

Research on Virtual Reality in Contemporary European Neo-Figurative Painting

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Abstract—This paper focuses on the research of virtual reality of space-time in contemporary European neo-figurative painting. In general, there are two virtual modes: box spacetime and stage spacetime. In this paper, works of such contemporary European neo-figurative painters as Adrain Ghenie, Michaël Borremans and Neo Rauch are taken as cases for analysis and demonstration, based on which the reasons and significance of style is discussed.

Keywords—European Neo-Figurative Painting; Contemporary Painting; Adrain Ghenie; Michaël Borremans; Neo Rauch

I. OVERVIEW

Space-time characteristic of contemporary European neo-figurative painting differs from that of former figurative painting in the representation of virtual reality. There are two representation modes of virtual reality, which I concluded as “box and stage”. First, space partitioning is included in lots of European neo-figurative paintings where “box” structure is adopted to splice or organize spaces from different ages, in different places or of different types into one image, as shown in works of Adrain Ghenie and Michaël Borremans. Secondly, the interlaced and splicing space-time in many works produce ambiguity when it comes to interpret the paintings. However, setting “stage” becomes the best means for representing the virtual reality, as shown in the works of Neo Rauch. Multiple stages and box space stress the performativity of human behaviors and the existence of hierarchical power structure that is above these performances. The existence of painting stage and box implies the hierarchical structure of watching and being watched.

II. THE BOX

Firstly, the structure of box will be discussed. Adrain Ghenie often creates black box in his paintings. Such characteristic is usually presented in Michaël Borremans’ paintings. Both of them have the similar painting techniques, and carry on and develop Chiaroscuro^[1] and lighting effect of Baroque paintings. The virtual reality that they created is enriched with a strong sense of theater style and brings viewers a great history-cross imagination.

A. Adrain Ghenie

Most of the rooms appeared in Adrain Ghenie’s works are empty and dark, as if they are covered with a thick layer of dust. He applies much photography and movie screenshots,

and creates three-dimensional models, and then he will put his thoughts into paintings. He always put different kinds of images, even irrelevant ones, together in his work, which gives his works unique and various space-time characteristics. He composes human being, political disaster and entertainment industry together, through which he delivers his clear awareness of the society and politics.

In his work *World Falling Apart* 2007, the painting is divided into one upper-box and one lower-box. The upper box presents debris and broken stones while the lower one draws two characters. The whole scene is trapped in the debris as if viewers overlook a performance presented under a huge power. Such performance technique make the protection boundary between indoor and outdoor space disappear. The space in the painting becomes open to everyone like a stage. Meanwhile, indoor scene is deprived of privacy and has been watched mercilessly. Such scene strongly suggests people are exposed to wars and historical violence and human vulnerability to suffer oppression and deprivation. Similar box scenes still appears in his work of *They Say This Place Does Not Exist* (2007) (Fig.1) and *Anxious to Jump* (2007) (Fig.2). The space is like ruined building structure existed on the border of indoor and outdoor space. Such closed and open space, in essence, is a metaphor that demonstrates that human living space in contemporary society is gradually infected and infiltrated by power. Metaphorically, it describes a life without communication, an illusion like a shadow and a disillusionment of hope.

Similar indoor/outdoor semi-closed structure continues extending in his later works *The Flight into Egypt I* (Fig.3). In this *The Flight into Egypt II* (collage painting) (Fig.4), Adrain Ghenie uses collage techniques to organize space-time. In this work, the whole family seems to be in a box space—a forest. One side of the box space is absent and presents a semi-closed space—like a stage. The space out of the box does not have real logical structure. The box space seems to hang in the air, as if it is above the abyss and in a nonexistent space. Its painting language presents a state between the concrete and the abstract. The setting of stage or box can easily attract viewers’ attention, thus the surrounding space is substituted by the abstract. The structure of scene reminds viewers of Manet’s work *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe* 1863. Similarly, his painting is in a forest and presents a stage scene, but the difference is that Manet infuses metaphysical thoughts into physical scenes

while Adrain Ghenie lifts physical scenes to metaphysical space.

The prototype of *The Flight into Egypt II* originates from *the New Testament—Matthew*. The scenes in this painting have an obvious connection with the scenes in the Bible. The whole family in the painting is being persecuted and seeks to escape. In *The Flight into Egypt II* (collage painting), they seem to face the danger of being forced to migrate and the danger of losing a sense of direction and being lost in true self. But in the oil painting, abstract environment in collage painting leaves a trace for viewers — like a wooden stage. The whole environment seems to become a dramatic scene rather than an abyss created out of thin air. In a general sense, trees and box represent home while the abstract space stands for the abyss. In *Babe in the Woods*, the same box reappears, but trees disappear. However, as the same image source of *Babe in the Woods* and *The Flight into Egypt*, the titles both refer to “in the forest”, implying the connection between the two works.



Fig.1. *They Say This Place Does Not Exist*, 2007,

Adrain Ghenie



Fig.2. *Anxious To Jump*, 2007, Adrain Ghenie



Fig.3. *The Flight into Egypt I*, 2008, Adrain Ghenie



Fig.4. *The Flight into Egypt II* (collage painting), 2008, Adrain Ghenie

B. Michaël Borremans

The box structure appears in great number in Michaël Borremans' works, such as the series of *German*. In the early 1940s, other European regions and United States all begin to conduct crazy researches on atom bomb for fighting against German atom bomb. The series of *German* is created under such a background, in which small red points that appear frequently are seen as the metaphor of subatom. Meanwhile, scenes in these paintings are similar to ones in theaters with the characteristics of large screen, projection, small characters and black space. Such scenes are semi-open in a vertical view and presents similar theater effect.

In *German Part III* (2003) (Fig.5), the projection appeared on the wall was that a man in black focuses on playing small red balls in his hands while his viewers stand, sit or walk to and fro. The large-scale scenes and a great number of small outsiders nearby in this painting just show that ordinary people lead a plain life. Those relatively famous actors or actresses only perform some certain fragments of human history. This seems to be a collective, unconscious, and external projection. The works abound, in which small potatoes watch big shots while the scene is composed of box or stage, such as *The Spirit of Model-making* 2001, *Milk* 2003, *NYC September, 24, 2030* 2006, *Lesson* 2006, *The Greatness of Our Loss* 2006, *The Waiting Room* 2007-2008 (Fig.6), *The Cutters* 2004, etc.. The big shots in these paintings take blind and meaningless actions, as if they are accepting certain punishments. This unique space can provide viewers sufficient historical imagination and endow Michaël Borremans' paintings with a strong characteristic of collective memory.



Fig.5. *German Part III*, 2003, Michaël Borremans



Fig.6. *The Waiting Room*, 2007-2008, Michaël Borremans

Except for theater effect and collective memory, the form of projection in these paintings still contains another more important metaphor. Based on the skeptical thinking, Michaël Borremans views real life as a huge model, in which what have performed can be projected to a more real outside world and be seen by other people like in a cinema. In a sense, Michaël Borremans adopts the method of projection to deliberately give this whole society that is stubborn and reluctant to see its true self a chance to be acquainted with itself. Watching and performing can be considered as the core of Michaël Borremans' works.

III. STAGE

The following part will mainly take Neo Rauch's works to analyze stages that appear in virtual space. Actually, the "box" models have already included stage effect. Thus, here open stage space will be discussed. Travel in historical space-time is an important characteristic of Neo Rauch's paintings, in which the collage of different space-time frequently emerges, or one space-time fades out while the other space-time fades in. In his paintings, the confusion and juxtaposition of different space-time turn up in a great number. On the one hand, due to the themes of his works, Neo Rauch usually mingles history, memory and other factors in his works. On the other hand, his paintings have been greatly affected by comic composition.

The setting of stage in virtual space has been fully presented in a large number of Neo Rauch's works, such as *Pergola* 2005, *Leporello* 2005, *Der Vorhang* 2005, *Kommen wir zum Naechsten* 2005, in which the setting of stage can be clearly recognized. In *Abstraktion* 2006, the stage space of the pavilion has been mixed with the surrounding space of the house, implying that different characters dominate different stages and that the irrational space-time finds out its rationality of painting space in this two-dimensional work. In *Neue Rollen* 2005 (Fig.7), three space-time events appear simultaneously. A group of people drinking and waving appear on the left side while a mother shows her boy an exhibition stand model on which people are at lost and their houses fall apart. In the rear of this work, three persons rehearse and perform a play near a guillotine and three viewers under the stage are applauding. Except for space juxtaposition, the "stage" model has reappeared twice. So what is the relationship between the upper stage and the lower stage? When the viewers watch other people's performance, are they still watched by someone else?

The "stage" brings all these questions and implied meanings. Neo Rauch associates his personal memory with collective memory and historical events in this "stage" to present an amazing new space-time.

Besides, Neo Rauch usually uses backstage perspective in "stage" effect. In *Leitung* 1997, viewers can see the back of the easel, implying the backstage perspectives in this work. In *Das Signal* 1997 (Fig.8), the back of the easel reappears. These easels seem to support some templates like trees, which suggest many typical "stage" scenes. Outside the "stage" space, a person is beyond the border the stage, as if he waves to another person on the other side of the "stage" while another person is only represented by the dress. The border between the "stage" and the space outside the "stage" is obscure, as if the border between indoor and outdoor space and that between performance and reality are obscure in Adrain Ghenie's works. Does the space that is implied by the dress stand for viewers' space? Does the space also imply that viewers also can join in the performance on the stage? All have become open-ended questions.

Except for the juxtaposition of multiple perspectives and interlaced "stage" space, virtual space is still expressed in a unique way—bubble dialog box in comics. These bubbles bring space-time of different types into a space-time with the characteristic of synchronicity, which also produce Montage^[2] effect in films.

In *Night Shift* 1997 (Fig.9), three persons seem to work in a kitchen or a workshop. The models on the working table are similar to their surrounding environment in style and color. Does this mean that these people are producing a model of their situation? There is no way of knowing. The green and yellow colors in the background outside the bubble also imply the existence of another space. The space in the bubble can be seen as scenery in dreams, memories or thinking. It can be referred to as "space in another space". Besides, this kind of space can also be presented in *Leitung* 1997 and *Sucher* 1997 in another way—easel presence, which frequently appears. Such picture in picture means the possibility of the existence of another space-time. Meanwhile, the relations between the works and the picture in the works will give viewers boundless imagination.

The bubble space reappears in *Uhrenvergleich* 2001 (Fig.10), in which the painting is divided into the upper and lower bubble box and they appear simultaneously in the black space. The explosion plot like 911 event appear in the upper bubble while two clocks exist in the lower bubble. The two clocks seem to mean that the time shown in the lower bubble is consistent with the explosion time in the upper bubble. The synchronicity of different space-time transforms abstract possibility into specific representation with the characteristic of surrealism.



Fig.7. *Neue Rollen*, 2005, Neo Rauch



Fig.8. *Das Signal*, 1997, Neo Rauch

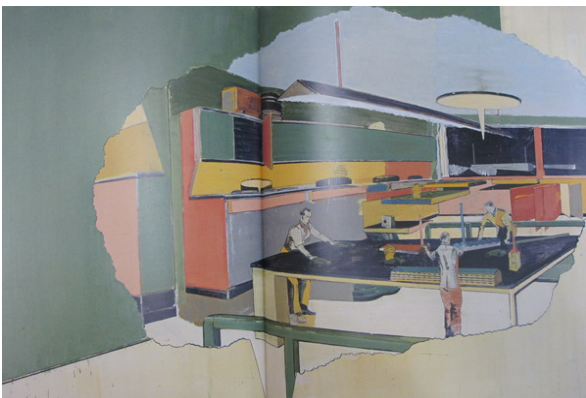


Fig.9. *Night Shift*, 1997, Neo Rauch



Fig.10. *Uhrenvergleich*, 2001, Neo Rauch

IV. SUMMARY

This paper analyzes the works of three representatives of contemporary European neo-figurative painting—Adrain Ghenie, Michaël Borremans and Neo Rauch, and explores the common characteristic of their works—virtual reality. This characteristic has similar features with space-time in surrealism paintings, from which the lessons and innovation that contemporary European neo-figurative painting learns from traditional paintings can be seen. In addition, virtual reality helps contemporary European neo-figurative painting open the door to contemporary life, culture, memory and history and becomes one of key characteristics of contemporary European neo-figurative painting.