

The Logic of Micro-Narrative: A Study of Individual Life Experience in Chinese Contemporary Figurative Painting

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Abstract: This paper takes Chinese contemporary figurative painting after the 1990s as its research object and discusses the logic of “micro-narrative” and its relationship with individual life experience. It first defines micro-narrative, experience, and individual experience, and explains the philosophical foundation of micro-narrative through subject philosophy and Walter Benjamin’s theory of fragmentation. Second, it reviews the historical context from “Scar Art,” “Rural Realism,” and the “1985 New Wave Art” to “New Generation Art” and “post-70s painting,” arguing that the narrative mode of Chinese contemporary figurative painting has gradually shifted from grand narrative to micro-narrative. Third, it analyzes case studies of Liu Xiaodong, Chen Weiming, Chen Ke, Li Jikai, Xiong Lijun, Zhang Xiaotao, and Li Dafang from three levels: micro-sociological concern, everyday experience, and narration of site experience. The study argues that micro-narrative is not simply a narrowing of subject matter, but a new creative methodology: artists use individualized, fragmented, and everyday life experience as an entry point to re-establish connections between the individual and the era, society, and history.

Keywords: Micro-narrative; individual experience; Chinese contemporary figurative painting; New Generation; post-70s painting.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Since the 1990s, the artistic trends of a group of young Chinese artists have attracted widespread attention. Unlike their predecessors, they have independently reflected on tradition, parental values, academic institutions, and everyday behavioral patterns. Standing at the dawn of an era of fragmented information, they transformed the previous mode of artistic exploration and advanced the creation of artistic language. Among them, “post-70s” artists are a generation that, following the “New Generation,” responded differently to urban life and contemporary reality. Most grew up in the 1980s, witnessed reform and opening up, and were directly influenced by urban consumer culture, Internet culture, and Western contemporary culture.

1.2. Research Questions and Significance

This paper asks: In Chinese contemporary figurative painting, why and how have artists shifted from grand narrative to micro-narrative? What is the relationship between this micro-narrative and individual life experience? By systematically reviewing the historical context of micro-narrative and artists’ case studies, this paper further understands the creative methodology of the younger generation of Chinese artists and examines how individualized, micro-level experience can be transformed into mature artistic expression. The significance lies in moving creation beyond the image plane and sensory experience toward a deeper expression of social and life experience.

1.3. Research Content and Methods

This paper is developed from three aspects: theoretical research, historical context, and case studies. Theoretical research focuses on definitions and philosophical foundations

of micro-narrative, experience, and individual experience. Historical context examines the art movements of the 1980s, “New Generation Art,” and “post-70s painting.” Case studies analyze micro-narrative in Chinese contemporary figurative painting from different angles, including artists’ statements, working states, and creative thinking.

2. Concepts and Philosophical Foundations of Micro-Narrative and Individual Experience

2.1. Definitions

Micro-narrative can refer to the object of artistic representation, including the micro-world or lower-class society; it can also refer to an observational viewpoint, that is, viewing life and history from a subtle angle; and it can refer to a narrative method that uncovers details usually ignored or concealed [1].

“Experience” is a process in which the subject constructs object materials in a spiritualized way, and the object leaves an imprint on the subject’s mind in either holistic or fragmented form [2].

“Individual experience” is an inner experience accompanying self-knowledge, an emotional manifestation of self-consciousness, that is, an attitude held by the “I” toward the “me” [3]. Critic He Guiyan argues that individual experience is actually a discursive mode and a product of Western modernism; in the Chinese context, artists’ creation must often be placed within sociological narrative, so individual experience presents different states in Chinese and Western contexts [4].

2.2. Philosophical Foundations

2.2.1. Brief History of Subject Philosophy

The concept of the subject can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy. Maxims such as “know yourself” and

“man is the measure of all things” indicate the awakening of ancient Greek subjective consciousness. In the Middle Ages, divine power replaced human rights, and humans became servants of God. The humanist movement of the 15th century restored human beings’ subject status, and individual subjective consciousness awakened. Descartes proposed “I think, therefore I am,” emphasizing the rational status of the knowing subject; Kant regarded the subject as a precondition for the formation of knowledge and proposed “man legislates for nature”; Hegel shaped reason into something like “world reason,” “absolute idea,” and “absolute spirit,” making the subject seem like an incarnation of the creator [5]. Marx proposed the principle of subjectivity based on social practice, emphasizing that human subjectivity must be formed through the interaction between subject and object and through practice [6].

2.2.2. Benjamin’s Fragmentary Theory and Micro-Narrative

In Benjamin’s philosophy, fragmented things are attended to by experiential inner life. Precisely because “totality” does not exist, what people grasp is fragmented modern life, and easel painters also use micro-narrative to create art [7]. Therefore, the philosophical origin of micro-narrative can be traced to Benjamin’s theory of fragmentary totality. He used tiny “micro-worlds” to analyze modernity and modern urban life experience.

3. Historical Context of Micro-Narrative in Chinese Contemporary Figurative Painting

3.1. Art Movements in the 1980s: The Context of Micro-Narrative

In the cultural context of the new era, this generation of artists was one in which subjective consciousness spontaneously strengthened. The pursuit and construction of typical characters had been the mainstream spirit. However, within the rise of collective subjectivity, individual experience still existed.

3.1.1. Scar Art

Scar Art has a unique individual experience. In Wang Hai’s *Spring*, a young educated female sent-down youth stands under the eaves; it is raining, and there is a pot of cactus at the door. The young woman seems to be thinking about something, and her feelings have no specific direction. The powerful narrative in the work conceals the artist’s individual reflection, which is nostalgia or reflection on sent-down youth life. He Duoling’s *Youth* emphasizes literariness and symbolism, but this cannot erase its individualized expression. These works contain strong individual experience, but behind it is mostly constructed by state ideology [8].

3.1.2. Rural Realism

After “Scar Art,” artists began to pay attention to themselves and expressed their thoughts on themselves through depictions of ordinary real life; “Rural Realism” emerged in painting. It was a rebellion against “Scar Art” and the previous “Cultural Revolution” pursuit of grand political themes. After *Father and Son*, Zhu Yiyong created *Mountain Village Shop*, shifting attention from political concern to concern for ordinary people’s survival. Luo Zhongli’s *Father* uses a huge super-realist oil painting to present an ordinary peasant image, truly reflecting the living conditions of Chinese peasants and inspiring art to return to humanistic

ontology. Chen Danqing’s *Tibetan Suite* plainly describes Tibetan life scenes and expresses human truth [9].

3.1.3. 1985 New Wave Art

1985 was a new starting point for Chinese contemporary art. The New Wave Art Movement was a local reflection after China’s reform and opening up encountered the impact of Western modernist philosophy and art. Artists emphasized “individual consciousness,” concretely embodying the influence of Western modern art [10]. In 1985, “The Advance of Chinese Youth Art Exhibition” was held in Beijing. Young artists’ thinking about painting itself far exceeded thematic creation. Zhang Qun and Meng Luding’s *New Era—The Revelation of Adam and Eve* has surrealist traces and clearly expresses the artists’ thoughts and ideas. At this time, “individuality” was still dominated by Western modern art and modern philosophical discourse [11].

3.2. New Generation Art: The Beginning of Micro-Narrative

New Generation artists refer to a group of young artists who became active in the art circle from the 1990s, mostly born after the 1960s, such as Liu Xiaodong, Yu Hong, Wang Hao, and Wei Rong. They narrate trivial and ordinary daily life and convey the turbulent, vague, and complex experience of contemporary urban life. On the basis of the awakening of “collective subjectivity,” the New Generation moved further toward “individual” and “sensuous,” representing the rise of “individual subjectivity” [12].

3.2.1. Social Context in the Early 1990s

In the early 1990s, Chinese contemporary art was in an exploratory stage. The market gradually intervened, and early slogan-style critical ideas and shouts were abandoned. Artists began to give up empty philosophical concepts and return to real life. The market economy influenced the art world; the market greatly dissolved avant-garde art while also generating utilitarian emotions. “New Generation Art” emerged in such a social environment.

3.2.2. Characteristics of the New Generation

Although New Generation works have different styles, they all present a spectatorial spiritual state. Their characteristics include: no longer “typical,” abandoning “meaning”; “close-range” perspective; and a “fragmentary” picture. Li Xianting pointed out that New Generation works have no cultural burden and no condescending perspective of the previous two generations; they paint themselves, friends, relatives, and daily, trivial, boring, and casual life [13]. Fan Di’an also pointed out that they treat reality in a close and calm artistic way, and the reality they depict has a fragmentary sense, but these fragments are credible and real [14].

3.3. Post-70s Painting: The Development of Micro-Narrative

“Post-70s” artists mostly grew up in the 1980s, and urban culture and market economy had a direct impact on them. They are more daring in seeking stimulation and full of challenging spirit. They have almost no traditional burden, and their works likewise contain little ideological interpretation or philosophical discourse. They mainly use popular images and self-designed images as cultural resources, examining them from the current Chinese cultural context.

3.3.1. Clarification of the Concept

Most “post-70s” artists were born around the 1970s. In

their growth, they witnessed China's reform and opening up and formed basic views and understandings of contemporary Chinese society. "Post-70s" painting should essentially refer to the shared temperament and characteristics of this group of artists, representing the spiritual temperament of the entire "post-70s" generation, that is, a painting style, new artistic concepts, and new creative mentality different from the previous generation [15].

3.3.2. Background

First, China's social transformation. Since reform and opening up, the unified political system model rapidly disintegrated, and the market economy brought about diverse cultural interactions. A cultural pattern composed of mainstream culture, elite culture, and mass culture was formed.

Second, the rise of urban consumer culture and mass culture. Since the 1990s, China has gradually entered an era of consumption, and mass culture began to prevail. The younger generation pursued trends and fashion, and sensory stimulation, visual elements, and behavioral habits changed [13].

Third, the advent of the Internet age. The rapid development of information technology and the popularization of electronic technology have made the virtual network world a lived daily experience and influenced communication methods, behavioral habits, and ways of thinking.

Fourth, the spread of postmodernism. Postmodernist culture expanded from a specific "cultural circle" into daily life and became a consumer product. Its cultural phenomena roughly include pluralistic difference, anti-authority, flatness and fragmentation, and mass character [12].

3.3.3. Presentation of Individual Life Experience in Post-70s Painting

The painting of this period is a new art form that emerged during China's social transformation and is an immediate response by young painters to new social realities and spiritual problems. The flood of images and information through the Internet has led young artists into an era of global sharing. These works largely reveal the living state of contemporary Chinese youth, like "diaries" they record. From grand narrative to micro-narrative, Chinese oil painting began to show a tendency toward micro-narrative creation, first in "New Generation" painters represented by Liu Xiaodong, and later developed among "post-70s" painters.

4. Three Levels of Micro-Narrative and Artist Case Studies

4.1. Micro-Sociological Concern: Liu Xiaodong and Chen Weiming

This type of artist conducts field-style social investigation. The issues they discuss may appear macro, but their point of focus or mode of implementation is micro.

Liu Xiaodong graduated from the Oil Painting Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1988 and is one of the most representative New Generation artists. In 1989, Pastoral Song became a representative of the new visual expression form and "close-range" observation method of the 1990s. His works are characterized by making viewers feel as if they are personally on the scene. After 1995, works such as *The White Fatty*, *The Blind Man*, and *Violation of Rules* expressed a relaxed, clear, and simple painting quality. Beginning in 2000,

Liu Xiaodong turned more toward contemporary Chinese social issues, recording the helplessness and fragility of individuals in specific historical contexts through realist painting, such as *New Immigrants of Shanxia* and *Immigration of Shanxia* [16].



Figure 1. Liu Xiaodong, Immigration of Shanxia.

Chen Weiming is a teacher in the Oil Painting Department of Sichuan Fine Arts Institute. From 1996 to 1999, his works entered a prop series, such as *Black Handbag*, *Props*, *rattan chairs*, *certificates*, *military canteens*, and *kerosene lamps*. These objects are memories of the Cultural Revolution. Afterward, he gradually moved away from symbolic "grand narrative" and returned to sketching, combining Pop art language with rural-flavored airplanes, advertisements, slogans, and architecture in a sociological field investigation. Beginning in 2000, he focused on rural and peri-urban architectural landscapes. Works such as *BMW*, *Small Building*, and *Sony* show new landscapes on China's urban-rural edge.



Figure 2. Chen Weiming, Small Building No.2.

4.2. Everyday Experience: Chen Ke, Li Jikai, and Xiong Lijun

This group of young artists borrows cartoon schemas, contexts, and expressive techniques to express themselves; it is an externalized form of the artists' own emotions and lifestyles. Cartoon painting abandons traditional painting modes and grand thematic narrative methods, turning instead to human inner life and the artist's own daily life.

Chen Ke's works are like entering a dreamlike fairy-tale world; a happy childhood is the source of inspiration. She uses childhood impressions such as red scarves and runny noses to create a nostalgic childhood period. Her work phases can be roughly divided into 2001–2005: *I Cannot See Myself Clearly in the Fog*, *I Will Never Feel Lonely with You*, and *The Bond of Love*; 2006–2008: *I Have No Confidence or Security If I Do Not Work*, *Take Care of Yourself While I Am Away*, and *Until the End of the World*; 2009–2010: *The End of the World and the Cold Fairyland*, *I*, and *Important Things*. She explores characters' inner lives through diary-like

expression, showing strong scenography and narrativity [17].



Figure 3. Chen Ke, I Will Never Feel Lonely with You.

Li Jikai's works create various quiet atmospheres that evoke viewers' memories. He believes that creation is a habit of expression. In a sense, Li Jikai's art expresses the individual experience of the "self generation." In his Boy and Mushrooms series, ruins represent the end of old life and the beginning of new life. The mushrooms are full in color and shape, and a little boy nestles beside a huge mushroom. The artist seems to be metaphorizing something and brings viewers into the atmosphere he creates. Li Jikai condenses the "I" into childhood; the boy is fragile, sensitive, nervous, and indulges in self-play and meditation, showing the emptiness of this generation [18].



Figure 4. Li Jikai, Boy and Mushrooms.

Xiong Lijun's expression comes from her own experience of life. In a contemporary society dominated by material desire and highly developed material civilization, under the influence of consumer culture, people's consumption concepts and desires are constantly changing. Fashionable clothing, jelly-like skin, trendy accessories, thick eyelashes, and sexy red lips often appear in Xiong Lijun's pictures. In Dada, Dada, for example, she uses the saturated, strong colors of Pop art, full of visual tension. The unstable composition and heavily foreshortened figures fill the picture with dynamism and vitality, reflecting young people's tireless vitality and creating a visual carnival of the consumerist era [19].



Figure 5. Xiong Lijun, Dada, Dada.

4.3. Narration and Rewriting of Site

Experience: Zhang Xiaotao and Li Dafang

"Post-New Generation" artists were mostly born around the 1970s and witnessed Chinese-style reform and opening up as they grew up. Images that appeared in various Chinese environments after the 1990s have entered people's daily lives. These existing images changed their way of understanding the world and were quickly used by them.

Zhang Xiaotao believes that under globalization and fragmentation, everyone can become a link and a discipline. The meaning of fragmentation lies in discovering the traces of specialization within it; historical information is hidden in fragments. He hopes to make social analysis and artistic decoding more rational through the micro. In *The Ant Moving Things No.3*, for example, a group of sesame-sized ants lives under a highway bridge on urban concrete. The smallness of the ants forms a huge contrast with the magnificent reinforced-concrete urban architecture, creating a sense of contradiction and conflict. The skewed viewpoint and horizon, the ants in near-large and far-small perspective, the blurred skyline, and the cold purple-gray space all bring viewers a sense of unease and danger. He uses the smallest things to metaphorize the world and depicts the end of life as "flowers of evil" [20].



Figure 6. Zhang Xiaotao, The Ant Moving Things No.3.

Li Dafang graduated from Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts in 2000 and now lives and works in Beijing. In the early 1990s, he began his painting experiments through the interactive reference between titles and works and other brilliant narrative formal means. In his early works, he juxtaposed images and texts with disordered signifier-signified relations. In his new series, there seems to be an ambiguous, mysterious, and indistinct relationship between the figures in the painting and the extremely realistic and lifelike background. For example, *Under the Sunshine* creates a scene of "ruins after ruins," a typical Chinese demolition site. In the process of

rapid urbanization, such scenes of destruction constantly appear in every Chinese city. His paintings contain a visual metaphor; absurd narratives and contradictions weave a farce of truth and lies, and through absurd scenes they metaphorize the Chinese site, with strong sociological direction [21].

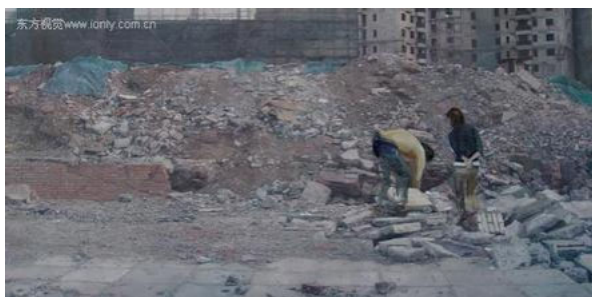


Figure 7. Li Dafang, Under the Sunshine.

5. From Grand Narrative to Micro-Narrative: The Turn of Chinese Contemporary Figurative Painting

Compared with “New Generation” painters, the observational viewpoint of “post-70s” painters turns more toward their own life experiences and psychological experiences. They abandon the traditional “grand narrative” mode and present their representational objects more from the level of “micro-narrative.” They no longer have the common ideals and strong social consciousness of the previous generation, but pay more attention to the self and the inner. Consequently, lively secular life, colorful mass images, virtual and dreamy anime atmospheres, and passionate youthful postures—micro contents that focus more on immediate self-feeling—have received extraordinary attention among “post-70s” painters and fill their works. At this point, Chinese contemporary oil painting has achieved a complete transformation from “grand” to “micro” narrative mode, bidding farewell to the era of grand narrative with clear thematic purpose, coherence, and unity, and entering an era of micro-narrative.

They shift their creative focus from criticism and reflection on life to the expression of concrete feelings about life, paying more attention to smaller individual expressions based on personal survival experience and emphasizing micro social concern and individual experience. Specifically, on the one hand, they put down the heaviness of history and, starting from perceptual experience, express subtle life scenes and spiritual experiences; on the other hand, their artistic languages are rich and diverse, and their works have very different appearances. Behind these representations is their independent individual experience of the era; finally, their creation does not stop at the image surface but has a deeper realistic concern.

6. Conclusion

In summary, micro-narrative in Chinese contemporary figurative painting is not simply a narrowing of subject matter, nor a complete negation of grand narrative, but a new creative methodology. Starting from individual life experience, it re-observes society, history, and reality in a fragmented, everyday, and individualized way. Through micro objects,

everyday experience, and site experience, artists transform personal feelings into visual expressions with universal significance. For the new generation of art workers, how to transform individualized experience and concerns into mature artistic experience, so that works no longer remain at the image level and sensory experience, is an important inspiration brought by the logic of micro-narrative.

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