

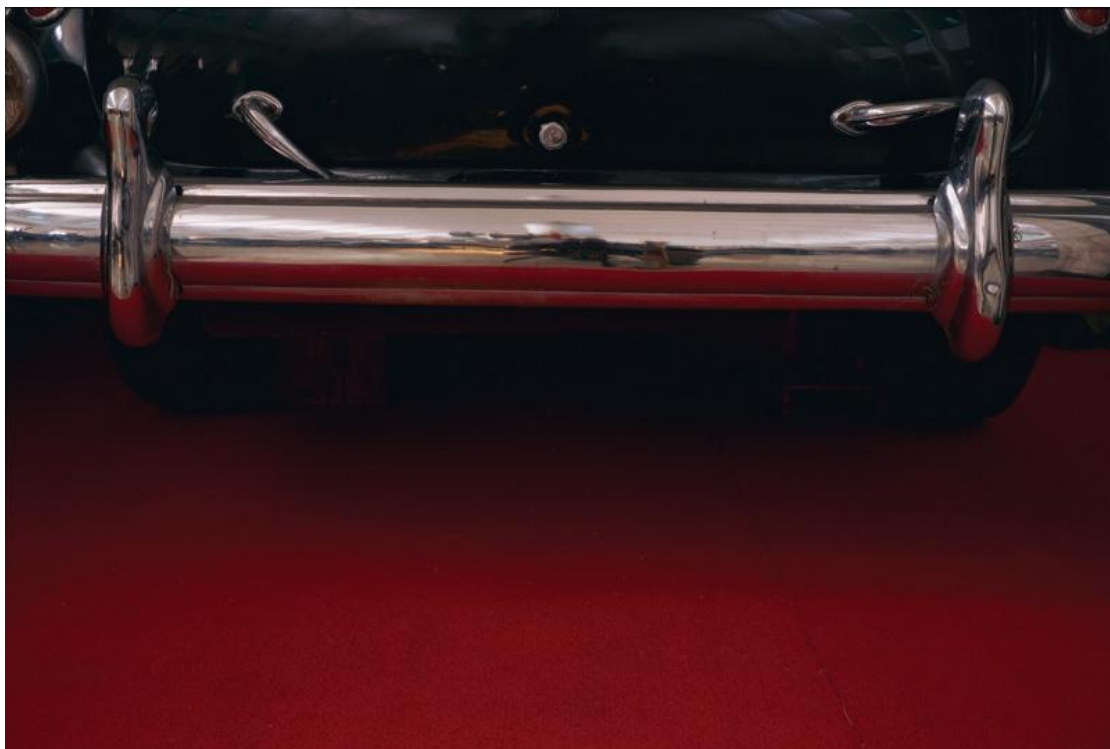
Writing what cannot be written about: The poietics of creation

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Abstract

“Writing” is often taken as a model of the creative process. It is widely assumed, not least by writers themselves, that creation in general has features that we readily associate with language, logic or discourse. “Text”, “textuality”, and “inter-textuality” became popular metaphors in the second half of the twentieth century to explain a large variety of cultural and artistic phenomenon. The present study takes issue with the idea that the creative component of culture is structured on the model of language. It draws on the work of the philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis to suggest instead that human creation is artefact of the imagination—and that acts of imagination in fact look more like object creation and design than speaking or writing. Ironically, this is true of speaking and writing as much as it is of painting or sculpture. The case for the non-discursive and non-linguistic model of creation is illustrated with the example of the work of the contemporary Chinese artist, Feng Yan (b. 1963).



Feng Yan, Black Car, Red Carpet, 130x87.3 cm, 2006



Feng Yan, Car Door, 130x85.7 cm, 2006



Feng Yan, The People's Conference Hall, 163.9x110 cm, 2006



Feng Yan, Tire and Red Carpet, 130x87.3cm, 2006

I insist that words are totally absent from my mind when I really think . . . (Jacques Hadamard)

Image and order: at a distance from words

The Chinese artist Feng Yan was born in 1963. He trained as a film director at the Beijing Film Academy. Later on, he worked as a writer in New York City until 2001 (Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, 2010). Since then, he has lived in Beijing, and has produced an impressive series of minimalist works in the photographic medium—notably “Order” (2005), “Power” (2007) and most recently the “Psychedelic Bamboo” series.¹ Among the images Feng has created are works of great power and resonance. The self-descriptions of these works also reveal a writer capable of great expressive economy and beauty. That is rare combination—to match word and image. Feng’s self-interpretation exceeds in explanatory power that of the critics, a number of them very astute, who have written sympathetically about his art.²

Many people say that my photographic works are like paintings. I think it is due to their painterly composition. I enjoy expressing my unchanged predilection for “design” through the process of photography. From when I was 21, Dang Cheng, my teacher from Xian who had studied design in Japan, imbued me with the fundamental concepts of design. I came to recognize the power that could be created through rational arrangement, and I believe it is essential in any design approach. In the “Order” series I display the natural order existing in quotidian things. In my 2007 “Power” series, I concern myself with the symbolic detail of things. “Four Flags” is a minimalist and abstract work.

“Psychedelic Bamboo” are entirely abstract. Most people would mistake the formless, beautiful colours for computer generated graphics. The fact is, they are not, and it does not matter. I took the pictures outside a nightclub where I live. My works have always been born from experience in my everyday life. Certain things in daily life have repeatedly appeared,

¹ Jpeg versions of works from the “Power” and “Order” series can be viewed at <http://www.fengyan.info/photographs.htm>

² For critical reception of Feng’s work, see <http://www.fengyan.info/reviews.htm>

stagnated, vanished, occurred then solidified in my mind; they become the DNA of my work, morphing eventually into a kind of classic scene—a moment in eternity.

As I travel my road, I would like to take these scenes with me until their secular identities are lost from my eyes (Feng, n.d.).

The critic Wu Hong makes two important observations about Feng's art. First his art is not photography. "I would rather place his works under the more neutralized term "picture" or "image"" (Wu, n.d.). Viewed in this way, photography is the technical medium of creation, not the artistic medium of creation. To create art out of a technical medium, as Feng does, begs the question of "what is art?" Images, and their animating presupposition, the imagination, is a good place to look for an answer to this question. Feng creates images, not photographs. The difference is that images—artworks—"stick in the mind". They are unforgettable—in a way that photographs in the ordinary sense are not. Such images resonant with us—and do so in deep and perhaps unaccountable ways.

Why is this so? One explanation is that such images strip away the inessential, the decorative, and the distracting. Another way of putting this is that, through abstraction, these images come close to exhibiting pure form. Feng does this even though, paradoxically, the common themes of his art are everyday artifices and objects—cars, rooms, armchairs. He reveals the transcendental form of these mundane objects. The intensity and focus of his images are riveting. The pictures are startling, not least of all because of their uncanny grasp of the depth of form that lies underneath the surface of everyday things. Feng's images, in this respect, are reminiscent of the paintings of Vermeer.

To do this successfully, to bear witness to the transcendental essence of mundane things, we see that Feng—in a biographical sense—has stripped back his own conception of art in pursuit of something stark and elemental. He began his artistic life as a cinematographer. In that incarnation, Wu Hong notes, "his pictures would naturally stir people with the impulse for literary narration". His still images, in contrast, "block any attempt for literary narration." This process of abstraction directly resists treating the world on the model of language. The model of language supposes that everything is fashioned after speaking and writing. The consequence of Feng's restoration of the dignity of things, Wu Hong observes, is that

... the viewer is no longer the above all "narrative subject." In linguistic study, people feel the natural superiority over nature simply because everything is the object for narration by people as the subject. Man's superiority develops from the process of turning this narrative possibility into reality. When Feng Yan breaks this "language" myth with object as the "material" for "discourse" no longer submits to the "linguistic" logic; it has gained a quality of "being itself" that is equal to the subject personality. (n.d.)

Such a claim is not without an element of paradox. The critic writes (powerfully) about rejecting the linguistic model. The artist, a writer himself until recently, relinquishes the baroque embellishments of discourse for a studied minimalist silence. It is not the case, though, that words are second rate. They are not any more second rate, or first rate, than musical tones, digital pixels, or pigments used by painters—or any other technical medium of creation. Most work, in whatever medium, will not arrest our attention. It will not cause us to pause to think. Most pictures hanging in galleries are passed over with barely a moment's consideration. They do not hold us in awe. And yet some, a minority, do—as a small minority of texts also do. Nevertheless most acts of creation are

a failure. If words are a special case, it is only because they have a certain facility for papering over such failures.

Words have one advantage over things—even if this advantage is not an especially admirable one. This is the ease with which words are able to recommend second-rate works of all kinds. If the visual and performing arts for the most part do not comment on works, writers do, and they do so unstintingly. If the intention of the writer is to trawl for the good among the bad, then the industry of criticism for the most part does a poor job of it. Little criticism survives the passage of time, and few critical judgements manage successfully at the time to identify the birth of classic works. On the other hand, critical defences of failed works are legion. In part this is because many writers and artists have difficulty distinguishing between critical explanations of art works and ideologies of art. Ideologies of art typically eulogize the artwork for its moral function. This function may be critical; it may be affirmative. Either way, ideologies of art serve as a substitute for art. Commentary on the moral force of the artwork, on what the artwork “stands for” or what it “symbolizes”, subsumes the artwork. Some artworks though resist this. Feng’s images are an example of such recalcitrance. Feng’s self-interpretation of his art is that “[some] commonplace objects and environment . . . summon me to use destructive measures to save them from the fate of being instantly symbolized”—so as to “discover the intact order existing in the object itself” (Feng, n.d.).

Feng is an artist who chooses his words very carefully. In order to erase the ideological element from art—something that is perhaps of special significance for a Chinese artist—he who speaks carefully also necessarily places himself at a distance from words. Feng does not quite follow Wittgenstein (1961)—and stop speaking about what cannot be said. Nonetheless, in an equally interesting way, he has stepped back biographically both from cine-narrative and from the writer’s art—for the sake of the arresting image. And when he does speak, which he does with economy and eloquence, he speaks in images. The images characteristic of Feng’s work, like all artefacts of the imagination, have the gripping resonance of things-in-themselves, rather than simply serving as symbols of some ideological—some moral—cause of the day. The power of his art, as the artist himself suggests, lies in its capacity to create order—order out of chaos, order created through rational arrangement, order by design, the work of abstraction and composition. The words to describe this are allusive. Terms like reason, design, arrangement and composition are slippery. We could easily conceive of them in a Cartesian spirit, hardly in sympathy with the artist, as ciphers of logic and method, columns of syllogisms marching implacably in our direction. Equally, and on the contrary, we can think of rational arrangement as the expression of mute, intuitive experience, beyond words. In this case, we conceive of reason and design in the same enigmatic sense as Aldo Rossi’s architecture (1982) or Theo Angelopoulos’ film making (Horton, 1999). Rossi, Angelopoulos and Feng share a common ineffable sense of art as contemplation. This is art as an intense encounter with the essential form of things. The imagination is the human faculty where such forms are both conceived and perceived.

Beyond language: artefact, form and imagination

The imagination has available to it a common stock of form-generating media. These are not media in the sense of tone or stone—i.e. materials that convey meanings. Yet they are not full-fledged socio-aesthetic forms either in the sense that the sonata form or the Greek temple form are. Rather, form-generating media lay half-way between the sensuousness of materials and the meaningfulness of explicit forms. Proportion and

harmony—or contrast and pairing—are examples of such media. They shape tone and stone into recognizable, transmittable and reproducible forms. But they are not actually forms themselves. And, importantly, neither are they discourses or arguments. Forms command light and shade—the softness and hardness of things—not the premises of commentaries. Words also have light and shade, and in this respect have the capacity to be poietic things. Yet in the poietic mode, words are separable from points of view, messages, and moral judgements.

Poietics is an approach to understanding communication, thinking and behaviour in the same way that textuality and inter-textuality, and language and discourse, served as models and metaphors for communication, thinking and behaviour across much of the twentieth century. Poietics, however, emphasises that meaning and significance is principally produced by the form, shape and patterns of artefacts, material things, and objectivations rather than via words, texts and sub-texts. The poietic approach distinguishes, as George Steiner (1989, p. 16) does, two modes in which meaning is created. One is grammatical-logical discourse. The second is the sculpture-like shaping and forming of matter. The poietic approach is not indifferent to words and texts, but it is sceptical of the tendency of theories that rely on linguistic-type models to equate meaning and message. When Harold Innis observed that buildings and transport networks were as important to human communication as writing and books, he made a point that was essentially poietic in nature (Innis, 1951). The illusion of much communication, both in theory and practice, is that if we say something, it has an effect. But messages tend to fall on deaf ears—and as we start to understand this we consider how many messages default to sanctions. Wittgenstein (1961) was right. What is significant in human life lies beyond language. It is when we strip away language that we encounter the form of things. The most powerful ways we have of communicating are not via the content of messages but as a consequence of the pattern and shape of things.

In this spirit, the philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis criticizes the rationalist illusion that attributes the genesis of socio-historical or socio-aesthetic forms to communicative reasoning or discursive interaction. Castoriadis is sceptical of claims that reason is capable of creating, positing or revamping the imaginary forms of society. The many delirious follies of intellectuals suggest that such scepticism is warranted.³ From the Jacobins to Pol Pot and Sayyid Qutb, their behaviour over multiple centuries has turned numerous societies into charnel houses. As Castoriadis points out, if it is not self-devouring then reasoning must come to rest itself on non-linguistic suppositions. The basis of any discourse cannot be discursive if semantics is not to terminate in violence.

³ Castoriadis (1991, p. 10) was unwaveringly critical of the endless procession of intellectuals who identified with despotic and murderous regimes. In one very typical passage, he observed the magnetic appeal that even the creepiest kinds of “revolutionary power” had for intellectuals of his generation. Whenever one of these ugly powers appeared, “[then] begins the golden-age of fellow-travelers, who were able to afford the luxury of an apparently intransigent opposition to a part of reality—reality ‘at home’—by paying for it with the glorification of another part of this reality—over there, elsewhere, in Russia, in China, in Cuba, in Algeria, in Vietnam, or, if worst came to worst, in Albania. Rare are those among the great names in the Western intelligentsia who have not, at some moment between 1920 and 1970, made this ‘sacrifice of conscience’, sometimes (the least often) in the most infantile kind of credulity, other times (most often) with the most paltry sort of trickery. Sartre, stating in a menacing tone: ‘You cannot discuss what Stalin is doing, since he alone has the information that explains his motives’, will remain, no doubt, the most instructive specimen of the intellectual’s tendency to look ridiculous.”

The *telos* of discourse lies beyond words. The apprehension of this realm and its objects is intuitive and figurative. They are the products of *nous*, not *logos*. The intellectual's vice is to think that *logos* can do the work of *nous* (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 350). But discourse—if it is left to itself—is pitiless and destructive. Logical language, disconnected from figurative *nous*, is a violent medium. The way that discursive logic moves, from premise to conclusion, is ruthless and implacable. For sure, as Castoriadis remarks, this is not physical violence, but it is destructive all the same. To stand in the way of the logical torrent is to risk being swept aside. To question the premises, the truth, of torrential discourse is to risk excommunication—and worse. In this manner, rationalist discourse “inevitably destroys discourse itself” (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 350). Once this happens, it is a short step for the violence of discourse to be replaced by the force of arms.

Castoriadis equates self-mutilating reason with communicative or discursive reason—the logician's or rhetorician's reason (1997, pp. 256, 265). Reason in this register means chains of reasons that rest on discursive principles and that are logically organized. The nature of such reasoning is distinct from the intuitive-figurative nature—the mute enigmatic order—of socio-aesthetic and socio-historical forms. Forms precede words, and words presuppose the existence of mute forms. Once in existence, forms can be represented in and by language. They can be put into words and turned into the premise of an argument or discourse. They become, in this manner, the starting point of a narration or a commentary. Implications and conclusions can be derived from such premises. Yet the problem with this is that, while reasoning is logico-deductive or rhetorically inferential, form creation is not. Form does not exhibit the “train-like” dynamic of discourse—its implacable running on track through any obstruction.

New forms emerge through images not words (Castoriadis, 1987, pp. 321, 329; 1997, p. 258).⁴ This was one of Castoriadis' most important conclusions. New forms emerge from society's collective aural, visual and haptic-tactile imaging. The work of the imagination does not just represent “what is absent”. It also posits objects that otherwise would not exist. This occurs, in the first place, through the making—the poietics—of an image of the object. This is an act of figuration: the “positing of figures and the relations between and to these figures” (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 204). The creative or radical imagination, capable of bringing into being the image of something that has not existed before, does so by positing figures or models (Castoriadis, 1997, p. 269). Although these models and figures may be represented by words, they are not created by words.

This principle applies as much to works and objects whose materials are primarily linguistic in nature, as it does to any other kind of human creation. As classical rhetoric theorists understood, the good use of language depends on *taxis* (arrangement). *Taxis* allows speakers and writers to communicate through figures. Figures of speech are a resonance of figures of thought. They share structural characteristics and a semantic architecture in common. Classical rhetoric stressed that schemas of balance, repetition, word order, presence and omission, and proportion are key aspects of this architecture. Great speakers and writers are masters of such schemas. They build their words using repetitions of alliteration, assonance and anadiplosis. They orchestrate plateaus and

⁴ Castoriadis (1997, p. 329) remarks “. . . abstract thought itself always has to lean on some figure or image, be it, minimally the image of the words through which it is carried on”. Elsewhere (1987 [1975]), p. 329) he observes that radical imagination involves “the incessant emergence of the other in and through the positing (*Vor-stellung*) of images or figures . . .”

climaxes. They balance phrases and clauses, make calculated omissions (ellipsis), and create flexible word orders (parenthesis). Speakers understate and writers exaggerate—they play with the proportions of words and the (dis)proportionate relation of words to things and events. Most interesting of all is the kind of word architecture that creates relations between things that are seemingly unrelated. Metaphor and simile are classic ways of doing this. So is the drawing of comparisons or the arranging words and phrases in opposition. There is also a *taxis* of stacking that allows for the creation of orders of superior and inferior, higher and lower, genus and species. Words, like tones and stones, also can be turned upside down. When we invert words, we create relations of irony and paradox. Whatever the techniques used, and however they are deployed, the overall power of words depends on the underlying *taxis*.

Taxis provides incipient structure for visible and audible words. *Taxis* arises in the imagination. Hence Castoriadis' view that linguistic-type axioms, criteria and rules are suspended in acts of imagination (1997, p. 268). They are suspended by being over-determined by figures, models, and diagrams.⁵ Figures, models, and diagrams are the common media of *taxis*. On both the individual and the collective social level, figuration occurs through the imagination's power of organization. Correspondingly, this power of arrangement operates through figures that take shape via the imagination's mastery of form-generating media like hierarchy, balance, parallelism, repetition, similarity, contrast, proportion and pairing. The formation of an image involves the positing of elements and the bringing of those elements into a relation (Castoriadis, 1997, p. 259). Whether the material is tone or stone, words or even the physical matter of the universe, form-generating media play a crucial role in all kinds of creation.

This account of the emergence of forms through non-linguistic organizing media parallels certain conceptions of the pre-Socratics from Greek antiquity. The pre-Socratics recognized that whatever it is that brings contrary pairings into a meaningful relationship permits the generation of order out of chaos.⁶ The impetus toward such pairings is a force, *phusis*, built into the universe and mirrored in the human mind. *Phusis* is the force of organization that creates lucid, sustainable, contrary pairings of elements. How does it do this? Already observed in Greek antiquity was the key role that abstract media—like rhythm, balance, equilibrium, proportion, harmony, and symmetry—play in the manufacture of order out of chaos. These form-producing media, when mobilized, function as powers that bring otherwise unconnected elements into a relationship that constitutes meaning. In doing so, these powers create objects, and amongst them social, social-aesthetic and social-historical objects.

⁵ The great English mathematician Roger Penrose (1999, pp. 541-550) observes that the most creative thought is non-verbal. At the highest levels of insight, the sense of beauty plays the crucial role in thought. Penrose cites the self-reflections of Albert Einstein ("The words or the language, as they are written or spoken, do not seem to play any role in my mechanism of thought. The psychical elements which seem to serve as elements of thought . . . are, in my case, of visual and some muscular type"), the geneticist Francis Galton ("I . . . waste a vast deal of time in seeking appropriate words and phrases . . ."), and the mathematician Jacques Hadamard ("I insist that words are totally absent from my mind when I really think . . ."). Penrose says of himself: "Almost all my mathematical thinking is done visually and in terms of non-verbal concepts . . .")

⁶ That makes a pair out of what otherwise has no relationship or else simply an accidental relationship.

Castoriadis distances himself from the pre-Socratic account of creation in one crucial respect, though. Its notion of contrary pairings was a-historical. It set the stage for Plato's assertion that forms are unchanging. Castoriadis, instead, veers close to Plotinus' view of a universe of forms that is caught up in a constant process of morphogenesis. In Castoriadis' view, a universe of structural pairs is a universe of spatial "difference" rather than one of temporal "otherness". Repeatedly, he stresses that time is a key dimension of the radical imaginary of creation. His social physics is relativistic in Einstein's sense. Time is a crucial medium through which figures of the "other" emerged. It is an indispensable medium for the "otherness-alteration" of such figures (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 193). Castoriadis is correct—up to a point. That there is a temporal dimension of human creation is true. But, equally so, structural pairs also play a central role in creation. The artist is one who is superb at balancing tension and release, familiarity and surprise, arousal and relaxation (Fuente, 2010). Art creates equilibrium between the expected and the unexpected. The artist, in other words, is the one who creates the pivotal relation between the "black car" and the "red carpet".

The history of Greek-Western thought can be divided into two strands. One is pre-Socratic. The other is Socratic. The pre-Socratics judged that what was most fundamental in the world was that which was non-discursive. Socrates in contrast considered that what was most fundamental was speech and argument. One can think of this as the difference between *nous* and *logos*. In the dominant strains of philosophical thought since the Renaissance, Socratic discursiveness has generally trumped pre-Socratic muteness. This was so even though the oral spontaneity of Socratic speech has given way to the congealed language of "the book" as the principal mode of discourse.⁷

There have always been dissenters of course—those who have challenged the presumptive primacy of discourse. Thomas Hobbes was a notable critic (1968, chapters VII, VIII, XXV). But, especially through the twentieth century, the idea that language is the principal medium for the generation of social relations has become a commonplace in social self-understanding. Many philosophers—ranging from Mead (1934) and Peirce (1991) to Heidegger (1971) and Habermas (1989), Eco (1984) and Gadamer (2004), Searle (1969) and Derrida (1998)—echoed this view. The upshot is the general over-estimation of the objectivating power of discursive language, and at the same time the underestimation of how important the poietics of things, the making of objects, including social objects, is to knowledge (Allen, 2004; Murphy, 2005). Discursive reason in itself cannot create objects. It cannot do this because by its very nature it cannot posit the non-verbal patterned forms around which social objects coalesce. Reason can explore the implications of objects—or rather the implications of statements we make that represent those objects. But even this has its limits.

Words are not very good at representing objects—let alone at positing them. This is why the early Wittgenstein thought that any hope for logic lay in picture languages—which was a good intuition (Murphy & Roberts, 2004, pp. 127-136). Non-figurative languages misrepresent as much as represent social objects. Discourse is often touted as a therapy for this. The propositional statements that we make about objects can be subjected to discursive treatment—ending in falsification or verification. Yet these discourses, while sometimes impressive, are also often inadequate. We can make deductions from, inferences about, and establish analogical relations amongst propositions. But discursive reason rests on the law of non-contradiction. If I accept that

⁷ This happened when printing made the production and distribution of the book so cheap and easy.

law, then I am bound to accept that my statements should not contradict the principles (the major premises, in effect) that I rely on. Creation, on the other hand, rests on “the law of contradiction”, on the power to organize contradictory qualities—light and shade, hot and cold, red and black. This is the mute power of the artist and the collective demiurge of society acting on itself. Such invention occurs through aural rhythms, visual pictures, and plastic-haptic shapes. In acts of individual and collective creation, we see, feel and grasp the shape and form of things. In this lies the poietics of creation.

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