

## Scud: Gay Filmmaker Extrordinaire

Let us live for the beauty of our own reality.<sup>1</sup>

### By Way of Introduction:

For those of you who have never heard of him or his films, Scud is the working name of Hong Kong film maker Danny Cheng Wan-Cheung. I first came across two of his films, *Utopians* and *Amphetamine*, on YouTube, and, apart from their obvious appeal, I thought they looked interesting and was motivated to explore them further. At that stage it was pretty difficult to find his films on DVD anywhere, but over the years they have become more and more available. All his movies feature same sex relationships and they are definitely what gets called 'arthouse', and the categorisation is not an inappropriate description – they all incorporate varying degrees of narrative complexity with unsignalled flashbacks and disrupted timelines, and they often include references to or quotes from his previous films plus self-referential 'meta-diegetic' elements or even interview material which raises the question about where fiction ends and fact begins and which draws attention to the fact that what you are watching is after all 'only' a movie. So they are all pretty densely packed: they repay close study. I should perhaps add that more recently his films have received more attention and a lot of what I have to say will echo what others have already said, but, while resisting the temptation to do a shot by shot / scene by scene analysis of each movie, tempting as it maybe, I shall nevertheless perhaps be examining the films in more detail than the average reviewer has space for.

But before I do so I just want to make two general observations. The first thing that strikes one, of course, is the amount of nudity in his films. What is it all about? Perhaps it is useful to distinguish between nakedness and nudity. While appearing to mean the same things, the two words have very different connotations. 'Nude' suggests prurience, invites a sexual response from the viewer, suggests what in my day were known as dirty magazines, is associated with pornography. 'Naked,' by contrast, implies vulnerability, goes with unashamed, is associated with innocence. A new born baby is naked, never nude. The naked person is without the carapace of clothing, is stripped of all the meaning that goes with clothing. You can tell the difference between soldiers, businessmen and car mechanics by looking at what they are wearing – take their clothes off them and that difference disappears. Remember, of course, that the word also goes with aggression as in naked aggression, but even there the connotation is that of primal body meeting primal body. And Scud's men are naked not nude. And just to return to pornography for a moment, there is certainly explicit sexual material in his films: as the warning on the *Adonis* box has it, 'Strong Sexual Content', but if one defines pornography as material specifically designed to stimulate sexual activity in the viewer, it does strike me that there is no such specific intent in his movies, not least because it is not shot like porn; . . . And from another perspective entirely, it is only by naming things that we call them into existence. So it is with porn: it is only porn if we name it as such.

Secondly there is the question of 'homosexuality', and here we are trapped by language and, given that language is the product of history, we are trapped by history itself, particularly by recent history. The problem arises because articles about and reviews of his films all talk about

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<sup>1</sup> Found this on Google. I gather it's taken from *Even Gowgirls Get The Blues* by Tom Robbins:

them confronting issues of ‘sexual identity’, a phrase that became important in my lifetime as a political tool needed order to battle the discrimination experienced by gay and lesbian – or non hetero-normative as I gather I should now be saying – people in our society. This has led to the need for people to label themselves as **either gay or straight or bisexual or trans-sexual**, or whatever, and you have to decide which. You have to be *either/or*; you can’t be *both/and*; you can’t be *maybe*; you can’t be *I’ll let you know when I find out*; you can’t be *who cares?* And while a number of Scud’s protagonists, particularly in the earlier films, are exploring their sexuality, they are all in the *I’ll let you know when I find out* category, and sexuality as such is not the most important identifying factor in his films. With his characters it is much more useful to think in terms of sexual preference, a much more fluid notion that can indeed vary from one encounter to the next.

And the films ..... My original intention was to discuss each film individually but as I have studied them I have started to see them as a single work, a ten movement symphony if you will, with intertwining and interrelated motifs changing and developing thematically as one moves from one film to the next; and Scud will often, in any given film, make explicit reference to a previous one, thus linking them all together in one continuous ten episode work – as I say, a ten movement symphony.<sup>2</sup> And my reading is perhaps reinforced by the fact that he has now announced that he has stopped making films – he has said all he wants to say.<sup>3</sup> As for what the films are about, the thematic content if you will? Well the earlier films tend to be about love, and indeed may look like love stories, but they have neither the traditional happy endings with the lovers holding hands and gazing into the sunset, nor indeed the traditional sad endings, with the lovers forever parted by circumstances beyond their control or, like R & J, clasped tragically together in death. They are rather what you might call films of disappointment, with relationships that look promising but which are then thwarted for one reason or another, that founder for one reason or another. The films are, as I say, films *about* love. In a similar way the later films are about death but they are paradoxically more positive, exploring, as they do, speculation about the nature of the afterlife and the possibilities of reincarnation. Films of transcendence if you will.

## 1. City Without Baseball (2008)

The original idea for the movie had come from the Hong Kong Baseball Association who had approached Scud to see if he would like to make a documentary about the national team. Scud met the team, liked them, but felt he would like to build a fictional story around them rather than make a simple documentary about them and, having never directed a film himself, he asked Lawrence Lau, who already had a track record as an established director, to direct; and in interview Scud has suggested that Lau was ‘responsible for all the picture compositions and angles choices’, though elsewhere Scud is credited as co-director. He was certainly responsible for the editing and the final cut, and, with a little help from the players themselves, he wrote it. We may also presume that he was responsible for the choice and use of the music, some of it

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<sup>2</sup> His own *Ring Cycle* if you will, though Wagner is far too bombastic a composer for the comparison to be anything but inappropriate in every other way.

<sup>3</sup> This analogy / interpretation is somewhat problematic since his final film, *Naked Nations: Tribe Hong Kong* is not currently available for home viewing.

especially composed for the film by Eugen Pao, some of it in the form of pre-existing songs, or even songs written by the players themselves.<sup>4</sup>

Genre wise the film initially appears to be a sports movie, the sort of movie that follows the fortunes of an individual, or in this case a whole team, with a narrative trajectory that takes them from struggle to success. In this particular case, since we are following the progress of a real baseball team in a real tournament who had real hopes of getting into the premier league but who don't quite make it, the success is only relative, but real enough in that by the end of the film they have moved several places up the league and survived to fight another day.<sup>5</sup> Intertwined with this sports movie is a film about love. Our protagonist is 20 year old Ron, a student and musician, who has ambitions to become a pitcher and who falls in love with the current pitcher, Chung, who will at the end of the film reject his advances. That's where the disappointment comes in.

The first shot of the movie introduces us to a naked Chung on the seashore in the dusk. He is picked out by a spotlight that suddenly switches on. He runs into the sea. Cut to a shot of him in bright orange overalls under a car – he's a garage mechanic. He drives off and we find him back at the sea in the dusk going skinny dipping with his blonde English girlfriend, he is breaking up with her. She calls him a bitch – gender on the agenda already at this stage in the movie; plus a touch of culture clash? Cut to Ron at home, then in a recording studio singing a song he has written – “When will we fly to the moon”, “climb up high” – a song of aspiration one might call it. A baseball montage follows featuring both Ron and Chung, placing them in each other's context baseball wise. The credits roll over the ensuing shower sequence announcing that the cast are the real players with their real names. At first viewing we don't know how the narrative sequence is actually working, but on second viewing we may note that the first shot does not seem to be in narrative sequence at all. Instead it literally puts Chung in the spotlight, suggesting perhaps that he is going to be the object of our gaze, the object of desire throughout the movie, a suggestion re-enforced by the powerful burst of music that has accompanied the shot. And, from a number of perspectives, so he will prove to be. In other respects this pre-credits sequence has established our two main characters in their respective contexts, and we have learned a bit about their personalities.

And so to the shower scene itself and straightaway we are into one of Scud's trademark self-referential conceits as the players talk about a rumour that they are going to be in a baseball movie, or even, since no-one will want to watch a baseball movie, a porn movie. They discuss, in other words, the very movie that they are in, which is already a baseball movie – or will it indeed turn out to be a porn movie? As for the porn movie option itself, they speculate about who will be the lead, who's got the best butt? Why Chung of course: ‘Your butt is more spectacular’ they tell him, and much horseplay as they smack him on that same said butt. His fellow players may all be ‘straight’ but already Chung, or more specifically his butt, is the object

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<sup>4</sup> All too often the contribution that music makes to a film is completely neglected. If it is well used it can serve a number of purposes:- to underline / re-inforce the emotion of a scene; to generate pace; or to serve structural purposes offering us punctuation points in the very narrative itself, to name but three. Ask yourselves, for instance, where *Psycho* would be without Bernard Hermann or *2001* without *The Blue Danube* or *The Draughtsman's Contract* without Michael Nyman.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, as an end title informs us, they did indeed make it into the premier league the following year.

of desire. Ron arrives late to the shower scene, acknowledges Chung, then chooses a shower that leaves a gap between him and the others, holding himself aloof from the others seemingly. He does not take part in the butt slapping horseplay, and a reaction shot shows that he is not amused by it. There is no explanation for this: indeed on first viewing we barely notice it. But once we have seen the film through and watched Ron's slow discovery of his own sexuality and seen that he is attracted to Chung, that he has feelings for him, then we are able to offer a reading, an interpretation, that can perhaps explain what is going on. We can suggest that he cannot bring himself to engage in the horseplay precisely because he *does* want to slap Chung's butt, but for entirely different purposes. The slap would have an entirely different conceptualisation, an entirely different emotional content, an entirely different meaning. And I would certainly suggest that there is an unconscious fear that he will give himself away, and not just to the others but most importantly to himself as well. Perhaps this is all an over-interpretation on my part, but I do adduce the rest of movie in support. All this in a couple of blink and you miss them visual details at the start of the movie – such is cinema.

Moving on: We find Ron on a river bridge watching a scene unfolding in an apartment over the way: Chung with a girl. An acquaintance passes and Ron greets him, telling him he looks handsome. A friend, Kevin, appears, asks if he is watching his girlfriend. He is. He phones her, we see her switching off the phone. Ron asks Kevin to take a message to her, telling her he is busy, and we watch, still from Ron's p.o.v, as she gets the message, ignores it, and turns her attention back to Chung. We have heard no dialogue, the visuals have told the story. Ron turns and chases off down walkways off the bridge. We should also note that the scene has contained a classic trope of putative gay romance, particularly a suppressed gay romance, whereby love is passed from one man to the other via a mutually loved female intermediary. Here it is implicit, but it will happen more explicitly later in the movie. Also of note is Kevin's role, appearing at crucial moments in Ron's character's trajectory.

Coach Tai arrives, we see him at the baseball pitch talking to the manager, then making his way across the city to a run-down café by the sea where he is chatted up by the waitress, Ping. Cut to Ron practicing a song – his room-mate tries to silence him by quoting Mencius at him, and they castigate each other, Ron castigating his room-mate for being white yet quoting a Chinese philosopher, and being castigated in return for being Chinese yet singing in English – another touch of culture clash. Mencius, it should be noted, was a follower of Confucius but, unlike his mentor apparently, he believed that people were inherently good, that the object of education should be the cultivation of benevolence, and that the proper path is one that is natural and unforced.<sup>6</sup> No accident, then, that Scud quotes him: one might even argue that his films embody, both literally and metaphorically, such a take on life.

After a training session we find the team relaxing in a bar and singing together, a song the players themselves had written apparently. Scud allows the song to play out, and on a couple of occasions the camera moves outside and we see them framed by the window – it could almost be a painting – emphasising their togetherness. On the drive home they seemingly hit a girl – Ping it seems, but she disappears, leaving only her cell phone in the road, which Chung picks up. Another training session, this time in the rain. Ping turns up again and teases Coach about wanting to keep her options open, tells him he doesn't even know her name; and in the bedroom

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<sup>6</sup> Don't worry, I looked it up!

scene that follows, talks about girls taking the initiative and about her previous lovers. She likes dating people that are on the move: ‘A roadster<sup>7</sup> attracts me.’ She even recognises that she doesn’t fully understand her own motivations: “I wonder if I know myself at all’. Ping remains covered but Coach lies on top of the covers, naked, back to the camera, and it is a tender scene, tenderly lit, tenderly filmed, with a relaxing three note repeated theme accompanying it that adds to the mood of tenderness. (And I should add that tenderness is a Scud trademark – he feels tenderly for his characters, and he is tender in his filming of all the naked bodies that are to be found in his films.) Back at the baseball pitch Ron talks to Coach, telling him about his aspirations to challenge Chung by becoming a pitcher himself. Cut to a domestic scene with Ron’s mother and sister, waiting for Ron himself to arrive with his new girlfriend, Meizi, who bears a remarkable resemblance to Ping – not just in appearance<sup>8</sup>, but in personality also happy, as we shall discover, to play the field when it comes to sexual partners; and who has nothing if not a strange role to play in the movie.

### Ron

As will be gathered, detailed scene by scene analysis of the movie yields nothing if not rich pickings, and each time I re-view the movie, the more I find in each scene, but to continue in this vein would fill a book: so I propose to focus on Ron’s and Meizi’s trajectories through the film. Starting with Ron, the film, which is decidedly an *I’ll let you know when I find out* movie, charts what is effectively a process of self-discovery as he comes to recognise his own sexual preferences. It’s a substantial psychological journey which Scud, with remarkable insight and economy, shows us; with the visuals telling us just as much as, if not more than, the dialogue. I have already noted and suggested an interpretation for Ron’s behaviour in the showers, and his congratulation on the handsome appearance of his passing acquaintance on the bridge is also suggestive. We have also seen that he would like have a chance at being pitcher, which would mean that he would have to replace Chung, to become Chung, or at the very least to inhabit his space – a conceptual co-habitation if you will. When we next see Ron and Meizi they are in bed together<sup>9</sup>, only to be interrupted by Kevin, offering, with appropriate gestures, to give Ron a helping hand, or mouth, in order to stiffen his resolve and to help things along, thus also precipitating a conversation between Meizi and Ron about homosexuality. Has he ever tried it? No, he is not a homosexual. Meizi has tried it but decided it was not for her, but suggests that, if they are young and very pretty, boys and girls can be equally attractive: “Why not open yourself up to choices? Particularly if you don’t know what you really need.” Also note again Kevin’s role as catalyst in the development of Ron’s discovery of his sexuality, aided in this case by Meizi herself. A following scene again finds the team relaxing in a bar, encouraging Chung to

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<sup>7</sup> One feels that the original language has rather lost something in translation!

<sup>8</sup> In an interview with Lawrence ah Mon which I can no longer access so I have to quote from unreliable memory he suggested that the original cut of the movie was too long, so they decided to cut the whole subplot with Ping and Coach. At that stage Ping and Meizi were indeed played by the same actor. Clearly at some later stage Scud must have decided to re-instate the subplot, and in the final cut it does indeed appear that they are played by the same actor, but the credits at the end of the movie (and in Wikipedia) have Yuan Lin credited as Meizi and Wei-Sha Yan credited as Ping.

<sup>9</sup> In discussing the movie with my partner, Garth, he wondered if baseball itself constituted a structural metaphor for the whole film, with Ron’s progress seen as a move from base to base until he finally gets to home base at the end. The match is not exact, with Ron maybe hitting more than 4 bases in his narrative trajectory through the movie, but it did seem to me to be an idea that had a lot of traction to it, so here we might suggest that Ron has reached first base? Whatever. As for where the rest appear, I’ll leave that to you.

strip off to show Meizi what he's made of – first off to twitch his pectorals, then to show her the stick between his legs(!) Ron calls a halt. Is he jealous, and in which case of whom? Of Chung for attracting his current girlfriend, or of Meizi for attracting his putative boyfriend? Certainly, walking home afterwards with Meizi, confessed that he finds Chung intriguing.

Later he allows himself to become more explicit: Chung has been injured in a bar fight, and we see him at the doctors with his best mate Jason – a beautiful scene, incidentally, in which they talk about life after baseball, another minor theme in the movie. Ron, of course is jealous of Jason and, it should be added, vice versa. Thus when they are back at practice and Ron sympathises with Chung, Jason tells him it's none of his business. A game follows, but Chung must sit out with the girls who are watching the game, and Ron has a chance to be pitcher. He asks Chung if he can teach him: 'Does King Chung have time for me tonight?' Chung: 'If concubine Ron needs me I'll take half an hour to turn down all the girls,' though he will check with Jason first. Ron tells him that he always has to fight Jason to get Chung's attention. Chung returns with a sour faced Jason who leaves them to it. Chung offers to show Ron his own way of hurling but it's on the condition that Ron treats him to dinner: 'I thought I'd have to sleep with you first,' says Ron. He may be 'just joking', but the fact that he is just joking allows him to say what deeper down he would like to say in all seriousness. And Chung? Again the fact that they are 'just joking' allows him to refer to Ron as his concubine. And he has after all turned down all the girls in order to be with the boy; and when he gets there: 'It's just the two of us,' he says. 'What shall we do?' It's virtually an invitation. Given that Chung will reject Ron's advances later in the movie, one may ask what Chung is playing at here. Has he too got unacknowledged feelings? The question will be left hanging at the end of the movie. In the meanwhile they bond in the car afterwards, talking about their lack of success with women.

A snooker scene follows where Ron and Chung compete for Meizi's attention as they teach her how to play, followed in its turn by a complex scene in a café which opens with Chung and Jason chatting together. Chung has invited Ron to join them, to see if Jason and he can reconcile their differences. No way, nobody likes him says Jason, and leaves. Enter Ron, asks Chung directly about his feelings for Jason, and Chung tells Ron about how important Jason in his role as catcher is to him when they are on the field. He, Chung, always gets congratulated when they win, but at least half the credit should go to Jason. The film cross cuts between the two faces, half profile, both in close up, Chung talking, Ron listening, quiet piano music accompanies and because of the way it is filmed it becomes an account of the deep affection that can exist between two men irrespective of their 'sexuality'. It's a moving speech, beautifully 'acted' by Chung – indeed you feel that it wasn't even a written speech at all, that it was quite simply spoken from the heart, and that the dividing line between baseball player and 'actor' has simply broken down. It's beautifully done. Meizi arrives, flings her arms around Ron, invites Chung to stay, he makes a joke about a threesome and leaves. Ron seeks reassurance from Meizi that she still loves him but she asks him, 'Isn't Chung taking care of you. I think he's going to fall in love with you soon', but Ron tells her that *she* is falling in love with Chung. He makes a lame excuse and leaves, but watches through the window as Chung returns and sits down with Meizi. Ron turns and runs down a flight of steps, echoing the movement he made at the beginning of the movie when he ran off after watching Chung with his previous girlfriend. What was implicit in the earlier scene is here explicit, Ron has passed his love on to Chung via an intermediary, and it's even confirmed in the dialogue as Ron tells Meizi that she is in love with Chung, and Meizi

herself, who is nothing if not perspicacious, tells Ron that Chung will fall in love with *him*. We may further note that Chung has joked about a threesome. Again we may well ask what Chung is playing at.

A baseball scene follows in which Ron and Jason quarrel, and in the showers afterwards Jason accuses Ron of being a pervert because of the way that he is looking at his team mates, and he runs off, still naked, into the dusk along the beach, an echo of Chung's first appearance at the beginning of the movie. We cut to Ron and his room-mate on their respective beds with Ron asking his room-mate if he knows of people who have changed their sexuality. His room-mate tells him about the marines in America who will have sex with each other in the absence of their girlfriends, situational sex if you like, leading Ron to comment that making love is not the same as loving. His room-mate tells him that the only thing *he* should care about is what he, Ron is. But Ron finds even that difficult. He has still not fully come to terms with his own sexuality. Both men are naked, vulnerable, open, but that very vulnerability gives the scene great intimacy; it's another tender scene. He gets similar advice from the captain after the next practice as they sit and chat about Ron's place in the team and about Ron himself and his feeling of not being able to fit in, and the captain tells him not to try so hard. He is what he is. It's another beautiful scene, beautifully 'acted' by Ron and beautifully shot – an over the shoulder shot from the captain's perspective dwelling on Ron's face in half profile. He tells the captain that he's easy to talk to, and the captain tells him that that's because he's not in love with him, and in many ways the captain is in a long line of characters who have divined more about his sexuality than Ron himself has, starting with Kevin's interruption when he and Meizi are in bed together, and Meizi's subsequent advice that when it comes to boys and girls he should keep his options open; continuing with Jason's accusation that he is a pervert for looking at them in the showers. And his room-mate's later advice to him to be what he is suggests that his room-mate too recognises where Ron's preferences really lie.

The film builds to its climax with a montage of the matches – the marching teams, the action on the pitch, voiceover from the players about how they are doing, etc. And to bring it off well the action needs to be caught by the cameras and the sequence has to be edited into shape, and Scud and his team certainly rise to the challenge. But before the final match our love story also reaches its climax. The players are goofing around in the showers, and Ron plucks up enough courage to kiss Chung on the cheek and a long scene follows in which Ron and Chung talk about it. Chung is nothing if not taken aback by what has happened, indeed at one point reiterates Jason's accusation that Ron is a pervert, though he then apologises. And Ron in his turn challenges Chung about his feelings for Jason and Meizi. How would he have reacted if either of them had kissed him. There, one might expect, it should end, but Ron cries and Chung comforts him with a hug and promises that they can talk about it after the final game. A hint here that Chung might come round, but we are never to find out. In that final game the team don't score quite enough points to get promotion into the A league so it is a disappointment for them too. Afterwards they lie around in the changing room disconsolate, but the captain tells them that they did their best, that they are still young: 'We must pick ourselves up from where we fall.' The camera comes to rest on Ron's face. He too must pick himself up from where he has fallen. And in what is effectively a postscript Ron goes in hunt of Kevin only to discover that he has killed himself, but he too has left a note for Ron, again encouraging him to find himself, exhorting him: 'Live your life to the fullest before coming to meet me.'

### Meizi / Ping & The Transcendental

Both Meizi and Ping have already featured in my account but their roles are complex and certainly bear further examination and, as I have noted above, they bear a remarkable similarity to the extent that as they blend into each other we may even begin to question their very corporeal reality. We may ask if they are merely defined by their role, or are they fully formed characters in their own right? It is Scud's achievement that the answer to each of those questions is yes. Yes, they are defined by their role, yes they are fully formed characters in their own right, and yes there are occasions where we can question their very corporeal reality. I have talked a fair bit about Meizi's role in enabling Ron to get in touch with his own sexual preferences, and in terms of character we have seen that both girls are changeable in their affections. Ping tells Coach she wants to keep her options open. And Meizi would seem to live by the same principles. No sooner, for instance, have we established that she is Ron's girlfriend than we see her at practice watching Chung rather than Ron himself, and I have already noted her enthusiasm for Chung to strip off in the bar. So by the time we get to the café scene Ron has realised, as have we, that she has moved on, that she is in love with Chung rather than with him. But it is when we start to ask questions about their very corporeal reality that things get interesting and questions of transcendence begin to emerge, and in the analysis that follows I am going to discuss the two girls as if they are manifestations of each other. So 'her' first embodiment as a character is as Ping, telling coach he doesn't know her name and even wondering if she herself actually knows herself at all. Of note at this point is the chronology: she picks Coach up at the café, watches him at the training session, and then we see her in bed with him. But in in-between whiles she has been hit by the car and disappeared, and her re-appearance must count as what? A re-embodiment? It is perhaps no wonder that she feels as if she doesn't even know herself. Or was it not even her that was hit? Hold that thought!

In the meantime the next time we see 'her' it is as Meizi in the family scene with Ron where he introduces her to them as his girlfriend. There is then an immediate cut to shots of Coach cycling around the town with a girl on his handlebars<sup>10</sup> whom we must presume to be Ping. The juxtaposition is nothing if not disconcerting. To make sense of it all you have to re-conceptualise the characters along the lines that I am suggesting and even suggest that what we have is two manifestations of the same 'character'. Which means that at a deeper level the very idea of 'character' as a stable entity in cinematic fiction is challenged. (The only other director that I am aware of who would attempt such a challenge would be Godard himself.) These ideas may sound far-fetched but a following extraordinary scene does nothing to resolve the conundrum. We find Chung at work. His cell phone rings. It turns out not to be *his* cell phone, it is rather the cell phone that was left at the scene of the 'accident', if indeed it was one. And it is Meizi, (we presume), and she wants to meet him, and off he goes to a busy city street. There is a blur of crowds crossing to and fro in front of the camera and from this blur emerges a more stable image, Meizi herself. Chung apologises for having nearly run *her* down, i.e. not for having nearly run Ping down. But she in her turn is not concerned, telling him she even wishes he *had* hit her. The curve was called Dead Curve, notorious for its accidents, which was why she was there. Initially they are having the conversation on the pavement but then a downward shot shows them standing alone in the centre of the road, with traffic passing by on either side. With camera back at ground level she gives him back her cell phone telling him that it will enable him

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<sup>10</sup> - the scene looking, by the by, like nothing so much as some sequence out of a French Nouvelle Vague movie of the sixties!

to call her if he needs to, the reverse logic again suggesting that she has become her cell phone. In a final high angle downward shot she walks off into the crowd, but moving slower than them so that we can still pick her out, part of the crowd but at the same time a lonely figure within it. And the high angle shots, their isolation in middle of the road, Meizi's emergence from the passing figures, and her isolation from them as she leaves again, formalises the entire scene, tells us subliminally that we are not watching 'real life' whatever that might be. As for Meizi's death wish, this would seem to be confirmed in a later scene with Chung where she tells him that she is training to be an undertaker, that way she'll get a better rate when she dies. They are on a roof, and she asks Chung to push her over the edge. He refuses and she walks away from him, but her image fades before she gets to the edge. And the next time we see her is when Chung dreams of her, and this time there are most decidedly two of her, whom I shall call Meizi(a) and Meizi(b). The setting is the arrival lounge of an airport and Chung, who has seemingly just arrived, is greeted by a bunch of girls, Meizi(a) amongst them, carrying welcoming bouquets of flowers. Reaction shots throughout the scene show Chung looking slightly puzzled. Meizi(a) moves to the end of the line and towards Chung smiling invitingly, ending up in medium close-up, at which point Meizi(b) appears behind her, back at the end of the line, but out of focus so that we are not quite sure that it is her, but when we cut to a medium close-up it plainly is her, also smiling invitingly at him. That's the end of the dream, but each of the girls is to make a final appearance in the movie, Ping manifesting herself only as a message on her cell phone tinging Coach after the final match to wish him a happy birthday, and Meizi whom we find at the snooker table ringing a somewhat disconsolate Chung to tell him, 'Hello, I'm back, let's celebrate'.

### The Transcendental

And so we move inexorably to a consideration of the transcendental in the movie. In my introductory comments I have suggested that Scud is interested in two things, the nature of love, and the transcendental, the former being a central concern in his earlier films, and the latter a central concern of later films such as *Bodyshop* and *Apostles*, and it is once you have seen these that you can see that the seeds of that interest are already here in this, his first film. You will have noticed, for instance, that Kevin's suicide note to Ron advises him to live his life to the fullest '*before coming to meet me.*' (my emphasis). The assumption that there is an afterlife is clear enough. And the scene is immediately followed by a title quoting Confucius: 'We don't even know life. How can we know death?', a central question that will inform *Apostles*. The case(s) of Meizi and Ping offer us another possibility, that there is a parallel world that can affect what is happening in the 'real' one, a central suggestion that is the basis of *Bodyshop* where a ghost intervenes in the real lives of the people he is 'haunting.' It is not possible to read the roles of Meizi and Ping without thinking in such terms. Starting with Ping, she disappears after she has been hit by the car, leaving only her cell phone behind, but she then re-manifests herself in bed with coach. And Meizi on various occasions: as her image emerges from the passing crowd in the street scene with Chung, already telling him she wants to die, and as her image fades as she walks off the roof top, again in a scene with Chung, again telling him she wants to die. And at the end of the film when she tells Chung that she is 'back' and wants to start up the relationship again, we must ask 'back from where?' We are not told. As for the suggestion that she and Ping are dual manifestations of the same person, the dream scene makes it very clear that there are two of them and they would appear to be welcoming Chung into the very land of dream itself. And trivially, or perhaps not so trivially, they seem to share the same cell phone. It is the

only evidence of Ping's existence after the accident, but it is Meizi – or do we presume it's Meizi? – who calls Chung on it to invite him to meet her in the street scene, and at the end of that same street scene she tells Chung to keep the phone in case he wants to phone her, the reverse logic of which doesn't strike one initially until you think about it. But the two girls have come to be represented by the same cell phone.

Postscript: The Self Referential and the 'Meta Diegetic'

A final note about the ways in which Scud constructs his narratives, plus a quick look at examples of the self-referential and what I am calling the 'meta diegetic' elements – elements that sit outside the actual narrative itself, that blur the distinction between the real and the fictional, or that draw your attention to the fact that what you are watching is actually 'only' a movie. Thus at the start of the movie we are informed that the actors are the real baseball players playing themselves, and we will realise that they are involved in a real tournament and the result at the end is the real result. At a different level, I noted above the discussion that the players have about whether they are going to be in a baseball movie or a porn movie. We, like the players / actors, will have to wait and see. Another such example occurs after the bar scene where they are encouraging Chung to strip:- a birthday cake arrives, it is Chung's birthday. Ron looks expectant then disappointed but we must wait until after the scene to get the explanation as he tells Meizi that it was his birthday too. And she comments that it's like something out of a movie. Just so. Other examples occur in relation to the accompanying music, often pre-existent songs, and a title will identify the real singers and give their dates, but at the end of the movie when fictional character Kevin has committed suicide, a title gives us his dates too. Fiction and reality treated in identical ways to the extent that I had to just check that they were only the dates of the fictional character rather than the dates of the real actor.

Forthcoming

*City Without Baseball* is a complex many stranded movie, and in one of the interviews that I have seen Scud suggests that when he made it he was expecting to make only the one movie and I get the impression he threw everything into it. Certainly it is true that the seeds of the themes that he will explore in greater detail in his later movies, where they are to take up more permanent residence, were all sown in this one.

. . . . to be continued . . .