

Mourning Love:
Queer Performativity and Transformation in
Zero Chou's *Spider Lilies* and *Splendid Float*

Ivy I-chu Chang

Foreign Languages and Literatures Department
National Chiao Tung University, Taiwan

Abstract

This paper looks at the role of gay and lesbian performativity, mourning and (individual and communal) transformation in Zero Chou's *Spider Lilies* (2007) and *Splendid Float* (2004). Chou shows us the close relation between loss of the love object, the ambivalence or destabilization of self-identity and the need for mourning that marks the gay and lesbian collective imagination. On the line between male/female, straight/gay, life/death and mourning/melancholia, the lesbian *Po* (Femme) in "Spider Lilies" and gay drag queen in "Splendid Float" perform a hyperbolically feminine role, thereby confusing heterosexual desire and parodying the binary logic of heterosexual representation. Also, through the force of their queer performativity, they transform their own shame and grief. Little Green as *Po* transforms her shame and is reconciled with the inner child of her past, thus re-affirming her lesbian desire and identity. Ai-wei/Rose and his drag queen friends open up a space of hybridization: their nightly show absorbs the force of communal, native Taiwanese village culture, and the patriarchal Taoist funeral for Rose's lost love Sunny is infiltrated with queer desire, proliferating the possible forms of gay performativity and representation.

Keywords

Zero Chou (周美玲), gay, lesbian, queer, desire, identity, Taiwanese cinema, *Tongzhi*, performativity, shame, mourning, melancholia

In Zero Chou's (周美玲) gay and lesbian films, love and sex have always been recuperated in the form of mourning, as gay and lesbian characters struggle in vain to forsake their beloveds. Mourning is also the performative act through which the protagonists attempt to overcome the loss of their loved ones with intensified memories and haunting desires. Lingering on the fine line between mourning and melancholia, Chou's queer subjects masquerade in a space between life and death, love and shame, the past and the present. Like shamans or ghostly non-subjects, they have to negotiate their existence by playing "not me" or "not-not-me" on the divide between the homosexual and the heterosexual.

In 1915, Sigmund Freud introduced a theory of mourning which, like many other Freudian theories, is implicitly heterosexist but latent with queer possibilities. "Mourning," as Freud has it, "is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved one, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on" ("Mourning and Melancholia" 243). Mourning is a precarious process through which one has to withdraw his or her libido from an object or abstraction that has become absent. The process of mourning is, then, an experience of gradually "letting go." Mourning may be distinguished from melancholia, a state which Freud considers pathological. Melancholia is brought about by the subject's inability to immediately identify the problems and contradictions caused by the lost object. In melancholia, the process of grieving is accompanied by the problematic retention of the absent objects. Later, in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), Freud even attempts to deconstruct this mourning-melancholia binary. He realizes that the identification with lost objects—which he has described as characteristic of melancholia—is also crucial to the attainment of mourning. The demarcation between mourning and melancholia can be elusive and the work of mourning may easily be deconstructed and construed as the manifestation of melancholia.

Representation of the T/Po in Spider Lilies

Focusing on Zero Chou's films *Spider Lilies* (刺青) (2007) and *Splendid Float* (豔光四射歌舞團) (2004), this paper will explore the issue of gays' and lesbians' repression of their desires and the paradoxical recuperation of these desires in the form of mourning, itself highly aestheticized by Zero Chou as an ambivalent structure of cinematic grieving. Off and on during the lingering process of letting-go, Chou's gay and lesbian protagonists fail to successfully mourn, that is, to completely release their lost objects and so are caught in a state of melancholia.

These protagonists also “masquerade” in an ambiguous state between homosexuality and heterosexuality. Camping among the tropes of eroticism and death on this divide, they are able to “infiltrate” the apparatuses of heterosexual representation with gay and lesbian desire. On the other hand, they run the risk of reifying themselves under the heterosexist, voyeuristic gaze while struggling to deconstruct/reconstruct their own identities. In terms of gay and lesbian representation, the gay/lesbian subjects in Zero Chou’s films are problematic or even symptomatic. Nevertheless, by means of an insightful queer spectatorship, this study will interpret their mourning and/or melancholia as a sort of queer performativity compounded with shame and stigma, and further explicate the connections among performativity, melancholia, mourning, the affect of shame, and the ambivalent construction of gay and lesbian identities.

Spider Lilies is a melodrama on which is superimposed an arguably lesbian romance, one that deals with family trauma caused by the 9/21 earthquake, the subculture of youths and social outcasts (tattoos and pornography on the Internet), and lesbian eroticism and fetishism. Its cinematic diegesis revisits and reappropriates the present and the past, life and death, memories and amnesia. In this lesbian romance, Bamboo is a lesbian who prohibits herself from desiring women because she has been repeatedly haunted by shame and guilt combined with the bitter memories of the 9/21 earthquake. One dark night, she left her younger brother behind to date her first love. Catching everyone off guard, the disastrous earthquake erupted, causing her father, a tattoo master, to be buried alive under the ruins with only one arm stretching out from the debris. The tattoo of Spider Lilies (which is also a Mandala, a symbol of sad memories believed to pave the way to Hades in Japanese culture) appearing on that arm continues to haunt Bamboo’s memories. After the trauma of her father’s death, her younger brother suffered from amnesia. In order to mourn her father and to help her brother retrieve his lost memories, Bamboo learned tattooing and gave herself a gorgeous golden spider lily tattoo on her left arm. Little Green, another character in this film, is haunted by her memories of Bamboo; she had fallen in love with her at the age of nine and then lost track of her. Failing to let go of her lost love object, she has become a melancholic, looking for Bamboo day and night. She roams around in the daytime and performs in pornography films on the Internet at night, secretly wishing to seduce Bamboo, meet her and satisfy her unrequited love.

In *Spider Lilies*, the T/Po (婆) (butch/femme) duo,¹ Bamboo and Little Green, arouse heated discussion and controversy in lesbian communities. Isabella Leong (梁若施), who played Bamboo, and Rainie Yang (楊丞琳), who played Little Green, found themselves wooed by a large number of fans and became idols in/of the lesbian community in Taiwan.² On the other hand, some lesbian audience members dismissed this film as a corny “love story” between two women that neither represented lesbian subjects effectively nor contextualized lesbian history in Taiwan. Some even criticized the film for appropriating lesbian eroticism to appease heterosexual filmgoers’ voyeuristic desires for commercial purposes.³ Many discussions have concentrated on the erotic bed scene. In this scene, Bamboo places her face between Little Green’s legs, moving her face upward beneath Little Green’s body as they caress and fondle each other’s torso. This “almost but not quite” scene (displaying lesbian eroticism without showing actual intercourse), the erotically charged climax of the film, has become a popular topic for discussion at fan gatherings.

At one such meeting in Hong Kong, Zero Chou was challenged to justify her decision not to show lesbian kissing in her film. Wearing her trademark shy smile she confessed: “As a matter of fact, the two actresses are very devoted in acting in bed. They did French kisses, putting their tongues into each other’s mouth. However, when I edited this film for release, I felt too shy to show their French kisses and then I cut them. The scene of French kissing is not shown at movie theatres, but it is fully shown in the DVD version.”⁴ Chou’s playful and

¹ Antonia Chao notes that the term “T” means “tomboy” while the “Po” (“wife” in Chinese) is the T’s feminine partner. “T” as “tomboy” was introduced when western pop music was imported into Taiwan from Hong Kong in the early 1960s. T-identity was formed in 1960s pubs under the influence of American GI culture during the Cold War and Vietnam War, when US armed forces were stationed in Taipei. (“US Space Shuttle Going to the Moon” 1). Chao further emphasizes that T/Po culture did not become popular until 1986—coinciding with the opening of the first lesbian bar (called the T bar) in Taipei—after which stylized T-Po role playing came into existence (3) See Antonia Chao, in “US Space Shuttle Going to the Moon: Global Metaphors and Local Strategies in Building up Taiwan’s Lesbian Identities.” Tr. Chang Yu-fen. Paper presented in the Third Annual Mini International Conference on Sex/Gender Politics, Central University, Taiwan, 1-15.

² See online postings between 30 Mar. and 22 Apr., 2007 on the “lesbian” board of PTT BBS. <telnet://ptt.cc>. A webpage copy of the posting can be found at <http://www.ptt.cc/man/lesbian/index.html> (Accessed on 15 Oct. 2008.)

³ See posting on PTT BBS. See also online posting between 4 Apr. and 8 Apr., 2007 on the “T les” board of KKCity 5466 BBS. <telnet://5466.kkcity.com.tw> (Accessed on 15 Oct. 2008.)

⁴ Hsin, Pei-yi and Tsai, Chung-Leng. “Interview with Zero Chou the Director.” *Dockworker*. 6. (4 Mar. 2008). Accessed on 15 Oct. 2008. <http://docworker.blogspot.com/2008/03/blog-post_670.html>.

light-hearted answer tends to downplay her use of what Liu Jen-peng (劉人鵬) and Ding Naifei (丁乃菲), describing the traditional Chinese treatment of same-sex subjects, call “reticent poetics”⁵ (30-5). Her use of self-censorship is of course in keeping with heterosexual values and conventional morality; her concessions are admittedly aimed at making this film a commercial success, a movie that appeals to both homosexual and heterosexual audiences.

Similar doubts were raised about Bamboo and Little Green as supposedly a T/Po (butch/femme) couple by some lesbian filmgoers, who thought that Bamboo did not act “T” enough because she was not sufficiently masculine. Indeed, Bamboo hardly befits the image of a typical T-lesbian when compared with those pre-lesbian movement leaders who were already represented in literature as genuine imitators of the heterosexual male, appearing very masculine and even male-chauvinistic in their relationships with Po-lesbians.⁶ Bamboo, as played by Isabella Leong, seems too neutral, passive, reserved, self-repressed. She might fit one specific type of *Pu-fen* (不分) or “not differentiating,” which connotes both an egalitarian relationship among members of a lesbian couple and more neutral gender behavior in general. In her study of lesbian role types after the lesbian and gay movement in the mid-1990s, Chien Chia-hsin (簡家欣) found that university lesbians in Taiwan were adopting a mixed style rather than uniform *Pu-fen* coupling. In terms of

Also accessed on <tv.openv.com/play/dvdprogramme_20070722_354190.html>.

⁵ Liu Jen-peng and Ding Naifei point out that the traditional Chinese attitude towards same-sex sexual relationships is one of silence and tolerance, rather than one of an official-public-rhetorical tolerance which turns “coming out” into “becoming invisible” (30). The disciplinary and rhetorical forces of communal harmony (both social and familial), along with these traditional attitudes of reticence and tolerance toward those perceived as threatening this harmony, tend to keep lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people in the realm of ghosts (32). See Liu, Jen-peng and Ding Naifei, “Reticent Poetics, Queer Politics,” in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6.1 (2005): 30-55.

⁶ Prior to Taiwan’s lesbian movement in the 1990s, many Ts in T bars and lesbian communities imitated the male role in heterosexual society through hyper-masculinity (Chao 8). See Antonia Chao, in “US Space Shuttle Going to the Moon: Global Metaphors and Local Strategies in Building up Taiwan’s Lesbian Identities.” Tr. Chang Yu-fen. Paper presented in the Third Annual Mini-International Conference on Sex/Gender Politics, Central University, Taiwan, Nov 27, 1999. 1-15. As for lesbian representation in literature, Liou Liang-ya cites examples from Chiu Miao-chin’s fiction to show that the pre-lesbian-movement T-lesbians are usually portrayed as suffering from self-hatred and self-loathing in Taiwanese literature; they imitate heterosexual males with their heightened masculinity and even reproduce male chauvinistic stereotypes in their relationships with Pos (“Yu-wang keng-yi-shi” 113, 115, 119). See Liou Liang-ya, “Queer Theory and Politics in Taiwan: The Cultural Translation and (Re)Production of Queerness in and Beyond Taiwan Lesbian/Gay/Queer Activism,” *NTU Studies in Language and Literature* 14 (2005): 123-154.

gender behaviors, power relationships and gender roles in sexual intercourse, Chien found that university lesbians are comprise a spectrum of at least twenty-four types of *T-Po* role-playing, with the extreme masculine and feminine types at the two poles (94-5).

That the portrayal of Bamboo's role appears problematic and disturbing even to lesbian audiences casts doubt on the simple and convenient observation that the character is insufficiently masculine, for this paradoxical representation includes a sense of shame and stigma. Too many coincidences associate her lesbian desire and love with natural catastrophes and family trauma. Bamboo's date with her first love is followed by the fatal earthquake, the death of her father and the illness of her brother; her love-making scene with Little Green is followed by her brother's serious injury and the amputation of her client Ah-tong's arm due to his street fight. The punishment for moral transgression or "sin" implied by this implausible plot resonates with the attitude taken by Taiwan's mainstream literature and cinema during the period before the gay and lesbian movements, the attitude which pathologizes and stigmatizes gays and lesbians by attributing their sexuality to a broken family or traumatic childhood or even to divine retribution.

Tattoos, Mourning, and Lesbian Shame

Corresponding with the theme and the Chinese title of the film "Tattoo," the tattoo itself becomes an ambivalent object or fetish, the mark of an erotic stigma, and the act of tattooing becomes the double movement that re-inscribes the act of cinematic mourning, compounding it with lesbian shame and desire. For Bamboo, who has always been obsessed with the ghost of her father and the attempts to retrieve her brother's memories, the spider-lilies tattoo on her left arm signifies her wish to reconfigure her living body into a sign that reconnects the patriarchal line between father and son, but also implies her sense of being stigmatized, the shame borne by a lesbian who attributes her own family tragedy to her taboo love. As if in a rite of passage, the mark of the father's body has been bestowed upon her through the tattoo, giving rise to her anxiety and feeling of ambivalence about identifying with the patriarchal values of the symbolic realm. On the other hand, Bamboo's mourning for her father has been intertwined with her mourning for the lost object, the object she is prohibited to love. Nevertheless, her attempt to let go fails repeatedly and she always returns to a state of melancholia, an ambivalent structure of feeling that works to simultaneously introject the image of the father and to retain the problematic object of love. With self-hatred and loathing, Bamboo forbids

herself to love a woman, be it her first love or Little Green.

Like the double movement of mourning, the spider-lilies tattoo functions as an ambivalent fetish: it substitutes for the phallus to consolidate the patriarchal values while erotically re-inscribing Bamboo's escapist desire and unfulfilled love. Be it a sign or an object, the fetish is indispensable in lesbian subculture, as pointed out by Teresa de Lauretis:

What the lesbian desires in a woman ("the penis somewhere else?") is indeed not a penis but a part or perhaps the whole of the female body, or something related to it, such as physical, intellectual, or emotional attributes, stance, attitude, appearance, self-representation—and hence the importance of clothing, costume, performance, etc. in lesbian subculture. (228)

Lesbian love and desire are imbued with fetishism. Be it the tattoo of gorgeous golden spider lilies encircling Bamboo's arm or the green fluorescent wig glistening around Little Green's face, the fetish object is the signifier of a fantasy scenario, an erotic sign marking the difference as well as the desire (or the desire as difference) between the lesbian lovers. Little Green wears a green wig when she appears in Internet pornography, attempting to invoke Bamboo's lesbian desire and childhood memories of her. When Bamboo is alone, she ambivalently and stealthily glances at Little Green's videos on the screen. The image of Little Green is virtual and unreal in Bamboo's imagination, but it projects Bamboo's desire to escape the inescapably real—what she actually desires is Little Green's real body. Through incessant failures and attempts, the fetish object both elides and marks the separation in describing the object of desire and its absence. The tangled golden spider lilies on Bamboo's arm epitomize the self-negation of her mourning for her taboo love and her haunting lesbian desire. However, this sign also conceals the pledge of love to Little Green. Little Green insists on having Bamboo tattoo her body when she sees her in her tattoo shop. After Bamboo completes a jasmine pattern, she understates its meaning by suggesting "it's only a tattoo." "It's a tattoo of love," Little Green insists.

Masquerading on the Divide Between Homosexuality and Heterosexuality

In the *T/Po* relationship, Little Green as the *Po* is more active, flexible, and

resilient than Bamboo. Taking advantage of the heterosexual apparatus of representation of lesbian desire, Little Green has been appearing in pornographic films on the Internet in the hope of seducing Bamboo. In so doing, Little Green rides and subtly manipulates the divide between heterosexuality and homosexuality. As a feminine *Po*, she must pass as a straight woman in order to find access to the heterosexual representational apparatus. This gives her more freedom to express her libido and to attract “T” lesbians. In the art of lesbian representation, whether of the “lesbian continuum” (Rich 23), or of the T/*Po* (butch/femme) duo (Case 290) type, the *Po* (femme) has always been challenged as lacking subjectivity and visibility. The *Po* is usually represented as a passive, dependent role; she can only be “seen” when she is coupled with her T. As Joan Nestle points out, “[a] femme is often seen as a lesbian acting like a straight woman who is not a feminist” (140). To lesbian activists, the *Po* seems “not lesbian or feminist enough” in her gender identification. In terms of gender/sexuality representation, if the T is doubly dismissed and marginalized (as woman and lesbian), the *Po* (femme) might be seen as being triply dismissed or marginalized (as woman, lesbian and self-effacing *Po*), which places her in the position of “non-subject.” As a lesbian non-subject, the *Po* is like the ghost of a ghost or shadow of a shadow: her voice has been excluded from the discourse and her body has remained unrepresentable within the heterosexual apparatus. Nevertheless, in her study of Taiwan’s lesbian representation in literature, Amie Parry (白瑞梅) argues that a *Po*’s invisibility and ability to pass as a heterosexual woman may be signs of privilege or camouflage in a social context, which resonates with Jewel Gomez’s femme-feminist location of femme-identified women as “tactical guerrillas” in the “war of liberation” (8). Masquerading as a straight woman on the Internet enables Little Green to infiltrate and perhaps confuse or subvert the sign system of the heterosexual apparatus with lesbian desire. However, she is at risk of exposing herself to the voyeuristic gaze of heterosexual males and policemen assigned to control Internet pornography.

As a matter of fact, *Spider Lilies* is director Zero Chou’s renewed attempt to make a commercial movie after filming a series of documentaries. Aiming at both homosexual and heterosexual audiences, she has cast stars in the two leading lesbian roles. In *Spider Lilies*, Rainie Yang’s Little Green is given the doll-like image of a *bishojo* (美少女, beautiful young girl)—a “Japanese” girl with big eyes, long hair and a slim, flat body, which was imported with Japanese *Manga* into Taiwan in the 1980s and has since been re-appropriated by the phallogocentric imagination. Over the years this *bishojo* image has been circulated, romanticized, and commoditized to such a degree that it now operates as an indispensable element

across a wide range of fictions concerning modern Taiwanese female subjectivity. Taiwanese males' fantasies of virginal *bishojos* are laid bare in the gaze of the voyeuristic cop in *Spider Lilies* who, in his MSN chat with Little Green, inquires as to whether she has already given her "first time" to someone. Little Green, half jokingly, lies to the anonymous cop, whom she sometimes mistakes for Bamboo, saying that she is saving herself for a lad living next door, a "lad" who is of course the much-desired Bamboo.

Little Green's masquerading as a *bishojo* on the Internet is what Judith Butler terms "the paradoxical process of performativity" that can either consolidate or subvert the heterosexual norms, depending on the milieu of performance and spectatorship. For Butler, performativity involves a paradoxical process in which the body's "sex" and sexual difference are materialized through the reiterative and citational practices of regulatory norms, and hence it opens up the possibilities of both identification and disidentification with these regulatory norms. Insofar as the process of "materialization is never quite complete," its instability opens up "the possibilities of rematerialization . . . that mark one domain in which the force of the regulatory law turns against itself (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 2). In other words, such performativity not only materializes sex and sexual difference in the consolidating of the heterosexual matrix, but it also produces "a domain of abjection" during the identificatory process, one which makes possible feminist and queer disidentificatory strategies for subverting the heterosexual imperative by exposing its contradictions from within (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 3-4). In addressing performativity, Butler is specifically concerned with the performative charge of "queerness."⁷ She regards the strategic ambiguity, mutability, oscillation, and mobility of queer politics as making it possible for gays and lesbians to return from the domain of abjection to subvert heterosexual normality.

Little Green's appropriation of the image of *bishojo* allows her to interpellate lesbian desire on the Internet. While she uses obscene language to flirt with the anonymous male spectators, the slippage between her language and her lesbian

⁷ The word *queer* itself, from the German *quer*, means "across"; the concept itself can only be understood as connoting a mode of identification that is both relational and oblique. Sedgwick has explained that "queer" is a moment of perpetual flux, a movement that is eddying and turbulent. Cross-identifications, Sedgwick and others have forcefully argued, are standard operating procedures for queers. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Duram, 1993) 5-9. For some radical activists and cultural practitioners, *queer* means a strategy of purposeful elusiveness and ambiguity which allows them to expand their agenda in coalition with other progressive forces in contest with the dominant ideologies and institutional structures, while resisting interpretive and deontological closure.

body causes a rupture, and her performance becomes a mockery of the phallogentric imagination. In other words, through the voyeuristic male gaze, the *bishojo* image appropriated by Little Green is the other without otherness; it is otherness in the process of undergoing, arguably, a phantasmagoric transition.

For a lesbian, the mourning of lost love and masquerading as a heterosexual woman in order to retain the problematic object of love are tactics as well as consequences of negotiating one's existence as a non-subject while struggling to deconstruct and reconstruct one's identity. Taking on the absence of otherness in the specific experience of lesbians in Taiwan, Amie Parry draws our attention to their exclusion from the symbolic realm as non-subjects "whose practices do not in this context enter into the modern field of rights and whose voices are heard in ghostly laughter, scattered manuscript papers, and sex talk" (12). As Little Green masquerades as a *bishojo* on the boundary between homophilia and homophobia, negotiating her ghostly existence as a non-subject, she lays bare the ambivalent structure of feeling of *heterosexual* representational apparatuses. Hiding behind the image of a *bishojo*, Little Green imitates an innocent and erotic heterosexual woman with a hyperbolic femininity. The virtual image of a *bishojo* on the Internet activates the cop's desire for an ideal virgin/straight woman. Performing his patriarchal duty of surveillance, that is, checking for any "unclean and obscene" pornography on the Internet, the voyeuristic cop with his male gaze has been enticed to the point of obsession by Little Green's *bishojo* persona. Under the pretext of collecting evidence, he postpones the actual arrest but becomes more and more self-indulgent in gazing at Little Green and chatting with her on MSN. He even warns her of her impending arrest by a police task force, thereby helping her escape. The virtual image of a *bishojo* performing pornography serves as a kind of fetish, an obscene object arousing the cop's ambivalent pleasure (Mulvey 14-26). For as a policeman and guardian of the patriarchy, he must serve the law and promote the order of society, which in this case may mean punishing Little Green in order to redeem her.

Mediated by the virtual image of the *bishojo*, the voyeuristic cop has ironically become obsessed with a lesbian body. The slippage between the virtual image of the *bishojo*, the real lesbian body (Little Green), and the object of the cop's desire (a virgin and a straight woman) exposes the imitative, performative, phantasmatic status of gender and sex, even as defined by the heterosexual majority, and denaturalizes the male/female dichotomy. Judith Butler writes:

Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself. In other words, the naturalistic effects of heterosexualized gender are produced through imitative strategies; what they imitate is a phantasmatic ideal of heterosexual identities, one that is produced by the imitation as its effect. ("Imitation and Gender Insubordination" 313)

Though Little Green runs the risk of reifying her own body in heterosexual representational contexts, her performance as/of a *bishojo* on the Internet denaturalizes the heterosexual normality which has been taken as a naturalistic effect, and hence exposes the fissures and contradictions in/of the heterosexual matrix from within. Little Green's campy eroticism that disrupts the male gaze culminates in the scene in which the cop and Bamboo are buying credits on the porn website in order to see her performance. As usual, Little Green flirts with her male and her potential lesbian audience simultaneously, and it seems that both Bamboo and the cop view her on-line live show with mixed feelings. Bamboo covers her laptop and walks out of her study room to smoke in the midst of Little Green's performance; worried about her upcoming arrest, the cop writes Little Green a message online, advising her to quit her live show on the Internet: "You are degrading yourself." Little Green replies to this anonymous critic: "If you despise me, you can just log off and leave."

"Sooner or later, you will destroy yourself," writes the cop.

"If you look down upon me, you can get out," Little Green replies. "Why do you preach to me? Who do you think you are?"

The cop responds, "I am nobody, but I . . ."

Little Green retorts, "You have no guts to identify yourself, but you criticize me in high moral tones. You are pretentious and hypocritical."

After her confrontation with this anonymous viewer, Little Green becomes more certain of her love for Bamboo and hence more active in seducing her. Later on she goes to Little Green's tattoo shop and insists that Bamboo pledge her love in the form of a tattoo, thereby seducing Bamboo to make love to her. Ironically, while Little Green is making love with Bamboo, the cop logs onto Little Green's porn website, not finding her there. With mixed feelings of loss and relief, he leaves her a message: "Thanks for taking my advice. Never come back. Farewell. I love Little Green."

Thus the force of patriarchal surveillance is itself in some sense confused and perhaps weakened by Little Green's queer performativity, dwelling as it does on the divide between homosexuality and heterosexuality. Moreover, her defiance of the cop's imperative reveals her way of dealing with her shame, which is rather different from Bamboo's pattern of withdrawal and self-loathing. The policeman's admonishment implies a message of "Shame on you!"—one reminiscent of what Sedgwick calls the process of "interpellation" through which the speaking subject (the policeman) interpellates and humiliates the "I" of the other (Little Green) by reducing it to a mere object, a "you" (Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity" 4).⁸ Nevertheless, as the policeman is projecting (his own) shame onto the showgirl, he is effacing his own subjective agency (his "I") in the very act of trying to consolidate it. For Little Green, in the place of the interpellated second person, the affect of shame further detaches or defers her lesbian "I" which has been struggling to come into being. As a lesbian subject, various forms of the shame of her past life have been invoked, but she endeavors to transform this shame into combative energy and in effect throws a "Shame on you!" back at her interpellator while reaffirming her lesbian desire and identity. Then she becomes more persistent in furthering her relationship with Bamboo.

Little Green imbues her performance with this sense or force of the transformation of shame, turning it into queer performativity: passing as a *bishojo* in her interpretation and perhaps parody of lesbian desire; mourning for her lost object of love (mother and/or childhood lover); narcissistically gazing at her inner child; obscenely exposing her *Po*'s body. When she naughtily performs as a child-like *Bishojo* on the Internet, going through her erotic poses, she is narcissistically invoking her own "inner child"—the nine-year-old lesbian child who used to wear a green wig while waiting for Bamboo on the roadside; the nine-year-old lesbian child who was running through green fields, playing with toy cell phones and pretending to talk with her mom who had already left her for Japan.

⁸ Correlating shame with queer performativity and subject formation, Sedgwick writes, "'Shame on you' has several important features in common with Austin's pet examples: most notably, it names itself, it has its illocutionary force (the conferral of shame) in and by specifying its illocutionary intent. Then, like Austin's example, it depends on the interpellation of witness. . . . There is a 'you' but there is no 'I'—or rather, forms of the implicit 'I' constantly remain to be evoked from the formulation 'Shame on you.' They can be evoked in different ways. The absence of an explicit verb in 'Shame on you' records the place in which an I, in conferring shame, has effaced itself and its own agency. . . . I, now withdrawn, is projecting shame—toward another I, an I deferred, that has yet and with difficulty to come into being, if at all, in the place of the shamed second person." See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1 (1993): 4.

Invoking this lesbian child in solitude and destitution, Little Green is now performing the childlike *bishojo* in a new, pleasurable form of exhibitionistic flirtation with both male and lesbian adults. This new form of self-(re)presentation dramatizes her distance from the abandonment and repudiation she experienced as a child, which she now exaggerates and parodies as part of her “little-girl” act. In Little Green’s pornographic performance we see her riding “the narcissism/shame circuit” between the performing “self and its ‘inner child’” as this intersects with “other hyperbolic and dangerous narcissistic circuits” (Sedgwick 11). It is a performativity that transfigures and transforms the sense of shame which flooded through her when her lesbian identity was first formed—when Little Green first knew she loved women at the age of nine. Sedgwick points out that shame is integral to gay and lesbian identity formation but is also available for metamorphosis and transfiguration. She writes:

The forms taken by shame are not the distinct “toxic” parts of a group or individual identity that can be excised; they are instead integral to and residual in the process in which identity is formed. They are available for the work of metamorphosis, reframing, refiguration, transfiguration, affective and symbolic loading and deformation; but unavailable for effecting the work of purgation and deontological closure. (Sedgwick 13)

Moreover, Sedgwick notes, shame and exhibitionism are two sides of the same coin: “shame turns itself skin side outside; shame and pride, shame and self-display, shame and exhibitionism are different interlinings of the same glove” (5). Dramatizing and transfiguring shame in her exhibitionistic flirtation with both heterosexual and homosexual audiences, Little Green renders the potentially paralyzing affect of shame emotionally and performatively productive in search of self-empowerment.

The Melancholic Drag Queen in *Splendid Float*

Viewing Zero Chou’s films as allegories of gay and lesbians’ ghostly non-subject existences, we may assume that their stories and histories can’t be performed by totally ignoring the forms of mourning and melancholia. In Chou’s films, mourning is never far removed from “life.” The scenes of mourning are part of the characters’ process of dealing with all the catastrophes that occur in their

lives. In the repeatedly failed process of letting go, a melancholia that works as an ambivalent “structure of feeling” is necessary and not always counterproductive or negative. It could be the mechanism that helps these characters (re)construct their identities by bringing the dead into the various struggles which they must wage in the names of the dead. Melancholia could open up the productive space of hybridization that exists between a necessary militancy and an indispensable mourning.⁹

In *Splendid Float*, a gay film directed by Zero Chou, the aesthetics of mourning and melancholia compounds the paradoxical process of cinematic grieving. Ai-wei/Rose is a gay man who works as a Taoist shaman (Ai-wei) in the daytime and performs in drag (as Rose) on an electronic float at night. At the beginning of the film, his lover Sunny is drowned. In order for Ai-wei/Rose to retain the lost object of his love, masquerading across the divide between homosexuality and heterosexuality becomes a performative tactic. In spite of many attempts, Ai-wei/Rose fails to “release” Sunny and becomes imprisoned in a melancholia that compels him to retain Sunny within his inner self. Furthermore, the collective mourning by him and his drag queen friends opens up a productive space for hybridizing urban drag subculture and native Taiwanese ritual, thereby allowing us to envision “family” and “home” in the context of queer intimacy and kinship. Playing on and across the fine line between mourning and melancholia as well as that between heterosexuality and homosexuality, Ai-wai/Rose manipulates his double role of shaman/drag queen in order to negotiate between life and death, love and shame, and past and present.

Drag as a Form of Gay Representation

Zero Chou’s *Splendid Float* (2004) is the first attention-getting feature film dealing explicitly with Taiwan’s transvestite subculture. Prior to this film, Chou had produced another feature film, *Films about Body* (身體影片) (1996), which explored the lives of drag queens and transvestites and drew little attention. Mickey Chen (陳俊志) had also directed a prize-winning documentary dealing with the

⁹ When relating melancholia to identity (re)construction, in addition to Sigmund Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia,” I am inspired by Judith Butler’s elaboration on Freud’s concept of “melancholia.” Butler describes the melancholic as a subject who “refuses the loss of the object, and internalization becomes a strategy of magically resuscitating the lost object, not only because the loss is painful, but because the ambivalence felt toward the object requires the object be retained until differences are settled.” See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* 58.

same subject, *Boys for Beauty* (美麗少年) (1999); the film aroused heated discussions, and made the rounds of Taiwan's high schools where it was shown in sex and gender education classes. Chou's 2004 *Splendid Float* ignited discussions and debates on the question of whether drag is an effective form of gay representation, long a controversial issue among Taiwan's gay communities.¹⁰ Those on the pro-side believe that cross-dressing speaks for the marginalized people within gay communities and makes palpable the diversity of gay culture. Moreover, this form of gay self-representation has been effectively utilized in drawing media attention, increasing the visibility of gay people in Taiwan's *Tungzhi* (同志 gay and lesbian) movement. However, those on the con-side believe this may lead to a misunderstanding of gay people and stigmatize the already shamed gay community. As a matter of fact, the art or practice of "drag representation" has always been caught in the ambivalent relationship between Taiwan's popular culture, gay subculture and *Tungzhi* movement. Beginning in the mid-1990s and under the influence of western popular culture, drag queen shows were well-received at commercial venues like bars, pubs and nightclubs. They gained in popularity following the phenomenal debut of *Hong Ding Yiren* (紅頂藝人 Red Hood Performers) in June, 1994, a dancing company featuring fifteen female impersonators in wigs and stockings (Ivy I-chu Chang 152-55). In 1998, drag queen contests became the latest hit on many TV variety shows as they boosted network ratings. Then at the First Taipei *Tungzhi* (Gay) Festival in 2000, "drag" was employed as a performative strategy to encourage gay self-disclosure as well as draw media attention.¹¹ However, this practice drew criticism from the gay community. For fear of further stigmatizing this community, drag was no longer utilized as a "visibility" tactic in The Second Taipei *Tungzhi* Festival (2001) and

¹⁰ Whether drag is an effective form of gay representation has long remained a controversial issue among gay communities as well as in Taiwan's *Tungzhi* movement. Drag was utilized as a form of gay representation to increase gay visibility. However, it aroused criticism from within gay communities. According to a survey by the Motss board KKcity, which connects to the most frequented gay online user group, the flip sides of the drag debate include these: it will stigmatize the already shamed gay community; it's too entertaining and too phony; it will cause misunderstanding; it's too foreign to Taiwan's culture. Advocates of drag, however, argue that such performances can speak for doubly marginalized people; make palpable the diversity of gay culture; support the freedom of speech; arouse pleasure; help attract media attention. KKcity Motss: <telnet://bbs.kkcity.com.tw> (Jun. 25 2001).

¹¹ The First Taipei *Tungzhi* Festival in 2000 utilized drag as a form of strategic representation to increase gay visibility. However, this aroused criticism from within the gay community. For fear of being criticized and stigmatized, drag was no longer utilized as a visibility tactic in The Second Taipei *Tungzhi* Festival (2001) and The Third Taipei *Tungzhi* Festival (2002).

The Third Taipei Tungzhi Festival (2002).

Some members of the Taiwan's gay community had worried since at least the 1990s about various forms of "elitism" within the gay community, and the desire for more open forms of gay representation in cinema must be seen in this context.¹² Moved by the drag-queen performance in *Splendid Float*, gay activist and practitioner Luo Ching-yao (羅敬堯) feels the film envisions a more diverse and inclusive gay community. Criticizing the increasing exclusion of drag from the representation of gays in recent *Tungzhi* movements in Taiwan, he asks, "After the rainbow (a metaphor for the newly diverse *Tungzhi* culture), what will be the next? Only the sunlight (of health, purity, cleansing)?" Luo comments that the "cleansing" of drag from gay representation is a sign of regression in Taiwan's *Tungzhi* movement, one which makes clear the undercurrent of "sissy" phobia and the increasing exclusion of sexual dissidents such as sissy gays, drag queens and transvestites, transgender gays and s/m practitioners from the gay community (Luo Ching-yao 2005).¹³ Another pro-drag film critic, Chao His-yen (趙錫彥), remarks that *Splendid Float* makes drag queens and transvestites more visible, providing a kind of identificatory category that should not be reductively understood as either homosexual or heterosexual. He acknowledges Director Chou's efforts to visualize the desires of drag queens through their bodies, costumes, singing and dancing.

On the other hand, film audience members opposed to this cinematic drag representation may be exemplified by Chien Ching-hang (簡靜航), an activist and leader in the Hsinchu gay community and on their website. Chien objects to the drag queen role in *Splendid Float*: "The film is very beautiful and the Taoist ritual is extremely interesting. But I would regard it as a film about love and death rather than gay life. Rose is just like a woman. In my opinion, a gay relationship is a mixture of homosociality and homosexuality. In those gay communities I have been through, even a sissy gay considers himself a male and identifies himself as a *Didi* (弟弟 younger brother), not as a woman. Rose is too feminine to represent gays, and most of my friends won't go out with a drag queen (Chien Ching-hang 2005)"¹⁴

¹² Thus, for example, queer scholar Chao Yen-ning (趙彥寧) criticized the exclusionism of Taiwan's gay representation and *Tungzhi* Movement in the 90's: "In the discourses and practices of Taiwan's *Tungzhi* movement, though such provocative words and codes as 'queer' and 'movement' are frequently utilized, the participants . . . seldom include non-elite, lower class transvestites, transgender gays, cross-dressers, drag queens, or drag kings (including bull dykes and stone butches)" ("Mask and Reality" 89).

¹³ Interview with the author in Taipei, July 3, 2005.

¹⁴ Interview with the author in Hsin-chu City, June 14, 2005.

Despite the controversies spurred by this film, Chou's daring attempt to hybridize urban gay culture and indigenous performance is noteworthy because she stimulates our imagination and contributes to the envisioning of a more inclusive form of gay (self-)representation. When producing *Splendid Float*, she was often questioned by gay people about the efficacy and legitimacy of drag as a means of gay representation. She replied:

You folks are not the only people in the gay community. There are drag queens, transgender gays, and s/m gays. My film is not aimed at conflicts but aimed at reconciling the society through an artistic form. But who is being reconciled with whom? Combining indigenous ritual and drag performance, I want to include the lower class and the dissidents. Through characterizing drag queens and transvestites as warm and affectionate people, I hope that I could enhance gay and straight people's understanding and appreciation of drag."¹⁵ (Zero Chou, *Interview*)

Chou's all-inclusive politics is clear in this feature film, which seems to have served as a remedy to the ailing art of gay representation in Taiwan.

Performing in Drag to Negotiate Between Life and Death, Love and Shame

Through camera movement and film editing, *Splendid Float* teases filmgoers, playing with their gaze and their desires by staying on the line between homosexuality and heterosexuality. During the drag queen shows, such techniques as crane shots, long shots, medium shots, panning and handheld shots are utilized to create the spectacle of a carnival. The dichotomy of male/female and the conflation of biological sex and gender role are constantly disrupted by double-gendered drag queens who swiftly oscillate between a womanly appearance onstage and manly appearance offstage, at once projecting viewers' sexual desires and their gender anxiety. Right from the opening of the film, the director reveals her intention of displaying the polymorphous desire, and perhaps perversity, of cross-dressing and the double-gendered reality it makes possible. In one scene we see Rose, who appears as a demure and beautiful lady wearing long hair and earrings. (S)he

¹⁵ Interview with the author in Hsin-chu City, May 18, 2005.

narcissistically looks at her/his own image in the mirror, slowly blowing air onto the mirror and gently kissing her/himself. Then (s)he wipes the mirror clean. In the very next scene we are given a disorienting contrast: here we see Ai-wei/Rose as a naked man passionately making love to another naked man, Sunny, on their splendid float. *Via* close-ups we only see fragments of two naked men's faces and torsos entangled with Rose's long fluffy-white feather-boa: their arms, breasts, waists, hips and legs can sometimes hardly be distinguished from each other.

The stunning parallel of these two erotic scenes, with their overt narcissism and exhibitionism, is of course likely to shock and confuse heterosexual viewers; it will probably intensify their homophobic anxieties but may also compel them to rethink the (non-)essential nature of sex and gender. Gay viewers will naturally be used to thinking in terms of a less rigid binary division of masculine/feminine, but they may have differing views of this particular kind of gay representation as discussed above. Chao Daniel Ting-huei (趙庭輝), expounding on Francette Pacteau's theory of androgyny, regards the drag queens in this film as a representation of the androgyny in/of the pre-Oedipal imaginary, a figure of narcissistic and fetishistic desire who is neither man nor woman (134).

For the transvestite characters in *Splendid Float*, the drag queen show is not only the essential masquerade fleshing out their sexual fantasies and identities, but also a parody of the heterosexual normality. Furthermore, this show is the way for them to negotiate between present and past, life and death, love and shame. For the drag queen, discriminated against and humiliated, may also (like Little Green) be performing or acting out the shame which flooded his/her initial disruptive moment of queer subject formation in childhood, a performance which mirrors the exchanged gazes of queer child and parent through the years. The drag show allows him/her, as her pornographic film-within-the-film performance allowed Little Green, to present "feminine" narcissism to the spectators' eyes, reconnecting "the narcissism/ shame circuit" between the performing " 'self' and its 'inner child'" as this intersects with "other hyperbolic and dangerous narcissistic circuits" (Sedgwick 11).

The queer impulse to reconnect the pulsation of mirroring regards—between parent and child, between lovers separated by the border between life and death—through the narcissism/shame circuit is also embodied, in *Splendid Float*, in the recurrent motif of Rose's narcissistic gaze at herself in the mirror before she does her shows. The film gives us three drag queen shows which highlight the turning points in Ai-wei/Rose's love journey: the first one precedes his romantic encounter with Sunny and their love making; the second follows Sunny's departure from the village and his death; and the third one, presented in the form of a ritual of

mourning, allows for Ai-wei/Rose's temporary reunion with his dead lover.

Prior to the third drag show, which is itself dedicated to his dead lover, Rose stays in the dressing room alone, putting on make-up. As usual, he casts a narcissistic gaze at himself in the mirror, but surprisingly he sees Sunny appearing in it. The two lovers bewilderedly and affectionately gaze at each other. "I am coming," says Sunny. "This time, don't give me a yellow rose again," Rose replies, recalling the heart-breaking yellow rose Sunny had given him before his departure. Moments later, the hostess of the drag queen show announces: "Our splendid show will take you to an eternal paradise." Accompanied by the quick-tempo music and Lily and Lulu's alluring dance, Rose in a white sash gown and Sunny in a yellow T-shirt intimately caress each other, dancing together to the music amidst the crowd. However, as Rose sings solo, Sunny gradually walks away from her toward the river, fading into the water until we see only his yellow T-shirt floating on the water, while Rose and the splendid float are left far behind. In this momentary scene of "reunion," Aiwei/Rose's narcissistic gaze recuperates the mirroring regards exchanged between two lovers, ferrying them across the divide between life and death.

This queer desire and its recuperating gaze from out of the taboo terrain of death is also enacted in two earlier enigmatic scenes which show us Ai-wei/Rose's soul engaged in a seashore ritual with Sunny. In one, Ai-wei/Rose appears as a man swimming in the ocean and gazing at Sunny, who is happily swimming alongside two men. Ai-wei/Rose tries to swim toward them for a while, but then turns back. In another scene, Ai-wei/Rose again appears as a man swimming in the waves, gazing at the nearby splendid float on which Sunny, wearing Rose's long white fluffy feather-boa, dances happily with the drag queens Lily and Lulu. This is reminiscent of an earlier scene showing a romantic encounter at the beginning of the film, a scene in which Sunny was swimming alone in the ocean and watching the adorable Rose dancing with Lily and Lulu on the passing splendid float. These two enigmatic scenes make palpable Ai-wei/Rose's melancholy state and his unsettled relationship with his lost object of love. The first scene portrays Ai-wei/Rose as a melancholic subject who attempts to retain the lost object by internalizing the attributes of Sunny: swimming toward Sunny and his male friends, he attempts to imitate Sunny's masculine style and to join men's homosocial world. However, his turning back implies his lack of determination, his oscillation between masculinity and femininity. The second scene portrays a more complex and subtle relationship between the melancholic subject and his lost object. Insofar as Ai-wei/Rose as melancholic subject has internalized Sunny's perception/sensation

invested with libidinal cathexes, his ego has to find a substitute for these cathexes. Consequently, Ai-wei/Rose's ego regresses to the narcissistic phase, in which Sunny occupies the position of object-libido in the loop of narcissistic libidinal cathexes. Ai-wei/Rose, occupying the position of ego-libido, projects libido and sensation/perception onto his object-libido Sunny, while also internalizing Sunny's sensation/perception. In other words, Sunny and Ai-wei are inseparable—in a different way from Ai-wei/Rose, they are one. This kind of “floating” and self-reflexive, narcissistic identification allows Ai-wei/Rose to exchange his position, the “location” or “situation” of his gaze and desire, with that of Sunny. Occupying Sunny's position, then, he mournfully and narcissistically looks back at Sunny who, though with a man's appearance, replaces Ai-wei/Rose's position as drag queen, dancing with Lily and Lulu on the seaborne splendid float.

Heterotopia in a Taboo Space

Corresponding to the themes of the film—the passage between life and death, the fluid and floating identities of gays and drag queens—the scenes in *Splendid Float* are mostly what Marc Auge terms “non-places” (passageways and spaces detached from social relationships; 98-9). Thus we have the highway, delta, riverside, seashore and cemetery, spaces that are characteristic of passages and transient states, abstracted from normal everyday life and social relationships. In particular, to help create the drag queen shows' aura of transient happiness and ephemeral beauty, Zero Chou chooses a delta along the Tamshui River as the main performance site. In this natural setting is placed a phantasmagoric electronic float, and the flamboyant dancing of drag queens clad in colorful and fluffy feathers is seen against the Taipei City skyline with its dazzling neon lights across the river. In the performances of Taiwan's indigenous peoples, the electronic float is a carrier of a grass-roots life force, social mobility, and sexual libido.¹⁶ Imbued with queer

¹⁶ The evolution of the electronic float as an element in indigenous Taiwanese performances is noteworthy. Up to the mid-1980s, the electronic float was mainly used for funeral ceremonies; it was simply decorated with paper flowers and had no girl dancer. Beginning in the mid-1980s, the Taiwanese bubble economy was booming, and many middle and lower class people accumulated instant money *via* real estate speculation and the stock market. Besides, the whole island became excited about the Liu-ho lottery and a great variety of gambling possibilities. During this period, the functions of the electronic float became more diversified: now the float was used not only for funeral ceremonies but also for various kinds of open air religious ceremonies, in order to fulfill a vow or to pray for more fortune. The float was used not only as a vehicle but also as a gaudily decorated mobile stage on which young sexy girls were hired to dance or do strip teases, in order to entertain both the gods and the human audience. In some temple fairs, the worshippers even

desire and transvestite fantasy, the splendid float caught by Chou's lens illuminates the dream-like, ephemeral utopia of gender and sexual transgression while the urban backdrop represents the reality everyday, banal life. When the drag queen shows take place, the splendid float shimmers like a floating phantom at the edge of water, reminiscent of the *papier-maché* boats in native Taiwanese rituals that ferry the ghosts to Hades in the lunar-calendar month of July. This then becomes the mobile home and/as stage for the performing of a queer desire and intimacy propelled by both thanatos and eros, the death drive and the erotic (sexual) drive.

When asked what motivated her to deal with such taboo topics as death, funerals and drag shows, Chou replies:

These taboo things seem very natural to me, just like the air I breathe in my everyday life. I grew up in Keelung---the site of the largest ghost festival in the Chinese lunar month of July. They are just part of my everyday life. It seems to me that life and death are so close to each other and you can hardly draw a line between them. Since childhood, I have always been attracted to the gaudiness and flamboyance of Taiwanese indigenous culture, which might be criticized by some middle-class people as being vulgar and lacking taste, but to me it is so vital, fascinating, and full of life force.¹⁷

Commingling the spiritual and the corporeal, Zero Chou transforms her memories of the geographical and social margins to negotiate the interstices between different times and spaces. In *Splendid Float*, the articulation of drag queen performance art

competed with one another in spending money, trying to make their electric floats the most luxurious and hire the sexiest dancing girls. In other words, the evolution of the electronic float as an important element in native Taiwanese ritual performances corresponds to the growth of Taiwan's bubble economy. The float is then not only a vehicle for the passage from life to death and a carrier of sexual libido and the grassroots life-force, but also a representative of upward social mobility—the last being an aspect of the dominant heterosexual culture that Chou is parodying in the film.

¹⁷ Zero Chou talked about her feelings towards Taiwanese indigenous culture at a colloquium held by the Film Studies Center at National Chiao Tung University on May 18, 2005. She also told the audience that *Splendid Float* is the first of her Rainbow Series of feature films, in which she planned to explore and investigate gays and lesbians' lives. In *Splendid Float* the symbolic color is yellow, embodied by the Taoist shaman's yellow robe as a symbol of power, the yellow rose as a symbol of love, and Sunny's yellow T-shirt as a pledge of love. At the end of the film, Ai-wei throws away Sunny's yellow T-shirt, implying that he has finally let go of the object of his love and mourning.

coupled with native Taiwanese ritual makes possible a fantasy space which might also be described, to use Michel Foucault's term, as a "heterotopia." According to Michel Foucault, a heterotopia is comprised of "other" spaces; it co-presents various contradictory spaces and nodal points. A heterotopia then could be the enclosed space, non-space or passageway which allows for transgression and transformation (22-7). Performing at/on/in the liminality (threshold) between life and death, heterosexuality and homosexuality, the drag queen/shaman simultaneously deconstructs and fetishizes the boundaries, opening up death into a self-reflexive queer theatricality. Ritualistic mourning (of the lost ones) and summoning (of the living spirits) propel the dimensionless exchange between interior and exterior worlds: Ai-wei/Rose's reunions with Sunny in the drag queen show and by the cemetery are both spiritual and corporeal, blurring the boundary between illusion and reality. The gay heterotopia is imbued with heterochronies (or with a multiple non-linear temporality). In the campy drag queen show on a funeral float, the drag queens take a flight from the linear time of everyday life, allowing spectators to transgress taboos and materialize queer desire in a timeless utopia. As the theme song says, "The splendid float will bring us to an eternal paradise." This paradise is envisioned by the director as having "no hierarchy, no boundaries" but being "a realm of reconciliation" (Zero Chou).

Infiltrating Taoist Ritual with Queer Desire, Queering Family with Drag Kinship

Using the form of mourning, *Splendid Float* combines or merges native Taiwanese ritual performance with drag queen performance and a gay sensibility, mapping this marginalized space and culture onto a gay landscape. Chou's vision functions on three levels. First, by scrambling the cultural codes of Taoist shamanic ritual and drag queen performance, it gives Ai-wei/Rose a transformative power of performativity with which he can infiltrate the patriarchal, heterosexual symbolic realm with queer desire and bodily affect. Second, it puts into question traditional ideals of "home" and "family," opening up the possibility of exploring queer conceptions of home and kinship. Third, it vernacularizes drag queen performance by giving it a grassroots Taiwanese force, thereby proliferating the forms of gay representation.

In *Splendid Float*, the collective mourning for Sunny is carried out in the form of a drag queen show as Taoist ritual; that is, Ai-wei/Rose transposes two marginalized roles, that of the Taoist shaman and that of the drag queen, both of

which imbue him with the transformative power of performativity. This enables him to catalyze queer desire and act across the border between life and death, traversing both homosexuality and heterosexuality. Such “transformative performativity,” to use Richard Schechner’s term, constructs both the (film and drag show) audience’s and the (film and drag show) performers’ subjectivity and social roles; it not only “marks” changes but effects changes through the performative act (Schechner 117-50).

In his mourning for Sunny, it is Ai-wei/Rose’s queer performativity and transformation of shame that enables him to negotiate or indeed “move” between life and death. In traditional Han-centered society it is the Taoist shaman, after all, who mediates the living and the dead while performing in and out of the taboo terrain of death. His performances at funeral and burial rituals are considered “the last bastion consolidating the symbolic realm as well as family line of patriarchal power and genealogy” (Wang 1). Being a shaman indeed means being very “masculine.” Ai-wei/Rose’s father, who is not aware of Rose’s relationship with Sunny, warns him prior to the “soul invoking ritual” (招魂) for Sunny that “to act like a Taoist shaman, you have to be serious and stern. How come my son cries as if he were losing his husband when the son of another family dies? You are acting like a woman.” Ai-wei/Rose’s “unmanly” behavior makes him the target of teasing by his drag queen friends: “If you keep crying like this, you won’t look like a shaman, but like a paid filial daughter (paid female mourner).” Playing with gender codes, other characters also ride the divide between homosexuality and heterosexuality. Ai-wei/Rose’s aunt, cross-dressed as a man to play the ritual role of “the Shaman Governing Three Spheres” (三壇法師), looks up from the mirror to ask Ai-wei/Rose’s father, “Do you think I look like a man?”

The great reliance of both shaman and drag queen upon costumes and props also signifies the transformative process that enables them to transcend the prescribed pathways of everyday life and assume new and powerful roles. In traditional Han society, the Taoist shaman was marginalized as the practitioner of a lower-class profession. However, when wearing his ritual robe that confers shamanic status according to a strict hierarchy, he has the authority to communicate with the dead and protect the legitimacy of patriarchal normality. A gay man in drag is a doubly marginalized social outcast: as a gay he is discriminated against by heterosexuals, but as a drag queen he is even excluded by his own gay community and may internalize the sissy phobia he is accused of harboring. Nevertheless, on stage the drag queen, empowered by his transvestite masquerade, becomes a glamorous persona who interpellates the repressed queer desire of his audience. The

film *Splendid Float* combines the transformative power of both drag and shamanic performances, mixing cultural codes to create a campy queer funeral that disrupts the patriarchal, heterosexual symbolic realm.

In the “soul consoling ritual” (安靈), Ai-wei/Rose and his drag queen friends are shocked to see the handsome and macho Sunny lying in a coffin, dressed like an ancient ancestor in melon-cap and classic Qing-dynasty robe. “You look so ugly,” says Ai-wei/Rose. Overwhelmed by the feeling that Sunny’s true personality and image were consumed by the traditional funeral, Ai-wei/Rose and his friends decide to hold an alternative funeral for him. However, feeling ashamed, they hesitate. Lily ridicules Aiwei/Rose: “Under what pretext can we hold a funeral for him? We don’t even occupy a position in tradition. Have you any right to pray to his tablet (牌位) and carry it home for worship?” Yet rather than withdrawing, Aiwei/Rose transforms shame into combative energy. Recalling his own status as a Taoist shaman, he decides to pray to the “double tablet” (分靈) and carry it home so that he can stay with Sunny and take care of him forever. Consequently, he holds an alternative Taoist ritual that is witnessed by his drag queen friends, carrying the double tablet for Sunny while leaving the main tablet with Sunny’s family. Eventually, he carries Sunny’s double tablet home—this “home” being the backstage of the float.

Rose’s carrying of the double tablet is an ironic twist on the patriarchal paradigm, because in a traditional Taoist funeral the tablet of the dead person is a commemorative symbol of the deceased, and signifies the continuity of the family line. The family of the dead person carries his tablet home so that his offspring can worship him together with his ancestors. While a Taoist shaman is supposed to be impersonal and authoritative at the funeral, in order to imbue the tablet with the legitimacy of family continuity, Ai-wei/Rose takes advantage of his shamanic status to infiltrate the patriarchal ritual with queer desire, bringing Sunny’s tablet home to become part of, and even commemorate, a queer “family”. Ai-wei/Rose’s queer act subverts patriarchal norms by superimposing onto the traditional signifying system the oblique meanings of queer intimacy and kinship.

Another campy performance is enacted at Sunny’s burial service. As Sunny’s coffin is led by Ai-wei’s father, the master shaman, together with the funeral procession to a cemetery facing the sea, the drag queens’ splendid float follows. After Sunny is buried, the burial ritual proceeds with the performance of “The Kings of Hades Governing Ten Palaces” (十殿閻羅), in which three voluptuous young girls roll and do somersaults in front of Sunny’s grave, chanting the “Soul Transcending Song” (牽亡歌) to lead Sunny’s soul through one check point to

another until his soul arrives in Hades. Meanwhile, Rose's drag queen friends are waiting in the shade of the trees until dusk. As the night approaches, Rose sits beside Sunny's ghost on the top of Sunny's cemetery, watching their friends perform an unprecedentedly erotic show on the splendid float to speed the transcendence of Sunny's soul. On the float they strike erotic poses and sing a campy "Love Song of Soul Transcendence" (愛情牽亡歌), a pastiche of the traditional "Soul Transcending Song" and a TV video puppet show (霹靂布袋戲) with its electronic music and special melody and tempo.

This queer funeral expresses the gay community's resistance to those patriarchal social rituals that assume heterosexuality as the cultural norm, and make homosexuality taboo along with death. The hybrid ritual performance breathes into queer acts a culture-crossing emancipatory spirit which incorporates the homosexual and the indigenous to reclaim a cultural space for gay people.¹⁸

In *Splendid Float*, Ai-wei/Rose's bringing home of Sunny's double tablet, in mixing queer desire into the patriarchal symbolic realm, puts into question the traditional ideals of "family" and "home." For the drag queens on the splendid float who can move freely from one place to another, "home" is dissociated from "place" or "rootedness" but aligned with queer ideals of desire and intimacy. The film is permeated with the image of "darkness" and "ghosts," which implies gay people's lack of cultural and social space, even of a home and family in the traditional sense. Sunny comes and goes like a ghost throughout the film; Rose and the other drag queens are also like phantoms who can only fully realize their desires in gaudily lit nocturnal shows, obscene yet strangely beautiful infernal rituals. As director Zero Chou points out: "As a matter of fact, all the gay people here are but ghosts living in darkness." Indeed, in Taiwan's gay and lesbian discourse "the kingdom of darkness" is a familiar phrase, and the gay-darkness connection originally appeared in Pai Hsien Yung's (白先勇) *Crystal Boys* (孽子), which describes Taipei City Park—a famous cruising spot for young gay guys—as the kingdom of darkness. "In our kingdom, there is no bright day but only dark night." Since *Crystal Boys*, many scholars have employed "darkness" as a metaphor or metonym in the discussion of

¹⁸ Gloria Anzaldúa relates "queer" to "the supreme crosser of cultures" by proposing a coalition of homosexual and racial minorities like "Black, Asian, Native American. . . ." She stresses that "colored homosexuals have more knowledge of other cultures; they have always been at the forefront (also sometimes in the closet) of all liberation struggles and have survived them despite all odds." Here I would like to apply her theory by proposing a coalition of the lower class, ethnic minorities and homosexuals in Taiwan, thereby breathing into its queer landscape the emancipatory spirit and sensibility of the "culture crosser." See Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderland: La Frontera* (San Francisco, 1987) 84-85.

gay spatiality and the queer nation in Taiwan.¹⁹ Chao Yen-ning appropriates this image to address queer politics in her essay “Out of Closet or Not—This is a Question of Darkness.” Contrasting darkness with bright day, Chao says:

“Darkness,” as a matter of fact, surpasses the symbolic effect of “bright day” [which connotes the naturalization of heterosexuality]. “Darkness,” which signifies spatiality, living style, personal attributes, is considered a non- structural force. (Chao Yen-ning, “Out of Closet or Not” 62)

Seeing “darkness” as symbolizing the stigmatized, immoral, and illegitimate (59), and the “dark and narrow space for queer survival” (60), Chao proposes the appropriation of the oblique meanings of “darkness” by queer politics in its confrontation with the heterosexual politics of “brightness” (59-62).

Faced with the conflict between traditional ideals of “home” and queer ideals of sexuality and desire, the gay people in *Splendid Float* are still forced, after all, to lead dark and ghostly lives. Insofar as the traditional Chinese ideal of “home” is associated with roots, place, family line and the emphasis on male heirs, gay people will tend to face the most intense homophobia in places designated as “home.” As the drag queens gather and perform on their float, a mobile stage and mobile home, they temporarily depart from traditional notions of “place” and “rootedness,” moving from one place to another in search of communion. “Home” for these queer troubadours is wherever they can enjoy their own communal kinship and intimacy; perhaps it is even “a translated geography of pleasure where new sites of deterritorialized desire are always being reproduced” (Gopinath 125). Queer performativity across the thin line between male and female, straight and gay, life and death, melancholia and mourning also compels us to rethink the “rootedness” of home/family and the “routing” of queer intimacy and kinship.

Conclusion

In *Spider Lilies* and *Splendid Float*, Zero Chou’s cinematic grieving destabilizes traditional cinematic positions. Chou shows us the close relation

¹⁹ For this discourse, inspired by “the kingdom of darkness” in Pai Hsien Yung’s *Crystal Boys*, on/of Taiwan’s gay spatiality and its conception of the queer nation, also see Chang Hsiao-hung (1996), Wang Chi-hung (1996, 1998), Lai Cheng-che (1998), and Chu Wei-cheng (1998, 2000, 2001).

between loss of the love object, the ambivalence or destabilization of self-identity and the need for mourning that marks the gay and lesbian collective imagination. Lingering between mourning and melancholia, the *Po* (Femme) and drag queen present the spectacle of feminine narcissism and also, through the transformative force of queer performativity, the transformation of shame. Insofar as the heterosexual representation apparatuses have been dominated by the male gaze and patriarchal surveillance, both *Po* and drag queen have to masquerade on the divide between homosexuality and heterosexuality, using their (apparent) hyperbolic femininity to tease and confuse heterosexual desire and parody the binary logic of heterosexual representation. Little Green as a *Po* also employs the politics of “invisibility” to disguise herself as a *bishojo* and so interpellate lesbian desire on the Internet; Aiwei/Rose and his drag queen friends employ the politics of “visibility” to fully embody and enact their sexual identities and fantasies in live drag queen shows.

In both films, mourning is an ambivalent, even paradoxical process which might consolidate or subvert heterosexual normality. In *Spider Lilies*, Bamboo is ashamed of her lesbian desire and feels guilty about her familial traumas, and hence internalizes her homophobia and patriarchal values through the symbolic act of tattooing. On the other hand, for Little Green in *Spider Lilies* and Ai-wei/Rose in *Splendid Float*, individual or collective mourning makes possible the seeking of reconciliation. Little Green transforms her shame and is reconciled with the inner child of her past (the abandoned nine-year-old girl, the abandoned lover, the shamed lesbian subject), thus re-affirming her lesbian desire and identity. In *Splendid Float*, the communal mourning for Sunny by Ai-wei/Rose and his gay friends opens up a space of hybridization: the drag queen show absorbs the grass-roots force of communal, native Taiwanese village culture; the patriarchal Taoist funeral is infiltrated with queer desire, proliferating the possible forms of gay performativity and representation. The combined transformative power of drag queen and Taoist shaman enables the transfiguring of the sense of “family” and “home,” and we come to see the natural link between (a past-oriented) communal mourning and (a future-oriented) queer politics.

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About the Author

Ivy I-chu Chang is currently a professor of Foreign Literatures and Vice Provost of Academic Affairs at National Chiao Tung University. She is the author of *Remapping Memories and Public Space: Taiwan's Theater of Action in the Opposition Movement and Social Movements from 1986 to 1997* (Taipei: Bookman, 1998), and *Queer Performativity*

and Performance (Taipei: Bookman, 2003). Her articles and essays have appeared in *The Drama Review*, *Research in Drama Education*, *Chung-Wai Literary Journal*, *Tamkang Review*, and *Concentric*.

Email: ivychang@cc.nctu.edu.tw

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