

Ghosts of Memory: Fleur as Cultural Residue in Stanley Kwan's Rouge

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Abstract

This essay interprets Stanley Kwan's *Rouge* (1987) as a cinematic meditation on queer temporality, cultural memory, affect, and the end of colonial Hong Kong. Through the ghostly presence of Fleur—a ghost-courtesan hovering between the 1930s and 1980s—the film stages the city's encounter with the onset of modernity, amnesia, and the dissolution of affective and cultural continuity. Influenced by Ackbar Abbas's theory of *déjà disparu* and Helen Leung's notion of queer undercurrents, the analysis argues that *Rouge* remaps the melodramatic ghost story into allegory for Hong Kong's "politics of disappearance", in which memory can only persist in the form of performative traces. Close reading of the critical scenes elucidates how Kwan's metacinematic *mise-en-scène*, non-linear temporality, and symbolic lighting create a hauntological site through which love, performance, and identity converge. Lastly, Fleur is no figure of supernatural terror but a haunting persistence of cultural and affective truth—a ghost of memory that sustains Hong Kong's affective complexity in the face of historical oblivion.

Keywords

Hong Kong new wave, *Rouge*, Stanley Kwan

1. Introduction

Rouge (1987), Stanley Kwan's movie featuring Leslie Cheung and Anita Mui, is a masterpiece of the Hong Kong New Wave. Drawing on both ghost tale and melodrama traditions, it uses the character of Fleur, a courtesan who turns into a ghost, to uncover anxieties about identity, memory, and emotional loyalty in a society experiencing rapid change.

Set against the contrasting decades of 1930s colonial Hong Kong and its 1980s capitalist boom, *Rouge* portrays a city wracked by social change. By 1987, Hong Kong was experiencing runaway economic growth, headlong modernization, and looming uncertainty about the 1997 handover to China (Chu, 2003). In this context, traditional forms of culture—Cantonese opera, opium-era courtesan culture, and pre-war emotional values—were in the process of being destroyed or commodified. Kwan's film is a response to this cultural amnesia in the form of summoning a ghost from this past and asking: what remains of fidelity, love, and cultural identity in a city rebuilding its memory with every new skyscraper?

This paper argues that Fleur is not only a tragic ghost but a spectral embodiment of cultural memory, a haunting residue of emotional and cultural ideals that have vanished in modern Hong Kong. By employing formal strategies such as metacinematic *mise-en-scène*, non-linear temporality, and symbolic lighting, Kwan depicts what Ackbar Abbas has described as Hong Kong's politics of "disappearance" (Abbas, 1997): the way that memory, affect, and identity exist only as fragmented, spectral traces in a culture based on forgetting.

Stanley Kwan, born in Hong Kong in 1957, is widely recognized as a major figure of the Hong Kong Second New Wave. As opposed to the action genre films for which Hong Kong would eventually become renowned internationally, Kwan's work is concerned with gender, memory, and affective subjectivity, specifically through his nuanced explorations of women leads and queer sexualities (Cheung, 1998). His directorial debut *Women* (1985) was a hit overnight for its humane treatment of the dilemmas women face in love relationships, while *Rouge* (1987), *Center Stage* (1992), and *Lan Yu* (2001) solidified his position as an auteur devoted to the complexities of gender, desire, and urban transformation. As one of the only openly gay directors to be active in Asian cinema—a status he made explicit in his documentary *Yang ± Yin: Gender in Chinese Cinema* (1996)—Kwan brings a unique empathetic and performative approach to his filmmaking.

Historically and culturally, *Rouge* occurs between two contradictory moments in Hong Kong history. The 1930s period evokes colonial-era traditions, rigid class structures, and ritualized spaces such as Cantonese teahouses and opium dens. By contrast, the 1980s scenes depict a city overwhelmed with capitalist modernity—skyscrapers, neon, consumerism, and deep social transformation brought about by the impending 1997 handover (Teo, 1997). It was also a period of collective uncertainty and cultural amnesia when more conventional emotional ideals—such as passion, sacrifice, and poetic romance—yielded to pragmatism and economic need.

Kwan's formal cinematic style further reflects these tensions. *Rouge* blends melodramatic narrative and hauntological form—a ghost story that's elegiac, not scary, paying tribute to emotional fidelity rather than gimmick. Past and present are juxtaposed in the film through costuming, period settings, and cuts; Haute opera scenes yield to city streets with various textural light and dark shades of illumination. Performance spaces—the original stage of Cantonese opera where Fleur (Anita Mui) and Chan Chen-Pang (Leslie Cheung) meet, then the constructed movie set towards the end—operate as affective and temporal sites of dislocation. These formal interventions work to further Kwan's fascination with performativity and memory as mediating processes.

Thus, *Rouge* replicates Kwan's signature: an interrogation of interiority and loss within the woman's experience, a challenging of the vulnerability of memory, and a film critique of a city sacrificing emotional richness in exchange for modernization. Stratified temporality, performative *mise-en-scène*, and ghostly appearance collectively serve to visually instantiate the underlying obsession of the film: that what remains of love and identity in present-day Hong Kong is but a faintest whisper—a ghost of memory.

To illuminate how Fleur functions as a ghost of cultural and affective residue, the following section offers close formal analysis of three key scenes of *Rouge*. Each scene is situated at a distinct narrative and temporal moment of turning in the film and reveals a distinct aspect of her ghostly being and of the film's exploration of memory, performance, and loss. From Twelfth Master and Fleur's first operatic encounter in the 1930s brothel, through their search for him amidst the neon-lit streets of the contemporary metropolis, and on to their miserable non-reunion on the soundstage of a film, these minutes shared illustrate the intricate ways in which *Rouge* signals the breakdown of emotional fidelity and cultural heritage in a city that does not even know what it once cherished.

2. Shot-by-shot Analysis

Fleur and Twelfth Master's first encounter is not in private domesticity but on a performativity stage—a flower house in 1930s Shek Tong Tsui, where performativity is literal and social. The scene begins with Twelfth Master's flamboyant arrival at a brothel room in privacy, with all eyes turning in the room—a visual cue (fig. 1) that immediately proclaims his favored social position in this highly stratified colonial society. His power aura and lascivious masculinity are materially heightened through costuming and movement, but are instantly undercut by Fleur's entrance onto the stage dressed as a male Cantonese opera player, moving with an easy pace onto the teahouse stage.

Figure 1. Screenshot of Rouge



The moment Fleur begins to sing, the visual landscape of the film shifts. Her eyes-steadfast, unblinking beneath painted brows (fig. 2)-fill the space. Twelfth Master's former assertive glance softens to one of stunned wonder (fig. 3), the beginning of an emotional and aesthetic transformation. As Fleur's acting continues-her eye swinging between operatic calm and flirting glint (fig. 4)-the camera moves the two lovers apart to either side of a wide table. They confront each other while other diners occupy the peripheries, spatially underlining their increasing closeness (fig. 5). It is a song that records division and seduction: the couple belong to different social worlds, but visual alignment isolates them in an electric duet of glance and sound.

Figure 2. Screenshot of Rouge



Figure 3. Screenshot of Rouge



Figure 4. Screenshot of Rouge



Figure 5. Screenshot of Rouge



The operatic sadness of Fleur's voice when she sings, “愁对月华圆” (“I gaze mournfully at the full moon”), a poetic moan of yearning. Strangely, Twelfth Master completes the line with impeccable affective vulnerability (fig. 7). At that moment, his ritual is finished: from isolated bachelor to lovesick boyfriend. The transaction suggests not only mutual desire but also mutual ease with symbolic action, cutting across class and gender lines through aesthetic channels. Fleur's final wisecrack-“Where does all this sorrow come from?” (fig. 8)-is flirtatious but biting: it gently deflates the romantic myth even as it inserts itself inside of it. The brevity of this encounter-barely over a minute-both serves to instantiate the melodramatic logic of “love at first sight,” and Kwan deliberately blurs the line between theatrical convention and emotional truth. In *Rouge*, affect is performative but no less genuine; memory manufactured but no less haunting. Fleur's ghostiness at the close of the film must be understood in relation to this moment: she is not merely a ghost who has ever loved, but the figure of a world in which love itself was understood in terms of common ritual, aesthetics, and performance. Her appearance on stage is already ghosting: an anachronistic presence of idealized femininity, sincerity, and cultural refinement-fated to disappear as the city progresses towards forgetting.

Figure 6. Screenshot of Rouge



Figure 7. Screenshot of Rouge



Figure 8. Screenshot of Rouge



Moreover, Fleur's first entry in 1980s Hong Kong animates the temporal and affective rupture at the heart of Rouge. Approaching a modern-day newspaper office to place a missing persons notice, she stands out cruelly from her surroundings: donning a 1930s cheongsam and heavy makeup (figs. 9–10), she looks otherworldly in a world of fluorescent lights, utilitarian furniture, and clattering typewriters. The offscreen drumbeat on her entry marks not horror, but strangeness. From Mr. Yuen's POV, the camera pans the room hesitantly (figs. 11–12), repeating her ghostly presence-heard, seen, somehow unlocatable. Fleur is not threatening; she is evoking absence. Her presence underscores not only her own displacement, but the city's erasure of emotional lexicons once cherished-poetic language, romantic passion, performative sincerity. As Ackbar Abbas indicates, Hong Kong is not so much defined by what it remembers as what it forgets. Fleur is a ghost not just of a missing lover, but of a cultural practice the city no longer remembers.

Figure 9. Screenshot of Rouge



Figure 10. Screenshot of Rouge



Figure 11. Screenshot of Rouge



Figure 12. Screenshot of Rouge



The final studio sequence [c. 1:28:49–1:34:51] coincides with Rouge’s formal and thematic concerns. On a contemporary film set where Twelfth Master is used as a faceless extra, the scene dissolves reality and illusion, unifying performativity with memory and symbolizing Fleur’s final emotional accounting. It starts off with a very wide, high-angle shot of a stuntwoman suspended mid-air, with smoke enveloping her, flanked by bare lighting rigs and pro-filmic façades (fig. 13). A reverse low-angle shot of the film crew and cameras makes the artificiality of the scene purposefully apparent, revealing the fabricated nature of cinematic representation itself (fig. 14). Kwan’s metacinematic staging invites the spectator to see performance not as deception, but as a truth-telling-the way to report emotional contradictions that cannot be contained in realism.

Figure 13. Screenshot of Rouge



Figure 14. Screenshot of Rouge



The dialogue between the director and the stunt woman—“You’re a swordsman and a ghost, fly like a swordsman, look scary like a ghost”—and her confused response, “How can I do both?” (figs. 15-17), is a short parable for the emotional oxymoron that Fleur embodies. Her glance onto this scene, shot in close-up (fig. 18), is not merely one of looking but of reflection. The stuntwoman’s question echoes Fleur’s own condition: between roles, eras, and desires, chivalric lover and disappointed ghost. The scene echoes as well Twelfth Master’s own failure: his inability to couple passion and action, love and bravery. In Fleur’s glance, the scene reclaims the performative apparatus of the film to function as a mirror for fragmented self and historical distance.

Figure 15. Screenshot of Rouge



Figure 16. Screenshot of Rouge



Figure 17. Screenshot of Rouge



Figure 18. Screenshot of Rouge



As Fleur observes that Twelfth Master survives but is reduced to the level of an anonymous background figure, her astonishment is registered in a dolly zoom—a dignified distortion in which the background warps while her face remains frozen (fig. 19). The visual discontinuity corresponds to the breakdown of the romantic legend she has sustained for over half a century. Anita Mui’s acting resists melodramatic excess: she still masters her face, her silence a more powerful kind of speech. Dolly zoom doesn’t merely represent dismay; it isolates the trauma of discovering that the past not only lost its presence—it has been trivialized. Twelfth Master’s confession, “I used to be a VIP, now I am nobody,” is heard, not seen, and casts a shadow over himself. The illumination of these scenes is also significant: Fleur stands in soft frontal light while Twelfth Master is half-hidden (figs. 20-21), a pictorialized symbol of their roles being reversed—she now self-contained and elevated, he diminished and debased.

Figure 19. Screenshot of Rouge

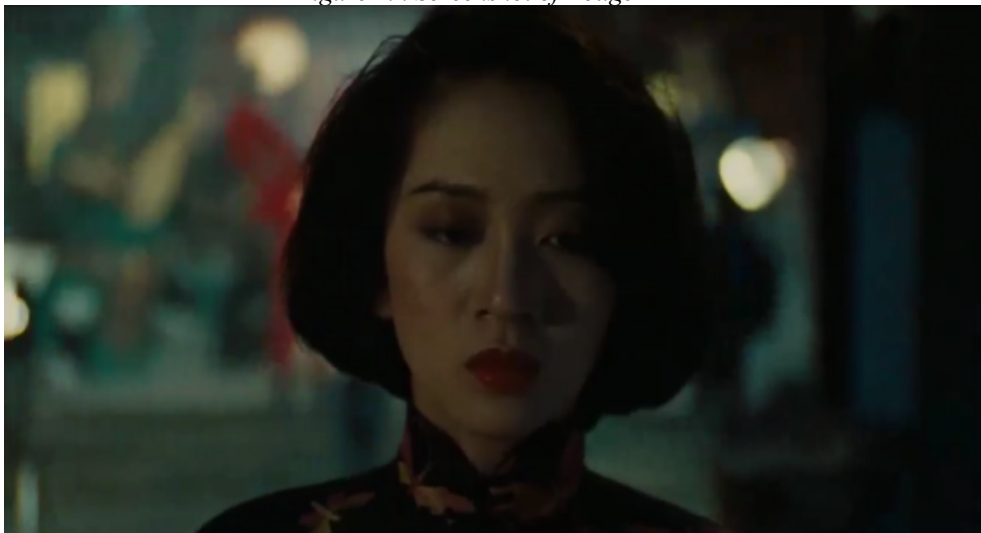


Figure 20. Screenshot of Rouge



Figure 21. Screenshot of Rouge



This mise-en-scène reaches its climax with the act of Fleur returning the rouge case, an iconic gesture of emotional relinquishment. No longer a token of love, it is an icon of release. Her comeback-”See you in the next life”-is not only departure but emotional liberation, the shedding of a legend she can no longer sustain. Marching out of the frame between mortality and eternity, her departure is rendered from Twelfth Master’s perspective (fig. 22). He walks toward her, begging forgiveness, but in vain. The later operatic flashback-back to their first meeting on stage-brought the movie full circle, as Cantonese opera lyrics provided critique: “Promises disappear like smoke, love, burning love, can hardly endure forever. I foolishly thought you would remain loyal...” The lyrics compress the affect and time, suggesting the performance was always the actual location of truth-not the romance, but the role-playing.

Figure 22. Screenshot of Rouge

This last scene encapsulates the tragedy that lies at the heart of *Rouge*: not lost love, but the unattainability of sustaining idealized emotion in a universe subject to time, fear, and concession. Fleur's otherworldly journey therefore concludes not in retribution or amorous reunion, but in disillusionment and serene release. Her ghostliness is not so much supernatural as it is symbolic of a lost cultural sensibility-performative mode that no longer governs Hong Kong's modern temporality. In this final moment, the ghost coalesces into memory itself: evocative, open-ended, performative, and vanishing.

3. Conclusion

At the center of understanding *Rouge* is Ackbar Abbas's theory of *déjà disparu*, or "already disappeared"-which builds Hong Kong as a cultural space haunted less by loss than by misrecognition. Abbas describes that disappearance "does not refer to nonappearance, absence, or lack of presence... It is rather an issue of misrecognition, of recognizing a thing as something else". This is sensible of why Fleur's ghost is not spooky in the supernatural sense, but rather uncanny-a displaced performative trace of an effaced cultural affect. Abbas continues that the New Hong Kong Cinema's task is often to "construct images out of clichés," outmaneuvering or merely keeping up with a subject "always on the brink of disappearing". Kwan's use of the ghost narrative in *Rouge* is one instance of this strategy: Fleur is a cinematic cliché-a sentimental courtesan ghost-but redefined to say something more complex about Hong Kong's affective history.

Abbas also identifies a third sense of disappearance, one neither of resistance nor redemption, but working with disappearance-utilizing it to answer itself. *Rouge* occupies precisely this area, using melodramatic form, metacinema, and ghostly temporality to elicit a confrontation with memories already lost-even as they remain in aesthetic trace.

Helen Leung's *Undercurrents* goes further with the essay by situating Hong Kong cinema in a queer, postcolonial frame. She expands on queer not just as identity politics but as a paradigm for "non-fixity of gender expression and desire"-an undercurrent of uncertainty bursting through overlying norms. That paradigm resonates in *Rouge*, where Fleur's gender performance (female performer acting male parts, operatic cross-dressing) and Leslie Cheung's androgynous star persona destabilize normative gender and love categories (Leung, 2008).

Leung also argues that Hong Kong's cultural identity is itself a haunted site of representation, repeatedly narrated "from below" by the edge dwellers-the *tongzhi*, the queer, the actor, the outsider. Fleur is this very liminality: the returned outsider, queer remnant of affective states of both high performance and at-the-edges identity. Her inability to die along with Twelfth Master and her acting crossing gendered boundaries make her a figure of affective queer cosmopolitics against nostalgic assimilation.

By combining Abbas's theory of disappearance with Leung's queer aesthetics, *Rouge* can be seen as a film about the disintegration of identity, memory, and emotion under modernity-not only for a city, but for a queer

subject. Fleur's ghostliness is an un-pained hauntology: not revenge, but refusal to vanish. Her cross-time performance negotiates a lost emotional space and contemporary spatial forgetting. Twelfth Master's fragility, Yuen and Ah Chor's observational reporting, and Yue's creation of the ad-each display emotional detachment and temporal dislocation.

As Abbas illustrates, these films do not simply represent Hong Kong, but they disassemble the act of looking itself, reminding viewers that the more one tries to pin down the image, the more it slips from your fingers. Rouge accomplishes this in spectacle via mise-en-scène, dolly zoom, deep focus, and film-within-film methods, joining time and identity into a shuddering frame.

Leung's construction of queer undercurrents demonstrates that opposing identities never get integrated-their existence goes on within the cinematic fabric. Fleur and Twelfth Master are legend and performance; their love story performed, yet affectively true. Their tale is an allegory for queer Hong Kong's fragile visibility-a city never stabilized, always in process, and always performing against erasure.

Stanley Kwan's Rouge is not just a ghost story, but an exploration of the aesthetics of erasure, affective temporality, and queer memory. On the phantom return of Fleur in a disillusioned 1980s Hong Kong, the film offers a formal and emotional critique of modernity's cultural amnesia. By placing her first operative experience with Twelfth Master, her anachronistic turn through the newspaper office, and her final instant of disillusioned liberation on the set of a contemporary film, Kwan constructs a cinematic world wherein memory, performance, and identity conflate. These instants do not merely signify the forgetting of love-they bewail the disintegration of a shared emotional grammar of ritual, poetics, and bodily sincerity.

In Ackbar Abbas's déjà disparu theory, we see that Fleur's ghostliness is not absence, but misrecognition: she is a cultural memory read or overwritten in metropolitan logic in modernity. Likewise, Helen Leung's queer reading describes how Fleur performs emotional and gendered ambiguity, transgressing containment within heteronormative temporal or sexual regimes. Her story is then hauntological and queer-demanding the continuity of feeling in the disruption of history.

The ghost in Rouge is not what threatens Hong Kong, but what sustains it with the possibility of emotional and cultural density. Fleur, suspended between eras, embodies a Hong Kong that can no longer be whole, but still lingers in gestures, glances, and silent tragedy of vanishing.

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