

Psychedelic Aesthetics: Tangling Phantoms

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Abstract: This video essay is an auto-ethnographic practice within psychedelic aesthetics in a 3 min film – *Tangling Phantoms* (2022), which explores the ‘semiotic fluidity’ of cultural identity under transnational contexts. This practice aims to express anti-essentialist cultural narratives, in which, as a Chinese student studying in the UK, the cultural symbols – Beijing opera mask and mahjong tiles – as ‘semiotic sensation’, signify author’s transnational/cultural experiences. Also, this research will discuss semiotic approach and fluid semiotics that engage with cultural symbols to create non-linear and fragmented narratives, in which the application of film techniques such as superimposition, rapid editing, and over-texturing provides an ambiguous interpretation of cultural symbols that challenges stereotypical narratives of Chineseness. This article asserts that sensory aesthetics serve as a tool of sensational cultural memory, which suggests new pathways for future research in experimental filmmaking and cultural studies. The approach of this practice highlights the importance of personal experiences that create hybrid and fluid trans-cultural identity. The findings from this practice, therefore, contribute to how art can redefine perceptions of cultural identity.

Keywords: psychedelic aesthetics, auto-ethnographic, transnational, cultural identity

1. Introduction

This video essay discusses an auto-ethnographic film work-*Tangling Phantoms*, in which the author applies psychedelic aesthetics within its visuality. The non-linear narrative aims to empower the cultural symbols in the film presenting an ambiguity which challenges the stereotypes under the transcultural context between China and Britain. As a Chinese student studying in Britain, the author intends to seek for an approach to place his, according to Stuart Hall-fluid and hybrid cultural identity [1], within art practice based on his interest for psychedelic art. *Tangling Phantoms* is one of his Filmworks in the author’s PhD research (practice-led), in which he focuses on the sensation from the film sequence. As the cultural symbols-Beijing opera mask, mah-jong tiles and Chinese folding fan serve as semiotics that want to showcase author’s fragmented personal memories. Viewers may be able to sensorially engage with the negotiation of cultural identity.

2. Psychedelic aesthetics within autoethnography

Psychedelic aesthetics as a visual and artistic style encompasses intense colors, surreal imagery, and a sense of heightened perception, which displays an unsolid sensation that transcends normative perceptions by creating altered states of awareness with surrealism and abstraction [2,3]. The non-linear narrative in the psychedelic film sequence offers audience more space to imagine the

information within the filmic frame, which breaks the boundary between screen and viewers. As Cook notes: 'They are cinematic protests against singular and static Western conceptions of perception, self and society, and filmic utopias of pluralism, relativity, and social change.' [2] The author, therefore, intends to use psychedelic aesthetics as a tool to express the sensation of trans-cultural identity between China-Britain.

In *Tangling Phantoms*, the author used autoethnography to integrate its personal memories, which is based on decolonial approach that questions the narratives inflicted by power structures [4]. Thus, the cultural symbols represent author's Chineseness in Britain, which aims to disrupt the exotic imagination by western society. As Russell states, autoethnography creates discursive contexts that do not follow the expectation of dominant norms. Psychedelics alter-states in the film, therefore, provide more uncertainty than autoethnography in traditional narratives [5].

In this practice, personal memory and symbolic representation are highlighted as crucial elements in navigating cultural identity [1,6], particularly for author's transcultural/national experiences between Britain and China.

3. Methodology

3.1. Film practice as research

Tangling Phantoms functions as practice-led research by using s psychedelic film techniques to explore complexities of cultural identity. This short film serves as an experimentation in which author investigates how 'Chineseness' can be integrated within psychedelic visuality. In this manner, *Tangling Phantoms* employs non-linear editing and image superimposition, which creates an 'interstitial space' between different footages and audios within the film frame [7]. By layering temporal experiences, author can present the fluidity and hybridity of cultural identity. In this film, the author utilizes the psychedelic techniques-rapid editing techniques and the juxtaposition of cultural symbols to challenge and reinterpret cultural stereotypes that often confine Chinese identity within essentialism.

3.2. The approach of fluid semiotics

The semiotic approach and fluid semiotics provide a theoretical foundation in which the cultural symbols within psychedelic aesthetics become ambiguous for its definition signified [1,2,8,9]. In the film, the semiotic approach transcends the limitation of mimetic mode, which is given by reality, i.e., the superficial and conventional code dominates the representation of diasporic cultures [8]. In this manner, the cultural symbol plays as a signifier of cultural identity that signifies fluid and hybrid meanings. On the other hand, the concept of fluid semiotics emphasizes the sensation of filmic elements which present a 'rhythm', i.e., 'force and energy, movement and the materialism of a cinematic body that exists as matter' [9].



Figure 1: Cultural symbol-Beijing opera mask shot by Weizhi Gan

4. Tangling Phantoms

This paper underscores the use of personal memories, to weave shared cultural symbols from the author's background in which these symbols, therefore, link with broader cultural histories. The Beijing opera mask, for example, connects to the author's childhood and memories with his grandfather, who was devoted to Beijing opera. Another symbol-folding fan symbolizes elegance in Chinese culture, which is related to author's Han-fu exhibition in the UK. The mah-jong tiles as a table game, reminisces the memories where the author played it with friends in Britain.

These symbols constitute the semiotic elements within *Tangling Phantoms*, in which psychedelic visuality blurred the traditional perception for the image of Chinese symbols. According to the definition of Chinoiserie as the Chinese aesthetics are often perceived as exotic and restricted within static stereotypes by dominant norms [10]. The author's use of cultural symbols is to respond that the Chinoiserie needs updates.

In *Tangling Phantoms*, the author wears glowing glasses that serves as the element of strobe/stroboscope, which produces drug-free stimulations and altered states [11]. The psychedelic film techniques- image-superimposition, over-texture and rapid editing become the creation of ambiguity for the cultural symbols of Chineseness. The multi-layered images transfer personal memories into a haptic sensation in which the cultural identity enters a fluid and hybrid state via non-linear narratives.

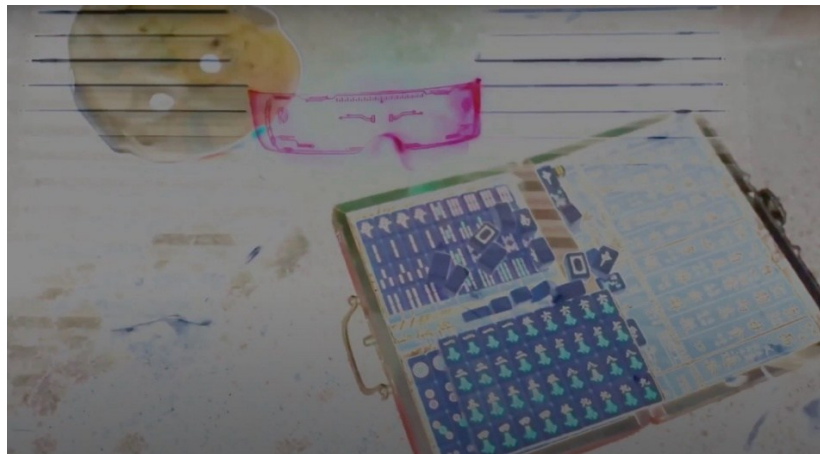


Figure 2: Tangling Phantom (2022) by Weizhi Gan

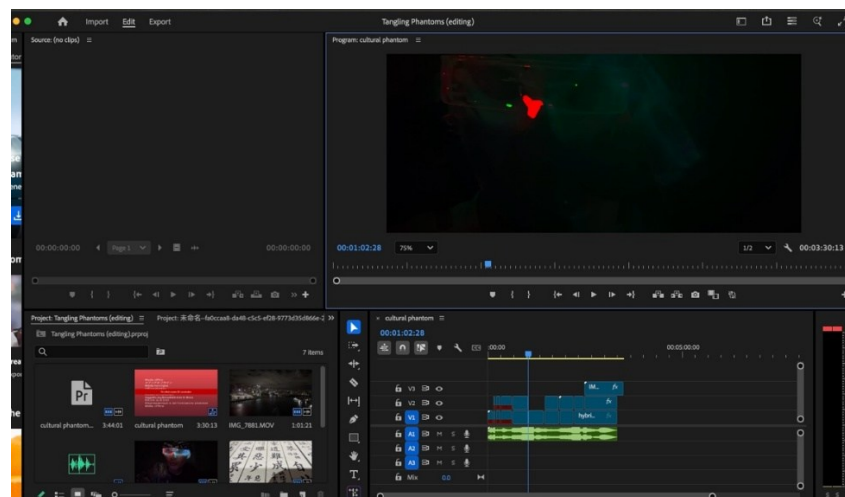


Figure 3: PR operation for Tangling Phantoms (2022) by Weizhi Gan

Adobe Premier (PR) as a major tool for editing the filmic sequence, the author uses ‘blending mode’ to manipulate the images, which produces different ‘overlay effects’ for each of image overlapping. In *Tangling Phantoms*, the juxtaposition of ‘two-selves’ and scattered mah-jong tiles aim to portray the sensation of a discursive and non-singular cultural identity, as well as the soundtrack increases the feeling of tense.

‘Rapid editing’ is the key technique to showcase the fluidity of cultural identity, which speeds up the transition of each of footage. The strobe forms the glasses formed ‘fluid tracks’ that intensify the ‘tripped out’ state from the visuality. Particularly, the close-up of face and the mask blend within the light and superimposition. The author, therefore, creates a ‘rhythm’ of fluid semiotics, more importantly, within personal memories and histories. This frame of cultural context is uncopiable to respond the transformation from collective to individual identity, which facilitates cultural difference that does not fully belong to neither collective culture nor the culture shaped by dominant norms.



Figure 4: *Tangling Phantoms* (2022) by Weizhi Gan

To the end of sequence, the author amplifies the textural sensation for the visuality. According to Deleuze’s concept for the transformation from liquid image to gaseous image, the filmic images sensationally become detached from fixed representations. This is the central notion of fluid perception, as psychedelic aesthetics in the film are adaptable liquid and non-tangible ‘gas’. The texture varies by the cultural symbols within multi-images in which the sensation of cultural symbols transcends mimetic mode.

5. Conclusion

Tangling Phantoms contributes to the first step for author’s practice on psychedelic filmmaking, which establishes connections between psychedelic aesthetics and trans-cultural identity regarding individual Chineseness. Nevertheless, this paper does not discuss the specific dominant narrative on Chineseness within the lens of de-colonialism, although, the author employs semiotic approach to disrupt the static representation of cultural identity. The concept of fluid semiotics provides a guidance for experimental filmmaking; thus, the deeper discussion of de-colonialism allows this research to associate with broader contexts of history.

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Appendix

Tangling Phantoms (2022): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ma9G2ITC9p0>.