A (Disjointed) Series of Notes towards a Reading of Lu Xinjian’s Series of Paintings, Constellations

Lynne Howarth-Gladston with Paul Gladston

Heaven is black, Earth is yellow; the cosmological significance of the colour is sited in the I Ching (Book of Changes). Chang Tsong-zung (Johnson Chang)

Cosmology

I Methods used by Lu Xinjian in the production of his series of paintings, Constellations are similar to those related to his earlier City DNA series. Both involve mapping techniques, usually taking Google Maps as a point of departure. In the case of Constellations, stars are marked out with ‘dots and circles first’ and then connected ‘layer by layer...in order to create a sky map’, to which Lu then adds fields of transparent luminous colour. Lu asserts that his Constellation paintings relate to the ‘architecture, history, economics, culture and geography [of the] man-made city’ through the use of ‘new technology’ as well as ‘myth and imagination’.

II Constellations is intended by the artist to adhere to a concept of cosmic harmony associated with the geomantic practice of Feng shui. The Daoist conception of yin-yang, which informs the practice of Feng shui, upholds the notion of an interactive reciprocity between societal/architectural structures and a wider cosmology. According to the concept of yin-yang, seemingly opposed forces in nature are viewed as both interconnected and interdependent; consequently all oppositions are to be seen as relative as well as open to the possibility of harmonious reciprocation. Such thinking relates to historical Chinese cultural conceptions of ‘harmony’ and ‘ultimate harmony’ signified respectively by the terms He and Tai he. He, which signifies reciprocal interaction between otherwise non-identical objects, allows for acceptance of difference as a condition of harmony. Pragmatic non-absolutist ways of thinking, such as those signified by He and Tai he have persisted throughout China’s intellectual tradition over the last two millennia and more.

III Aspects of China’s intellectual tradition that have been informed by the concept of yin-yang include a Daoist-Confucian desire to live in close accordance with the way of nature. Both Daoist and Confucian thought uphold the notion that harmony is a fundamental feature of the cosmos. As Zhang Dainian makes clear in Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy, the ‘constant’ is therefore regarded as the norm ‘governing the process of change’ and, since ‘harmony is the basic principle of the universe’, there is an understanding that ‘things cannot leave harmony and still exist’. Cosmology in Chinese thought is related to the principle pairing of yin and yang, whereby yang represents that which is turned toward the sun, and yin that which is turned away from the sun. This usage is found in ‘The Book of Songs’, where He is understood to ‘determine the points of the heaven by means of the shadows’.

2 Quotations are taken from an interview with Lu Xinjian conducted by Lynne Howarth-Gladston in September 2015.
4 Ibid, 273
5 Ibid, 83-84
IV

As Dainian also indicates [28][3] 'flowing qi [universal interaction between matter and energy] moves in all directions, united and forms concrete objects', generating 'the myriad variety of humans and things. Its two "ends" of yin-yang in their unending succession establish the great meaning of heaven and earth'.

Therefore, in the process of 'making and transforming' no one thing is produced like another. [30] Within form and within qi, 'yin-yang' has various manifestations: from the point of view of form there are things such as heaven and earth, man and woman, male and female, from the point of view of qi there are things such as cold and heat, day and night, breathing in and out, taken overall, whatever pertains to qi is yang, whatever pertains to form is yin'. Dainian concludes, 'whatever has form and substance even up to the qi which is clouds and vapour with a shape is yin; any change, transformation, movement, rising and falling, flying around that is invisible is yang'. Moreover 'the invisible is not independent of the visible...yin and yang were two forms of qi, cold and hot, but in later philosophy they were used as the master concepts for expressing the paired nature of reality. This development began in the Commentaries to the Book of Changes and continued especially in the works of Zhang Zai'.

Enantiodromia

Enantiodromia is a pre-Socratic term used by the philosopher Heraclitus to signify a supposedly universal process through which cold things, warm, warm things cool, wet things dry and dry things become wet. The Greek term enantiodromia is a combination of the adjective 'enantios' (opposite) and the verb 'dromai' (to run). Such thinking is almost certainly culturally unconnected to but nevertheless resonant with conceptions of harmonious interaction within the Chinese intellectual tradition, and in particular the concept of Fan in which all things are understood to tend cyclically towards their opposites.

II

Carl Gustav Jung incorporates the term enantiodromia into his spiritual thinking, stating 'in the course of events...everything that exists turns into its opposite'. Jung's use of the term refers directly to Heraclitus's notion that everything is in flux and that the only universal constant is change. Jung’s thinking encompasses the pairing action/non-action, which has a tenuous linguistic affinity as an outcome of cultural translation to the classical Chinese conception of Wu wei (spontaneous accordance with the Dao, or way of nature, often translated literally and somewhat erroneously into English as ‘non-action’). Jung’s sometimes loosely contextualized comparative reading of eastern and western cultural thought has arguably contributed to a wider misapprehension (Californication) of the Chinese intellectual tradition associated with the proliferation of ‘new age’ thinking since the 1960s and 1970s. On its website the Jungian Center for the Spiritual Sciences claims, for example, that Wu wei encompasses conceptual pairings of chaos/cosmos and classic/romantic inherent to the history of western art and culture. Such unqualified confluences of Chinese and western cultural thought are highly contestable.

Cultural Translation

I

Cultural translations within and between the (so-called spaces of) East and West have been a significant feature in the making of modern art, China has moved away from the aestheticism of traditional literati painting towards realism and particularization, while in the West, the fomrid realism towards abstraction. Sullivan concludes that this dual translation of historical cultural tendencies may lead to an eventual convergence of eastern and western visual languages. See from the non-rationalist standpoint of the Chinese intellectual tradition, argues Sullivan, such a convergence would not result in synthesis, as envisaged by western rationalist thought, but the eternal, dynamic interaction of these opposite but complementary forces. In Sullivan’s view, we should therefore regard the interaction between East and West as a process in which the great civilizations, while presenting their own character, will stimulate and enrich each other. [13]

III

Lu Xinjian’s painting brings together traces of Eastern and Western cultural thought and practice by artists as part of the development of modern and contemporary art, in most cases any correspondence between the two is at best attenuated. Attempts by art historians and theorists to adumbrate affinities between eastern culture and western/contemporary western art have therefore relied more often than not on circumstantial rather than substantive evidence. Consider, for example, Michael Sullivan’s speculative discussion of works by Jackson Pollock and Naum Gabo as manifestations of a specifically eastern aesthetic. [12]

In The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art Sullivan seeks to compare the Chinese intellectual tradition’s historical espousal of non-rationalist dialectics with arguably similar tendencies among modern western thinkers, including Jung’s unfolding of Enantiodromia. [13] Sullivan argues, that in relation to the making of modern art, China has moved away from the aestheticism of traditional literati painting towards realism and particularization, while in the West, the fomrid realism towards abstraction. Sullivan concludes that this dual translation of historical cultural tendencies may lead to an eventual convergence of eastern and western visual languages. [14] Seen from the non-rationalist standpoint of the Chinese intellectual tradition, argues Sullivan, such a convergence would not result in synthesis, as envisaged by western rationalist thought, but the eternal, dynamic interaction of these opposite but complementary forces. In Sullivan’s view, we should therefore regard the interaction between East and West as a process in which the great civilizations, while presenting their own character, will stimulate and enrich each other. [13]

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reciprocation is performe dependent upon the effects of cultural parallax; that is to say, the particular cultural standpoint from which the object in question is observed. In the case of western discourses this is one informed by the traces of a fundamentally rationalist sense of perspective (distance between subject and object); and in the case of China non-rationalist empathetic immersion.

Myriad Modernisms

I

In Godless in Eden Fay Wheldon makes explicit reference to Jung’s use of the term enantiodromia, describing the supposedly universal processes to which the term refers metaphorically as a river that ‘zigzags rather than flows steadily down a hill, reversing its direction when too much pressure mounts’. Wheldon appropriates enantiodromia from Jung to identify historical moments when all the currents of belief that have been running one way suddenly turn and run in another. Wheldon then extends this notion of historical reversal to explain the significance of the falling of the Berlin Wall as a symbol of Cold War political division; a moment that relating to the lunar landings of the late 1960s. Wheldon asserts, ‘freedom fled East during which, Wheldon asserts, “freedom fled East and control fled West.”’

II

The physical and ideological separation that occurred during the Cold War, not only impacted on society, economics politics but also upon culture. It was a time of myriad modernisms each infused by the contemporaneity of differing localized socio-economic, political and cultural discourses and practices. The pluralism more usually attributed to postmodernism was therefore already integral to the fabric of modernism both in the East and the West.

III

Writing in Japan Architect in 1981, the architect Kazuhiro Ishi states that modernism, is something foreign to Japan, which had to be ‘imported and learned’, while postmodernism is an ‘inherently native’ concept. Ishi asserts that ‘Postmodernism in architectural relations can be defined as the situation in which no things do not expel older things but continue to coexist’. Always-already operative postmodernist sensibilities can thus be understood to precede and to suspend those of modernism.

IV

Viewed from one cultural standpoint, Lu’s paintings appear to affirm the universalizing abstractions (form and thought) of western (ized) modernism. Viewed from another, they carry traces of a localized less conceptually defined painterly-calligraphic tradition. In China there is a durable non-adherence to hypothesizing western ideas and canons of fine art practice. This is coupled with a more general blurring of boundaries between artistic disciplines.

V

There are evident formal affinities between Lu’s cartographic paintings and early twentieth-century European and Soviet abstraction. Piet Mondrian’s late painting Broadway Boogie-woogie (1943) projects what may be interpreted as an abstract mapping of New York’s urban space. Lu acknowledges the formal impact of Mondrian’s painting on his own. In the case of the Constellation series, Lu also acknowledges an interest in the work of the Zero group, principally that relating to the lunar landings of the late 1960s.

The Zero group — founded by Heinz Mack and Otto Piene in the late 1950s — sought to divest art of its formalist- institutional focus. The Zero group worked to precede and to suspend those of modernism. This is coupled with a more general blurring of boundaries between artistic disciplines.

The Yellow Box

I

In his essay Yellow Box: Thoughts on Art before the Age of Exhibitions and a series of related publications including a conversation with the present author, the gallerist Chang Tsong-zung questions the curatorial limits of the ‘White Cube’ and ‘Black Box’ as means of showing artworks produced in relation to traditional East–Asian cultural thinking and practice. Chang asserts that ‘as exhibit items in the modern exhibition the aesthetic appeal of calligraphy-painting is hypostatizing western ideas and canons of fine art practice. This is coupled with a more general blurring of boundaries between artistic disciplines.

II

Within the contexts of the White Cube, artworks are viewed discretely and in perspectival relation to the gaze of the individuated viewer. In the Chinese tradition, and in particular that associated with literati culture, artworks are conventionally viewed at close range and at times within the context of social gatherings conducive to interactive forms of viewing referred to as wan shang (play appreciation).

III

The relationship of Lu’s Constellation series to the work of the Zero group, principally that relating to the lunar landings of the late 1960s, is evident, the intervention of the Yellow Box holds out the potential for a manifest pronouncing of its relationship with localized thinking and practice. Lu’s paintings are therefore by no means ‘hybrid’ in the sense of a productively integrated composite. No such composite is ever definitively realised. Rather, their variegated and shifting significances arise precisely as a consequence of unfolding, to some extent imbricating but in the final analysis non-reconcilable multi-dimensional refractions of meaning.

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