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**The Virtual Theater of Belief and
Events: On Remnants of Beings in
Yao, Jui-Chung's Photographic
Collection, *Beyond Humanity***

Emily Shu-hui Tsai

Associate Professor

Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures

National Chung Hsing University

Taichung, Taiwan

Athens Institute for Education and Research
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209
Email: info@atiner.gr URL: www.atiner.gr
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**The Virtual Theater of Belief and Events:
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Emily Shu-hui Tsai

Associate Professor

**Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures National
Chung Hsing University Taichung, Taiwan**

Abstract

This short paper aims to interpret *Beyond Humanity*, a collection of Black- and-white photographs by the famous Taiwanese artist, Yao Jui-Chung. *Beyond Humanity* is one of Yao Jui-Chung's photographic works on the images of ruins—the deserted buildings or ruined religious idols or houses—in contemporary Taiwanese culture. Employing the theoretical ideas of Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Gilles Deleuze and Henri Bergson, I first interpret the cultural meanings of this specific photographic collection. I, then, analyze the documentary photographic images as the time image, haunted by its double, the specter of the past. I suggest each frozen piece of the photographic time image refers to the past, pointing out its virtual dimension like the theater in either individual or collective memory. The time image invites the viewers to take a leap from the present moment into its ontologically-virtual dimension of the past.

Key words: Yao Jui-Chung, the past, ruin, photography, the virtual, Deleuze, Barthes, Bergson, Sontag, the time image, cultural memory

Contact Information of Corresponding author:

Yet it is not (it seems to me) by Painting that
Photography touches art, but by Theater. (Barthes,
Camera Lucida, 1993: 31)

Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art. Most subjects
photographed are, just by virtue of being photographed,
touched with pathos....
(Sontag, *On Photography*, 1973:15)

Prologue

In this technological age of postmodern visual culture, simulacra saturate the perceived reality in the place of truth; subjectivity in question prevails and it functions to allow multiple positions in a world where there is no underlying authenticity consistent with its appearance. This is cynicism, par excellence, in charge of the post-ideological age, like Slavoj Žižek has postulated in his well-known book, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, that “people no longer believe in ideological truth; they do not take ideological propositions seriously” (Žižek 33). Even though people are fully aware of the dominance of this ideological fantasy, they still behave with a certain inner distance as if they would still act truly, in correspondence with what they believe. However, it is rather hard for the paranoid humans to believe fully in what they see and hear, let alone to make a permanent commitment to any belief system. In this technology-revolutionized world, we find the sort of cyborg culture discussed by Donna Haraway, where the boundary between humans and machines as well as that between humans and animals is thoroughly breached. Our belief-system has already been reshaped into a superficial ritual that people only enact to fit into the ideological fantasy.

Given these conditions, when people view a photographic image, the first question that crosses their minds is often: “Is it a digital image or a documentary image?” Digital photography can fulfill people’s greatest fantasies by creating a scene that does not actually exist, whereas documentary photography functions otherwise, to “represent” the actuality. To be more precise, for the digital photography in the postmodern visual culture, the ontological status of the image has lost its originality and valid authenticity. On the other hand, documentary photographic images not only uncover multi-layered hidden realities and unmask hypocrisy but also function as the truth-telling evidence to preserve the past. The former has heralded an epochal shift in our understanding of representation itself and has challenged our relation to the images-saturated world; the latter functions as a leap from the actual to the virtual, that is, from reality to the ontological status, in a Deleuzian sense. Conventionally, each sliced image in documentary photography, as a “time image,” confirms that everything is perishable. It proves that reality itself is fundamentally a duration composed of fragmented and discontinuous images. Photography captures or hijacks a frozen piece of time from the duration of life itself. Thus each scrutinized image refers to the past as Susan Sontag says that

“a photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence”(Sontag 16). Our experiences of reality would be rather limited if there is no invention of photography. But in this post-ideological and high-tech age, photography is regarded not merely as the factual evidence but also as an artistic medium as well. In this short paper, I attempt to interpret a collection of photographs, entitled *Beyond Humanity*, by the Taiwanese artist, Yao, Jui-Chung. I shall be making use of the theories of Deleuze and Barthes to penetrate deeper his documentary photography, viewing it as a mechanical practice of visual art that documents our cultural memories and aestheticizes the perceptual ruins of culture.

Introduction

Yao, Jui-Chung, born in 1969 in Taipei, is considered as one of the most prominent Taiwanese artists. He has versatile talents in documentary photography, installation art and painting. The various themes of his works include the absurdity of human existence, Taiwan's unsettling postcolonial identity, the political conflicts between China and Taiwan, and the collective unconscious of Taiwan's deserted buildings or ruins in Taiwan. Since 1997, when he launched his first art exhibition, he has represented Taiwan in several international art exhibitions, such as the Venice Biennale, and the International Triennale of Contemporary Art Yokohama (2005). Unlike some reclusive or ungregarious artists, who withdraw into their own creative world, Yao, Jui-Chung has been quite a keen-eyed social observant and critic. He uses his camera with great enthusiasm as a political tool to dig out the hidden truth from the multi-layered simulacrum of reality. The camera, being his critical gaze, documents the socio-cultural wounds, combats ignorance and uncovers marginalized, forgotten, and excluded memories, and mocks contemporary high-tech consumer culture. His early series of art exhibitions focus more on the controversial issues of the struggling crisis in the post-ideological and post-colonial Taiwanese identity. These are the major themes in *Recover Main Land China* (1994-1996), *The World is for All-China beyond China* (1997-2000), *Phantom of History* (2007), and *Liberating Taiwan* (2007). In addition to the politicized aesthetics in his art exhibitions, the most impressive black-and-white photography collections, *Roam the Ruins of Taiwan* and *The Ruined Islands* are about the traumatic memories of those deserted buildings or ruins in Taiwan and its related islands, Chinmen and Matzu. Of all his documentary photography, these two collections have been the most remarkably outstanding because Yao, Jui-Chung has spent almost ten years roaming through the ruins of Taiwan, not only saving their neglected history from oblivion in visual images, but also creating verbal beauty as he narrates the traumatic history of those ruins in poetic language. Understandably, these collections has received major critical acclaims from the local art critics. Yet, his later art works have shifted their political emphasis into the more lyrical and aesthetic themes in a creative style of his own that has parodied or transmuted conventional Chinese

painting, such as *Honeymoon* (2010-2012), *Dust in the Wind* (2008-2012), *Small Landscape* (2011), *Dreamy* (2008-2011), *Long Live Landscape* (2012), *Beyond the Mountain* (2012) and *Spirited Away* (2012).

Beyond Humanity belongs to his black-and-white documentary photography of the ruins series in 1998. These awe-provoking images in sublimity represent the local crisis in religious belief and a utilitarian consciousness pervading in the contemporary post-ideological and high-tech Taiwanese culture. Most of the photographic images in this collection are of the fractured and monstrous bodies of the religious idols, with either their heads, severed or broken, their bodies discarded, abandoned in a dark corner against a decayed garage, or in a filthy landfill. These nothingness-provoking images with affects of decadence or ruins create a moment of shock; yet they are framed from a perspective of remarkable aesthetic sense that alleviates or even smooths away the feelings of disgust or repulsion. This manner of representation indicates that these idols have lost their omnipotent charm for their believers and now remain as fragments of ruins.

The Ruins of the Sublime

The cover of the collection, *Beyond Humanity*, invites the viewers into the neglected world of the ruins. The deserted buildings are positioned behind the abandoned statues of two crouching monkeys on the rock in gloomy black-and-white images¹ which provoke the affects of emptiness or nothingness. This threshold of nothingness is found in the image of gigantic tellurion,² which is rather unearthly, expressing something grotesque, monstrous and absurd beyond our imagination. It is as if these documentary images were extraterrestrial or a serial bricolage of digital images. Yet, however gruesome they may be, the images in silence scream out that human existence has been distorted. They are followed by the images of two human male models,³ with empty faces, like haunting phantoms strolling on earth. Next, we are invited into the subversive images of the traumatic wound of culture—the broken idols of Sakyamuni Buddha and Mercy Buddha lying down on the filthy ground, instead of being in a dignified temple.⁴ The reverently-worshipped religious idols, as if lost, misplaced or dislocated, have been turned into the

¹This photographic image was taken in Sanjhih Township, Taipei County, in 1992. Several photos that Yao, Jui-Chung has taken in this area are included in this collection. Please consult the index for more information.

²Ironically, this photo was not taken in Taiwan; from the index to this collection, we know that the artist, Yao, Jui-Chung took it in Queens Museum of Art in New York in 2006.

³This photo was taken in London in 2001 according to the information in the index to this collection.

⁴The photo about Mercy Buddha was taken in Taichung County in 1999 and that of Sakyamuni Buddha was taken in Sanchong City, Taipei County in 1992. There are still several sacrilegious images in this collection. Some were taken in Jiaosi Township, Yilan County, Taiwan, 2000; others were taken in Sanchong City, Taipei County, in 1992, or taken in Taichung County in 1999, in Sanyi Township, Miaoli County in 1998, in Yilan city in 1998, in Pingjhen City, Taoyuan County in 2008.

images of agony, or sublime horror to the spectators. When we view these images, a certain affective “punctum” is aroused in us. I take the term from Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*; it is useful here to describe the fright and shock experienced by the spectators. According to Barthes, a photograph’s punctum is “the element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow and pierces me” and it “designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument”(Barthes, 26). The viewers, affected by these weird and gruesome images, might first become vertiginous or overwhelmed, as if falling into the unearthly dimension, then soon might feel attacked by disgust, agony, and resentment. Undoubtedly, these shockingly-sublime images prick the viewers, as if they were forced to confront with the traumatic kernel of the psychic wound.

To be more precise, it is actually the intention of this collection to use sublime awe, nothingness or horror to affect its viewers. Each specific angle that Yao, Jui-Chung creates reinforces the affects of the sublime, by contrasting the sharp distinction of light between black and white—highlighting the disfigured, grotesque or fragmented monstrosity of the abandoned or broken statues of western and eastern gods and goddesses in a certain forsaken and neglected corner. In addition to the images of ruins, there are other images that show some gigantic Buddhas, such as Mazu,¹ Maitreya Buddha² or Chikung.³ These stand erected higher than the temples, as if the divine gaze is invisibly-ubiquitous to detect evil deeds or to protect innocent people from harm. Yet their sublime altitude is a bit incongruous in relation to their surroundings. There is something alien protruding in these remainders from a past civilization as they protrude in sharp contradiction to the environment. Some other photographs portray the stone statues of Taiwanese local folktales and fables, which evoke a sense of anachronism as they are abandoned in an open ground; these are the remnants of the metaphysical belief in the past. The multitude of the silent and disfigured, together with some images of Buddha in blurred focus, dinosaurs’ skeletons,⁴ and plastic models of humans with transparent internal organs⁵ create the sublime effect of an unearthly ensemble. These images of ruins ironically have transported us into an excluded realm of the cultural truth as if we are encountering with “the Real” in a Žižekian-Lacanian sense—a constitutive excluded element exists included as a traumatic wound, a hidden truth or a stumbling block within the whole structure itself because this fundamental psychoanalytic belief is that something has to be excluded in order to make the whole structure function well. Thus, the images of ruins might be viewed as a return of the Real to disturb and to make ugly the harmonious appearance of the culture itself. They indicate the traumatic wound of the culture uncovering or unfolding its intended forgotten past.

¹This photo is Lung-Feng temple, taken in Jhunan City, HsinChu County, in 2000.

²This photo was taken in Emei Township, Hsinchu County, in 2008.

³This photo was taken in Taichung County in 2008.

⁴This photo was taken in Taiwan Provincial Museum, Taipei in 1993.

⁵This photo was taken in the National Museum of Nature and Science, Taichung, in 1998.

These images of sublime awe are followed by others of sublime horror, that is, the ruined statues of Buddha.¹ “What happened to them?” the viewers might ask themselves. The answers could be various: first, they needed to be removed because there was a new city plan and the place where they used to stand was needed for redevelopment or some other functions; second, people had lost their belief in them, or converted into another religion; or third, with the lapse of time, their appearance and the paint had become faded, and thus they were in need of conservation—perhaps they are temporarily awaiting further “reconstruction”; the final and the worst scenario is that they have been discarded because they are no longer revered since they have lost the omnipotent power to help the local people fulfill their wishes. Well, to the iconoclasts, this scenario suggests the local people have been awakened from their mass delusion that has forced them unconsciously to regress into infantile helplessness in search of a powerful paternal protection for their destiny. In fact, to an atheist, these images of those discarded religious idols have eventually revealed the truth, that is, they have proved themselves to be mere simulacra. Yet, to the iconolaters or the devout, this act of blasphemy demonstrates local brutality and rigid irrationality. It simply means that the spirit of the gods has flown away and now exists in other forms. Therefore, people have to abandon idols so that afterwards they can continue to search for other more trustworthy deities who are the “real things,” with true omnipotent power to fulfill their wishes. For whatever reason it might be, the images of ruined idols do indeed symbolize the crisis of belief in Taiwanese local culture.

The greater their dreams, the more idols they need to produce for this mass religious consumption, and in the end, the more discarded idols will end up in the landfill. Near the turn of the twenty-first century, many kinds of lottery frenzy have arisen in Taiwan; people are obsessed with the idea of winning the lottery to fulfill their dreams. These dreams include buying a luxurious apartment, travelling all over the world staying at fancy hotels, or emigrating to start a new business or to improve their quality of life. People who dream thus of becoming millionaires or even billionaires overnight depend on these religious idols for certain secret guidance. If their dreams come true, these idols are treated with reverence; if not, they can be mercilessly abandoned. From my own viewpoint, I find a sharp sarcasm mocking contemporary culture in these contradictory, grotesque or monstrous images that discover Buddha abandoned in the deserted garage, rather than revered in a dignified temple. The immortality or eternal timelessness which belongs to these idols is greatly undermined and throughout the whole collection there is a shocking contrast which demonstrates a disruption between pathological fantasy and reality. Thus, each photographic image of the ruins in this collection is a piece of demystification of belief as well as representing a certain malfunctioning of government city plans.

Every culture has its own religious belief. While in his other collections of photographs depicting ruins, Yao, Jui-Chung provides a cultural commentary

¹The most sublime images of ruins of Buddha are those taken in Sanyi Township, Miaoli County in 2003 and also in Yilan City in 1998.

in poetic language, in *Beyond Humanity* he only provides images and thus leaves room for viewers to supply their own comments. Conversely, each image does not “evoke” in silence the feelings of nostalgia, for a time when people still had a profoundly reverent religious belief. This absence of nostalgia does not imply loss, because, normally, we tend to think that the less people indulge in the religious belief, the greater their autonomy for the decision-making in their life. Freud in his essay, “*Civilization and its Discontents*” has argued that religion is a mass delusion, and that its origins can be traced back to “a restoration of limitless narcissism.” As such, it involves a regression to infantile helplessness, to the fantasized protection from a powerful father (Freud 72). On the other hand, I still do not think that the photographer—Yao, Jui-Chung—intends to deliver to his viewers the message that people in Taiwan are now more enlightened, and no longer need any belief in religion. The sublime images of Buddhas or the figures from the local folklores indicate both that reality itself is full of mysteries and that tradition is sustained by the local older generation—as distinct from the current fashion for high-tech culture amongst the Americanized or westernized younger generation. Yet, some of the photographs of deserted buildings do truly depict a distance between the past and the present. If it is always the case that the present can become the past instantaneously; something is missing in the flow of life’s duration, bearing witness to the transience of life itself. Susan Sontag in her book, *On Photography*, states that “Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt” (Sontag 15). Since each photography is a frozen piece of time, referring to the past, to the temporality of history at an ontological level, these gruesome images may cause a sense of “negative epiphany,” a sudden revelation of a negative. On the surface, the image of the ruins represents a cultural wound. If we penetrate deeper into each documentary image, we come to realize that the secret lies in the surface level, that it is haunted by its double, the monstrous specter and the specter of the past.

Photographic Images as the Virtual Theater

Undoubtedly, these documentary photographs could be regarded as the time images, referring to the past. Each image is haunted by its double, the past as a specter, in a Deleuzian sense, pointing out to the realm of the virtual: the invisible ontological status. Roland Barthes states: “Yet it is not (it seems to me) by Painting that Photography touches art, but by Theater (Barthes 31). It makes sense to link Barthes’ notion of photography with Yao, Jui-Chung’s art of ruins, since both of them think that photographic images indicate “the return of the dead”(Barthes 9), or rather, I think, “the virtual theater of the dead.” What has happened is that the image no longer exists in the present moment. Obviously, each photographic image captures a frozen piece of time, that is, a piece of the past, or of a contingent event from the infinite duration of time. I agree with Barthes who considers photography is closer to the theater; it is a

kind of the theater like *Tableau Vivant* (Barthes 32) where characters remain motionless in silence, as in a picture or a painting. What I understand it by “the virtual theater” is based on a notion of a passage of time from the past coexisting with the present in a way suggested by Deleuze and Bergson. Deleuze in his book *Cinema 2*, discusses about “the crystal-image of time” composed of the actual and the virtual images. He explains:

The actual image and its virtual image thus constitute the smallest internal circuit, ultimately a peak or point, but a physical point which has distinct elements. Distinct, but indiscernible, such are the actual and the virtual which are in continual exchange. When the virtual image becomes actual, it is then visible and limpid, as in the mirror or the solidity of finished crystal. But the actual image becomes virtual in its turn, referred elsewhere, invisible, opaque and shadowy, like a crystal barely dislodged from the earth. The actual-virtual couple thus immediately extends into the opaque-limpid, the expression of their exchange. (*Cinema 2* 70)

From this viewpoint, I regard the photographic image as the actual, layered with its specter, the duration of the invisible past; the virtual image is juxtaposed with the actual. Each photographic image is an event, an evocation of the past, a fragment of memory, to recall the past. Thus the past, as the specter of the image itself, becomes the virtual invisible theater, into which we are invited to leap from the present actual image into its ontological and virtual theater of the invisible past. Each image invites the viewers to dive into either individual or collective socio-cultural memories making use of the dynamic movement of the imagination to recall the past. Some details of memories are lost, and cannot be remembered. Thus, according to Bergson, to recall the past

is an activity of the imagination—the right to dream.¹ From the images of ruins, especially the ruined idols or the deserted buildings, the viewers would try to “imagine” in an invisible theater in which the traumatic events, the hidden history and the forgotten memory went on there in the past. The frozen image, which functions as the site of the event could not properly be regarded as the cause of the event itself; it merely functions as a certain clue which might be traced back to its possible cause in the past. As they witness the series of images of ruins, the viewers intermingle in their consciousness the double layers: coexistence of the present and the past. Thus, we begin to “dream,” to “imagine” and to “interpret” the presented images.

Influenced by the theories of Henri Bergson, Deleuze in his book, *Bergsonism*, understands the notion of time— the past, the present, the

¹In Henri Bergson’s book, *Matter and Memory*, he suggests that there are two kinds of memory: one is by habit or repetition, the other is by imagination. Bergson states that “Of these two memories, of which the one imagines and the other repeats, the second may supply the place of the first and even sometimes be mistaken for it...To call up the past in the form of an image, we must be able to withdraw ourselves from the action of the moment, we must have the power to value the useless, we must have the will to dream” (Bergson 82-83).

future—not as chronological order, or logical progression, but as coexistence, that is, a contemporaneity of the present, the past and the future.

The past and the present do not denote two successive moments, but two elements which coexist: One is the present, which does not cease to pass, and the other is the past, which does not cease to be but through which all presents pass. (*Bergsonism* 59)

The Bergsonian concept of duration is defined less by succession, than by coexistence. To Bergson, “only the present is ‘psychological’; but the past is pure ontology; pure recollection has only ontological significance” (*Bergsonism* 56). The photographic image invites us to dive into the past through imagination, as Deleuze states that

We really leap into being, into being-in-itself, into the being in itself of the past. It is a case of leaving psychology altogether. It is a case of an immemorial or ontological Memory. It is only then, once the leap has been made, that recollection will gradually take on a psychological existence: “from the virtual it passes into the actual state....”(*Bergsonism* 57)

Each photographic image invites us to imagine the past and our memory has two aspects of actualization: translation-contraction and rotation-orientation (*Bergsonism* 64). When we look at the photographic images of those discarded religious idols, we feel as if a certain sinister gaze from the virtual ontological past is gazing at us behind the image, suggesting that some disastrous events happened in the past.

The image is like a screen, masking what has happened in the past. It is also like “the screen memory” in the Freudian sense: the visual surface level of the dream is a fabricated bricolage of memories—often distorted, displaced and fractured—unable to represent the original content, the event itself. The full original narrative of how and why the ruins are left like this, that is, the procedure of the event itself, can never be fully traced back. What we can retrieve is this instantaneous slice in the form of an image, which appears to seize the empty grain of the passing moment. However, local religious ceremonies have never been less prosperous and paradoxically, the more the environment is surrounded by technology, the more popular the religion has become. But this is not only a matter of spiritual belief, but in fact for a more utilitarian function— to assist people to win more lotteries and to fulfill their wishes.

Conclusion

Benjamin states in his essay “*Theses on the Philosophy of History*” that “to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really

was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (*Illumination* 255). These tragic images of the discarded idols provide that "the moment of danger." Further more they speak in silence that high-tech culture runs the risk of precipitating the crisis of belief, and also of treating religious idols as mere simulacra and as wastes. The truth revealed in this way implies our helplessness in face of the destiny as well as the insatiable human desire or greediness for survival. The images of ruins—the broken, fractured idols—bear witness to a spiritual corruption and pollution that permeates people's minds. These images of ruins open up the ontological dimension of an irretrievable and irreversible past, and yet this intimation of things, the feeling of past does not imply a regression to feelings of nostalgia or melancholia. Instead, it tends toward the future taking on responsibility for the forward duration of life itself. I would like to quote a statement from Jacques Derrida as my final conclusion. Derrida in his book, *Archive Fever*, explains that "the archive is not, we repeat, a question of the past...It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow. The archive: if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in times to come" (*Archive Fever* 36

). In other words, Derrida effectively agrees with the idea that history repeats itself; things happening in the past will repeat themselves in difference in the future. Viewing the images of ruins as "cultural archives" has not only transported us to the past, to ponder over the events of the past but also has prepared us well for the future, demonstrating that all things of beauty, even belief itself, exist only for a brief moment. These images might evoke a certain consciousness of good will in people so that they deal with unwanted idols more respectfully in the future— even if they consider them mere simulacra with no divine spirit living in them. Though traversing this fantasy might be a bit painful, in the process we discover the certain truth of freedom: a freedom that includes responsibility for a more enlightened future.

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