

## Endless Humility - Existential and Metaphorical Use of Images in Toh Hun Ping's *Dance of a Humble Atheist*

By Kelvin Tan

“Imagine an eye unrulred by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure in perception. How many rainbows are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of ‘Green’? How many rainbows can light create for the untutored eye? Imagine a world alive with incomprehensible objects and shimmering with an endless variety of movement and innumerable gradations of colour. Imagine a world before the ‘beginning was the word.’”

- Stan Brakhage, *Metaphors on Vision*

What Brakhage, an important figure in 20<sup>th</sup> century experimental filmmaking, espouses here comes close to giving us an idea of the processes and themes that Toh Hun Ping has attempted to explore through his painstaking works of moving images.

In a sense, for Hun Ping, the human form is too distracting an image, that gets in the way of someone who is trying to get back to the whole idea of pure perception, and pure consciousness, to a child-like sense of imagining a world devoid of definite forms. Hun Ping is creating a journey of re-discovering that sense of seeing all things for the first time, while at the same time, probing deeper into the depth of the Image made Flesh, ie. more realistic. His work is an attempt to wipe clean the slate of the mind’s needless clutter of the defined logic of things and appearances.

It is as if by disposing of the body, one is left only with thoughts, ideas, space, images, and emotions expressed on a canvas. Not unlike Samuel Beckett’s *Not I*, where only a flame of garish lips appears throughout the short play, uttering gibberish words at such breakneck speed that renders the voice virtually inhuman. In his later plays, Beckett seemed to have not only wanted to do away with words, but also with the human, and the human form. Human form stripped down to its bare soul and consciousness. To a stark and real Nothingness.

This seems to be happening in *Dance of a Humble Atheist*. With an emphasis, like Beckett, on Death and Dying.

The work is sub-divided into three parts, the first being ‘Funeral’. Why? Whose funeral is it? Making use of images taken from ceramics and other paraphernalia, Hun Ping in his usual meticulous manner juxtaposes fast, flickering images of abstract forms of barely decipherable objects in varying speeds and intensities. The colours themselves seem to be narrating a different set of stories.

What do they say? How does death figure? Are they dead cells? Sick amoebas? Slimy glands? What are they trying to convey to me? Hun Ping refuses to divulge. The journey is the discovering. Funeral is after-the-fact. Processes of dying? Where does it lead to?

“Man dies constantly, until the moment of his demise.”

- Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*

Is ‘Funeral’, a celebration of dying? In a sense, it’s an urgent need to preserve and realise one’s sense of one’s individuality, whilst accepting the inevitability of dying and death, one of the key definitions of Heidegger’s Being-Toward-Death, Art being the meaningful existential act of pure individuality. It seems that Hun Ping is attempting to express that, with the astonishing flurry of lush and striking images thrust at us.

Which leads to the second part, ‘Cornucopia’. There, disturbing but fascinating shots of lip-like apparitions twist and turn like anuses, rotten intestines, or just lips like from the Beckett works. It feels like an antithetical cornucopia. An abundance yes, but of existential subversion, an outpouring of spontaneous angst, reverting and subverting on itself, as if to keep overturning our perceptions of existence. Going beyond the merely human. A struggle towards a deeper sense of being.

“And unhuman nature it’s towering reality -  
For man’s half dream; man, you might say, is nature  
dreaming, but rock  
And water and sky are constant - to feel  
Greatly, and understand greatly, and express greatly, the  
natural  
Beauty, is the sole business of poetry.  
The rest’s diversion: those holy or noble sentiments, the  
intricate ideas,  
The love, lust, longing: reasons, but not the reason.”

- Robinson Jeffers, *The Beauty of Things*

Perhaps this explains Hun Ping’s use of ceramics, made of clay that comes from natural rocks and stones, in this work. Ceramics, in a sense, become a metaphor for untouched, natural works far away from the complexities and folly of man’s narcissism. The images made from the ceramics are clean, defined, yet mutated to represent some kind of vibrant pulse of nature’s veracity; the colours possess a sea-like tenacity.

Which leads us to ‘Phosphorous’, the final part of the work. We can’t live without phosphorous. Neither can the earth. An individual substance that’s volatile in its purest form, and yet we need it. In this final part, there seems to be a more resolute and meditative element to the churning of images. Earlier images are repeated but underwent a certain transformation, and the pace of the images seem to be more prayer-like in their nature.

“I would never say... this would sound obscene: “I am.” I wouldn’t say “I am an atheist” or I wouldn’t say “I am a believer” either. These statements, I find them absolutely ridiculous: “I am a believer, I know that I am a believer.” Who knows that? Who can affirm and confirm, “I am a believer.” And who can say “I am an atheist?” I just write these sentences, that is the only thing I can say...”

- Jacques Derrida On ‘Atheism’ and ‘Belief’. Interviewed by John Caputo.

So, what does it mean to say one is an Atheist, or one is a Believer? It takes humility

to say, one really doesn't know. How much does one really know about one's consciousness? When are we being honest, or telling the truth?

So, does the humble atheist really believe in God? It's possible that even he doesn't know. He's only reached the conclusion that he doesn't, for now. The 'humble' adding great ambivalence to 'atheist'. Only by working through the Art, can one truly attempt to at least come closer to the truth of one's beliefs, in the questions one needs to confront oneself in the making of the work. A conflicting, yet meaningful journey even Heidegger would prove. And one that Hun Ping seems well on his way to achieving.

Kelvin Tan is a writer and musician. He is the author of *All Broken Up and Dancing* and *the Nethe(r);R*, as well as over 100 albums. His play, *Flights Through Darkness*, was made into a film directed by Wong Kwang Han, and made its World Premiere at the 2017 Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival. Kelvin is also the lead guitarist of seminal homegrown band The Oddfellows.

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