

# Wind Rising from the Tips of Green Duckweeds: —A Conversation with Qiu Anxiong

Posted by blancdixin March 2, 2017



In 2006, Shanghai-based artist Qiu Anxiong premiered *New Classic of Mountains and Seas I* (NCMS1), a thirty-minute, three-channel ink animation that narrated a powerful allegory of modern civilization and its plight. Inspired by the ancient encyclopedic cosmography *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, which describes a myriad of prehistoric and mythological creatures, the video and its 2007 sequel speculate how humans from prehistoric times may perceive the spectacles and phenomena of modernity — urbanization, environmental degradation, terrorism, space exploration, bio-technology, and ethics — and what forms of provocative wisdom this perspective may engender. This series became a hallmark in the artist's multimedia practice, which often deploys allegories as a device for cultural critique. On April 1, 2015, I visited Qiu in his Shanghai studio where he was developing the last installment of the NCMS trilogy, eight years after the release of NCMS2. We spoke about his work processes, expanding the technological and conceptual bandwidths of the medium of ink animation, forms of control and the socio-technological contexts of contemporaneity, connections between Buddhism and sci-fi, and how speculations collide with reality.

*“Wind Rising from the Tips of Green Duckweeds: A Conversation with Qiu Anxiong.”* *Temporal Turn: Art and Speculation in Contemporary Asia*. Kansas: Spencer Museum of Art. pp. 155-161.

**For a few months now you’ve been developing a leviathan project — the third and final installment of the *New Classic of Mountains and Seas* trilogy. What’s your process so far?**

I’ve by now come up with three or four versions of the script that are quite hardcore sci-fi, full of plot twists and suspense, but they are perhaps better off professionally produced by a film studio, which I may explore in the future. The script I’m working with now still revolves around a narrative that

takes place in a futuristic city sprawling around a lofty central tower. The city is controlled by those who reside higher up—physically, hence hierarchically—through a computer system that projects its perceivable urban landscape.

**This setup reminds me of the premises of *The Matrix* (1999).**

Yes, indeed. The internal logic of *The Matrix* is fundamentally a Buddhist one, in fact. It was derived from a Buddhist world view, that all is an illusion. The key difference is that in *NCMS3*, a fragment of the concrete real world exists alongside the virtual projections, whereas the humans in *The Matrix* exist in a collective dream-state while they are in fact submerged in solutions and only neurologically alive. The protagonists in my film still inhabit the real world, but they are closely monitored by the governing system, which is actually closer to our reality. I sometimes wonder if the plot is a bit mainstream. The hope is to portray a relationship with reality that is sometimes analogous to the way people navigate game worlds: While they seem to have free reign, they are also micromanaged and not necessarily aware of the extent of control.

**The inhabitants have partial agency in this city?**

Yes. For them reality is blurred and augmented by the fictional, and the virtual is layered into reality, so that what you consider or perceive as real is not necessarily so. There's a chief landscape designer who is commissioned to cover up or touch up certain areas—for instance, transforming less desirable parts of the city into beautiful scenery. As he grew weary of this responsibility, he began building a hidden “level” within the virtual reality, his personal “peach blossom spring,” if you will. Since he had command of the necessary resources, he was able to build it in secrecy. However all was lost when the system experienced a total collapse, which also terminated the entire city's simulated reality.

There are the protestors whose residences were demolished. When the police chased after them, the chase itself was programmed into a gameshow by the media and the entertainment industry. Virtual citizens tuned in as the chase took a predesigned route to the top of a building, where the protestors leapt off. This is what caused the whole system to collapse.

Then there's this *caonima* in the city zoo, where all animals were trained to speak sheep.<sup>[1]</sup> The *caonima* was forced to learn as well, but by the time the animal was revealed on a variety show for the first time, it forgot the learned tongue and literally blurted out “caonima,” much to the shock of the viewing public, as they had always assumed that animals only sounded like sheep. As the incident became viral, a riot ensued.

When I installed my solo show *Zoo* (2011), there were certain allegories that shared common grounds with the *NCMS* series—the idea of *caonima* originates in the *Zoo* project—and the metaphors of a surveillance state. When curator Pi Li saw this exhibition, he asked whether I had

read *Animal Farm* (1945), to which I replied I hadn't. After finally reading it, I realize that the logic behind the allegories are indeed similar.

**Though this reference has become a bit clichéd in discussing contemporary artworks involving animals as the subject or medium.**

This is also what has prompted me to emphasize on specificities. Orwell's time knew primarily control, but now we have capitalism in the mix, which creates illusions of freedom and comfort in service of various forms of control. It extends to every aspect of life, yet we are so willing to comply. Art and our theorization of life should be in simultaneous exchange and conversation. Powerful works of art of any age usually have one thing in common—speaking pointedly to their times. It has to have a claim to reality, if not truth.

**I do think that our speculations of a future scenario—as often seen in works of sci-fi—are deeply reflective of our current moments, its problems and anxieties, and these speculations might be even more effective than political science and other forms of investigation that address the here and now. What are some of the sci-fi works you find yourself revisiting from time to time?**

I love *Solaris* (1961) by Stanisław Lem. There's also Alejandro Jodorowsky's *The Holy Mountain* (1973); its rich imagination and intense ritualism, the striking symmetrical compositions, the director's command of space...it renders the likes of Mathew Barney, who is clearly inspired by this, weak in comparison. *The Holy Mountain* was a cult film that's deeply surreal, but it was also deeply critical of a capitalist reality.

Later Jodorowsky wanted to make another film, *Dune*, but the budget was too astronomical. While the script was based on the synonymous novel, he had also heavily incorporated his own ideas—some later found their way in franchises like *Star Wars*. He had assembled a dream team for the franchise with designers like Jean Giraud and H. R. Giger who later worked on *Alien*, and a cast that included Dalí, who had agreed to film but asked for a \$10,000 per minute rate. He had prepared a script with full storyboard and character map, but no studio in Hollywood would work with the director, because he was obviously too crazy for middle-class taste. It was a shame that Jodorowsky's *Dune* didn't get produced, but his ideas for narrative and design have paved way for sci-fi classics to come.

I remember seeing this conversation between you and artist Shi Qing on Wechat, where you were talking about how *Three Body* (Chinese author Liu Cixin's celebrated Hugo Award winning sci-fi novel; the trilogy was published from 2006 to 2010) was superior to *Interstellar* (Christopher Nolan's 2014 film) in treating similar tropes and subplots.

**Right, both described contacts with higher dimensions and the relativity of time interferes with human relationships. *Three Body* struck me more profoundly because it was ultimately about an inter-galactic power struggle, where the fate of men isn't central to the morality of this battle. *Interstellar* is essentially humanitarian: mankind has survived, mankind in search of what's meaningful to them...*Three Body* is cruel.**

So you really do get a sense that *Three Body* is written by a materialist, whose perspective on the universe is informed by a very materialist knowledge structure, ideology. The ending was cruel and tragic: our solar system destructed by a tiny piece of dimension-reducing weapon. As a reader, you'd of course experience sheer desperation. Those highly advanced sentient beings are completely apathetic to our fate; destroying the human civilization was simply done as a preventative measure.

**How is this different from humans destroying entire species, say, of pests?**

That's why I think *Three Body* has a very materialistic point of view. This is to say that it comes from the perspective of social Darwinism, of natural selection through competition, which also reminds me of Jeremy Bentham and his philosophy of utilitarianism.<sup>[2]</sup> He was in support of sacrificing the minority for the greater good within a certain community. There is an ongoing debate in the West regarding whether sacrificing the few is just, which is ultimately a moral issue. In China, I don't think people are too bothered by this as an ethical dilemma; I think we take it for granted that society should function such that one person can be sacrificed if the sacrifice can ensure the survival of ten. But is it really so? What if you are that one person? In the Confucian framework of thought, I may embrace self-sacrifice as a moralistic act. But in a different philosophical context, it might be hard to justify this kind of sacrifice, especially if the sacrificed is innocent, because innocence is central to this form of justice.

Perhaps the morality during times of war is fundamentally different. *The Art of War* advises that "all is fair in war; nothing is too deceitful in warcraft" — it's almost an imperative, but deceit is immoral in times of peace.<sup>[3]</sup> Wartime morality, then, is necessarily utilitarian, where victory at the expense of a few—even many—is justifiable. But is there still a clear boundary between peace and war?

When different parties are in conflict, they would probably still subscribe to utilitarianism. For me, as a practicing Buddhist, sacrifice—whatever the subject—matters very little, because nothing is really lost or gained. But there's no way you can really abide by this principle. You still need to fight for your rights sometimes, and this is where secular pragmatism diverges from religious doctrines. This sometimes makes me rather conflicted, especially when my rights and interests are infringed upon.

**Can you expand on the parallels you see between Buddhist world views and *The Matrix*?**

In the Buddhist understanding of the world, we transmigrate through the three realms, and everything in the phenomenal world is in fact illusory. It's not that it doesn't exist, it's just not everlasting; it's impermanent. The phenomenal world arises from causes and conditions, *orkarma*. Everything is dependently originated but without self-nature.

The illusory nature of the phenomenal world is also true of the perceivable universe. The mind is not a mere combination of its spiritual and physiological properties—these only constitute a part of it. All Phenomena are nothing but the mind's creation, which isn't to say that you understand everything through your mind, but that the whole world is contained in it. So the concepts of the heart and mind aren't limited to the conscious activities within a living entity, but rather are as expansive as the universe. This is why the Marxist critique of Buddhism centers on its idealism. But this "idealism" isn't necessarily voluntarism, because it encompasses the material world too, in the sense that the universe and your being are two sides of the same entity; your existence results from your interactions with the world, and when you die, your world also disappears.

Hence there are eighteen realms of senses, where the first six are based upon your material and biological constructs, six organs. There are also realms that concern the operative systems, which is analogous to the spirit that comes and goes with life and death. It carries all the information of your consciousness—all of your past activities and thoughts in all cycles of past lives—and will guide you in the afterlife, because your existence is dependent upon your mind's will. Being a human in this life is in fact driven by your strong wish to reincarnate as such, a process that has incorporated all the information in and out of your control. You might become a being of another species—a pig, for instance—against your will in the next life. Since your existence is determined as such, actions now can ripple across and affect the future, so it's in fact not fatalistic. In this sense, *The Matrix* can be seen as a sci-fi expression of the Buddhist experience in the phenomenal world.<sup>[4]</sup>

**This process reminds me of the butterfly effect and how the Lorentz system describes chaos mathematically—as a phenomenon at once predetermined and random.**

Indeed. The most apt and concise Chinese term is perhaps "the wind rises from the tips of green duckweeds<sup>[5]</sup>" In Buddhism there's a similar expression: "Bodhisattvas fear the cause; mundane beings fear the effect/retribution." <sup>[6]</sup> Enlightened beings and practicing Buddhists fear the impurity of motives, and would nip evil ideas in the bud. But mundane beings are shortsighted; they only become aware of malicious consequences when the evidence presents itself. Therefore, practicing Buddhists are extremely aware of the nature of an idea or an impulse in its latent stage. This is where we find a connection to the theory of chaos: in the beginning there's very little difference between the enlightened and unenlightened paths, but the results drastically diverge down the road.

It's not hard to see parallels between popular Buddhist concepts and the design of *The Matrix* world, including its physical laws, the protagonists' ability to alter the appearances of certain objects, as well as their ability to distort and control reality with the mind. When I first watched the film,

without the knowledge that the directors had acknowledged their indebtedness to Buddhism, it had already left a strong impression that Buddhist thoughts were pervasively appropriated in its narrative. It was a well-done appropriation that made those concepts more accessible.

I've always had this perception of the Internet, which you may say is extremely negative, that it is instrumental in revealing the illusory nature of things. For many people, even those deeply immersed in virtual simulation, they are well aware that it's an imaginary constructed by flows of data, but you can't easily persuade people that concrete objects they encounter in the real world are also constructed by flows of data.

**But the Internet can be real—as an extension of our neurological capacity.**

So in a way it reveals that all of your feelings and sensations are similarly constructed by neurological perceptions. While dreaming, you are not moving or in any kind of real action, but you still experience the dream in lucid realness. You won't be aware of the illusory nature of dreams while dreaming, exactly like how the humans in *The Matrix* are living in their shared dreams. In Buddhism, the dream state is analogous to *zhongyin*, an intermediate existence between death and reincarnation. There's a phase of complete unconsciousness when we fall asleep, and waking up from a dream is like experiencing a lighter version of death. In this intermediate state you may also foresee what happens in the future.

**Like déjà vu. In *The Matrix*, déjà vu is a glitch that testifies to the constructed nature of the phenomenal world that is *The Matrix*.**

Yes, but that plot design is actually informed by Christianity, where people believe a designer or a god-like figure lays out the rules of how the universe functions. There is one creator. In Buddhism, however, every being is its own creator.

**You've made beautiful sketchbooks of the plot that flows like an awesome work of manga. These are arguably artworks in their own right. Have you observed or participated in professional manga productions before?**

No. I'm just competent at drawing and creating narratives with it. In the beginning of *NCMS3*, you'll see a person leaping off a cliff, but you won't know for sure if he's diving into a real space or a virtual one. In the void tree branches begin to protrude from dense mist and clouds, which may remind of you of a traditional Chinese landscape painting, but as the fog dissipates, you notice that the trees are attached to architectural structures.

**Why did you want to make this a 3D ink animation?**

NCMS3 is embedded in an urban landscape, whereas the first two videos featured primarily natural landscapes. I'm also hoping to explore its technological feasibility. The ink-wash effects seen in commercials aren't really 3D ink imagery, but are mostly simulations of ink diluting in water. There is 3D modeling that involves ink texturing, but content-wise there remains much to be done with this medium. Many urban environments are actually suitable for this kind of treatment. On the other hand, it shouldn't impose its own limits and become gimmicky.

**I find it very meaningful that the NCMS trilogy has spanned ten years, because the last installment would be very different had you worked on it right after the first two. The effects of a deep surveillance state and social media immersion wouldn't be as palpable and pronounced a few years ago.**

The reason the third installment came out so late is because I couldn't identify a meaningful new entry point. The first video was an intense release of ideas that had accumulated for years. I was already diluting them a little in the second video. Video art nowadays seems much more accessible in terms of production—you can always sift through the massive amount of stock materials available online to make a neat cut/edit as artwork. They may look nice, but the more these kinds of works are produced, the more homogenous and meaningless they become.

**Which is why some may rely on the guidance of critical theory, perhaps believing that it can create a shortcut to insight.**

Then that theory is also an illusion.

[1] Caomima corresponds to the pronunciation of alpaca in Mandarin; since it's homophonic with the curse word "fuck your mother," it has been widely used as an Internet meme and a popular, coded expression of dissent.

[2] (1748–1832) Jeremy Bentham is a jurist and political reformer, is the philosopher whose name is most closely associated with the foundational era of the modern utilitarian tradition.  
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/bentham/> (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/bentham/>)

[3] “兵不厌诈” is the artist's original wording, which is a popular idiom similar in essence to “All warfare is based on deception” (兵者, 诡道也) in *Art of War*. See a translation by Lionel Giles at <http://classics.mit.edu/Tzu/artwar.html> (<http://classics.mit.edu/Tzu/artwar.html>),

[4] In a 1999 interview, Larry Wachowski explained that the directors were “fascinated by the idea that math and theology are almost the same. They begin with a supposition you can derive a whole host of laws or rules from. And when you take all of them to the infinity point, you wind up at the same place: these unanswerable mysteries really become about personal perception. Neo's journey is affected by all these rules, all these people trying to tell him what the truth is. He doesn't accept

anything until he gets to his own end point, his own rebirth.” Richard Corliss, Popular Metaphysics, *Time*, April 19, 1999 Vol. 153, no. 15. <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,22971-1,00.html> (<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,22971-1,00.html>)

[5] 风起于青萍之末, *from Ode to the Wind by Song Yu, 298–222 BCE.*

[6] 菩萨畏因，凡夫畏果

Advertisements

**Tagged:** Asian Futurism, Contemporary Art, Qiu Anxiong, Sci Fi [Permalink](#) [Leave a comment](#)

Blog at WordPress.com.

[Home](#)