

## Zhou Tao: Allegories of Topography

### Curatorial statement by Nikita Yingqian Cai

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Zhou Tao spent nearly two years in between an oasis and the Gobi village, capturing our modernist obsession and utopian desire to turn deserts into habitat. The result is a rich repertoire of images swiftly alternating between landscapes of sandstorms, dust clouds, changing seasons, and portraits of humans and other species cohabiting on ephemeral ecosystems left behind as byproducts of industrial intervention. In a state of exception, even the sublime of nature is burdened by human traces: winds batter through poplar trees, swirling sand scours metal surfaces of voluminous flora lying hopelessly in the desert, and voluptuous red buds are abandoned to appeal to no particular audience. The enormous leaves and flowers have been created by humans for the purpose of invoking a “green” imagination of nature, yet the landscape seems to be depicted as an archeological site by some future species unknown to us (*Winter North Summer South*, 2019). Within the vast planetary timeline, nature and human are seen to coexist in the blink of an eye: as if an allegorical adaptation of *The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains*, people gathering at the public squares of Guangzhou and Bangkok are suspended in an everlasting mode of anticipation (*Blue and Red*, 2013), while small groups of workers endlessly labor to build a mega reservoir in the middle of a desert (*South of the Mountain*, 2019); the artificial moon rises from the oval lid of an abandoned washing machine exuding a glimmer of romance (*The Worldly Cave*, 2017), while the spontaneous script the artist writes on a plastic bag eventually disseminates into the river (*South Stone*, 2010–11). All of these transient interrelations enter Zhou Tao’s camera as a “connecting point of perception”:

*Since the camera entered the ecological relationship as a connecting point of perception, a relationship of mutual “calibration” and “infiltration” is forming between the film taker, the camera, and the landscape, in which the question of “how moving-image happens” returns incessantly to where it takes place: the moving-image didn’t happen in the script, nor in one’s will or imagination, but through processes of continuous “calibration” and organic coalescence between human, machines, and environment.<sup>1</sup>*

Frederic Jameson unfolds his critique of the subject-object binary by proclaiming the allegorical mechanism: “Allegory foregrounds this strange process by way of a unique autoreferentiality or self-designation in which a text’s language necessarily acts its content out, and uses itself to articulate the inexpressible.”<sup>2</sup> But how does this “calibration” and “infiltration” happen? How does the regime of cinematic language give in to a corporeality that is beyond the script? How does a moving-image overcome the urge of “show and tell,” and how is it able to incorporate the invisible and unspeakable? When Zhou Tao speaks of “calibration” and “infiltration,” they are both allegories of connecting himself with the machine (camera) and the environment, and of a “film taker” to act out the tension that cannot be registered by the narrative apparatus.

Zhou Tao’s conception of cinematography can be referred to as the aesthetics of *liubai*, from the Chinese Southern School, or literati painting, where an artist creates a sense of space by pushing the landscape to one corner or one side of the painting. Under the Mongol Yuan dynasty, many Chinese literati had to withdraw from government service, and they gathered frequently to commemorate in paintings that conveyed ideals of reclusive worldview. Painting was no longer about the description of the visible world: it became a means of conveying the inner landscape of the artist’s heart and mind. Zhou Tao transforms such lofty spirits into his images but didn’t adopt the literati’s escapism; he believes the act of filmmaking is a way of engaging realities so heavily

mediated by technology, and of finding the shortest circuit between our bodies and the world. His short films crystalize the transient moments of affect: at the end of *Blue and Red*, Zhou Tao reenacts a tear gas attack he experienced on the streets of Bangkok, mimicking the movements of running, falling, and regaining consciousness by subjecting the camera to such motions. It calls to mind Francis Alÿs' *Tornado*, shot over the span of a decade from 2000 to 2010—the difference being that Alÿs' decision to chase the eye of the tornado is entirely voluntary, while Zhou Tao did not choose to “fall”; in fact, he is not even sure whether this moment of collapsing senses could be represented. “I find it a violent conflict. It is not a fiction, just a conflict. It gives the feeling of mountain contours. It is so violent, so confrontational; it mercilessly drops the landscape in front of your eyes.”<sup>3</sup> This coupling of realism and romanticism is mesmerizing insofar as it points to no transcendency. The men fishing around the mucky hill and enjoying the seemingly impossible leisure in the wasteland of *The Worldly Cave* are both creators and pioneers of the infrastructural “mountain contours.”

Modern-day topography is a process of measurement and recording concerned with a series of chosen coordinates, which can be recorded to produce contour lines and three-dimensional representations of the Earth's surface. In Zhou Tao's reading, what lies at the core of topography is a process of abstraction and control, and he creates his own “terra-temporality” as resilience. The term “terra-temporality” defies a cleavage of senses and categorization of concepts, it lingers between hot and light, cold and soil, smell and sight, space and time. There is a form of rhetoric in Chinese poetry known as *yijue* or *tonggan* (synesthesia), which can be literally described as the fluidity of sensations. Zhou Tao documents an assemblage of utopian bodies and images “projected as the senses swap places, lights doing double duty for sounds and then vice versa ... whose *pensée sauvage*, divested of abstractions, must use each singular perception to express the other, then appropriating the other in order to return on itself to shore up its own existence as representation.”<sup>4</sup> *Tide* (2008) is one such rigorous documentation of artist's body subjected to the rise and fall of the tide, and it invites the viewer to viscerally relate to his anxiety and physical vulnerability. In *East 6th St. to Location One*, the artist's body remains present but is dissipated by improvising with a collaborator and the surroundings. After a conceptual experiment of urban intervention (*Power Here*, 2009), *South Stone* (2010–11) evinces a notably more relaxed and equal relationship between the body and the environment, the subjects and the objects. Later on, in *After Reality* (2013), it becomes difficult to conclude whether the “grazing” or “tea-leaf picking” is an appropriation of agricultural activities or the artist's assimilation into nature. This process of assimilation continues in *Blue and Red*, when all the subjects and objects are indiscriminately bathed in the ambiguous ambience of the LED lights. It makes it hard for the viewer to tell the difference between the mood of the anti-government protesters in Bangkok from the one of those casual onlookers gathering at a plaza in the central business district of Guangzhou.

*The Worldly Cave* is filmed across a variety of locations: from Dafu Mountain in Panyu, China and Yingde in Qingyuan, China, to Phoenix in the US, Menorca in Spain and Gwangju in Korea, among other places. The camera's ISO sensitivity meticulously reveals shades of brightness and darkness beyond a human's visual capacity. Upon the finishing of this film, Zhou Tao began to consider the challenges presented by the technological acceleration of image-making. *North of the Mountain* (2019), commissioned by Times Museum, is approximately the length of a feature film. In finishing the film, Zhou Tao subjected himself to the whole duration of editing, and recalled his bodily memories to tune the images and to reconstruct the sequence of shots. Such withdrawal from outsourcing the production to others is the artist's radical attempt to ecologize the mechanism of representation: as technology evolves into prosthetic corporeality and the border between visibility and invisibility is defined and challenged by machines, film is no longer just about representing reality, but a means of projecting our inner landscape onto the outside world.

What cannot be registered in the narrative apparatus are the complicities and particularities of locales: the horizon in a tortoise's eyes, the concrete overpass and the recreational activities it shelters, the ecological enclaves of a mine pit, the alien dome of an urban theater, the idyllic song of an occupied square, the reservoir collapsing into sands, the kid, the plant, the cow, the goat, the chicken, and the dog all cohabitate with the rusty machines ... It is precisely by allegories of topography that Zhou Tao attempts to capture the organic coalescence between human, machines, and environment, to speak of planetary realities contaminated with local details and personal memories, and to allow particularities to fold back into the universal filmic space.

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Zhou Tao, artist statement of Shān Zhī Běi, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Archeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York, 2005), 61.

<sup>3</sup> A conversation between Hu Fang and Zhou Tao, conducted during the post-production process of *The Worldly Cave* in May 2017 in Guangzhou, Courtesy of Vitamin Creative Space.

<sup>4</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Archeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, (New York, 2005), 62.