

American Museum of the

# Moving Image

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## FINDING A PLACE: THE FILMS OF ANG LEE

May 31 – June 8, 2003.

Saturday, June 7

2:00 p.m. A PINWOOD DIALOGUE WITH ANG LEE AND JAMES SCHAMUS

### **CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON**

Sony Pictures Classics, 2000, 120 minutes. 35mm print courtesy Sony Pictures Classics.

Directed by Ang Lee. Written by James Schamus, Hui-Ling Wang, and Kuo Jung Tsai, based on a book by Du Lu Wang. Produced by Ang Lee, William Kong and Li-Kong Hsu. Executive producers, James Schamus, David Linde. Photography by Peter Pau. Edited by Tim Squyres. Production designer, Timmy Yip. Original music by Jorge Calandrelli, Yong King, and Dun Tan. Principal cast: Yun-Fat Chow (as Master Li Mu Bai), Michelle Yeoh (Yu Shu Lien), Ziyi Zhang (Jen Yu), Chen Chang (Lo 'Dark Cloud'), Sihung Lung (Sir Te), Pei-pei Cheng (Jade Fox), Fa Zeng Li (Gov. Yu), Xian Gao (Bo), Yan Hai (Madame Yu), De Ming Wang (Police Inspector Tsai), Li-Li Li (May), Su Ying Huang (Auntie Wu), Jin Ting Zhang (De Lu), Rei Yang (Maid), Kai Li (Gou Jun Pei).

### **THE CHOSEN**

BMW Films, 2001, 6 minutes. Video courtesy Anonymous Content.

Directed by Ang Lee. Written by David Carter. Produced by Robyn Boardman, Aristides McGarry. Photography by Frederick Elmes. Original music by Mychael Danna. Principal cast: Clive Owen (as the Driver), Mason Lee (Passenger), Sonom Gualson (Tugboat Monk), Brian Smyi (Shadow), Jamie Harris (Stick).

### **Scenes from THE HULK**

Universal, 2003. 10-minute preview video courtesy Universal Pictures.

Directed by Ang Lee. Written by James Schamus, Michael France, and John Turman. Produced by James Schamus, Gale Ann Hurd, Avi Arad, and Larry J. Franco. Photographed by Frederick Elmes. Edited by Tim Squyres. Production design by Rick Heinrichs. Music by Danny Elfman. Principal cast: Eric Bana (as Bruce Banner), Jennifer Connelly (Betty Ross), Sam Elliott (Ross), Josh Lucas (Talbot), Nick Nolte (Father).

Pinewood Dialogue with Ang Lee and James Schamus, moderated by David Schwartz, Chief Curator of Film.

## Feature films by Ang Lee and by James Schamus:

### All films are directed by Ang Lee.

2003 <i>The Hulk</i>	Schamus: co-writer, producer.
2000 <i>Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon</i>	Schamus: co-writer.
1999 <i>Ride with the Devil</i>	Schamus: writer, producer.
1997 <i>The Ice Storm</i>	Lee: director, producer; Schamus: writer, producer.
1995 <i>Sense and Sensibility</i>	Schamus: co-producer.
1994 <i>Eat Drink Man Woman</i>	Lee: director, co-writer; Schamus: co-writer, associate producer.
1993 <i>The Wedding Banquet</i>	Lee: director, co-writer, producer; Schamus: co-writer, producer.
1992 <i>Pushing Hands</i>	Lee: director, co-writer, producer; Schamus: co-writer, producer.

### Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon

A review by Elvis Mitchell, *New York Times*, October 9, 2000:

In Ang Lee's soulful action film, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Chow Yun Fat strides onto the screen proud, erect and easy; he's Cary Grant with a ponytail. His witty reserve is used beautifully here, and the picture is more fun than it has a right to be.

Any collaboration featuring Mr. Lee, Mr. Chow, Michelle Yeoh, Yo-Yo Ma and the wizard martial arts choreographer Yuen Wo-Ping is bound to spike expectations through the roof as well as start more than a few hands scratching heads in confusion. What are these guys doing working together? They're applying their specialties to a Hong Kong action movie that rings with confidence, and is being shown tonight as the closing film of the New York Film Festival.

Mr. Lee takes the action form, which often attacks the screen with energy and movement, and creates a placid surface that offers a new perspective and a spirituality not normally found in these pictures. In terms of action nothing much takes place for the first 10 minutes. That's so he can set up the incredibly complicated plot, which has as much romance, intrigue, free-wheeling action — and rousing silliness — as any five Hong Kong throw-down fests. This is no small feat, given the dizzying amount of exposition in these movies. Outrageous plot pile-ons certainly take place in *Tiger* — a practice as ritualistic as having a martial arts master and student square off against each other, also a part of the picture. Fans of the genre will giggle with delight over the canny way Mr. Lee handles the intersections, and audiences new to these films will shudder with excitement. Mr. Lee puts things together artfully and stages this movie like a comedy of manners; it could be *Sense and Sensibility* with a body count.

The script, by James Schamus, Wang Hui Ling and Tsai Kuo Long, incorporates the rusty machinery that's a part of almost every culture's folklore. Li Mu Bai (Mr. Chow), legendary martial artist, is tracking the murderer of his master. Poised, fit and self-assured, he can handle anything except his feelings for the lithe, pantherish Yu Shu Lien (Ms. Yeoh, who gives one of the most adult and deeply felt performances ever seen in such a movie). They talk about the intrigues with the intensity others append to matters of the heart. Jen (Zhang Ziyi), the tremulous and spoiled daughter of the governor of the province, is fascinated by Shu Lien's glamorous life: that a woman can have so many adventures and such freedom is marvelous to her. The refined Jen is to be married off into respectability. By night, though, she's a masked and cunning thief and fighter, out to steal the Green Destiny, an invincible blade once wielded by Li.

A mouthful of plot, and that doesn't even take into account the battles with the spurned female warrior Jade Fox. *Tiger* uses the familiar twists of the willful young heroine and combines them with the tradition of *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and *Zorro*, only this time the foppish young noble

is a fiery young woman determined to taste a life denied her. And because she ends up being the ruination of others, with the added complication of the love that Li and Shu Lien dare not pursue, it's as if Mr. Lee and his team were out to fold parts of *The Bostonians* into this mix.

It's a heady and delirious brew, too. The action is dexterously produced, thanks to the martial choreography of Mr. Yuen, best known to American audiences for the high-flying fights of *The Matrix*. The action in *The Matrix* was put together with a process called Bullettime, and here it should be termed Ballettime, as the performers soar gracefully over rooftops and up the sides of buildings as softly as leaves dancing in the air on an autumn day. Mr. Lee has found a way to make even the action feel poetic and spiritual, while sparked by a high adrenaline content. The first fight scene, which brings all the principals together, will make you want to applaud. And each action sequence builds on what has come before, increasing the stakes with a dignified hilarity.

At times *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is like a compendium of every line from a Hong Kong action film ever made, and the clichés include someone intoning, "It only looks so pure because blood washes so easily from its blade" about the Green Destiny.

Mr. Lee brightens the stockpiling by giving the picture a knockabout, screwball comedy bounce. With pairs of lovers expressing their affection through nose-to-nose physicality, it could be *Hit Me, Kate!* Because the women are treated as generously as the men — and are more important to the narrative — *Tiger* is just the film for an audience transfixed by the weekly girl-power cool and soap-opera bloodshed of *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*. Ms. Zhang is just as commanding a presence as Sarah Michelle Gellar, and even now Internet sites devoted to her talents are probably being created: the typing heard 'round the world. The picture frees the genre from being part of a man's, man's, man's world.

The formality is just part of the texture, which Mr. Lee uses for purposes other than comedy: he also exploits the calm for its ominous purposes, to build suspense. (The ringing sound that emanates from the admiring strokes given the Green Destiny emphasizes the toll of the violence.) And Mr. Ma's gorgeous — sometimes almost weeping — cello solos speak to the tragic elements. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* glides through the trees like its characters; it's an epic that breaks the laws of gravity.

An interview with Ang Lee and James Schamus, *The Guardian/NFT Interview*, November 7, 2000:

*Let's start with Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon. This is based on the fourth of a five-part novel sequence, a sort of Chinese Pulp Fiction. At what stage did you see the possibility of a film within this?*

Lee: I read the book through a friend of mine who knew I was a fan of this particular writer in 1994. The fourth volume, which is the story of a young girl, Jen, struck me that there was a movie there. When there is a strong woman character in a story—that always grabs me. Especially in this very macho genre, which since boyhood I've wanted to do. It felt as if it took six movies for me to even begin to earn the right to make this kind of movie. Of course, I'm growing up, I'm an established film-maker, known for making family dramas about personal relationships, I cannot go all the way and make a purely genre film, I've got to throw everything I know into the movie—like a combination platter. The key is to keep the balance.

I think the book struck me in a few ways that I thought very interesting to pick it as my first martial arts film. It has a very strong female character and it was very abundant in classic Chinese textures. Usually these pulp fiction books are set aside from the lawful society—they create a world called Giang Hu, which is an entanglement, a relationship with the underworld, with swordsmanship—almost like a fairytale. But this one is not quite that way, it is very abundant in what I care about—and also to do with the process of Chinese history, which has been lost, classic Chinese textures, which I know from history, my parents, from movies. It gives the impression of China which is kind of like the hidden dragon in me, in some ways, and I feel I want to pursue it. At the same time I was offered *Sense and Sensibility*—I couldn't refuse that job, it was just too good a job—so I made that. Meanwhile, *the Ice Storm* was still in development, And that was

something I really wanted to do, and frankly I don't think I was ready to do a big production like this. Then I did another movie, *Ride with the Devil*, and then I thought I was ready. Going back after three major league productions, English-language films, including one somewhat action film, *Ride with the Devil*, I thought I was ready. I was, you know, tougher. And then James can tell you about the scripting process. There's the script and financing. Meanwhile, I went to Beijing and started to do location scouting. It's a process of two years. Five, six months of pre-production, then five months of shooting and five months of post-production and then seven or eight months in promotions.

*The remarkable thing about this being a Chinese production is that there are resonant myths with the west. For example, the Green Destiny sword can be compared to Excalibur in Arthurian legend. And there seem to be bits of Hamlet dotted all over the film. Was this embedded in the text itself, or was it something you drew out in order to make it more universal?*

Lee: I think people are universal. I took the name Green Destiny from—well there is such a sword called Green Destiny. It is green because you keep twisting it, it's an ancient skill, you keep twisting it and knocking it and twisting it until it is very elastic and light. Swoosh! It swings like that, you know?

Green Destiny is a name which is derived from the book, and I took the name and I go further with the Taoist philosophy. The jade fox—the old green, the murky green that's what the green really means. It is the ultimate yin-ness. Yin and yan where everything exists in and derives from. . . this is hard to explain. The most mysterious feminine factor, the existence that we men, we don't know. It's woman. It's feminine. That's what the sword is about. That's the symbolic meaning of the sword. Even in Chinese you probably don't get that. . . I don't know. But that's for me. Anything green is hidden dragon, desires and repression. . . something weird when you dig into the depth. I think there is something like that in Excalibur, for example. . .

We didn't exactly have that in mind for a western audience. For a western audience, I think between James and me, the bouncing passing forth between Chinese and English, I think it is a good exercise to make it reasonable for a worldwide audience—not just a western audience—a worldwide audience and to some degree a modern Chinese audience as well. Things and logic that we used to take for granted in the Orient might not be that logical today. It's a good exam—how to tell a story with a global sense. That means more layout of the texture of society, more explanation of rules of the games. For example, the first fight does not ensue until 15 minutes into the movie. To a Chinese audience it must feel like 30 minutes—'Are we gonna see a fight or what?' Usually with this genre the first thing that happens is a good fight sequence to show that you're in good hands. So we broke that rule. I think a lot of that comes from the western audience.

I also I didn't want to make just a martial arts film, you know, there's drama in it. I think there is somewhat of a western three-act structure that lays things out. Starting with a crisis or an action, things like that, or verbalising a relationship.

*Your last four films have been based on novels. Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm*, Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* and Daniel Woodrell's book *Woe to Live On* and now this. When you have a source material to work from, do you think in a different way when you approach the script? James?*

Schamus: Oh, me?

*Well, both of you. . .*

[Laughter]

Lee: It's running out of things to write about. That's why I adapt. . .

Schamus: Well essentially it means I can get away with a first draft just by ripping off somebody else...

[Laughter]

Which is a great comfort. Because that first stage is just going through and underlining all the juicy bits and then trying to run them in some kind of order that makes sense cinematically. Then the hard part actually does take over, and you realise that novels don't simply translate into movies. Assuming that the world the novel created for you is the basis for the enjoyment of the script and the film is a deadly error. Because that world doesn't exist once you're dealing in cinematic terms—you have to create it every step of the way. It's like film production itself. My partner Ted Hope, at Good Machine, who started as an assistant director, the guy who ran the set, used to say it's like a Phillip K Dick novel, if you don't think about the floor, it's not there and you fall through it. And to a certain extent it's the same adapting novels, you suddenly realise you've forgotten what you need to do to make it into a movie. So it's an interesting process, it's a good process for lazy people, because the first stage is so easy, and it's a good process for procrastinators, because you already have a draft before you even start thinking about making a movie.

*Does this mean that we're not going to have any more original Ang Lee scripts?*

Lee: There could be an original James Schamus script. . . I don't care about writing really. When I started out, nobody gave me scripts, so I had to write. . . That's why I wrote family drama—I'm a domestic person, it's all I know! Now I'm kind of established as a director, I much prefer directing to writing. Writing's lonely. Directing, I get all kinds of inspiration. It's working with people. It's a lot more fun. When I have a full schedule like that, I don't see myself sitting there for a couple of months, doing the research, going through a painful process, it's just not my thing anymore. I grab the life I have to direct as many movies as I can.

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