

Tales of the Girl with the Blue Wig

“And what’s more horrifying than normalcy?” [Patti Smith]†

Weirdness is present in our everyday life. No matter where we go, we find something weird, and there are days even when the weirdest part is glimpsing a bit of normality. The bus driver is weird, our boss is weird, our classmates are overly weird and they call us weird, too. The Chinese tourists are so weird, the Arabs dress weird, the Americans are weirdly big, and the Germans are weirdly precise. Everybody who is a little bit different from us is weird. We can call anybody weird who is not “normal” according to the norms of our own society, anybody other than the one who writes the narrative of that culture.

To be normal is to be what we are used to. To expect someone to behave normal in school is to expect everybody to behave alike. To have a normal job is to have a job similar to what other people have. To look normal is to look as ordinary as you can. Otherwise you will be judged. An outlier. Worthy of enhanced scrutiny. On the other hand, normalcy is something we use to cover up individual trait, a wet brush of gloss we glide over any peculiarity we see ourselves as having.

The oddness of ‘ordinary’ becomes visible from a fellow oddball who has spent time under the hard glare of the normal masses. The validity of the norms we are used to is all quite relative, as has been pointed out for centuries by philosophers and writers. Voltaire in *Zadig, or the Book of Fate* writes about Zadig, a fictional character from ancient Babylon with no attempted historical accuracy, but as an allegory to Voltaire’s France. Right in the beginning of the novel, the narrator addresses the reader as a perfect person in the following way: “In a Word, your Soul is as spotless as your Person. You have, moreover, a little Fund of Philosophy, which gives me just Grounds to hope that you’ll relish this Historical Performance better than any other Lady of your Quality would do.”‡ The narrator adds that the text “was originally composed in the Chaldean Language, to which both you and my self are perfect Strangers.”§ Yet, Zadig is presented as a knowledgeable and wise man, who despite living thousands of years ago, seems to be the representative of Enlightenment, who disputes with clerics and stands up for human rights. Voltaire directly criticizes his own era, slightly comparing it to an ancient barbarism that anybody would condemn.

On the other hand, by presenting a stranger, writers can discuss the possible invalidity of their own values. Let’s take Montesquieu as an example. In his *Persian letters*, he tells the story of two Persian travelers, Usbek and Rica, and through their adventures, we are offered an accurate description of the overlooked aspects of contemporary France. In *Letter 30*, Rica describes his experiences when he arrived in Paris. Being a foreigner, he was a spectacle and everybody couldn’t help but stare at him. This is why he began an experiment and dressed as an ordinary Parisian:

“This experiment made me acquainted with my true value. Divested of everything foreign in my garb, I found myself estimated at my proper rate. I had reason to complain of my tailor, who had made me lose so suddenly the attention and good opinion of the public; for I sank immediately into the merest nonentity.”**

Rica’s experience of blending in to the point of disappearance makes us wonder a great many questions. But the most pressing query is this: if it was so easy for him to become alike with so different a group, are we all deep down just as different from each other as Rica was from the Parisians at first sight?

Nietzsche also reflects on what Montesquieu so vividly presented. According to Nietzsche, people have a tendency to universalize “impressions into less colorful, cooler concepts, so that [they] can entrust the guidance of [their life] and conduct to them.”†† Nietzsche argues, anything in the world, “>>the thing in itself<< [...] is quite incomprehensible”‡‡, thus people transpose them into metaphors, which are inevitably only interpretations of the original phenomena. He writes:

“...we believe that we know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, colors, snow, and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things—metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities.”§§

This also means that individual things we might say are the same only seem so because we use simplified language. Dumbed-down in face. Thus, according to Nietzsche, we lie “in the manner indicated, unconsciously and in accordance with habits which are centuries’ old; and precisely by means of this unconsciousness and forgetfulness [we arrive] at [our] sense of truth.”*** This lie that Nietzsche talks about is normalcy that is merely a cultural construction relative to the cultural perceptions of certain groups. To condense everything into generalized concepts makes us overlook the individual in favor of some “normal” according to which there necessarily must be a “weird” as it’s counter point.

The relativity of weirdness can clearly be seen in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New world*, a genetically designed society where everybody lives happily, drugged, not thinking about anything that would bother them. The two main characters, Lenina Crowne and Bernard Marx are supposed to belong to the smartest and most beautiful caste in the society, yet they are a little bit odd. Bernard is an Alpha-plus, but his body is that of a lower caste member, while Lenina has had a long relationship, not only one-night stands, which is considered abnormal. They take a trip to the Savage Reservation in New Mexico, where “uncivilized”

† Patti Smith and David Lynch talk Twin Peaks, Blue Velvet and Pussy Riot. Part of the Newsnight Encounters series. BBC, 2014 November 27. URL:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/5GTb8Zvtjb2FWb5FsN4CDXv/newsnight-encounters-meetings-of-great-minds-from-the-world-of-arts-and-culture>

‡ <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/18972/18972-h/18972-h.htm> pp iv-v

§ Ibid. pp v.

** Charles de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, 1721. Translated by John Davidson, 1899. URL: https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Persian_Letters/Letter_30

†† Friedrich Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, 1873. URL:

http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl201/modules/Philosophers/Nietzsche/Truth_and_Lie_in_an_Extra-Moral_Sense.htm

‡‡ Ibid.

§§ Ibid.

*** Ibid.

people live. In addition to the expected oddity of the people in the reservation, they encounter a woman named Linda who had come from the World State as well, but was lost decades ago. She and her son John were outcasts in the reservation's society, but they are regarded as uncivilized by Bernard and Lenina. Bernard then decides to take them back to London and they become spectacles.

Huxley's world is a network of people in which everybody seems weird to each other. He draws a picture of different norms mixed together in a satire about the nature of his society, where the pursuit of happiness ends up in superficiality. People want to be "normal" only insofar as they are spared from ridicule. They think alike, dress alike and do things alike. Everybody who does not is an outcast and is ostracized. But this world is the strangest for the outsider observer, whose concept of normal is abnormal. In fact, Huxley's novel implies that there are no such things as "normal" and "weird" as everybody is normal and weird at the same time depending entirely on context. According to this sort of relativism, with the help of Michael Krausz we can say that the discrepancy between normalcy and weirdness comes from the incompatibility of several "non-converging reference frames, in terms of which we perceive and understand the world".⁺⁺⁺ These historical or cultural reference frames provide us a perspective through which the world seems logical and comprehensible, but only in a certain era within the context of a certain culture, and "we have no absolutist way to adjudicate between contending frames".⁺⁺⁺ But as soon as we mix to contexts we lose our reference points and misunderstand the otherwise obvious.

A girl in qipao wearing a blue wig, dancing on a Hong Kong skyscraper in "Along with the Fall" or to be locked in a Chinese vase in "The Idea of Getting Out" is certainly not normal. Yet the world she inhabits, we have to admit, sometimes is far from what we think of normal, too. Her presence helps us realize that and look beyond the things we are used to. It helps us realize that aesthetic judgments cannot be singular.

Nietzsche says that not only does the conceptualizing power of language universalize, but it also creates "laws, privileges, subordinations, and clearly-marked boundaries—a new world". As Voltaire's Zadig lives in a world, Montesquieu's Rica travels to another world and Huxley's John is bullied in all the worlds, each having its own rules and logic. The *weird one*, however alone he or she might feel, has his or her own rules in accordance with their respective *world*. Quite like them, the Girl with the Blue Wig lives in her own world, weird to us but achingly parallel in metaphor. In this world, Chinese landscapes mix with western ideas ("Riverside Anachronism") and vases grow giant ("Sacred Fragility"). She is dancing on a laundry rope on "All the Things You Are" as if she is light as a feather or not even present. In fact, quite the opposite, she is present as she is balancing on the edge of two worlds. The contrast here lies in the collision of different (artistic) worlds. One considered normal and another one considered weird. Yet, looking at their fragments, we seem unable to tell which world is which, and the mystery of art continues to be delightfully non-singular.

She stands, dances and plays everywhere, but all along she is just an observer. In this exhibition, the weird girl is the observer who serves as a contrast to the normal world, yet at the same time, she is observed and we are the voyeurs. We don't know the Girl with the Blue Wig and the stories about her are contradicting. She is the anonymous; she is the unknown that's always present. Yet, if we read all the stories about her and see all the places she went to, we will see she comes from a world where her existence is justified, that is the art of the Liu Dao Collective. And when we enter this exhibition, we enter her world where we are the weird ones.

Dates: From June 1st to September 27th, 2017

Curation: András Gál

Art Direction: Thomas Charvériat

Artistic Research: Jin Yun 金云, Tang Dashi 汤大师 & He Dashi 贺大师

Coordination: Yeung Sin Ching 杨倩菁

Venue: island6 Main, 50 Moganshan Road, building #6, 2/F, Shanghai

Artist: island6 art collective (Liu Dao 六岛)

Link: http://island6.org/TalesOfTheGirlWithTheBlueWig_info.html

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⁺⁺⁺ Michael Krausz, *Mapping Relativism*. In: *Relativism: A Contemporary Anthology*. Ed: Michael Krausz

Columbia University Press New York, 2010. pp. 14. URL:

<https://books.google.hu/books?id=Na7GAgAAQBAJ&pg=PA21&dq=aesthetic%20relativism&hl=hu&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false>

⁺⁺⁺ Ibid.