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# A Kind of Multiverse? Traces of a Forgotten Modernity Inside Yang Fudong's Black and White Work

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After graduating from the China Academy of Arts (Department of Oil Painting) in Hangzhou in 1995, Yang Fudong (1971) moved to Shanghai to work as a graphic designer. Inspired by his daily job in Pudong, he started producing photographic series that closely resembled the advertising campaigns he worked on. Glossy images of stylish young people or dishevelled white collars in highly saturated colours, defined "intellectuals" in cryptic accompanying captions. Conversely, his body of work in black and white, almost entirely shot on 35mm film, portrays a suspended reality out of the historical time: a ghostly dimension akin to a drowsy vigil, a uchronia, an "estranged paradise"—to borrow the title of his earliest film set in Hangzhou. But it is Shanghai's elusiveness and material relationship with the past that has contributed the most to form Yang's trademark imagery and aesthetic. What he conjures up in his still and moving images, is a dimension with a distinctive oneiric quality, an "in-between" universe where all the circumstances are justified and have an inner logic, just like in dreams, or just like in the China of his childhood. The research of Yang Fudong is somewhat unique in the universe of contemporary Chinese art and sets him apart from a plethora of artists that have used the video in a much more "didactic" and quotational way. I will illustrate some specific aspects of his black and white body of work, trying to show how a certain self-orientalist trait can be interpreted as strategy to regain narrative agency and bring to the surface a series of removed instances: the main of which being, in my opinion, the fate of Shanghai's (perhaps of Mainland China in its ungraspable entirety?) modernity.

*Keywords*: multiverse, China, Shanghai, multimedia art, film, photography, modernity, orientalism, Cultural Revolution

## What Is the (Yang Fudong's) Multiverse?

The notion of "multiverse" has gained momentum with the popularization of quantum physics but traces back to the concern showed by pre-Socratic philosophers with physics and the possibility of a multiplicity of worlds. The Multiverse Theory is the popularised version of what is known as "Many-Worlds Interpretation", a theory of quantic physics elaborated by H. Everett III in his 1957 Ph.D. dissertation. Before that, in 1935, Erwin Schrödinger had made the famous thought experiment known as "Schrödinger's cat", meant to highlight the simultaneous coexistence, i.e. superposition, of multiple states at once (for an accessible explanation of the challenging notion I recommend two texts by Gribbin (2020) and Trucchio (2024)).

The possibility itself of the multiverse or MWI, is a direct consequence of the mysteries that shroud the Universe in its ungraspable size and unknowability. In a nutshell, according to this theory the multiverse is (constantly) generated by the bifurcation and/or expansion of matter in its interaction with itself and other matter

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(in time). Except that matter does not usually have consciousness; when it does—in the case of human beings—there is no way to find out when and where said bifurcation takes place because, in the moment we learn about one of the possible outcomes (that is, when the box of Schrödinger's cat gets opened), the other outcomes are automatically excluded. This is, in fact, what is also commonly known as "Sliding Doors" case scenario.

The philosopher Aldo Trucchio explains the popularity of the Multiverse Theory in art and pop culture with the suggestive notion of "Quantum Melancholy." According to Trucchio,

> Upon closer inspection, the idea of the multiverse reflects a pervasive emotional tone characterized by pronounced melancholy. Deprived of any possibility of ethical and political agency, the subject risks petrification, that sensation which Jean Starobinski, one of the sharpest contemporary readers of the theme of melancholy, described as "a frozen now [that] reigns both outside and within oneself." (…) The idea of the multiverse is thus distinctive of an era in which every beyond (ethical, political, artistic) has been cancelled in the name of repetition and necessity. (…) Reflecting on the concept of the multiverse underscores the gradual fading from our emotional, social, and political horizon of that beyond which once guaranteed and sustained the subject's "presence to the world." (Trucchio, 2024, pp. 318, 320)

Trucchio seems to be describing exactly the type of "emotional tone" inside Yang Fudong's art. A subtle melancholy and a sense of indefinitely protracted loss that create a suspended time full of unfulfilled possibilities and soaked in oneiric visions. Of course, my use of the notion is purely metaphoric and suggestive, but inasmuch the multiverse stays mainly as a hypothesis, its power to represent or stand for something else is quite robust.

Finally, if the concept of "multiverse" reconducts multiplicity to a unitary entity, by the same token Yang's works are different manifestations (or representations, or epiphanies) of the same multiverse.

## The Crystal Ball

Shanghai could be considered a multiverse in its own respect.

One of the most striking aspects of this city is the apparent seamlessness with which 1920s and 1930s buildings coexist with more recent or new ones. Such feature generates a form of cognitive dissonance that is not dissimilar to what surrealist art intentionally produces and, since the late Nineties, has been incorporated in Yang Fudong's *oevre*. But what does this notion ultimately stand for, especially inside his artistic output? Short films such as *Backyard—Hey, Sun Is Rising!* (2001), *Liu Lan* (2003), and the five-chapter series *Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest* (2003-2007) conjure up a very specific type of (sur)reality: an interstitial one that has survived the turmoil of history, hidden somewhere under the fragrant, greasy stairs of some old *shikumen* house. Such (sub)conscious liminal space channelling perhaps the collective memory of the city, appears close to what could be called today a "multiverse."

Shanghai embodies many fascinating contradictions that, at a better look, are just facts connected by a cause-effect relationship. It was the colonial city of China before Hong Kong, with the British and French concessions occupying large parts of its downtown area, but also the place where the Chinese Communist Party (*Gongchangdang* 共产党) was founded in 1921, and where class consciousness started undermining the power of the Nationalist Party, especially in the phase of its collaboration with Japan, another occupying force. When Mao Zedong's rule over China began, Shanghai—then the most industrialised and modern city of China—was spared from the radical transformation Beijing underwent since 1949, but not from some of the extreme consequences of the Cultural Revolution, as the accident known as the "January Storm" demonstrates (The "January Storm" (*Yiyue Fengbao* 一月风暴), also known as the "January Revolution", is a *coup d'etat* carried

in the early months of 1967 by Maoist factions against the city-party leadership in a partially failed attempt to undermine and weaken its authority and autonomy (Li, 2015, pp. 781-784; Russo, 2020, pp. 167, 203).

Being a true metropolis full of vestiges of the foreign rule during the early phase of the Republican era, Shanghai has also always been the preferred ground for testing CCP's power. But these demonstrations came in waves and although certainly not untouched by violence, it could be argued that the city and its population have been less exposed to the most violent manifestations of the decade between 1966 and 1976. This is part of the reason why Shanghai has been living in a strange temporal limbo resembling a crystal ball where bits and pieces of different eras, fashions, aspirations, and dreams coexist in charming jumble, whose essence Yang has managed to capture and reproduce.

In the essays and texts about Yang Fudong's work, one often finds the word "atmosphere": his works present a certain atmosphere…but what kind of atmosphere? The curator Gu Zheng suggests that this mood might be deriving from the artist's choice to pond over (by emphasizing it) the sensory and emotional fragmentation people experience in contemporary society and—I add—in a city like Shanghai. According to Gu, Yang captures "serendipitous epiphanies" and

> With his unique mode of visual production (and by extension meaning production), Yang Fudong suggests to us that the fleeting moments and fragments he has supplied contain his personal understanding and visual interpretation of the secrets of life and meaning of existence (…) These fragmentary (hence out of context) approaches to the interpretation of the world have close affinities with the reality of a contemporary society riven by the fragmentation of meaning and value systems, while meeting the requirements of meaning production characterised by multiple perspectives, instant capturing and switching with a view to establishing overarching connections. (Gu, 2013, p. 3)

Nighttime is when the mind reorganizes and makes sense of all these fragments. When I first met Yang, several years ago, he told me that what he wanted "to convey and represent was a certain kind of state—the peculiar atmosphere lingering in the first hours of the day, when one is not completely awake neither deep asleep." Coincidentally, that is also the moment when the most vivid dreams and unusual ideas (that is, symbolic meanings) are generated.

This is slightly paradoxical, because it implies that we grabbed some kind of tangible reality only when we are far from the world (at least the world as we know it in the daylight) and from ourselves in that world; it also means that for Yang Fudong, certain kind of dreams are more real than reality itself. This is the principle behind every good narrative, including those of films and moving images: they can make plausible what is not (or should not be) and, by the same token, they can make the most prosaic, concrete reality, oneiric and lyrical.

## A Surrealist Multiverse

> 我是不重要的。我是可以消失的。也一定会消失的。而曾经有过的那些梦想，它会永远存在。
>
> I am nothing. I may vanish and am bound to vanish. But the dreams I had will remain. They will last forever. (From *Seven Intellectual in a Bamboo Forest*, chapter I, 2003)

The recent passing of American author and artist David Lynch seems to have renewed the interest for surrealist art as well as the controversy around the term itself: in particular, about whether it was appropriate or not to define "surrealist" the work of contemporary artists, as well as the work of non-European artists.

As Lauren Walden (2024) demonstrates in her book *Surrealism from Paris to Shanghai*, not only was Surrealism openly influenced by the philosophies of Asia—or the "Orient", as it used to be called—but it also gained a foothold in China, and Shanghai in particular, thanks to the Storm Society (*Juelan She* 绝烂社) and its

founders, whose activity was (also) inspired by the European Surrealism. On the (literal) other side, although it is difficult to trace back the Chinese surrealists living and working in Paris during the golden age of the movement, the presence of artists from China is well documented and certainly created a real and virtual bridge between the two cultures (for Walden "it is valid to question whether Surrealism can be canonised as solely a 'Western' movement while fundamentally opposing its core philosophical trajectory." Quoting Lu Xun's interesting definition of "grabbism", she also analyses the ways in which Chinese artists and intellectuals made use of Surrealism, amongst the several European avant-gardes, as a "springboard to forge a new national identity at a time of political turbulence." (pp. 3, 14))

Just like impressionism is said to have been born from the encounter of French painters with East-Asian—Japanese in particular—art, and cubism from Picasso's fascination with African masks, Surrealism too is a complex "product", certainly influenced by non-western approaches to creativity and thinking processes in general, but also by psychoanalysis and the new attention paid to the subconscious.

Hence Surrealism cannot be confined to a place or a single era and its specific *zeitgeist*, i.e. Paris in-between the two World Wars, especially when one considers that the philosophical implications of the movement can be applied to different human experiences. In fact, if we approach Surrealism as a method consisting in giving dreams and the subconscious the power to be the driving force of artistic creation, not only we will notice a massive presence of *ante-litteram* surrealists but also, of course, of "contemporary surrealists." Yang Fudong can be considered one of them.

To add to the mystery, there is something in his persona that seems to defy time and age, something that resides in the delicate features of his face as well as in his extraordinary, almost metaphysical attunement with the realm of dreams, whereas the word "dream" is not meant only literally, i.e. as the neurological phenomenon affecting the mind during the REM stage of sleep, but also as the oneiric quality of reality in the wake, or in that specific state in between sleep and wake. The visual representation of this state is one that Yang has come to master throughout the years.

The ineffable quality of his works seems to be deriving from this and from the capacity to reproduce the specific type of mood dreams summon: one that is already highly compatible with visual art, in its inherent tendency to combine symbolism and iconicity. In other words, he knows that dream represents a purer, uncontaminated version of reality, and is this specific type of reality that he aims at evoking in every work.

By giving so much substance and (literal) space to dreams, the Shanghai based artist has also generated an independent universe that I assimilate to the multiverse. I would argue that this multiverse is not just simply a parallel world: it is beyond that and, in a way, above. In this sense it ontologically falls somewhere in-between the categories of "multiverse" and "metaverse": both are the visual (and in his case artistic) rendition or materialization of otherness. But while the metaverse's virtual environments are defined by an outbound movement (like a journey in which someone goes to this or that virtual space), the environment defining Yang Fudong's body of work is the result of a backward, or inbound, movement, something that is conceptually assimilable to what André Gide has described in his *Journals* (1893) as *mise en abyme*—the collapse of the image in itself and in its infinite repetition(s). Gide quotes *Las Meninas*, *The Arnolfini Portrait* and *Hamlet*'s scene of the play as examples of this notion, in which the act of reflection (both literal and metaphorical) proves to be crucial:

> I wanted to indicate that reciprocity, not in one's relations with others, but with oneself. The subject that acts in oneself; the object that retroacts is a literary subject arising in the imagination. This is consequently an indirect method of acting upon oneself that I gave outlined; and it is also, more directly, a tale. (…) That retroaction of the subject on itself has always

> tempted me. It is the very model of the psychological novel. An angry man tells a story; there is the subject of a book. A man telling a story is not enough; it must be an angry man and there must be a constant connection between his anger and the story he tells. (Gide, 2000, pp. 29-30)

Similarly, Yang's multiverse is a space populated, or better literally haunted, by "retroactive" characters and stories that come back from somewhere else, and in doing so discretely invade and besiege our world. But isn't this precisely what dreams do? Don't they constantly overflow into our daily lives with their indecipherable meanings and messages? So, the characters and ethereal figures in his films and photographic images are not just oneiric: they *are* dreams; and ghostly presences too. Like dreams and ghosts, they are replicas resembling humans, but they occupy a different ontological level. In fact, like a multiverse (*and* a metaverse that exists as a blank space to be filled and given significance), the world originated by Yang Fudong throughout his films is an actual set. It is an actual place: one that has been imagined, designed, planned, built, and finally filmed; and intentional too: wanted by the artist himself and waited for by the audience. So, it could be said that Yang's universe begins as a metaverse and ends up creating a whole new universe whose existence unrolls in a parallel/alternative dimension.

This notion is very central, I believe, inside the artist's body of work, being somewhat complementary to that of "replica" discussed above. In each work, in fact, he retains and reiterates a very specific trope: the "historical alternative." Using the extraordinary markers of Jiangnan's and Shanghai's landscape as a starting point, he unravels (or spin like a weaver) worlds as he imagines them to unfold from an unfulfilled past: an un-lived life or history's potential (yet never embarked upon) path. This adds yet another layer to my analysis and clarifies that nature of the ghosts I am referring to: they are not ghosts of people who existed and died; they are even more uncanny evocations of people and fact who have never actually come to life, and for this reason dwell in an alternative dimension of possibilities. They never existed to begin with. But is not this the purpose of the screen's narratives? In this sense, Yang Fudong's work is purely cinematic.

## From Technology to Content

The alternation (from a work to another) between color and black & white is one of the trademarks of the Yang Fudong's approach to art and reality: neither are real, nor hyperreal—both are, in fact, surreal. So, if the saturated cibachrome typically confers an (intentional) allure of glamour and mundanity, his signature black and white enhances the shape of things (which is why it is preferred by many photographers), giving an architectural and textural quality to the shots; at the same time, paradoxically, it makes a whole scene abstract, almost metaphysical and devoid of historical "actuality."

For Gu Zheng, Yang's "unique visual interpretation is inextricably linked to the characteristics of the media he employs (cinema, video and photography)". (p. 2)

Inside the multiverse created by Yang Fudong, technology is never just purely instrumental, but a crucial part of it. It could be said that it's both conductor and creator of meaning(s). Technology itself—the one chosen and the one applied—becomes a powerful historical indicator: in this, any artist's *oevre* has a double relevance, because it reflects the technology used at a specific phase of history and, via the same, creates a temporal fold, an in-between realm of possibilities amongst the many granted by the very "technological" multiverse it creates.

Like a kind of cinephile Schrödinger's cat, the artist relates his discovery of cinema to specific objects and places: the objects are the VHS cassettes, the place their retail shops where you could sometimes test the (pirate) copy before buying it; other times, the test would result in a full watching session. These objects evolved into

VCDs (very popular in China in the early 2000s), then DVDs. But the overall experience didn't change. This embedment of an experience with a place evokes something akin to Foucault's notion of "heterotopia" (1967). It goes without saying that a heterotopia leads to a "heterochrony": both are outside (the perception of) history, and belong to the individual, eternally present experience taking place in the time of the mind. In China, technology is also a specific type of heterotopia (another kind of multiverse?) one can find in the many "electronic markets" (*dianzi shichang* 电子市场), including the widespread "photography markets" (*sheying shichang* 摄影市场), where all the possible type of photographic equipment and cameras are available for purchase. This spatial and contingent experience defined the approach of many Chinese artists to technology and creativity.

Technology is always inside history: it's a product of it, and a generator at the same time. Right at the turn of the new millennium—a very prolific moment for Chinese art and film—the discussion about technology(ies) was extremely lively, because digital technology was becoming mainstream and its spread on a large scale very promising in terms of costs reduction and so-called "portability", which allowed artists and filmmakers much more discretion in their filming. So much that a whole aesthetic—the "on the ground" or *xianchang* (现场) described by the film scholar Zhang Zhen (2007, pp. 18-20)—was born out of this "revolution." Filmmakers faced two choices: going digital or staying analogic. Those who didn't focus too much on the aesthetic qualities of the single frame or on the overall atmosphere conveyed by the film, but more on its power to document something, didn't hesitate to get hold of the latest model of handheld cameras, today in some cases replaced by smartphones. On the other side stood Yang Fudong, who was already using digital technology and editing software for his (still "official") job as graphic. Pretty much all his black and white films are shot on 35mm film and then digitally reversed. A refined cinephile, he knew that, despite being time-consuming, expensive, and not as practical as digital cameras, analogic cameras would in most cases grant better images. Or perhaps just the kind of image he was after.

Things are slightly different today, when shooting on film has become not only impractical, but almost impossible due to costs, the ever-decreasing availability of actual film, and the specific type of arrangement required, set and equipe-wise. But except for a few occasions, Yang seems to be intentioned to hold on to his signature instrumentation and approach to film-making. In fact, there seems to be another reason that does not concern the quality of the resulting images, but the filming process that an analogic equipment requires: a process you must go through to achieve a certain result; something only time and the comprehension it leads to can guarantee. In a Buddhist (and even Zen) mindset applied to filmmaking, it is always about the process—the *guocheng* (过程)—never about the result.

## Melancholic Intellectuals, Chinese Divas, and Barking Dogs

Yang Fudong became involved in avant-garde art via silence. During his third year as a student of the China Academy of Art, he carried on a three-month performance in which he stayed completely mute. They say silence is gold, meaning that silence is more eloquent than all possible talks… and there is a lot of silence in Yang's art.

His first major work—*An Estranged Paradise* (*Mosheng Tiantang* 陌生天堂), a 76 minutes long, 35 mm black and white film (transferred to DVD)—manages to capture, also via meaningful silences, the essence of a place very important and dear to him: Hangzhou, the city he moved to for studying Fine Art.

The full-length film was shot in 1997 but completed and released only in 2002. Seminal for assessing his signature imagery of melancholic reverie, the film unfolds in front of the spectators' eyes like a scroll, and like a traditional horizontal scroll it lays out landscapes as well as reflections about time, history, and relationships. The

"estranged paradise" of the title is precisely Hangzhou, one of the most popular touristic destinations of China, full of ancient monuments and scenic spots around the famous *Xihu* (the West Lake), so much so that it has a dedicated proverb—*Shang you tiantang, xia you Su Hang* (上有天堂，下有苏杭): "There is paradise in Heaven and Suzhou and Hangzhou on Earth"—the title of the work in question refers to.

The film follows Zhuzi, a young man (and clearly Yang's alter ego), in his physical and mental wandering between the young and adult life, but also between his girlfriend Linshan and another mysterious woman: a state of restlessness that the viewer can sense in the voice-overs revealing the character's thoughts—a stream-of-consciousness that is one of Yang's signatures, especially in the early productions. Zhuzi is affected by an undisclosed illness, but his main (real?) disease is a form of *ennui*, a subtle dissatisfaction of life, deriving from disillusionment, disaffection, and existential hopelessness: all elements that were the trademark of the Chinese avant-garde in the final decade of the Twentieth century, in the post-Tiananmen and pre-economic-boom China.

Another estranged, and somewhat alienating paradise, is the one in which the artist's silent divas got stuck: a parallel dimension, timeless and abstract, radically outside the stream of history. Grown up in a newly capitalistic society still very much influenced by Marxism, and consequently by a Hegelian idea of History as the teleological fulfilment of (a) fate rather than the neutral fact happening, Yang Fudong was certainly affected by such idealistic vision, but at the same time he seems to be rejecting it altogether. In fact, something he appears to suggest with the worlds he creates, is that history is always arbitrary, and it takes less than a gust of wind for it to change course. The definitive act of creativity evokes, through a visual construction, the "what ifs" and all the plausible, forgotten corners of a history we find impossible to cope with. In this discourse, modernity is a very difficult concept to handle and Yang's evolution as an artist can be seen, I would argue, as the attempt to reveal the failure of modernity as an agenda. That is why, in his still and moving images, aesthetics are blended and combined in a way that makes it impossible to detect specific historical eras: simply, they intentionally defy any attempt and by doing so subtly hint at the broken promises of progress. What if the world was already modern not long ago? Maybe a century or a not identified moment that lasted the blink of an eye? What if real modernity was yet to come? And although many have mentioned Yang's strenuous evocation of the *Haipai* (海派)—the distinctive aura of refined cosmopolitanism mixed to surveillance that marked Shanghai from the late 1920s throughout the 1940s (Lin, 2016)—he himself seems to conjure up that very aura only to deny it when he states that "it's a feeling of yesterday, but it's actually tomorrow". (Gopnik, 2013)

Similarly, the transience of fashion and of all the exterior forms in general, is used to highlight, by contrast, an essential way of being, preserved throughout the centuries. Such is the world depicted in the short film *Liu Lan* (2003), a story of unfulfilled love where the breathtakingly beautiful Taihu lake is a location as well as a character. In the typical emotionally subdued fashion of the artist, the one conveyed in the film is not a sentiment of impending tragedy or regret, but only a bittersweet nostalgia and the awareness that changing one's fate is much harder than what it's told (and thought): the lake being also a powerful symbol of time that encompasses everything and one can only bow to, despite all the vain attempts to bend it.

All these elusive features can be found in Yang Fudong's most acclaimed work: *Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest* (*Zhulin qi xian* 竹林七贤), comprising five chapters released between 2003 and 2007, for a total length of 4 hours. The title of the *opus magnum*, first screened in its entirety at the 52nd Venice Biennale, echoes the Chinese legend of the "Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove", scholars in different disciplines who lived during the Jin Dynasty (3rd century CE) and were close to the Taoist philosophy, in an era that saw the primacy of Confucianism under the rule of the Sima clan. Some of the sages were involved in politics, but their non-

conformist or openly divergent views made them disillusioned outcasts who left society (or were ostracized by it) to live in close contact with nature. The seven men roaming the deep forest and devoting themselves to art and to a life of quiet meditation, have been the subjects of endless paintings and poems, but the category of the "intellectual"—in Chinese *zhishi fenzi* (知识分子)—also resonates in the modern history of China as the one group targeted by Mao for its supposed privileges and wealth. Something Yang, as an intellectual himself, is clearly not so sure about. Therefore, the label "intellectual" of the early photographic works becomes a signifier for different things in different eras, coming back in a completely different context, i.e. an atemporal dimension which is both beyond and above time and one in which the notion itself seems to find its definite meaning and proper place. Like the missing piece of a puzzle, the displaced intellectuals finally find their ultimate abode in one of the many worlds of his multiverse.

The languid characters, young men and women placed in (or better against) different locations, have a very limited interaction with the surrounding environment—an alternation of natural and urban landscapes where they move like alienated avatars. Alienated from what? Once again, they are not "real people": they are projections, hostages of the multiverse, thoughts incarnated and exteriorized. The thoughts of Yang himself, as well as those of an entire generation.

While the mystery of each chapter of the series, like that of its characters, is very manifest (in this sense, not mysterious at all), the evidence—hidden as usual behind the layers of convoluted analyses—lies in the omnipresent influence of Chinese traditional painting. Yang himself has called his very distinct approach to camera and subjects as "abstract cinema" (TateShots, 2017). Abstract as opposite to real? Perhaps, what he means by "abstract" is the cinematic equivalent of the abstract painting that he studied at the Academy: a cinema with no clear narrative development or conventional plot, just like abstract painting has no conventional composition or subject. A cinema, again, of heterotopias and heterochrony, but without the sense of decay and impending doom Foucault associated to the notions. After all, the ruins of a civilization don't mean much to another one, and Yang develops his heterotopy with the serene attitude of a demiurge.

So, each film ends up becoming a portal to his own past, entries to his personal multiverse: that is, his own life. It could be said that the artist always starts from the still image: this time more a trace than an icon—whereas I use the terms in the original, semiotic sense of the words that Peirce gave to them (1998)—and uses film to animate and develop what would otherwise remain a virtual, unfulfilled story. Moving figurines like realistic animations; real people treated like mannequins but in a way that is somewhat remote from that of traditional cinema or even theatre. Once again, those people are shadows and play the role of ghosts. Yang Fudong's worlds are in fact populated by people that resemble models. And vice versa.

By no chance, he has received a commission from Prada to shoot the short video *First Spring* (the video is available on various YouTube channels): nothing to be snubbed if we think about the brand's long-term commitment with the fashion world that Yang himself is well-aware of. Like visual art, fashion can be seen as, and to some extent *is*, a commodity. But I also think he finds an affinity between his almost aloof coolness, the stillness of the models and the supreme emotional control expressed by the characters of his films: these factors might in the end all trace back to his experience as a student making portraits of art models, as well as a graphic in an advertising company in Shanghai, and finally as an artist building his own aesthetic at the convergence of all these elements. At a first, superficial glance, the promotional film may come across as a case of sheer self-orientalism, presenting the trope of the recomposed dichotomy which echoes the Tao's yin-yang and is so distinctive of Yang's visual universe. Black and white, East and West, antiquity and modernity, actors and

amateurs, the real city and the set. Nevertheless, there is in it, like in every other work, a genuine and urgent preoccupation with China's fate bound to a transcultural idea of modernity. The flying umbrellas evoke Magritte; the hanging electric cable is a metonymic sign of modernity and becomes a dangerous tightrope: in and of itself a powerful signifier of something intangible yet straightforward in symbolizing the danger of falling on one side (the past) or the other (the future), the present being too narrow and uncomfortable. Similarly, two young foreign strangers carrying suitcases make one wonder about their content. Do they carry modernity or a lighter version of it? Perhaps one that China was never ready/willing to accept? In this case, we can see how Yang's multiverse collides, or better harmoniously blends with the brand's universe, but instead of being swallowed by it, ends up conquering it to the point that the viewer becomes oblivious to the clothes and gets progressively lured into the artist's suggestive world.

*Figure 1.* Yang Fudong, *Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest, Part I*, 2003, single-channel video with sound, 35 mm b&w film transferred to DVD, 29′32″ (Photo courtesy of ShangART Gallery, Shanghai).

Yang Fudong's artistic intention cannot be grasped without considering his experience as a man of the North in Southern China, as an art student in Hangzhou, and as a graphic in Shanghai. These three phases correspond to three different places and personas that he never really abandoned along the way, but rather integrated, like in a game of Chinese boxes. That could be said of any Chinese citizens caught in the turmoil of historical changes and epochal turning points, but in the case of artists, and of an artist like him, each turning point generated a new identity that left the former one lingering in the background like a ghost. And a powerful one too. Sometimes those phases and the corresponding identities overlapped: this can be seen in his early works, where he was moving from the status of art student to that of graphic, and again from that of graphic to that of full-time artist. The phantomatic quality of his art is therefore also result of the coexistence of different identities such as (the I in) the past and (the I in) in the present, the individual and the member of the collectivity, the worker and the

artist, the Chinese and the international artist. The interaction between these instances can also be transversal and it is precisely what generates the intricate texture that I call the "Yang Fudong's multiverse."

One of the worlds of said multiverse, and a very crucial one, is the seminal North. Less evident than his fascination for the myth of the Jiangnan region, but rooted even deeper, is his identity as a northern Chinese. So perhaps, the exoticism that his works exude is not a form of self-orientalism concocted to lure and seduce the "foreign" gaze like some mistakenly think, but the expression of a personal form of enchantment for Chinese stories that are not the ones he grew up with. After all, China is big and ancient enough to justify this kind of "inner" exoticism, which is also a form of internal ethnography—the same an author like Gao Xingjian has successfully embarked upon (this is particularly evident in his book *Soul Mountain* (1990), that has earned him the Nobel Prize).

Constantly aware of and coherent with his own story and thoughts, Yang has conjured up his past self and embedded it in the present and future. The six-channel video *East of Que Village* (*Que cun wang dong* 雀村往东, 2007) stands out in his production for its documentary style and for the subject. As the artist himself has stated, it is not a documentary in the strict sense, and it couldn't be such since it was conceived for being shown as a multichannel video-installation. However, there are some documentary elements it, especially in its way of incidentally documenting the artist's return to his roots. Interestingly, it came at a point of Yang's career when he was already established as one of the most important artists of his generation, certainly the most well-known amongst his peers from China. So, it may look as though to move forward and plunge deeper in the Shanghai's life, he needed to look backwards (in time) and elsewhere. To do that, he had to go back to his hometown in Hebei, in the outskirts of Beijing. Like in his other films, the location seems set apart from history, caught in a (parallel) atemporal dimension, but this time for the exact opposite reason: not for its glamour and enticing charm, but for its "timeless" poverty and dilapidation. The overall sensation is that of coldness and hopelessness: the ones he must have felt, as a child, during the long northern winters. The choice to let dogs roam freely in the locations and in front of the camera is intentional and functional. Yang uses them as detached observers. They represent the objective gaze of nature, or of the universe (or of God, for those who believe): they don't judge, don't dream, don't expect. They just are, and they are in that specific place at that specific moment. Their apparently random presence gives even more relevance to the situation. Yang entrusts animals of this very important task, because their behavior is unpredictable, and they cannot be fully controlled or directed, unlike human actors and actresses. Therefore, whenever an animal appears in one of his works, we know he is trying to draw some crucial truth from another level of consciousness.

## The Absent Subject

As Yang himself explained in interviews and public talks (TateShots, 2017; M+ Talks, 2024) some of his most representative videos can be defined "spatial." Mainly because, I think, they explore the relationship between human figures (the characters), space, and camera; the latter corresponding to the gaze of the filmmaker/artist but also, eventually, to the subjective gaze of the audience/spectator. There is yet another gaze—that of the actors/characters, which is the major narrative element, in the (apparent) absence of historically connoted elements. These transversal relationships are the same found in the classic Chinese scroll, marked by an abundance of signifying vectors meant to orientate the gaze, and by the absence of a (singular) viewpoint.

However, unlike traditional painting, Yang's camera/gaze can focus on the characters' expressions and emotions, as seen for example in seven-channel video installation *The Fifth Night* (*Di Wu Ye* 第五夜, 2011), one

of his most eminently spatial works, where the simultaneity of the shots taken from different cameras orchestrates a detached interplay resulting in a magnetic, conceptual dance, which also effectively evokes the multiple points of view of the Chinese scroll. Also, whereas the traditional scrolls include a meta-commentary in the form of a poem, in Yang's installation it's the eerie sounds of a cinematographic set at night that integrates and enriches the feeling of solitude and the suspended atmosphere he wanted to convey.

The multiplicity of channels (i.e., of sources as well as perspectives) Yang often recurs to—as in *Close to the Sea* (2004) and *The Revival of the Snake* (2005), both ten-channel video installations; *No Snow on the Broken Bridge* (an eight-channel synchronized video installation, 2006); the already mentioned *East of Que Village* (six-channel video installation, 2007) and *The Fifth Night* (2011); and *New Women* (2013)—further highlights the extrapolation of meaningful fragments and allows him to create a Deleuzian "time-image", matching also the historical fragmentation that defines contemporary China behind the surface of continuity and cohesion. The same fragmentation, as well as Deleuze's theory itself, brings to mind some implications of the MWI (Multiple World Interpretation) or Multiverse theory. For Deleuze, in fact, the "time-image" is a kind of "crystal-image" that, like a prism, condenses meanings and experiences in one material (and sensorial) configuration that is the shape of time itself:

> What constitutes the crystal-image is the most fundamental operation of time: since the past is constituted not after the present that it was but at the same time, time has to split itself in two at each moment as present and past, which differ from each other in nature, or, what amounts to the same thing, it has to spit the present in two heterogeneous directions, one of which is launched towards the future while the other falls into the past. Time has to split at the same time as it sets itself out or unrolls itself: it splits in two dissymmetrical jets, one of which makes all the present pass on, while the other preserves all the past. Time consists of this split, and it is this, it is time, that we *see in the crystal* (…) What we see in the crystal is therefore a dividing in two that the crystal itself constantly causes to turn on itself, that it prevents from reaching completion, because it is a perpetual *self-distinguishing*, a distinction in the process of being produced; which always resumes the distinct terms in itself, in order constantly to relaunch them. "The putting into abyss *[mise-en-abyme]* does not redouble the unit, as an external reflection might do; in so far as it is an internal mirroring, it can only ever split it in two", and subject it "to the infinite relaunch of endlessly new splitting. [Ricardou]." (Deleuze, 1985, pp. 81-82)

Art simulates and at the same time exposes this attempt, by keeping the fragments "together." Once again, we see how for Yang film is both the medium *and* the content (or the message): the two are inseparable in his visual poetic, just like the texture and grain of film cannot be separated from the image. By being able to show a multiplicity of perspectives, the narrative itself—both filmic and literary—turns into a powerful generator and aggregator of worlds.

Perhaps not incidentally, Yang Fudong's work makes me think of three texts that have influenced my relationship with film and art and seem to have done the same with him.

The first is Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* (*L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, 1961), with the screenplay by Alain Robbe-Grillet. The film revolves around the apparently serendipitous meeting of a man and a woman during a party inside an elegant hotel where both are guests. The man claims they have already met (the year before at Marienbad) but she denies that; a third man (possibly the woman's husband) enters the ambiguous game as a paradigmatic antagonist. Heavily relying on intentional repetitions and the reiteration of situations, the film shows the interaction of the three anonymous characters through an unconventional storyline made of flashbacks and sudden changes in the chronology and locations. The shots of corridors and of the labyrinthic garden in front of the hotel/château enhance the lingering ambiguity, also conveyed by the enigmatic voiceovers.

The one portrayed by Resnais's film is an oneiric world in which thoughts and the inner life of characters are more coherent than the "external" phenomena, with exteriors mirroring the baroque architecture of the (conscious and subconscious) mind. Similarly, the non-linear treatment of space and time and impossibility to distinguish between truth and fiction, suggest that there is no real difference between the two.

The other narrative is the story known as "The Dream of the Butterfly", contained in the Taoist text *Zhuangzi* attributed to the homonymous philosopher from the late Warring States period (3rd century BC)—the same era when the story of the "Seven Sages" (or seven intellectuals) originated. The anecdote reads as follows:

> Once Zhuang Zhou dreamed he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he woke up, and there he was, solid and unmistakable Zhuang Zhou. But he didn't know if he were Zhuang Zhou who had dreamed he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuang Zhou. Between Zhuang Zhou and a butterfly, there must be *some* distinction! This is called the Transformation of Things. (Watson's translation (2013, p. 78) from the original text: "昔者庄周梦为蝴蝶，栩栩然蝴蝶也，自喻适志与，不知周也。俄然觉，则蘧蘧然周也。不知周之梦为蝴蝶与，蝴蝶之梦为周与？周与蝴蝶则必有分矣。此之谓物化。")

Pretty self-explanatory, the anecdote is one of the earliest, and until now more refined examples of "relativity" that calls into question the perceived and presumed (sensorial) reality. In this sense, also an early (and lyrical) precursor of the Multiverse Theory.

Finally, Akira Kurosawa's masterpiece *Rashōmon* (1950), known for a plot device that involves various characters providing alternative, self-serving, and contradictory versions of the same incident. In it, a story is evoked through a narration within a narration: the initial scene introduces a woodcutter and a priest finding repair from the pouring rain underneath the Rashomon city gate. A third man joins them and is informed in detail of the terrible fact that they have witnessed: an assault of two persons (a samurai and his wife) at the hands of a bandit, in the forest of Nara near Kyoto. The bandit was charged with the murder of the samurai and the rape of his wife. However, when call to testify, each provided a different version of the fact. Hence the impossibility to verify and assess the truth. Through the plurality of versions and corresponding perspectives, Kurosawa's complex apparatus unveils the hypocrisy as well as people's penchant for lies (the ones told, and the ones heard) (Speaking about the film, the Japanese director has stated: "Human beings are unable to be honest with themselves about themselves. They cannot talk about themselves without embellishing. The script portrays such human beings—the kind who cannot survive without lies to make them feel they are better people than they really are." (Kurosawa, 1983, p. 183))

What these narratives, coming from different times and cultural contexts, all have in common is precisely the multiplicity of perspectives they are based on—what could be also called the relativity of points of view. *Last Year at Marienbad* develops from the major ambiguity around a supposed encounter between two persons; *Zhuangzi*'s "dream" overthrows and rejects the possibility of a coherent subject living unequivocal experiences and perhaps anthropocentrism *tout court*; *Rashōmon* is simply about the impossibility of truth in the world of people.

Once again, the ubiquitous camera and the plurality of focal points translate into the absence of a clear subjective position, which allows an open reading of the work(s) and at the same denies any univocal interpretation. These are all features of Chinese traditional painting whose legacy Yang Fudong clearly and proudly claims, together with the Buddhist and Taoist ones. In the conceptual multiverse he has created, these influences happily coexist with different avant-gardes, such as the European and the Japanese one.

## Conclusions

The future is not written. In China, neither is the past, or at least some uncomfortable parts of it. This likely generates a disconnection of the (pre)conscious self—what Freud referred to as "ego" (1923)—with the vastly submerged unconscious part of the psyche that generates dreams. I believe that from the very beginning Yang Fudong was very intrigued by the possibility to create a multiverse of and with the submerged (repressed?) Chinese collective psyche. In this, the (memory of the) Cultural Revolution played a crucial role. Every Chinese artist of his and perhaps the former generation had to deal, in a way or another, with the Cultural Revolution, which is a multiverse in its own respect: a time-place where everything was subverted; an exhilarating (for children) and dreadful (for adults) Carnival where everything was collective to the point that nothing really was, because the collective was behaving like one big individual.

*City Light* (城市之光, 2000) and *Backyard: Hey! Sun Is Rising* (后方——嘿，天亮了, 2001) can be considered Yang's "Cultural Revolution works" and the culmination of a reflection started with the multichannel videos *I love My Motherland* (1999) and *Tonight Moon* (2000).

*Figure 2.* Yang Fudong, *Backyard—Hey! Sun Is Rising*, 2001, single-channel video with sound, 35 mm b&w film transferred to DVD, 13′ (Photo courtesy of ShangART Gallery, Shanghai).

In these short films, once again anonymous characters can be seen behaving like children, dummies, or soldiers; what they do ultimately is acting out the artist's quest to find out the real significance of being a man, or an individual, in a potentially disruptive phase of the Chinese society, when the echo and the modalities of the collectivist era were still very much in place, but a new role of self-made man and entrepreneur was becoming the new rule. With armies of self-centered entrepreneurs appearing on the horizon, new identities were being

embraced with a collectivist mindset—something at the core of Yang Fudong's artistic research, and one of the many (contradictory) aspects of contemporary China.

Just like his multimedia works and the imagery he generated, this artist occupies a peculiar position: a threshold between the (identity of) visual artist and the filmmaker, the commercial director and the radical avant-gardist. This suggests that the real essence of the multiverse defining—as I have hopefully demonstrated—his identity as a man and as an artist is precisely the threshold and the blurring boundaries that separates these worlds. We don't know (yet) where the threshold of this physical world is, and we don't know (yet) how to reach other world(s), be them parallel, overlapping, or superposed. The same thresholds define the essence of human beings at the present time: modern, postmodern, or just in-between entities, even holding onto some premodern modalities. A combination of structure and superstructure, but in the end just plain genetic matter that can be arranged in the most aesthetically pleasing way, as the images created by Yang Fudong show.

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