

CONTEMPLATING 'CROUCHING TIGER'

By Michael Ventura

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The inevitable dances with the unpredictable. That sentence I scrawled in my notebook, the fifth time I saw Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Then, this sentence: Great art re-creates itself within us according to the vulnerability and readiness of our response.

Now that the film is being released on video I can assume you've probably seen it and that I'm giving nothing away. What follows is no review or critique, but rather a kind of contemplation of the scenes and elements that spoke most directly to me.

The opening. It is clear from the faces of Li Mu Bai (Chow Yun-Fat) and Shu Lien (Michelle Yeoh) that we are in the presence of two who strive for grace in the profoundest sense, yet accept tragedy as they accept sunlight: as a natural building block of existence. Their expressions, seeing one another after a long separation, are complex portraits of unadorned love. So this film begins where most end: with two whose love, understanding, and acceptance of each other know no bounds. It is disturbing to see such communion between two people in the first moments of a film, because it means that their deep relationship, of itself, will not answer to the dilemmas of their story. Rather, their communion is merely one element of their dilemma. So from the film's first moments, our usual cultural assumptions begin to work against us.

Their relationship is such that without any preambles they immediately speak of spiritual states. Li Mu Bai tells Shu Lien that he has broken off his meditation in the mountains. "I came to a place of deep silence. I was surrounded by light. Time and space disappeared ... I didn't feel the bliss of enlightenment. I was surrounded by endless sorrow." Which isn't what any of us wants to hear. If reaching a place of deep silence surrounded by light cannot bring satisfaction, what can? He tells her he could go no further because of "something I can't let go of." His eyes tell what that "something" is: It is her. Her eyes, in turn, express gratification and uncertainty: While she seems thankful he can't let go of her, one premise of their life (that enlightenment is more important than anything) has been invalidated. What now? Already both Western and Eastern ideals (romantic communion and spiritual enlightenment) have been found insufficient. Every premise has been undercut, every assumption discarded. And we are only about five minutes into the movie. (John Cassavetes once said to me: "Sooner or later, you can't find your way home anymore. And that's where it's important to start a film.")

The Green Destiny. Li Mu Bai's response to this meditation experience is to give up his great sword, called "The Green Destiny" -- that is, to give up his destiny. But you can't give up, or walk away from, a destiny. Of course, this is not an American idea. Americans tend to be besotted with the notion that anyone can be and do anything -- a notion that the opposite of destiny. But don't confuse having a destiny with having a predetermined fate; rather, to have a destiny is to have a fate which it is one's duty to fulfill. To feel you have a destiny is to feel that you must grow into the dimensions required by that destiny. Thus a sense of destiny draws you forward in life, to do more, to be more, in order that this particular destiny may manifest in the world. One may fail one's destiny -- it's not predetermined; but that means that one has failed one's role and

place in the world, so that the world, the community, is then weaker than it might have been. By contrast, to fail at a career is only to fail yourself.

Westerners tend to treat spiritual paths as a kind of conceptual buffet, choosing a little of this and a little of that as it suits them for self-fulfillment. But the ancient sages would say that you are there to fulfill the Path, the Path isn't there to fulfill you. Once you choose a Path, you can't just get off it. That's the price of taking it. The Path is not a passive thing; it, too, has a will. If you try to get off it, the Path will make you take it -- dragging you along in ways you're no longer in charge of. Since Li Mu Bai won't take his Path, his Path is going to take him. Li Mu Bai's decision sets in motion the events that will destroy him.

Jade Fox. She is an evil warrior who exists only to destroy. Her actions will determine the fates of all the other characters, for they all exist in relation and reaction to her -- that is, in relation to their need to escape from or to crush evil. Thus *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* presents evil as a legitimate force of fate. Western thought thinks of evil as an aberration to be expunged; but this story sees evil, as it sees tragedy, as simply one of the building blocks of existence, a constant, a force that has its place in the dance of the inevitable with the unpredictable. Without Jade Fox -- that is, without evil -- there is no story; which is to say, there is no way that all the characters in the story can live themselves out to the fullest. And because living to the fullest (rather than happiness) is the highest value in this tale's moral universe, and because we live to the fullest in part through our struggle with evil, even evil has a positive value. The questions the story is concerned with discount the importance of happiness and so also discount the importance of whether or not evil wins, and those questions are: Are you really living? And if not, why not?

Jen. The wild princess Jen, a disciple of Jade Fox, has stolen the Green Destiny sword and her willfulness disrupts everyone's life. In her marvelous battles with Shu Lien and Li Mu Bai, she tries hard to kill them; each of them has moments when they could kill her, but they cannot do it. "Deep down you are good," Li Mu Bai tells her, even though he knows she doesn't want to be good. He and Shu Lien assume a parental relationship to Jen's very soul. I cannot think of an instance in Western art -- certainly not modern Western art -- that even knows of the existence of such a decision, such a relationship.

Jen's actual parents are utterly unaware of who their daughter really is and of what elemental forces rage in her. They are, therefore, not really her parents. To them she is merely a role, a function. Her blood parents are merely the way she came into the world; they have, in effect, channeled an energy they are incapable of comprehending, much less loving. Psychology, which bases so much on the parental bond, is flatly discounted in *Crouching Tiger*. In this tale, one's soul is an orphan until it finds its equal in others; and it can find its equal only by expressing its own force, however brutally and blindly, and the expression of that force is likely to estrange it forever from the mere social convention and biological necessity that is family. And once a soul expresses its true nature it cannot long remain among those who cannot comprehend, relate to, or exchange with it -- not if it is to be true to itself.

The death of Li Mu Bai. Shu Lien, absolutely stricken with grief, tells the poisoned Li Mu Bai to conserve his breath, and, if he is to die, to use his meditation techniques to leave this plane and escape into eternity. But he's no longer interested in salvation. "I would rather be a ghost drifting by your side as a condemned soul than to enter paradise without you." They cannot be happy. But with a love stronger than

separation or even death, they can still experience love. And if that means living forever in sorrow, so be it. They would not want to be "cured" of such a sorrow, since sorrow is now the element in which their love can live.

Jen's flight. After Li Mu Bai's death, Jen, the wild girl who's helped cause all the trouble, goes to meet her lover who's taken refuge in a mountain monastery. They stand on a stone bridge over a chasm -- as all lovers stand. There is a legend that if you make a wish with "a faithful heart" and dive off the bridge, the wish will come true. She tells him to make a wish. He wishes that they could be again as they were when they fell in love. She leaps into the chasm. His face is utterly desolate -- and it would not be if he believed his own wish. And she ... she wafts upon the breezes like a hawk, ever down and down and down, and disappears into the mists. We do not know if the wish comes true, or if Jen wished for something else -- perhaps to undo the trouble she and Jade Fox have caused and for Shu Lien and Li Mu Bai to somehow live happily ever after. All we see is a legend disappearing on the wind. And all we know is that the story is over, and that these people have lived to the fullest. That, and only that, is the justification of the story and of their lives. It ain't a house in the suburbs, and it ain't a Hollywood ending. It is neither winning nor losing. The story (and this is why it is exhilarating) asks: Have you expressed every last ounce of yourself? You ask: How can I? The story ends by saying with images what the 14th-century monk Ikkyu once said in words:

"Entrust yourself to the windblown clouds and do not wish to live forever."

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