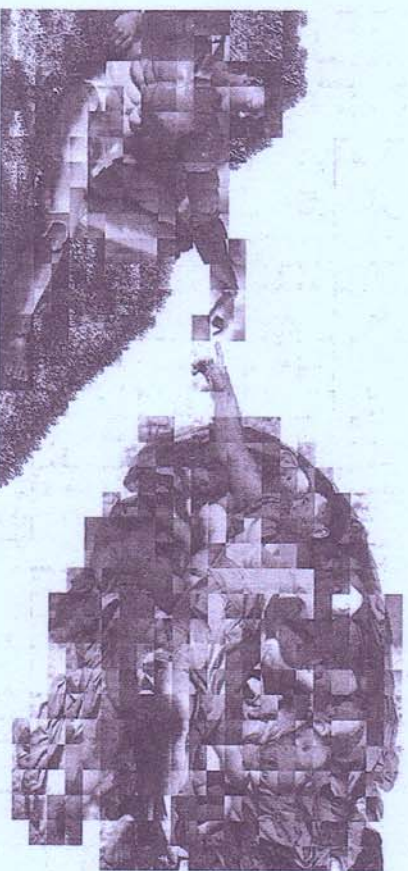


圖五 周俊輝 Chow Jun Fai, 文藝復興三部曲之一 - 最後晚餐 Renaissance Trilogy I - Last Supper, 攝影裝置 Photo Installation, 340cm(H) x 740cm(W)



圖六 周俊輝 Chow Jun Fai, 文藝復興三部曲之二 - 創造亞當 Renaissance Trilogy II - Creation of Adam, 攝影裝置 Photo Installation, 352cm(H) x 694cm(W)

About Chow Chun Fai and intertextuality

Frank Vigneron

The term 'semiotics' (or 'semiology') appears for the first time in the works of the creator of linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure, but it became an independent domain of research, and an interdisciplinary mode of inquiry, especially in the works of the American philosophers Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). It is however the work of the poststructuralist Roland Barthes (1915-1980) and of his followers that will be our main concern here. The structuralist worldview derived from linguistics and the first impact it had on another discipline was on anthropology in the works of Claude Lévi-Strauss. Strauss's extremely original ideas and elegant style were a major influence on the students of popular culture and Western society. Barthes extended the analysis of codes of signification Strauss applied to the native societies of South America to analyze popular culture in his own country, France. In his books, which always retained a definite literary ambition, structuralism was used to shape an elaborate 'science of signs', what we call today semiotics. For Barthes, structuralism was an alternative to the traditional concepts of the autonomous Subject. As far as art making is concerned, one of the strongest points made by Barthes was what he called the 'intentional fallacy' of authorship. Since language comes before us, since it shapes us in the way we think and relate to the

environment, and since every kind of artistic practice in which thought is articulated (like painting, sculpture, movies, novels, etc.) is already there and already in language when we come into the world. Barthes argued that we don't speak language, but that language speaks us. The intentional fallacy of authorship, referred to as the 'death of the author', had a tremendous impact on the art world and art criticism in general and completely overturned the traditional expression-based theories of art. It ultimately made more sense to understand a specific artwork in the social and linguistic context that produced it than as a manifestation of the psyche of an artist, since that artist, as a person, was also produced by his/her social and linguistic context.

Barthes is today considered to be a literary critic but, just like the critics of the Frankfurt school who practiced the analysis of literary works as an interdisciplinary tool, his practice of criticism applies to everything and, obviously, to visual artworks. Barthes established a difference between literary works and 'text': a book is a literary work because it is finite, whereas 'text' is about the interactions of signs and these interactions can take place within a book but also in between books of all kinds. For him, works are moderately symbolic whereas text is radically symbolic. The work is an organism, because it grows and develops, like a book with its influences, whereas the text is a network, and it extends itself because it is the result of a combination between many types of sources. 'Text' is therefore not only about written productions but can also include any kind of signs, visual or otherwise. There is a strong dimension of play in this conception of signs and Barthes used the term 'play' in a very specific sense. The word 'play', as in 'this machine has too much play' also means a kind of looseness that leaves room for independent and unexpected movements. When Barthes says that the text 'plays', it means that signs leave ample room for many

types of interpretations, that they can be performed like a piece of music or like a type of game. He therefore opened up literary and art criticism to a kind of discourse that lays no claim to any absolute truth: art criticism is a production of meaning just like art is a production of meaning. We may even add that both art and art theory and criticism must be open-ended. Barthes wrote, for instance, that modern music and some contemporary art seems boring to some people, because these people have lost the capacity to participate, play with a text or an artwork. Many installations made by contemporary plasticians are only there to make us produce other ideas; the meaning of an artwork is not fixed any longer and the plastician will only provide the tools that will help us generate meaning. In these circumstances, viewers become other kinds of plasticians, active participants in the creation of as many different significations as there are spectators.

In the visual arts, this notion of text as a network of relationships, pre-existing models and influences, could also be employed to make sense of the very postmodern concept of appropriation as practiced by Sherrie Levine. This open-endedness can also help us make sense of the works of such artists as Chow Chun-fai 周俊輝 (born 1980) who requires the viewers to give their own meaning and integrate their own experience into his installations, the artwork being not the objects put together by the artist in a room but the varied ideas 'playing' in the mind of the viewers. In his *Creation of Adam* 《創造亞當》, a photo-montage part of a series he titled *Renaissance Trilogy* (*Menyi Fuxing San Bu Qu* 文藝復興三部曲), Chow has played with his own image in the context of what Western art has considered to be its canonical works. The other two parts of this *Renaissance Trilogy* are an appropriation of Leonardo's *Last Supper* and Raphael's *School of Athens* where Chow Chun-fai is also 'playing' all the parts and all the characters of these 'over-famous' artworks. These works

started with Chow's reconsiderations of David Hockney's reconstructions of time and space in the form of photographic montages, and Chow has also made similar compositions with simple photographs while he was studying for an MFA at the department of fine arts of the Chinese university. The multiplication of the plastician's face in these works can be read as an insistence of that old idea of individuality in the making of an artwork that has haunted contemporary art ever since Barthes and Foucault's 'death of the author'. There is a great deal of resistance to that notion, mostly because it was misunderstood, and many plasticians are still holding on to the necessity for an artwork to be done by someone and therefore for an artwork to have an author. But we will see with the work of Yan Lei 顏磊 that there are ways to question that notion and criticize the concept of 'maker as author'. Another reading of the presence of the plastician in the work is closer to some of the questions raised by contemporary Chinese artists in the 'international' context of art, namely what possible relationship Chinese artists may have today with Western art. These plasticians have chosen to manifest this relationship very simply with the presence of Chinese facial features in a context where they are not expected. The Chinese Chow Chun-fai playing the parts of God and Adam is certainly less shocking today as when Gauguin represented the Virgin Mary and Jesus as a Tahitian family in his *Ia Orana Maria* of 1891, but it still questions very efficiently how to establish limits between two pictorial traditions. Two Mainland plasticians in particular, Wang Xingwei 汪興偉 and Wang Qingsong 王慶松 have played with these notions of appropriation in re-positioning what constitutes tradition. Wang Xingwei, in a photo-realistic oil painting, has mimicked *The Awakening Conscience*, a painting made in 1853 by William Hunt (1827-1910), an associate of the pre-Raphaelite group. The composition is the same, a man in a chair making advances to a young woman suddenly standing up from his lap in realization that

she was going to do something wrong. In the work of the Chinese artist, this Victorian prudishness is transposed into a contemporary office in a Chinese city, the man a businessman and the woman obviously a secretary, into a statement that could also be read in terms of feminism and the reification of women in contemporary culture. As for Wang Qingsong, he has been mimicking many famous artworks through the medium of elaborately staged photographs, but this time they were 'borrowed' as often from Western as from Chinese paintings. In his *Birth of Venus* appropriated from Botticelli, he chose to replace the standard elongated Florentine Renaissance beauty with a much more stocky Chinese girl and, in the process, managed to question the present desire of the mass media in China to adopt stereotypical Western standards of beauty; but in other pieces, he preferred to use other canonical Chinese paintings, like *Court Ladies Wearing Flowered Headresses* 《簪花仕女圖》, an original Tang dynasty painting attributed to Zhou Fang 周昉 (ca. 730- ca. 800), and the even more celebrated *Night Revels of Han Xizai* 《韓熙載夜宴圖》 by the early Song dynasty painter Gu Hongzhong 顧闳中 (late 10th century). Asked whether he would consider doing the same type of works using Chinese paintings, Chow Chun-fai made it very clear that he was not interested and preferred to play with more established stereotypes. More established because, even in the Mainland and Taiwan (and this might be even more true in Hong Kong), Chinese people are usually less aware of their own artistic tradition than they are of works like these three Renaissance paintings since they can also be found, everywhere in popular culture, advertising or the movies. As much as appropriation, it is therefore Kristeva's intertextuality these works are depending on because Chow Chun-fai has woven into visually stunning works a multitude of references to 'high' art – Michelangelo's fresco – as 'low' art – the dolls he used to create Adam's body and the angels' heads – that are as much about his own background

as they are about this fascinating fallacious meta-narrative of 'East meets West' and how it could be put into play for hilarious effects. Once again, we are directed towards the figure of the rhizome in which the plastician has managed to very nimbly connect a variety of points into a coherent cultural production.

All these considerations on game and play make clear why Barthes was so insistent on the notion of pleasure, the pleasure of making and, in his particular case, the practice of writing. One specific project he often alludes to is Marcel Proust's novel *Remembrance of Things Past*¹, in which the main character basically wrote thousands of pages of personal memory to explain why he had to write these thousands of pages of personal memory and, in the process, makes us reevaluate our lives in a 'textual' fashion; similarly, Chow Chun-fai has documented how he elaborated his appropriations with photographic documentations which are always shown next to his completed photographic montages. The pleasure of meaning production in the interaction of these many documents is its own reward and artworks that leave room for such an endeavor, the open-ended ones, are the richest in implications for both art appreciation and art criticism. Similarly, many artists of the nineteen seventies were convinced that art should be produced by everyone, at any time and in every possible way. The most famous of these artists is the extremely influential German artist Joseph Beuys (1921-1986), but the idea that art should be a communal and open-ended project can be traced back to the late nineteenth century in the poetry of a writer who also influenced the Surrealist movement, Isidore Ducasse, aka the Conte de Lautréamont (1846-1870). As we have seen, this analysis of 'text' was not restricted to written material, in fact Barthes's semiotics cover the whole gamut of cultural productions without any distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture. When he writes that 'pic-

tures become a kind of writing as soon as they are meaningful'², he made clear that he intended to look at any image, artistic or not, with the method of structuralist linguistics. He therefore wanted to study three things and how they are related: 'the signifier, the signified and the sign, which is the associative total of the first two terms'³. To clarify, he took the example of the bunch of roses which expresses passion in amorous exchanges in the West: 'passion' is the signified, 'flowers' are the signifiers, and the two together are the sign. This technique can be applied to any object that conveys meaning. For Ferdinand de Saussure, the concept was the signified, the sound was the signifier and the sign was the written word and, according to Barthes, this three-part structure can also be found in Freud: the manifest meaning of behavior, the latent or real meaning, and the third term being the dream in its entirety. These complex references to such diverse fields as linguistics, psychoanalysis and also Marxist theory, exemplify the interdisciplinary project of structuralist and poststructuralist thinking and how, precisely because of its interdisciplinarity, it is particularly fitting for the understanding of plastician art.

The publication of Roland Barthes' most famous and most popular book, *Mythologies*⁴, made the study of films, cars, food, popular fiction, photography possible in these new conceptions of the system of signs. Myth had been one of the most important preoccupations of Claude Lévi-Strauss in his study of the native societies of South America. For Barthes, 'myth is a type of speech'⁵ and therefore belongs to semiology. Since myth is a type of speech, it is conveyed by discourse and, for Barthes, anything can be myth: a car, for instance, can become myth the moment it becomes a status symbol, because another meaning has been added to the actual object. If everything can be myth, not everything can remain a myth forever. It is also clear that these notions have a lot in common with the Marxian

theory of 'commodities', the value of something also has to be understood in terms of the potency of the signs. In general, this attitude towards the objects of consumerism and popular culture fits perfectly with Pop art in England and the USA. All the Pop artists were fascinated by the products of consumer culture because they were all signs with the potential of becoming myth. Since myths do not always remain myths, but are so in a certain historical context, Barthes re-introduced history in his project and thus moved away from strict structuralism. At the end of his life, Barthes also returned to literature; a decision that was clearly related to his concept of intertextuality and the pleasure of writing. Even though mention of the concept of intertextuality can be found in the works of Barthes, it was elaborated by other semioticians like Julia Kristeva (who also made the choice of writing popular fictions) or the Italian Umberto Eco⁶ (born 1932), another famous professor of semiotics and one of the best-selling authors of the twentieth century. Kristeva recognized three dimensions in the textual space, and their 'coordinates of dialogue' are the writing subject, the addressee (or ideal reader), and other texts. She also describes this textual space as intersecting planes which have horizontal and vertical axes. The word's status is thus defined horizontally (the word in the text belongs to both writing subject and addressee) as well as vertically (the word in the text is oriented towards an anterior literary corpus). The principle of intertextuality, another essential concept of the work of Chow Chun-fai (and he made ample use of it in his MFA dissertation) is that any text is the assimilation and transformation of another because every text is informed by other texts which the reader has read, and by the reader's own cultural context. It should be made clear however that she is not really talking about influences, i.e. the conscious use of the ideas of preceding artists or writer within one's own artwork, even though influences are also a kind of intertextuality. Intertextuality is a playful, and often unconscious,

recycling of all the things that construct both our environment and our own Selves.

¹ This novel in seven volumes written by Marcel Proust (1871-1922) is still considered, with *Ulysses* by James Joyce (1882-1941) and *Journey to the End of Night*, by Louis Ferdinand Celine (1894-1961), one of the major novels of the twentieth century.

² Barthes, Roland: 'Myth Today', in Harrison, Charles (et al., ed.), op. cit., p. 687.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 690.

⁴ Barthes, Roland: *Mythologies*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 688.

⁶ Next to highly serious books like *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (1984), Umberto Eco is also the author of novels like *The Name of the Rose* (1981), which was later made into a movie starring Sean Connery, and Foucault's *Pendulum* (1989). Both novels are as much about entertaining action as they are about a reflection on the nature of 'truth'.