

DEATH
AND LIFE
OF
FICTION
OR THE
MODERN
FANTASY

The ancient Chinese monster *Taowu* has been described as a vicious creature that is always making the best of its own life, due to its ability to see both future and past. In his book *The Monster That is History*, David Der-Wei Wang describes how somewhere in the course of Chinese history, writers and historians began to identify the monster *Taowu* with history itself, since it could thwart and undermine human intentions. *Taowu* thus represented the human failure to master history and occupied the blind spot of the respective historical rationales. But Wang suggests that in fact *modern* Chinese history lends itself to a reading through the *Taowu*. The Chinese experience of the twentieth century, then, can be characterized as a raging *Taowu*—an experience not merely of hitherto unheard of evils and suffering, but an experience of undermined human intentions, seeding not reason and liberation, but waves of repression and countless inhuman and irrational terrors committed in the name of humanity, rationality, or a social order that must be installed or defended against all threats. The Taipei Biennial 2012 takes Wang's suggestion as its starting point. At the same time, it takes the *Taowu* beyond the realm of literature and historiography and also tests the proposition beyond the limits of the Chinese experience. It explores whether *Taowu* is a possible *common* experience of all modernity, and it uses the monster as a figure through which we encounter contemporary artists' engagement with modern history. The modern *Taowu* we imagine here sits not merely on the prescribed road of history, but also at the meridian point of dialectics—the point where opposites meet, originate, conflate. Like all monsters, it is a dialectical figure, a symptomatic mirror of actual relations. Just as it guarded the empire's frontiers or imperial tombs in ancient times, it now inhabits the borders of political and social control, the horizons of aspiration, the lines of division, and the distinctions that structure social life and the order of knowledge. Situated in the middle between dividing lines, the *Taowu* is a constant reminder that both sides of a division mutually constitute each other—that all relations, even the most asymmetrical, stem from such a meridian point of reciprocity. Its monstrosity is the very form through which it reminds us of what we have in common with what we exclude.

If there was a particular *experience* of modernity represented by the modern *Taowu*, it is the experience of structural violence and the double binds that tie victims to perpetrators, slaves to masters, the minor to the major. The *Taowu* also represents the experience of being entrapped by an anonymous, faceless system and the experience of terror-as-rationality, as in disciplinary or “educational” violence (*this will teach them a lesson...*). But above all, the *Taowu* stands for the monstrous modern story of power, whose vicious character, intelligences, and stupidities the monster epitomizes; for it is the dynamics (and so-called pragmatics) of power—the mastery over people as well as nature—that have notoriously thwarted the modern schemes of progress, emancipation, and liberation.

This biennial dedicates itself to the death and life of fiction. Modernity has unleashed fiction on a grand scale—as colonial projection, commodity driven economy, and desire. It has ghettoized fiction in institutions and disciplines (such as “art”), but out there in the really-real world it has waged a holy war on fiction, a holy war on beliefs, superstitions, and whatever is suspected of non-compatibility with rationality and the reality principle, in the attempt to replace these things once and for all with modernity’s knowledge, its hard facts. Historically, this effort has been a powerful, monstrous fiction itself. When killed in the name of facts, fiction grows bigger; it is usually the first attacker who falls prey to the new monstrosity thus created, the power of which stems from the fact that it no longer knows that it is fictional.

Yet what we call fiction is not merely manifest in those imaginary creations of monsters. It is in the stories we tell and the images we use to interact and make sense of our environments, of which only a very small part are “fictional” in the conventional sense—that is, false or made up. Rather, fiction—or the imaginary—nests at the center of a reality. It is through fiction-as-figuration that cognition and recognition becomes possible. Fiction determines what we can think and do in the world, and above all, our horizon of possibility. Fiction is the glue that holds things together, the womb from which images and the imaginary are born, and the medium of which our relationships are made. There is

hence nothing outside fiction, no other or beyond; there are only different *qualities*, different *grammars*. We call these differences in qualities *culture*.

When cultures die, this glue no longer holds the real world and the real relationships together. In a similar way, this exhibition attempts to import monsters from the limits or frontiers back into the center, back “home,” into the core of normality and to normalize them, bring them close to us—in order to enhance the awareness of the fact that it is we ourselves who produce and reproduce the very divisions from which the monster is born, so that we can stop falling prey to the *Taowu* at the border, which is the mechanism of monster-making: imposing our own evil as an objectified symptom onto others.

The death and life of fiction appears in this exhibition, just like the *Taowu*, in ever-changing identities. Sometimes it appears in the experience of colonial and political terror, as plain death that lurks behind powerful fictional projections. Fictions die in the resulting destruction of cultures, but they live on as fragments animating the broken links—they live on as ghosts, or in the imagery of trauma, or in rituals of commemoration. The life of fiction is hence not identical with striving illusions, and the death of fiction not identical with the final arrival at a definite reality or truth. But the death of fiction indeed can also mark a realization, or the end of a narrative, an image, or an ideology, and the life of fiction can also mean fiction as a mask which diverts us from actual relations and realities. The life of fiction can refer to dreams and utopian projections or to ways of mediating alterity, but it can also be a life in fiction, in the sense of delusion, madness, and delirium. The death of fiction, on the other hand, can simply refer to the end of a dream, or less simply, to an immobilization as experienced in states of depression: the absence of dialogue, the absence of transformative power, the absence of alterity. It is through this reflection on fiction that we become aware of limits and boundaries and our *systemic implication* in them: they are not “out there,” but within our social bodies, within our cognitive and aesthetic apprehension of the world, like dialogic membranes. Fiction in this sense tells us how our borders are guarded and how they can be opened or even dissolved; and the Taipei Biennial

suggests that we use both the aesthetics of monstrosity and the economy of fiction as essential for a *realism* whose subject is the making and un-making of cultural boundaries.

The question of modernity today is not primarily a cultural question. It is primarily systemic, machinic, and abstract, and its anonymous power overrides experience, values, morals, culture, and subjectivities. The systemic aspect of modernity is willfully ignorant of culture and human relations, and this is its strength and its anonymous monstrosity. It is technological, but in a wider sense: it embraces the kinds of fixations, inscriptions, calculations, and automatizations that stabilize and make events predictable—only in order to create a greater potential for other entities to be displaced, mobilized, and to circulate. Under the conditions of modernity culture is, on the one hand, only the unpredictable outcome of the logic of division and hence its destruction; on the other hand, it is the outcome of the forces unleashed by the dialectics of objectifying control and hybrid entanglements. This systemic modernity does not differentiate between humans or commodities or things when it feeds its machines at the frontiers of “development.” To be on the side of the affixed or the mobilized is left to human concern.

In various ongoing waves of external and internal colonizations, the frontiers of this systemic, abstract modernity have long become global. Official ideologies increasingly act like farcical *Taowu* in that they conflate and subvert opposing positions along the *systemic necessities* of power, as shown by both the current financial crisis or the regime in the PRC. This globalization also means that there is no more outside (spatial, cultural, critical) to the matrix of this systemic modernity, which embraces what it negates in the contemporary deadlock of the inclusive exclusion. This means that there is no *simple* resistance nor simple negation possible, since these positions are already prescribed systemically. But the fact that the modern *Taowu* produces and embraces its opposition and hence distributes its subject positions does not mean that it is immune to the dialectics of power: it is forced to transform as the form of resistance changes. But this resistance always depends on culture as its resource: what

it needs are shared, horizons which unite people around a cause.

We live in a historical moment where all prevalent *understandings* of the world within the frame of “modernity” are in crisis. The crisis concerns narratives, rationales, ideologies. These things no longer provide us with common horizons that mobilize us, since any such aspiration is overshadowed by the fear of unleashing the negative force of the modern *Taowu*, or is already subverted by it in the form of capitalism’s spectacular mimicry. The spirit of modernity was powerful and contagious: in its various incarnations it mobilized people and changed both societies and the world irreversibly. This was a spirit of break-up and departure, a spirit of aspiration against the backdrop of the oppressive forces that first destroyed the memory of the otherwise. But this spirit of common emancipatory aspiration has died in a seemingly endless series of disappointments and monstrous revelations, which today cast their spectral shadow over the horizons of the present, and fuel systemic conformism, self-adaptation and self-modulation. The modern *Taowu* hence stands before us triumphant, petrifying us; it qualifies as perhaps the only universalist fiction of modernity that has not died. It has become the emblem of a modernity we can neither fully identify with nor leave behind. The lesson of the modern *Taowu* as we contemplate it today seems to dictate the reduction of all forces of negation and negativity at all costs: its lesson is the (systemic) administration and management of the given—which at least is better than yet another wave of cultural destruction. But the price that is paid for this is the loss of common horizons, and hence the loss of a sense of alternatives, and of our basic autonomy, our productive powers of negation. Thus we have ever fewer narratives through which we imagine and negotiate our relations as *qualitative*, and fewer images capable of altering the present through an encounter with historical experience. This narrative-imaginary vacuum calls for a dialogue with the monster that is modernity, in the form of a re-narration which re-describes the modern divisions-as-relations, hence implicating us in the historical-narrative space we inhabit but no longer know how to navigate. And this requires a radical historicizing of all ideas to meet the challenge of relativism, and the making-strange of the systemic-

normality of modernity and its self-descriptions and narratives. The task is to close the gap between the cultural and the systemic aspect of modernity, to unlearn to speak in the name of the system and lend it our human face. As a symptomatic mirror, the modern *Taowu* is a figure just for that purpose, the purpose of de-monstering.