

Screening the In-Between: Intermediality and Digital Dystopianism in Contemporary Chinese Film and Fiction

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Abstract

This article uses Chinese popular narratives rooted in and circulated via the internet to investigate what effects it might have on texts that move through the internet in the process of adaptation or transformation from one cultural form to another. By juxtaposing the analysis of mainland Chinese films based on writings first published on the web, namely the 2012 films *Caught in the Web* (搜索 *Sousuo*), directed by Chen Kaige (陳凱歌), and *Mystery* (浮城謎事 *Fucheng mishi*), directed by Lou Ye (婁燁), with online fiction that expands the storyworlds of blockbuster films, such as the 2007 novel *Infinite Horror* (無限恐怖 *Wuxian kongbu*) by zhttty, this article focuses on the discursive role intermediality plays in literature-to-film and film-to-literature adaptations. I show how all three works share a preoccupation with the “in-between,” a term closely related to intermediality. In these texts, the in-between is replete with struggles between different forms of agency facilitated and limited by digital media. The connotations that the internet carries as a form of intermediality are, however, dependent on the creators’ own experiences and beliefs about the impact of digital media on contemporary society. In some cases, their work suggests the normative project of digital dystopianism, a predominantly negative outlook on the dangers digital technologies pose to morality and social institutions. In others, it points to a liberating creative agency that allows cultural producers to use the internet to forge new stories and meanings out of a global archive of popular culture.

Keywords

adaptation, intermediality, digital dystopianism, Chinese internet fiction,
vernacular creativity

The movement of stories between and across media forms is a defining feature of China's cultural landscapes in the digital age, spurred by the popularization of the internet and the growing prevalence and affordability of digital technologies. On the one hand, there is an emerging industry consensus in China that licensing popular narratives for reproduction across media channels represents the most efficient way of maximizing profits from a single cultural brand. At the same time, fans and other audiences are adept at using digital technologies to appropriate and rework texts into unauthorized or "transformative" works (Lothian; Schwabach) that spread even more rapidly across traditional media boundaries—from film to fiction, for example, or from computer games to comic strips.

Within English-language scholarship, the increasing porosity of media boundaries has been theorized using a variety of terms that include adaptation,¹ remediation, transmediality and transmedia storytelling, multimodality,² mixed media or media mix, hybrid media, media synergy, media convergence, and spreadable media. Some scholarship has even attempted to move away entirely from any claims to media specificity, arguing that contemporary culture has entered a "post-medium condition."³ Intermediality, for those who still acknowledge difference between media, is a key term for understanding what happens to artistic works during processes of transmedia adaptation or the mixing and convergence of media.⁴ Though subject to multiple definitions and theoretical approaches, intermediality broadly corresponds to the relationships between media and transgressing of medial boundaries (Rippl, "Introduction"). Many of the theoretical questions thrown up in the field of intermediality studies relate closely to André Bazin's mid-twentieth century ideas on the "impurity" of film and other media ("In Defense"; "Adaptation") and can be traced further back to writings on the "sister arts" and *ekphrasis* in ancient Greece and Rome (Webb). Bazin intended his defense of the mixed or "impure" nature of cinema as a rebuke to the elitist tendencies of those in favor of "pure cinema" and media specificity, and it can thus be considered a utopian

¹ For studies on adaptation see, for instance, Hutcheon; Bruhn et al.; Murray; Sanders; for remediation see Bolter and Grusin; Bolter; Erll and Rigney; transmediality and transmedia storytelling have been examined by Dena; Jenkins, "The Revenge"; "Transmedia"; Ryan, "Transmedial"; Voigts and Nicklas, "Introduction"; Scolari, Bertetti, and Freeman.

² See Elleström for a discussion on multimodality; see Mitchell; Frølund; Steinberg for mixed media or media mix; see Howard; Lindgren; Chadwick; Artz for studies on hybrid media; see Diehl and Karmasin for media synergy; see Jenkins, *Convergence*; Ludes; Tryon; Inwood; Constandinides for media convergence; Jenkins, Ford and Green on spreadable media.

³ Krauss; Graw and Lajer-Burcharth.

⁴ Wolf; Rajewsky; Punzi; Booth; Voigts-Virchow; Elleström; Grishakova; Pethő; Schröter; Nagib and Jerslev; Bay-Cheng et al.; Rippl, *Handbook*; Bao; Mack.

political stance in support of popular filmmaking, or even “total media fusion” (Nagib 24-26). As Lúcia Nagib suggests, however, the kind of intermediality to which Bazin attends is less a future-oriented political project than “an ever-present dialectical crisis” between the tendency of all artistic forms towards impurity and an awareness of the limitations of such impurity—a crisis that is, she contends, political (27).

In China, a newfound embrace of copyright culture and the transmedia adaptation and marketing strategies it entails has been dubbed “adaptation fever” (改編熱 *gaibian re*) or “Intellectual Property/IP fever” (IP 熱 *IP re*) and is widely celebrated as a positive development for the nation’s cultural industries, regardless of any associated media “impurities” or political implications.⁵ Starting around 2011, the year of the hit television drama *Scarlet Heart* (步步驚心 *Bubu jingxin*), which was adapted from the online Time Travel Romance (穿越言情 *chuanyue yanqing*) novel of the same name, the most common source of new narratives has been the internet, or more specifically online portals specializing in instalment fiction such as *Qidian Zhongwenwang* 起點中文網 (also known as Starting Point, www.qidian.com) and *Jinjiang Literature City* (晉江文學城 *Jinjiang wenxuecheng*, www.jjwxc.net).⁶ Literary websites create revenue by charging readers small sums of money to subscribe to novels for the course of their serialization; many are written by “amateur” authors whose works have not previously been published in print. Among the most well-known examples of IP developed from Chinese internet novels are *Ghost Blows Out the Light* (鬼吹燈 *Gui chui deng*) by Zhang Muye (張牧野) and *Grave Robbers’ Chronicles* (盜墓筆記 *Daomu biji*) by Xu Lei (徐磊). These works of “Tomb Robbing Fiction” (盜墓小說 *daomu xiaoshuo*) began serialization in 2006 and have since been converted into a diverse array of media products from comics and computer games to stage plays, films, and television dramas. At the same time, their narratives have been expanded and modified via unofficial sequels, prequels, and subversive rewritings in the form of fan (同人 *tongren*) fiction and art and the genre of anti-Tomb Robbing Fiction (反盜墓小說 *fan daomu xiaoshuo*).⁷

⁵ According to news reports, however, major Chinese companies have yet to see substantial profits emerge from this transmedia licensing strategy (“China’s” n. pag.).

⁶ According to a recent survey, 61 of the 100 most influential IP in China originated in online novels, with a further 29 originating in traditional Chinese novels (Ying).

⁷ One of the most common fan versions of *Grave Robbers’ Chronicles* features the male protagonists Wu Xie (吳邪) and Zhang Qiling (張起靈) in a same-sex relationship; in anti-Tomb Robbing Fiction, the hero is someone who protects, rather than robs, ancient tombs. 2015 and 2016 saw the release of three film adaptations of these novels: *Chronicles of the Ghostly Tribe* (鬼吹燈之九層妖塔 *Gui chui deng zhi jiuceng yaota*) and *Mojin: The Lost Legend* (鬼吹燈之尋龍訣 *Gui chui deng zhi xunlongjue*), both based on the eight print volumes of *Ghost Blows Out the Light*, and the 2016 film *Time Raiders* (盜墓筆記 *Daomu biji*), adapted from *Grave Robbers’ Chronicles*.

The success story represented by China's Tomb Robbing IP demonstrates the logic that popular narratives and storyworlds must prove their commercial value on the internet before being selected for adaptation into audiovisual forms.⁸ Online literature portals thus function as a hotbed and testing ground for new cultural content (内容 *neirong*) to be produced across media forms. Similarly, it is via the internet that cultural "prosumers" or "proams" tend to consume the majority of their sources of cultural inspiration before processing them into new creative works such as fan fiction or art, spoofs, online videos, microfilms (微电影 *wei dianying*), and more.⁹ While the spread of popular narratives between fiction and audiovisual and performative modes of culture has attracted large volumes of journalistic and academic discussion in China, so far little attention has been paid to the implications of storyworlds shifting from one medium into another via the intermedial environment of the internet. The basic assertion of this article is that the internet is not a neutral context in which texts are produced, consumed, and brought under license before being distributed elsewhere, but a form of intermediality that exerts a potential aesthetic and ideological influence upon the narratives it makes possible.

My central questions, therefore, build upon scholarship on transmedia storytelling, adaptation, remediation, and intermediality to ask: What effects might the internet have on texts that move through it in the process of being remediated or transformed from one cultural form or medium to another? And, secondly, how might the intermedial function of the internet as embodied by such texts relate to what Nagib describes as the "dialectical crisis" ever present in "impure" artistic forms? In order to explore the aesthetic and discursive implications of such intermediality and examine the sociopolitical attitudes surrounding the internet as a mediating environment in early twenty-first century mainland China, my analysis focuses on three contrasting texts that point to the strong intermedial presence of the internet within the adapted or transformed/transformational work.¹⁰ My intention is not to

⁸ My use of the term "storyworld" follows David Herman's basic definition of "the worlds evoked by narratives" (105). As Marie-Laure Ryan asserts, storyworlds need not be limited to a single narrative, but can unfold or exist simultaneously across multiple texts and cultural forms as a result of transmedia storytelling ("Story/Worlds/Media").

⁹ "Prosumer" is a portmanteau of the words "producer" and "consumer" and "proam" is a combination of "professional" and "amateur"; both can be considered hallmarks of the convergence culture that has increasingly come to define contemporary mediaspheres, including that of mainland China (Yu 11). For a detailed study of Sinophone microfilms, see Voci.

¹⁰ The specific forms of intermediality I identify in my chosen texts fall within the categories identified by Irina O. Rajewsky as "media transposition," or the transformation of one media product into another medium (as in literature-to-film adaptations), and "intermedial references,"

further the technologically deterministic belief that the internet possesses certain pre-determined qualities or encourages cultural behaviors that are intrinsic to the “essence” of the medium itself. I hope, rather, to respond to calls by Marie-Laure Ryan and others for a media-conscious narratology, which acknowledges that “the choice of medium makes a difference as to what stories can be told, how they are told, and why they are told” (“Story/Worlds/Media” 25). This follows an understanding of media as semiotic entities that possess a cultural dimension (29)—and, indeed, ideological assumptions that shape the ways one medium is represented by another. In the case studies I explore here, the assumptions on display revolve primarily around emerging forms of human-to-human and human-to-machine sociality enabled by the internet, which take on both utopian and dystopian dimensions. Consequently, the internet is distinct from earlier forms of intermediality such as the presence of paintings in films or films in literature: by challenging or even dissolving older modes of human sociality and behavioral norms, it has even greater potential to provoke a sense of crisis in the creators and critics of culture.

The first two texts to be examined are both films released in 2012 that were adapted from fictional and non-fictional narratives first published on the web: Chen Kaige’s 陳凱歌 *Caught in the Web* (搜索 *Sousuo*), and *Mystery* (浮城謎事 *Fucheng mishi*), directed by Lou Ye (婁燁). *Caught in the Web* is a continuation of the later cinematic style of the Fifth Generation director Chen Kaige, evidencing his shift away from the social realism and formalist experimentation of his earlier work of the 1980s, as seen in films such as *Yellow Earth* and *King of the Children*, towards a more commercial, entertainment-oriented approach to cinema (Zhu and Robinson) with a focus on the social, cultural, and architectural changes reshaping urban China (Braester 250). The film is a fairly straightforward adaptation of a medium-length work of online fiction by the female author Wen Yu (文雨) that was first entitled *Please Forgive Me* (請你原諒我 *Qing ni yuanliang wo*), then *Web-Death* (網逝 *Wangshi*), then, after the film was released, *Search* (*Sousuo*), before being renamed in a 2015 print edition as *Tomorrow, Will You Love Me Like Before* (明天，你是否愛我如初 *Mingtian, ni shifou ai wo ru chu*). The film’s screenplay was written by Tang Danian (唐大年) and Chen Kaige himself.

Mystery was Lou Ye’s first film in ten years to be approved for official release in mainland China after his depiction of the Tiananmen Square massacre in *Summer Palace* resulted in the State Administration of Film, Radio, and Television (SARFT) issuing him a five-year ban on filmmaking in 2006 (M. Berry 348). It is adapted from

whereby only one medium is materially present but another is alluded to through techniques of evocation and imitation (as in *ekphrasis*, or the verbal description of a work of visual art) (52-53).

a piece of online writing which claimed to be a real-life diary by a netizen named “Watching the Moon Leave” (看著月亮離開 *Kanzhe yueliang likai*). The diary was entitled “Watch How I Take Care of That Bastard and His Bit on the Side” (看我如何收拾賤男和小三 *Kan wo ruhe shoushi jiannan he xiaosan*) and was first published in installments in 2009 on a “Marriage and Family” (婚姻家庭 *hunyin jiating*) discussion forum hosted by *Tianya.cn*.¹¹ Like Chen Kaige’s *Caught in the Web*, *Mystery* marks Lou’s move away from an earlier cinematic mode: in this case, from a preoccupation with fragmentary urban subjects and the documentary-style neorealist aesthetics typical of the Sixth Generation, epitomized by Zhang Yuan’s 張元 *Beijing Bastards*, Jia Zhangke’s 賈樟柯 *Xiao Wu*, and Lou Ye’s *Suzhou River*, to a greater degree of integration with commerce, marketing, and digital media on display in the “iGeneration” (Johnson, Wagner, Yu, and Vulpiani; Vulpiani). According to Vulpiani, the “iGeneration” style can be traced to Jia Zhangke’s 2008 film *24 City* and, in the case of Lou Ye, his 2006 film *Summer Palace*. In these films, the “grim real” of the Sixth Generation is displaced by a “brutal realism” which conveys a “savagely violent, almost anthropological vision of China” in the midst of neoliberal development (95).

I contrast Chen Kaige and Lou Ye’s film adaptations with an example of a text that remediates in the inverse direction, from films into online fiction: the 2.7 million-character novel *Infinite Horror* (無限恐怖 *Wuxian kongbu*) by zhttty or Zhang Heng (張恆), which was serialized on Qidian between April 2007 and January 2009 and has since been published as three print books (zhttty n. pag.). *Infinite Horror* sets most of its action within the storyworlds of popular genre films that include *Resident Evil*, *Alien*, *The Mummy*, *Jurassic Park*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Transformers*, and *Independence Day*. Several of these are, themselves, adaptations of other media content, including computer games (*Resident Evil*), novels (*Jurassic Park*, *Lord of the Rings*), and toy brands (*Transformers*—the transmedia franchise of which, like many of the films featured in this novel, also encompasses cartoons, comics, and books).

In terms of its cultural status, *Infinite Horror* stands apart from *Mystery* and *Caught in the Web*. While the latter were directed by two of China’s leading filmmakers and, as self-declared adaptations, fulfill Linda Hutcheon’s criterion of being “an acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works” (8), zhttty is an anonymous online author who disavows similarities between his novel

¹¹ The original post can be read here: <<http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-feeling-1201955-1.shtml>>.

and preexisting texts.¹² As well as commenting in paratextual writings on the difficulties of earning a living from online fiction in a time of rampant “copycat” (跟風 *genfeng*) writing, zhttty also probes the tensions between different sources of authorial agency within the narrative of the novel itself. Its overall mood is dystopian, with horrors appearing in every chapter and characters killed off at regular intervals in imaginatively gory ways. What it has to say about the impact of the internet and digital technologies on Chinese society and culture, however, is potentially more optimistic than *Mystery* and *Caught in the Web*.

My decision to juxtapose analyses of two texts that appear to be standard literature-to-film adaptations with another that would more likely be considered an example of fan fiction or “vernacular creativity” (Burgess) is a conscious one. Despite the recent broadening of the scope of adaptation and intermediality studies to include creative texts and processes of a more grassroots or vernacular kind (O’Flynn; Nicklas and Voigts, *Adaptation*; Bruhn et al.), there is still a tendency to consider acknowledged transpositions and “derivative” forms of creativity as distinct cultural phenomena. This is also true of Chinese-language scholarship. While research on adaptation has focused on the commercial motivations behind novel-to-screen adaptations and resulting questions of textual fidelity and audience tastes (Feng; Liu Nian; Dan; Zhou; Ji; Zhu; Hu; Tan; Wei), fan (同人 *tongren* or 粉絲 *fensi*) studies have thus far been predominantly concerned with copyright issues (Han; Huang; Li and Yang; Gong) and the challenges that fans as producers of “subaltern culture” (亞文化 *yawenhua*) pose to mainstream Chinese culture (Wang and Zhu; Liu Guiru; Tang).

What, then, can be gained from considering authorized literature-to-film adaptations alongside vernacular or grassroots transformative works? Rather than attempting to measure the distances between my case studies and their source texts, an approach typical in the older mode of adaptation studies, I direct my attention to the question of what these adaptations actually do (Dicecco), pointing in response to a shared thematic and narrative preoccupation with the “in-between,” a term that is closely related to intermediality. In the texts under examination, the in-between is not portrayed as an easy place to be. It is, on the contrary, replete with struggles between different forms of agency facilitated and limited by digital media technologies and overshadowed by the tangible risks that technologies can pose to human lives if employed in reckless or unethical ways. My analysis of the in-between thus supports

¹² On the original publication site of the novel on *Qidian*, a disclaimer declares, “this story is purely fictional, any resemblance [to other works] is coincidental, please do not copy” (zhttty n. pag.).

Nagib's understanding of intermediality as the source of a dialectical crisis intrinsic to impure artistic forms. In this case, it is a crisis that requires its occupants to engage in a constant process of adaptation (in both the transmedial and Darwinian senses of the word) to the social and political challenges of ever-evolving technological environments.

Comparing the two 2012 films with zhhtty's internet novel reveals some interesting differences between the three adaptations. The dystopian overtones of Chen Kaige's and Lou Ye's films suggest that their auteur directors harbor an (at best) ambivalent attitude toward the social uses and effects of mass media in China, an attitude that reflects a more general unease within segments of contemporary Chinese politics and society regarding the kinds of social developments facilitated by digital media technologies and that could, I argue, be considered a form of digital dystopianism. Greg Goldberg suggests that digital dystopianism, as demonstrated by non-fictional writings that comment on the negative social impact of the internet and digital technologies, might be considered a "normative project linked to domination," a way of forcing readers to take responsibility for "their bodies, minds, families, communities, and nations" (785). Despite the more explicitly horrifying subject matter of zhhtty's *Infinite Horror*, vernacular texts such as this seem to be relatively free of any such normative goals, pointing instead to the liberating creative potential of participation in the virtual reality of the internet and associated cultural forms. I conclude by suggesting that these texts nonetheless rely upon an ideological understanding of the internet as an enabler of new, potentially lethal forms of human-to-machine interaction and can be considered just as political as the more overtly dystopian visions of Chen Kaige and Lou Ye.

Digital Dystopianism in *Caught in the Web* and *Mystery*

Both *Caught in the Web* and *Mystery* offer a meditation upon the ways in which the internet and online society are reshaping human lives and relationships in twenty-first century China. Chen Kaige's *Caught in the Web* tells the story of a well-to-do young woman named Ye Lanqiu (葉藍秋) who, on her morning bus commute to work, is filmed on a cell phone camera failing to give up her seat to an elderly man. She is subsequently subjected to an online "human flesh search" (人肉搜索 *renrou sousuo*) that exposes her identity and publicly shames her for her moment of moral failure. What follows is an escalating series of intrusions into Ye's privacy billed by the media as the "sunglasses sister incident" (墨鏡姊事件 *mojingjie shijian*), a reference to the oversized designer shades that Ye was wearing on the bus. This

seemingly minor incident ends up endangering her job, reputation, friendships, and ultimately her life, with the final scenes of the film culminating in television reports of her suicide.

The clear moral of the film is not only that reality is usually more complicated than it may seem when filtered through the hype of viral news stories, but also that acts of online social vigilantism, a hot topic in China in the early 2010s, have the power to destroy reputations and ruin lives. Unlike the many thousands of people who participate in the online humiliation of Ye Lanqiu, viewers of the film know from the start that the reason for her apparent lack of social decency was that she had just received a diagnosis of advanced lymphatic cancer, a factor that also plays into her later decision to take her own life. By the end of the narrative, not only has Ye died by suicide, a successful multinational company has endured severe reputation damage, an up-and-coming journalist has lost her job, and almost all the relationships in the film are revealed to be built on some combination of narcissism, mutual distrust, ruthless personal ambition, unhealthy financial dependence, and psychological abuse.

Seemingly the only positive human connection depicted in the film is that of Ye Lanqiu and a photographer named Yang Shoucheng (楊守誠), whom Ye hires to keep her company while she goes into hiding from the news media. Yet even their burgeoning romance is thwarted by Yang's continued loyalty to his girlfriend and Ye's suicide. Audiences are made aware from cross-cut scenes throughout the film that Yang's girlfriend is none other than the ambitious TV journalist, Chen Ruoxi (陳若兮), who was responsible for recording the "sunglasses sister" video on the bus and launching the online human flesh search against Ye. This messy tangle of relationships serves as a narrative manifestation of the web that is ever present in the film and gives it its English name. Digital technologies are not only central to the plot but form an essential element of the *mise-en-scène* and cinematography: shots are framed by outstretched cell phone cameras or blurred by the fuzzy pixels of closed-circuit television footage; characters are shown constantly checking social media accounts on cell phones and laptops; and text messages and web search results are overlaid onto the screen with a cartoon-like "ping" and the sound of clattering computer keys.

When the presence of digital technologies is not directly conveyed through the *mise-en-scène* or sound effects, the camera adopts voyeuristic angles that hint at a shady underworld of digital surveillance, such as the softly lit point-of-view shots of Ye Lanqiu that gaze up at her semi-naked, freshly showered body from a set of weighing scales, or the bird's eye shot of her boss, Shen Liushu (沈流舒), exiting his chauffeured luxury sedan at the start of the working day. Oblique and upwards tilting

camera angles combined with diagonal pans convey a world in which characters and their relationships have been knocked out of kilter. The social impact of digital media in contemporary China is further reflected through on-screen television interviews in which passers-by are asked to reflect on morality today and news reporters turn to the camera to summarize their thoughts on the distorting effects of the media with platitudes such as, “What is the truth? You and I can see the same thing in entirely different ways” (00:09:08-00:09:14). Even the final scenes of the film that take place in the aftermath of Ye Lanqiu’s death are seen through the lens of the news media, with Ye’s boss offering a less-than-sincere eulogy to his former employee on the national evening television news.

Although *Caught in the Web* ends on a solemn note and comes across as a damning cinematic indictment of the harmful effects of the internet on Chinese society, its overall tone is light, with numerous signs of humor and self-reflexivity, sometimes implied by a jaunty whistled melody that accompanies expository scenes. Chen Kaige’s focus on the disruptive potential of digital technologies for contemporary lives and relationships bears strong echoes with an earlier film directed by Feng Xiaogang (馮小剛), the 2003 New Year blockbuster comedy *Cell Phone* (手機 *Shouji*), adapted from Liu Zhenyun’s 劉震雲 novel of the same name. In Zhang Rui’s analysis, the cell phone in this film takes on an agency of its own, bringing the protagonist Yan Shouyi (嚴守一) “deeper and deeper into a world of deception and infidelity” (136). By the end of the narrative, Yan decides that the only means of escaping the nightmare brought about by mobile communication technologies is to throw his phone into a fire and swear never to own one again. In *Caught in the Web*, it is not made clear whether the threats posed by digital media derive more from the ill intentions of those who employ them or from something inherent to the technologies themselves; the answer, the film seems to suggest, lies somewhere in between.

In contrast to both *Caught in the Web* and *Cell Phone*, the tone of Lou Ye’s *Mystery* is darkly melodramatic throughout, typical of the “brutal realism” of China’s iGeneration (Vulpiani 95). Opening shots depict the source of the film’s eponymous “mystery,” namely the brutal death of an anonymous young woman, who is hit by a speeding car driven by a wealthy young drag racer in the midst of drinking, smoking, and flirting with his girlfriend. The film gradually peels back the layers of lies and deceptions that have led to the appearance of the woman—we later learn she is a university student who uses the Weibo (微博) handle Wenzhi 蚊子 (Mosquito)—in the middle of a Wuhan highway during a heavy rainstorm. Sounds and images of torrential rain accompany many key scenes and contribute to the film’s foreboding

atmosphere. Its cinematography borrows heavily from documentary filmmaking aesthetics, employing a color palette of dark greys and sickly yellows and featuring jerky handheld camera work and extreme long shots of the gritty urban environment of Wuhan, where most of the action is set. Aerial footage of the city's transport infrastructure and smoggy industrial zones is intercut with claustrophobic urban interiors filmed with a shallow depth of field and featuring blurry, low-lit extreme close-ups of characters' emotionally blunted faces. Together these elements make the film emblematic of what Chris Berry and others have termed the "on-the-spot" or "edgy" realism inherent in the work of China's Sixth or Urban Generation of filmmakers.

While the internet and digital media technologies are less obviously a driving force in the narrative of *Mystery* than *Caught in the Web*, their presence can nonetheless be felt throughout the film. The central characters, namely the handsome philandering husband, Qiao Yongzhao (喬永照), his legal wife, Lu Jie (陸潔), his long-term mistress or "second wife," Sang Qi (桑琪), and his one-night stand, Wenzhi, live their lives in and through digital media. Qiao engages in extra-marital affairs through Weibo and Wenzhi gazes seductively into her cell phone camera to create wobbly, soft-focus "selfies" that swallow up the screen and threaten to break the fourth wall. Frequent allusions to digital media through the cinematography and mise-en-scène contribute to the film's pervasive air of deception and mystique; characters are constantly going behind each other's backs and relying on computers and phones to both uncover the truth and cover their tracks.

The film's commitment to narrative suspense is such that we are not made privy to the full context of Wenzhi's death until well over two thirds of the way into the film, when a series of darkly lit, slow motion flashbacks show Lu Jie stalking and then repeatedly smashing Wenzhi over the head with a rock after discovering that her husband is having an affair with her. Immediately following this confrontation, Sang Qi, who had followed Lu Jie and was observing this attack from a distance, releases her own jealous rage upon the already severely injured student, shoving her down a highway embankment where she soon dies under the wheels of the drag racers. In addition to the car crash that featured in the opening scenes, in the course of the film Qiao attempts to cover up his lovers' crimes by brutally killing a homeless man who had witnessed Wenzhi's murder, Lu Jie is confronted by the police after her keys are discovered at the crime scene, and Qiao's two seemingly idyllic nuclear families are revealed to have been built upon a lie. Not only has Qiao fathered children by two women, he continues to jeopardize each set of relationships by conducting affairs with younger women he meets online to satisfy his rampant sexual desires. An

epilogue superimposed on the screen before the final credits reveals that Qiao and Sang are later investigated by detectives, but their fate remains undetermined at the end of the film.

Along with its ambiguous ending, *Mystery's* narrative fragmentation, in particular the frequent use of flashbacks and flash-forwards and elision of key plot details, makes its conclusions on the impact of the internet and digital media technologies on contemporary Chinese society less clear-cut than *Caught in the Web*. Despite the dark, dystopian atmosphere and motifs of death and digitally-enabled desire and deception, there are hints in *Mystery* that the internet can exert a more positive, leveling effect on the inequalities of contemporary Chinese society. When one of the drag racers appeals to an investigating detective with the words “my dad is You Qiang” audiences cannot help but hear an echo of the internet meme, “my dad is Li Gang” (我爸是李剛 *wo ba shi Li Gang*). This phrase took the Chinese internet by storm in late 2010 with its implied denunciation of the “official second generation” (官二代 *guan er dai*) and “rich second generation” (富二代 *fu er dai*)—the children of government officials and wealthy business people, respectively—and in doing so helped draw attention to the social inequality and corruption plaguing the Chinese legal system.¹³ By referencing the Li Gang incident, *Mystery* hints that a grassroots approach to social justice, facilitated by the observational and discursive capacities of digital media technologies, has the potential to raise public awareness of some of the ethical and legal issues facing Chinese society today, even if it cannot do away with these problems entirely.

Films into Online Fiction: Intermediality and the “In-Between” in *Infinite Horror*

The group of writings known as “Infinite Fiction” (無限小說 *wuxian xiaoshuo*) is much less concerned with depicting real-life social issues than either of the films analyzed above. The novel from which the genre gets its name, *Infinite Horror*, is usually categorized within the relatively escapist genres of Time and Space Travel (時空穿梭 *shikong chuansuo*) and/or Science Fiction (科幻 *kehuan*). Rather than

¹³ This phrase was uttered by a Hebei University student named Li Qiming (李啟銘), who was accosted by security guards after driving his car into two university students during a night out, killing one of them and leaving the other seriously injured. It later emerged that Li Qiming’s father, Li Gang, was the deputy chief of a district Baoding Public Security Bureau; by invoking his name, his son clearly intended to bypass standard legal procedures and use his family connections to literally get away with murder. For more on the Li Gang scandal, see Brown.

remediating the narrative of a single pre-existing text like *Mystery* and *Caught in the Web*, *Infinite Horror* moves between the diegeses of a series of well-known films, and in doing so blends multiple storyworlds into one newly expanded work. Other examples of Infinite Fiction include *Infinite Demonization* (無限魔化 *Wuxian mohua*), *Endless Armor* (無盡武裝 *Wujin wuzhuang*), *Final Killing* (最終殺場 *Zuizhong shachang*), *Infinite Endemic* (無限流傳染病 *Wuxianliu chuanranbing*), and (most horrifyingly of all?) *Infinite Part-Time Work* (無限打工 *Wuxian dagong*).

The central protagonist in *Infinite Horror* is a twenty-something man named Zheng Zha (鄭吒), a homophone for “struggle” and a reference to the author’s own struggles with copyright protection in an era of rampant online piracy. While sitting in front of his computer at work one day, a window pops up on Zheng Zha’s screen asking, “Do you want to understand the meaning of life? Do you want to really . . . live?” (n. pag.). Against his better instincts, Zheng Zha hits “yes,” a split-second decision which results in his mind and body being transported into a series of well-known horror and science fiction films. The first film he encounters is the 2002 zombie apocalypse film *Resident Evil*, adapted from the Japanese computer game of the same name and first released in 2000. The diegeses of this and subsequent films in the novel are accessed via an interstitial space governed by a disembodied presence known as “God” (主神 “zhushen”), a name that always appears in quotation marks, and linked by a system of unwritten rules that Zheng Zha and his fellow characters must learn to accumulate points and survive. The stakes are raised by the knowledge that dying in any of the films means dying for real, a fate that befalls many characters in the novel.

If one were to probe *Infinite Horror* and other works of Infinite Fiction for examples of the kind of intermediality that Rajewsky terms “intermedial references,” the obvious assumption would be that cinema is the dominant medium being referenced throughout the novel. This is made clear by the way in which the storyworlds of *Resident Evil*, *Alien*, *Jurassic Park* and so on are referred to in the narrative as “films” with “plots” and “main characters.” When discussing the dangers that await them in *Alien*, for example, Zheng Zha remarks, “this film is pretty old, and although it’s a classic, I haven’t seen it for ages and have forgotten most of the details of the plot—all I can remember are some basic story elements” (n. pag.). For the characters in *Infinite Horror*, horror films constitute a global archive of cultural knowledge that they must master if they are to have any hope of combatting the dangers that await them: the more familiar they are with the films they encounter, the greater their chances of survival. There is a Darwinian metaphor at work here: only the fittest survive, with the fittest being those who have spent a significant part of

their lives watching scary movies. Adaptation, therefore, functions on both a literal and a metaphorical level.

In addition to intermedial references to film, a subtler form of intermediality comes from online role-playing games and interactive digital media technologies more broadly. Rather than letting the narrative of each film play out in a predictable linear fashion as in the original (which would be typical in a standard novelization), zhttty places the protagonists in a situation in which they have to negotiate the narrative as though first-person players in a computer game version of the film, not letting the pre-programmed diegetic or “non-player characters” (NPCs) become too suspicious of them and, in some instances, changing the plot and saving characters from a preordained death. The ideal “player” in this novel is a brave and media-savvy one: someone who is familiar with the storyworlds of the films and has the courage to “adapt” by altering the course of the narrative at key junctures.

The first time this happens is in the underground hive of *Resident Evil*, a film that features a team of security contractors attempting to bring a secret research facility under control after the leak of a fatal virus that turns humans into zombies. Zheng Zha finds himself having to convince the character Matthew Addison that he should stay close to the door to avoid death by laser beam—the same fate that had already befallen several other characters in the film. Zheng Zha acts to save Matthew Addison’s life despite having been warned that any attempt to mess with the film’s plot will result in certain death. Here he is struggling between his prior knowledge of the narrative and his urge to save Addison:

This time the laser formed at the height of his upper leg. Zheng Zha recalled that, in this part of the movie, the laser would first slice past the first private security contractor, then slice the second contractor’s body into pieces. He only had one chance to make a decision and knew that if he failed, the laser would kill him in a flash! Not knowing whether the plot would change at this point, his only choice was to trust his knowledge of the movie. (n. pag.)

After Zheng Zha successfully assumes first-person control over the plot, the narrative continues:

Matthew Addison struggled with all his might. “Let me go! If we stay here we’ll be sliced into pieces! Let me go!” Zheng Zha held on tight to his collar. “Trust me! Trust me! This time there’s nowhere to hide,

all we can do is stay close to the door and try our luck! You have to trust me!” . . . Zheng Zha opened his eyes. He hadn’t noticed the laser web disappear, but he knew he’d succeeded: the familiar wheels of the plot were in motion once again and he’d escaped the jaws of death. In over twenty years of living, never had he come so close to dying. Death’s tracks had slid right past his shoulder, so very, very close! (n. pag.)

This conflict between the pre-written plot of the film and the agency of the characters to change the outcome of the story recalls the relationship between narrative and the ludic (or playful) in computer games, a topic that has been widely discussed in computer games scholarship (Anderson; Boellstorff; Atkins; Bizzochi; Smith et al.; Tavinor; Calleja). While the overarching narrative serves as an orienting device that drives the player forward to discover what happens, or what *could* happen next, the ludic nature of computer games is embodied in the rules that determine what the player can and cannot do, what the objectives of the game are, and ultimately how players engage with the “text” of the game. Both the plots of the films that appear in the narrative of *Infinite Horror* and the “rules” of the life-and-death game that are presented to the protagonists in the novel function as constraints upon their individual agency. While the films’ narratives are malleable and open to change, the rules that confront the protagonist-players appear beyond their control. The players’ desire to change the ending and create new narratives thus lies in tension with the rules of the game, with the latter personified by the figure of “God.” Free will is most easily enacted in the interstitial space between movies, when characters can rest in the privacy of their own bedrooms, have sex with the partners of their dreams, “power up” by acquiring new physical abilities and weapons, practice their monster-killing skills, and brush up on their knowledge of horror movies by watching them again and again in a quest to improve their performance in the next film they encounter.

“God,” therefore, can be taken to represent the ultimate power over both authorial and readerly—and, if viewed through the lens of a game, ludic—agency, and as a form of artificial intelligence at odds with the human subjectivity embodied by Zheng Zha and his fellow player-characters. This seems to be the case when the protagonists are transported into the second storyworld depicted in the novel, Ridley Scott’s 1979 film *Alien*. As soon as the characters arrive on the alien-occupied spaceship they realize something is not quite right, as an unexpected host of new characters appears to have joined them in the film:

Zheng Zha and the other two looked at Zhang Jie in confusion. Zhang Jie took a deep breath: “I haven’t come across this situation before, but when I was in my first horror movie I heard a more experienced person explain that “God” will sometimes adjust the plot and the difficulty of the movie so that anything can happen. This usually ends with the whole team dying, but of course it goes without saying that if you can complete a horror movie like this then you’ll be richly rewarded.” (n. pag.)

This friction between what characters have come to expect from surviving the previous film and watching the original movie and what happens to them in subsequent episodes continues to play out throughout the novel. “God,” therefore, is both a source of fantasy-fulfilment and a malevolent rule-enforcer who repeatedly prevents the protagonists from returning to the world they left when they first clicked “yes” on the pop-up window that appeared on their computer screens.

To take this reading one step further, I would like to conclude my analysis of *Infinite Horror* by suggesting that, in symbolizing the tension between the creators of commercial media texts and the agency of consumers or fans who wish to rewrite these texts to meet their own needs and desires, the figure of “God” embodies a kind of intermediality that is present throughout the novel. “God” can be detected within each of the films the player-protagonists encounter as “He” selects the films and arbitrarily changes the plot. Yet, the only space in which the protagonists can communicate directly with “God” is found *between* films, sometimes referred to as “God’ Square.” This interstitial zone has similarities with the menu screen in computer games where players select weapons and skills prior to entering a new phase of the game. It also represents an imaginative space between media where consumers navigate between texts and attempt to assert control over what happens next by “adapting” themselves to upcoming challenges. Such a unique re-combination of media products and intermedial references lies at the heart of *Infinite Fiction* and offers a useful point of comparison with the cinematic adaptations of online writings examined above.

Conclusion

My goal in this article has been threefold: to explore what happens to narratives when they move through the internet in the process of adaptation from one medium to another (a way of responding to Dicecco’s question of “what do adaptations do?”);

to juxtapose the analysis of authorized adaptations with a more vernacular example of transmedia adaptation; and to examine the role of the internet as a kind of “in-between” or intermediality that may exert an aesthetic or ideological influence on the content of storyworlds that depend upon it for their production, narration, and circulation. One challenge of this approach is that the internet and associated digital media technologies have become a visible part of the lives of characters in Chinese films, novels, and other genres of contemporary culture regardless of whether the narrative has been adapted from or via the internet. Because digital media are ubiquitous in contemporary China, films, television shows, and other forms of narrative fiction have become replete with depictions of technologically complicated lives.

In the texts discussed above, however, the internet is more than a benign background presence or intrinsic part of the characters’ daily existence. Whether alluded to through on-screen acknowledgements that a film is based on an online text, the use of *mise-en-scène* or cinematography that implies the distorting effects of digital technologies, or a plot that dramatizes the tensions between forms of agency implicit in digital media and the choices of individuals who live their lives through them, the internet takes on a powerful (re)mediating role in these texts. In all three cases, it contributes to a state of human existence in-between the mediatized reality of digital media and the offline, physical world increasingly dominated by those same media. The in-between, therefore, can be understood both as a position that straddles media environments and as a reflection of the challenges or crises that come with living within a multiply remediated or “multilaminated” (Hutcheon 6) environment, in which the effects of different media technologies overlap and shape people’s lives in complex and conflicting ways. As scholars of intermediality in performance cultures have argued, the “in-between” might be more productively thought of as “both/and” rather than “either/or” (Nelson and Bay-Cheng 17): at once physical and mediatized, it is thus subject both to the foibles of human nature that exist apart from technological intervention and to the possibilities and challenges that emerge through social uses of digital technologies.

The manner with which these texts convey and dramatize the state of being in-between has further symbolic implications for the kinds of intermediality that underpin their production and are increasingly defining China’s contemporary cultural landscapes. On one level, *Caught in the Web*, *Mystery*, and *Infinite Horror* might be considered examples of “metadaptations,” defined by Voigts-Virchow as “films and other texts that foreground not just the film-making process or other processes of text production, but also the adaptive processes between media, texts

and genres” (146). The mediality of adapted texts such as these is not something natural, to be gleaned from comparing media forms to media-specific modes of representation and assessing their aesthetic and formal success “as a film” or “as a painting”—it is also culturally inflected and socially constructed along lines that include “national, regional, local, ethnic, gendered or class- and age-based identities” (Voigts-Virchow 150). Paying attention to the social and cultural factors that affect how one medium remediates or represents another can serve as a response to the basic question often posed in adaptation studies: “why adapt?” (and, just as importantly, “who adapts?”). Adaptations, as Hutcheon reminds us, are also interpretations that carry with them the often “deeply personal” views, ambitions, strengths, and shortcomings of their adapter(s) (95), whether that be a world-famous film director or an anonymous internet author.

With this in mind, I conclude with the observation that there appear, at first glance, to be significant differences in how digital media are interpreted by the three cultural producers examined in this article, and that the generational experiences of these producers are likely to have had an effect on how they reflect upon the social impact of new internet-enabled technologies in their works. Chen Kaige has acknowledged that he sees an analogy between “human flesh searches” and the kinds of vitriolic personal attacks that took place during the Cultural Revolution, the era in which Chen and his fellow Fifth Generation filmmakers came of age. He recalls that when he was making *Caught in the Web* and imagining Ye Lanqiu watching her computer screen, he “could hear the overwhelming noise from the public” during the Cultural Revolution (Pennington n. pag.). For the Sixth Generation or “iGeneration” director Lou Ye, what seems most powerful about the internet and related digital media technologies is not that they have enabled a re-enacting of historical forms of violence, but that they have brought greater visibility to the social and political problems that exist in the here-and-now, such as the abuses of power that so often destroy the lives of the poor in neoliberal China. *Mystery* is arguably less pessimistic about the harmful potential of digital technologies than *Caught in the Web*, since it suggests that difficult stories can be told in part because technology has allowed us to know they are happening, as was the case when the “my dad is Li Gang” incident went viral in 2010. Although the outcomes of using digital media for selfish purposes may be tragic, Lou Ye’s film implies that possessing knowledge about the moral threats lurking beneath the surface in Chinese society might be preferable to living in ignorance. To varying degrees, therefore, both Chen and Lou’s films bring to mind the normative project of digital dystopianism described by Goldberg, in which a

“moralizing suspicion of pleasure” leads to a call to internet users to “return to the real” (794).

Finally, for the generation that has come of age in the digital era, known in English as “digital natives” or more disparagingly as “nerds” or “homebodies” (in Chinese, 宅男 *zhainan* or 宅女 *zhainü*, equivalents of the Japanese term “otaku”), these technologies promise a path to greater agency over the society and culture that surrounds them. Whether that culture is considered “real” or not is less important than the task of creating immersive, entertaining texts that reflect their authors’ and readers’ experiences of living between online and offline, fictional and non-fictional worlds—forms of reality, these novels suggest, that are increasingly difficult to tell apart. In their writings, authors like zhttty borrow from a huge range of texts that span temporal, geographic, linguistic, medial, and generic borders. As we have seen, this can involve setting their narratives within pre-existing storyworlds, thereby allowing their protagonists and, by extension, their authors to rewrite cultural history and assume control over the narratives they enjoy. Such processes go further than the media studies concept of “active audiences” who make their own meanings during the process of consumption: along with other grassroots producers of culture who pour their energies into appropriating and remixing existing texts, these writers are busy forging new stories and meanings out of a global archive of popular culture.

Despite the seemingly utopian possibilities implied by the “opening up” of Chinese cultural adaptations in a digital age (Zeng), authors like zhttty are, however, all too aware of the challenges of living and creating across media. What is most striking about *Infinite Horror* in comparison to the two films is its more radical understanding of social relations as they exist in a multiply remediated world. The dilemma presented in the films of Chen Kaige and Lou Ye is how best to handle the breakdown of the social contract which ensues when lives are lived as much through digital media as through face-to-face interactions. While their films may not offer any easy solutions, they at least point to the potential of linear storytelling, in the case of Chen, and online activism, in the case of Lou, to respond to social crises. zhttty’s novel, on the other hand, shows how the dialectical crisis precipitated by the intermediating function of the internet results from the tension between purposeful play and narrative rules and, by extension, between the agency of humans and that of machines – or, at the very least, of those who control them. In the face of unknowable powers, adaptation, it seems, is the only possible response.

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