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You are tirelessly experimenting with different film genres, from contemporary dramas to costume dramas, from Western war stories to martial arts fantasies, and from gay love stories to comic book blockbusters. I have even heard that you are planning a musical. What inspires your constant experimentation with different cinematic styles? What type of film do you enjoy most or feel most comfortable with?

I feel most at home exploring human relationships. Each time I think I am drifting away from that, I always somehow seem to come back. What people truly feel is my anchor, and that is what always gets the audience. I have tried hard to get away from that, but I can't—that's my vibe. Quentin Tarantino can blow people's heads off and audiences laugh and are entertained. But then I simply say something rough and people raise their eyebrows. People send out different vibes. It is not like I can't do it, but audiences won't take it well. In *The Hulk* I stretched to a place that made people feel uncomfortable. I think part of the problem was that it was *me* doing that film. So I think it is those films that really dig deep into the complexities of human relationships that I call home. After my fifth film, *The Ice Storm*, I was beginning to get tired of family drama—but I keep coming back to it anyway, like in *The Hulk*, which is also a form of family drama. (*Laughs*) It just happened that way. I don't have an agenda, I just wait until something hits me and I do it. It is of great interest to me that I do a lot of genre hopping. But I don't think I do straight genre films either—I mix them, I twist them. It must be a form that is just right to tell a particular story. But I am delighted to pick up the different skills that each genre requires. That is the filmmaker part of me. It always pleases me to pick up something new.

What is fascinating is that although virtually each film is a different genre, there is always something very distinct that identifies your work as an Ang Lee film. What do you think that quality is?

I don't even know what that thing is! (*Laughs*) When asked to pinpoint one theme, I used to say "people in a changing time." But I gradually found myself growing out of that. Up until today, I think one thing I have always been exploring through my work is the concept of freedom against social propriety. It is not merely someone putting a force upon you, but you putting a force upon yourself. But there is no such thing as absolute freedom. Unless, of course, you jump off a cliff to get away from it all! (*Laughs*) Other than that, as long as you are still dealing with people, you are enslaved in a relationship. I think that hasn't changed. But within that range there are all different tastes I was portraying. Then again, this theme of freedom is just an abstract concept and doesn't really identify an Ang Lee film. I guess what identifies my work is going out there every day and doing your best, trying to survive and make the scene

work—somehow it shows. There a lot of scenes that didn't work and ended up on the cutting room floor—they were never seen in the movie. I thought they would make a difference. Sometimes they are just not a great scene and are cuttable. I think your effort just shows what works for you. I try not to know too much, and that is another reason I keep hopping back and forth between different materials. I try not to know too much about any one subject. I like to move on before I learn too much about the subject and get bored. I try to maintain that innocence and freshness. Being scared keeps you alert. Once you feel too comfortable, you get lazy. Unless you are scared, you aren't doing your best.

There often seem to be recurrent themes and riffs that you begin in one film and pick up again several films later. Comic books were first introduced in *The Ice Storm* and returned full force with *The Hulk*. *Brokeback Mountain* marks a revisiting of not only the homoerotic themes first explored in *The Wedding Banquet* but also themes from the western, which you had explored in *Ride with the Devil*. You also used *The Hulk* to revisit conflicts between father and son dealt with in your Father Knows Best trilogy.

With *The Hulk*, the recurrence of the father theme really surprised me because the screenplay was original. James Schamus wrote me three drafts of the screenplay, each about different things. One of them centered on a villain with a large head called The Leader, but none of those early drafts really hit me. Then one day James mentioned that in one episode Banner's father came back as a janitor, and suddenly everything clicked. Marvel really didn't want to do it; they were very skeptical and scared. What interested me most about the Hulk was how this big green guy comes from a tiny cellular reaction in the realm of genetic engineering. So that got to me. I wanted to seek out the smallest possible thing. And when it comes to the genetic element, it is not the mother that comes to my mind, it is the father, of course.

I felt a bit hesitant at first. I wondered whether or not I really wanted to revisit the father again. After *The Ice Storm*, I thought I was done with that. But you still see it in *Ride with the Devil* and, now that I think about it, I never really stopped dealing with that theme. In *Ride with the Devil* it is funny because Tobey Maguire's father image is not his own father—he is actually fighting for his friend Skeet Ulrich's father, who is the true patriarchal figure and master of the property. And I think Chow Yun-fat is also somewhat of a father figure to that young girl in *Crouching Tiger*, but in a tricky way. So I actually never stopped dealing with the father—but I did stop dealing with the direct father-son relationship for two projects.

But when I started to focus on genetic engineering, I couldn't help but think of the father and just went deeper and deeper. In some ways that is the most personal film for me because I go to a subconscious level—not a social level.

Before that I had always been exploring these relationships on a social level through reasonable storytelling. But I think *The Hulk* goes to the limbic system of the brain, into the subconscious and the heart of male violence. It goes underneath consciousness and deep inside the animal instinct. We couldn't survive without that anger. It is part of our survival instinct and what keeps us going. We have to respect it. The fatherly anger in *The Hulk* is very unreasonable, it is very violent. I found after I made the film that some of the images I had made came back to haunt me. That is something I had never experienced in all my years making movies. Particularly that final duel with the water father under the lake. It disturbed me in a big way, haunting me every night before I fell asleep. Then there was the whole medusa and jellyfish thing. When we were watching that big jellyfish thing before it blew up, I remember Denis Muren at Industrial Light & Magic (ILM) telling me that it was the weirdest image ILM ever made. (Laughs) And *Brokeback Mountain* still has the shadow of the father. It is horrifying in this film. My own father passed away, and here I am doing a gay film. So it isn't over yet. Sometimes it is me as the father. While directing *The Hulk*, I was sometimes in the shoes of Bruce Banner (Eric Bana), but most of the time I was in David Banner's (Nick Nolte) shoes. I was that father. I think I was also identifying with Chow Yun-fat as father, but things gradually shifted and I moved into that irrational, under-the-surface territory. It hurts. Making a movie can really hurt. But unless it hurts, you don't usually get anything fresh.

Although you have revisited a lot of themes through your work, you thus far have avoided any formal sequels, even though there has been a lot of speculation about potential franchises connected with both *Crouching Tiger* and *The Hulk*.

I don't really see myself continuing those stories. Maybe if I find something new. But I won't do it because it is good for business. Sometimes I feel that with *Crouching Tiger* there were a lot of things left unsaid that I should finish. But I always ask myself if it is really a good idea. Perhaps some things are better left unsaid. Maybe I should just do something else. There are all kinds of films to be made; why repeat something I already did unless there is something new there to discover? Maybe it takes a longer time. There is always that hidden dragon, it just takes different forms. You see, we have a film. It is a product, you can watch it. There are certain things you can examine, and so forth. Each film takes a form, it must be etched in celluloid to be seen and elicit reactions. But to us filmmakers, no matter what story we make, we leave a trace of who we are, what we do during that period of time. I might have different interests from movie to movie, time to time. And I might address different themes, but I always do my best, struggle to make things work. I tend to go to the thing that

scares and interests me the most. Perhaps someday it may be a sequel that scares me the most. And I'll do it because of that! (*Laughs*) But sometimes it isn't characters or stories, it is the ingredients that interest me. When I'm doing a film, that becomes my life. I make story after story that appears on the screen, but I can never watch them as complete stories; to me they are always pieces of flash-backs. I cannot watch it as a story. It is a strange thing to say. (*Laughs*)

One great accomplishment of your work is the fact that none of your films feels like there are sets or soundstages; it always feels like you have created an entire world and we as the audience are merely peeking into one small corner of that world.

That is what cinema is for. Each time you make a movie, you are creating a world. In my mind, when I adapt someone's work I am making a movie *from* a script and not *to* a script. It is very important that writers understand this. You can be completely loyal to a writer, but if the vibe isn't working for you or the actors, you have to be flexible. It is not about who is right or wrong, but who is making the movie. I don't tell writers, "Look, this is an Ang Lee film, we have to do this the way it works for me." I tell them, "Look, we are creating a world." But when it comes down to it, I'm the one who has to create that world. The writer creates it on a page, but the look of the actors, the places have to work for me. Not everything works for me. Everybody has their own vibe, and I have to do what works for the vibe of the film and be true to that.

Crouching Tiger not only opened up new avenues for Asian cinema in foreign markets but also set up a new model for transregional or pan-Asian productions. After you featured stars from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Malaysia, Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, and others have expanded upon that model with films like *Hero*, *House of Flying Daggers*, and *The Promise*. What are your reflections on this phenomenon and the effects of globalism on Chinese cinema?

It is kind of inevitable. In a way I do hope the Chinese market can be on its own, because, like Hollywood cinema, the more global it gets, the less specific it gets. That may be good in some ways, but I think you need both kinds of movies. You need specialized films for targeted audiences, where you can make everything authentic and classical and the way you want it to be. Not everything is market orientated. On the other hand, the Chinese film industry cannot stand on its own. There are only around five really major directors who can call their own shots and then a lot of smaller directors like Tsai Ming-liang, Jia Zhangke, and Fruit Chan, whose movies don't really get beyond the festival circuit, and there is really nothing in between. So what 99 percent of the people are watching are Hollywood films.

I was offended when they promoted *Crouching Tiger* in Taiwan as a Hollywood film. But they said that nobody goes to see Chinese films there anymore and they couldn't sell it unless people thought it was a Hollywood production. So they promoted it as a Sony or Columbia picture. Some filmmakers like Edward Yang don't even want to show their work in Taiwan, which is strange. I hope the industry can one day be like American film, since we do have large populations in Asia to potentially support a thriving film culture. But the Chinese government is still not willing to open up and the film business is still behind the real world. Someday there will be a lot of audiences watching Chinese films. I think that is healthier. But right now it has to be international. Nobody has the budget to make decent-sized Chinese films; there is really no other choice but to look to the outside for funding. Even small-budget art films are all made with foreign money. That is just the reality we are living in. The Hong Kong film industry is declining. I think it is unhealthy and I don't personally like it.

Although films like *Yi Yi*, *In the Mood for Love*, and *Eat Drink Man Woman* have done well in foreign markets, none has garnered the huge commercial success of martial arts films like *Hero*, *House of Flying Daggers*, and *Crouching Tiger*, and the action films of Jet Li and Jackie Chan. Do you see Chinese cinema breaking through this "action barrier"?

I would like to make efforts toward some other genres, but it is much harder. I do see things potentially going the way of contemporary Korean cinema, with Hollywood studios buying up remake rights for films like *My Sassy Girl* (*Yeopgijeogin geunyeo*) (2001). But it is hard for me to see true crossovers outside of action films or hits on the art house specialized market. But besides martial arts, what is there? Speaking frankly, we don't do other things well. There is nothing special we could do with political thrillers, film noir, or love stories—we are not going to top Hollywood. We can't compete in those genres. But when it comes to martial arts, we are an inspiring force in filmmaking. Those are films we excel at, and there is something special about them. I cannot think of another genre that we do better than America.