

# **They Programmed Her to Kill: *Black Cat*, a Hong Kong Remake of *Nikita***

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## **ABSTRACT**

Remaking the French film *La Femme Nikita* (Luc Besson, 1990), Chinese-born Hong Kong filmmaker Stephen Shin modified the story's basic structure to take it out of its western context and place it in a South-East Asian cultural context. *Black Cat* (1991) diverges from the original tale of *La Femme Nikita* by adding a twist inspired by Wu Cheng-en's literary classic *Journey to the West*. The two films explore ethical margins: the transgression of the murder taboo and the imprisonment of a woman by a patriarchal state. In their concern with the ethics of killing in the name of the State, both narratives present ideologies which reflect their respective cultures. The comparative analysis approach taken here foregrounds the cultural traits of the two stories.

## **KEY WORDS**

Confucianism

*Journey to the West*

Georges Bataille

control by technology

East/West culture

filial duty vs. right

state and law

sacrificial ideology

state control

community/individualism

cyborg feminism

female role in society



The silver screen is a window on culture. When a Chinese film rethinks and remakes a French film, when both, in their own way, deal with a woman held captive by government authorities, and when in each case captivity serves to reconstruct the identity of the rebellious female, a comparison of the ideologies behind the two works seems called for.

On finding inspiration in Luc Besson's *Nikita* (1990), Hong Kong-born filmmaker Stephen Shin adapted the story and remade the film.<sup>1</sup> *Black Cat* (1991) diverges from the original tale of *Nikita* by the addition of a twist: American scientists implant a microchip into the brain of the captive to ensure her irrevocable loyalty to the United States before sending her off on killing missions in Asia.<sup>2</sup> In the French version, *Nikita*, played by Anne Parillaud, is a junkie sentenced to life in jail for killing a policeman in a drugstore shoot-out.<sup>3</sup> The French government feigns *Nikita*'s death during incarceration on the pretext that she will be given a second chance to live a free life—but the real aim of the government is to gain a spy and assassin for the state-run secret service.

Both versions of the story share common generic plot characteristics. Following some years of training, the female protagonist is sent on her first killing mission, which is actually an ambush designed to test her in her new role as an assassin, since surviving the ruse and finding a way to escape on her own will prove her ability to survive real missions. She thus begins her professional life. Though this new life allows her to return to society, her freedom is limited to that of a "hired gun," who must keep killing in return for the liberty that she has been granted.

The two narratives therefore explore an ethical margin. They are

both concerned with a transgression of the murder taboo and their essentially common plot develops a paradox, which can be formulated as follows: "You made a costly mistake. Killing the police officer was wrong; therefore now you must kill." This apparent contradiction places the protagonist in the role of both aggressor and victim—a dual status that proves highly effective in building up narrative tension.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first part of the analysis seeks to understand this paradox. Here, I use Georges Bataille's (1897–1962) idea of an "economy of transgression" (*Oeuvres Complètes* 7: 313). Bataille attempts to explain the logic behind the ritual of sacrifice. In his early anthropologically oriented writings, he analyzes the fundamental contradiction between the prohibition against committing murder and its opposite, sacrificial immolation. In order to explain how the ritualistic performance of sacrifice—a transgressive act par excellence—can be allowed in a society that condemns homicide, Bataille distinguishes a "general economy" from the everyday "regional economy." He situates the ritual of sacrifice within the general economy, the economy that allows homicide under specifically established ceremonial circumstances.

For instance, in applying Bataille's anthropological model to modern legal systems, we could say that on the level of a regional economy, the state enforces laws and establishes limits that are to be respected. But on the level of the general economy, the same legal system makes allowances that enable the violation of these limits under special circumstances. Accordingly, a state may prohibit homicide while also preserving its own right to use the death penalty against those who break the law. Transgressive behavior usually involves a disregard for rules that ensure the smooth functioning of society within a regional economy. Some infractions are tolerated and no complete transgression occurs; the law survives the infraction because the transgression is in the service of a "sacrificial economy."

Thus the general economy enfolds or points toward the sacred, while its opposite, the regional economy, refers to the prohibition to kill within the profane realm. Bataille's economy of transgression is

useful here because it emphasizes the ambivalent relationship between law and its violation, and the resultant sanction of "legal murder." In the two films, the prohibition of killing leads to a court verdict of guilty. Yet it is precisely this moment of guilt that allows both women to access the "sacred" realm of the state, wherein their killing within the general economy is permitted. Nikita and her Chinese counterpart Catherine (Jade Leung) therefore become sacrificers, masters of the state's ritual ceremony.

In the Besson version, the need for the government to resort to such a tactic is explained within the narrative. Once Nikita is a senior agent and learns more about the motives behind her killing and spying missions, it is made clear that the general economy services the regional economy of criminality. When Nikita takes charge of her own mission, she has to spy on a foreign diplomat who purchases industrial secrets in order to obtain incriminating evidence against him. It is thereby implied that the government can justify its illegal dealings, for if the state is to crush the mafia, it must at times adopt the same criminal strategies. Killing, then, becomes the last resort for re-establishing a stable, "orthodox" society. It is important here to draw a parallel between the general economy of the state and Bataille's anthropological ideology of sacrifice. In both cases, salutary qualities are sought. Traditionally, the purpose of religious sacrifice is to obtain expiation through immolation. In a similar fashion, homicide can uphold the state and is beneficial in appearing to eradicate criminality.

Shin's adaptation also explores this same economy of transgression, but engages in a different discourse shaped by Asian ideology, a discourse where the American state is represented as perverse and treacherous. First, it is the American state that forces a Chinese woman to kill Asians. Second, the United States' killing missions consequently take on a worldwide dimension with an apparent ideology of international incursion (in contrast to the domestic missions in *Nikita*). And third, no explanation is ever offered to justify Catherine's missions. Killing for the sake of fighting criminality is never advocated, even in a context that gives a connotation of gratuitousness to the murdering missions, mainly because unlike Nikita Catherine never gets any in-

formation about the missions that she is expected to execute in China and Japan. In the film, America is presented globally as a treacherous mandarin state with no just purpose, only a despotic urge to overthrow Asia.

Consequently, reading the institutional transgression of limits in terms of sacrifice makes for an ambivalent conclusion. In *Nikita*, we witness a form of cruelty as the French government expects Nikita to execute its dirty work. Nevertheless, the resulting ideology is one that projects a government powerful in its ability to fight criminality. However, in the Hong Kong film America is depicted as a state that simply abuses its power. The oppression of Asia by the American regime is thus implied.

Cultural differences derive from specific conceptions of the world. In considering how dissimilarities surface out of a single storyline, I now intend to look at the two films in order to examine how Western and Eastern cultures generate mirror reflections of their very distinct societies. I assume that the specific ideology of each film is representative of its respective society, and by extension of its culture. Since the Hong Kong film transposes its narrative onto America, I will also scrutinize the way in which an Eastern culture here projects its vision of a West which to a certain degree it also emulates.

The Asian film is a free adaptation of *Nikita* and engenders two major modifications. These reside in the nature of the government involved and in the absolute technological control exercised over the Asian heroine. Whereas in the original film narrative, a young French woman is trained by French authorities to work for their secret service, her Asian counterpart is an immigrant to the United States and trained by Americans so that they can send her back to China and Japan on killing missions. In adapting the French narrative to an Asian context, clearly Shin could not possibly have made a film about the Chinese government's total control of a Chinese woman; censorship forced him to further modify the narrative structure in terms of national allegiances. Furthermore, the film was issued two years after the Tiananmen Square incident—a context that called for extra caution. The board of censorship was not likely to have allowed the issuing of a film with a narrative

alluding to a manipulative Chinese government.<sup>4</sup> However, they gladly circulated a film about a manipulative America.

Stephen Shin's second major modification is significant and provides the title for the Hong Kong film. Whereas Besson's authorities trust the French protagonist to serve her government indefinitely, the Chinese immigrant Catherine is kept under the constant control of the American state through the use of technology. She is put in a position where she cannot possibly betray America due to the implantation of a microchip named "Black Cat." Black Cat operates on Catherine's brain by remote control, enabling the government to intervene whenever it likes by giving her excruciating migraines. Two ethical issues arise out of the Hong Kong variant. The first pertains to the impossibility of the protagonist's escaping the control of the government, and the other relates to her role in society as virtually a female cyborg.

Since the Chinese protagonist cannot escape the control of her oppressor, Shin's film does not allow for the story to end in the same way as Besson's original. Nikita's journey commences with her inability to judge right from wrong and concludes with her final decision to abstain from killing any more by attempting to escape. The open ending leaves the spectator free to decide whether or not her attempt will be successful. In any event, it is a conclusion that endorses freedom: a freedom not to kill, a freedom from thralldom to the state. Nikita's refusal to kill rehabilitates her into society, within the sphere of the regional economy, where homicide is forbidden. Thus, in escaping, Nikita actually endorses the moral values of a "just society."

In contrast, Catherine does not have this alternative. She is a tagged bird; wherever she goes they can find her by locating the microchip in her brain.<sup>5</sup> No freedom is possible for a Chinese woman held captive by technology. And the finale is one of ongoing captivity rather than freedom. At the end of the Hong Kong version, Catherine's mentor and surrogate father, the Asian American who trained her, intervenes to kill her lover. Black Cat had already given Catherine sufficient warnings to be aware that her superiors disapproved of this relationship. The couple flee by car when her mentor arrives by helicopter and stops them by landing on the road in front of them. Then he gets out with a gun, aim-

ing at her lover. Catherine interferes calmly; she takes the gun and kills him herself, aiming for his heart. At this point, a flashback reminds us that her lover has a physiological anomaly. His heart is on the right side of his breast, and, although it appears that she has just killed her lover, she has not. The final shot shows Catherine and her surrogate father flying away.

Recalling Bataille's notion of sacrifice as transgressive homicide within the legal system of a general economy, how can we situate the sacrifice of Catherine's lover within such an economy? Once again, the American state is presented as plainly treacherous. Murdering criminals in the name of law is very different from killing an innocent man in order to prevent your agent from having a romantic relationship which might distract her. While presumably it falls within the general economy of serving the state, this particular transgressive mission may also seem to be undertaken in the service of a selfish interest. The decision to kill Catherine's lover might be interpreted as the state's interference in her private life. But where do you locate your private life when your employer is your "father"? This image of the father-state is a brilliant representation of the Chinese concept of society—modeled on the traditional family, but on a wider scale. Actually, claiming that the state is interfering in the private life of Catherine is a typically Western allegation. In China, the Western binary distinction between public and private domains becomes something closer to a continuum. That is, Chinese culture will tend to reject a black-and-white dialectic, preferring instead several shades of gray. Thus, if your father were *both* the state *and* your father and, by extension, all the citizens were your family, where would your private life belong?

The "kill the boyfriend" ending relates to the concept of filial piety within a Confucianist philosophy. In this light, the finale becomes a metaphor for the Chinese tradition of arranged marriages. The intervention of the surrogate father in Catherine's illicit romance echoes the traditional convention of having the father arrange the weddings for his progeny. Furthermore, Catherine's decision to kill her lover in front of her surrogate father is one that evokes the concept of filial piety by putting a formal (and in this case merely *apparent*) obedience to the

father before state law.<sup>6</sup> Thus Catherine manages to maintain the outward appearance of family harmony by shooting the man her father had turned against, yet in reality she opposes her father's will by not actually killing her lover (a concealed act of rebellion), so that in effect she is meeting her antagonist (surrogate father) halfway in the name of familial harmony.<sup>7</sup> The Black Cat microchip thus forces Catherine to be (at least ostensibly) held captive in a binding loyalty that borrows from and functions as metaphor for the Chinese principle of filial piety. The microchip is a device that compels filial loyalty and discipline. Yet when put into the wrong hands, the microchip can become a totalitarian tool. That is ultimately the ideology behind the ending of the film, wherein Catherine is forced to choose between what her heart tells her to do—save by “killing” her lover—and what the discipline of filial piety demands of her.

The Black Cat in Shin's version of the narrative also transforms Catherine into a cyborg woman, that is, a creature both robotic and human. No longer entirely normal, she becomes foreign, an alien, a mutant. While the original French version is very strong in its insistence upon bringing Nikita back to normality, Shin initially depicts Catherine as having a normal life before becoming abnormal. Indeed, Catherine is more normal than Nikita at the outset in a very significant way. She is an isolated young immigrant woman trying to earn her living in a foreign country. Unlike Nikita, who is a junkie smuggling with her punk buddies, Catherine is an innocent waitress who accidentally shoots a policeman after killing a man in self-defense. This victimization of the Chinese-born protagonist might be read as the expression of a major discrepancy that separates Eastern from Western notions of people's relation to the law. The subtext of the Hong Kong film is a harsh criticism of the unbending American legal system. The suggestion is that Hong Kong law is superior in being more human-oriented and, furthermore, that Chinese living in the U.S. may be overwhelmed by the inflexibility of the American legal system. For rules do not have the same absolute authority in China as in the West.

In legal and political philosophy, [ . . . ] one finds two [ . . . ]



fundamental elements—again in considerable disagreement with the West. One is the element of humanism, in which the individual person is more important than the abstract rule (in law, as in ethics), and the concept of “both-and,” or non-black-or-white. The other—also humanism—is the tendency toward rule by man rather than rule of law [. . .] (Moore 6–7)

Thus the East tends “toward rule by man rather than rule of law,” which fits with the duty-oriented mentality generated by a general attitude of tolerance. And paralleling the Eastern “both-and” notion with the Western guilty-innocent duality we get an Eastern legal conception of “both” guilty “and” innocent. This is made clear in the victimization of the Chinese protagonist who killed a police officer, but obviously did so unintentionally. The rigid American law will not consider the accidental aspect of the killing, but rather applies the standard charge attributable for intentionally killing a policeman. To force Catherine to serve the government due to a pure accident is plainly abusive. As a result, she is transformed from an innocent, normal human into a generically programmed cyborg woman: a less-than-human person, a rigid robot embodying rigid American law. Catherine is an innocent victim condemned to abnormality. Like an animal obeying its master or a robot executing the input command, Catherine is also the victim of manipulation. That is, the new cyborg Catherine is dehumanized.

Catherine is victimized to a greater degree than Nikita owing to the inhumanity of the American legal system, which programs Catherine’s mind to accede to a fixed American legal mentality that subsequently “Americanizes” and “Westernizes” her own Asian subjectivity. I would even argue that this mutant cyborg variant corresponds with the view that the Chinese have toward Chinese emigrants, especially toward those who go abroad to study. In China, those who leave their country and come back with a Western education are often compared to bananas: yellow on the outside but white on the inside. They all have the appearance of Chinese people, but are considered to have been assimilated into another culture.

This distinction between “true” Chinese and foreign-influenced Chinese is particularly notable in *Black Cat* in the scene where Catherine meets her lover. He asks her name and immediately questions her about her stay in America. Embarrassed that her secret has been exposed, she wonders why he thinks she has traveled abroad. He replies that local women do not reveal their names so easily upon first encounter. This simple incident suggests how Catherine no longer corresponds to the standard conception of a “Chinese woman.”

The film’s ideology actually works against the idea of Catherine’s being a woman, since she has mutated into a cyborg and is no longer “natural.” During her stay in the US she loses her womanhood in a technological defeminization: in order to be granted the power to kill, she must belong to the other gender. Unlike Nikita, who learns to reappropriate her womanhood through a loving relationship with the cosmetics instructor, a character played by Jeanne Moreau, the Hong Kong killing agent is only trained by men.

In demonstrating that Catherine’s boyfriend does not find in her the usual shyness typical of Chinese women, director Shin characterizes Catherine as an aggressive masculine figure. Indeed, the narrative robs Catherine of several female characteristics. In her boyfriend’s refusal to acknowledge her Chinese womanhood, she is deprived of her right to be erotic. Thus the narrative discharges her from the traditional biologically reproductive role advocated in a patriarchal society, and she is instead given a uniquely masculine killing role. The surrogate father, or more precisely the American state, appropriates the female capacity to give birth by having Catherine re-produced. Moreover, her loss of womanhood occurs at a precise intersection: womanhood disappears at the same time the American state appears, as the mentor/father-figure offers Catherine a new life.<sup>8</sup>

While Nikita has a surrogate mother who teaches her how to be a woman once more, Catherine does not. In fact, she has limited access to the female sphere and women she meets get killed before they can interact with her. The first female Catherine is in contact with is a new girl who, like her, is confined to becoming a hired gun. But this first acquaintance soon commits suicide. Catherine meets a second girl

much later when she is on a mission in China and she happens to encounter a former classmate on the street. The woman recognizes her but Catherine, shaped by her new identity, claims she has been mistaken for someone else. The very same night, while watching the news on television, Catherine learns that the classmate was killed in what appears to have been a murder, made to look like an accident. All the other characters Catherine encounters are male. "America" clearly wants Catherine's boyfriend to die; Shin allows a romance scene to take place for entertainment needs, but then he aborts it in the name of filial piety at the end. Thus the female realm is effectively denied to Catherine.

Catherine is a modern-day samurai, a mutant masculinized by America. Her character shares many of the attributes of a traditional Japanese hero called *tateyaku*. The *tateyaku* was the leading role in the New Shimpa School, a trend following the Kabuki tradition. This protagonist was a noble, idealized samurai "educated according to Confucian morals, which place no value on romantic love" (Sato 16). In the conventional Shimpa story, the *tateyaku* "was never permitted to place his love for his wife or sweetheart above loyalty toward his lord. This was one of the fundamental principles of the *Bushido*, the code of behavior of the warrior" (Sato 16). According to Western codes of loyalty in medieval tales of chivalry, there is often a triangular conflict involving a knight who dares to oppose his lord in order to protect the honor of the lady he worships, as with the triangle comprised of Lancelot, Arthur, and Guinevere.<sup>9</sup> In contradistinction to this, the typical samurai cannot possibly present any obstruction to his loyalty to his lord:

[. . .] in the tales of the *Bushido* [. . .] a noble samurai (performed by the *tateyaku*) would sacrifice his wife and children out of loyalty toward his lord and, despite his inner pain, would watch them die without betraying the slightest emotion. (Sato 16)

Catherine belongs to this race of noble human beings that must

sacrifice loved ones without betraying any emotion. She is held captive by this warrior code that enforces such sacrifice, an adherence to Eastern discipline that materializes in the narrative as the Black Cat implant and is attributed to Western manipulation. Held captive by technology, the Chinese heroine cannot aspire to freedom as does her French foil. Rather, this female samurai is subjected to the East Asian feudal ideology of serving a larger purpose, so that this greater destiny (of the self within the cosmos/filial system) overrules personal ambition. Thus, self-interest and individualism are negated.

Although Catherine is different from Nikita in her cyborg- and samurai-like qualities, as well as in her masculinity, the two women nevertheless share characteristics typical of the anti-hero. They serve a state that on the one hand punishes them for having committed homicide yet on the other grants them a realistic vision of the society in which they live. Once initiated into the secret realm of the state, they are aware of the duplicity of such governmental institutions. Similarly, as anti-heroes they both fall in love but lose their loved ones—Nikita by choice, Catherine by force. Thus Besson's and Shin's films share much common ground and their narratives can be read metaphorically. Female access to the gun (the displaced phallus) perhaps symbolizes accession to a form of male power as the female becomes master of the state's transgressive ritual sacrifice.

Yet an analysis of the respective cultures within which the two films were made yields a greater understanding of how they still have significantly different meanings. Shin's ideology depicts the supremacy of technology in holding Catherine prisoner. But while Catherine is kept captive, Besson's ideology affirms freedom of choice and Nikita claims her right to choose her own destiny. Catherine, however, is exclusively tied to the community, and denied self-determination because of the Black Cat. She is bound by duty, and this obligation infringes on her right to freedom. Catherine's role is above all social. Nikita belongs to the individual, Catherine to the communal.<sup>10</sup>

In distinguishing Eastern from Western ideology, it seems to me that *Black Cat* sets its discourse in the Buddhist framework of a "reincarnation ideology" that condemns as productive of bad karma any

attempt to eradicate life. Catherine fits into the universal cycle of life and, according to karmic retribution, once “reincarnated” must pay for her crime by assuming a status inferior to that which she enjoyed in her previous life.<sup>11</sup> She will only break out of this new stage of the reincarnation cycle through death. In my opinion, Shin intends to represent American imperialism but is nevertheless biased by his own conception of state and society, insofar as his notion of the absolute power of the community over the individual is very much an Eastern conception (Liu 180).

In the original narrative, Nikita had a right to freedom, but Shin modifies the outcome and refuses to give this right to Catherine. Besson’s ideology contains traces of thought associated with the French Revolution: the emancipation of an individual, the promotion of a person from the condition of vassal to that of a citizen with human rights. Conversely, Shin restrains the Chinese heroine within a form of thralldom, and if we consider the political situation in mainland China at the time of his film’s release (that is, the context of a post-Tiananmen-Square China), it is understandable that the director feels compelled to conclude that the state overpowers the individual. Subsequently, Shin seems to be stipulating that the community fuses the individual within the state. Individuality is negated in favor of duty to the nation.

Thus far, I have set in opposition Besson’s French and Shin’s Hong Kong films in an attempt to decipher traits characteristic of their respective cultures. At this point, however, I wish to further consider the Chinese mythopoetic and literary tradition. It occurred to me that the microchip variant of the Hong Kong film suggests similarities with a Chinese literary classic. I wish to outline these parallels with *Black Cat*, in order to form a tentative picture of the Chinese view of America, or rather one possible interpretation of this view. *Black Cat* diverges from the original tale of *La Femme Nikita* with the addition of a twist that has much in common with Wu Cheng-en’s (1570s) *Journey to the West*. In both this Chinese novel and the film, the main character is subject to punishment in the form of atrocious headaches.

In the novel, the protagonist is a smart young monkey, eager to learn and spend years studying martial arts. He ends up acquiring

mastery of various combat skills and thereby becomes the king of the monkeys and a powerful opponent. The Monkey King causes havoc everywhere he goes, for he always uses his skills to his own selfish advantage. In one of his numerous acts of mischief he steals and eats enchanted fruits from the gods' garden. The fruits have a heavenly magic charm: to eat them will make one immortal. Consequently, the Monkey King is not only a fearsome creature but also an immortal.

Fuming with rage at the daring monkey, the gods finally restrain him (after several attempts) by causing an enormous mountain to tumble on him. The Monkey King cannot escape, so he stops causing chaos. Yet since he is eternal, he spends many centuries under the mountain until one day a goddess needs his help and decides to free him. In return for his freedom, the Monkey King has to accept an assignment. At the will of Bodhisattva, the goddess of mercy, he must go to India and bring back the scriptures of Buddha in the company of a priest whom he must protect and obey. To make the monkey docile, Bodhisattva has him wear a golden band around his head. This band is permanently attached; he cannot take it off. Whenever the monkey misbehaves, the priest recites a magical formula that shrinks the band to produce atrocious headaches.

The "golden band" thus becomes a common motif in the two different narratives. Like the monkey's band, Black Cat is made of gold since a microchip requires a golden component. And, like the monkey in *Journey to the West*, Catherine misbehaves and is given missions in return for her freedom. She creates havoc by misusing a gun. For this reason, she is trained and learns to obey. Catherine misuses technology, and from then on she is subjugated by technology. In the process of domestication, she learns how to both obey and please the authorities much as an animal obeys his master. Her French twin Nikita, however, receives a promotion and learns the motives behind her own killing missions. Catherine never obtains this awareness. She is kept in the dark and is expected to behave. Thus the latter-day Chinese golden band as microchip connotes a form of domestication by way of modern technology. Catherine is transformed into a cyborg being, a humanoid useful to the American state. Essentially, Shin's film alludes to the

supremacy of technology. While the French original evokes the supremacy of moral values, *Black Cat* keeps the female character and her subjectivity in America's clutches. America's technological power is figured as an ability to tame, to engender submissiveness.

Both *Black Cat* and the classic novel breach the issue of the West's influence upon China. In *Black Cat*, the West (in the form of the US) takes on an all-pervasive, global dimension, while the Chinese novel reduces it to a smaller scale in situating India as the West of China.<sup>12</sup> *Journey to the West* narrates the legendary process of transmission through which Buddhism came to China. The Buddha's scriptures brought humanism from India to China and domesticated human urges into altruistic behavior. While in *Black Cat* the West is no longer India, Catherine's journey to the West will nonetheless have her leave the realm of the profane in order to access the sacred realm of Bataille's general economy.

The Indian "West" brought a high spiritual discipline to ancestral China, but conversely in *Black Cat* the American "West" has little in the spiritual or cultural domain to offer contemporary China. It has no ethics, only a desire to use its influence to control China. In opposition to the Monkey King who returns from the ancestral West with the Buddhist scriptures that will shape Chinese religion, Catherine comes back with a murderous technology and with the sole purpose of wreaking destruction.

Both Catherine and the Monkey King are instruments of the divine in that they are allowed to kill for a higher purpose. The goal of the Monkey King is made clear, but what is the ultimate goal of Catherine's mission? America's sole acknowledged aim in the film seems to be to impose its power on others by extending its destructive activities abroad, thus endangering Asian culture—but if these destructive activities are indeed meant as acts (within a general economy) of sacrifice to a higher cause, this higher cause or purpose is never revealed.

*Black Cat* in many ways paints America as a feudal state and a colonizing empire. Ironically, however, the Black Cat apparatus that forces Catherine to be faithful to the American state also fosters, as I have shown, a filial piety and a samurai-like code of behavior both

consonant with Confucianism. But although Catherine behaves in accordance with Confucian ideology, she does so to serve a selfish state, a self-interested community within which she barely belongs. America is in this sense represented as anti-democratic. Thus we might say the ideology of Shin's film is ultimately anti-American: the original French narrative was altered so as to omit the justifications for the killing missions; the American state's transgression of the taboo against murder, especially when we consider the killing of Catherine's lover in relation to the "general economy" of sacrificial ideology, can hardly be justified. For the law at large does not benefit, nor does the Chinese community; only selfish American interests are at stake. Bataille's sacrificial transgression theory acts in a vacuum here; there are no ethical justifications for the American missions, which seem gratuitous and egotistical. Hence, situating this homicidal transgression within Bataille's ideology of sacrifice, we find that in *Black Cat* America (unlike France) is continually associated with abusive attitudes. It seems to me that Stephen Shin has an Asian conception of community that cannot reconcile itself with American individualism.

On looking at Shin's changes in Besson's plot in order to show how the major modifications are representative of Chinese culture, one is faced with the paradox of how these alterations can be conceived as representative of Chinese culture when Shin's narrative has the force of sacrificial violence originating from the US. However, since the creative process of filmmaking took place in Hong Kong, *Black Cat* ought still to be viewed as reflecting an Asian ideology. Thus the first modification, placing America in the role of a lawless regime with China as its victim, denotes a form of paranoia—that is, a sense of dread over the imminent intervention of the US in Asia. Meanwhile, the second modification—the microchip motif—symbolizes American governmental power in its use of high technology to control Catherine and, by extension, Asia.

In posing a narrative threat to China, Catherine functions as an embodiment the country's paranoia regarding American imperialism and her storyline serves as a powerful allegory of electronic spying by the United States ("Téléphone"). And such paranoia is indeed extend-



ed to Chinese migrants, since studying abroad infringes on loyalty to the Chinese nation: in Shin's film, xenophobia and technophobia are equated.<sup>13</sup> Catherine as a sacrificer becomes at the same time a highly corrupted cyborg-being, a fraud that correlates technology with American propaganda. And so the American dream is reversed in a deconstructive trope that seeks to expose the two fatal weaknesses of so-called American "democracy": the control of the press by American interests, and the abuse of reconnaissance technology for the sake of interference in foreign affairs.

Spying is the dominant allegory in *Black Cat*, and the power of microchip technology represented by Black Cat can easily be likened to all of the diverse spying strategies used by America: observation by satellite pictures, listening to cell phone conversations, and reading email communications as well as information saved on computers. As for the control of the press, it is merely alluded to in the "accidental death" of Catherine's former classmate. The scene in which Catherine learns about the tragedy on the news makes it very obvious that the true version has been kept secret. The diffusion of information has manipulated the event into an official accident and thereby concealed the intrusion of the American state.

Thus, targeting three major instruments of American imperialism—the power to spy electronically, the power to control the media, and the power to impose its decisions by the force of weaponry—Shin's *Black Cat* is exceptionally eloquent in its critique of American oppression. When viewed in the context of the Monkey King legend, Shin's America acquires a "heavenly" status, but this "divinity" is the virtually superhuman power of technological expertise. America's technology might almost seem to connote the *magic power* of the goddess of mercy. Yet, the American idol (unlike the goddess or even the Monkey King once he has been tamed by Buddhist teachings) lacks a corresponding system of spiritual values, and subsequently lacks any real spiritual weight or meaning. This, therefore, is where American idealism ultimately implodes, self-destructs.

It would perhaps be more accurate to say that America is the counterpart not of the goddess or spiritualized Monkey King but of the

original (young and brash) Monkey King. Like the latter, America possesses "supernatural" powers, but this mastery merely serves egocentric goals. Just like the Monkey King in his youthful acts of foolish bravery, America creates havoc. The idealism of America is reduced to an idolization of a power devoid of moral or spiritual values. *Black Cat* ultimately represents the "West" as an oppressive force lacking any moral integrity, a powerful enemy in urgent need (like the young Monkey King) of a master who can give it moral guidance.

In conclusion, several dualities recur in the French and Hong Kong versions of the death-agent narrative: aggressor-victim, homicide taboo-right to kill, individualism-communalism, sacred-profane, and oppression-freedom, to name a few. Some of these are developed in a similar way by the two films. For instance, at the onset of both, transgression of the killing taboo places both women in the role of victim-aggressor. This is a paradox that allows them to enter into the sacred realm of the state, and gives them the right to murder as masters of a sacrificial ceremony in the service of general economies, that is, in the service of a "higher good" which transcends our normal ethical understanding. Both women begin a journey toward normality; by the end Nikita chooses not to kill and resumes a regular life different from her previous junkie lifestyle, while Catherine acquires a surrogate father who supplies her with the context of a "family" which will help her to make decisions that fit into Confucianist precepts of filial piety.

Yet at some point these dualistic tropes operate differently in the two films. Nikita's move to normality is absolute; Catherine's is only partial since the Black Cat microchip transforms her into a cyborg-woman, a "robot" with a rigidity comparable to the rigid framework of American law. The comparison of Shin's film with the classic Chinese Monkey King narrative, where the cult of killing belongs to the unlawful monkey (in need of supervision by a priest who teaches him proper Buddhist values), suggests the lack of humanistic values in American power or (extending the Confucian metaphor and taking world as family) "filial supervision." Shin's Hong Kong version of *Nikita* emulates his conception of America, denouncing that country's unbending legal system and criticizing a legalistic rigidity which leaves no room for a

humanistic (East Asian) "both-and" conception of law and ethics.

Any cult is the product of a specific culture. In their respective depictions of a sacrificial cult, the two texts speak for their particular cultures. If Besson's film echoes an ideology influenced by the French Revolution and its quest for freedom, the Hong Kong version stands for Chinese family values. Furthermore, if Besson's narrative mirrors an individualist conception of humanity, then Shin's adaptation exposes the clash between American individualism and its Chinese counterpart—a focus on community and, consequently, on a humanistic legal system that values individualism over state law.

Two main conclusions are drawn from Shin's Hong Kong variant. The first pertains to the impossibility of Catherine's escaping the control of the government, and the second to some aspects of cyborg womanhood. Nikita chooses freedom and normality, but Catherine remains faithful to her divine status, within the sacred realm of a general economy finally more Asian than American. The final scene of *Black Cat*, where Catherine ascends in the helicopter with her surrogate father, is a powerfully symbolic image endowing her with a supernatural aura—an image that has much in common with the Monkey King's acceptance of the power of supernatural locomotion, when he flies on a cloud like the Asian gods. Furthermore, just as the Monkey King becomes powerful by studying the martial arts, Catherine becomes mighty by undergoing intensive training in America. They have programmed her to kill, by implanting a microchip in her brain so that she would seem to be fully subjected to the American cult of technological power; paradoxically, however, it is her American training that allows her ultimately to undertake and accomplish missions which embrace community, thus subverting her own selfish (Western individualistic) aspirations.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The original title of *Nikita* is *La femme Nikita*.

<sup>2</sup> The original title of *Black Cat* is *Hei Mao*.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Parillaud won the Cesar in 1991 for “best female performance” in this part.

<sup>4</sup> Recently, while presenting her film on the post-Tiananmen lifestyle *Dong Ci Bian Wei (Conjugaison, 2001)*, which premiered at the Locarno Film Festival, Hong Kong filmmaker Emily Tang commented on the necessity of using metaphor in order to be allowed to treat this topic.

<sup>5</sup> The Chinese film uses a typical form of Asian expressionism to lyrically represent her captive state: Catherine is compared to a bird. At the beginning of the film she is shown as especially gifted at evasion. In two instances she escapes close supervision: the first occurrence happens on her way out of court, when she has just heard that she has been found guilty, and the second comes during her training, when she has to pass a test while tied to an apparatus that will keep her submerged in a swimming pool. Somehow she manages to break out. She seems to be made for freedom. However, her reinsertion within society requires incarceration so as to tame her animal nature, domesticate her wildly free tendencies. Numerous other allusions are continuously made to remind us of her bird-like nature. To cite a few, her lover is an ecologist who protects wildlife; finding out about a bird that does not sing after being placed in a cage, she sets it free; the microchip is an equivalent of the bird’s “tag” and its name suggests a cat that always watches a wild bird.

<sup>6</sup> In *Analects* XIII. 18, Confucius taught that “it is not upright for a son to bear witness against his father’s stealing of a sheep but upright for him to conceal the misconduct of his father” (Wing-Tsit Chan 27). Confucianism values family harmony over the law. Rule by man is more powerful than rule by law because “the individual person is more important than the abstract rule” (Moore 6–7). Nevertheless, “while the individual is fully considered as important, his importance is not to

overshadow that of society" (Wing-Tsit Chan 26). Furthermore, the conception of Chinese society is based on family structure. There is the family at the root of it, and then, on a larger scale, there is the state that is alluded to as an extended family and relies on a similar structure.

<sup>7</sup> On the concept of harmony and the solution of conflicts by meeting the antagonist halfway, see Wu 226–32.

<sup>8</sup> Regarding male narcissism in China and how it implies bypassing the female reproductive role, see Chow 135–36.

<sup>9</sup> Guinevere is a character in the Arthurian Legend, the wife of King Arthur and the mistress of Sir Lancelot.

<sup>10</sup> On the notions of duty and community, see Wu 219, Mei 326–28 and Hsiu 111.

<sup>11</sup> For the issue of karmic retribution, see Seaman 387–89.

<sup>12</sup> Buddhism came from the West, and later on, when the Jesuits came to China during the Ming dynasty, Jesus Christ was also called a Western sage (T'ang Chün-I 212).

<sup>13</sup> On the theme of technophobia in relation to propaganda in Chinese cinema, see Chow 121–23.

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