



External Space



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Jessie Sheng

Havoc in Heaven

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Have you ever driven through the suburbs? Sprawling box-framed houses and square architectural compounds blur into a grey horizon at the periphery of your vision. Every turn you make, you see the same houses, lawns and cars. The landscape is reduced into a simple image, vibrating deep in your memory — a blue or white painted house with a well-manicured lawn and a car parked in the garage, surrounded by a white picket fence — the image of the American Dream, a simulacrum of happiness, the model of a better life.

For her single-channel, *Havoc in Heaven*, Jessie Sheng uses stock images of properties listed on North American real estate websites. Sheng builds her video in layers, cutting and pasting the stock photos to reassemble shifting façades of imagined houses. Between each frame, the artist inserted video clips featuring the well-known Chinese mythological character, the Monkey King. Taken from the opera, *Journey to the West*, the mythic figure dances underneath the animated layers of roofs, windows, and walls. Visibly trapped in the suburban landscape the Monkey King's body fractures and disintegrates, hinting to a larger concern regarding the state of North-American neoliberal condition.

Sheng considers the Monkey King as a seed of fire, which sparks life into the prison of the suburbia, attempting to grow larger than its confinement. He is referenced in an early chapter of the opera as being born out of a stone with great power which could potentially be a threat to the Gods of the Eastern Heaven. In order to contain the Monkey King's powers, the Gods recruit him and provide a minor post in the palace. However, he soon discovers his belittlement, as he is not invited to a prestigious banquet attended by all the other divinities. Flying into a rage, he steals the feast before it begins and destroys the palace. Eventually, Buddha saves the Eastern Heaven by imprisoning the Monkey King under a mountain. Five hundred years later, a holy monk takes on the task to bring back the sacred scripture from the West to the East. On his journey, he sets free and controls the Monkey King with the help of the Buddha, travelling with him and other fallen deities towards the West. ¹

This journey from the East to the West resembles the immigrant experience of seeking a better life in the New World: a fantasy featuring a house with white fences in a rigidly designed suburban landscape. *Havoc in Heaven's* "heaven" invokes this imagery of dense and invariable dwellings. These corporative utopias leave no emotional markings: in order to expand and encourage mass consumption, these houses are designed using a cookie-cutter model. During our conversation, Sheng makes use of the term "McMansion" to describe this phenomenon: a McDonald-like production chain of uniform homes that regulate individual desires and disregard more flamboyant cultural and traditional preferences for self-expression.² Not only does it reduce the immigrant cultural experience to a blend template, as these kind of homes being sold on the market in a cheap and fast chain flow, but it also accommodates more and more people moving from the city centre to suburbs. The city outskirts is aggressively appropriated and reduced to concrete for properties and industrial complexes.

¹ Anthony C. Yu, translated and edited, *The Journey to the West Volume I* (Chicago: University of Chicago

² Jessie Sheng in conversation with the author, December 2018.

In her video, Sheng employs the strategy of deconstruction to defy the ideology of perfection and control that comes with the materiality of the suburbia, echoing the wrecking of the palace by the Monkey King. In his book *Gestures*, author Vilém Flusser analyzes what the difference is between a gesture of “destruction with intention”³, and a gesture that becomes a radical work of art. The destructive act of the Monkey King in the original opera is a narrative device, which reflects the internal struggle of the Monkey King in addition to also developing the plot. This gesture of destruction is motivated by a desire for self-actualization. The Monkey King is transformed into an anarchistic radical. However, the work of *Journey to the West* remains separate from his act of subversion. It is not the work which becomes “revolutionary”⁴, but only the character of the Monkey King.

Sheng turns the gesture of destruction into the work itself: deconstructing the houses into fragments reflects what Flusser discusses as the “negation of objects”⁵ with a clear motive. The deconstructed houses are not accidental ruins but intentional symbols of shattered confinement, a portal to a freedom from stereotypes and expectations set by the Capitalist hegemony. By using video as her medium, Sheng also participates in the actions of the Monkey King, battling against “heaven” and eventually escaping. Video production is a process, “produc(ing) an event in which the maker participates, even if he is controlling it.”⁶ The shooting and editing screens show immediate changes and responses every time the artist gathers and consciously selects samples of the homes, animating its disintegration through layering techniques in computer graphic software, and pushing the subject to the cumulative escape sequence at the end. Sheng gives agency to the fractured body of the Monkey King, whose imprisonment also refers to the entrapments of her Chinese Canadian identity. Consequently, this video becomes a performance of disappearance: it is a defiant gesture of non-conformity and refusal to engage in a society which attempts to control its

³ Vilém Flusser and Nancy Ann Roth. *Gestures*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014),59

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Vilém Flusser and Nancy Ann Roth. *Gestures*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014),56

⁶ Vilém Flusser and Nancy Ann Roth. *Gestures*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014),146

citizens' bodies in order to build a conveyor belt of packaged and pre-determined existences.

In the video, the rapid rhythm of operatic accompaniment is digitally manipulated: the rousing procession fades into a glitchy stop. The music contains an urgency and clearly signifies to the listener its cultural and ethnic specificity. The use of sound reconstructs an imaginary space within the houses: it suggests a torrid internal life besieged by the calm exterior of suburban homes. The tension between the facade's promise of perfect life and the dissatisfied residents finally exhausts itself at the end in the manner of a distorted musical pause.

Unlike the original opera, in which the Monkey King's rebellion against heaven is shown at the start of a journey, Sheng's video *Havoc in Heaven* is shown as the destination of the migration. It reveals the disillusionment of suburbia and its material ideology, and the improbability of a better life especially if there is no consideration for individual and marginal desires.

-Yuling Chen