

## Posthuman Cinema and Taoist non-anthropocentrism

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Although it's hard to say that watching Zhou Tao's long film "North of the Mountain"(2019) while wearing a mask inside a museum was a very comfortable experience, it serves as a good metaphor for the relationship between the human and film in the posthuman era. By covering the mouth, nose, and part of the skin, the mask reduces the senses of taste, smell, and touch, and thus allows the viewers to focus more on sight and hearing. In other words, the mask enhances the senses crucial to the mainstream cinema by weakening irrelevant senses. As William Brown (2009) argues, in the posthuman era, the humanity of film viewers is not a fixed concept — the human and human qualities can always be easily modified to suit the technology of cinema, whether through wearing a simple piece of mask or a complex visual production equipment like the HoloLens 2.

However, the cinema is not just about sight and hearing. Without our perception of time, cinema would not be possible. So perhaps the following questions are still worth pursuing: does the changing relationship between people and film also affect the time in film? If so, in what way?

Zhou's cinematic concept, "terre-temporality (地面时间)", may provide a direction for discussion of these issues based on Chinese philosophy and aesthetics. In the interview, Zhou mentions the influence of traditional Chinese literati painting on the expression of time in his films, specifically, he also finds this "terre-temporality" in the paintings of the Yuan Dynasty (Zhou & Shen, 2017). Due to the limitations of the material, the time in the painting can only be represented through the implication of space. As aesthetician Zong Baihua (宗白华)(1949) argues, time in literati painting is always spatialized by reorganizing the real landscape on paper or silk. Traditional Chinese cosmogenesis believes that the essence of cosmos is the change or fluidity generated by the interaction between two of the most fundamental opposite forces, yin and yang. Since ancient literati painters aimed to approach the essence of cosmos through their art practice(Zong, 1949), showing the landscape from a mere static viewpoint and fixed-point perspective could not satisfy this need, and thus was considered to be a technique that lacks aesthetic and moral value (Zou, 2009). The dynamic vantage points and perspectives more favoured by literary painters, however, can only be achieved through what Zong(1949) calls the "mind's eye" (心灵之眼) that roams the landscape.

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<sup>1</sup> Zong Baihua explains the "mind's eye" as follows: "In meditation, the painter returns to the rhythms of his own deep mind in order to resonate with the innermost rhythms of the cosmos."

Guo Xi, a painter and painting theorist of the Northern Song Dynasty, concluded the specific method used by literati painters to present the landscape in their paintings as the "atmospheric perspective" (三远法), which can be considered a topographic technique that overcomes the limitations of the naked human eye by presenting a full view of the mountains from multiple perspectives and viewpoints. " Through the "atmospheric perspective", the mountains, whether near or far, in front or behind, on the top or at the bottom, are all reorganized onto the flat surface of the paper according to the roaming path of painters' "mind's eye." In other words, the roaming of the "mind's eye" is temporal, and the "terre-temporality" in literati painting records the time experienced by the "mind's eye" through showing the trajectory of the "mind's eye," or, say, the "terre-temporality" in literati painting is a by-product of spatialization and visualization of time.

So how does Zhou transform the "terre-temporality" of the literati painting into the cinematic one? To better explain Zhou's concept, it might be helpful to first compare with two related film theoretical ideas or gestures, Dziga Vertov's "Kino-Eye" and Michael Snow's counter-cultural gesture, to broadly position his concept within the film history.

As a technique, Vertov's "Kino-Eye," which roughly means looking through a camera, is very reminiscent of the "atmospheric perspective." In Vertov's view, the camera can go beyond the limitations of the human eye by showing what the latter cannot reach and performing the movements that it cannot achieve (Vertov, 1923). And Vertov's masterpiece, "Man with a Movie Camera" (1929), is the product of this idea. We can regard that both the "atmospheric perspective" and the "Kino-Eye" montage are designed to transcend the naked human eye by restructuring reality. On the other hand, in terms of the theme and the artist's attitudes towards art history, Zhou's idea seems to be much closer to Snow's initial intentions for "La Région Centrale (1971)." Zhou tries to explore and develop "terre-temporality" through cinematic practice, and thus to respond to the question of modernity (Zhou & Shen, 2017). Likewise, Snow(1969) aimed to "make a gigantic landscape film equal in the terms of film to the great landscape painting of Cezanne, Poussin, Corot, Monet, Matisse and in Canada, the Group of Seven." In other words, Snow also aims to reinterpret the Western landscape painting tradition through film in a modern context.

However, Vortov's and Snow's deliberate devaluation of the human is far from Zhou's understanding of the relationship between the human and cinema. Vertov assumes a clear gap between filmmaker and the camera, and proposes that the former needs to submit to the latter, because the latter can be endlessly improved through technology(Vertov, 1923: 15), and therefore can be "the means of perfecting vision"(Quendler, 2011: 404). As a consequence, the human needs to adapt to the camera and the temporality produced by "kino-eye" montage. Likewise, Snow puts man in opposition to the machine by reducing human intervention in camera operation. He notes that, in "La Région Centrale," he "only looked in the camera once," and that "the film was made by the planning and by the machinery itself" (Snow, 1971). By showing alien planet-like no-man's-land in this film, Snow expresses his countercultural political gesture associated with the land-art movement in the 1960s (Tomas, 2013: 101).

If we take a closer look at the way Zhou makes his films, we can notice an equal interrelationship between the filmmaker, the camera, and the depicted objects, which is also the basis for the production of the cinematic "terre-temporality." As mentioned above, the reorganization of landscape in the literati painting is similar to the film montage: they are both techniques to redistribute and transform the depicted objects. In this regard, in Zhou's films, the editing process is a key approach that produces the "terre-temporality," because, in filmmaking, the landscape is no longer reorganized on a two-dimensional canvas, instead, it is first reorganized primarily by rearranging and constructing shot sequences in the temporal dimension. For him, the whole editing process is led by the reconciliation between his bodily memory of the landscape and the footage recorded by the camera.<sup>2</sup> Zhou calls this principle of filmmaking "calibration"(校对), which is the way to discover the "organic coalescence between the human, machines, and environment."<sup>3</sup> In other words, no one element is dominant over others in the process: the principle of "calibration" is neither guided by the camera, as in Vertov's "Kino-Eye," nor like what Snow did in "La Région Centrale," pre-designed by filmmaker's imagination of camera's mechanical characteristic, but rather it is a process aimed at discovering an equal and unified relationship between the filmmaker, the camera and the filmed objects.

However, although Zhou's cinematic concept develops the aesthetics of traditional literati painting in a sense, they do not share the same understanding of the ethical capacity of the human. The traditional cosmology in China believes that the cosmos contains the unification between cosmic order and moral order, and the "moral sentiment" emerges from the "resonance between the human and heaven" (天人感应)<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, the literati painters, who were usually educated with Confucianist, Taoist or Buddhist ethics, generally regarded the "unification between the human and the heaven" (天人合一) as the supreme virtue, and art was precisely a way to grasp the essence of the fluidity of the cosmos (Zong, 1949). But as Yuk Hui (2016: 21) points out, the continuation of traditional Chinese cosmology has been replaced by modern astronomy, thus leading the organic relationship between the human, the cosmos, and morality to fragmentation. In other words, in today's China, the philosophical and moral foundations necessary for the ethos of traditional literati painting have long since disappeared. In this light, it is not difficult to understand why Zhou's films do not show the traditional culture's expectation of a harmonious relationship between human and nature, although he claims that the way he depicts the slag heap hills in Shenzhen awakens his memory of literati painting (Zhou & Shen, 2017). In "South of the Mountain"(2019), the companion piece of "North of the Mountain," Zhou focuses more on the nature that has been disruptively transformed by technology's massive infrastructure construction projects, in which we can see more clearly a different kind of human-nature relationship engendered by modernity. The reorganization of the landscape in traditional literati painting is achieved on the basis of aesthetics and ethics, through the techniques of the human mind or meditation. However, in the contemporary era, driven by economic and policy demands, the massive infrastructure construction projects are already restructuring the landscape on a large scale. That is to say, today's artists are no longer able to

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<sup>2</sup> Nikita Yingqian Cai, Curatorial statement of "Zhou Tao: Winter North Summer South."

<sup>3</sup> Artist statement of "North of the Mountain."

<sup>4</sup> In the Confucian and Taoist doctrine, heaven(天) means the celestial aspect of the cosmos and the principal of nature.

reorganize landscapes through art exactly as the ancient painters did, because the landscape is first being reorganized in reality, through technology. Therefore, the moral pursuit carried in traditional literati painting has lost not only its intellectual foundation but also the means to achieve itself.

On the other hand, "North of the Mountain" is more concerned with showing the human condition in the transformed landscape, and the primitive instincts of sex and violence that arise after the moral order and the cosmic order are disconnected. For this film, Zhou spent two years wandering between an oasis and Gobi villages beneath the Kunlun Mountains, observing and recording the living conditions of local villagers in ecological change. In the process, he captures several scenes of everyday life that hint at primal instincts: in the wilds at the edge of the village, a shepherd slowly skins and disembowels a sheep, then an innocent-looking kitten snatches at discarded innards; a male donkey gets an erection from an erotic dream, and bloody dogs bark in the dogfighting ring. "North of the Mountain" reveals these brutal scenes of everyday life that would not normally appear in traditional literary paintings, but have existed for thousands of years, and this seems to become a metaphor for the moral disconnect between the human and the environment.

Although the ethos of literati painting has lost the reason for its existence, Zhou does not turn to the so-called posthuman cinema, in which post-humanity is regarded as the reinvention of humanity to overcome "its limitations through technology"(Buckland, 2009: 8). Instead, the way Zhou portrays humans in his films seems to be linked with a much older non-anthropocentric Taoist gesture. As one of the core beliefs of Taoism, *Tao Te Ching* describes that "Nature is impartial; It treats everything like sacrificial straw dogs,"<sup>5</sup> pointing out the equity among humans and non-humans, as they are all the same to the laws of the cosmos. This understanding of equality is reflected in Zhou's approach to filmmaking, in which he attempts to strike a balance between the human and the camera in terms of temporality.

Zhou studied painting at the Art Academy. In an interview, he talks about how he realized the difference between the time of cinema and the time of painting when he turned to filmmaking: unlike the viewers of a painting who are free to control and distribute their time to view the work, film viewers must adapt themselves to the time of the cinema, which also leads to the domination of the cinema over the viewer (Zhou, 2019). If we apply this Taoist non-centric gesture to the machine, and see the camera as equal to everything in the world, then this could provide a basis for rethinking the domination of the cinema in time. In this sense, Zhou's "calibration" principle can be seen as an approach of trying to achieve equality between the filmmaker and the camera by rebalancing the relationship between the two. Along the same lines, in "North of the Mountain," Zhou also tries to reconcile the temporal relationship between the viewer and the cinema.

Firstly, in the film, Zhou devotes the same amount of attention to depicting villagers, animals, machines, ruins, vegetation, and waste. He thus implies a state of being in which moral orientation has disappeared, but everything remains unified in the operation of the cosmos.

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<sup>5</sup> The straw dog is a figure of a dog, which is used as a ritual object in ancient China, but was often discarded after use.

To do this, it is necessary to distribute time evenly between humans and non-human agents. In this respect, the way the dialogue is handled is crucial, because the content of the dialogue could easily trigger the viewers' emotions, and thus affect their subjective time. So, if one avoids dialogue altogether, would that solve the problem? The answer seems to be negative. For example, even showing speechless villagers would raise the viewer's anticipation for an absent dialogue that does not exist, or shift their attention to the bodily actions of the characters, as in Lech Majewski's "The Mill and the Cross" (2011). Therefore, Zhou chooses a different approach: he deliberately does not translate the film's dialogue from a Uyghur dialect that most viewers do not understand. In doing so, the effect of language on the emotions of the viewer is thus substantially reduced in the general case, like when you are on a train in a foreign country, and you hear that your neighbours are talking calmly in an unfamiliar language.

Secondly, the film seems to deliberately play down the time of day, specifically the constant gloomy weather in the scenes making it difficult to tell if it is in the noon or early evening. Conversely, if, as in most other film montages, one emphasizes the specific time of day in which the scene is set, the narrative of the film can have a significant impact on the viewer's time. For example, if, in a certain movie, one scene shows daytime and the next shows night, the viewer will have an illusion of alternating day and night. Therefore, by only showing a homogeneous time of day, the effect of the narrative of time generated by the montage on the viewer's time is substantially reduced in "North of the Mountain."

Lastly, and at the same time, the most crucial approach: the extensive use of fixed long shots that tend to show relatively static scenes allow the viewer and the cinema to unify in the time of the cosmos. According to Zhou, the fixed long shots allow the viewers to gradually shift their attention to subtle movements in the picture, such as the slight swing of the leaves when the wind is blowing.

This understanding of the relationship between movement and stillness is also reminiscent of the traditional Chinese cosmogenesis mentioned above. In the *Taiji Tushuo* (太极图说, Explanations of the Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate) and the *Tong Shu* (通书, the All-Embracing Book), the Song dynasty philosopher Zhou Dunyi describes that "movement generates yang, and movement to extremes turns to stillness; stillness gives birth to yin, and the extreme of stillness returns to movement; movement and stillness are the genesis of each other;" movement corresponds to yang, and stillness corresponds to yin, and like yin and yang, movement and stillness are interdependent and mutually transformative. The temporality in literati painting also arises precisely from the change of yin and yang. As Zong Baihua states, the fluidity produced by the contrast between "abstraction and realism, light and shade" in the painting is the embodiment of the change of yin and yang, which was regarded as the "fundamental cosmology" in ancient China. And the cosmic time is the rhythm created by this fluidity. Thus, We can understand that Zhou's application of long fixed shots opens up an alternative possibility for the resonance between the viewer and cosmos. However, it is led less by the moral pursuit of the "unification between the human and the heaven," but rather, reconciles the time of the viewer and the time of the cinema by unifying them in the time of cosmos, and therefore serves to dissolve the domination of the cinema in time. Therefore, if we understand the principle of "calibration" in a broad sense as a way to

achieve their "organic coalescence" between human and machine through reconciling their relationship, then it applies not only to the relationship between filmmaker and camera, but also to the relationship between viewer and cinema.

None of the above techniques involves complex technologies, but Zhou still thus proposes a new direction to regulate and develop the relationship between the viewer and the cinema, the human and the camera, in a relatively simple way, just as it is not always necessary to use high-end equipment, wearing a simple piece of mask is enough to bring about a notable change in viewers in front of the screen.

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