Overlit Realm/ Inner World

A Loosely Articulated Series of Notes on the Work of the Artist Lu Xinjian

Prof. Paul Gladston and
Dr. Lynne Howarth-Gladston

Paul Gladston is associate professor of Culture, Film and Media at the University of Nottingham and principal editor of the Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art. Lynne Howarth-Gladston is an artist and free-lance writer.

I

In the 1995 introduction to his novel Crash, first published in 1973, one-time Shanghailander and always (as a consequence) uncertainly 'rooted' Englishman, J.G Ballard writes: '[t]he marriage of reason and nightmare that has dominated the twentieth century has given birth to an ever more ambiguous world. Across the communications landscape move the spectres of sinister technologies and the dreams that money can buy. Thermo-nuclear weapons systems and soft drink commercials coexist in an overlit realm ruled by advertising and pseudo-events, science and pornography'. Ballard also writes, '[i]n the past we have always assumed the external world around us has represented reality, however confusing or uncertain, and that the inner world of our minds, its dreams, hopes, ambitions, represented the realm of fantasy and the imagination'. Now, contends Ballard, these roles 'have been reversed.' Therefore, '[t]he most prudent and effective method of dealing with the world around us is to assume that it is a complete fiction [and that] the one small node of reality left to us is inside our own heads'.[1] Lu Xijian's paintings are perhaps both a representation of the outward fiction of our contemporary 'overlit realm' and a trace of the obscure 'reality' of his own inner world.

[1] J.G. Ballard, Crash (London, 2011).

II

Lu Xinjian was born in the Chinese province of Jiang Su in 1977. His parents still live there. Lu trained as a designer and illustrator, graduating with a master's degree after studying in the Netherlands between 2004 and 2006. He returned to China in 2006 where he secured a job as a lecturer at the Shanghai Institute of Visual Art – he left after only 3 months. In 2008, Lu took up a lecturing post at the Yeunguam University in South Korea. He now lives and works in Shanghai.

III

Lu employs both 'Chinese' and 'western' graphic/painterly techniques. There is an evident cultural duality to his painting signified by an (ostensibly precise, but inherently) uncertain organisation of shape, line and colour.

IV

Lu's initial training as a designer and illustrator stressed the importance of craft. Lu came to painting relatively late. He was taught how to paint by a fine art student while working as a design lecturer in South Korea. His painting is highly crafted.

V

Lu's work may be read both in terms of manifest and latent significances. One can reflect simply upon the surface conditions of his paintings; the eye quickly takes in the combined gestures of line, shape and colour presented as a superficial whole. There is no need for in-depth discussion or conceptualised analysis at this level of viewing. A generally pleasurable mood or feeling arises in the viewer in response to formal combinations of visual elements. Beyond this manifest significance one may begin to see initially abstract combinations of shapes, lines and colours signifying something other than themselves: hallucinatory mappings of urbanspaces and obscure, uncertainly realised symbolic languages. This text(style) may be contemplated at length like the unfolding of a painted scroll (charting some unknown and perhaps (seemingly) fantastical landscape) and decoded in the manner of the reading of a work of scholarly calligraphy. It is a(n only partially visible/emergent) poetic conveyance as well as the regulated product of a keen (carto)graphic eye. Manifest pleasure gives way by turns (of the scroll) to more complex relays of latent feeling and connoted meaning.

VI

What exactly is signified by Lu's painting other than abstract form?

(Seemingly) Imaginary street plans: harmonious-schematic projections of complex though perfectly laid out cityscapes (traversed by unseen social,economic and cultural flows) - in actuality abstracted from images on the Internet.

Words: unconventional typographies and uncertainly signifying pictographic sign systems. In approximately 2600 BCE an early Chinese system of signs and symbols made with the assistance of knotted string was replaced by a pictographic writing system. Around 1800 BCE this system developed into one in which pictograms began to stand for abstract concepts.

VII

Lu's paintings are abstracted from 'Google' maps of world cities readily available on the Internet. He first uses a felt tip pen to trace out a basic template or 'plotter' before going on with the use of plastic foil, canvas and acrylic paint to project full-scale paintings from these templates. Lu initially painted city maps of Beijing, Amsterdam, Groningen, New York, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Paris. He would later

make paintings of Barcelona, Berlin, Tokyo, and Brussels.

VIII

Historical Chinese cultural conceptions of harmony and ultimate harmony are signified by the terms He and Tai He. The most frequently used of these terms in modern Chinese is He which signifies reciprocal conjunctions between as well as a fundamental unity of otherwise non-identical objects. This conception allows for acceptance of difference as a condition of harmony. [2]

[2] Zhang Dainian, Edmund Ryden trans., Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy (Beijing, New Haven and London, 2002) pp. 270-276.

IX

Pragmatic non-absolutist ways of thinking have persisted throughout Chinese history. These ways of thinking have tended towards the promotion of harmonious reciprocation between otherwise differing states of being. Exemplary of this tendency is the non-rationalist dialectical concept of yin-yang, which has persistently informed the development of the Chinese intellectual tradition. According to the concept of yin-yang, seemingly opposed forces in nature are in actuality both interconnected and interdependent. Consequently, all oppositions can be seen as relative as well as open to the possibility of harmonious reciprocation. Examples of Chinese thought that have been influenced by the concept of yin-yang include a traditional Daoist-Confucian desire to live in close accordance with nature as well as the Confucian vision of a harmonious, hierarchically ordered society. The classic Daoist text the Zhuangzhi states that '[u]tmost yin is solemn, sombre; utmost yang is brilliant, shining. The solemn and sombre comes from heaven, the brilliant and shining comes from earth. The two intermingle, interpenetrate, perfect harmony and so things are generated from them'.

X

Both Daoist and Confucian thought uphold the notion that harmony is a fundamental feature of the cosmos.The Laozi states that 'myriad things carry yin on their backs and yang in their arms. Blended qi is their harmony.' As Zhang Dainian makes clear, the 'constant' is therefore regarded as the norm 'governing the process of change' and, since 'harmony is the basic principle of the universe', there is an understanding that 'things cannot leave harmony and still exist'. [3]

[3] Ibid., p 273

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From the point of view of established Chinese discourse, assertions that 'harmony is the basic principle of the universe' and that 'things cannot leave harmony and still exist' present themselves almost automatically as positive. From a western(ized) discursive perspective strongly informed by post-modernist scepticism, however, assertions of this kind invite a rather more critical reception. [4]

[4] Donald Wesling, 'Methodological implications of the Philosophy of Jacques Derrida for Comparative Literature: The Opposition East-West and Several Other Observations' in J.J. Deeney(Ed.),Chinese-Western Comparative Literature Theory and Strategy (Hong Kong, 1980)pp.79-111.

XII

Let us consider (provisionally) another form of 'reciprocal' mapping…

As Craig Clunas has indicated with reference to the work of the film and video installation artist Yang Fudong, the question of whether we choose to emphasise the 'Chineseness' or the globalised nature of contemporary Chinese art is a 'fundamentally political' one that 'has no easy or definitive answer'.[5] Although Clunas does not elaborate further upon this statement, he can be understood to imply that while Chinese national-cultural exceptionalism remains anathema in relation to internationally dominant post-colonialist attitudes towards the critical standing of contemporary art, any move to dismiss outright or to overlook that exceptionalism stands in danger of a return to colonialist relations of dominance. In short, we cannot choose to align ourselves resolutely with an established international post-colonialist perspective against differing localised points of view without what would appear to be a self-contradictory denial of difference.

[5] Craig Clunas, Art in China (Oxford, 1997, 2ndedn 2009) p.235.

By the same token, exceptionalist perspectives on the significance of contemporary Chinese art are themselves very much open to deconstruction as both unjustifiably limited in their conceptual scope and as intellectual adjuncts to authoritarianism. This not only includes those exceptionalist perspectives that align themselves openly with governmentally supported nationalist-essentialism within the People's Republic of China (PRC), but also those that invoke deconstructive thinking (overtly or covertly) to justify exceptionalism. Moreover, we should be sensitive to ways in which localised constraints on criticism of governmental authority within the PRC limit the scope of deconstructivist critique reducing its interruption on authoritative meaning down to an eminently manageable abstraction. Indeed, this sensitivity should be extended to discursive conditions outside the PRC where a now institutionalised deconstructivism is, for example, in relation to contemporaneity, also subject to the limiting abstractions of political correctness and recuperation by the market.

What persists then is a highly problematic paradox. By taking account of Chinese contemporary art's dualistic relationship to modernity and tradition, there is a danger of entering into unjustifiably orientalising or essentialist views of the significance of contemporary Chinese art and therefore of overemphasising its cultural separateness from other forms of contemporary art. By downplaying the 'Chineseness' of contemporary Chinese art there is also the risk of overlooking the persistence of tradition as part of the critically resistant construction of a modern Chinese cultural identity. The work of the critical interpreter of contemporary Chinese art, as well as of the transnational cultural networks that support its production, display and reception (whether Chinese or non-Chinese), is thus revealed to be a profoundly challenging one, which points towards the critical necessity of new (and almost certainly wholly imperfectable) theoretical paradigms beyond those currently envisaged both within the PRC and in an international context.

One possible way forward, I wish to argue here, is the use of polylogues – that is to say, inter-textual multi-voiced discourses – as a means of opening up differing interpretative perspectives on contemporary Chinese art to one another while at the same time internally dividing and questioning their individual authorities; a strategy exemplified by Jacques Derrida's radical collage text Glas (1974), which juxtaposes readings of text by G.W.F. Hegel and Jean Genet to pervasively unsettling critical effect. Such multi-voiced discourses involve the juxtaposing of differing discursive perspectives whereby the meaning of those perspectives is subject to the possibility of critical remotivation as the result of their mutual recontextualisation in a manner akin to the effects of artistic collage-montage.[6] As the intercultural philosopher Franz Martin Wimmer has argued, in order to go beyond the rash universalism or relativistic particularism of philosophical thinking conducted from a single cultural point of view, it is necessary to engage critically with other cultural perspectives in the form of such a polylogue or 'dialogue of many'. [7]

[6] Gregory L. Ulmer, 'The Object of Post-Criticism' in Hal Foster (ed.), Postmodern Culture (London 1985) pp.83–110.

[7] Franz Martin Wimmer, InterkulturellePhilosophie, Vienna 2004.

Crucial to this methodological approach, perhaps, is Derrida's conception of inter-textual telepathy. As Claudette Sartiliot indicates, this does not amount to a misplaced belief on Derrida's part in an occultist connection between otherwise materially discrete instances of signification, but instead, and more justifiably, in the deconstructive openness of the medium of language to 'distant influences' as a consequence of the aleatory (chance) processes of reading and re-reading conducted in the space between text and consciousness. [8] The implication of which, Sartiliot explains, is a 'telecommunication between words within a single language and between different languages' whereby 'one's discourse is always contaminated by that of the other which never allows itself to be either totally excluded or totally included'.[9]

[8] Claudette Sartiliot, 'Telepathy and Writing in Jacques Derrida's Glas', Paragraph: The Journal of the Modern Critical Theory Group, vol.12, no.3, 1989, pp.215–6.

[9] Ibid.,pp.222–4.

The following two-part text is part of an attempt to arrive at a first draft of such an analysis. The text below addresses ostensible similarities between deconstructivist theory and practice and aspects of traditional 'non-rationalist' Chinese thought and practice associated in part with the conceptual pairing yin-yang as well as related Confucian notions of social harmony.

XIII

Indigenous Chinese art theory

As part of dominant cultural discourses within the PRC, there is a persistence of traditional Chinese 'non–rationalist' dialectics – as exemplified by the Daoist conception of dynamic complimentarity between the otherwise opposing cosmic forces of yin and yang. This sits alongside and commingles with the official persistence of Marxist-scientific rationalism.

Traditional Chinese thought and practice is informed strongly by a non-rationalist dialectical way of thinking associated with the pre-Daoist conception of yin-yang. The term yin-yang refers to the notion that seemingly opposing forces in nature (for example, light and dark, and male and female) are in actuality both interconnected and interdependent, and that, as a consequence, all oppositions can be seen as relative as well as open to the possibility of harmonious reciprocation. This notion is a fundamental principle of many aspects of classical Chinese science, philosophy and cultural practice.[10]

[10] See Zhang Dainan,Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy, pp.83–94.

A Marxist conception of dialectical realism has been and to a large extent remains strongly influential on Chinese intellectual life as part of official government thinking. According to this official line, China's development is predicated on a rationalist-scientific approach towards the resolution of social and material contradictions. It should be noted, however, that a Maoist interpretation or

translation of Marxist dialectics is often akin to a traditional Chinese non-rationalist dialectics insofar as the desired outcome of class conflict is a state of harmonious social interaction and not simply the outright negation of one class by another. It should also be noted that since the mid-1990s the CCP has supported a return to the traditional Confucian notion of a harmonious society as a way of addressing sharp social divisions brought about by the implementation of economic reforms.

The persistence of traditional Chinese 'non–rationalist' dialectics informs a recently revived tendency towards traditional Chinese metaphysical notions of harmonisation and reciprocal interaction within the PRC.

While traditional Chinese dialectical thinking is distinctly non-rationalist in outlook, it nevertheless tends towards metaphysical conceptions of harmony and reciprocity; for example, a belief, central to both Daoist and Confucian thought, in the desirability of harmonious interaction between humanity and nature.[11]

International art theory

International art theory continues to be informed strongly by the theory and practice of deconstruction – that is to say, a performative critique of the authority of legitimising discourses and associated truth claims. The pervasive scepticism/criticality of deconstructivism sits alongside the persistence of metaphysical rationalist thought underlying all discursive representation.

Deconstructivist postmodernism is informed strongly by a non-rationalist dialectical way of thinking associated with the Derridean conception of 'différance'. Différance is a neologism coined by the French theorist Jacques Derrida to signify his view that linguistic signification is made possible by a persistent deconstructive (negative-productive) movement of differing-deferring between signs.[12] This envisioning of difference and deferral immanent to linguistic signification is broadly similar in conceptual terms to the interconnectedness of opposites signified by the Daoist concept of yin-yang. It is important to note, however, that Derridean deconstruction looks towards a persistent disjunctive deferral of meaning, while yin-yang is conventionally understood within a Chinese cultural context to support the desirable possibility of reciprocation between opposites. [13]

Within a mainland Chinese cultural context deconstructivist thought and practice has been compared to the classical Chinese philosopher Zhuangzhi's opposition to rigid Confucian notions of social order and etiquette associated with the term 'Li-Jiao'. Along with feudalism and a patriarchal clan system, li (education) constituted one of the fundamental discursive cornerstones of ancient Chinese society. Li later became a central aspect of Confucian ethics underpinning supposedly proper relationships between individuals and social classes as part of a harmonious social order. During the pre-Qin period (3rd century BC) Zhaungzhi criticised Confucian notions of rigid social order on the grounds that they alienated society from nature and, consequently, from a spontaneous achievement of social harmony. Zhuangzhi also argued that conceptual oppositions signified by language were rigid and arbitrary and therefore pointed away from natural conceptions of value.[14] There is therefore a strand of traditional Chinese thought that can be understood to accord to some degree with internationally dominant deconstructivist theoretical perspectives insofar as it questions the authority of linguistic representations of opposition and hierarchy.

XIV

In respect of Lu's painting, what precisely can therefore be classified as Western in approach, and what is conceivably Eastern? Recognisable constituents of the Western(ised) post-De Stijl/post-Bauhaus visual languages of graphic design and illustration commingle - robbed of any obvious use-value - with the aesthetic particularities of modernist abstraction (placed under implicit but inescapable post-modernist/contemporary quotation marks).The paintings of Piet Mondrian are a direct influence upon those of Lu Xinjian. In his late painting Broadway Boogie-woogie (1943) Mondrian also projected what may be interpreted as an abstract mapping of urban space. Less immediately obvious, but also in evidence in relation to Lu's painting, is a pictographic sensibility through which abstract form hovers continually on the brink of calligraphic-symbolic representation – it is this which, in the main, connotes the work's 'Eastern' identity. Two cultures are re/conjoined through the effects of globalisation. The outcome is one of multiple parallax. Seen one way, Lu's painting appears to affirm the universalising abstractions (form and thought) of western(ised) modernism. Seen in another light, its refractions of abstract form into a discernible cartography/calligraphy suggests deconstructivist intervention. In China there is a non-adherence to hypostatising Western ideas and canons of fine art practice. This is coupled with a more general postmodernist/

[11] Ibid., pp.276–9.

[12] See Jacques Derrida, Margins of Philosophy, Alan Bass trans., (Hemel Hempstead, 1982) pp.1–27.

[13] Paul Gladston, 'Chan-Da-da(o)-De-Construction or, The Cultural (Il)Logic of Contemporary Chinese "Avant-garde" Art', Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art, vol.7, no.4, 2008, pp.63–9.

[14] See, for example, Luo Yang "Compare Western Deconstruction and Zhuangzhi", 2008, http://wenku.baidu.com, accessed 12 January 2014.

contemporary blurring of established boundaries between disciplines.

XV

While living in Korea, Lu took to gazing out from the balcony of his apartment at night in a state of meditative reverie, drifting across the dreary rooflines of local houses towards the crosses of nearby churches outlined in red neon (an imagery echoed by recent works produced by Lu using actual coloured neon lights). Lu also meandered through the inner world of an acquired visual vocabulary including the geometric abstractions of Mondrian, which he felt were closest to his own artistic vision. Lu was also impressed by the imaginative reach and ambition of Pablo Picasso as well as the gestural abandon of Pollock and the dream-like qualities of paintings by Joan Miró. By then, Lu had read the theories of the De Stijl group. He admired the artistic self-examination exemplified by Mondrian's paintings as well as their distillation and eventual abandonment of visible nature. He also admired Mondrian's incremental attempts to depict a universal harmony. Lu's recourse to an inner visual world was in part a response to unsettling personal trauma. He met with a therapist and began meditation on the balcony of his apartment. It was there that Lu envisioned his painterly cityscapes, dreaming inwardly in the face of an overlit urban realm.