

## **Mythic Rhetoric: The Alienation and Populization of Images: Centered on the Video Creations of Qiu Anxiong, Wu Junyong and Lu Yang**

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**Abstract:** A new current of the creative use of Chinese mythological images by Chinese young artists has developed strongly, especially in video art exploration practices, in the new century. Based on their upbringing and the contemporary reality of life in China, the young artists represented by Qiu Anxiong, Wu Junyong and Lu Yang have used mythological narrative from different aspects and in different forms to diagnose the disease of human hubris spawned by the concept of scientific supremacy of human imperialism and the power of capital; to describe and simulate the real world absurd and carnival; and to destroy and tamper with the real flesh to synthesize the undefined digital human. The images in these works highlight the artists' deep observation of the obsessively spectacle and consumption in our society. But the paradox is that while they are criticizing, their artistic logic is thought to have the tendency of populization because of falling into the value and landscape of their criticism in different degree. This is a warning laying upon the current and future artists who aspire to art.

Since the new century, mythological images have been gradually used in the video creations<sup>①</sup> of young artists such as Qiu Anxiong, Wu Junyong and Lu Yang". In particular, they use the strange images from the ancient mythology book *the Classic of Mountains and Seas* or the religious classics as a model to create "alien" images<sup>②</sup> that are a blend of the author's experiences, realistic observations and human attitudes. Unlike DV and camera lenses that are directed at the real world, they create or synthesize new images mainly by hand or through computer soft ware. This imaginative approach to image creation is mainly inspired by mythological images and their symbolism, rather than their direct application, which gives them the freedom to use traditional culture. With their familiarity with internet technology, growing up in the computer age, the open and rich cultural resources of the past and present can be accessed very easily. These artists do not have to take on the responsibility of reviving traditional Chinese culture, or the task of criticizing it, when they use Chinese mythological images. Therefore, the artists mainly rely on the need to observe and express reality, to study Chinese mythological images and to transplant and adapt the iconography and references of traditional images. And the spectacle-driven and consumerised reality has given birth to a magnificent, crowded, bizarre and absurd world such as that depicted in the ancient mythology *the Classic of Mountains and Seas*, amidst the hubris of technological rationality. It is on this basis that young artists such as Qiu Anxiong, Wu Junyong and Lu Yang have developed their artistic practice.

### **1. Science and Technological "Alienation": No more Utopia, Only Fantasticality**

Qiu Anxiong is one of the leading hand-drawn animators in China, and his animated images are full of grotesque and alienating imagery, which largely derived from his familiarity with the ancient Chinese mythological text and *the Classic of Mountains and Seas*. With this in mind, in 2006 he created his masterpiece "New Classics of Mountains and Seas I". This masterpiece takes a particular manner of narrative to describe the bizarrely changes caused by technology in the human world: the beginning of the video is a continuously unfold Chinese ink landscape, clouds floating among mountains. while several minutes later, the harmony atmosphere of Chinese ink landscape been broken down, what the viewer seeing is the chaos world where various manufactures occur in

disorder. the land dotted with roads, cities, electricity, and a series of other objects symbolizing modern life, which dramatically changed the face of the landscape. In the end, the infinite expansion of desire leads to wars over energy resources and the destruction of the world. The alien figures in the animation are inspired by the strange images in the classic book *the Classic of Mountains and Seas*, and viewers with some experience of contemporary society will be able to recognize these contemporary alien “beasts”. For example, the Dolly, the Mad Bull, the Youfool, the Bitu, the Misail, the Tangtan, the Marefool, and the Hysterical Cloud are based on cloned sheep, mad cow disease, UFOs, B-2 bombers, nuclear submarines, tanks, air craft carriers, and the mushroom cloud after an atomic bomb explosion. Obviously, there is homogeneity in visual and structural between the alien figures created by Qiu Anxiong and the image of the “kui bull” in *the Classic of Mountains and Seas*. This similarity in image creation is the author's visual allegory for contemporary technology and the myth of human imperialism, drawn from ancient mythology.

The fantasy landscape has been created largely through the complicity of financial capital and the human concept of 'techno-optimism'. As the Frankfurt School feared in the twentieth century, technology was alienating humanity and gradually locking itself into the "cage" that Max Weber (1864-1920) had criticized. 2007's “New Classics of Mountains and Seas II”, which takes biotechnology and space technology as its subject matter, depicts the crisis that scientific and technological developments are bringing to humanity on both a micro and macro scale. The weakening of human perception is one of the manifestations of the alienation of human beings by technology, which is offloading the ability and power of people's bodies to work. This is what the work “New Classics of Mountains and Seas III”, completed in 2017, seeks to expose and critique. Computer network technology organizes people from any location on the planet in a web of links, where their faces are shaped into the alien form of eye less octopuses, parts of mindless machines on a scientific “assembly line”. They are waiting for and transmitting information from any of the endpoints, thus creating a temporary virtual space. The real space outside, constructed of concrete and steel, gives a cold and strange “beauty” from a large overhead view in the haze and other pollution, but the ink effect does not evoke any classical Chinese “realm of landscape that can be lived in, travelled in and worked in”. The beautiful symbolism in Chinese culture of the “the peach garden” of the animation video has been replaced with the ideal utopia, to which non-modernized countries have aspired since the twentieth century. This is a metaphor for the myth of technological rationality, by which Qiu Anxiong suggests that the beautiful “the Peach Garden” is becoming “a softening agent and a comforting drug to avoid reality, and that when people are addicted to the beauty of the virtual world, they no longer want to strive for anything in real life, which is what the controllers would like to see.”<sup>③</sup> This is reminiscent of Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno (1903-1969) and M. Max Horkheimer (1895-1973)'s critique of the cultural industry, where capitalist "happiness" and hedonistic pleasures have taken away the "fighting spirit" of the masses. This is why Qiu Anxiong like the International Situationists to create a different kind of living situation and anomaly, so that the audience does not dwell on the sweet world woven by the myth of technology and capital, but actively reflects on and breaks free from the heavy bondage of information management technology on the human body and mind.

## 2. Folk Grotesque: Revelries on Desire

The imagery of Wu Junyong's paintings and video works mostly benefit from the cultivation of folk culture and the sensual content liberated from slang. His initial creations do not show direct inspiration from *the Classic of Mountains and Seas*, but are more derived from the visual and memory enlightenment of his formative experiences. The various folk activities and folk art production in the Fujian region retain a strong memory of ancient cultures, which is reflected in Wu Junyong's ability to complete his creations without any prior conception and preparation. At the same time, hyperlinked computer technology has greatly enriched his library of graphic words, which has enabled him to link and fuse images from folk myths and rituals with a myriad of pictorial information at will, and to represent them as visual new images. Thus, it can be said that

Wu Junyong's image production benefits from the various intricate connections between the former images. This kingdom of images becomes typical of Wu's work, which is baroque in its crowding, grotesqueness, tangling and twisting, as well as pop-like in its piling up and brilliance. One might even say that his approach is a metaphor for the never-ending auto-breeding and distortion of contemporary landscape life. Painted mainly on corporeal skin and walls, and thus deeply embedded in people's lives, these images are an allegory of consumer and spectacle society: material and surreal spectacles that wrap themselves around every aspect of people's lives. The superficiality, fragmentation and generalisation of people's perceptions are vividly portrayed.

The production of images for his video works are based on slang. These images are characterized with super flat style, and more easily circulated in Internet than the written nature of his improvised tattoos and murals, which is not unrelated to his familiarity with online motion pictures and expressions. At the same time, his passion for producing images based on images is somewhat curbed, but the way he constructs them and the space he creates for the exhibition is primitive and mythical. In his "Slang Dictionary" project, which began in 2008, he takes the imagery directly from words, picturing the sensual qualities of slang, and with an ineffable humorous "epiphany", he makes a clever and witty interpretation of the mundane and absurd in life. In this way, Wu's works are a poignant and ironic critique of the mundane and absurdities of life in a clever and witty context. Therefore, Gao Shiming considers Wu Junyong's work to be "social portraiture"<sup>④</sup>. And in an interview there was such a statement by Wu Junyong: "China is in turmoil and rapid change, and as a participant and witness of history, I hope that I can feel the absurdity of the times in my work! For the absurdity of reality, I would prefer an allegorical and symbolic noir narrative. A social portrait of a personal perspective between the two worlds of reality and fantasy."

<sup>⑤</sup> The work *Wait Us Rich* issued in 2005 is one of important representatives, which established the basic style of Wu Junyong's images style, but this self-consciousness was not established until the *Slang Dictionary*. Subsequently, works such as *East Island*, *North Country*, *South Ocean*, *West Garden* (2018), *Flying Ark* (2014) and *Cloud's Nightmare* (2010) have gradually developed and matured this style.

For this reason, although Wu Junyong does not make much use of images similar to the mythological texts of the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* in his video works, the absurd world he depicts is a historical fable that examines contemporary social life from an ancient mythological perspective.

### 3. The Digital Man: Abandoning the Flesh, Born of Virtual

Lu Yang graduated from the New Media Department of the China Academy of Art and grew up in a sub-cultural atmosphere of animation, games, electronic dance music and punk. These experiences given her a unique artistic outlook: behind the strong and dazzling pop culture atmosphere is a deviation from the labeled mainstream life and vision, and the deep rebellion of the subculture has led her to use science and religion as an excuse to try to construct a virtual identity and autonomous space with the help of computer technology. She often names her work after seemingly profound scientific terms. Works issued in 2017 such as "Transcranial Magnetic Exorcism", "God of the Brain" and "Electromagnetic Brain Theology" are all related to brain science. The brain, littered with nerves, is the key organ for all human thinking attics and instructions, and in Lu Yang's works can be used as a metaphor for the status of science in the pursuit of modernity. Science has brought to mankind the highly developed material and technological aspects of modern society, which is precisely what Lu Yang wants to criticize. It is well known that the myth of an anthropocentric science is going in the opposite direction, just as popular culture, driven by capital interest, has tamed so-called 'sub-cultural groups', who are used to being labeled and directional feeding. This bizarre device of capitalism and science has replaced people's perception of the outside world. The response of Lu Yang's interview might the best explain: "I suffer from neurological insatiability myself, and I always need strong auditory stimulation to feel a little bit."<sup>⑥</sup>

So, starting with the questioning of scientific myths, everything that was built on them needed to

be questioned. For example, the once unchallenged authority that "people have gender" is, in Lu Yang's view, problematic. In her work "Lu Yang's Digital Human 'Alone Life, Alone Death'" issued in July 2020, she created a de-gendered digital human with her own physical body as the original data. This is similar to Sun Wukong's extracorporeal body in *Journey to the West*, in that it can fully represent the activities that the real Sun Wukong cannot do in the non-corporeal perceptual world. That is to say, the "person" defined and labeled in reality can accomplish in the virtual reality a view of reality that transcends the solidified "thing-ego"; and the various virtual realities of the de-gendered "digital persons" produced by computer technology are also a reflection of the reality. It has infinite possibilities in that world. In *Moving Gods* (2015), Lu Yang redefines the light back-the halo of light that is common behind paintings of gods and Buddha-which implies a deconstruction of ancient religious icons. It implies the "destruction" of ancient religious icons.

Therefore, Lu Yang is not only mean to criticism of science, religine and mythology, but rather the freedom and liberation of his own personality in the virtual world, and finally the realization of Lu Yang *Delusion Mandala* (2016). All in all, she is to build a self-destruction, the elimination of gender, and can be unlimited copies of the virtual digital people-"Lu Yang" empire.

#### 4. Conclusion

The video creations of Qiu Anxiong, Wu Junyong and Lu Yang make full use of the mythic rhetoric of mutation: Qiu Anxiong simulates the contemporary scene of the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* from the perspective of ancient mythology, telling a contemporary cautionary fable from a new historical narrative path; while Wu Junyong portrays the "Revelries" of the present world in a light hearted and playful manner, creating a secular myth through folk and popular means. Lu Yang, on the other hand, has destroyed her physical body to build a de-gendered virtual empire of digital people in a virtual world, in order to enjoy a free and colorful digital life. On the whole, their artistic practices make use of Chinese mythological images and logic to varying degrees and enter into their pictorial narratives in an alien form, aiming to criticize the consumerisation and spectacle of contemporary social life, human imperialism, environmental pollution and scientific optimism, among others.

But, again, their creations fall to varying degrees into the value traps and visual spectacles they critique. Qiu Anxiong's last two films about *New Classics of Mountains and Seas* largely do not surpass the visual representation and narrative manners of the first, despite the use of 3D technology in the *New Classics of Mountains and Seas III*. The repeated use of images, the rendering of atmosphere, the cinematic narrative and the high-tech dazzle of *The Classics of Mountains and Seas* give a sense of the popularation of mythological imagery. Whereas, also with the critique of information management techniques, Li Yongzheng's *Help Me* (2019) offers another perspective and path in an extremely concise and powerful form. Li Yongzheng describes the intention of his work as follows: "We now seem to have more ways to express ourselves through the internet, more freedom, but in fact we are undoubtedly caught in a more controlled situation. Even though we express ourselves on social networks on a daily basis, we are actually being swayed by greater power." <sup>⑦</sup> So there is an similarity between his work and Qiu Anxiong's, but Li Yongzheng chosed to use a "QR code" rather than an image as his medium, conceptually and interventionally forcing the viewer to respond to the letters "Help Me" displayed on their mobile phone after scanning the code. Wu Junyong has indeed found a unique mode of image generation with a primitive folk power in folk culture, popular culture and vivid slang, but his works have gradually fallen into the logic of brand production, management and maintenance. The bright, crowded, bizarre, inflated, fantastical and primitive images makes his works wandering between capital and critical positions. The reality and fantasy of the revelry of Qiu's works are just like the work of contemporary Japanese artist Takashi Murakami, always tied to the spectacle of capital and consumption. Lu Yang is younger than the previous two artists and shows a greater preference for new technologies and subcultures. Her "hate and rejection" of her own flesh and blood, and pursuit of the sexless digital figure, highlights a sense of Lyotard's (Jean-Francois Lyotard, 1924-1998) sublime. Lu Yang's digital

person in terms of gender and life experience is in a “formal state of openness; they can attract, capture and control our attention without completely defining it. In an unfathomable way, it appeals to us and makes us feel deeply uneasy, so that our sense of being, destiny or responsibility arises.”<sup>①</sup> But her work gives rise to an inside worry that her intention is not this sense of the sublime, but rather the "delusion" (myth) of building a virtual empire in a paradox of using science (myth) and counter-science (anti myth). Subcultures and stimulatingly visual manners are her mythically narrative appearances, which is extremely Pop in her works. While its image should be given fuller conceptual refinement and sublimation, so that the virtual becomes the realm, not the effect. In contrast, Bill Viola's work *Martyrs: Earth, Air, Fire, Water* (2014) is impressive. "The eastern view of nature is perfectly combined with the modernist philosophy of life and technological video means"<sup>②</sup>, the spiritual content sublimates its realm and gives an inner shock and soul washing when it is displayed in the church. In conclusion, the creative practices composed by Qiu Anxiong, Wu Junyong and Lu Yang are based on Chinese mythological images and their references. But while enriching the visual language and narrative of Chinese video art, their works suffers from different degrees of A popularized tendencies, which is a problem they need to reflect on in their future creations.

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<sup>①</sup> Although this essay focuses on the artists' video creative practices, it does not mean that their practices do not involve the use of other media; on the contrary, their practices reflect the symbiosis of multiple media.

<sup>②</sup> "Alien" firstly appears in the title of an exhibition curated by Qiu Zhijie in the 1999 in China, namely "Post-Sensibility: Alien and Delusion", and is used in this essay to summarize the various strange biological images created by the artist based on phenomena in contemporary social life. The connotation is in line with Qiu Zhijie's definition of sensuality in the exhibition, which states that art must focus on the immediate sensual experience of people in a moment. Later, Qiu Zhijie repeatedly discussed and gradually developed his post-sensual theory on different occasions to emphasize his theoretical reflection on the live sensual experience to stimulate the audience.

<sup>③</sup> China Central Academy of Fine Arts Experimental Edu I Experimental Art, Experimental Art|Qu Anxiong: No more Taohuayuan(Utopia), Only Shanhaijing (Fantasticality). <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/QOfnY-Wdkm0XWKjVpE54XA>. 2019-05-20. (in Chinese)

<sup>④</sup> Refer to Gao Shiming. Wu Junyong's Social Portraits[J]. *Contemporary Art and investment*, 2008(05):38. (in Chinese)

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