

Amphibian Heroes, Skins, Naive Effects

A GATHERING AT THE
CARNIVAL SHOP, 2015,
still from digital video:
35min. Courtesy the artist.

A CONVERSATION WITH MOCHU



BY LANTIAN XIE

Mochu is an artist and filmmaker whose work treads with acidic vibrancy across cybernetic theory, psychedelics, utopianism and special effects. We first met on the occasion of “What Time Is It?”—a conference on technologies of life in the contemporary, convened by Sarai-Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi, and Raqs Media Collective in December 2017—where Mochu spoke on holes and post-cinema. Since then, we’ve had many conversations, frequently leaving me with the feeling of being swept up in an undertow, at great velocity and yet without friction or edge. Here’s a transcript of one that we had over Skype, between Dubai and Delhi.



Lantian Xie In your visual essay *Trophies of an Afternoon*¹ you speak about becoming amphibian, so I’d like to start with Kevin Costner. More specifically, the film *Waterworld* (1995), in which Costner plays an amphibian good-guy sailing through a wet *Mad Max*² world ruled by pirates called the Smokers, so-called because they live aboard the world’s last oil tanker, but also, more importantly, because they ration between themselves the world’s last cigarettes. What do you make of this?

Mochu I guess “becoming amphibian” implies a negotiation with surfaces, an ability to claim one’s right to remain undifferentiated and underground in some way. There is an infidelity toward transparency as well. In a liquid world, perspective distorts and light

1. Published in the journal *Studies in South Asian Film & Media*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2015.

2. The original *Mad Max* film was directed by George Miller and released in Australia in 1979, with Mel Gibson in the title role, fighting biker gangs in a remote, post-apocalyptic landscape.

3. The protagonist, played by Johnny Depp, in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films (2003–17).

4. *Om Dar-B-Dar* is a 1988 experimental film directed by Kamal Swaroop, set in a small town in Rajasthan.

5. *Possession* is a 1981 horror-thriller about a woman whose body is inhabited by a monster.

6. *Bamboo Stalk* is a 2012 novel about Jose, the son of a Filipino domestic worker and a Kuwaiti father, and his split upbringing and identities between the two countries.

COOL MEMORIES OF REMOTE GODS, 2017, still from digital video: 14 min 48 sec. Courtesy the artist.

7. There is a theory that the Disney film *Aladdin* (1992) is set in a post-apocalyptic future, which explains many of the story’s chronological inconsistencies.

8. At the end of *Kiss Me Deadly*, the character Gabrielle opens a mysterious box and unleashes a blinding nuclear fire.

9. In the last scene of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, the Ark of the Covenant is seen being entered into storage in a warehouse belonging to agents of the American government.

becomes unreliable. What is far may crawl up close all of a sudden, and an ancient geology may sprout tentacles upon contact. To become amphibious is to get naturalized to this “incorrect” perspective, to be at home with opacity, ambiguous translucencies and other metamorphic states.

In that sense, more than Costner’s character the Mariner, it is Jack Sparrow³ that I find even more amphibious. Through sustained interaction with amphibious beings like crabs, mermaids and the *Flying Dutchman* crew, Jack Sparrow learns to become unreliable and shifty. Piracy here is a hack of personality, an instantaneous shedding of skin. Or to take another example, in the movie *Om Dar-B-Dar* (1988),⁴ adolescence is a kind of amphibious condition, tadpole-like. The boy grows up into a frog, learning to hold his breath under water. The idea is that once we learn to control our breathing it’s a kind of bargaining with death, because it is on the basis that after a certain number of inhalations death inevitably arrives. Once our breath is exhausted, we die—unless we learn to animate ourselves without breath, like vampires.

So to become amphibious is to cheat death, to stay underwater and use gills instead of lungs. Like vampirism, it’s a kind of crypto-currency, in that we change the terms of trading with death. Smoking in *Waterworld* is perhaps an allusion to this kind of pirate-trading on inhalations and exhalations. It’s the perfect sport for the end-times because smoke adulterates breath. It’s the camouflage ink outside of water and defines the first amphibious slither. The smoker is of a tentacular order, like the creature in *Possession* (1981).⁵ Interestingly, the kid in *Possession* also begins to breathe underwater in the bathtub.

LX In Saud Alsanousi’s novel *Bamboo Stalk* (2012),⁶ there’s a smoker who seems to speak only if words emerge from the throat accompanied by smoke, as if speech sits more easily in carbon, tar and heat, than not. In Moscow, Lenin is swimming mute in his mausoleum, painted a pale skin tone, suspended in liquid embalming solution of formaldehyde, ethanol, phenol and water.

M Just like the postponement of death is achieved through either prolonging adolescence or by staying amphibious, techniques proposed for physical immortality also evoke some kind of amphibious state, mostly the images of cryogenic chambers in science fiction. In all possibility if Lenin is ever resurrected, he would be an amphibian hero, somewhat like Godzilla.

LX Godzilla and Aladdin’s genie also share a nuclear womb.⁷ This makes me think of the glowing briefcase from *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and the atomic Pandora’s box from the end of *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955).⁸ Or, maybe better, in the last scene of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981),⁹ a clandestine warehouse is seen filled with innumerable crates all labeled “Top Secret.” In the talk you gave at Alserkhal Avenue [in November 2018], “Island Mentality or As Tax Free As the Undead,” you make this formulation about freeports in which forces seem to operate with utter ambivalence to light, visibility or optical register.

M Freeports and tax-free trade zones, in addition to providing relative autonomy and exception, seem also to promise some kind of metaphysical “outside” to the dominant rules. In principle then, a freeport can be as good a fantasy device as outer space. Just as the extreme conditions of interstellar space—like warped gravity or distorted time—provide fertile ground for the imagination of alien life or objects anterior to thought, tax-free zones allow for thinking outside of finance and algorithmic computation. Like a tragic rehash of Fredric Jameson’s point about the impossibility of imagining the end of capitalism,¹⁰ simply setting up a zone with altered financial rules begins to feel as fantastic and trippy as the thought experiments in the novels of the Strugatskys.¹¹

A text that set me thinking in this direction was by Stefan Heidenreich, about art freeports.¹² Referring to the anti-correlationist writings of Quentin Meillassoux,¹³ and their later contextualization by Suhail Malik,¹⁴ Heidenreich argues that Speculative Realism provides cover for an ideology of Freeportism that aims to eliminate all sensorial considerations in art—by creating conditions where all that can be done with art is to store it safely, and no one ever gets to see it. Which is to say that if the value of artworks rises so high, then its risk management would eventually end up having to protect the artworks from even human intervention or contact. By extension, one could imagine art production itself becoming something disengaged from human decisions or the human sensorium. Anticipations of such art exist within modern art history itself, like in Suprematism and the non-objective world, for instance.

Even though in practice ideas like these foreclose any attempt to be realized through images, I am interested in how works of art have always been used as markers to grasp dystopian puzzles or time-paradoxes. I gave some examples in my talk, like how Edvard Munch’s *The Scream* was proposed as a nuclear warning sign for the far future, to be installed in New Mexico.¹⁵ That’s pretty much the same kind of imagination as *Raiders of the Lost Ark*; the most “Top” of all secrets is coded with a healthy dose of Expressionism. Perhaps Odilon Redon’s flying eyeballoon might decode such secrets.¹⁶

LX In this formulation of computational transactions at a thought-speed ulterior to “the world,” do subject identification and disciplinary practices occur as inconvenient fossils that give no more than texture to a litany of capital flows?

M I haven’t been able to entirely decide whether it makes more sense to think of capital flows being absolutely and neatly indifferent to subject identification or to discipline, in the human sense. The term “litany” strikes the warning note there because the primary problem itself is that extrapolating forces of capital into a transcendental register like this runs a direct risk of covertly replicating theological models. It recalls the mainstream apocalyptic imagination of AI singularity, which is as absurd as climate change as visualized by Hollywood.

I suppose a reasonable question about subjectivity and consciousness could be about how one can reprogram or revise thought itself in such a

10. In his essay “Future City” (2003), published in the *New Left Review*, Fredric Jameson writes, “Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.” He himself had written in 1994, in *Seeds of Time*: “It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations.” Slavoj Žižek has repeatedly made the same argument. Mark Fisher attributes the idea to both Jameson and Žižek in *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (London: Zero Books, 2009), p. 2.

11. Arkady Strugatsky (1925–1991) and Boris Strugatsky (1933–2012) were brothers and collaborators on science-fiction novels. They adapted their novel *Roadside Picnic* (1971) for Andrei Tarkovsky’s film *Stalker* (1979).

12. Heidenreich’s *Freeportism as Style and Ideology: Post-Internet and Speculative Realism*, published in *e-flux journal* #71, March 2016.



COOL MEMORIES OF REMOTE GODS, 2017, still from digital video: 14 min 48 sec. Courtesy the artist.

13. Meillassoux’s speculative materialism is against the correlationist idea of “finitude.” Meillassoux describes correlationism as “the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other.”

14. Malik’s thesis is that “contemporary art is a correlationism,” because any perspective found in the aesthetic experience of most art is still mediated through thoughts and knowledge.

15. In the 1990s, the American Department of Energy hired artists to design signage for the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in New Mexico. They proposed, among other things, small reproductions of Edvard Munch’s *The Scream* (1893).

16. Odilon Redon’s drawing *Eye-Balloon* (1878), depicts a floating eyeball suspended above the earth.

17. George Méliès (1861–1938), French film director of early science-fiction films including *A Trip to the Moon* (1902); Segundo de Chomón (1871–1929), Spanish director known for his optical and camera tricks; Karel Zeman (1910–1989), Czech filmmaker and animator.

manner that it can occupy a location outside of what we currently assume to be human. This would involve a complete world-building exercise realized through rigorous reasoning and analysis as well as wild leaps of imagination. What remains of the notion of the human or of subjectivity will be seen then.

LX I’ve said this to you before but your work always makes me think of whiskey; there’s a particular surface tension, light refraction, and a certain grip to glass (and throats), but also a kind of delirium—a determined intoxication of thinking that produces contortions and has an acrobatic quality.

M Thank you for the kind and generous reading! And if I am not wrong, you mentioned this in a previous conversation, in the context of my video *Cool Memories of Remote Gods* (2017). Intoxication and delirium there focused on a particular kind of ruin and decay along the hippie trail in India. The politics of the ‘60s counterculture was a prologue to the emergence of the current technological regime. Psychedelic substances as chemical prosthesis provided the necessary biopolitical impetus to build the edifice of the Californian ideology and its subsequent neo-conservative nodes. However, it is in the sites of its decay that one can observe the initial mutations of this ideology that suggest further delirious currents. Decay exposes new formal arrangements and material conspiracies similar to the dynamism of the undead, the amphibian or the pirate. This is the realm of surfaces, skins and special effects, of animations with remote causes.

LX You’ve described in our previous conversations a formulation of the special effect as eternal slippage in which the difference between an ascent and a fall becomes indistinct.

M To begin with, there is the trick imagery in early cinema like in the classic works of George Méliès, Segundo de Chomón or Karel Zeman.¹⁷ They present a kind of “naive” world, with perspective tricks and apparitions derived from the paradoxes of common-sense physics. It’s a kind of exploitation of our audiovisual perceptive wiring and our orientation to gravity, somewhat like stage magic, which is where cinema’s prehistory lies in any case. Basic magic tricks utilize very fundamental perception gaps on a regular basis. Even upon a rudimentary reading about tricks we end up with ontologically indeterminate entities like holes, shadows, spatial parts, etc. And there emerges curious junctures at which language games, logic and jokes collide, producing certain special effects that we commonly refer to as sense or even as meaning, depending on the circumstances.

Special effects in cinema too are about a similar combination of affects, logic and sensations. However, in a contemporary sense, this indeterminate mass of stray ontologies also becomes symptomatic of a planetary-scale technological condition that stays in a constant state of material and computational flux. That’s when the image of a frictionless, slippery surface comes up. The ability of automated pixels to fill in gaps in images promises such a seamless surface-enabling smooth motion and ethereal curves.

In the culture industries this manifests as a general loss of boundaries after the deactivation of modernism and the emergence of post-internet practices in the arts. Hybrid surgeries, hormone downloads, live metabolism trackers and other bio-engineering fantasies develop in conjunction with the proliferation of particle effects, material libraries,¹⁸ and Transformers and Sentinels in pop culture.¹⁹ This could also be seen in the rise of an aspect of cinema that doesn't belong to the domain of light, something that evades the solar hegemonic complex.

LX On the album *The Sun's Tirade* (2016),²⁰ Rashad depicts time spent living in California's endless summers as though living with the sun in endless tirade, a tirade that swallows time.

M Hollywood shows that California has always been good at photosynthesis; sunlight is converted directly into energy. But there were strong subterranean rebellions too in California, against the same photosensitivity. What comes to mind is the early avant-garde cinema of Maya Deren and Kenneth Anger or the dark sunlight in many of David Lynch's films.²¹ For example, Kenneth Anger considered Lucifer, the fallen Morningstar, to be the "patron saint of movies." For him cinema was an invocation of non-retinal light. Claudine Clark's title song *I see the lights! I see the party lights!* in Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1963) becomes an invocation of visionary light that is from the fallen star, a light from nether that is not seen by the eye but is sensed directly by the brain. CGI continues this revolt against the sun in some way by producing visions that are independent of photosensitive surfaces. It has something of the underground in it.

LX I recall during that conference where we met in Delhi—and I hope he doesn't mind my mentioning this—Ravi Sundaram, one of the conference's conveners, accidentally fell out of his chair shortly after a clip played of Sreenivasan falling out of his bed in a scene from *Arabikkatha* (2007).²² I wonder if sympathetic magic can be formulated as special effect?

M That's a great observation! Though I would assume that all moving images, by design, carry a sympathetic relation with the world. Like how Sreenivasan's fall could directly influence the conference. Special effects would be only necessary for things that subvert or lie outside of such a mimetic relation. Let's say the T-1000²³ is a voodoo doll from the future, but it also kills on its own whomever it copies.

LX A scenario: a protagonist/antagonist retrieves the long-lost MacGuffin²⁴ from decaying surroundings. Its contents occur materially as incidental—its value is its plot-motivating capacity in that it occasions movement, a future.

M A counter-scenario: the introduction to Milorad Pavić's *Dictionary of the Khazars* (1984) describes its original medieval version that is written with poisoned ink.²⁵ An exact copy of the book exists

18. "Particle effects" is the term used in motion graphics and game physics for re-creating highly complex and specific phenomena such as fire, explosions, smoke, moving water, sparks, snow, dust and explosions. "Material libraries" are physical places where information about different substances can be acquired and the materials can be physically experienced.

19. Originally a Japanese toy line and animated television series, Transformers are robots that convert their bodies into machines. Sentinels appear in the *X-Men* comic franchise as mutant-hunting robots.

20. *The Sun's Tirade* (2016) is American rapper Isaiah Rashad's debut studio album.

21. Maya Deren (1917–1961) was an experimental filmmaker known for her expressionistic, dreamlike films including *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943); Kenneth Anger (b. 1927) is famous for his explorations of biker, automobile and queer subcultures in his films *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954), *Scorpio Rising* (1963) and *Kustom Kar Kommandos* (1965); David Lynch is the creator of the television series *Twin Peaks* (1990–91) and films including *Dune* (1984), *Mulholland Drive* (2001) and *Inland Empire* (2006).

22. *Arabikkatha* ("Arabian Tale") is a 2007 film directed by Lal Jose and written by Ikkal Kuttipuram about a young man steeped in the leftist ideology of Kerala's Communist Party who is forced to work in Dubai where his worldview conflicts with the laborers and other economic migrants he encounters there.

23. The T-1000 is an android assassin from the "Terminator" franchise, first appearing in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), and is composed of a liquid metal. Due to its composition, it possesses the ability to take on the form of objects or the appearance of other people.

24. Alfred Hitchcock popularized this term for something that a character in a story desires but is largely incidental to the narrative itself.

25. Milorad Pavić is a Serbian novelist. *Dictionary of the Khazars: A Lexicon Novel* (1984) is largely fictional but constructed like a series of encyclopedias.

ISLAND MENTALITY OR AS TAX FREE AS THE UNDEAD, 2018, image of lecture performance at Alserkal Avenue: 35 min. Courtesy Alserkal Residency, Dubai.



that is written in normal ink. On simultaneous readings of both books it is possible to tell on which page exactly the reader of the poisoned original would die. In addition, the non-poisoned copy also contains an hourglass. As the first half of the hourglass empties itself of sand the reader would have to continue reading the book back to front. Taking a cue from the nuclear warning sign, what cover art could be retrieved from the future to warn a medieval reader of the poisoned ink and hack the fatal firewall?