

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Aesthetic Bearings

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世界上的每一个角落都隐藏着那种故事。

That kind of story is concealed in every corner of the world.¹

—Can Xue, *The Last Lover*

念念不忘报仇。

I have never forgotten about vengeance.

—Can Xue, interview in *Bafang*, 1988

I recently received an education in how to look at morally significant paintings of plural human activity. The historians and critics I read asked why artists handled crucial details the way they did and made the compositional choices that they made. By “morally significant” I mean paintings that clearly wish to relay precise, terrible predicaments amid life’s plenitude and that cultivate a sense of how benevolence and malevolence work in this world. Such paintings care to represent how things can be for other people. How might such paintings communicate signs of rightness and wrongness, or something having gone wrong, if that rightness and wrongness, their timing, their magnitude, and their real plausibility are not very clear? This art-critical education comes in handy for reading absurdist, postmodern literature that has clearly not forfeited morality or truth-telling. The reader of this kind of literature is put inside rudely incoherent, informationally confusing plots and asked to keep tabs on what’s happening, who is doing what to whom, and in what *sequence*. Overloaded and overstimulated, these literary worlds also “warn [us] that our (reading) lives depend upon our not missing something” (Cavell 148).

My literary test case is the work of Can Xue, a contemporary Chinese writer fixated on exerting this effort of depiction *within* absurdist, postmodern literature. Global and provincial insanity are written into every layer of her fictions. Her readers, navigating

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paranoid-schizophrenic novels and stories that seem as tightly plotted as the most intense works of moral realism, find themselves left with “no ‘normal’ textual space . . . to gauge, define, and thus contain madness” (Bachner 785). The first half of this essay explains why this type of literature requires interpretive moves from art history—especially art history that insists we differentiate language from paint and “take seriously enough the difference between visual and verbal representation” (Clark, “Turning Look”). The second part applies interpretive methods from T. J. Clark, Roberto Calasso, and Yu Hui. All three read masterful paintings of human and infrastructural activity in which signals—moral, aesthetic, or otherwise—have to share the same bodily and sociospatial forms.

You need help gaining your bearings when reading Can Xue’s fictional works, which can’t help but feel as if they are not put together correctly. Whether it is her confusing earlier works like *Five Spice Street* (五香街) and *Dialogues in Paradise* (天堂里的对话) or her even more confusing, latest works (*Love in the New Millennium* [新世纪爱情故事], *The Last Lover* [最后的情人]), you suspect yourself stuck in a defective fiction, one in which menacing pressures remain unnamed but never let up, social scenes and situations are abrupt and quickly dispensed with, and turned-on-a-dime changes of mind suggest that the writer has violated her social contract with the reader.² In one scene in *Love in the New Millennium*, a “Miss Si” is imagined as “a young woman . . . able to think deeply and thoroughly about what happened to her” (48). In the very next scene the same character tells another person that Miss Si is “trash.” Crammed into obviously consequential but impossible-to-follow micro-plots, the neighborhood personae are trustworthy the one day and snakes the next, these inconsistencies deriving from the characters’ inability to extend their own perspicacity or judgment beyond a single scene.

Can Xue, Deng Xiaohua’s nom de plume, has led a life straddling two worlds to the point of breaking: as a child in a persecuted and impoverished family whose professional precarity and

psychological damage during Maoism were not mitigated by the Opening and the Reform, and as a literary figure in the city of Changsha, a Northern industrial city where she and her family ran a tailoring business. Her literary work has only in the past decade garnered serious attention in Anglo-American circuits, largely thanks to feats of translation, but she has long enjoyed a reputation in China as an indisputable inheritor of Lu Xun and Franz Kafka, the latter especially. Kafka represented for her especially a storyteller who could capture the psychic and moral injuries of vast and nonsensical bureaucracies, that peculiar feeling of coming into consciousness through one’s victimization under the law.³

Can Xue’s work is difficult in its content—what happens to people, who is doing what, and where—and in what we tend to call “form.” Her image sequences are surreal, thick with allusions to modernist texts, Western and Chinese histories, fables and philosophies. The landscapes of her earlier fictions, such as her most anthologized short story, “The Hut on the Mountain” (山上的小屋), often resemble the frigid, abject, and impoverished hinterlands where youths, writers, artists, and the myriad others tagged for reeducation were sent during the Cultural Revolution. There is no direct mention of the political order, but family members persecute and grotesquely harm one another, replicating the most extreme instances of the regime’s psychological terrors.⁴ Her more recent works extend these psychic states into the phantasmagoria of late capitalism and across the industrial and commercial wastelands of the 1980s to the present day in China and abroad. Lovers, prostitutes, and miscellaneous figures on the lower rungs of a poorly governed society hustle and socialize and expend tremendous amounts of energy on reconnaissance, the logistics of trysts, and the tyranny of other people’s talk.

More than any formal experimentation, Can Xue wishes to show you that something is the case, is what realistically *happens*. You have to pay attention—but to what? There’s so much going on, even by the standards of surrealism and postmodernism. Conditioned to ask probingly after the neighbors in

her neighborhoods, you can't even tell if something bad happens to them because so many naturally painful activities are going on. In *Five Spice Street*, the novel that most straightforwardly plots Can Xue's themes of neighborhood patrol, zoning catastrophes, and sexual promiscuity, an ordinary, prevalent injustice is underway. Speculation, gossip, and projection figure so prominently that they discursively overwhelm narration. The novel begins by asking who Madame X is and what the nature of her relationship to Mr. Q is. A foodstuffs vendor and a philanderer, these two figures in the neighborhood are known only by different people's prejudicial testimonies, different hunches about their transgressive lifestyles and the transgressions of their "rivals." The novel has to convince you that Madame X is constantly being wronged without thoroughly maligning the characters who wrong her, and without giving any concrete information for measuring the discrepancy between fact and rumor. Many parts of the novel thus replicate the totalitarianism that took hold from the death of Wang Shiwei in 1947 to the end of the 1970s, when citizens mobilized against each other and turned every nook and cranny of society into political units. We're also clearly experiencing the glitches in Deng Xiaoping's reform, as economic and political liberalization occur at breakneck speed. After the ongoing wronging of the central characters that also vaguely feels like a just dessert, something seems to be righted at the very last minute—the community elects Madame X to head a governmental construction oversight committee—only to go very wrong again. Her appeal to renovate shoddily built *tongzilius* (public housing) is denied, and her building collapses. The cause of this is not, as one reviewer has suggested, unfathomable.⁵ It's obvious to anyone who has lived in China in one of these Soviet-styled constructions, or abroad in out-of-zoning immigrant apartment buildings, that structural mistakes and human follies trickle down to become other people's material realities. Lives become difficult, stressful, and full of pain, and domiciles become increasingly less habitable because of egregious human misgoverning.

Can Xue's writings seem closest in moral makeup not to Kafka or Lu Xun, therefore, but to Nathaniel Hawthorne and Can Xue's contemporary Su Tong. In Hawthorne and Su Tong, the primitive taboo of adultery and social animosities such as sexism and classism are overlaid by the liberal logics of commerce, so that the fate of a strong-willed woman as she transitions from severely restrictive to more free and open societies becomes oddly undermined, somehow much harder to judge. The transition from communitarianism to liberal economic progressivism, the dark business of prejudice and community-led economic oppression, is traumatic, bizarre, listless, and boring. Like all inheritors of Lu Xun, Can Xue delivers scathing critiques of Chinese society through the picaresque and the insane; her work's moral engineering, however, is developed out of the tradition of modern Chinese literature of womanhood. Can Xue depicts young people, usually women, seriously mistaking who the vicious actor is in oppressive, slightly manufactured Chinese environments. Like others in this tradition she dramatizes to the point of misrepresentation actual Chinese practices to show you the extent to which her protagonists can be wrong about who's looking to protect and who's looking to harm, because they have been given wrong information or because they are simply prejudiced beyond correction.

You have trouble getting your moral bearings in Can Xue's literary worlds because you're in the moral and informational dark every step of the way, either making a mistake, paying for a mistake, or misjudging and overcorrecting. The sequences that are rendered are illogical, chaotic, and paranoid because that is the on-the-ground, hour-by-hour experience of the unprivileged and the underinformed, whether they are trapped children, factory workers, sex workers, small business owners, white collar workers, or vagrants. In this milieu, which Haiyan Lee assigns to "low justice," it remains important that we are still able to "pass moral judgment on the oppressed" if only to prove that moral injury moves downward: that wronging turns vulnerable people into those that wrong others ("Importance").⁶ Characters bear the distilled pressures of the global and local outsourcing of liability

and anger and suffer and become consternated accordingly; they also commit serious moral and legal crimes and are generally very shifty. Frenzied dispatches from the neighborhood watch suggest that such things are happening in every corner of the world.

Finding footholds becomes easier when you adopt critical faculties and vocabularies usually reserved for the visual arts. It helps to imagine the worldly predicaments Can Xue depicts—the psychic aftermath of Maoism, hyper-exploitative global capitalism, and ordinary Chinese problems—on one pictorial plane, forcing moral discernment to “stick to the look of things” (Clark, “Poussin’s Sacrament”).⁷ On this plane you’re not reading separate narratives, this novel or that novel, this story or that story, but a different unseemly corner of an infinitely expansive painting. Human activity has been crammed into a kind of roadside vignette to be seen not quite from a birds-eye view, nor totally from the ground. Here, as Roberto Calasso says of Tiepolo’s *scherzi* and *capricci*, “something is going on, something is constantly going on, but no one has been able to pinpoint what” (89). Cantilevered into these scenes you begin to take stock of significant *marginal* deviations from a passing look.

One premise of the visual arts is that insignificant details, as well as morally significant details and all other types of significant details, must overlap in empirical space. Real predicaments have to use the same pixels, if you will, as scenery, landscape, commotion. Intensities of hue and posture and odd lighting begin to matter in the spaces where wrongdoing and normal activities share space and sound. You become attuned to contrastive peculiarities, a “convergence of a superabundance of light and a kind of internal corrosion of the objects” (95). Shifted into this art-historical register, the prurience, frequency, and variety of arrangements made for sex will also no longer require special apologies or authorial fallacies (e.g., the idea that Can Xue is just a libertine). They can simply be seen as serial studies of human copulation, one of the most useful and serious conventions of pictorial didacticism. Human sex and the ambiguities therein—are we looking at something lurid, problematic, and

oppressive or natural, erotic, and free?—can be studied as one studies paintings for signs of pleasurable obscenity and for signs of distress, especially because regiments of fear and sexual liberation have bizarre protocols and flimsy pretexts in common.

Standing before embedded signals we might notice first the things happening in spaces unnoticed by others, where some people are making a lot of strange, inefficient trips and others cannot seem to move at all. Studying the works of Brueghel and Poussin, Clark finds moral tells in their degree of literal uprightness and mobility, and in the space in which things must stand (*Heaven on Earth*). These obviously imprecise measurements understand that human forms are plural—it is not biological fascism—but they insist that odd postures and funny angles have indicative value. Can people move? How do things sit where the vertical plane meets the horizontal? These compositional choices alert us to serious predicaments and human situations. Can Xue’s characters do a lot of crouching, squatting, boring roadside waiting, abandonment in unknown locales as if it were some failure of geolocation. In *Love in the New Millennium* there’s an antiques dealer-scout named Lao Yong who mysteriously shows up everywhere with dirt on this or that lover, and their past rendezvous, and places where they might meet in the future. A stand-in for either paranoid surveillance or protective omniscience, the oppressive stress positions and neglect borne by his body represent the simultaneity of total loss of privacy (over-looking) and gross administrative oversight (underlooking).

Looking at a *comédie humaine* in the form of a *tú* (a maplike landscape painting) can help us know which threads to start pulling to reveal ineptitude and iniquity without denying splendor and civilizational achievements. In the iconic handscroll painting *Along the River during the Qing Ming Festival*, of which there are three versions, 810 people are depicted, representing a variety of classes, stations, and privileges. Yu Hui asks rhetorically whether “the painter Zhang Zeduan, [who] took such pains to make *Along the River*, really aimed to represent the magnificence and commercial splendor of the

Song Dynasty, or whether he wished to use *Along the River* to reveal to [Emperor] Song Huizong in pictorial form contemporary social ills that were already quite obvious?” (张择端费尽心力绘出的《清明上河图》，其目的在于表现大宋盛世繁华？还是欲通过《清明上河图》向宋徽宗在画中展现当时已凸显的社会顽疾？[215]). People in the painting are conducting activities in the bucolic countryside and the imperial metropole at a time when the discrepancy between renaissance and rapid decline was hardest to see. Yu Hui’s key to the three versions of *Along the River* identifies historical-artistic clues that tell you how sound this world is, when so much that is wrong and so much that is right happen at the same time. This way of looking—almost like a civil engineer’s—asks if the bridge structures in the painting seem to bear pressure that’s not depicted, asks where traffic is smooth and where it is breaking down, where there might be too much surveillance and where too little. Details such as the absence of guards at key stations, the use of the wrong water vehicles, become subtle ways of communicating policy weaknesses and governmental neglect and mismanagement.

In the pictorial arts whatever is meant, including moral signals, has to be *seen*. Things that need to be considered together have to appear *together*. This requirement poses additional moral and aesthetic challenges to representation, especially in the communicatively confusing places where East meets West. Critical information can all but disappear in a truly global context in which cultural hybridity is finally at scale. An overwhelming amount of information—cultural, moral, and aesthetic—has to be processed in tandem and the best and worst traits around the world have combined. In such places the painter Giovanni Battista Tiepolo staged, according to Calasso, an “epiphanic story in thirty-three episodes . . . as esoteric as anything to be found in an epoch that—more than any other—was an enemy of secrecy” (87). These episodes, which Calasso called *scherzi* and *capricci*, manage to reveal critical information in culturally chaotic scenes where everything is out in the open and seen all at once. Calasso’s sifting of morally important clues from aesthetically and culturally important ones

helps with the problem of phenomenological overlap in Can Xue’s works. Speech acts that occur frequently in the neighborhood of *Love in the New Millennium* like “spare time recreation” can be read as any of the following: leftover Soviet regimentation of leisure time in post-reform China, Maoist sloganeering, Orwellian doublespeak, Chinese folk euphemism for hanky-panky, a sign of the internal corruption of modern cadre culture, the effect of Westernization and libertinism on young Chinese men and women, or billboard and TV ads. It becomes difficult to convey that something is wrong within contemporary Chinese sex cultures if the reader can never separate *telling* information—the kind that you cannot miss if you wish to know what’s really going on—from ethnographic output (i.e., contemporary Chinese sex culture as such). At global scale, the level at which Can Xue has often said in public that she wishes her work to operate, art has an even harder time communicating what’s happening beyond generic cultural activity.

Like the roadsides where Tiepolo’s Orientals and Old Testament figures meet, the wondrous, phantasmatic Eastern- and Western-feeling worlds that Can Xue produces can interfere with recognizing the depicted world as a plausible, imminent one, where many people already live. Distant locales in Can Xue’s latest works seem close together—just the next alleyway over—and traversable, as if no boundaries existed between small villages in China and the outskirts of polluted northern industrial cities like Changchun, Jilin, and Xingtai, between older neighborhoods in Shanghai or Beijing and the bourgeois suburbs of Tokyo or the exurbs of Vancouver. Characters seem to be able to walk from one into the other. These are places where it’s hardest to tell what is China, what is the West, where you cannot be sure of which regime you’re living under, because synthesis has done its finest job. A non-jet-setting global subject begins to form in the mind, one bearing the effects of rapacious global capitalism and quasi state-owned industries and enterprises, while still being stuck in the struggle sessions of yesteryear. The tragedies of planned economies and ideological standardization have primed their victims for a system that outsources its environmental and moral

injury to distant others. A surveillance state is finally depicted as it is most commonly lived: out of order, messy beyond cognitive control, not involving drones, cameras, and the secret police. Techniques of intimate social control from the prior decades never fully went away, and may even be returning, while neoliberal biotechnologies of tracking and monitoring have also entered the scene. Seeing these literary works collectively as one painting makes it clearer that vastly different predicaments can befall people (Chinese or otherwise) at the same time, all at once, with no real contradiction.

What to you is surrealism might just be absolute realism to someone else. Efforts to depict the effects of truly integrated systems on human lives have to cope with the increasing difficulty of truth telling and eyewitness testimony. To suggest this as a lived reality at a global demographic scale may then be depiction's greatest moral ambition. People live nonelectively inside Chinese and Western realities, often engaged in activity whose many layers are inscrutable from the outside. Their emotional plenitude and behavioral quirks have to be left well enough alone if one wishes to walk back from cultural essentialism and reductive historical materialism; at the same time, areas of pressing concern do emerge, one visible detail at a time.

NOTES

1. All translations from the Chinese are my own unless otherwise indicated.
2. This surrealism, this otherworldliness, is compounded in Chinese. Can Xue's unorthodox uses of the language exacerbate the fact that *cis* and tokens that involve two or more character groupings in Chinese can technically be split apart, a character in one noun grouping becoming a verb in another arrangement, creating alternative microplots.
3. Can Xue published a literary-critical monograph on the works of Kafka: *The Castle of the Soul: Understanding Kafka* (灵魂的城堡—理解卡夫卡 [*Linghun de chengbao: Lijie Kafuka*]). Joachim Kurtz's English translation of the fourth section of the book is called *The Castle's Will: Reading Kafka's Castle, IV*.

4. See Bai Xianyong and Ye Hongsheng's readings of these earlier works.

5. Brendan Hughes, in an otherwise insightful review, writes, "Two weeks later the house collapses. The temptation for the reader is to interpret the collapse as symbolic of something—its occurrence is so random, so unaccounted for, it would be hard not to—but it isn't symbolic, it's meaningless. The collapse is the culmination of the trick that *Five Spice Street* has been playing on the reader all along; on *Five Spice Street*, nothing means anything."

6. The concept of "low justice" comes from Lee's forthcoming book, *A Certain Justice: Toward an Ecology of the Chinese Legal Imagination* (U of Chicago P).

7. Clark develops this line of argumentation in *Heaven on Earth* and in "The Turning Look," his interview with Robert Meehan in *Bomb Magazine*.

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