Still from Zhao Liang's Behemoth.

Speculative Landscapes, Promethean Mirages, and Eco-Poiesis

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In recent years, familiar or seemingly 'traditional' landscape forms have provided artists working in China with legible ecocritical modes. This essay expands on an earlier account of what the author describes as documentary and illusionistic 'Chinese landscapes of desolation' by outlining an additional mode: the speculative. Speculative landscapes look forward to a time (fast approaching but eerily similar to our own) when the impacts of ongoing environmental crises have definitively reshaped the world. In bringing the future to the present, this mode offers a rebuke—sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit—of the techno-optimist assumptions of unlimited growth that define Promethean thought.

It has become common over the past decade or so to encounter vaguely familiar or seemingly 'traditional' Chinese landscape forms updated to represent contemporary environmental problems. In a 2019 article, I argued that many of these artistic 'Chinese landscapes of desolation' fall into two overlapping categories, the documentary and the *trompe l'oeil*, both of which are intended to function as ecocritical modes capable of changing how viewers see and act in the world (Byrnes 2019a). Whereas the former offers objective views of environmentally compromised landscapes, the latter reflects on China's environmental

predicament by presenting illusionistic images of mountains and waters that appear 'traditional' but are in fact built out of trash, ruins, effluent, or smog.

Artists working in these modes imagine the world in different ways, but they participate in a shared representational enterprise: they deploy aesthetic landscape forms to make claims about the relationship between people and their physical surroundings. What distinguishes them is how (and how fully) they draft the viewer into the fiction of their plausible realism. In other words, how wedded they are to a contemporary frame and to 'real' places, people, and environmental problems. Where *trompe l'oeil* landscapes by artists such as Yao Lu (姚璐), Yang Yongliang (杨泳梁), or Xu Bing (徐冰) are often wilfully playful and approach the present through the past, documentary landscapes by artists such as Edward Burtynksy or Wang Jiuliang (王久良) generally take themselves very seriously, persuading viewers of the urgency of our current predicament through images of the way things undeniably are. The documentary landscape asks viewers to look hard so they might see and think differently about the world as it is. The *tromp l'oeil* landscape asks viewers to look at the present through the lens of the past to reflect on the world as it once was and no longer is.

This essay expands the landscape of desolation to include an additional mode: the speculative landscape. Like 'the documentary and [the] trompe l'oeil, with which it often overlaps, the speculative reflects powerful anxieties about the present, though it privileges the viewer's interpretive agency by projecting contemporary problems into a strange and often horrifying future' (Byrnes 2019a: 155). Where documentary sometimes pushes viewers to 'fall into line' with its pose of objectivity, the speculative is more likely to ask viewers to self-orient with respect to a new or imminent (un) reality. Though its frame of reference is often the present, the speculative is ultimately a fictional mode that offers images of a possible future. In this sense, it is equally well suited to representing ongoing environmental crises, which are marked both by scientific indeterminacy and by anxiety about that indeterminacy, as it is to imagining a future that is simultaneously endlessly deferred and already upon us. The speculative landscape looks forward to a time (fast approaching, far distant, or eerily like our own) when the spatial and social impacts of climate change and environmental degradation have radically reshaped the world as we have known it. In bringing the future to the present, artists working in this landscape mode rebuke—sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly—the techno-optimist assumptions of unlimited growth that define Promethean thought. If Prometheanism imagines the future in terms of ever-increasing trends—'increasing parkland, croplands, and forests, increasing life expectancy, increasing crop yields and fisheries catches'—that can be 'extrapolated indefinitely into the future', the speculative landscape imagines the reversal of those trends and a physical world that places definite limits on growth (Dryzek 2013: 63). As I argue in my conclusion, the speculative landscape mode is best understood as a form of creative 'eco-poiesis'—a term appropriated from the scientific literature on terraformation—that mirrors in order to distort the world-building fantasies offered by Promethean discourse.

This essay offers an initial account of the eco-poietic speculative landscape mode as it appears in the China-focused work of two contemporary artists, the US-based painter Ji Yun-fei (季云飞) and the Beijing-based documentary filmmaker Zhao Liang (赵亮). Until recently, Ji's work has centred primarily on the interaction of historical traumas with the displacements and dispossessions that are reshaping relationships between people and places in contemporary China. Ji draws deeply on the figurative and landscape traditions of Chinese art, though he is also well known for producing fantastical images busy with ghosts and monsters that evoke not only Chinese traditions of the strange, but also European artists such as Goya, Bosch, and Picasso (Fitzgerald 2004; Tsai 2012; Chung 2016; Adler 2016; Byrnes 2019b). The past and the present, the everyday and the strange, the living and the spectral are linked in many of his works by a skein of psychic and bodily traumas.

In some of his recent work, Ji has turned his attention to environmental problems that require a subtle but striking reorientation away from the retrospective and towards the speculative. In the painting I discuss below, *An Account of Wen Village*

(文村记事), Ji combines the narrative logic of the long handscroll format with a fragmentary textual narrative to tell the story of a changing climate, a doomed village, and the mirage-like appearance of a ghost city—a form of urban speculation that Christian Sorace and William Hurst (2016: 305) describe as 'the extreme pathological expression of [a] syndrome of phantom urbanisation'. Ji's texts neither simply describe what the image shows—the latter often 'omits' events, including the appearance of the ghost city, which are described in the text—nor provide the reader with a didactic frame for determining the connection between representational landscapes and real environments. Instead, image and text stand in a looser juxtapositional arrangement that allows the viewer/reader to speculate on the relationship between the painting's fictions and its claims to documentary authority, between the time of artistic creation and that of circulation, and between the sequence of events described in the text and those figures and landscapes depicted in the image.

Speculative landscape aesthetics and the phantasmagorical effects of speculation in land and real estate are paired to different effects in Zhao Liang's 2015 experimental documentary film *Behemoth* (悲兮魔兽), in which the human thirst for resources is figured as a monster and mines, foundries, and empty 'ghost cities' serve as settings for a retelling of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In Zhao's work, the *Divine Comedy* serves as a template for mapping processes and spaces of extraction, production, and consumption on to an eschatological narrative of environmental desolation. Dante's Paradise, the ultimate Christian object of speculation and deferral, becomes Zhao's ghost city, the ultimate object of financial speculation—a space designed for a populace that is unlikely to arrive.

Leaving Home

Beginning in the late 1990s, Ji Yun-fei, who was born and grew up in mainland China but has lived primarily in the United States since the 1980s, began producing paintings that imagined the social and spatial impact of the Three Gorges Dam and reservoir. When Ji, who was based in Brooklyn at the time, first turned to this topic, he imagined the gorges as a disaster zone, an almost post-apocalyptic wasteland of ruined buildings and scattered migrants. After travelling to the region, he began to develop a more self-consciously documentary style that gave far greater prominence to figures framed by landscape elements rather than lost within them (Byrnes 2019b). Though the Three Gorges Dam project has caused widespread environmental damage, most artistic responses to it have centred primarily on the social impacts of the dam. Ji's work is no exception.

The depiction of demolition and displacement (拆迁) has become one of the hallmarks of socially conscious visual culture in China in the past two to three decades (Wu 2004, 2008, 2012; Byrnes 2019b). It is only relatively recently that artists such as Ji have started to connect the social crises caused by China's economic development and the artistic forms that have developed to represent those crises with local and global environmental problems. Figures in Ji's recent works are now just as likely to be environmental refugees as they are economic migrants or villagers displaced by a dam. In many ways, the visual language of demolition and displacement has been repurposed to create environmentally conscious art with a strong social consciousness. On the level of form and content, there is little to separate Ji's work on demolition and displacement from his more recent ecocritical art. What distinguishes the latter, however, is its treatment of time. Whereas Ji's late Three Gorges paintings primarily document the ongoing displacement of people as well as ties between the dam project and various historical traumas, his more explicitly environmental art presents a speculative vision of how ongoing climate change and pollution will radically reshape the relationship between people and their surroundings, even when framed as records of past events and lost spaces.

In the 2011 two-scroll painting *An Account of Wen Village*, which is in the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art under the title *Last Days of Village Wen* (see Ji 2011), Ji subtly combines fantastical imagery and documentary-like text with his signature adaptation of Chinese landscape and figural painting styles to create a prospective

record of displacement that makes it impossible to distinguish between the effects of climate change and the dictates of officialdom. Produced using traditional ink and colour pigments on mulberry paper, the paintings are mounted as handscrolls, introduced by calligraphic titles, and stored within specially built, silk-covered boxes, fully replicating the physical format of traditional Chinese paintings as connoisseurial objects (see Figure 3). The title inscription on both scrolls includes a date—the tenth month of the *guisi* (癸巳) year (2013)—and informs the viewer that the title was inscribed by Yun-fei. The mounted paintings as well as the colophons that conclude the second scroll include inscriptions that indicate that Ji completed both text and image in the *xinmao* (辛卯) year (2011).

The painting depicts a village erased by migration, forced displacement, drought, floods, freak windstorms, and wailing ghosts. The first scroll, which closely resembles several of Ji's Three Gorges images, opens with two villagers—a woman carrying bamboo chairs, a bamboo stool, and an umbrella and a man bearing a bundle and a stick—walking through a partially flooded landscape (see Figure 2). The colours in this section, which takes up nearly half of the first scroll, are muted and the first six figures are simply outlined in black ink and accented selectively with light-coloured ink washes. Near the middle of the scroll, the flooded landscape gives way to solid ground and a group of displaced people living in the open surrounded by their possessions (see Figure 3). The figural and landscape elements of this section are more boldly delineated and coloured and this section has a greater density and level of detail than the preceding one. The final section of the scroll is marked by a series of grey boulders and a cloud-like negative space. At the left-most edge of the scroll, the two figures who walked into the image reappear to walk out of it (see Figure 4). Now, however, they are more boldly outlined and coloured.

Figure 1: Ji Yun-fei, An Account of Wen Village [Last Days of Village Wen] scrolls and storage box.

Why do these figures reappear at the end of the scroll and why are they depicted in greater detail there? Have they already walked through this part of the image and thus gone through a process of displacement and relocation that the scroll represents retroactively? Are they the future of a narrative that Ji is telling in the image or does their repetition suggest a circular temporality, a process of displacement that has no real beginning and no end, that begins with official policy and continues with environmental catastrophe, one blurring into the other?

In contrast with the documentary-like quality of the first scroll, the second revels in fantastical imagery of strange machines, floating skeletons, Red Guard ghosts on political campaigns, goat-headed monsters, enormous insects, crabs, and bird-headed creatures (see Figures 5–6). Rather than a lateral continuation of the landscape Ji depicts in the first scroll, the second seems to provide a vertical perspective: either a look through the everyday to its otherworldly substrate or the exposure of its invisible spectral epidermis. This enigmatic image comes to an end with a group of four figures (two men and two skeletons) flying into empty space (see Figure 7), though the scroll itself concludes with six textual records that describe a series of trials and strange events. These short texts are written in everyday language with a temporal and spatial specificity that gives them a dry, matter-of-fact tone. This is, as the painting's title suggests, a *jishi* (记事): an objective record (记) of events (事) that occurred in the places and at the times listed.

(Left) Figure 2: An Account of Wen Village [Last Days of Village Wen] (detail), 2011. Yun-Fei Ji (Chinese, b. 1963). Pair of handscrolls; ink and colour on Xuan paper; painting only: 34.6 x 657.8 cm (13 5/8 x 259 in.); painting only: 34.6 x 610.8 cm (13 5/8 x 240 1/2 in.). The Cleveland Museum of Art, The Severance and Greta Millikin Purchase Fund 2012.99. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

(Bottom) Figure 3: Detail from the first scroll of Ji Yun-fei's An Account of Wen Village.

While this episodic narrative begins prosaically enough with a reference to the breaking of an eight-month-long drought, it gets stranger as it goes, combining the everyday with the surreal and supernatural in accounts of irregular weather patterns, tales of strange happenings, local ghosts, and a 'fantastical' scene of a flooded landscape. In the second entry, we learn that the villagers have 'demolished their own homes and moved temporarily into tents … in a clearing in the wheat field', though we never learn why. This displacement seems to be the primary focus of the first scroll, though there is nothing that resembles a wheat field in that image. Are the villagers in the image and the text the same people? Are they environmental migrants, or have they been displaced by some official development program, as suggested by the fifth entry, which describes an ailing party secretary who is being pressured by a spectral county magistrate to speed up the process of 'demolition and relocation'?

The fourth and sixth texts centre on events that are not obviously depicted in either scroll.[1] The fourth text (*Raising Fish*) describes an unpredictable climate swinging wildly between punishing drought and catastrophic flooding. These conditions destroy the fish-farming operation set up by those villagers 'who chose not to leave Wen Village to work as migrant labourers'. This reference to a stage of migration preceding both government displacement and environmental migration suggests that the destruction of Wen Village is both a repeatable event and an overdetermined one. The final text, which seems to refer to the same flood described in the penultimate record, describes a 'fantastical scene' (奇景):

> Over the course of the river 30 *li* south of the village, during a massive summer flood, atop the mist covered waters that stretched as far as the eye could see, there sometimes appeared a fantastical scene of brightly illuminated skyscrapers.

(Right) Figure 4: Detail from the first scroll of Ji Yun-fei's An Account of Wen Village. (Bottom) Figure 5: Detail from the second scroll of Ji Yun-fei's An Account of Wen Village.

Figure 6: Detail from the second scroll of Ji Yun-fei's An Account of Wen Village.

Figure 7: Detail from the second scroll of Ji Yun-fei's An Account of Wen Village.

This mirage evokes the illusory floating islands of Penglai (蓬萊), Fangzhang (方丈), and Yingzhou (瀛洲)—home to immortals and their secrets—which tempted early emperors to send exploratory missions into the open seas off China's coast, though it also points towards forms of speculation that are currently reshaping China (Zheng 2012: 15). The glowing, towering city that appears out of the misty waves evokes forms of 'anticipatory urbanism' or 'phantom urbanisation' fuelled by government policy and real estate speculation and exemplified by the phenomenon of the mostly unoccupied 'ghost city' (Woodworth 2018; Sorace and Hurst 2016). As suggested by the supernatural procession in the painting's second scroll, however, this city is likely to be occupied by the still-present ghosts of Wen Village's recent past.

The final line of text on the painting tells us that Ji wrote out the colophon in the ninth month of the *xinmao* year (2011), just three months after the drought that dried up the villagers' river and the flood that killed the fish they had been raising. Simultaneously a record, a narrative, and an image, *An Account of Wen Village* treats the surreal and supernatural as everyday occurrences and the everyday as increasingly surreal. Though it depicts and narrates a sequence of events in the years leading up to 2011, the present of the painting is merely a conduit between a past that has not yet passed (figured both by the ghosts of the second scroll and by the repeated figures of the first) and environmental futures occupied by the painter as recordkeeper (who inscribed the scrolls in 2011 *and* 2013, after the disappearance of the fictional village) and the painting's viewers. The past in Ji's speculative fiction is not past both because it is tied to the present of the artist's creation and because it imagines unfolding and future environmental change. The repeatable experience of unrolling the image and re-reading the narrative made possible by the handscroll format, along with the circularity implied by the repeated figures in the first scroll (see Figures 2 and 4), keeps that future in a state of endless suspension.

Speculation and the Speculative

An Account of Wen Village is a retro-speculative document of the economic, social, and environmental forces reshaping rural China. It places the viewer in a simultaneously speculative and retrospective position from which to consider a narrative future that is both always unfurling and forever situated in the past. When we look at Ji's image and read its texts, we occupy the future on which they vaguely speculate, although, to the extent that climate change continues to unfold in

unpredictable and increasingly devastating ways, we are also forced to continue Ji's retro-speculative project, simultaneously looking back to places that are disappearing or no longer exist and forward to an uncertain future. In this sense, Ji's environmentally focused art is part of his extended artistic meditation on the persistence of the past and the inexorability of change.

In contrast, Zhao Liang's 2015 film *Behemoth* engages less with the temporal disorientation caused by displacement and climate change and more with the spatial and environmental consequences of economic growth, rampant consumption, and real estate speculation. Set in the open spaces of Inner Mongolia, Zhao's film imagines not only the degradation of a previously green and thriving landscape (which he associates with Mongolian nomadic traditions) but also the production of a completely new landscape of desolation—one that is markedly inhospitable to humans (see Figure 8). A loose retelling of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the film traces an eschatological journey from the hell of open-pit mining, through the purgatory of poverty and black lung, and on to Paradise, which takes the form of one of China's famed ghost cities (see Figure 9). As in Dante's early fourteenth-century poem, *Behemoth*'s narrator is led by a guide, though instead of the Roman poet Virgil, Zhao casts a silent, mirror-toting coalminer who wheezes as he picks his way through the ruined landscape (see Figure 10).

In his cinematic adaptation of Dante, Zhao has removed almost all the writing. There is no dialogue in the movie and the narrator speaks only periodically, usually to introduce some shift in the journey or the focus of the film. His brief reflections on the environmental destruction wrought by human avarice are often introduced by still shots of a man in a foetal position on the ground or standing naked in the landscape (see Figure 11). These shots seem to figure not only the vulnerability and innocence of the narrator, who finds himself caught within a dystopic dreamscape, but also the inadequacy of the landscape of desolation, which Zhao fractures in post-production to create an even more disorienting and inhospitable ground for the figure. The landscape of desolation in *Behemoth* not only fails to offer stable ground for the human, but also embodies it in darker ways. In Zhao's depiction of coalmining, for example, workers are swallowed by the earth even as they work to hollow it out. The same workers inhale the coal that they pry free, taking the formerly invisible elements of the landscape into their lungs, where it becomes inseparable from the body (Sorace 2016: 41).

Figure 8: Still from Zhao Liang's Behemoth.

Figure 9: Still from Zhao Liang's Behemoth

While the film is sensitive to the uneven distribution of harm on which Promethean energy regimes and forms of consumption depend, it is also designed to expose the complicity of the individual in the collective madness of our moment. Dante's dream journey may end with his vision of God, but the narrator in *Behemoth* ends his journey with his realisation that he is not dreaming and that the monster of the film's title—a biblical creature who consumes 1,000 mountains a day—is us: 'This is not a dream, this is us. We are that monster, that monster's minions' (这不是一个梦, 这是我们. 我们是那魔兽, 那魔兽的爪牙). If the previous green landscape that the narrator imagines at the beginning of the film embraces and supports the human figure, Zhao's landscape of desolation is another beast altogether. In place of a vision of world-building grounded in Greek mythology, Zhao Liang offers a biblical account of world destruction—Behemoth as the true face of Prometheus.

The monster is the debased remainder of the thing we have consumed; it is the thing that consumes us; it is a landscape we have created in our image; it is us. It is also a landscape reshaped by real estate speculation, the creation and sale of a massive volume of unoccupied housing in the hopes that the value of these properties will increase. *Behemoth* is designed to show how speculation as a form of rampant consumption creates not only the readymade desolation of the ghost city, but also environmentally ravaged sites of resource extraction and industrial manufacturing. The urban 'heaven' that takes the place of Dante's Paradise in *Behemoth* is no longer an object of Christian speculation and longing, but rather a vision of the emptiness and environmental ruination caused by the economic instrumentalisation of futurity.

Eco-Poeisis

In closing, I would like to propose a term that captures the logic of the speculative landscape of desolation as a response to Promethean thinking: eco-poiesis. This neologism, which pairs the ecological prefix 'eco-' (from the Greek *oikos*, meaning family, property, and home) with the Greek-derived suffix 'poiesis' (to form, or make), was coined to describe the 'process of establishing an ecosystem, or biosphere, on a lifeless planet' (Haynes and McKay 1992: 134). In scientific terms, 'poiesis' describes the natural formation of some-

Figure 10: Still from Zhao Liang's Behemoth.

Figure 11: Still from Zhao Liang's Behemoth.

thing, 'especially of various organic substances', though eco-poiesis uses it to imagine an anthropogenic process of atmospheric transformation (OED Online 2022a). For scientists studying terraformation, eco-poiesis is an essential step in a much longer process of creating Earth-like conditions on a planet like Mars. Considering new climate change science, eco-poiesis seems to offer a classic techno-modernist fix—the creation of a 'Planet B' through productive rather than destructive climate change—diametrically opposed to most humanistic and post-humanistic environmental thought.

My use of the term similarly foregrounds the creative agency of humans but resituates *poiesis* in philosophical and literary terms as 'creative production, especially of a work of art' (OED Online 2022b). In this sense, my eco-poiesis resonates strongly with the capacious definition of 'ecopoetics' offered by Angela Hume and Gillian Osborne, for whom the term 'encompasses experiments in community making, ranging from poetry and the visual arts, literary criticism, and performance to walking, foraging, farming, cooking, and being alongside each other, whether human or other than human, in space and place' (2018: 3). While I am inspired by Hume and Osborne's conception of ecopoetics, I have opted for the Greek *poiesis* rather than the English poetics to maintain a connection to the techno-optimist vision of human agency implied by scientific uses of the term. My eco-poiesis diverges from the techno-optimism of terraformation to characterise the creation of works of art that reflect an ecological consciousness, but it also encompasses the creation of works of art that imagine the dark side of eco-poiesis: anthropogenic climate change, habitat destruction, and generalised ecological collapse. Ji's and Zhao's works do not offer reparative models for 'being alongside each other … in space and place'. Instead, they force us to stay with the horrors of climate change and environmental destruction. They show us how and why creative production in its many different modes is especially well suited to imagining the Promethean forms of eco-poiesis that threaten the life of the planet. ■

[1] In the years after the completion of An Account of Wen Village, Ji produced separate images depicting some of the events described in these records as well as an additional long handscroll entitled The Move of Wen Village (Adler 2016).

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