The MacGuffin Beyond Humans
—— Laurent Grasso's futuristic images

Text: Nikita Yingqian Cai

Laurent Grasso, in an interview with Claire Staebler, brought up the notion of a silent China: "In relation to my work, China has always been quite a silent space. I have no mental images of it, and as I like to make images in situations of absence, and to construct things that don't *give* much, it was interesting to find myself there." But this remark sounds at odds with the impression most of us share — the fact is, for many outsiders the Asian metropolis looks more like an all-day multi-channel theater, a noisy and chaotic place largely beyond their ken. Such incongruity of observation, however, points us to the way one may take to decipher Grasso's idea of "silence": it is more a psychological repositioning in compensation for a certain visual void than a visual experience empirically recognized. In contrast to the cosmopolitan image projected by the global media — that, for example, "the Statue of Liberty stands for New York" and "the Eiffel Tower means Paris", which are all icons of popular culture almost commonsensical to us — the image of contemporary China is complicated and unfathomable. There lacks a perceptible "switch" that will light up in an instance the various images of China, which, owing in part to language barrier, are almost always untranslatable and inhospitable even for those who are inside of them. They look just like a flux of symbols too hastily condensed and edited, their meanings indefinite and undirected. It is in the wake of this peculiarity that we may consider *Radio Ghost*, a 2003 video installation of Grasso, a series of image in want of its voice, or a string of voice in want of its image.

In *Politics of Friendship* Jacques Derrida introduced to his readers an anomalous friend: "this friend does not show itself, so much so that it is invisible. It doesn't seem to speak or is spoken of. It has no physique, no name. It is neither man nor woman, neither me nor another 'self' of mine. It is not a substance, not a human. It is the *being* — the *Dasein* — that exists besides the self, the *being* that, through what it hears, carries with it another *being*." In Grasso's *Radio Ghost*, these invisible friends, or the silent "Others", are transformed into some garrulous, whispering spectres. Looking from above, Hong Kong as a place so overfilled by human traces is largely "dehumanized"; it is bathed, instead, in the many unverifiable, impalpable discourses. In another of Grasso's video installation, *The Horn Perspective* (2009), there appears in the exhibition hall a variety of solid "horns" in dissimilar size, of obscure identity and with dubious intention. But the most arresting imagery in the video is the birds — a flight of birds that keep flying deep into the forest, as if summoned by a power behind the scene. They might have been a mimicry of Hitchcock's aggressive "birds", though it seems more befitting to say that they are flocking to a MacGuffin outside of the realm of human. Laying aside the traditional realist perspective of an omnipotent narrative, the work is a forthright simulation of a nonexistent (the horn's) point of view.

Here the "suspense" and its ineffectuality are irrelevant: the audience of Grasso is not the innocent lot of petite bourgeoisie we had for the Lumière Brothers' *Arrival of the Train at La*

Ciotat but a worldly herd of middle-class well trained by Hollywood blockbusters. By constantly deferring, and even dispelling, the so-called "truth", Grasso drives his audience back to the 19th-century vision of "the other world", one that is to be revered and feared. Modern education and technological universalism have made science an ordinary part of life, and the estrangement of science entails no exposition of the suspense and its logic. At the other extreme of empiricism, Grasso takes the step to cast away the illusion of science, forever procrastinating the ultimate imagination of science fictions. What we call the fictitious elements in a science fiction are plotted to set up a certain logical relationship between the world *in being* and the possible world. It may have evolved, as an inevitable consequence, from technological advancement, which brings about those "hard" science fictions that stress upon the progress and expansion of science as a specialist discipline; it may also be an outlandish fancy of a high-tech human society, as in the many "soft" science fictions. Sci-fi characters, whether or not optimistic about the future of technology and the human society, invariably look for some forms of "salvation"; even non-human characters are pondering, in the final analysis, the question of what a world after humans would mean to human beings. With this, one is again urged to confront more questions: if humans, in a post-apocalyptic world, cease to be the agent of retrospection, what is the meaning of a retrospect? Who, in this arena, is looking back on humans from a yet-to-be-known perspective?

In the *Retroprojection* series (2008), Grasso duplicates on some silvered ink silkscreens six illustrations of Camille Flammarion's epic *Astronomie Populaire* (1880), including the plates of eclipses, aurora and comet. The 19th century was a fruitful epoch for modern astronomy as the breathtaking progress of telescope technology made possible the development of astrophysics. Scientific discoveries in this period have been so influential that they still, two hundred years after their birth, serve as the basis upon which we envision the future, and especially the future of the cosmos, as expressed in science fictions. This is precisely what Grasso makes clear in *Retroprojection*: "future is the projection of the past", and that "the world beyond (and after) humans" does not come "after humans" in the literal, time-progressive sense; it is, in lieu, a parallel, undetectable, purposeless world devoid of narrative. All the images — Kepler's supernova (*Stella Nova*, 2010), the pollens that swirl senselessly around the Berlin Television Tower (*Polair*, 2007), the flock of birds that sway in the sky of Rome (*Les Oiseaux*, 2008), the wall that deadens sound (*Anechoic Wall*, 2008), and the wordless footballers on the field (*Missing Time*, 2002) — pay no heed to the gaze of humans and attend to nothing of their ideologies. They are not even the "Others" waiting to be shaped or recovered of speech. They are but the purposeless *showing* of self.

In *Melancholia* (2010), a film by Lars von Trier, the doomsday is pictured within a secluded world — the mansion of Justine's brother-in-law, a backdrop without societal interaction. It is quirky in that melancholia, a state of virtual absolute quietness, is presented as the only positive human reaction in face of purposeless deed, and while it shares the same theme — comet collision — with many Hollywood movies, such reaction is at stark variance with the saleable heroism and topsy-turvy spectacle of, like, *Falling Fire*. The reason behind melancholia is less the fear of doomsday than the loss that humans feel the moment they find the logic by which the universe is interpreted goes astray. If humans, and the traces of humans, are obliterated, what does the world mean? Resting on this premise, every writing or narrative is essentially retrospective, but the paradox lies on the

inability of humans to look back in a world beyond humans, and therefore to reflect, on absolute terms, upon their deeds and the meaning of such deeds. We may well consider science the conceptual element that runs through Grasso's creations, only that it is not to be thought of as a body of knowledge nor a discourse on technology. It is, in the end, a mirror of the tipping point between the knowable and the unknowable.

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[1] Interview Claire Staebler/Laurent Grasso/Christophe Kihm, "My Life in the Bush of Ghosts", P28, *Laurent Grasso; The Black-Body Radiation*, published by Les presses du reél, 2009

[2] Jacques Derrida. Politiques de l'amitié ; suivi de L'oreille de Heidegger[M], Paris: éditions galilée, 1994

[3] In Hitchcock's films, MacGuffin is referred to as something nonexistent. It is a simple topic, plot or idea to which the protagonists follow fervently without apparent reason. The efficacy of MacGuffin leads directly to the audience's relentless quest for reality and, in consequence, the seeming fallacy of the logic behind a character's motive and his/her behavior.

[4] Here the definitions of hard and soft science fiction rest on the following classification: "Hard Science Fiction" (Hard SF) is a subset of science fiction, the main idea of which is established out of respect and admiration for the spirit of science. Hard SF is characterized by the pursuit of (every possible) scientific accuracy and details, and its plot has much to do with the development of natural science and technology. "Soft Science Fiction" (Soft SF), on the other hand, is a subset of science fiction that focuses on philosophy, psychology, political science and sociology in its plot and theme. It is therefore comparatively inattentive to science, technology and physical laws, and the subject matter it deals with is often regarded as of a soft-science or belonging to humanities.

人類之外的麥格芬 The MacGuffin Beyond Humans
——洛朗·格拉索的未來圖像

文：蔡影茜 Nikita, Yingqian Cai

在克萊爾·斯塔布勒（Claire Staebler）對洛朗·格拉索（Laurent Grasso）的一篇採訪當中，格拉索提到一個沉默的中國，"對我的創作來說，中國一直是一個相當沉默的地方。它在我的心目中沒有圖像，我喜歡在圖像缺失的情形下進行創作，去建構一些我們所知無多的東西, 身處其中是一種有趣的經歷。（In relation to my work，China has always been quite a silent space. I have no mental images of it, and as I like to make images in situations of absence，and to construct things that don't give much，it was interesting to find myself there.") 現實中的亞洲都會往往接近於一個 24 小時的、多聲道的劇場，"吵雜"可能更符合那些初來咋到者的印象，而格拉索的陳述卻似乎與我們大部分人的感受相反。這樣的反差提示我們不應以一種經驗主義的方式去理解格拉索所言的"沉默"，與其說"沉默"是一種聽覺上的體驗，不如說這是某種視覺缺失的心理轉換。與由全球媒體所建立起來的著名國際都會形象——如"自由女神像等同於紐約、埃菲爾鐵塔等同於巴黎"等幾近於常識的大眾文化圖像相比，當代中國的形像是複雜的、難以捉摸的，它缺乏一個真正有效的、可以馬上接通的視覺"開關"；同時，由於語言文字上的障礙，即使是身處其中，這些圖像大部分時候仍然是不可譯和難以進入的，它像是一段段被過快地剪輯起來的符號之流，無法指向任何確切的涵義。因此，我們也可以將格拉索 2003 年創作的《靈魂電台（Radio Ghost）》看作是一系列找不到自己聲音的圖像，或者說找不到自己圖像的聲音。

在德里達《友誼的政治學》當中，他為我們介紹了這樣一位朋友："這位朋友並不自身顯現，因而是不可見的。他似乎既不說，也不被說。這位朋友沒有外形，沒有姓名。這位朋友不是男人，不是女人，不是我，不是某一個'我'，不是主體，不是個人。它是每一個此在在自身旁邊通過它聽到的聲音所攜帶的另一個此在。"在《靈魂電台》當中，這些隱身的朋友、沉默的他者化身為絮絮言說的幽靈，從鳥瞰的角度看，幾乎每一寸土地都留有人類痕蹟的香港被"去人化"了，只留下那些難以證實的、無法付諸於型的述說。在格拉索的另一件影像裝置作品《號的遠景（The Horn Perspective）》（2009）裡，身份模糊、意圖不明的"號"時常以或大或小的物理形式出現在展覽現場，但更引人注目的是影像中不斷往密林深處飛去的、彷彿受到不明之物召喚的鳥群；與其說它們在模擬希區柯克鏡頭下攻擊人類的"群鳥"，不如說它們前仆後繼撲向的是一個人類之外的"麥格芬（MacGuffin)"，它摒棄的不僅是傳統現實主義敘述的全知全能，更直接模擬了一個不存在之物（號）的視角。

這裡不存在所謂"懸念"的失效，格拉索作品所面對的觀眾已經不是盧米埃爾兄弟放映《火車進站》時天真的小布爾喬亞，而是被好萊塢電影反複訓練過的、見過世面的當代中產階級，通過不斷地延遲甚至消解所謂的"真相"，他迫使觀眾回到某種十九世紀式的、心懷敬畏的對"另一個世界"的假想中來。現代教育及科技的普及使得科學成為某種日常事物，通過將科學重新陌生化，懸念及其邏輯變得無關重要；在實證的另一端，格拉索又進一步對科學的虛構，即科幻小說的終極想像無限擱置。在科幻小說的傳統裡，虛構的使命是為另一個可能的世界建立起某種與此在世界相關的邏輯，它可能是一種技術必然性上的演進，例如大部分強調科技進步及其領域拓展的"硬"科幻；也可能是一種對技術化人類社會的另類想像，例如大部分的"軟"科幻。無論對技術及人類社會的未來是否持有樂觀態度，科幻小說中的主角都存在著某種對"救贖"的寄望，即使這些主角有時是"非人"的，但它最激進的終極想像仍然是"人類之後的世界對人類有何意義？"然而如果人類作為主體已經消失，回溯的意義又是什麼？是誰在替代人類、以另一種視角回溯？

　　在《回溯反射（Retroprojection）》系列（2008）當中，格拉索用銀墨絲網印刷的方式複製了 6 幅卡米爾·弗萊馬里恩（Camille Flammarion）1880 年出版的著作《大眾天文學》中的插圖，其中包括日（月）蝕、極光和彗星等圖像。十九世紀是近代天文學的大發展時期，由於天文望遠鏡的技術突破，更加精確的天體物理學成為可能。即使是兩百多年之後的今天，我們仍然可以發現科幻小說中對未來（尤其是宇宙）的想像很大程度上是建立在這一時期的科學發現之上的。正如格拉索在作品中表明的:"未來是過去的反射"，"人類之外（後）的世界"並非在時間上出現於"人類之後"，而是另一個平行的、不可見的、缺乏目的性的和人稱敘述的世界。無論是開普勒觀察到的超新星（Stella Nova，2010），柏林的電視塔尖上無端聚集的花粉雲（Polair，2007），羅馬上空飛舞的鳥群（Les Oiseaux，2008），無反響的牆（Anechoic Wall，2008），還是是球場上靜默的足球員（Missing Time，2002），這些圖像都不為人類的凝視及其意識形態服務，它們甚至不是等待被賦予聲音及形態的的他者，而是無目的性的自我顯現。

　　在拉斯·馮·提爾（Lars von Trier）2010 年的電影《憂鬱症(Melancholia)》當中，對於人類末日的想像被置於一個缺乏社會關係的環境——賈斯汀的姐夫的莊園當中。與絕大部分好萊塢電影中"末日救地球"式的英雄主義或混亂場景相反，平靜的憂鬱被看作是人類面對無目的之物——彗星撞地球——時唯一的積極面，與其說憂鬱的原因是對末日的恐懼，不如說是人類解釋萬事萬物的邏輯失效之後的一種挫敗：如果人類及其痕跡徹底消失，世界究竟有何意義？從這一點上說，任何寫作或敘事的嘗試都是回顧性的，然而主體的悖論卻在於他（她）難以在其身後思考自身，因此也難以在真正意義上去反思自身的行動及其意義。如果說科學是格拉索創作中貫穿始終的元素，它卻並不是以技術論式的主題出現的，它始終提示著我們可知之物與不可知之物的臨界點。

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[1] Interview Claire Staebler/Laurent Grasso/Christophe Kihm, "My Life in the Bush of Ghosts", P28, *Laurent Grasso; The Black-Body Radiation*, published by Les presses du reél, 2009

[2] Jacques Derrida. Politiques de l'amitié ; suivi de L'oreille de Heidegger[M], Paris: éditions galilée, 1994

[3] 在希區柯克電影當中，"麥格芬"意為並不存在的東西，它是一個簡單的話題、情節或概念，往往原因不明，電影中的主角卻必須拼命追逐。麥格芬失效的直接後果是觀眾對真實性的執著，從而令片中角色的動機及行為在邏輯上容易露出破綻。

[4] 這裡對於"硬"科幻和"軟"科幻定義的主要參照為：硬科幻小說(Hard Science Fiction，簡稱 Hard SF)是一種科幻小說的分支類型。作品的核心思想是對科學精神的尊重和推崇。在手法上，硬科幻以追求科學（可能的）的細節或準確為特性，著眼於自然科學和技術的發展。軟科幻小說(Soft Science Fiction，簡稱 Soft SF)是情節和題材集中於哲學、心理學、政治學或社會學等傾向的科幻小說分支。相對於"硬科幻"，作品中科學技術和物理定律的重要性被降低了，它所涉及的題材往往被歸類為軟科學或人文學科。