Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Suzhou River by Lou Ye; Nai An; Philippe Bober
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Suzhou River


Love is a story you tell yourself—about yourself, about the one you love, and about your lives together. But we want love never to end, while a story, a narrative, must come to an end, or else it is not a story. Does that make love a special kind of story, or is love the arena where we can see storytelling working against itself, undercutting its own narratives? Suzhou River, the second film by 35-year-old Chinese director Lou Ye, sinks deep into these questions, not only addressing them but taking them in, taking them on.

As one might expect from a movie about narrative working against itself, the plot of Suzhou River is slippery. There are, it seems, two pairs of lovers. The first pair, whose story begins years before the main action of the movie, is Moudan (Zhou Xun), indeterminate in age but girlish in her pigtails, and Mardar (Jia Hongsheng), a silent, withdrawn motorcycle courier. He is hired to take Moudan to a relative’s house whenever her father has an assignation. Mardar lives for the mobility, the endless motion, of the motorcycle—off-duty, he sits immobile on his sofa and watches videos—and he is valuable to his shady employers because he tells no tales (we will see this thematic pairing of mobility and story elsewhere too). Eventually, he notices Moudan’s love, and returns it, but when his employers tell him to kidnap her and hold her until they collect a ransom from her father, he obeys; when he releases her, she runs off and jumps into the Suzhou River. He dives in after her, but cannot find her.

The other two lovers are the unnamed male narrator of the movie and Meimei (Zhou Xun again, in a great double performance). Meimei swims around a tank of water in the local bar, wearing a mermaid outfit and a blond wig; without the wig, she looks exactly like Moudan, as Mardar discovers when he shows up at the bar years after Moudan’s jump and halfway through the movie. Meimei’s costume even matches a mermaid doll which Mardar gave Moudan for her birthday—matches it exactly, right down to the blue nail polish and eyeshadow. Mardar, of course, tries to get Meimei to admit she is really Moudan so that their love story can resume, and Meimei begins to respond to Mardar’s attentions.
Caught in these and other ambiguities (the two love stories blur together and the doubling gets increasingly complicated), close to half the reviews I have read get even the plot summary wrong. Or maybe it’s just all those six-letter M—- names. The critics are unanimous, however, in citing Hitchcock’s Vertigo as the major influence on Suzhou River, and one can see why: a man is obsessed with a blonde/brunette in whom he sees the woman of his past who apparently fell to her death; he wants to replay the story of his love with a different ending, but the ending is instead repeated, and made all too final. Several critics point out that the score of Suzhou River contains allusions to Bernard Herrmann’s score for Vertigo. And even minor details in Suzhou River pay homage to Vertigo: greenish neon through the window during the pair’s crucial dialogue; someone who dies in a cop chase across the rooftops. At least that’s what we’re told happens to him—we don’t see it ourselves; like the other references to Vertigo, this one is kept glancing. The reviews may all bring up the resemblances to Vertigo, but the better ones go on to stress the differences. Suzhou River is not a remake, like Psycho (1998) for Psycho (1960) or Point of No Return and Black Cat for La Femme Nikita or even The Magnificent Seven for Seven Samurai—it revitalizes its “source,” riffs on it, makes it new.

Even the Vertigo structure—the main point of similarity between the movies—is made much more complex in Suzhou River. Vertigo is a V: poor Midge (Barbara Bel Geddes) loves John Ferguson (Jimmy Stewart), while he is obsessed only with Madeleine Elster (Kim Novak). The women have nothing to do with each other—Midge’s attempt to make herself correspond with Elster, in the self-portrait she paints, is a disaster—and the structure is programmatic: love is female and ineffectual, while obsession is male and deadly. In Suzhou River, on the other hand, there are two interrelated pairs, and the psychologies cross gender lines: both Moudan and the narrator are in love; both Meimei and Mardar are obsessed. Mardar wants to recreate Meimei as his lost Moudan, while Meimei falls under the spell of Mardar’s love story and into the same trap; she is devastated when she learns that Mardar really did love Moudan, not her (“I thought it was just a story,” she laments), and she tries to turn the narrator into Mardar just as Mardar had tried to turn her into Moudan (and just as Johnny in Vertigo tries to turn Judy Barton back into Madeleine Elster). “If I leave you someday, would you look for me? Like Mardar? Would you look for me forever? Your whole life?” Meimei asks the narrator in a voiceover at the start of the movie, and the scene is replayed at the end, just before she runs away. Her farewell note says, “Find me if you love me.”

Lou Ye’s most important reinventions involve the existence of this narrator, and the nature of his response to Meimei. The narrator does more than give the voiceover common to many other movies: in Suzhou River, the jittery, skittering handheld camera is his eye; we never see his face, though his hands sometimes reach into the field of view. He is a videographer (“Pay me and I’ll shoot it”), and several scenes are explicitly what he is filming. On the other hand, sometimes both of his hands come into view, or the back of his body, and sometimes we see scenes where the narrator is not there, so the movie’s perspective cannot literally be that of a camera the character holds. The movie’s camera sometimes is the narrator’s camera and sometimes isn’t; it is the narrator’s camera insofar as his eye is his camera; we both are and are not the narrator himself, as Meimei both is and is not Moudan. So whereas Vertigo analyzes obsession from without, and with “objective” cinematography to match, Suzhou River responds to repetition compulsions from within, and the viewer is part of the story.

Here we can also see Lou Ye’s divergence from the other most obvious and most often cited influence on Suzhou River: the handheld-camera style of Wong Kar-Wai’s Chungking Express. Wong Kar-Wai’s film emphasizes the relativism of our lives and love stories, and is told, as it were, from within, but an omniscient narrator tells it from within, or at least an omniscient filmmaker, so to speak, who moves freely between the different narrator-characters’ interiorities. Suzhou River takes the subjectivity of Chungking Express one big step farther by locking us into a single subjectivity and keeping us there. This difference means much more than the similarities (if anything, Wong Kar-Wai’s Happy Together, with its investigations into the possibilities and impossibilities of “starting over, from the beginning,” is closer to Suzhou River’s concerns than Chungking Express is). The narrator of Suzhou River, like all of us, cannot simply read another’s mind or see the world through their eyes for a moment, and so how does he love? If you don’t want to love like Johnny Ferguson or Mardar, the movie seems to ask, then what do you do?

The narrator’s relationship with Meimei has been on the rocks for a while, and he seems to spend an inordinate amount of time filming her rather than more simply being with her. He is, in short, the lover as teller of stories. The Suzhou River itself is a place of stories: in the movie’s wonderful opening sequence, the voiceover tells us that the river carries “a century worth
Zhou Xun as Moudan, Meimei, mermaid
of stories” (“and rubbish, which makes it the filthiest river”). “If you watch it long enough, the river will show you everything,” and the narrator has seen everything along the river—love, loneliness, suicide, two young lovers’ bodies being pulled from the river—every possible plot. (All stories are love stories.) He travels along with the current and films these proto-narratives. Meanwhile, during the same sequence, the camera skitters around the river while sailing smoothly down to the sea, and stops to zoom in on different faces, interactions, and little scenes, each of which could, the shot suggests, generate a movie-length story of its own. Here the Hitchcock influence seems to be the panoply of apartments in Rear Window, but the Suzhou River moves, unlike Rear Window’s tableaux; the river, like Mardar’s motorcycle, is movement, flux, nonrepetition. You cannot step in the same river twice. Yet Mardar and Moudan do fall in the same river twice, and Mardar (later with Moudan) watches the same stories over and over again on video, and Mardar’s motorcycle rides criss-cross the city only before he meets Moudan, and after he loses her; when they are together, they take the same route along the river over and over again.

Meimei wants the narrator’s love for her to be permanent and fixated, as in Mardar and Moudan’s world of repetition, immune from the narrative drive toward an ending. The “I” of Suzhou River, in contrast, resists repetition in favor of narrative—stories which come to an end and are followed by other stories. In the final sequence of the movie, he relinquishes Mardar-esque love and lets Meimei go, “because nothing lasts forever”; he lets this love story come to an end and waits “for the next story to start.” And young Moudan, the figure of innocent, untainted love in Suzhou River, is in the narrator’s situation too: when they lose the single person they love, they move on, he by ending the movie and she by jumping into the river, threatening to come back as a mermaid to torment Mardar. If her jump is a suicide attempt, it represents a refusal to move on, a rejection of both narrative and repetition. But we don’t know Moudan’s intentions, so she does come back as mermaid: half in the underwater world without love, half in the living world of another story. And that is just where the narrator ends up in the movie’s haunting conclusion: on the Suzhou River, drunk, stranded at the end of one love story and waiting for the next to begin.

If this were its only theme or subject, Suzhou River would be impressive enough. But there are layers beneath these psychological layers, because the entire story of Mardar and Moudan is explicitly framed as just that, a story, invented by the narrator. When Meimei first tells the narrator about Mardar, the narrator dismisses Mardar’s love—just as he also claimed not to believe in mermaids—by saying that it’s “just a story. I could make one up too.” The camera, with the most uncertain movements in the movie, reminiscent of but even more erratic than the camerawork in the opening sequence on the Suzhou River of stories, skips around the passers-by on a bridge over the river. The view has already been defined as the narrator’s view out of his window. It picks up empty pavement, a fight in the opposite apartment (Rear Window again), a motorcycle courier, bicyclists, people on foot, a girl with long black hair, the couriers again, empty pavement, the girl, settles on the motorcycle courier, and the voiceover says, “The motorcycle courier. Mardar.” If the story were “real,” the narrator could not see the years-ago Moudan and Mardar outside his present-day window; instead, these people have caught the narrator’s eye and he has created around them a story set in the past. (There is the same dynamic in The Usual Suspects, where the roving camerawork in the interrogation room at the end of the movie conveys Kevin Spacey’s roving eye, which has picked up whatever was at hand and woven it into a story. Camera movement spins the thread of story into existence, and generates for the viewer the feel of narrative.) Throughout the story of Mardar and Moudan, the narrator reminds us that he is its author, not merely its teller: “What else? Let me think”; “His past . . . could be . . .” ; “Maybe Mardar’s not simply a courier”; “What happens next? Well . . .” He even cites sources: “I remember reading an article about it in the paper,” which is then shown onscreen. Finally, when Mardar returns, years after Moudan has jumped in the river and when all his avenues for finding her again seem exhausted, the narrator admits, “Not much of a love story, but I don’t know how to go on with it. Unless . . . Mardar can finish telling his story himself . . .”

That is when Mardar meets Meimei, and the two stories begin to intertwine. But even in this second half, one could make the argument that all of the Mardar/Meimei encounters are invented and narrated, not “real.” After all, how could a made-up character suddenly become real? Maybe the narrator is just continuing to tell his Mardar story. When Mardar first sees Meimei in her dressing room, the shot is identical to when the narrator first saw her there. The narrator likes to work from material he knows, or can see before him, like the motorcycle courier and the girl on the street outside his window. Most obviously, all of the parallels between Meimei and Moudan, from the mer-
maid costume to their identical appearance to the press-on tattoos of a rose on their left thighs, are explicable only as the products of a story (the narrator, who already knows Meimei, has invented Moudan to match). How else, “in reality,” could the two women be so similar?

The two conversations between the (“real”) narrator and (the “fictional”) Mardar seem to refute this theory, but both conversations have a certain unreal quality—they are slightly out of focus, or opaque, as if shot through a pane of glass; most affecting, Mardar looks directly into the camera, with an open expression on his face that is the exact opposite of his usual dour scowl. (In fact, people rarely look into the camera in *Suzhou River*—Moudan constantly looks at Mardar, while Mardar’s gaze is off into space, or in-drawn, or buried under the brooding visor of his black motorcycle helmet; even when the narrator is “shooting” Meimei, she looks past the camera at the implied filer—except in the explicitly artificial sequences: the fisherman who sees a mermaid on the river; the karaoke singer; and Mardar with the narrator.) The second of these conversations between Mardar and the narrator is inexplicable on a “factual” level (Mardar promises to give Meimei back to the narrator if the narrator lets him go on looking for Moudan, but how could either of them possibly do these things?); it does make sense, however, as a character addressing his author. Give me a happy ending, Mardar says, and that will make Meimei love you again, either because the story will be happy, or because you’ll stop telling it and will start paying attention to her again. After all, we never learn what Meimei and the narrator’s fight is about—is it because she is falling for Mardar (as the movie implies on the surface), or just because she is tired of the narrator constantly filming her and daydreaming?

Even the circular frame of the movie is open to interpretation, once we go down this road. The first words of the movie—“If I left you, would you look for me? Like Mardar?” “Yes.” “Forever?” “Yes.” “Your whole life?” “Yes.”—return at the end, with visuals of Meimei lying in bed and talking to the narrator (that is, talking past the camera). We assume that this dialogue happens chronologically last, and that everything in between has been the narrator’s flashback. But the dialogue at the end appears in the context of the narrator saying that it was just “like old times” again; he “sat up all night watching old videos [he] had shot of her,” and we see scenes we saw earlier, so perhaps the conversation is chronologically first and the repetition at the end is just another flashback.

When we start to take these possibilities into account, *Suzhou River* turns into a movie like *The Usual Suspects*, a movie about storytelling. It also becomes solipsistic, or at least a study in solipsism: the “I” is a
man trapped in his stories, whose stories become more real to him than the reality of the woman he loves. The fact that the narrator knows nothing of Meimei’s past starts to seem more sinister, more indicative of the fact that he knows nothing of her present; we too know nothing about the “real” Meimei, because everything is filtered through the mind which controls the camera, and which therefore controls our access to everything we see and hear. All we “know” is that Keyser Soze is released from custody and disappears into the end of The Usual Suspects, and that Suzhou River’s narrator ends up alone.

This clever argument, however, which purports to be the real story, cannot be the real real story—and that is Suzhou River’s greatest strength. There is the Vertigo level of repetition and loss, although Suzhou River comes down on the more ambiguous side where narratives end but life remains open-ended. Then there is the underlying level, which is perfectly satisfying in The Usual Suspects—“Verbal” Kint’s brilliant storytelling abilities foil the lame narrative style of the cops (“To a cop, the explanation is never themselves complicated . . .”), and Keyser Soze gets away—but to stop there would seem cheap in Suzhou River. The story Verbal tells in The Usual Suspects is just a crime caper, but love runs deeper.

In the end, no matter how much evidence there is to explain away the story of Mardar and Moudan, it refuses to be explained away. There are enough elements of the plot which are impossible, or far too implausible, to explain as the narrator’s story, especially the scene when Meimei sees Mardar’s and Moudan’s bodies. (Death is always ground zero, almost perfectly resistant to storytelling’s power.) At the other end of the spectrum from death, beauty is the culmination of storytelling’s power: the visual beauty of the film as a whole, and especially the striking sequences whose sheer, exquisite audacity lift themselves out of the thread of the narrative, leave the realm of story, and become real. These sequences are the ones I listed above, in which characters—even the “fictional” Mardar in dialogue with his “author”—look into the camera to connect with us, the real figures unequivocally outside the narrator’s frame. There is an additional shot where a character looks into the camera—a shot which is not, like the others, “unreal,” but which instead is the movie’s utmost portrayal of beauty: when Meimei is swimming in slow motion in her mermaid outfit toward Mardar and us. Beauty creates a connection across levels—between the “fictional” Mardar and the “real” Meimei, and between Meimei and us.

Finally, and most importantly, just as Moudan’s innocence (and Zhou Xun’s acting) radiate an authenticity and—in the strongest sense—reality, Meimei and Mardar have that aura: we care about them, and we cannot emotionally accept a theory that would submerge them into the mere imagination of a solipsistic “I.” Love is the real real story, as always—our emotional investment in love stories, at least my emotional investment in love stories, simply outweighs epistemological considerations. Suzhou River’s true accomplishment is to do two synonymous things at once: to undercut its own intellectual paradoxes and force us to this conclusion, and to create a beautiful and moving film which speaks this truth for itself even if all the epistemological trickery goes unnoticed.

Of course, in the most literal, pedestrian sense, this talk of “reality” is just mystification, because Mardar and Meimei are “just” characters in a movie—mere products of a director’s or screenwriter’s or actor’s fantasy, like the characters in The Usual Suspects and Vertigo and every straightforwardly realistic movie too. But our decision to go to the movies—to give ourselves over to a story—makes us all the more able to acknowledge a character’s emotional reality (and a film’s visual reality); in fact, we are all too willing to not make that effort for the “real” people in our lives, and instead explain them away with the stories we tell ourselves about them. “Suspension of disbelief” is far too tepid a phrase for what we do when faced with fictional art; we engage our powers of belief, activate our moral imagination.

And that is how love works too. “How could a made-up character suddenly become real?” is the question which Mardar’s status as part of the narrator’s fictional story makes us ask, but that question has an answer, in fact two answers. If this made-up character is in a really good story. And: love. (Love, Iris Murdoch once wrote, is the incredibly difficult process of coming to believe that another person is real.) Suzhou River is one of those rare works of art which not only thematize openness or open-endedness, but which are themselves open, opening out into the rest of the reader’s or viewer’s life. The “I” ends—“I” end—the movie having been touched by another life. I have seen it, half-submerged in the unknowable world of its own reality, and now it has left me, and maybe I don’t even believe in mermaids, but here I am, alone for now, but ready.

Damion Sears is a writer and translator based in Oakland and Amsterdam. His translation of Ingeborg Bachmann’s Letters to Felician and his own book, Travelogue, are forthcoming.