

# ANIMATING THE INANIMATE

QIU ANXIONG'S *NEW BOOK OF MOUNTAINS AND SEAS*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the first installment of Qiu Anxiong's trilogy of animations *New Book of Mountains and Seas* (2006, 2008, 2017). Replete with fantastical creatures, Qiu's films immediately call to mind their namesake, the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, an encyclopedia of strange beasts written and compiled between the fourth to first century BCE. His animations show the contemporary world as if seen through the eyes of someone living thousands of years ago, alive during the time of the original classic. Rather than casting this subject-position as "irrational" and backwards, Qiu mines the generative possibilities of adopting this new logic of perception. In doing so, he brings together two distinct ways of presenting the world. The first relays the modern myths and universal assumptions constituting our contemporary reality. The second destabilizes divisions between the animate and inanimate to challenge how this narrative led to the disavowal of animism to begin with. In restituting animism, the artist offers an alternative to the pictured story of predation, extraction, and consumption.

## KEYWORDS

Animism; Animation; Qiu Anxiong; Contemporary Chinese art; Contemporary art; Decolonial; Decoloniality; Environment.

## I. Introduction

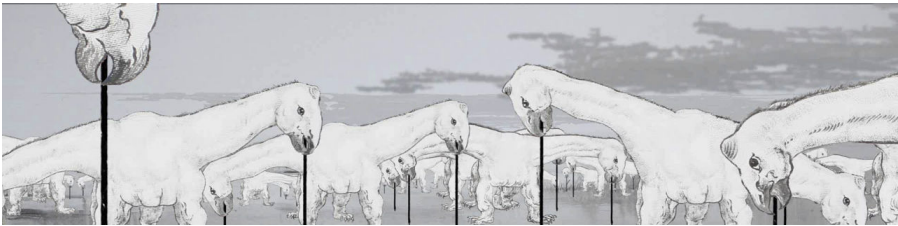
A dazzling array of creatures populates Qiu Anxiong's *New Book of Mountains and Seas* (*Xin Shanhaijing*). In its representation of strange beasts, Qiu's trilogy of animations (2006, 2008, 2017) follows in the footsteps of its namesake, the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (*Shanhaijing*). The original text, hereafter referred to as the classic, was written and compiled between the fourth to first century BCE.<sup>1</sup> It presents the world as a central territory with water and land extending in the four cardinal directions. It has entries for more than five hundred creatures organized according to whether they are found within or beyond the directional mountains and seas. Difficult to pin down, the classic has been variously referred to as a cosmography, bestiary, mythology, source about the occult, and more. Its elusive nature has contributed to its survival over the centuries. With its colorful assortment of enigmatic creatures and deified beings, the classic has continually captivated audiences with its descriptions of seemingly otherworldly phenomena within this universe. Qiu's *New Book of Mountains and Seas* elicits the same sense of wonder that contemporary readers experience when encountering the ancient text. It's like looking through a window onto a different world.

His animations, however, do not depict a primordial past. Instead, Qiu imagines someone on the other side of that window looking in at us: he presents our contemporary world through the eyes of someone who lived at the time of the classic. By preserving the original text as a marker in time, he shares what it would be like to operate using an entirely different set of logical assumptions. That is, creatures that we might nowadays consider to be machines – cars, helicopters, submarines, oil rigs, and such – would visually and conceptually be interpreted as living beings to someone from thousands of years ago. Thus, in Part I of the trilogy (2006), carapaced vehicles guzzle gas, giant scorpions drill deep into the earth, and equines bob tirelessly for oil [Fig. 1]. In the ensuing clashes over these natural resources, predatory birds alight on spinning helicopter-like wings, steely-eyed porpoises periscope up, and elephant-headed tanks extend their barrel-trunks to fire [Fig. 2]. The marvel elicited by these curious creatures juxtaposes starkly with the bleak subject matter of the film.

Focusing on the first installment of the trilogy, this paper analyzes the artist's two distinct ways of presenting the world: a dystopic plot that follows the global energy crisis and a primordial point of view that renders it full of strange creatures. I study each in turn to show Qiu's inquiries and interventions into the universalized assumptions and modern myths that constitute our contemporary reality. First, I examine the rich references – from scientific materialism to techno-optimism – that Qiu weaves into his scenes of

<sup>1</sup>

For more on the classic, see Richard Strassberg, *A Chinese Bestiary. Strange Creatures from the Guideways through Mountains and Seas*, Berkeley, CA 2002.



[Fig. 1]  
Qiu Anxiong, Still from New Book of Mountains and Seas, Part I, 2006, Three-channel animated video with sound, 30:05 min., 10:58 © Qiu Anxiong.



[Fig. 2]  
Qiu Anxiong, Still from New Book of Mountains and Seas, Part I, 2006, Three-channel animated video with sound, 30:05 min., 17:11 © Qiu Anxiong.

environmental exploitation and war. His interest in uncovering how we have arrived where we are leads him to picture the historical events and contemporary conditions that have resulted in a world ruled by consumption and competition. I then explore the different ways in which he uses animism to enable viewers to see this same world anew. In its study of the tensions between what is animate and inanimate, *New Book of Mountains and Seas* rehabilitates ways of thinking that invite viewers to question accepted determinations of what is alive and what constitutes reality.

## II. From Double Helix to Mushroom Cloud

The first indication that a different perceptual logic is at play occurs four minutes and twenty seconds into the film when a vaguely aquatic creature glides onto the screen [Fig. 3]. Up until this point, Qiu presents a series of ink landscapes and cultural monuments to relay an abbreviated history of China. In it, he includes a bird chirping on a branch and a figure tilling the fields, both of which indicate a changing relationship with nature, but neither of which appears out of the ordinary. Thus, when a flying sea creature drifts over the Great Wall, its alienness is particularly striking. Even more so in the following scene when it pauses above a Spirit Path and releases a small wooden box. Something even more startling leaps out: a double helix. As this foreign form springs down the path, the screen fades to black. It is only after this prologue that the story rolls out a bevy of bizarre beasts, all toiling away in urban spaces, oil refineries, and industrial processing plants. Marking the divide between these two contrasting epochs, the floating orca-like creature and its enclosed double helix core are deliberately meant to throw viewers off-kilter. According to Qiu, they are “a description of Western colonialism”.<sup>2</sup>

It’s no coincidence that the fins and wings on the flying creature resemble a ship’s sails and oars. Qiu states that they refer to the fifteenth-century European sea voyages that began “colonialism as a process of globalization”.<sup>3</sup> The double helix, meanwhile, represents what he regards as the West’s most efficacious vehicle for worldwide expansionism: science. His linking together of science and colonialism implicates a founding narrative in the history of science and modernity. It’s one that positions “the Scientific Revolution as the Great Divide separating the West from the Rest”.<sup>4</sup> In it, science serves as both the justification and ideological apparatus by which

<sup>2</sup>

Qiu Anxiong, interview by author, January 5, 2015.

<sup>3</sup>

Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>

Lorraine Daston, *The History of Science and the History of Knowledge*, in: *KNOW. A Journal on the Formation of Knowledge* 1/1, 2017, 131–154, here 134.



[Fig. 3]  
Qiu Anxiong, Still from New Book of Mountains and Seas, Part I, 2006, Three-channel animated video with sound, 30:05 min., 04:36 © Qiu Anxiong.

the West modernized so-called backwards cultures. Elaborating on this in 2005, Qiu described Western science thusly:

Taking proof as the basis of truth, the West made science the order of the day. Darwin's theory of evolution [...] instigated a new order of materialist belief [...]. This narrative of the natural world gradually became a gospel principal of life and eventually the governing philosophy of human existence.<sup>5</sup>

In citing materialism (*weiwuzhuyi*) as the root of Western science, Qiu emphasizes the necessity of “proof” in explanations of life and the natural world. Materialism's focus on rigorous methods of observation, practice, and testing for determining truth vehemently rejects any appeals to spiritual intervention. This combative stance against the divine was as central to advancing modern science in fifteenth-century Europe as it was in succeeding centuries of colonial expansion when existing epistemologies – now deemed “superstition” – were systematically hollowed out and replaced by a universal faith in scientific reasoning. As Arturo Escobar argues: in this process of universalizing universality – “one of the pillars of Western modernity” – the world became something “only modern science can know and thoroughly study”.<sup>6</sup>

As the discovery of DNA structure didn't occur until the mid-twentieth century, its pairing in the animation with fifteenth-century maritime colonialism represents the increasingly expansive terrains that were – and continue to be – infiltrated by a materialist philosophy of human existence. The double helix marks the eventuality of an ever-widening application of modern science where even human beings are broken down to bio-physical structures composed of genetic sequences. Changes over time are, moreover, rationalized as a matter of replicated patterns, inherited material, and occasional mutations. The double helix thus participates in a sweeping history about “scientific advancement” that supports – and is supported by – appeals to materialist structures, natural laws, and evolutionary theory. Qiu's depiction of science as a Western colonial export connects it to the spread of modernity's rhetoric of progress and its complicity with history-writing.

The film's five-minute prologue quite deliberately concludes with the double helix landing on a Spirit Path, a path leading to a tomb.<sup>7</sup> This scene portends a funereal end to not only the Chinese empire, but also attendant belief systems – particularly ecological – that flourished at the time. For example, the harmonizing objectives of *fengshui* (literally “wind and water”) that undergirded

<sup>5</sup>

Qiu Anxiong, *New Classic of Mountains and Seas*, 2006 (January 25, 2024).

<sup>6</sup>

Arturo Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics. The Real and the Possible*, Durham, NC 2020, 26.

<sup>7</sup>

Qiu, interview, 2015.



the construction of court structures and tombs. Erected according to relational understandings, directional orientations, and energy flows, these edifices became part of a sacred landscape. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when European powers sought to secure rights for building railroads and mines in China, they posed a direct threat to not only the land itself, but also supporting cosmologies. Chinese officials cited popular geomantic beliefs as a tactic for resisting foreign aggression. The first Chinese ambassador to Germany, Liu Xihong, wrote in 1881:

Westerners do not know of the gods of the rivers and the mountains. Every time they attempt to make a railway that is blocked by the mountains, they use dynamite and other explosives to tear open a hole in its belly [...]. If railways were to be connected to cities, this would upset the placement of tombs and mausoleums.<sup>8</sup>

Liu describes here an environment governed by relationships between human and non-human entities. His allusion to the mountains as pulsing with life directly conflicts with Western views of land as inert and ready for occupation. Deemed “irrational” and “superstitious”, *fengshui* met the same fate as other casualties of Western expansionism and its universalization of modern scientific classifications.

Throughout the prologue, Qiu ushers viewers through a history that engages multiple ways of interacting with the environment. For example, in his turn to the language of ink landscapes, or *shan-shui* (literally “mountains and water”), the artist recalls the layering of long hemp-fiber strokes by Huang Gongwang (1269–1354), the sparse compositions of Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322), and the diffuse dots of Mi Fu (1051–1107). As the camera lingers on each scene, viewers take in the endless permutations of lines and wash, paired with manipulations of brush and ink, that have been used to communicate nature’s own infinite range of organic diversity. Quickly, however, these landscapes recede and become backgrounds for human action and the built environment. Those same painterly ruminations on nature transform into physical sites for inhabitation, imperial grandeur, and agrarian cultivation. Stone walkways and guard towers punctuate previously rendered mountain ranges to form the Great Wall of China. An ornate gate is built on an empty patch of land to establish a courtly presence. As Jonathan Hay argues in his study of Ming-dynasty Beijing, even as rulers engaged in deforestation,

human beings understood themselves to be in constant interaction with non-human activity and movement. As a

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Liu Xihong, Liu Guanglu (Xihong) Yigao, in: *Jindai Zhongguo shiliao congkan sanbian* 446, 1988, 76–77. Passage translated in Albert Wu, *Superstition and Statecraft in Late Qing China. Towards a Global History*, in: *Past & Present* 255, 2022, 279–316, here 281.

form of ecological awareness, this is very different from our own [...] it possessed its own sharpness of vision – perhaps a stronger sense of connectedness [...].<sup>9</sup>

Qiu signals the end to this form of awareness as the aforementioned Spirit Path extends outward from the gate and an explicitly mortuary structure takes shape.

These disparate ways of treating the work's titular mountains and seas are thrown into relief when we witness the following scenes that turn water and land into explicit sites of exogenous violence and violation. Bridging the two is China's experience of colonialism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Qiu describes:

Opium, weapons, capitalism, churches, science and technology, ideology, political idealism all these things rode the waves across the ocean and disembarked on these shores. Facing the aggression of colonialism, the Chinese [...] were helpless against the will to wrench open the borders.<sup>10</sup>

Due to Western assertions of extraterritorial rights and financial exploitation through unequal treaties, China is often referred to as having been “semi-colonized”.<sup>11</sup> The prologue points to the specific epistemologies and cosmologies that were impoverished when Western countries forcibly opened up China's treaty ports.

In tracing the connections among colonialism, science, and the present, it is useful here to consider Walter D. Mignolo's elaboration on the historical centrality of the “myth of universal science”. That is, how time and science have been used to justify “epistemic colonial and imperial differences”.<sup>12</sup> As a tool for stoking fears of belatedness and fueling the urgency to catch up, time presses differences into a “comparative point of view that allows for the erasure or devaluation of other forms of knowledge”.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the prologue shows exactly this: the kinds of beliefs that were devalued and disavowed due to Western modernity's configurations of time and scientific reasoning as metrics of advancement. In this light, the transition from the prologue to after does not merely represent a

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Jonathan Hay, *Green Beijing. Ecologies of Movement in the New Capital*, c. 1450, in: Craig Clunas, Jessica Harrison-Hall, and Luk Yu-Ping (eds.), *Ming China. Courts and Contacts, 1400–1450*, London 2016, 46–55, here 54.

10

Qiu, *New Classic*.

11

Jürgen Osterhammel, *Semi-Colonialism and Informal Empire in Twentieth-Century China. Towards a Framework of Analysis*, in: Wolfgang J. Mommsen (ed.), *Imperialism and After. Continuities and Discontinuities*, London 1986, 290–314.

12

Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity. Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, Durham, NC 2011, 161.

13

*Ibid.*, 171–172.

shift in perspective from a China-centered world to a Western-centered world, but can be more broadly understood as the suppression of multiplicity through the imposition of universality on a global scale.

As Anibal Quijano, Mignolo, and other decolonial theorists have argued, even after the period of colonization, its logic continued through coloniality, or the colonial matrix of power. The main plot of *New Book of Mountains and Seas* explores precisely this in its focus on predation, extraction, consumption, and domination. This story is primarily told through depictions of oil drilling, refineries, and manufacturing. When a cache of oil barrels is bombed, escalating scenes of violence explode and culminate in a grisly nuclear end. Amidst the many curious creatures carrying out oil production and warfare, Qiu depicts two particular groups that stand out as most human-like in their appearance. In the three-channel film, they appear to face off against each other [Fig. 4]. On the left side are desert dwellers dressed in flowing full-body black garments. Veils cover their faces, leaving only an opening for their eyes. On the right, a team of people is attired entirely in white with only the contours of their bodies visible and reflective shields obscuring their eyes. Those on the left reference residents of the Middle East while the figures on the right are meant to be stand-ins for Americans.<sup>14</sup>

In the early months of 2006, when the artist was working on the animation, the events of September 11 and the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq were still fresh in recent memory. Qiu recalls how these events reverberated worldwide through their geo-political ramifications and facilitated by the immediacy of mass media.<sup>15</sup> It confirmed for him the networks and systems that make contemporary crises shared experiences. This also fed into his continued interest in uncovering the universalized ideals and epistemologies underwriting these global connections. To this end, it's important to recognize his address of the Iraq War as more than a timely reference. This subject matter participated in the artist's study of the history and aftermath of colonialism. Not an isolated event – historically or geo-culturally – the 2003 incursion was only the latest instance of Western occupation in the Middle East. Historian Charles Townshend positions the twenty-first-century invasion in relation to Britain's conquest of Mesopotamia in 1914 and its "imperial expansion on a dizzying scale" following World War I.<sup>16</sup> In the succeeding century, demands over access to oil-rich countries and strategic policies to keep oil prices stable worldwide led to European and American support for regional wars and direct military

<sup>14</sup>

Qiu, interview, 2015.

<sup>15</sup>

Qiu Anxiong, interview by author, February 21, 2014.

<sup>16</sup>

Charles Townshend, *Desert Hell. The British Invasion of Mesopotamia*, Cambridge, MA 2011, xxiii.



[Fig. 4]  
Qiu Anxiong, Still from New Book of Mountains and Seas, Part I, 2006, Three-channel animated video with sound, 30:05 min., 08:39 © Qiu Anxiong.

intervention in the Middle East. This intertwining of Western corporate interests, militarism, national security, and economic sanctions here illustrates a global hegemonic model of power emerging from a legacy of colonialism.

Within this narrative, Qiu embeds references to techno-optimism that extend and magnify the aforementioned complicity between science and time. In particular, when choosing how to depict Americans, Qiu drew on a particular source: Intel advertisements of people wearing cleanroom suits.<sup>17</sup> Colloquially called “bunny suits”, these full-body coverings are part of the rigorous ultra-clean protocols necessary for working with microelectronics. By protecting technology from the oils and dust particles carried on people’s bodies, these garments consign the natural world to a form of contamination. The choice of the bunny suit as emblematic of Americans both explicitly pulls in and, indeed, directly results from the linking of technology and geo-politics in the world economy. During the 1990s, the easing of Cold War trade embargoes meant that the U.S.-based tech giant Intel could now sell computers to China. With China as a new “market to be mined”, the American chipmaker set out to conquer this frontier by enticing Chinese consumers with dreams of personal computing.<sup>18</sup>

In a characteristic advertisement from the late 1990s for the company’s new Pentium chip, a voiceover announces that viewers are being shown “the world’s most advanced manufacturing environment”, but then disrupts the presumed sterility of these places by showing workers dancing wildly in colorful, metallic bunny suits. As Intel’s director of worldwide advertising explained in 1997: “These commercials are humorous, high-tech fantasies that show how fun computing can be with MMX technology.”<sup>19</sup> Such high-tech fantasies spread visions of the future built on access to the newest and fastest technology while preying on fears of falling behind. To preserve the upper-hand, it was just as important for Intel to entice Chinese consumers as it was to keep knowledge from potential Chinese competitors. In the 2000s, Intel built testing and assembly plants in Shanghai and Chengdu, taking advantage of low-cost labor.<sup>20</sup> Notably, they did not set up any fabrication facilities – the very ones that require bunny suits – in order to safeguard intellec-

<sup>17</sup>

Qiu, interview, 2015.

<sup>18</sup>

Jeffrey Parker, Intel in China to Push Development of Software, in: *Journal of Commerce*, 1994, 5A.

<sup>19</sup>

Intel, *Intel Launches New Ad Campaign for MMX™ Technology That Puts the Fun in Computing*, January 22, 1997, Intel press release (January 25, 2024).

<sup>20</sup>

Andrew K. Collier, Labour Cost, Education Attract Intel. Chipmaker Picks Chengdu Site for Assembly and Test Plant, in: *South China Morning Post*, August 28, 2003, 3.

tual property over advanced chip design.<sup>21</sup> To maintain economic dominance meant ensuring the continuation of strict hierarchies that enforced geo-political divisions between those who create and those who assemble, and more broadly, those who produce and those who consume. All of this was powered by a belief in technology as the future, and Western “control and management of knowledge” as the means of maintaining authority in the world order.<sup>22</sup> Qiu’s basis of an entire tribe on these “bunny people” enshrines the aspirations for technology within the accumulation of technical knowledge and global capital.

In depicting successive scenes of militarism and environmental destruction, Qiu presents a deep skepticism towards these same future-facing ambitions. Extending from the film’s prologue, the heralding of science and technology in the name of progress arrives out of the same logic that organizes the world according to dominators and dominated. As a chilling example of their convergence, the artist states: “the theory of relativity allowed us to better understand the world, but it also led to nuclear weapons”.<sup>23</sup> This is aptly depicted in one of the final scenes when a nuclear explosion blooms over a city. This not only concludes a plot strewn with violence and global competition, but also serves as a final reminder to viewers of the promises of scientific progress, represented first by the double helix and then by the mushroom cloud.

### III. An Animated World

While featuring antagonistic stand-offs between distinct parties, a key cornerstone of Qiu’s vision of the contemporary world – its history and future – lies in his allusions to the universal myths and economic demands that weave together seemingly discrete peoples and territories. As a physical counterpart to these interdependencies, he includes twisting pipelines, meandering roads, and elevated thoroughfares that snake through the animation [Fig. 5]. Without beginning or end, these conduits for circulation form interlocking networks that traffic goods and resources all over the world.

When those same structures morph into sinewy veins, curling vines, and creeping tendrils, Qiu expands the connective tissues of globalization beyond their lateral, physical configurations [Fig. 6]. By activating manmade structures with writhing, rhizomatic growth, the artist morphologically transforms inert forms into living ones. This is most evident when the earth’s mantle and

<sup>21</sup>

U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2005 Report to Congress*, Washington D.C. 2005 (March 8, 2024).

<sup>22</sup>

Mignolo, *The Darker Side*, 33.

<sup>23</sup>

Qiu, interview, 2015.



[Fig. 5]  
Qiu Anxiong, Still from New Book of Mountains and Seas, Part I, 2006, Three-channel animated video with sound, 30:05 min., 10:05 © Qiu Anxiong.



[Fig. 6]  
Qiu Anxiong, Still from New Book of Mountains and Seas, Part I, 2006, Three-channel animated video with sound, 30:05 min., 07:50 © Qiu Anxiong.



core appear unmistakably like dermis and flesh [Fig. 7]. A thumping heartbeat plays beneath the scene as scorpion-like creatures insert their stingers to pierce the multiple layers. Viscerally and visually connecting the land with those who occupy it, we see at once a zoomed-out view of the earth's strata down to its core and a zoomed-in view of skin, flesh, and blood vessels. When the creatures begin to bore through the surface, they appear as much like a drill in search of fossil fuels as needles seeking blood or marrow. Recalling Qiu's earlier connections between the physical environment – mountains and seas – and the double helix, he continues here to show the multiple scales and sectors through which colonization, invasion, and extraction occur.

In his mapping and merging of exterior and interior, and macro and micro, Qiu connects the seemingly distinct fields of geology and biology. This is already raised through the theme of oil and war where the drilling of the earth is connected to the spilling of blood. Qiu goes even further with this when he remarks that even though people might consider the war over oil a problem exclusively between the Middle East and the United States, everyone is implicated: "Everything you eat has petroleum."<sup>24</sup> The burning of fossil energy to create food energy inextricably connects oil and industrial food processing.<sup>25</sup> That the very things we ingest deplete the richness of the earth multiple times over links the geological with the biological through increasingly integrated and insatiable chains of consumption. This breaks down the illusion that wars and ecological destruction are restricted to territories or nation-states "over there". Instead, as Qiu contends, they are imprinted into each of us at the corporeal level.

Bringing together geology and biology raises important questions about the impact of perceived distinctions between what qualifies as life and non-life. As Elizabeth A. Povinelli argues: treating coal and petroleum as dead remains makes it easy to subordinate, occupy, exploit, and exhaust. Turning so-called dead fuel into resources for sustaining life allows people to overlook the ethical and ecological costs of extraction.<sup>26</sup> Qiu confronts this when he depicts a living world where even the manmade structures move like organisms. What happens if we start to perceive stones, earth, infrastructure, and soil as living? When the earth is as alive as a human body? When, hearkening back to nineteenth-century defenses against Western aggression, blasting open a mountain is likened

<sup>24</sup>

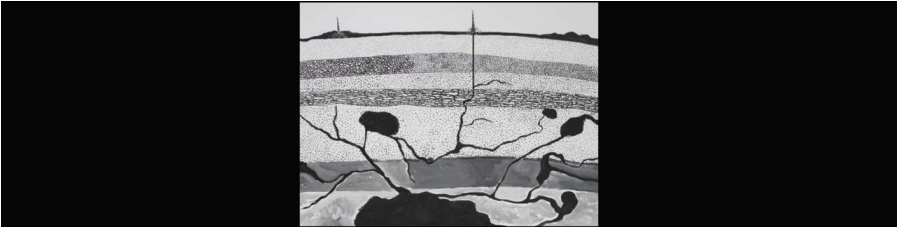
Qiu, interview, 2014.

<sup>25</sup>

Richard Manning, *The Oil We Eat. Following the Food Chain Back to Iraq*, in: *Harper's Magazine*, February 2004, 37–45, here 44.

<sup>26</sup>

Elizabeth A. Povinelli connects this to the exploitation of "living fuel" in the form of human labor in *Geontologies. A Requiem to Late Liberalism*, Durham, NC 2016, 167. For more on the connection between geology and extractive economies, see also Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, Minneapolis 2019.



[Fig. 7]  
Qiu Anxiong, Still from New Book of Mountains and Seas, Part I, 2006, Three-channel animated video with sound, 30:05 min., 09:16 © Qiu Anxiong.

to tearing a hole in the belly? These images contribute to the more overt examples of animism in the film, generating an even more pervasive sense that everything around us – from machines to the ground itself – is profoundly alive.<sup>27</sup>

When Qiu presents an animistic world, he is showing viewers what the contemporary world would look like from a different perspective. On the one hand – using a modern scientific lens – the appearance of these creatures may seem like a function of ignorance, evidence of how a primitive person lacks the knowledge of technological machines or scientific understanding to accurately assess what is living. On the other hand, we can focus on what is present in this worldview rather than what is absent. An animistic worldview shows us what was possible to believe before Western modernity dismissed it as backwards. Most notably, it offers a way of relating to the world premised on an “alternative to the modernist elevation of humanity above its natural origins, and by implication, the ecological damage this elevation has wrought”.<sup>28</sup>

In championing this alternative, scholars arguing for the productive value of animism have focused on it as a relational epistemology. This places emphasis on the dynamism found in relations rather than an exclusive focus on individuation and dichotomization. Nurit Bird-David makes this explicit comparison:

If the object of modernist epistemology is a totalizing scheme of separated essences [...] the object of animistic knowledge is understanding relatedness from a related point of view within the shifting horizons of the related viewer.<sup>29</sup>

This attention to animism’s insistence on interconnectivity challenges the dualistic ontologies that separate humans and non-humans, subjects and objects, and upsets the “mechanisms and practices that constitute us as ‘autonomous individuals’”.<sup>30</sup> As Achille Mbembe notes, animism is predicated on a foundational willingness to see agency as distributed among people, objects, and

<sup>27</sup>

As Darryl Wilkinson has observed: the “renewed interest in indigenous animism in terms of its place within recent intellectual history” is largely connected to “the growing engagement with the global environmental crisis among scholars in the humanities”. Id., *Is There Such a Thing as Animism?*, in: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 85, 2017, 289–311, here 289.

<sup>28</sup>

*Ibid.*, 295.

<sup>29</sup>

Nurit Bird-David, *Animism Revisited. Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology*, in: *Current Anthropology* 40, 1999, 67–79, here 77. See also: Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Exchanging Perspectives. The Transformation of Objects into Subjects in Amerindian Ontologies*, in: *Common Knowledge* 10, 2004, 463–484; Alberto Lopez Cuenca, *Trash-ing Scale. Distributed Agency, the Afterlife of Commodities and Animism in Contemporary Art*, in: *Third Text* 35, 2021, 317–340.

<sup>30</sup>

Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics*, 15.

creatures, thus challenging the “monopolistic agency” of humans espoused by Western modernity.<sup>31</sup>

These ideas can also be found in the original classic which similarly proposes a more horizontal relationship between humans and non-humans. In his study of the classic, Richard Strassberg argues that the depicted “monsters” differ from those “in the Ancient Greek or medieval European sense. That is, they are not primordial powers that must be overcome by virtuous gods or heroes for human civilization to progress”, and instead “most legitimately dwell in the environment alongside humankind and simply represent another, overlapping order with its own principles”.<sup>32</sup> In its challenge to a singular logic of domination and submission, this description suggests a pluriversal acceptance of co-transforming and co-existing orders of being. Indeed, animism reminds us of ways of being that challenge the universality of a “singular reality” wherein “only the reality validated by science is real”.<sup>33</sup>

#### IV. Reaching Back, Looking Ahead

In this paper, I have shown how the plot of *New Book of Mountains and Seas* traces and presents contemporary crises as underwritten by a history of colonialism, and continued through the logic of coloniality. In the very premise of the work, Qiu upsets the distinctions between animate versus inanimate. In doing so, he destabilizes accepted divisions and shows the implications of seeing a world alive. As Arturo Escobar argues: “we urban-moderns imagine the world as an inanimate surface to be *occupied*; for many relational cultures, to the contrary, human beings and other beings *inhabit* a world that is alive.”<sup>34</sup> Qiu’s film shows both of these: the former being our contemporary trajectory with dystopic projections, the latter a way to imagine new possibilities for operating in the world.

Qiu describes the classic’s framing of the relationship among humans, non-humans, and the environment in this way:

The ancients recognized that the fate of man and the fate of nature were inextricable. This is quite different from the Western ideal of shaping nature to fit human needs. Traditional Chinese culture believed that all life existed in concert with nature. The ancients saw humans, though chief among

<sup>31</sup>

Achille Mbembe, *Negative Messianism in the Age of Animism*, lecture at the Institute of the Humanities and Global Cultures, September 26, 2017 (January 25, 2024).

<sup>32</sup>

Strassberg, *A Chinese Bestiary*, 44.

<sup>33</sup>

Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics*, 15.

<sup>34</sup>

*Ibid.*, 26.

all animals but essentially the same as other forms of life, comprising but a part of the overall ecology.<sup>35</sup>

In raising this difference, the artist is not calling for a return to precolonial times nor an essentialist restoration of cultural purity. Instead, when placed in a decolonial framework, we can recognize two important functions of this animistic viewpoint. First, it illustrates ways of being that were devalued by the constitution of Western modernity. Second, in using his art to reconstitute these perspectives, he invites viewers to consider the productive value of previously foreclosed paths.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the plot of the animation reveals how modern science's authoritative status produced binary categories such as "East-West, primitive-civilized, magic/mythic-scientific, irrational-rational, traditional-modern" that relegated "other" epistemologies and cosmologies to the past while the West represented the future.<sup>37</sup>

In his revival of animism, Qiu not only bucks against the authorization of these binaries, but also uses his roster of creatures to point out the breakdown between the animate and inanimate already underway. His living machines invariably conjure up existing examples of artificial intelligence, collaborative robots, and autonomous vehicles. The fact that they appear as animal-machine hybrids – somewhere between animal-like machines and machine-like animals – already starts the work of destabilizing distinctions. Hybridity accepts the value and importance of "borrowing vital parts of other vital beings".<sup>38</sup> When a single body houses an assemblage of forms and capacities, its constitutive matter is already based on thinking relationally and valuing multiplicity. In this light, animism's insistence on "re-distributed agency" prepares us well for thinking critically about "the shifting distribution of powers between the human and the technological".<sup>39</sup> This follows Mbembe's argument that animism primes us for the technological future and the need to accept "a shared ecology if you want, a shared ecosystem, circulation of life, of vital fluids – organs – between different types of species, and in the process the co-transformation, co-

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Qiu, *New Classic*.

36

This follows Mignolo's formulation of decolonial work as restituting what was destituted by the constitution of Western coloniality.

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Anibal Quijano, *Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America*, in: *Nepantla. Views from South* 1, 2000, 533–580, here 533.

38

Mbembe, *Negative Messianism*.

39

Nils Gilman, *How to Develop a Planetary Consciousness*, interview with Achille Mbembe, in: *Noema*, January 11, 2022 (February 24, 2024).

evolution, and so forth and so on”.<sup>40</sup> A human-centered hierarchy that only sees machines in an instrumentalized way will continue to deny the epistemological changes that need to take place. This final claim for the future is an important reminder for how we see the relevance of animism: not only as a challenge to the complicit relationship between science and time that have historically dismissed it as irrational and traditional, but also the need to break through these ways of thinking to produce new futures.

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Achille Mbembe, *Transcript: In Conversation with Achille Mbembe*, University College London, June 17, 2020 (August 15, 2022).