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Author
Duan, Siying

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Siying Duan
What do we actually see when we look at a painting?

Each of us might hold different answers, including line, shape, color, composition, or the objects get depicted in the painting, such as the path and trees or the peaceful country scene composed of which, if take Meindert Hobbema’s The Avenue at Middelharnis as an example.

If a painting tries to show us something, it has to figure out how to put our three dimensional objects, our three dimensional world onto a two dimensional surface. One of the most dominant techniques used in this painting to solve this problem is Central perspective. In this painting, the trees is lined in sizes from large to small, and the avenue is in a twisted shape almost like a triangular and by this way, the painting creates a quick recession from foreground to background, give the illusion of depth, and drawing us into this wide landscape.

Apart from Central perspective, there are other techniques being used to create 3D objects on a flat surface or in another word, the depth of the view, for example, Oblique perspective, Shading, Chiaroscuro, Atmospheric perspective etc., but is it possible to create a landscape without such stereoscopic illusion at all?

Paintings from traditional China would be able to show a different approach in solving this basic problem, although they would probably appear incomprehensible from a viewer who takes Central perspective for granted.

Take 郭熙/Guo Xi’s 早春图/Early Spring as an example, there could be loads of questions from an angle of Central perspective such as, why is this path on the left hand side even bigger than the rocks and trees at the front bottom that is closest to us, What is the exact
position of the little waterfall at the right hand side as it seems not quite in the same space of the left path, etc.

However, if we put the rules of Central perspective aside, just follow where the painting leads us to, we’ll find it an interestingly lively world, and the whole viewing experience would just feels like the experience exploring in the real mountain. How does the painting realize such an effect? Or to ask in another way, how does the painter organize different angles and spaces in one painting that would not conflict with each other without a method of central perspective?

The painter Guo Xi has a well-known theory of “三远说/three types of views from afar”, which are 高远/the view from bottom to high-up, 深远/the view goes deeper and further, and 平远/the wide open horizontal view.¹ And if you get close enough to the painting, all of these three views can be found in it.

This painting theory has been considered by some contemporary critics as Multi-point perspective. It is easy to establish a theoretical concept like “Multi-point perspective” as oppose to Central perspective, but what does it mean by multiple perspective? What does it mean by perspective even?

In the actual world we live in, trees are not naturally lined from bigger to smaller, path are not disappearing automatically, as Merleau-Ponty rightly pointed out in Eye and Mind,“quality, light, color, depth, which are over there before us, are there only because they awaken an echo in our bodies and because the body welcomes them.”² There are two layers of connotations here should not be neglected, ont the one hand, the illusion of depth, no
matter in a landscape painting or in a real world, is not a property of the world itself, it just appears so to us. What central perspective do is presuming that there is a pair of eyes staring at the painting, and it twist the world according to what this pair of eyes can see from a certain point of view. What actually shown on the painting in a central perspective way of representation is a perfect frozen moment built for viewer’s eyes. While on the other hand, the only reason for this mechanism being able to work is that the pair of viewer’s eyes is not just a pair of eye, but a part of the body. We see the world in a certain way we experience in our body. Without the thickness of the body of ourselves that we can both touch and feel from within, we would not be able to grasp the thickness of the matter at a glance. Hence Central perspective is the witness of the mutual existence of both the body of world and the body of viewer.

The so-called multi-point perspective then, would not be able to exist from this point of view, in that it would be illogical or doom to cause fragmental effect if there are several body-world relationship at play in the same frame simultaneously, such as what achieved in Cubism. The key to understanding a traditional Chinese painting is the breakdown of the fundamental space-time thinking mode lurking behind a picture, and the introduction of time, not the kind of narrative time as many classic historical painting would use to organize its spatial relationship, but the experiential time.

The landscape gets depicted in Chinese painting tradition is not a perfect moment but a space-time continuum; not a view awaiting a viewer, but a journey which invite viewer to step inside. That is to say, the traditional Chinese way of representation shown in Guoxi’s Early Spring is not the split of subject’s eye and the objective world in front of him or her, but rather the rhythmic interaction between the audience and the painting as an integral, dynamical, vital, harmonic world, which as Guoxi put it, open for them “to walk, to see, to play and to live” inside. Likewise, the possibility of the existence of this type of landscape shows a different type of understanding of “body”, or to put it another way, a different type
Let’s go back to our opening question, what do we actually see when we look at a painting. What we are seeing here from the comparison of these two types of paintings, is not a problem about the form or perspective but the bodily consciousness of two different cultures enfolded in their way of painting respectively, that is, the two different models of space-time construction showed in the painting, which is actually a reflection of the different ways people construct their idea of body-world in their daily life, how they experience the world in their body, with their body or as their body.

Central perspective implies a subject-object relationship always looking at each other and at the same time being looked at, although the painter and viewers are not being depicted in the painting, the whole distorted view itself is an evidence of the existence of the painter and viewers. As Merleau-Ponty put it, “Never are the things one behind the other. The encroachment and latency of the things do not enter into their definition. They express only my incomprehensible solidarity with one of them—my body”⁴. Thus, the distorted painting is also a visual document of the echo between the “subjective” body and the “objective” world.

However, in traditional Chinese Ink landscape, there are no this kind of chiasm between viewer and world, as in Chinese tradition, human body itself is the condensation of “氣/qi”, which is also the essence of the world. Qi is a Chinese character which can be loosely translated into “breath” and “air”, or can be also understood as “energy” or “spirit”, and since human and the world are made from the same “氣/qi”, they share the same body. As reflected in the realm of traditional Chinese aesthetics, the aliveness of “氣/qi”, is considered the first and most important principle of “Six principles of Chinese painting” established by 謝赫/Xie He in 6th century.⁵ “The first principle(spirit-consonance, which is life-motion)…” implies a cosmic harmony, energy or rhythm, whose reverberations produce the movement
of life...To the Chinese artist this is the force immanent in nature, to which he must subject himself, so that by an intuitive awareness he may apprehend it, and so convey it through his painting.” Chinese painting is an output of this self-nature idea of artist, the “energy or rhythm” of artist's life. The artist “embodies” himself in the painting’s world which reflects the “real world” or “human-world” relationship culturally established. Moreover, painting is also a method of self cultivation practice for both artist and viewer to feel the “气/qi” inside being at one with the larger universe.

After digging into the foundational cultural difference hidden in two types of traditional landscape painting, we can now have a better understanding of contemporary Chinese art works. In a contemporary art world that both the central perspective and the “frame” of the painting having been taken down, what would the New Ink Art grown from a dynamic, holistic tradition look like? Here are some examples.

Imagine the feeling of stepping into a black room with a whole wall occupied by a video of the grand scene from The Day of Perpetual Night. Shocking from the visual impact was my feeling at that time visiting it in its exhibiting venue. Although it has a very similar composition and elements we saw from the previous traditional one. Just take a closer look
at the work: the seemingly eternal daytime is now endless late night with bright stars; where
the creek used to flow is now running by cars’ taillights; what occupying the mountains are
no longer trees but the electric towers, just a second, they are even not mountain but a pile of
high-rises with lighted windows. As a video, this urban landscape can be literally
dynamical, but this type of dynamic, instead of a relaxing walk in the natural world, has been
pushed into an eternal moment of intensity made from power, speed and restless flashing
light.

Now it would be interesting to compare this kind of “intensity” with the kind that
Fredric Jameson used as a strange new exhilaration to describe the daily experience in late
capitalist space, a new form of “temporality” after the “end of temporality” in post-modern
time. Jameson has a claim on the “waning of affect” in his famous article Postmodernism, or,
The cultural logic of Late Capitalism which invited controversy later7, yet he was not
actually claiming an end of all kinds of feelings but trying to describe a turn in the “ground
tone”, “in which the pathos of high modernism has been inverted into a strange new
exhilaration, the high, the intensity”.8

This turn is mainly caused by two intertwining phenomenon, firstly, the death of old
“subject”, as Jameson concluded, “the end of the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or
individual”, “in the period of classical capitalism and the nuclear family, has today in the
world of organizational bureaucracy dissolved”9, and secondly, the “end of temporality”,
which is the “shrinking of contemporary (bourgeois) experience such that we begin to live a
perpetual present with a diminishing sense of temporal or indeed phenomenological
continuities”, which could be characterized as a reduction to “isolated body”, locked in a
“temporal present” with an experience of “global waves of generalized sensations”.10

It is particularly paradoxical to see such a phenomenon happen in a context of
contemporary China, which came from a fundamentally different historical experience and
thus has never established a same type of “subject”, yet after a radical social and political
reform, the urban construction and living experience in cities from China and United States are quite similar nowadays. Perhaps this is why the intensity appeared in *The Day of Perpetual Night* is, although also seems eternal, but not really exhilarating, or indeed somewhat exhilarating in a complex mixture of anxiety, absurdity and bewilderment.

At the end of 20th centuries, a school of New Ink Art works declared their existence in a series of exhibition including “An Experiment in Tension: An Exhibition of Expressive Ink Painting” in the year of 1994 and “Tension and Expression: An Exhibition of Ink-Wash Painting” in 1995. Tension and expression, we can see a strong western influence even just from the titles of these exhibitions, no wonder what followed was a wave of heated debates on whether Chinese painting should keep its own “brush and ink” tradition. Considering the previous analysis, the issue of “brush and ink” tradition is not just a problem of art form, but more about the identity crisis of Ink Art in between the heavy tradition of China and influential western culture, and the struggle as well as the confusion shared by the contemporary Chinese urban residents when experiencing a kind of experiential transform of their daily life.

*The Day of Perpetual Night* by Yang yongliang is not the only piece that depicts the kind of intense and unsettled temporality. Another experimental ink artist Chen Shaoxiong created a series of ink video, depicting his experience towards the “postmodern status” of Chinese city, mass media, and daily life. His works are first painted in ink frame by frame based on snapshots he took and collected and then assembled into anime. Although also working in a time-based media, in this case, the overall effect of his ink videos is more like a series of fleeting fragmental moments created by photographic composition of each frame, and this effect is augmented with the montage way of organizing all the frames and the messy background sound.
In the installation work *Visible and invisible, Known and Unknown*, Chen Shaoxiong physically represents this kind of experience by a set of perceptual installation. Firstly, like what he did for his video series, to transform his photographs of daily life into a tranquil, reminiscent language of ink art, and then to hang all of the Ink pictures high enough to be out of audiences’ normal vision, and lastly to have a little toy train carrying a video camera running in front of the pictures and recording the view from the train. What audiences finally be able to see is the output video from the camera on the toy train. In this video, the details of daily life have been blurred into a series of nonstop recursion of fragmental montage which could barely recognize clearly, not to mention to feel the beauty and affection of which. In this work, the train is the metaphor of the invisible mode of perception which every urban resident nowadays are holding in a busy urban life unconsciously.

Another thought provoking work worthy of taking a look here is Xubin’s *Background Story*. This is one of the pictures from it’s 7th version exhibited in the British museum. This installation has a sort of more stereoscopic effect with its large scale and backlight. As viewer walking towards it, it feels like stepping into the world of landscape, until suddenly, the back side of the installation reveals itself. Such beautiful mountain scenery is actually made from different kinds of leaves and tapes. It was quite a shocking experience for me.
when find out this contemporary recreation of traditional landscape is just an illusion. What does this work mean?

During the artist talk held with the exhibition, some of the audience shared their opinions about this work, some take it as a political stance in regards of environmental issues, other ask Xubin if this work can be seen as a fragment of the ruin of historic Chinese landscape. However, interestingly, Xubin’s own response to these comments and question was focused more on the continuity of tradition, he said that he was trying to have a dialogue with ancient painters by using contemporary everyday objects, for example, imitating the traditional hemp fiber texture stroke with actual hemp, this strategy of borrowing ordinary objects from daily life was called “folk methodology” by him.

These two sides of reading of Xubin’s work complicated the meaning of contemporary Ink art works. Do all of these works mean we are coming into a depthless, eternal present post-modern world described by Jameson? Well, at least the continuous practice of Ink art brought back some part of the history, not in a way of adding some nostalgic elements into a contemporary work, but working as a disclosure of an unavoidable
part of Chinese people’s body-mind structure accumulated throughout thousands of years. Although it is also undeniably true that this kind of body-mind structure has been radically transformed in a global economic social reality, and thus also means that keeping the traditional brush and ink technique would only be a pretty fantasy.

Those contemporary Ink art works, instead of creating a beautiful “other world” for us to dream about, they are working like a mirror, confronting us with our real situation, or an attempt to reconcile the wound caused by the radical transformation of Chinese people’s experiential modes, or at least to raise the question of what a Chinese body-world relationship in a so-called postmodern world could be. It is in this sense, these works regain a both historical and critical “depth” and yet at the same time, remain their closeness to the intensity of an immediate bodily experience in contemporary China.

1 Guo, Xi. Lin quan gao zhi, see in Chinese, (宋)郭熙：《林泉高致》， 济南市：山东画报出版社，2010年8月。


3 Guo, Xi. Lin quan gao zhi, see in Chinese, (宋)郭熙：《林泉高致》， 济南市：山东画报出版社，2010年8月。


5 He, Xie. Gu hua pin lu, see in Chinese, (南朝)谢赫：《画品》， 山西教育出版社，2015年1月。


7 For more on this issue, please see Massumi, Brian. The autonomy of affect. Cultural Critique, 31: 1995 and Grossberg, L. We gotta get out of this place: Popular conservatism and postmodern culture. Routledge: 2014.


9 Ibid.