

YANG FUDONG



MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

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THE FIFTH NIGHT

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LI ZHENHUA Can you briefly talk about the relationship between the film installation *The Fifth Night* (2010) and the video installation *The Fifth Night*, part two (2010)? Part one was exhibited at the ShanghART Gallery and part two at the Eighth Shanghai Biennial. You mentioned that part two was a by-product of part one. I’m curious about how the two pieces came about through different forms.

YANG FUDONG I should start by talking about the film *Dawn Mist, Separation Faith* (2009). During the shooting of this film, I wondered if, and how, I could make another art piece out of the same production. I realized that a lot of takes were simply discarded in the editing room, like in *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest* (2003–2007) and some other shorts I did. I would shoot the same shot five, ten, twenty, or more times. At the end of the day, I would pick the best take and edit it into the actual piece. Why did it have to be that particular take? Where did all the bad takes go? Shouldn’t they exist even if they were not perfect? In other words, should I reveal my working process by showing multiple takes as well as the mistakes I made? I pondered over different possibilities. So I chose to make *Dawn Mist, Separation Faith* only out of takes that were “no good.” It was shot in the summer of 2008. It is a film that consists of only nine shots, or, say, a film installation with nine projections. So even before making *The Fifth Night*, I considered trying out different lenses and perspectives that I had never used before. But none of the ideas were very concrete until I was asked to participate in the show *Useful Life 2010*. It was around the Chinese New Year in 2010 that I decided to make *The Fifth Night*.

LZ *The Fifth Night* is very different from *Dawn Mist, Separation Faith*.

YF Yes. Seven parallel screens form a line, and they connect with one another, imitating traditional Chinese long-roll painting.

LZ It feels like seven scrolls too.

YF I was trying to avoid it being like seven separate scrolls. The first version of *The Fifth Night* at ShanghART was more like a live film on multiple screens. It made use of camera movements and mixed lenses with a variety of depths of field, including wide-angle, standard 35 mm, and long lenses. It created what I call a “little midnight theater” feel by slight and gradual shifts in the framing, and slow dolly movements. My first instinct then was to shoot from different angles simultaneously so that, when projected, it would look like a live feed.

LZ I noticed that since *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest*, you seem to be increasingly interested in utilizing artificial scenery. In *Seven Intellectuals, Part V*, the only real location was Xian Qiang Fang Restaurant, one of Shanghai’s colonial places that serves traditional food. But the sets in *The Fifth Night* and *Dawn Mist, Separation Faith* were either preexisting at the shooting base or you had them artificially constructed. How would you account for that?

YF In Chinese, there is an idiom “真情流露” [similar to the English idiom “to wear one’s heart on one’s sleeve”]. The “heart” is not only transparent and open, it also has to be true. It is always a challenge to direct actors to express believably “true” feelings on screen. This is something I am slowly coming to realize. Another strange phrase evolved from that same idiom: “真假流露” [an alteration: “to wear one’s ambivalent heart on one’s sleeve”]. What if we expressed our true and fake emotions at the same time, in order to reach what we ultimately desire? Mixing both yin and yang is like painting truth and lies. I wondered how to achieve such imagery and how to show this thin line between the real and unreal through film techniques: set design, characters, costumes, and music. Is seeing really believing? After *Seven Intellectuals*, I realized that the most important goal for me was to create a psychological experience. *Estranged Paradise* (2002) is what I call a “little intellectual film”; it involves people with knowledge and education. *Seven Intellectuals* is more of an abstract one. They both interested me and made me excited. I can breathe their existence, be moved by them, and have a small telepathic moment with each, but I feel I cannot comprehend them 100 percent. I am deciphering more in the works I am making now; it’s an interesting change in myself.



LZ You have a concept of reading film by watching it, but your final concern is whether people have a spiritual life. What you do drastically clashes with traditional film education. You challenge film conventions in your own unique way. Can you elaborate on your choices?

YF I have had an increasingly bigger budget, and thus a larger crew, each time, from *Seven Intellectuals* to *Dawn Mist*, *Separation Faith* to *The Fifth Night*. My production teams look more and more like a standard-size, professional film crew. Sometimes I joke with my DP and other crew members, "Hey guys, looks like we are making a movie! We totally look like a professional film crew!" But I also keep asking them: "Do you think we are making a movie?" They say, "Of course we are making a movie." I highly doubt everyone believes it, though. Here is what gets tricky: it's a rhetorical question. Even though people who have collaborated with me for the longest time might still possess their own ideas of what a movie should be, I hope they are on the same page with me. If we see *The Fifth Night* as a little midnight theater, then part one should show the night before midnight, while part two should show the early morning after midnight. It's the same location. The same time. The same theater. The focus of part one is to create a world where boys and girls meet and part randomly, like in a dream. We achieve this by applying regular



shooting techniques, including sliding, panning, tilting, pushing, and pulling. The camera constantly moves to show individual young boys and girls in a meditative state in the middle of a small plaza at night. Moving cameras enhance this sense of loneliness: every night, there is only one person. Every night, there is only one soul wandering. The boys and girls meet with and part from one another through writing. Their encounters are brief, without deep exchanges. Maybe it is just part of the fantasy. What happened exactly? Or does it just look familiar?

LZ Why did you decide to use seven cameras and monitors for shooting *The Fifth Night*? Why not ten, or five?



YF Five is an odd number. Does a night look familiar? The piece is led by questions like these in order to build a particular atmosphere. On set, except when directing my actors and coordinating with my DP, I spent a long time gazing at all the monitors to oversee what was going on. But when I looked at them, I felt like I was watching a different movie. This excited me, because all the imperfections seemed to belong there. Booms in the shot, noises on set, bloopers, and mistakes mixed with actual dialogue became glamorous on the monitors. So I couldn't help but wonder: What are we really monitoring? Why do we need to decide what's good or bad? What are our standards?

LZ This takes us back to our discussion of the discarded takes from *Dawn Mist*, *Separation Faith*. Are these thoughts related?

YF Of course. However, *The Fifth Night* pushes this thinking further by making certain narrative changes. One change was driven by an alternate use of rehearsals. As directors, we judge what works by referring to what's on the monitor—this is why there is always something fake about a piece of work. In rehearsals, we refer to actors' performances on the monitor to make sure they work and end up in the final film. Yet the process itself can actually be part of the piece. I am interested in the realistic documentation on the monitor, before the real shoot. It inspires me. The best energy is there.

LZ Do memories affect your creativity?

YF Each time I've decided to make a project, I have had a vague conception of the general direction I'd like to take. For example, during the shoot of *Dawn Mist*, *Separation Faith*, I knew I wanted eight or nine shots, but I was unsure about their cinematic feel. Maybe I was uncertain of how it would feel to escape from a city, as those young people do in the film. Instinctively, I have a tendency to go for perfection and beauty. That is why I wanted to create the feel of a stage at the plaza between the two buildings at the Shanghai Film Shooting Base before I figured out what I was doing on set. I have a lot of appreciation for Yin Xiaoming, my excellent production designer, who built a lighthouse-style structure with a spiral staircase. He was able to design a set based on my ideas, which weren't clear until much later. I also had hoped to shoot night scenes in the woods so that it would look like a prop forest. Again, it was a matter of budget. I also wanted synchronic and fluid images, which could be moving cars, horses, pedestrians, lights, sound, or whatever. It was very vague. Images of young blacksmiths setting up the fire and pounding on the steel came much later. At that point, I only knew that there would be a few boys and girls walking around. But I had not yet decided how to shoot it.

LZ There is another hidden theme in several of your works, that of "returning to reality." What is the reality you are facing, let alone the spiritual life you are talking about?

YF First of all, what is reality? What is reality to you? What's surrounding you? What are your thoughts on reality? What's your inquiry into reality? There is a lot that we can digest and reflect on. In terms of paintings, are those orchids in Chinese paintings real? What do you see besides orchids? From ancient through modern times, what metaphor do orchids embody? Sadness, loneliness, worries about the country and people? This makes things interesting. How can we make sense of reality? We might imply certain things, beat around the bush, or throw in thoughts from a completely different angle. All these approaches are valid and have a lot to do with our daily life.

THE NIGHTMAN COMETH



On March 11–12, 2012, Yang Fudong and Li Zhenhua continued their ongoing discussion of the artist's recent work. Translated from Chinese by Ying Liu.

LI ZHENHUA In order to discuss *The Nightman Cometh* with depth, we might want to start by talking about *The Fifth Night*. *The Fifth Night* is a multi-channel installation—a more concrete theatrical attempt built upon your previous *Dawn Mist*, *Separation Faith*, which created a fête-like viewing experience and also played with the idea of synchronization. However, *The Nightman Cometh* is different—we can almost see the shadow of your much earlier work, *Backyard—Hey! Sun is Rising*. Of course it is more theatrical, and the different time periods are intermixed. The snow scene, in particular, is

almost horrifying due to its extreme quietness. Those spotted deer and the gliding eagle take the audience out of reality and into a space where historical references converge. So I would really like to know where you took your inspiration from, and how you account for returning to the short film format, as well as utilizing a style rooted in fantasy.

YANG FUDONG When a film focuses on space, it tends to emphasize the art of how to “be seen” in an exhibit. From *Dawn Mist*, *Separation Faith* (2009), to *The Fifth Night* (2010), to *One Half of August* (2011), these are creations that were presented with such an intention embedded within the work, while *The Nightman Cometh* is apt to highlight the “disappearing” part of things by utilizing drawn sketches and random video documentation. As for the reason



for returning to the short film format, it is because I hope to make “film paintings,” or so-called film “sketches” to metaphorically represent the imaginary space which results from the perception of an artwork. The footage recorded from a monitor that was attached to a shooting camera took place during the production, which supplements discussion and the viewing experience. In a similar case, *The Fifth Night, Part II*, also contains lots of “preview” segments. The viewer might find it interesting to see traces of “previews,” and this is something I would like to keep working with in the future. Now come back to *The Nightman Cometh*, this 20-minute film—its narrative has something to do with what I refer to as “hint film” that we have discussed before. A kind of narrative that would hint at things in order to express what words cannot communicate. And how to represent it in an independent movie, with elements such as narrative-contained imageries, actors, sets, and even something literary? It became the focus of my experiments during the production. Even though *The Nightman Cometh* looks like a period piece, I would consider it as a “neorealistic” approach. A meditative one. And it is only the feeling in the film that has to do with “neorealism” because in fact it questions contemporary reality as well as societal ideology.

LZ You mentioned historical references, neorealism, as well as literary elements. So, what part of your experience drove you to shoot a baron on an ancient battlefield or an intellectual in post 1900s Shanghai, instead of setting

it up with a contemporary cityscape as the backdrop, like what you did in *Backyard—Hey! Sun is Rising*?

YF *The Nightman Cometh* gives such an impression of an old classical narration, not so much by recounting historical events, but in how it depicts contemporary reality through the lens of history. It brings up modern and current concerns through the subconscious by asking certain questions. There is a baron. There are characters and plotlines. There seems to be reenactment of stories or situations that took place hundreds of years ago, however, it makes no effort to recover history. Rather, its goal is to transport a sense of history and to create room for introspection into one’s subconscious reality.

LZ As for you, does such reality truly exist?

YF It seems rather pointless to focus on whether such reality is the truth or whether the truth truly exists. In *The Nightman Cometh*, it is more crucial to pay attention when the soldier or warrior reaches a moment where he has to decide whether he should disappear or keep fighting when the night falls. Along with trying to retain his last hope, those things mean more to me than depicting “truth” or “reality.”

LZ *The Nightman Cometh* is more than just a video art piece. Besides the cinematic space you created, you also incorporated paintings and footage recorded off the monitor. I wonder if you can elaborate on the relationship between image created on set and the set uncovered by the monitor. Remember how we briefly talked about using paintings and playback video during your production, and how it resembles the process of archeological discoveries? Such additions seem to inform what is captured in your images by adding elements of the present tense, which is also marked by the past tense. There are connections not only in terms of aesthetics and relativity, but also in terms of the time continuum.

YF By utilizing documentary footage, I hope to confuse the line between the set and reality and thus to create a sense of mistake (or departure from the principal part/element). Can it be counted as part of the film, for example, what appears on the monitor or rises from my subconsciousness during the shoot? How about the realistic documentary section? Does this constitute a “time film” segment in *The Nightman Cometh*?

LZ Can you talk about how your paintings function in relation to the whole setup of the piece?

YF Besides a short film, *The Nightman Cometh* also comprises eight oil



paintings. The individuality of each of them is emphasized. Some stories in the whole piece are told through those images. That is also why I call them "sketch films," because they give a sense of incompleteness, and the rest of the "editing" is to be done in the viewer's consciousness. It is not unusual that film narrative is achieved through editing a series of shots into a sequence. So to some extent, the "montage" going from one painting to another can be more interesting, although they must be produced with the fundamental idea of film in mind, or say, under the direction of the "director." When I paint, I don't want to make something that is academic or absolutely painterly. What I care about more is to create a particular atmosphere and texture that has a handmade feel, as well as a narrative generated from painting-to-painting montage. The medium of oil on canvas or the quality of painterliness does not interest me much. The connections among those paintings could help render what I call "imagination film." The images that ended up in the gallery were painted when the short was close to being completed. They make an alternative version of the film part of *The Nightman Cometh*.

LZ What are you implying with the baron (someone hurt) and the male in a white suit (someone lost in his search) in *The Nightman Cometh*? Especially when it is set against a gloomy, sleeting day, on a snow-covered ancient battlefield filled with artificial hills and rocks. Does it have to do with your ongoing attempt in search for a spiritual life?

YF "Neorealism" is a kind of history theater where current and contemporary societal conditions come to play. Who exists in reality, the baron in his period costume or the ghost in a modern outfit? When the ancient battlefield scene and other historical events appear and reappear, where do they belong, in the past, the present or the night-falling future? How impossible it seems to make up your mind, when there is no easy answer to get from the narration! It is getting dark. The soldier or the warrior has to decide whether to disappear/escape (die) or to continue fighting, which of course might lead to the same fate—death. There is hope nonetheless. The body is essential, yet the soul is more precious still. It is the spirit which backs him up in life. How should we live our lives now? How do we identify ourselves with neorealistic historical events and continue to search for spiritual meanings? What do we really want?

LZ What will you do? Fight back or disappear?

YF To resist or to give up. At this moment, the truth is not important in the context of neorealism. I will keep searching for hope.



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Pages 1, 2, 4: *The Fifth Night*, 2010. 7-channel video installation, 35mm black-and-white film transferred to HD video with sound, duration: 10 minutes, 37 seconds.

Pages 5–8: *Yejiang / The Nightman Cometh*, 2011. Single-channel video installation, 35mm black-and-white film transferred to HD video with sound, duration: 19 minutes, 21 seconds.