

A Study of Absurdity in Yu Hua's Novels

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Abstract:

Yu Hua focuses on the characteristics of pioneering narrative in his novels in the early stage and transforms to focus on realistic documentary novels in the later stage, which are divided into suffering writing and warm writing, but absurdity is a literary characteristic that has been running through his writing activities; it is also a kind of aesthetic writing characteristic that is different from that of traditional literature. It has significant prominence in depicting absurdity, leading readers to think about and question this irrational world. This paper, based on previous studies in the academic world, proposes the construction of the absurdity mapped out in Yu Hua's novels in the dystopian world, which is divided into external and internal reasons: The way the technique of magic realism is presented in the creation, as well as the comparison of the presentation methods and spiritual themes in Chinese and Western dystopian workers, revealing that although there is still a big difference between these two works in terms of presentation methods, there is a similar spiritual world at the spiritual level. However, this paper hopes to be able to make additions and improvements to the academic community regarding the subject.

Keywords: Yu Hua; absurdity; narrative style; comparative study.

1. Introduction

Yu Hua is an influential writer in the contemporary literary world, known in the early days for his avant-garde, his novels rebelled against the traditional mode of writing, departed from the aesthetic style of traditional writing, and reconstructed the traditional literature with vulgar and easy-to-understand ink and writing, and his works are full of chilling violence and bloodshed. In the late 1990s, his cre-

ative work underwent a major transformation, shifting from postmodernism to realism, using popular writing techniques to enhance realism and attracting the attention of more readers. Many scholars at home and abroad have interpreted and studied Yu Hua's innovations, and with the renewal of the times, more attention has been paid to the universal consciousness of suffering in Yu Hua's creations, comparing it with modernized social human ideology and survival consciousness. In this study, the article extensively

searched and researched relevant theories and literature, as well as reading relevant books at home and abroad. Previously, many scholars have deeply explored absurdity in Yu Hua's works, but in most of the literature, they have researched how absurdity is manifested in themes, ideas, and contents. Contemporary writer Zhou Mingquan evaluates Yu Hua's *The Seventh Day*, clearly and incisively pointing out the authentic Chinese stories depicted in Yu Hua's work. He raises a thought-provoking question: Do these narratives present reality through absurd storytelling or do they contain absurdity within the realm of reality? This perspective is based on deep reflection [1]. Professor Wang Hailiang has conducted an in-depth exploration of existentialism in Yu Hua's writing, examining how Yu Hua integrates existentialist themes into his constructed world of absurdity, as well as recognizing the aesthetic value of "existence" in his works. This research provides a significant direction for subsequent scholars' studies, and the various reasons for the themes of writing are related to his life experiences, which led to his thinking about an irrational world [2]. There are also many studies on Yu Hua's transition period, from a vanguard writer in the 1980s to a realist documentary novelist in the 1990s. From a young experiencer to a mature bystander, academics have conducted in-depth studies on the techniques of Yu Hua's works during the transition period, pointing directly to the effects of the vanguard techniques presented in his later works [3]. Huang Tao's analysis of Yu Hua's creative techniques, his partly grotesque aesthetic morphology, his exploration of the principles of aesthetic production, and his reflection on the theory of aesthetic value, allow readers to fully understand the power of the aesthetics of the absurd in Yu Hua's writing [4]. Therefore, this paper is interested in exploring more aspects of its absurdity: How does Yu Hua construct this absurd world?

2. The Construction of Absurd World

Absurdity is a literary characteristic. The term "absurdity" can be broken down into absurdity and grotesqueness, which is specifically manifested as a plot contrary to the real world, and the author often reveals the absurdity of the real world and the dilemma of human existence through bizarre, exaggerated, illogical plots and the unusual images of characters [5].

In the 1980s, China was reborn from a panic in political history. Various social contradictions such as new political system, new political reforms, and new social trends were hitting everyone in the society. Yu Hua, as one of the representative writers of the early pioneers, whose aesthetic style of writing and linguistic characteristics were contrary to the traditional ones, was influenced by the

famous writer Kafka, and he began to boldly depict the authenticity of the world and the absurdity of the society. Yu Hua's early life experiences prompted him to start his writing career. His use and depiction of the "absurd" style comes from his own special childhood memories and youth experiences. The American writer Ernest Hemingway once said, "The best condition for being a writer is to have an unfortunate childhood" [6]. The famous Ireland writer Colm. Tobin once said: "An unhappy childhood makes a great writer" [7]. The unique experience of Yu Hua's childhood, spent in prolonged cohabitation with his father in a hospital setting, has endowed him with a distinctive understanding of death. For a long time, Yu Hua was a writer of anger and indifference, but as time passed, the anger within Yu Hua gradually subsided, and he began to realize that what a true writer seeks is the truth, a truth that rejects moral judgment.

2.1 Writing of Absurd Violence

Mental violence is a kind of soft violence, cold violence, combined with narrative, mainly referring to a narrative technique or narrative mode of literary creation [8]. The combination of absurdity and violence can often produce a strong visual and emotional impact on the readers themselves. In the 1980s, the rate of unnatural deaths in Yu Hua's early works was very high, and his novels were full of blood and killing, violence and indifference. He knows that violence originates from the complex world inside human beings, and violence is a symbol of human desire. For example, the cyclic revenge game in *A Kind of Reality*, the ritualistic serial killings in *The Mistake by the River*, the shocking self-mutilation of the history teacher in 1986, chilling cannibalism in classical love, etc. These novels with pioneering representativeness all have a common feature, which is the perfect interpretation of Yu Hua's violent aesthetics. For example, in *A Kind of Reality*, Shan Gang's four-year-old son, Pi Pi, has been watching his mother being punched and kicked by his father for years, and under this subtle influence, Pi Pi also begins to slap his own cousin, who is still waiting to be nursed, just because his cousin's cries make him feel excited. PiPi also dropped his cousin to his death, yet he viewed his cousin's death with unusual indifference, as described by Yu Hua: He leaned down to look and found that the blood was flowing from his head, and it flowed on the ground like a flower that was slowly opening up. The sequence of the characters' deaths in the novel is a ring upon a ring, and the tragic color of the back-and-forth correlation triggers the readers and research scholars to think about the irreconcilability and irrationality of absurdity. The depiction of such frightening, extremely bloody, violent and brutal

scenes reflects the extreme of violence and unusual human nature through Yu Hua's writing.

If the violence in the real world life is through the cruelty of physical blows, the physical nervous system is tortured, that readers of Yu Hua's novels feel is the violence of culture and spiritual thought. Growing up in the hospital, Yu Hua has a more than normal understanding and personal views of life and death. Through a series of alienations and distortions, he bursts out the heavy blow of reality and the absurdity of the real world, contrary to reality in the direct and revealing words, which completely crushes the whitewash of the disease-free world.

2.2 The Absurdity Constructed in the Historical Background

When a writer writes, he is usually influenced by the environment of the time he lives in, whether it is a political, economic, or social trend, which gives him a certain direction for creative thinking and space for imagination.

History often creates tragedy, and tragedy is interpreted to the fullest extent in violence. The absurdity shown in Yu Hua's novels is a history of violence combined with unusual human nature, killing, violence and bloodshed, which pushes the pace of history. Civilization and ideas are continuously improved and evolved in the pace of history, so different backgrounds of different times create different characters, and each character image generally summarizes one of the characters in different times and environments, and also constitutes a virtual character in the dystopian world. Yu Hua depicts a cruel feudal traditional ideology with obvious class differences between people. As a result, the characters in Yu Hua's novels are infinitely enlarged and shown in a very distorted background. For example, the funeral hall in *The Seventh Day* is also divided into ordinary and VIP areas, and the life jacket and urn are also divided into three, six, nine grades, and even the burning window is divided into imported and domestic ones, and the rich and powerful people can burn the ashes without getting a number in the queue first, which also shows that most people are unable to realize the class transcendence from life to death. In *Alive*, Fugui's son, Youqing, donates blood to the mayor's wife, and because the opposite party is the mayor's wife, no one comes forward to stop Youqing from continuing to donate blood, which leads to his death. When the goodness of human nature is used as a tool for capital to play with, the society becomes distorted and alienated. To Yu Hua, all this is hilarious and ridiculous. He delivers these grotesque and absurd images to his readers in the form of words to break the irrational and uncertain reality of the world through what he believes to be the meaning of

the individual's existence, in an attempt to build a human world that seems bizarre and absurd, but is in fact responsive to the reality of the existence of human beings. Therefore, as scholars have found after comparing Kafka's absurdity and Yu Hua's absurdity, "Kafka uses absurdity as a hypothetical device to obtain an interstitial effect and symbolic significance, whereas Yu Hua tries to eliminate the boundary between fantasy and reality, and replaces the real world with the world of hallucination. While Kafka's absurdity is the premise of erection, Yu Hua's absurdity is the result of hallucination [9].

3. The Mingling of Magical Realism and Reality: Take the Seventh Day as an Example

When magic realism is used in literature, "magic" is only a technique, and the purpose is to reflect "reality". The famous masterpiece is Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The narrative technique of *The Seventh Day*, compared with Yu Hua's other literary works, is characterized by the use of magic realism, which is used to tell the absurdity of the real society, and to recognize and criticize the society and human nature.

3.1 Metaphor of Social Conflicts from the Perspective of Journalism

The Seventh Day is also another major masterpiece of Yu Hua's transformation, which to a certain extent presents the new breakthrough of pioneering narrative characteristics in Yu Hua's works after he returned to traditional writing from his individual creative consciousness, and inherited the magicalism of pioneering narration, with absurdity as the main tone of the whole work. Many writers in the academic field have added the perspective of journalism to their novels to increase the new focus and writing intention. For example, Yu Hua's *The Seventh Day*, Liu Zhenyun's *I Am Not Pan Jinlian*, Jia Pingwa's *Extreme Flower*, etc. The writing technique of using news as a narrative perspective is not novel and unique, but rather it depends on how to utilize the news to express the writing intention. The fusion of non-fictional realistic plot and fictionalized text is a means of reproducing Yu Hua's magical illusionism. As a writing background in Yu Hua's novel *The Seventh Day*, he takes the perspective of "Yang Fei", a deceased soul, to travel through the city, and expresses what he sees and feels in the three worlds of life, death, and growth with a zero-distance realistic perspective, and takes the familiar hot social events, such as piracy of brand names, selling kidneys for cell phones, Jumping to death, doctor-patient relationship, assault on

police and so on, all of them reflect the reality and absurdity of this world, and profoundly reveal the real face and contradictions of this society, which looks peaceful on the surface, but is in fact surging with dark currents. From the top officials to the grassroots, from wrongful convictions to bribery in disguise, etc., they represent some of the social problems that epitomized the Chinese society at that time.

News is characterized by “newness,” not something that happened hundreds of years ago or centuries ago, but something real, something that just happened around us, with authenticity and chronology. Yu Hua used a combination of news and flashbacks to deliver the seemingly grotesque and absurd events that happened at that time to the readers by means of hotspots, so that the readers feel as if they were in that era, exiled themselves to the bottom of that absurd society, and clearly felt the people and events around them, and also truly achieved zero-distance contact between the spirit and the readers. The news mainly reflects the cause, passage and result of the event truthfully, without a trace of personal subjective emotion and opinion, while Yu Hua’s *The Seventh Day* shows most of the unit events through the news directly and revealingly the darkness of human nature and the social class difference, as well as the dystopia and strangeness of the real world.

3.2 The Mingling of the Undead and the Human World

What has been constant in Yu Hua’s creation is his exposition of death and his use of grotesque or surreal fictions of death to ironize the darkness of feudal society and the distortion of human nature. He once explained his intention of writing *The Seventh Day*: “I felt the coldness of the real world when I wrote it, and I wrote it very harshly, so I needed the warmth, the goodness, to give hope to myself and to the readers. After the real world was despairing, I wrote about a wonderful world of the dead. This world is not a utopia, not a paradise, but very beautiful [10].

Yu Hua disperses this boundary between life and death throughout the plot, integrating nonfiction into fiction. One of the keys to the success of *The Seventh Day* is the author’s depiction of the great contrast between reality and dystopia, and his skillful fusion of the two; dystopia is just sugar-coated, and the main thing is that what is wrapped up in it is still the absurd reality, which, when embodied by the reader, spreads out to a heavy bitterness. Yu Hua said in his reply to the *Beijing Times* that he has always had such a desire, “to focus on the seemingly absurd but actually real stories in our lives.Let a person who has just died enter another world and let the real world appear like a reflection” [11]. In the storyline, the burning of ash-

es on the first day is the truest reflection of reality: there are serious class differences in real society: the poor cannot experience the fun and power of the rich when they are alive, and after death, even the burning of ashes has to be lined up and divided into VIP and ordinary areas; such a very absurd portrayal cannot help but put the reader in a trance, they shuttle on the edge of the boundary between life and death, pondering whether this is the world of life or death, the mingling of the undead and the human world is demonstrated in the opening chapter.

As mentioned earlier, because of his own growing experience, Yu Hua has a clear understanding of human nature, and he can truly reflect the real thoughts and inner world of people at the bottom through plain and vulgar words. *The Seventh Day* appear to be a story of the dead, but it is essentially a depiction of the living, focusing on the reality of life with strong class consciousness and power struggle, where people try to get out of their predicaments but are powerless to do so, and the irony of the absurdity of the human world is extremely strong. Yu Hua takes a soulful perspective to show reader the most absurd scene - the rat shampoo girl and her boyfriend. The rat girl wants to exchange her body for money, but her boyfriend disagrees and buys her a copycat, during which the rat girl chooses to jump off a building, and after being persuaded to give up the idea of jumping off the building, she falls off the building because of her slippery feet. This story is absurd to the extreme, ordinary people’s lives are so sketchy. So Yu Hua wrote again in the later story that the mouse girl’s boyfriend bought a grave for the mouse girl, trying to bring a touch of warmth and goodwill to this absurd and ironic strong world, but ultimately the essence, or because the reality brings the grave.

4. Comparison of Absurdity in Chinese and Western Literature: Waiting for Godot and Alive

4.1 . Different Expressions of Absurdity in Chinese and Western literature

Absurdity has always been a creative idea challenged by many writers in literature, and the most intuitive feeling that dystopian literature brings to the table is irony. Both plays and novels present absurdity to the masses in different ways, striking at the deep spiritual world of the masses to empathize with the authors and to think and judge the irrationality and uncertainty of the real world.

Waiting for Godot brings the absurdity to the audience by the visual and auditory impact of the limbs and lines of the actors on the theater stage, which powerfully makes

the audience feel the real arm wrestling with the space and time; whereas *Alive* is the author's way to bring the readers the impact of the spirit and soul through the embellishment of the words, the rhetoric of the language, and the exaggeration of the techniques, and to think and sigh, which is the purpose of the novel to achieve the absurdity. This is the purpose of the novel to achieve the absurdity. This is the most concise and clearly different expression between the two.

Waiting for Godot, one of Beckett's famous masterpieces, is a drama set in the Second World War. The tone of its drama is existentialism. Beckett's play goes against the traditional flow of drama and adopts the creative technique of cyclical structure, making extensive use of symbols and metaphors, inverting logic and reason, and abandoning plot conflict and characterization in favor of simple and clear stage scene setting and strange and grotesque tools. Such as hats and boots, as well as ambiguous, grotesque and absurd, inconsistent dialogues between the protagonists and nonsense thinking, constantly repeating phrases. The ugly face of the society is shown to the public, which is enough to see the degree of its absurdity. In the first act of *Waiting for Godot*, the setting is a wilderness, with twilight, a wilderness path, bare and dead trees, two vagabonds in rags and in a trance-like state, and a man claiming to be a local landowner leading a servant who is tied up with a rope. The second act is similarly staged, with no major change of scene, the same preverbal dialog, the same day-serving grotesqueries, and a lack of coherence, but digging deeper into its detailed descriptions, one can find the ideas that Beckett is trying to convey to the public. Because of the simplicity of the scene setting, the author zooms in on the detailed descriptions, focusing all his attention on the description of the scenery and the tools of the characters, such as putting on and taking off boots, and the hat being worn between the two main characters. The seemingly logical descriptions of actions are in fact amplifying the mental world of the characters and revealing the absurdity of everything around them.

Yu Hua's depiction of absurdity can be said to be as pure as a flame. Although his early works are brutal novels with bloodshed and violence all rolled into one, his later works are about peeping into the absurdity of the world from the perspective of a minor character. In warmth and affection, in family ethics, in social class, a slow and rhythmic projection of a dark scene of social reality. To strike through the absurdity with the absurdity is the usual means of his novels. The medium of *Alive* is language, predominantly narrative, conveying imagination and intellect to the reader in black and white. Yu Hua adopts a linear narrative; the work observes Fugui's life from the perspective of a bystander, breaking the traditional single narrative and

enhancing the narrative color of the story. The novel pays more attention to the detailed aspects of the unnatural deaths, using meticulous writing to show the absurdity of the storyline and characterization. Yu Hua's delicate depiction of each tragedy has precise language and clear and complete characterization to drive the plot; while the medium of *Waiting for Godot* is the body language and lines of the comedians themselves, the display is more direct, holding the audience's visual and auditory senses, it is through the author's creation of a virtual space, simple plots, endless waiting, meaningless conversations, can't tell the difference between night and day, can't tell the day of the week, absurdity, and the absurdity of the story. It is also impossible to distinguish the day of the week, and absurdity is naturally accomplished in the text.

4.2 The Deserted World with Similar Spiritual Characters

Waiting for Godot and Alive both deeply reflects the spiritual world and spiritual state of human beings.

The disorganized dialogues of the two main characters in *Waiting for Godot* are repetitive, shaky and illogical, and their actions and languages are not on the normal track, which give people a strong sense of absurdity and strangeness, and reflect their inner despair and bewilderment in a twisted way, but they are still looking forward to it. In the play, the child repeatedly says, "If you don't come today, you will come tomorrow. And so the two vagabonds wait day after day. The play takes World War II as the background, and uses absurd forms to show that the war has brought irreparable progress to civilians, who have lost their homes, relatives, and everything that was originally happy, and have received serious mental torture, and their rich spiritual world has been razed to the ground since then, so they can only wait, even if they don't know what they're waiting for, because only waiting is their hope of living. Lacking self-awareness, they put their hopes on others, not realizing that they themselves can save themselves. In the face of uncertain time, scenes and characters, the only certainty is the endless *Waiting for Godot*. It represents the last bit of light in the world of nothingness, the only certainty, the only proof of their existence in the world of absurdity, the last straw they can grasp, and their performance against absurdity [12]. Fugui, the protagonist of *Alive*, falls from a rich family to the lower class because of eating, drinking, whoring, and gambling, and in the fading time of his life, his loved ones around him leave him one after another. After the death of his son, Fugui's character begins to mature and gradually hides his treasure of affection and love for his family, and he stays strong for their sake, and it is affection that gives him

hope for life. In contrast to Godot, Fugui's spiritual world is relatively full, but it becomes empty little by little later on, and he begins to learn to accept death and regard it as a normal thing in those days. People feel numb both mentally and physically after a blow, and "living" for Fugui is not a matter of shouting or attacking, but of enduring. The characters in Yu Hua's novels all seem to be destined for tragic endings, with absurd plots following one after another, and the deaths of the characters in the stories seem to be lined up one after another, which also truly reflects the fragility of human life.

Waiting for Godot and Alive both depict the complex emotions of hope and despair, are looking for the hope of survival, their thoughts are empty and scarce, life and war give them suffering, but they can not do anything about it, they have long been physically numb as the walking dead, the two vagabonds and Fugui's reality of the spirit of the world has long been inches of grass. Both "living" and "waiting" are the struggle against the absurdity of the world, they are still insisting on facing the predicament after being struck, and hope arises from the pain, which motivates them to continue to live, continue to look for, and continue to wait.

5. Conclusion

This paper has written three chapters on the study of absurdity in Yu Hua's works. The first is the way of constructing absurdity, summarizing the internal and external reasons for Yu Hua's construction of absurdity; the second is the use of creative techniques and their continuation in his later works; and the third is a comparison of the works of the Western absurdists, which unfolds in terms of expressive differences and spiritual similarities. Absurdity is always throughout the creative career of Yu Hua's novels, and it can be said that it is a characteristic engraved in his bones. He was influenced by the Western absurdists and formed his own absurd style over time, and even though he experienced a change of style in his later period, he did not leave out the addition of absurdity in the moments of writing warmth, but combined the two to raise the height of authenticity of his creations. Yu Hua's novels pursue the absurdity of details and use the small to see the big, bringing the human subjective consciousness to the macroscopic and uncertain real world, to feel and think, and to question the reality. He uses grotesque and twisted ink to expand the scope of public perception, unveil the peaceful and beautiful social appearance, construct a different dystopian world, and write about history and the pain of the country as well as the individual. Through Yu Hua's many excellent works, as a reader, one can clearly per-

ceive his emotions and thoughts about the times, and these creations of his have provided other scholars of the vanguard school as well as later fledgling scholars with new sources of writing and directions of thinking. This paper initially researches the existence of absurdity in Yu Hua's novels and enriches some relative theories, but due to the existence of subjective and objective righteousness, the paper still has some shortcomings, only involves a few of Yu Hua's works, the reading is not deep enough and wide enough, and it lacks examples and more systematic analysis. It is hoped that in the future, more scholars in the field of modern and contemporary can carry out more in-depth and detailed research on the absurdity in Yu Hua's novels.

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