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**Parallel Narrative:
Short-Video Social Media Platforms' Influences on Contemporary Narrative**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

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Abstract

By Ruiqi Zhang, M.F.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2019

Major Director: Orla Mc Hardy, Assistant Professor and Graduate Program Director, Department of Kinetic Imaging

Through the study of Kwai, a popular short-video social media platform in China, this thesis investigates the social issues, media class divides and aesthetic specific to Kwai culture. . It further proposes a strategy of artistic practice - parallel narrative - an experiment in video art production and editing techniques that explore new possibilities of narrative in video art. Integrating theoretical researches on Post-Internet art and object-oriented ontology, this thesis reveals people's ability to digest multisource information and how mobile technologies and open-source materials contribute to the parallel narrative.

Vita

Ruiqi Zhang was born on July 31, 1994, in Liaoyang, Liaoning Province, China. He graduated from Liaoyang the second high school, Liaoyang, Liaoning province in 2012. He received his Bachelor of Arts in Luxun Academy of Fine Arts, Dalian, Liaoning province in 2016. He will receive an Master of Fine Art in Kinetic Imaging from Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond in 2019.

Foreword

Manifesto: Art Downgrade

Art Downgrade is an aesthetic movement in the context of Post-Internet. Artists should actively face up to the images, objects, and culture produced by the public, it's energy returning to the essence of artistic creation by evoking the wild creative impulses and crazy imagination of the public.

Art Downgrade is an Art-Economics concept, which is necessary to cope with the constant elitism of art producers and consumers, the continuous structural upgrading of the art world (the resulting simplification of perspective and the bubble of false prosperity). It is also a pre-judgment of the downgrade trend to maintain the diversity of the overall structure.

The main effort of Art Downgrade is to remove the premium part of art creation, which includes carefully prepared content, structured choreography, visual deception, and any excessive artificial addition.

Art Downgrade is the downgrade of the art subject's sight line. The sight of artistic creation is no longer aiming upwards. The re-adjusted sight line focuses on a wide range of ordinary people's perspectives (people who lack a voice in the art world, mainstream culture, media and political life, vulnerable groups, ethnic minorities and marginalized groups).

Art Downgrade is the downgrade of the creative method and the outward shift of the artist's original sovereignty. The purpose is to reduce the artist's labour in the creation and weaken the artist's authority to interpret the work. Art after the Art Downgrade emphasises the daily attributes of creation, the individuality of ordinary people, and collective mass production.

Art Downgraded works can appear in galleries, street corners, home living rooms, email spam boxes, short-video social media platforms, and any physical space or virtual platform. They can be sculptures, paintings, sounds, online performances, short-videos on Instagram, blog advertisements. Art Downgrade works can exist in any form.

Users/artists should learn to freely use open source materials, such as mobile devices, off-the-shelf image processing techniques, physical and interpersonal relationships, objects found in daily around life, and any open download resources on the Internet.

The art of Art Downgrade is to see in more detail, and the survivability of Art Downgrade depends on the power of sharing.

The Spread of Art Downgrade Works > The authors' of creation Art Downgrade works > The Copyright of Art Downgrade Objects.

An artist is an ordinary person, and everyone is an artist.

By Ruiqi Zhang, 2019

1

Introduction

In the first decade of the 21st century, the global proliferation of Internet applications and widespread use of the image-text type communication of social media, such as facebook, twitter, and Instagram meant that being on-line 24/7 and incessant posting became a core aspect of millennials daily life. In China, post 2010, there was a marked acceleration in the spread of advanced media technologies and infrastructures. Ipv6, 5G network, and artificial intelligence, the three major technologies in the country, have been constantly promoted in various government documents.¹ At the same time, the government has developed strict censorship policies and technologies to reinforce ideology control as exemplified by the Great Firewall.² These entanglements between media technology, economic policy, and politics create the unique context of social media in China.

Around 2017, I started to notice that my friends around me used short-video social media platforms as their main entertainment tool. At the same time, I saw that a large number of advertisements were also present on these platforms. Short-video social media started occupying our daily lives and people spent a lot of spare time browsing them. My initial interest in this

¹ See the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council, “The Action Plan for Advancing the Extensive Deployment of Internet Protocol Version 6 (IPv6),” Xinhua Net, last modified November 26, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/2017-11/26/c_1122012631.htm; the State Council, “Guiding Opinions of the State Council on Further Expanding and Upgrading Information Consumption to Constantly Release Domestic Demand Potentials,” The State Council The People’s Republic of China, last modified August 24, 2017, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-08/24/content_5220091.htm; the State Council, “Notice of the State Council on Issuing the Development Plan on the New Generation of Artificial Intelligence,” The State Council The People’s Republic of China, last modified July 8, 2017, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-07/20/content_5211996.htm.

² The Great Firewall of China is the combination of legislative actions and technologies enforced by the Chinese government to regulate the Internet domestically. It is developed based on the the frameworks of *Temporary Regulation for the Management of Computer Information Network International Connection* in 1996, *CL97*, a law that criminalizes cybercrimes in 1997 and Golden Shield Project, a massive online surveillance and censoring system, starting in 2003.

phenomenon stemmed from the diversity of online identities and what they can tell us about the underlying social and political issues in China. Aesthetically, in my own art practice, my aim is to explore the possibilities of interweaving art creation with the cultures of online short-video.

Around 2010, a variety of short-video social media platforms started to emerge. All of them tried to set up effective macro strategies to attract users. Two of the most representative platforms are TikTok and Kwai (or “Douyin” and “Kuaishou”). The users of these two platforms represent two distinct communities in China, the urban and the rural. My research focuses on Kwai because though Su Hua, the founder and CEO of Kwai, claims that Kwai users are the “average person in Chinese society,”³ the demographic characteristics of Kwai users and the debates on this platform reflects not only the long-existing divide between city and country, but also new forms of media class divides, which will be further analyzed in this thesis.

"According to 2015 statistics, Kwai are the China's largest short-video social media platform. When you open this mysterious software, you will wonder why this vulgar, crude and rough app is the top one rank video app in China? The answer is the user of Kwai is the massive rural population."⁴

In 2016, an article titled *Brutal Low-Class Story: Rural China in A Video Sharing Software*, by an user named Doctor X, brought Kwai and the phenomenon of short-video culture into the spotlight.⁵ At that time, the article got the public's attention and led to a wide discussion of the

³ During “100 Person in New Economics” 2017 CEO Summit, Su Hua explained the concept of the “average person in Chinese society” that: “we did not make this choice. This is decided by the structure of Chinese society. We considered all users as an abstract person, equating the “average person in Chinese society.” Only 7% of the Chinese population live in the first-tier cities, and the rest 93% live in the second-tier and third-tier cities. Thus, the “average person in Chinese society” locate at in the second-tier and third-tier cities.

<http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2017-04-16/doc-ifyeimzx6533561.shtml>

⁴ Doctor X, “Brutal Low-Class Story: Rural China in A Video Sharing Software,” *Weixin*, last modified June 8, 2016, <https://xw.qq.com/news/20160609003283/NEW2016060900328301>.

X博士,“残酷底层物语：一个视频软件的中国农村,”《微信》,(2016年6月8日),检索于<https://xw.qq.com/news/20160609003283/NEW2016060900328301>.

⁵ Ibid

Kwai user community, using the examples of several typical cases of early Kwai users' posts. For example, a female user from Hebei, a northern Chinese province, posted a short-video in which she ate foreign objects including light bulbs, worms, glass. Other self-abuse videos featured excessive drinking, over-eating, people lighting firecrackers in their pants, and jumping in an ice covered river among others. Other samples of early Kwai users include videos depicting 8-9-years-old obese children, young mothers who had their babies at the age of 15 or even younger, as well as teenagers with violent tendencies. Throughout the early development of Kwai, these Jackass-style videos were produced by users to shock and attract audiences. This significantly contributed to the boom of this platform.

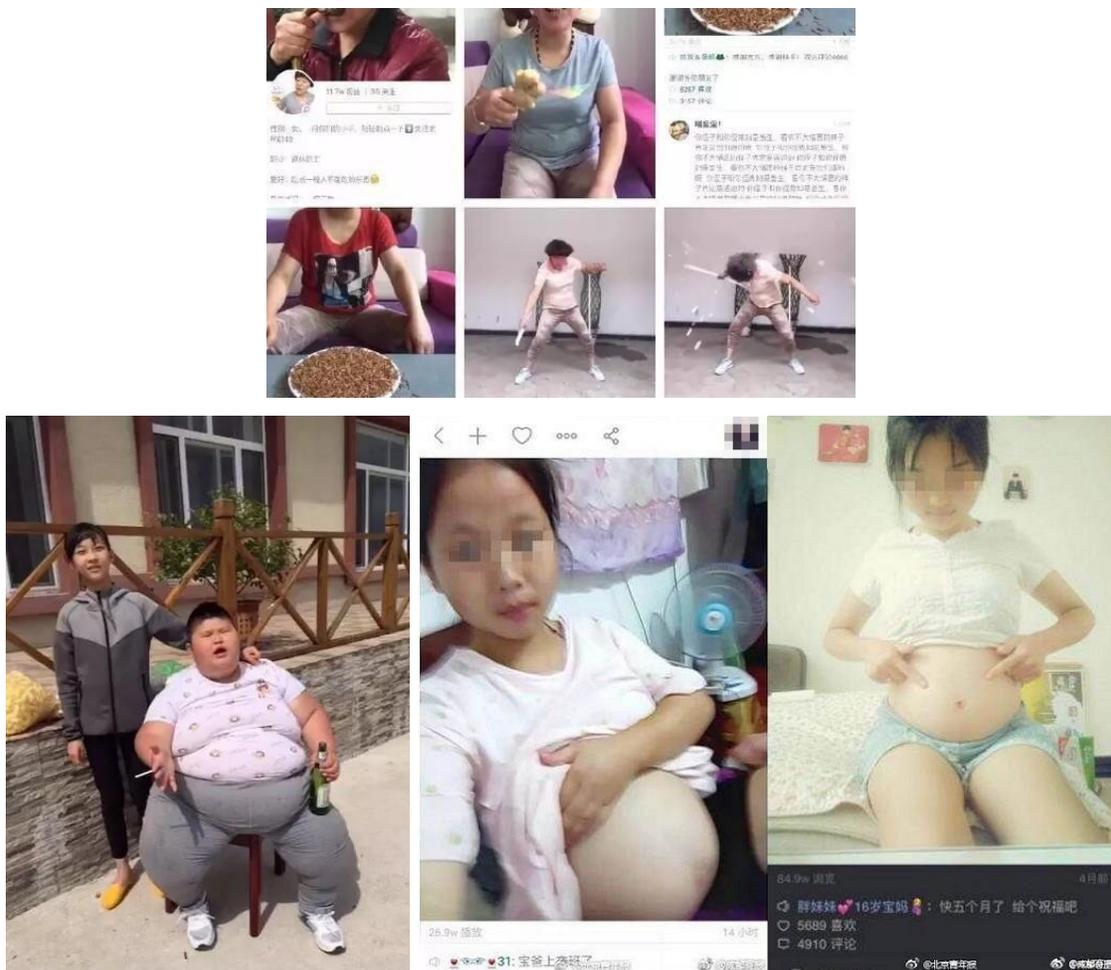


Fig. 1,2,3,4 Screenshots of early Kwai Users, 2011-2019

Before the advent of Kwai and other short video platforms, the realities of people living in rural China remained unknown outside of their own communities. The mainstream discourse of the Internet in China was dominated by white-collar classes in metro areas because of their privilege allowed them early access to Internet technologies. However, the popularity of low-priced smartphones and the increasing easy access to an Internet connection enabled people start using Kwai and other short-video social media platforms to share their daily lives. The urban residents were shocked by the previously underrepresented image of the rural population on the Internet. The community culture formed by Kwai users became classified as a vulgar subculture by the mainstream media and urban population. In 2018, the National Network Information Office criticized Kwai as containing vulgar content, breaking the social moral bottom line, violating social mainstream values, polluting the cyberspace, and seriously affecting the healthy growth of young people.⁶ As a result, the Chinese government banned a lot of Kwai users, but of course, these people still exist.

As one of the most popular and controversial short-video social media platforms, Kwai is the locus of this thesis. Chapter 2 introduces the background of Kwai through the lenses of the media class divide. Chapter 3 analyzes the aesthetic of Kwai, emphasizing its social, technological, and pictorial implications. Chapter 4 introduces Post-Internet art giving several case studies as examples and then goes on to underline the key concepts of object-oriented ontology (OOO) as a means to introduce the the idea of parallel narrative.

⁶ Zheng Ai, “Kwai, Volcano video, spread vulgar information got verbal warning,” *The Beijing news*, last modified April 8, 2019, <http://www.bjnews.com.cn/inside/2018/04/08/482234.html>
艾峥, “快手、火山小视频传播低俗信息被约谈,” 《新京报》 (2018年4月8日), 检索于 <http://www.bjnews.com.cn/inside/2018/04/08/482234.html>

Short-Video Social Media, Media Class divide

2.1 The Divide between the Discourse of Mainstream Media and the Rural Community

Today, in mainstream propaganda, the Chinese rural area is undergoing a comprehensive poverty alleviation project. The current President of China, Xi Jinping has formulated an important goal of the party; that by 2020, China's rural population will be fully lifted out of poverty. In these discourses, rural areas are represented by the slogan of “poverty alleviation,” and individual rural residents disappear into the grand narrative of the state. In terms of mainstream media representation, this disappearance is proven by the fact that from 1978 to now, there are only a few hundred feature films set in rural China. This number is even less than the total number of domestic feature films made in the year 2018 alone.⁷

This phenomenon reflects the divide between the mainstream media and the rural community. The disappearing image of traditional countryside contrasts to the proliferation in the representations of the Chinese urban classes in mass media. It represents a lack of representation and agency among rural communities. In this context, short video as a social media platform is not only a means of entertainment, but also an embodiment of the media class divide.

Due to historical reasons, the early design of household registration system (or *hukou*) separates people into urban and rural citizens (or non-agricultural/ agricultural) based on where they live. Even though the actual boundary between urban citizen and rural citizen is blurred by

⁷ Haijun Yan, “Why There Are Less and Less Migrant Workers on Screen?,” *Guyu*, last modified February 7, 2019. https://gy.qq.com/original/guyu_report/report297.html.
阎海军, “为何银幕上的农民形象越来越少?,” 《谷雨》, (2019年2月7日) 检索于 https://gy.qq.com/original/guyu_report/report297.html.

social and economic development, the household registration system still exists in contemporary Chinese society. The main human flow in China in the past three decades are migrant workers, moving from the rural to the urban areas. Migrant workers have had to leave their homes and families behind to work in urban areas. This has left many children in rural areas alone with no parental guidance or oversight, resulting in many poorly-educated teenagers. These and other marginalized communities previously ignored by mainstream media have become the majority of Kwai users.

In contrast, the major Tik Tok users are urban citizens; middle-class families, young people under 35, working class, college students, and freelancers, etc. When I started to look into these two short-video social media platforms, I discovered that there is a class divide between the two. One represents a rural population, the underprivileged group in mainstream media, the other represents the urban population who are the primary consumers of mainstream media. They live in their own online community, parallel to each other, yet without any intersection.

2.2 The Divide between the Symbol of Consumerism and Real Life Object

Both Tik Tok's slogan "Recording the Beauty of Life" and Kwai's slogan "Recording Life Recording You" emphasizes how short-video social media focuses on the daily and the documentary. However, one significant difference between these two short-video social media platforms are the different life styles documented because of the contrasting geographic locations of the two user groups.. Commodities, as symbols of consumerism, become important props for urban short video producers. Videos compiled with these materials become online versions of objectified desires. They symbolize the urban user's desire for the high life and luxury

commodities. In contrast, symbols of consumerism, such as luxury fashion brands, supercars, luxury houses, exquisite make-up, and high-end restaurants, are exactly what has been absent from Kwai videos. In the world of Kwai, material desires are more modest. The videos are of a more pragmatic nature and real life scenes are prevalent. Different images of labourers, road and forest workers, are shot with rural-urban settings often appearing as the backgrounds in the Kwai short-videos. Cheap clothing, tractors, basic necessities and many hand-crafted strange inventions appear as props in Kwai short-videos. (see fig. 5, 6) The significant differences between the backdrops and props featured in the two different groups of users' short videos demonstrate the divide between the objects used in the daily lives of the Tik Tok and the Kwai community.

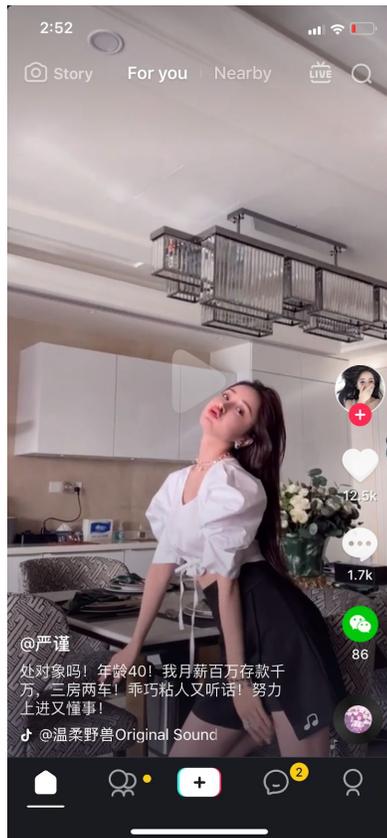


Fig. 5 Screenshot from a Tik Tok user, 2019



Fig. 6 Screenshot of a Kwai user, 2019

As a conclusion, the emergence of Kwai breaks the boundaries of the existing discourse, providing a virtual space for rural and other marginalized communities to express their voices and share their lives. The users get a chance to see an unknown world through Kwai's lens. Class divide, social inequities, and unbalanced distribution of urban and rural resources are made visible through the use the short-videos.

3

Aesthetic of Kwai

The strategies of Kwai user's production was affected by social and political issues. It is my opinion that there are two important periods in the development of Kwai; the pre-censorship period and the post-censorship period. On April 6, 2018, after being asked by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) to rectify the mistake of publishing controversial content that had been posted two days prior, Kwai recruited 3,000 new content examiners in addition to the already existing 2,000-person content examining team.⁸ Before censorship, a large portion of Kwai videos were known for their poor quality, voyeurism, and brutality. These features constituted a unique Kwai aesthetic, a wave of Internet-identity reconstruction running parallel to the mainstream culture. Through the window of Kwai, one could see the extensive and overlooked imagination and creativity from this rural population. This creativity, from my point of view, has the potential to stimulate contemporary art practice.

In the post-censorship period, especially after employing manual content checking, short-videos on Kwai got rid of the novelty and brutality that was a trademark of early videos, instead turning towards a direction of more stable user engagement of content production. In this conversion, Kwai superficially broke the barriers of age, culture and class, but actually became another form of spectacle. The serious social issues faded out of the short-videos, to be replaced by pure entertainment which audiences consumed in the fragmented windows of time that their daily lives allowed.

⁸ "Kwai's Mass Rectification, Recruiting 3,000 Content Examiners, Members of Communist Party and Communist Youth League Are Highly Wanted," *36Kr*, last modified, April 7, 2018, <https://36kr.com/p/5127645>

The attraction of Kwai originated from the constant convergence of Kwai users, censorship, and mainstream media. A unique and complete aesthetic system grew out of Kwai, short-videos representing the mentality, identity, and aesthetic orientation of a contemporary subculture community. This aesthetic system embodies an ‘anti-discourse’ potential. Kwai, as a synonym for grass-roots culture, became an alternative space for community forming and freedom of expression.

3.1 Social Implication: Mass Production of Non-Elites

By "art," let's say we mean the products of the traditional, professionalized art world, a privileged class of esthetic objects set apart from ordinary communicative acts, authored by a special person called an artist. For "social media," let's say we mean all these new-fangled media platforms which are highly accessible, and based around enabling open-ended conversations between networks of participants.⁹

In *Social Media Art' in the Expanded Field*, the author Ben Davis point out two oppositional fields. One is a relatively closed, distinct internal circulation. The other is a relatively open and is based on the mass participation of users. Artists have a special social role in the traditional, professionalized art world, which could be said to be equivalent to a privileged class. In a Chinese context, it specifically refers to art collectors and art lovers who live in Beijing Shanghai, Guangzhou, and other major cities. Within galleries, museums, and art organizations, culture production in urban areas demonstrates a tendency towards elitism. A fixed mode of production and reception designates the artist as the producer of the cultural product and the audience as the consumer of the cultural product, imprisoning everyone in a relatively fixed

⁹ Ben Davis, “‘Social Media Art’ in the Expanded Field,” *Artnet*, accessed May 4, 2019. <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/reviews/davis/art-and-social-media8-4-10.asp>.

relationship. I am particularly interested in the issue of authorship between the content producer and the content consumer in social media as it reflects the trend of breaking the elitism of cultural production. In doing so it echoes the Barthesian claim that only through the engagement of readers can multiple meanings of a text be revealed.¹⁰ Today, everyone can be a producer of a cultural product. High participation of social media users opens the network to create a new system, one which breaks the previous hierarchy of culture production and reception. Thus, the reason why short-video social media remains culturally relevant is that the non-elite public nature of its production ensures that marginalized voices are involved in its production.

“ Internet, New Media, Social Media, etc. are not only problems about techniques and medium, but more about the conditions of human being. So Internet research must include human story, especially from vulnerable groups, ethnic minorities, and marginalized communities, whose voices are absent from mainstream culture, media, and politics. Their stories need more telling and spreading.”¹¹

In *Deep Research of Chinese Internet*, Guobing Yang calls for a return to the sharing of stories of the general public and of marginalized groups, as their stories coming from more diverse perspectives, possess a primitive impulse and power. Mass production of the non-elite classes provides an outlet that breaks classical power dynamics of traditional narratives as the public’s self-motivated desires of expression have more internal connections to the way artists produce work.

In an untitled cyber comic piece, the anonymous author ironically compares Kwai videos, from the pre-censorship period which contain intense performativity and self-abuse, to Marina Abramović’s *Portrait with Scorpion* and *0 rhythm* (fig. 7). This comic criticizes that the danger

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, New York: Hill and Wang, 1978.

¹¹ Guobing Yang, “Deep Research of Chinese Internet,” *Journalism & Communication Review*, spring and summer issue 2017, 22-42.

of Marina Abramovic's performance is actually controllable, but that the Kwai users' performances are more authentic and impactful. In another short online article titled *What Makes Him Become Bill Viola*, the author compares a Kwai video produced by Brother Bao (or "Baoge") to Bill Viola's *The Crossing* and *The Reflecting Pool*, arguing that Brother Bao's usage of lo-fi mobile phone visual effects have their own intrinsic artistic value - the poetry of poor quality - which is equivalent to the poetry of Viola's work (see fig. 8,9,10,11).¹²



Fig. 7 anonymous, *Untitled*, 2019

¹² Naiqian. "What Makes Him Become Bill Viola?," *Keyi Art Company*, last modified April 11, 2019, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/XNkcGWZl6ZwQQ8rkdJHuaq>.
 乃千.“是什么让他成为比尔·维奥拉?,”《可以艺术公司》,(2019年4月11日)检索于
https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/ENljgvky1TEvh_9hODpBRg.

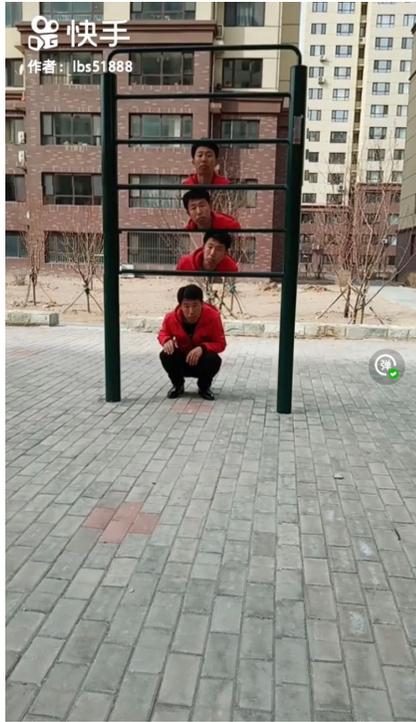


Fig. 8 Brother Bao, *Easily-Learned Photography*, 2018



Fig. 9 Bill Viola, *Surrender*, 2001



Fig. 10 Brother Bao, *Diving*, 2018



Fig. 11 Bill Viola, *The Reflecting Pool*, 1977-79

The cyber comics mentioned above highlight the ways in which the mass production of short-videos by non-elites is challenging the mainstream values of the art world. Emphasizing the public's talents of creativity, these articles argue that short-videos produced by members of the public with no formal art education could have the same artistic values as artworks produced by contemporary artists and even transcend them.

However, I am skeptical about these overly optimistic opinions about the value of on-line short-videos. Because in comparison to contemporary artists, it could be argued that these short-videos lack critical thinking. This means that when audiences watch them, they view them purely as a form of ephemeral entertainment and temporary visual stimulus, as opposed to an artwork that could suggest a critique or commentary of the subject at hand.

3.2 Technological Implications: the Shared Network

In *Digital Keywords: A Vocabulary of Information Society and Culture*, Benjamin Peters invited 25 writers to choose their own keywords about Internet culture and analyze their historical meanings. In a chapter by Nicholas John, he argues that “share” is the key concept of contemporary Internet society and mobile phone culture. Around the year 2000, social media platforms opened the way to easily share photos, articles and links online. Since then, the meaning of sharing has got broader and broader. In 2007, the same platforms started to encourage users to share things that could hardly be defined, such as “share your world”, “share the true yourself” among others. After 2010, “share” became a synonym for a daily action on social media but at the same time, its concept was too broad to be linked to any concrete objects. The evolution of the meaning of sharing reveals the evolution of the Internet's value as a shared

network based on a sharing system which includes public users, content producers, content examiners, all mediated by AI algorithm recommendation mechanisms.

Zheng Wen, the Vice President of Kwai, shared Kwai's recommendation mechanism in the ACM China Turing Award Celebration Conference 2018 (TURC 2018), saying that Kwai recommends not only what users are interested in, but also other diverse content.¹³ The AI system labels every short-video in order to recommend users with content unrelated to their current interests but which may be potentially of interest to them. So, if users want their videos to stand out from the countless other videos, the best way is to formulate effective media strategies based on the official recommendation mechanism.

I contacted a private online training institution called “Brother Chen Teach You How to Go Viral” and bought its tutorial on how to attract a large netflow in a short period of time. In the tutorial, Kwai videos are divided into the following categories; “funny,” “beauty,” “sex,” “skill,” “horror,” “healing,” “pet,” “social issue,” and “copycat.” It also introduces the “15 seconds golden rule,” meaning that 15 seconds is the best length for a short video. The algorithm of the recommendation mechanisms judges whether a short video is attractive depending on how many times the video is fully played after it is uploaded. Data shows that audiences' video watching attention span peaks at 15 seconds. The tutorial also talks about two peaks in viewer numbers throughout the day: 7-10 am, when people are waking up and early office workers are both checking their phones, and 10 pm - 1 am when people are looking at their phones while lying in bed before going to sleep. High numbers of concurrent users means more opportunities for

¹³ “The Vice President in Technology of Kwai Zheng Wen: Kwai Is an Artificial Intelligence Company,” *Chuangyehaoxiangmu*, last modified May 21, 2018, <http://www.momo180.com/view/8809.html>
“快手AI技术副总裁郑文：快手是一家人工智能企业,” 《创业好项目》, (2018年5月21日) 检索于 <http://www.momo180.com/view/8809.html>

attracting attention. All these invisible mechanisms of censorship and recommendation become the objective conditions that affect users' production of short-videos. Videos that successfully attract attention will impact many other short video makers, in turn becoming a paradigm for a category of similar videos.

3.3 Pictorial Implications: Tuwei Entertainment

Tuwei Entertainment is the most widely accepted aesthetic in Kwai, spreading among many other social media platforms. It has become one of the most popular forms of entertainment among both the urban and rural youth generation. "Tuwei" is a term originating from the Internet without a precise English translation. Literally, it means the taste of earth. The emergence of Tuwei uncovers a contradictory and divided aesthetic. It on the one hand contains derogatory sense, describing impolite and low-quality, on the other hand, it also contains sense of compliment, representing a popular trend of entertainment among young generation.

Tuwei entertainment became an indicator of the invisible class divide and social issues underneath short videos. Serious social commentary is dissolved into self-mocking videos. An online article titled *Everyone's Carnival of Tuwei Culture, Who is the beneficiary?* attempts to define Tuwei culture, arguing that it is a contemporary subculture in which its creators are mostly from marginalized groups, including migrant workers, poorly-educated teenagers in rural areas, among others. Tuwei video is a product of the collective outlet of the emotions of our age.

¹⁴ The reason why Tuwei video become a popular trend is that there is a group of curious middle

¹⁴ "Everyone's Carnival of Tuwei Culture, Who is the beneficiary?," *Tencent*, last modified June 13, 2018, <https://new.qq.com/omn/20180613/20180613A1Y12Q.html>
"土味文化的全民狂欢，究竟成全了谁？"《腾讯网》，(2018年6月13日) 检索于
<https://new.qq.com/omn/20180613/20180613A1Y12Q.html>

class people watching behind the screen who could be urban dwellers, students, office workers, among others.

In Kwai there is a category called the ‘self-produced series’, which refers to videos that are produced with ordinary scenes and props and the stories are basically jokes without deep meanings. When people watch them, they might be embarrassed by what they see but often they also feel a kind of indescribable humor. The silliness and poor production satisfies the middle class’s voyeuristic imagination of an unknown group. Figure 12 shows a group of teenagers dancing in a city public square wearing fake luxury brands such as Christian Louboutin shoes and Versace T-shirts. This kind of group dance is called “social swing,” known for its form of rhythmic and synchronized movement. Figure 13 shows a short video category called “national fashion” (or “guochao”), a combination of rural scenes with high fashion brands. In this image we see three rural women dancing on an unsurfaced road. Superimposed on the image is the text logo of fashion brand - “Supreme.” Tuwei videos achieve the quality of surrealism through the unlikely collage of dancing and music, luxury brands and rural scenes, all performed by user groups, which are beyond ordinary experience.



Fig. 12 Social swing Dancing



Fig. 13 National fashion

In conclusion, Kwai's short-video became a unique and complete aesthetic system, shaped by three factors; mass production by non-elites, a shared network and Tuwei Entertainment. Kwai aesthetic points to the mentality, identity, and aesthetic orientation of a contemporary subculture community. It embodies an anti-discourse potential as an important way to enter mainstream media discourse.

Parallel Narrative: Enlightenment from Post-Internet and Object-Oriented Ontology

In previous chapters, I introduced the background of Kwai, a short-video social media platform, through the lenses of the media class divide and the aesthetic of Kwai, emphasizing its social, technological, and pictorial implications. This chapter will firstly analyze Post-Internet art giving several case studies as well as underlining the key concepts of object-oriented ontology (OOO) as a means to introduce the idea of parallel narrative. I see parallel narrative as an experimental form of video art production and editing, a method of exploring new possibilities for narrative in video art. Secondly, I will lay out the connections as I see them between Post-Internet art, OOO, and the phenomenon of Kwai short-video through the concept of parallelity.

4.1 Enlightenment from Post-Internet Art

As an emerging contemporary art form, Post-Internet art connects the younger generation with cultural productions on the Internet. The aesthetic of Kwai, a mode of expression originating from a Chinese short-video social media platform, parallels and overlaps with the Post-Internet art in many aspects. Firstly, similar to Kwai's focus on the expression of the individual user, Post-Internet art gives the individual artist a platform for self-expression. This results in a more democratic way of production which involves the perspectives of ordinary people. Secondly, Post-Internet artists' practices enter into a more open structure as they use widely available mobile technologies and open-source materials. This embodies an anti-discourse potential, like Kwai short-video producers, by engaging audiences directly in the process of making artworks. Thirdly and most importantly, parallelity has become one of the most significant qualities to how narratives are constructed in both Post-Internet art and Kwai short-videos. Post-Internet artists

adopt the parallel narrative through actively providing comprehensive perspectives, two or more non-overlapping storylines and more readable information, which match the younger generations' online reading habits, thereby making video art more accessible. In addition, the divide between the urban and rural communities narrated in Kwai short-videos is also a kind of parallelity.

Parallel narrative in Post-Internet art is an artists' response to people's increasing ability to digest multisource information simultaneously. In Camille Henrot's work *Grosse Fatigue* (Figure 14), she challenges herself to tell the story of the origin of the universe. In the video there are many layers of images which emerge and overlap with each other mimicking pop-up windows on computers. The artist states that the video performs an "intuitive unfolding of knowledge."¹⁵



Fig. 14 Camille Henrot, *Grosse Fatigue*, 2013

¹⁵ Stephanie Bailey, "Camille Henrot in Conversation," *OCULA*, last modified February 5, 2015, <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/camille-henrot/>

Today, many people are used to the computer being an extension of our bodies. Marshall McLuhan argued that a medium is "any extension of ourselves."¹⁶ My computer desktop is very similar to Henrot's work, multiple windows overlapping each other all the time. I can proficiently jump back and forth between different windows and get the information I need. The same situation happens when I browse social media. I can read pictures, videos, text, user comments, and advertisements at the same time. At this point, the ability to read and digest information from multiple sources e.g. multiple windows on single screen simultaneously has become a common skill for contemporary audiences. As a response to this evolving digital literacy, it is necessary to actively add more legible information and increase the density of content in video works.

¹⁶ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man*, Berkeley: GINGKON PRESS, 2015, 19.



Fig. 15 Arthur Jafa, *love is the Message, The Message is Death*, 2016

Arthur Jafa's work, *love is the Message, The Message is Death* (Figure 15), mixes different sources of found footage - some violent, depicting the lived experiences of many African Americans in the US today. The video soundtrack is a slowed-down version of Kanye West's song *Ultralight Beam*, a powerful rap with strong beats. When talking about this work, Jafa said that: "with black visual intonation, it was really possible to create moving image phenomena

parallel to [what you hear] in black music - and the music, that's the one thing the people can agree on."¹⁷ His phenomenal parallel connection between visibility and aural, along with the constantly jumping cuts creates an atmosphere that attracts me deeply, and further inspires my practice of parallel narrative.

Next, I will analyze the usage of smartphones and other mobile technologies in the practice of parallel narrative. Amalia Soto, also known as Molly Soda, "has uploaded her private life online, for the sake of excavating and exposing the archetypal young person's Internet experience."¹⁸ In her work, *That's Me In The Corner* (Figure 16), she created a live-streaming performance on Instagram of her singing karaoke. Another work, *Exile in Camville* (Figure 17), recorded her interactions with netizens from her own bed. She devotes her practice to illustrating a highly performative daily life in the process of constructing her digital identity through a smartphone, webcam, computer, and other technologies.



Fig. 16 Molly Soda, *That's Me In The Corner*, 2017

¹⁷ Nate Freeman, "The Messenger: How a Video by Arthur Jafa Became a Worldwide Sensation—and Described America to Itself," *Artnews*, last modified March 27, 2018, <http://www.artnews.com/2018/03/27/icons-arthur-jafa/>

¹⁸ Casey Lesser, "Molly Soda on How Social Media Changes Us IRL," *Artsy*, Last modified June 7, 2017, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-molly-soda-social-media-changes-irl>.



Fig. 17 Molly Soda, *Exile in Camville*, 2017

Cindy Sherman uploaded a series of selfies (Figure 18) “affected by an array of many decorative filters available on Instagram that animate or change the facial features of users.”¹⁹ Today, Sherman can create these selfies with just a few clicks on her mobile phone. But in 1968 when the artist Nancy Burson had the idea to “age people with a computer,” it took 8 years to find computer engineers to work with her at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to produce some of the earliest computer-generated portraits in the early 1980s (Figure 19).²⁰ As the cases of Sherman and Burson demonstrate, in the past, the task of creating computer-generated images required a team of highly trained individuals, artists, scientists, and engineers. In contrast, today anyone with a smartphone can generate composite images because contemporary mobile technologies not only have similar capacities for image processing but also have live-recording, editing, and image optimizing capabilities.

¹⁹ Noah Becker, “How Cindy Sherman’s Instagram Selfies Are Changing the Face of Photography,” *The Guardian*, last modified August 9, 2017.

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/aug/09/cindy-sherman-instagram-selfies-filtering-life>.

²⁰ Jeanne Joe Perrone, “Artist Nancy Burson On the Convergence of Art, Politics, and Tech,” *New York Film Academy blog*, last modified August 8, 2018,

<https://www.nyfa.edu/film-school-blog/artist-nancy-burson-convergence-art-politics-tech/>.

In addition, a variety of built-in effect filters are available on most social media platforms. For example, the Instagram filter used by Cindy Sherman in her selfies created distorted facial features, adding radiant light effects to the backgrounds. Social media platforms have algorithms that differentiate face, background, and other elements in a photo. This allows phones to apply special effects to different elements. With built-in effect filters, users can completely customise their own generated images. The App store also offers image process software. For example, “Mixaloop” can convert a still image into an animated video. “Kirakira+” applies across the filter to the camera lens, making emitting materials shine. These mobile technologies offer a wide range of options for users to produce diverse and individualized material.



Fig. 18 Cindy Sherman’s selfie on Instagram, 2017-18



Fig. 19 Nancy Burson, *First Beauty Composite: Bette Davis, Audrey Hepburn, Grace Kelly, Sophia Loren & Marilyn Monroe*, 1982

Thirdly, open-source materials play a more and more important role in the practice of parallel narrative. In *Post-media Aesthetics*, Lev Manovich claims software (both actual computer software and software in a metaphorical sense, i.e., a set of data operations and metaphors employed by a particular media or representational technology) as a new object of cultural analysis.²¹ Forensic Architecture is a multidisciplinary research group based at the University of London. They utilize use architectural rendering software and close analysis of visual and aural clues from social media as means to investigate crimes. These crimes include cases of state violence and violations of human rights around the world.²² In their project *The Grenfell Tower Fire*, Forensic Architecture reconstructs the scene of a fire that killed 71 people

²¹ Lev Manovich, "Post-media Aesthetics" accessed May 4, 2019.

<http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/post-media-aesthetics>.

²² Mackey Robert, "Video Analysis of Fatal West Bank Shooting Said to Implicate Israeli Officer," *The New York Times*, last modified November 24, 2014,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/25/world/middleeast/video-analysis-of-fatal-west-bank-shooting-said-to-implicate-israeli-officer.html>.

in London (Figure 20, 21). The work consists of 3D modelling, situated testimony, and software development technology.²³ These three sources generate a conflicting feeling when brought together. The combination of the open-source elements in Forensic Architecture's works offers an overwhelmingly multisource and multi-perspective reading experience of a horrific incident and creates a new phenomenon of storytelling. Their approach gave me a new perspective of thinking about using open-source elements in the practice of parallel narrative.



Fig. 20 Forensic Architecture, *The Grenfell Tower Fire*, 2018

²³ See artists' own statement of this work, <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-grenfell-tower-fire>



Fig. 21 Forensic Architecture, *Video footage of the fire is 'motion tracked', and mapped onto a wire-frame model of Grenfell Tower*, 2018

4.2 Enlightenment from Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO)

My readings of dense and sometimes obscure philosophical and academic essays often are understood by me fragments, enter into free imaginations, which automatically connect to my real-world experiences and artistic practices. Besides Post-Internet art, Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) theory is another concentration of my research prior to making my thesis installation *Galaxy Equivalent Parallel Object*. The OOO is considered to be an important trend of speculative transformation, a specific reflection on speculative realism in the contemporary world. The OOO was coined by Graham Harman in his 1999 doctoral dissertation *Tool-Being: Elements in a Theory of Objects*.²⁴ In 2009, Levi Bryant rephrased Harman's original designation as "Object-Oriented Ontology," giving the movement its current name.²⁵ It is not my intention to fully explain this theory since it includes too many philosophical claims that are beyond the scope of this thesis.

²⁴ Graham Harman, "Tool-being: Elements in a theory of objects," Ph.D. Dissertation, DePaul University, 1999.

²⁵ Levi R. Bryant, *Onto-cartography: An Ontology of Machines and Media*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

Andrew Cole gave a brief definition of OOO theory in *Those Obscure Objects Of Desire: the uses and abuses of Object-Oriented Ontology and speculative realism*, arguing that “first, everything is an object, including you and each of your thoughts. Second, and accordingly, no object relates to any other object, because the universe itself is devoid of all relation. Why is there no relation in the universe? It’s because objects sever relations with every other object and withdraw into themselves to become self-subsisting, autonomous beings. It’s also because relation is typically a human mode of apprehending, describing, and interacting with the world. Given that not every object is a human, though every human is an object, you can’t have an object-oriented ontology if humans are at the center of it. Such an anthropocentric object-oriented ontology would be a contradiction in terms, because objects are not a means to our ends: They are meaningful whether or not we perceive them. Third—and finally—all objects are equal and, ontologically speaking, on the same plane. You, a speck of flea shit, an electric chair, and a solar flare are all equal objects.”²⁶

Cole clarifies the independence of objects and rejects the human centric perspective, criticizing correlationism and anthropocentrism. Correlationism, as defined by Quentin Meillassoux, means “the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other.”²⁷ Like in archaeology, we can only rely on unearthed artifacts to restore part of the history rather than uncovering comprehensive knowledge of the past. The connection of things are logical and temporal, that we can only imagine based on known objects. Anthropocentrism assumes the priority of humans

²⁶ Andrew Cole, “Those obscure objects of desire: the uses and abuses of object-oriented ontology and speculative realism,” *Artforum International*, 53:10 (2015), 318-323.

²⁷ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009, 5

above all objects, the human subject as a prerequisite for perception. This means that the connection between objects needs to be in the medium of human relations, and objects exist rely on perceived by human beings. In other words, human perception of the world is based on existing experience and cognition, and it is a process of continuous superposition.

The OOO's critique of anthropocentrism and Correlationism is based on the independence of object and the efforts to decentralize human beings. The theory argues that object are independent and have no relationship with human perception. All human and non-human relationships exist in equal status with each other. This thought denies the relevance of things in the universe and redefines the perspectives of people's understanding of the world, which contributes a new way of narrative making.

In *TENDER BUTTONS, Objects · Food · Rooms*, Gertrude Stein wrote poems with some unrelated object and uncertain description, creating a phenomenon of parallel aesthetic.

OBJECTS.

Within, within the cut and slender joint alone, with sudden equals and no more than three, two in the centre make two one side.

If the elbow is long and it is filled so then the best example is all together.

The kind of show is made by squeezing.

EYE GLASSES.

A color in shaving, a saloon is well placed in the centre of an alley.

CUTLET.

A blind agitation is manly and uttermost...²⁸

Stein's writings build connections between irrelevance objects and depict them in a mysterious and surrealism style. They experimentally create an unspeakable reading experience with its own attraction. And the logic of irrelevance is also similar to the recommendation

²⁸ Gertrude Stein, *TENDER BUTTONS, Objects · Food · Rooms*, New York: Claire Marie, 1914, 21

algorithms in short-video platforms, in which adjacent short-videos do not have any connection in their contents but viewers will play a new short-video after finishing watching the previous one. Browsing short-video social media could be an endless experience and the contents are constantly jumping accompanied by fast switches of music. It creates an abstract viewing experience, a rhythm that the videos always start and end suddenly. Due to the limited duration of single short-video (no longer than 57s), there is a constant stimulus to viewers visually and audibly, affecting them psychologically to keep looking for new stimulus. In addition, the browsing process of short-video forms two watching behavioral habit of modern people. First, people can enter the viewing state at any moment, automatically building connections within irrelevant contents during the viewing process. Second, people are constantly looking for new things to watch online.

In summary, the case studies of Post-Internet art provide a concrete aesthetic reference and inspiration for the practice of parallel narrative. Works by Camille Henrot and Arthur Jafa respond to contemporary audiences' ability to digesting multisource information simultaneously. Molly Soda, Cindy Sherman, and Nancy Burson's works show how smartphones and other mobile technologies enable everyone to generate images digitally. Forensic Architecture's works offer a new perspective of thinking about using open-source materials. The research of OOO theory provides theoretical foundations for parallel narrative. OOO redefines people's reading experience as building connections between irrelevance objects. The logic of irrelevance is similar to the recommendation algorithms in short-video platforms.

5 Conclusion

The popularity of Kwai, a short-video platform popular in China, on the one hand, reveals the divide between the discourse of mainstream media and the rural community and between the symbol of consumerism and real-life object. On the other hand, Kwai provides a virtual space for rural and other marginalized communities to express their voices and share their lives. In the process of Kwai users' production, it grows out a unique and complete aesthetic system. Kwai aesthetic embodies an anti-discourse potential and becomes an expression form to enter mainstream media discourse. The research of Kwai cultural and aesthetic motivated me to think about how the short-video social media platform influences the contemporary narrative.

The parallel narrative is my experiment of video art production and editing technique to explore new possibilities of narrative in video art. I got inspired from three aspects, Kwai aesthetic, Post-Internet art, and OOO theory. Parallel narrative responds to people's ability to digest multisource information simultaneously. The core concept of parallel narrative is to build the connections between irrelevant objects with mobile technologies and open-source materials in video production and editing. Parallel narrative reinforces the viewing experience of people browsing short-video social media through continuous stimulation and ever-changing content. Parallel Narrative attempts to provide a more comprehensive perspective, open story structure in storytelling.

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