

DESIRE PATH

by

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## **Abstract – *Desire Path***

In a world where digital technology shapes how we think, feel and interact, *Desire Path* is an exploration of media, philosophy, and the act of resistance. This research stems from a deep curiosity about how digital systems don't just reflect our desires but actively shape and control them – through attention commodification, surveillance capitalism, and algorithmic governance. Inspired by thinkers like Byung-Chul Han, Deleuze & Guattari, Foucault, and Daoist philosophers Laozi and Zhuang Zhou, *Desire Path* critically examines how hyper-mediated environments influence identity, autonomy, and the way we tell stories. At its core, this research is about reclaiming slowness, contemplation, and depth in an era of endless digital distractions. By weaving together Eastern and Western perspectives on desire and control, *Desire Path* proposes a new way of thinking about media—one that resists hyper-productivity and algorithmic determinism, instead fostering more meaningful artistic engagement and storytelling.

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## Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis, *Desire Path*, is the result of my research creation. It has been written and compiled by me under the guidance of my academic advisors and in accordance with the academic regulations of Ontario College of Art & Design University. I affirm that this thesis has not been submitted, in whole or in part, for any other degree or qualification at this or any other institution. All sources of information, ideas, and works of other authors have been properly cited and acknowledged in accordance with academic integrity guidelines.

Furthermore, I acknowledge that this work complies with ethical research practices and does not contain any plagiarized material. Any creative or practical elements incorporated into this thesis are original or are used with appropriate permissions.

I understand that this thesis will be deposited in the university's institutional repository and may be made available for reference by future researchers.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ge Lu', written in a cursive style.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## Short Drama #1

FADE IN:

1 EXT. ancient, CHINA DREAMSCAPE - DAY

1

The camera glides through a mystical expanse of clouds, following a majestic swan soaring gracefully through the mist. It flies toward the far and disappears out of frame. The camera tilts downward, revealing a seclusive panorama: layers upon layers of mountain ridges emerge from the fog, their jagged peaks towering into the sky. Nestled among the ridges, a solitary pavilion stands proudly. In the foreground, trees sway gently in the wind, their leaves rustling softly. On a narrow, winding path leading up to the temple, The Recluse (隐士 34) appears—a person cloaked in a Mino and conical hat (蓑衣斗笠 Dǒulì), leading a horse by the reins. The Recluse walks to the door of the pavilion and vanishes into the wind.

2 INT. ancient, PAVILION - NIGHT

Dim candlelight flickers, casting a faint glow across the space. The Daoist sage (63), dressed in dàopáo (道袍), sits

cross-legged on the floor. In front of him, a table is meticulously arranged with the Four Treasures of the Study. With his head bowed, he grips a calligraphy brush, wildly and erratically wielding it, leaving bold strokes of calligraphy on sheet after sheet of xuan paper.

### Daoist Sage

Water, so deft, so good at benefiting  
things by never competing with them, by  
putting itself where none want to go.

Smoke swirls from the incense burner, carried by a faint breeze. Sheets of calligraphy fall silently to the floor. The Recluse vanishes.

### BEGIN MONTAGE

-- The Recluse 隐士 stands atop the mountain. The *suōyī* (蓑衣) and *dǒulì* (斗笠) whip violently in the howling wind.

-- A crackle. Neon light shoots skyward, glitching with shifting colors against the burned-out, ash-grey landscape.

-- The rhythmic clang of massive machinery echoes in the distance.

The Recluse 隠士 gazes down at the vast land below, a landscape seemingly cultivated to grow machines. They appear organic yet mechanical—black, glistening with thick, oozing oil that seeps over their metallic surfaces. Wheels, screws, and intricate mechanisms stretch endlessly across the terrain, forming a vast, grid-like structure.

The machines operate in perfect sync, their deep, resonant hum creating an eerie soundscape.

He reaches into his pocket and retrieves a small glass vial filled with Soil and shimmering seeds.

Then, without hesitation, he leaps from the cliff.

**END MONTAGE**

“Choose Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram and a thousand others ways to spew your bile across people you've never met. Choose updating your profile, tell the world what you had for breakfast and hope that someone, somewhere cares.

...

Choose watching history repeat itself. Choose the slow  
reconciliation towards what you can get, rather than what you  
always hoped for.

...

Choose disappointment and choose losing the ones you love, then as they fall from view,  
a piece of you dies with them until you can see that one day in the future, piece by piece,  
they will all be gone and there'll be nothing left of you to call alive or dead.”

—Mark Renton (2017)

In a capitalist society, our lives seem to move at an ever-accelerating pace. We are made faster, more efficient, and seemingly abundant with choices, because of technological advancements. These conveniences, driven by vast amounts of collected data, complex algorithms, and incredible draws upon available resources, have oversimplified many aspects of our daily routines. Yet, beneath this veneer of ease and efficiency lies an incessant longing—an insatiable desire for the next thought, the next destination, the next product, the next ‘like’. This list could go on and on. Whether it’s the pursuit of self-optimization, the relentless cycle of consumption, or the drive for production, we find ourselves caught in a loop of constant yearning.

In this context, the production and distribution of information have become tools of discipline, subtly shaping and regulating our behaviors. “Discipline ‘makes’ individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise” (Foucault 170). These mechanisms steer us toward what might be considered a naive ideal, one that perpetuates the illusion of freedom and choice while binding us more tightly to the structures of control. My research establishes

philosophical frameworks for critically examining the impact of technology on contemporary society.

Authors such as Gilles Deleuze describe the concept of *desiring machines*, opening up an understanding of our relations to society as machines that exploit our desires to function within capitalism. *How can we be free when our desires can be transformed into consumption processes through these machines?*

In the Daoist view articulated by the Zhuangzi, freedom is not simply a state of emancipation or a divine gift but a complex, ontological measure of choice. Rather than fitting neatly into Western dualisms like body versus mind, it emerges from the interplay of multiple facets of being—such as the physical body (shen 身 and ti 體), the empirical self (ji 己), and the sustaining qi 氣—with each layer questioning whether freedom is a substantive state or merely an event-triggered condition (Chai 141). It is not achieved through external conditions but through an inner state of detachment and spontaneity.

## 1.1 The Problem of Our Desire and the Machine

The problem is complex and multifaceted, perpetuated and reinforced by machines. Machines here are not just calculators, cars, and computers. Machines are systems of information processing that interpret and remake the world according to their logics. "A machine may be defined as a system of interruptions... They operate along lines that vary according to whichever aspect of them we are considering.... Every machine functions as a break in the flow in relation to the machine to which it is connected, but at the same time is also a flow itself, or the production of a flow" (Deleuze and Guattari 36). Society is made up of many such machines, social, political, and bureaucratic. the very mechanism that makes the system function for shaping our behavior, desires, and choices.

Our desire is manufactured by the production of flow. Through data collection, algorithmic governance, and automated decision-making, these systems dictate patterns of consumption and production, which extend to our thoughts. The promise of convenience and optimization disguises the loss of autonomy as the machinery of capitalism defines, and redefines, freedom in terms of compliance and participation in a controlled ecosystem. This dynamic forces us to question the balance between technological advancement and human agency: Are we optimizing our lives for these freedom-desires, or are we being optimized to serve the system?



Short Drama #2

**FADE IN:**

**EXT. SMALL RESTAURANT - NIGHT**

*A wide shot of ZANE and LUKE walking out of a small restaurant that serves Luosifen (river snail rice noodles).*

ZANE pulls out a pack of cigarettes.

> **ZANE**  
*(offering a cigarette)*  
Smoke?

LUKE looks curiously at the pack in Zane's hand.

> **LUKE**  
What brand?

ZANE lights a cigarette, keeping it between his lips as he speaks.

> **ZANE**  
金圣 Jinsheng.

LUKE grabs the cigarette from Zane's hand.

> **LUKE**  
All I can picture is four old men sitting around a table, drinking  
soup from a clay pot.

ZANE chuckles.

> **ZANE**  
*(in Jiangxi dialect, mimicking an old man)*  
"Laoban, two bowls!"

> **LUKE**  
Let's go get Marlboro instead.

> **ZANE**  
Why American cigarettes?

> LUKE

Picture this: a cowboy stands on a hill, staring at the sunset. He lights a Marlboro. That's the feeling he's been missing—freedom.

**INT. SMALL CONVENIENCE STORE - NIGHT**

A cramped, dimly lit store. A faded sign reads:

**CENTURY UNION SUPER MARKET**

LUKE stares at two different packs of Marlboro, puzzled. He asks the STORE CLERK:

> LUKE

What's the difference between these two?

The STORE CLERK barely looks up, his face indifferent.

> STORE CLERK

No idea.

LUKE grabs the red pack and takes out his phone to scan the QR code. No signal.

> STORE CLERK

*(sighs, reaching for the scanner)*  
I'll scan it for you.

**EXT. CONVENIENCE STORE - NIGHT**

LUKE and ZANE stand outside the store. LUKE tears open the pack, takes out a cigarette, and lights it.

> ZANE

How is it?

LUKE takes a slow drag, pressing his lips together thoughtfully.

> LUKE

Honestly... kinda bitter.

ZANE exhales smoke, watching it swirl into the night air.

> ZANE

That's the taste of freedom.

LUKE looks at ZANE, nodding slightly as if contemplating something deeper.

The two stand in silence, the city moving around them. Pedestrians pass by, heads down, lost in their own worlds.

**FADE TO BLACK.**

### 1.1.1 The Rise of Digital Surveillance and Algorithmic Control

Digital surveillance and algorithmic control began emerging in the late 20th century with the advent of the internet in the 1990s, and since then digital surveillance has evolved dramatically. As personal data has become increasingly sophisticated in the 2000s, institutions and corporations have harnessed these technologies to monitor, predict, and even shape, predict, and even shape human

Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019) provides a critical framework for understanding this shift, illustrating how media transformed into an autonomous, self-exploitative force. Once heralded as a liberating force, the internet has evolved into a highly monitored, commodified, and behaviorally engineered space. With the rise of big data, AI-driven algorithms, and predictive analytics, digital platforms now exert unprecedented control over human behavior—shaping everything from personal preferences to political opinions. Social media giants, streaming platforms, and search engines operate on business models based on attention-extraction, where user engagement is the primary commodity. Everything we consume, search, or interact with online is collected, analyzed, and optimized to maximize corporate profit. Zuboff's analysis of surveillance capitalism describes an economic logic in which personal data is extracted and monetized, turning human behavior into a predictable and manipulatable resource.

Unlike traditional state-led surveillance, today's digital users *willingly* participate in systems of control by constantly curating their identities and optimizing their online presence. This active participation reflects a broader cultural shift, where the boundaries between personal freedom and corporate control blur, reinforcing the pervasive impact of digital surveillance and algorithmic control on everyday life. Economist Yanis Varoufakis suggests the term technofeudalism, the idea that we are not transitioning from capitalism to something better but slipping into a system where tech companies function like modern feudal lords.

### 1.1.2 The Impact on Storytelling and Narrative Structures

The rise of algorithm-driven media has not only influenced individual behavior but has also fundamentally altered how stories are told and consumed. Former CEO of Google Eric Schmidt "From the dawn of civilization to 2003, five exabytes of data were created. The same amount was created in the last two days." (Halliday). Film and media, once a space for complex storytelling, have been restructured by data-driven engagement models. Platforms like TikTok have popularized content designed for maximum emotional impact in minimal time. The dominance of streaming and algorithmic curation has made independent film distribution increasingly difficult, as content is now evaluated based on data metrics rather than artistic merit. Meanwhile, the short drama market is currently experiencing rapid expansion, driven by mobile-first consumption, algorithmic distribution, and innovative monetization models. The market is characterized by high-volume, low-cost productions, microtransaction-based revenue models, and algorithm-driven audience targeting.

## 1.2 Purpose of the Desire Path

My research explores how we can cultivate contentment with awareness in an increasingly technologically intertwined world, particularly in the face of rapidly accelerating media production. Digital platforms do not simply respond to human desires; they actively construct and manipulate them, fostering a system where individuals are perpetually driven toward the next engagement, purchase, or identity performance. Desire, a state of mind linked to specific actions, emotions, and thoughts, is central to this dynamic. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) conceptualizes the desiring-machine, where desire is not defined by lack but by an endlessly generative force that sustains capitalist structures. This leads me to ask: *How does desire cultivate freedom within systems of power that are designed to regulate and control it?*

I have been actively practicing filmmaking since 2010, earning a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Advertising and Film Production from Beijing Film Academy in 2014. In the following year I graduated from School of Visual Arts with a Master of Professional Studies in Directing. I regard filmmaking as an audiovisual language that involves elements such as framing, composition, lighting, color, camera movement, editing, soundtrack, among others. It is my intention that this research helps filmmakers, and Troublemakers led by Peter Morin at OCAD University including myself, explore the dual nature of technology revealed in films emphasizing human-specific suffering and concerning a wide array of social-political backdrops through world-building. I'm considering worldbuilding as defined by StudioBinder: "the act of imagining, designing, and implementing the world of a story" ("What Is Worldbuilding?"). The purpose of my research is to embrace the spirit of independent cinema, and to challenge Hollywood's industrialized production and profit-driven narratives.

## 1.3 Rationale

This thesis research *Desire Path* brings together multiple theoretical perspectives to examine the intersections of power, control, and creative practice in the digital age. By integrating post-structuralist critiques, contemporary philosophical insights, Daoist thought, media studies, and digital culture analysis, this framework provides a multidimensional approach to understanding how technological structures shape artistic expression, perception, and agency.

I found myself overwhelmed by the conflicting representations of events across various news outlets, grappling with the contradictions in how information is constructed and consumed. At the same time, creative tools have been rapidly evolving. With technological advancements, the role of a film editor, for instance, has undergone significant changes—from scriptwriting to visual composition, storyboard creation, sound synchronization, and the transformation of 2D hand-drawn sketches into animation.

Digital tools have not only enhanced efficiency in these production processes but have also reshaped how I and my peers navigate creative workflows. These ongoing changes require us to closely follow the rapid iteration of creative tools. In my writing, I will further explore this in the case study section, where I reflect on my relationship with filmmaking processes and the role of technology in my creative practice. This investigation builds upon philosophical thinkers to analyze and extract critical keywords within the research questions. In doing so, it reflects on the modes of production in modern society and their impact on human emotions and lifestyles. I will primarily engage with postmodern deconstructionist authors to discuss these research questions. However, it is important to acknowledge that postmodernism itself does not adhere to a clear and cohesive framework; rather, it encompasses a variety of schools, theories, and hypotheses under its broad umbrella. The following questions have informed my thinking, making, and dreaming with regards to this thesis project.

- How can fear and despair be diffused rather than amplified?
- How can storytelling resist the normalization of trauma while still bearing witness to it?
- How do the protagonist and his allies confront the world or a system that creates oppression?
- How do I honour ancestral knowledge while resisting the hyper-industrialization of storytelling?
- To carve out space for alternative narratives. To follow and reflect critically on the paths desire takes
  - both in its pursuit of freedom and in the structures that seek to contain it.
- How has digital media expanded human freedom while simultaneously reinforcing new forms of control?
- Can desire truly foster freedom when it operates within the structures designed to control?
- How to embody Dao in art practices. Byung-Chul Han's Non-Things and ancient Chinese painting analytical discourse.
- How does the historical evolution of media, from early cinema to short-form digital content, reflect power?
- What role does philosophy, particularly Daoist non-action (*wuwei*), play in resisting capitalist-driven desires?
- Why and how did the Hollywood 'desire system' misrepresent Indigenous and marginalized communities?

## 1.4 Theoretical Framework

### Foucault, Deleuze & Guattari's critiques of power and control.

Post-structuralist thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari provide critical tools for analyzing power structures and mechanisms of control in contemporary society. Foucault's concept of disciplinary power and biopolitics interrogates how individuals are regulated through institutions, while Deleuze and Guattari's notion of desiring-machines and societies of control expands this critique by illustrating how power operates through fluid, networked systems beyond traditional hierarchies. These perspectives will help contextualize how digital infrastructures mediate human behavior, creativity, and labor in filmmaking and media production.

### Examining auto-exploitation, the transparency society, and digital panopticons.

Byung-Chul Han's work critiques the ways that contemporary subjects internalize mechanisms of control, leading to self-surveillance and self-exploitation. His concept of the Transparency Society explores how digital culture fosters hyper-visibility, while the Digital Panopticon extends Foucault's notion of surveillance to online spaces, where data-driven governance dictates engagement and productivity. Han's critique will serve as a lens to examine how filmmakers and creatives navigate algorithm-driven platforms and the increasing demand for self-optimization.

### Daoist principles: Applying *Wuwei* (non-action) and *Qiwu* (equality of things)



To honour my ancestral knowledge, Daoist sages Laozi and Zhuang Zhou offer an alternative approach to navigating power structures, advocating for non-resistance and fluid adaptability through the concept of Wuwei (non-action). Similarly, Qiwu (equality of things) suggests a perspective that dissolves rigid distinctions, which is particularly relevant in the study of digital aesthetics and new media. These principles provide a counterpoint to Western critiques of control, offering ways to conceptualize artistic resistance and freedom beyond productivity and efficiency.

## Media and Film Studies: Exploring non-linear Narratives

Studio systems, particularly within Hollywood cinema, often reinforce linear, objective-oriented storytelling that aligns with capitalist notions of ambition and profit-driven production. While in China, a new form of short content is emerging—TikTok-style short soap operas, often structured as a series of 70 one-minute episodes. This format has gained significant traction in the Chinese market, driven by multiple factors. On one hand, the widespread distribution of digital content is actively reshaping audience attention spans. Viewers increasingly seek dopamine-driven engagement, favoring highly formulaic plots that deliver emotional shifts every five seconds. This trend reflects a broader transformation in media consumption, where immediacy and continuous stimulation take precedence over narrative depth.

In contrast, independent cinema challenges structured narratives, particularly the nonlinear sci-fi genre, inviting audiences to engage with temporality and meaning in new ways. By studying experimental films and new media, this framework situates film and media art as resisting dominant structures of control.

## Information Age under Technofeudalism.

The rise of algorithmic governance in media platforms has profoundly reshaped how content is produced, distributed, and consumed. This section examines how algorithmic curation influences public perception, prioritizes engagement over depth, and reinforces ideological biases. By analyzing the role of cloud capital, As Varoufakis explains, under capitalism "capital itself gives the owner the power to command" (Varoufakis 51). This framework critically explores the complex interplay between attention, desire, and structures of power, ultimately offering a foundation for developing acts of resistance.

## 1.5 Scope and Limitations

To narrow the scope of this investigation into human experiences influenced by today's media, I find myself reflecting on the rapid advancement of AI-generated art and its implications. I hold mixed feelings about this phenomenon and how it may impact my creative practices to move away from the desire machine(s). On one hand, it poses a potentially devastating threat to individual content creators, challenging the industry's standard workflow and possibly consolidating creative power within fewer hands. On the other hand, AI may soon become indistinguishable from traditional real-time capture tools, such as photography, and even replicate life-like performances. This tension—marked by a sense of suspension, insecurity, and the relentless desire for self-optimization—highlights the paradoxical nature of creative tools in a unitarian framework. AI's utility in tasks like generating accurate subtitles for movies or transcribing audio files has already demonstrated impressive efficiency, optimizing workflows and reducing time. These advancements underline the promise of enhanced productivity and streamlined processes, offering creators more time for imaginative pursuits. However, this thesis research does not delve into AI's implications in broader topics, such as big data or model development. Instead, it centers on understanding how AI's integration reshapes creative workflows and the human experience within contemporary media practices.

This investigation builds upon philosophical thinkers to analyze and extract critical keywords within the research questions. In doing so, it reflects on the modes of production in modern society and their impact on human emotions and lifestyles. I will primarily engage with postmodern deconstructionist authors to discuss these research questions.

Our understanding of the three key terms—freedom, desire, and control—is itself an epistemological experience that also reflects the limitations of language. Spoken Language, as a critical tool for

epistemological inquiry, serves as the primary medium for expressing, transmitting, and constructing knowledge. It defines and describes the world, and its structures influence our comprehension of knowledge. For instance, the vocabulary and grammar inherent in different languages may shape distinct knowledge systems. Epistemology also examines the role of language in interpretation. Semiotics and hermeneutics, for example, emphasize how linguistic symbols generate meaning and influence human understanding of the world.

Throughout this master's thesis research, I grapple with how to use—or intentionally avoid using—dialogue in constructing audiovisual narratives that explore the research questions and their associated key terms. This practice represents an ontological experiment. Ontology, in this context, involves categorizing the world into constructs such as "matter," "time," and "relationships," which both describe and shape reality. Ontological linguistics argues that language does not merely reflect reality but also influences how we perceive and understand it. For example, concepts like "time" or "self" are expressed differently across cultures, and language.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This study integrates a diverse range of theoretical perspectives to examine how desire, freedom, and control intersect in contemporary society through the lenses of art, philosophy, and media. Central to this framework are Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of desiring-production and assemblage theory, which explore how desires are continuously produced and manipulated within sociopolitical and economic systems. Byung-Chul Han's critique of digital culture, particularly his notions of the burnout society and the transparency society, which illuminate the psychological and emotional implications of living in hyperconnected systems of control. Daoist philosophy provides an ethical and metaphysical counterpoint, emphasizing natural harmony, adaptability, and the fluidity of water as metaphors for liberation from constructed desires.

Interactive and film theories, including Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope shows how narratives organize space and time<sup>1</sup>. In different kinds of writing, there are differing chronotopes, by which changing historical conceptions of time and space are realized" (Dentith). This concept offers to disrupt traditional narrative structures, fostering audience engagement and co-creation of meaning. Finally, visual arts theory grounds the study in material practice, exploring how embodiment and sensory engagement in mediums like sculpture, animation, and interactive installations can make abstract theoretical ideas tangible. This interdisciplinary framework not only critiques existing systems of control but also proposes alternative modes of resistance and liberation, advancing a deeper understanding of human experience and freedom in the context of art and media.

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<sup>1</sup> The word chronotope comes from Greek (chronos meaning time, topos meaning place) and was adapted by Bakhtin to describe the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships in literature.

## 2.1 Desiring Production in Controlled Society

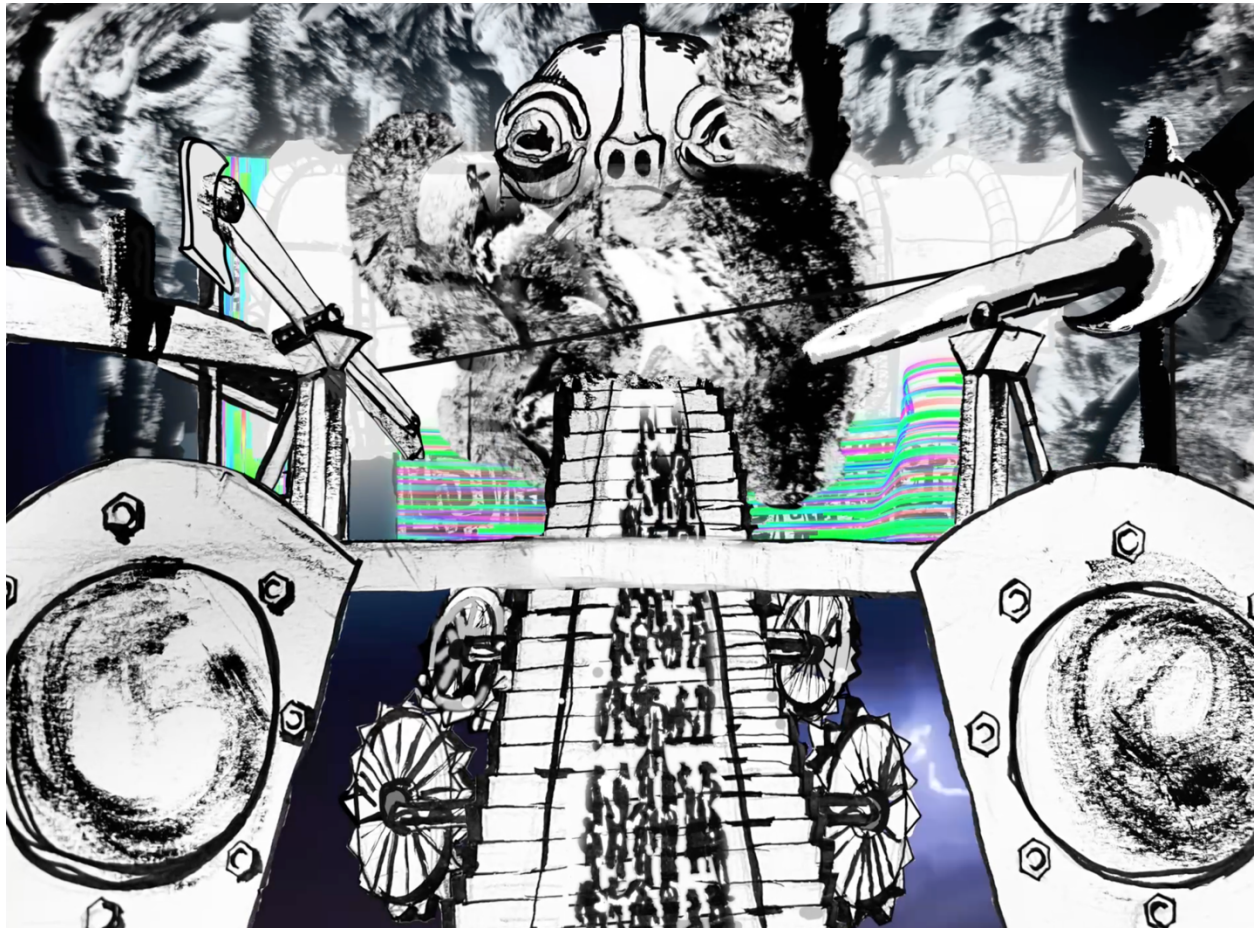


Fig. 1. Desire Path. Screenshot 1 of Digital Video by the author, 2025.

### 2.1.1 Desire Machine

Deleuze examines three types of societies in *Postscript on the Societies of Control* (1992). First, societies of sovereignty; second, disciplinary societies; and third, the newly emerged societies of control. Societies of sovereignty keep people in place by regulating death. Disciplinary societies, conversely, regulate life and the body by controlling space. A society of control, however, regulates access so thoroughly that resisting its machines and mechanisms becomes nearly impossible. This is largely due to the high level of technological automation.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, Desire does not lack anything; it does not lack its object. It is, rather, the subject that is missing in desire, or desire that lacks a fixed subject; there is no fixed subject unless there is repression. Desire and its object are one and the same thing: the machine, as a machine of a machine. Desire is a machine, and the object of desire is another machine connected to it (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* 25).

Deleuze and Guattari describe liberated desire as desire that escapes the impasse of private fantasy: It is not a question of adapting it, socializing it, or disciplining it, but of plugging it in so that its process is not interrupted in the social body and that its expression remains collective. Desire is either repressed by hierarchies and authority structures or channeled by capitalism. While repression and channeling are slightly different, in both cases, desire is not free. It is always subject to one form of power or another—either disciplinary or control systems. Conversely, liberated desire does not need to be adapted, socialized, or disciplined. Instead, it must be integrated in a way that allows its process to remain uninterrupted within the social body, ensuring that its expression is collective.

Capitalism doesn't just shape what we want—it ensures that our desires are never fully satisfied. It thrives on an endless cycle of production, aspiration, and dissatisfaction, where every fulfillment leads to yet another craving. Drawing from Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the *desiring-machine*, capitalism doesn't simply cater to human needs; it manufactures them, turning individuals into perpetual consumers. In today's digital landscape, this cycle has intensified under algorithmic capitalism. Social media, e-commerce, and entertainment platforms don't just react to our desires; they actively construct them in real-time, keeping us locked in an endless loop of scrolling, purchasing, and self-optimization.



### 2.1.2 The Cycle of Exploitive Mechanisms

Byung-Chul Han's critique of auto-exploitation sharpens this idea—under modern capitalism, coercion no longer comes from an external force but from within. We are not forced to work; instead, we push ourselves to be constantly productive, visible, and optimized. The pressure to improve isn't imposed—it's internalized. This is especially evident in the influencer culture, and self-branding, where identity itself has become a commodified asset. On the surface, this system appears to offer limitless freedom, yet it is tightly controlled by predictive algorithms and engagement-driven design. The result is that Desire never reaches a state of fulfillment; it simply fuels the engine of perpetual economic growth.

Capitalism channels desire into productive circuits, ensuring it remains an engine of economic expansion rather than personal liberation. Social media operates on this same principle: its algorithms don't just present content—they fuel desire by constantly tailoring what we see to our psychological profiles, maximizing engagement and consumption. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok structure interactions to shape what users desire (likes, follows, comments), reinforcing a never-ending cycle of self-presentation and comparison. Through this research I question that if so many are fixated on self-optimization—on becoming the "best version" of themselves—it leaves little space for genuine encounters with the other.

Now, individuals willingly participate in their commodification, optimizing their skills and presence for the digital market. Influencer culture exemplifies this, as personal identities are transformed into brands, and authenticity becomes a currency. Han describes “The exploiter is

simultaneously the exploited. Perpetrator and victim can no longer be distinguished. Such self-referentiality produces a paradoxical freedom that abruptly switches over into violence because of the compulsive structures dwelling within it. The psychic indispositions of achievement society are pathological manifestations of such a paradoxical freedom” (11).

Han argues these encounters are essential. They introduce a necessary form of negativity—something that resists the smooth, frictionless flow of curated digital experiences. Without them, our sense of reality becomes unmoored, and desire, rather than leading to meaningful engagement, loops back into the machinery of self-perpetuation. In a world where desire is endlessly modulated by algorithms, the challenge is not just to resist consumption but rediscovering the transformative power of encountering something outside ourselves.

### 2.1.3 Technofeudalism and Reclaiming the Cloud Commons

In the age of information technology, surveillance has become an omnipresent force, facilitated by the rapid expansion of data collection and AI training. Technological giants, driven by capitalist incentives, have weaponized information, transforming it into a resource for both economic gain and social control.

Douglas Rushkoff argues that technology has shifted from being a tool for creative unpredictability to an instrument for manipulating human behavior. He states:

The net was no longer about new possibilities. The net was about increasing probabilities, betting on something you want the highest possible probability of a return...Instead of technology being tools for weird people to make unpredictable stuff, we use technology on people to make them act more predictably (12:08).

This transformation means that human behavior is not only being tracked but is actively shaping the development of artificial intelligence. AI systems learn from our online interactions, reinforcing behavioral patterns that maximize engagement and profit for corporations. This process turns human agency into a self-replicating loop of consumption, where our desires are not just exploited but also reshaped to fit the needs of capitalism.

This form of capital consists of digital infrastructures—such as server farms, AI algorithms, and extensive networks—designed to influence human behavior. Unlike traditional capital, which focuses on producing tangible goods, cloud capital aims to shape consumer desires and facilitate direct sales, effectively bypassing conventional markets. Users inadvertently contribute free labor by interacting with these platforms, thereby becoming cloud serfs. Moreover, within workplaces, algorithms monitor and direct

workers in real-time, increasing productivity under increasingly precarious conditions. Yanis Varoufakis suggests that traditional capitalism has evolved into a new system termed "technofeudalism," driven by the rise of "cloud capital". "Cloud capital grabs our attention. It manufactures our desires. It sells to us directly outside any traditional markets, that which is going to satiate the desires it made us have. "cloud capital" also drives proletarian labor inside the workplaces. And it elicits massive free labor from us, the cloud serfs (Thinkers Forum 04:07)".

It required groundbreaking scientific discoveries, advanced neural networks, and AI innovations beyond imagination—all to create a world where, as privatization and private equity strip away physical wealth, cloud capital simultaneously extracts value from our very minds. As I attempt to do in my films and installations, disrupt and critique this machine-system driven trajectory to reclaim individual ownership of our thoughts, we must collectively take 'back' control of cloud capital. Only then, I propose that we begin to harness our minds to build a new shared cloud commons.

This will be an immense challenge, but it is the only path to transforming cloud-based systems from tools of behavioral control into platforms for genuine human collaboration and liberation. Those bound to digital labor and cloud dependencies must unite—we have nothing to lose but the chains that bind our minds.

Today the entire globe is developing into a panopticon. Google and social networks, which present themselves as spaces of freedom, are assuming panoptic forms. Today surveillance is not occurring as an attack on freedom, as is normally assumed. Instead, people are voluntarily surrendering to the panoptic gaze. They deliberately collaborate in the digital panopticon by denuding and exhibiting themselves. The prisoner of the digital panopticon is a perpetrator and a victim at the same time. Herein lies the dialectic of freedom. These interpretations of Freedom, especially tied to the panopticon turn out to be a form of control (Han and Butler, 49).

One of the defining characteristics of the digital age is the increasing presence of surveillance mechanisms, which operate subtly within everyday technologies. Michel Foucault's description of the panopticism has been widely applied to contemporary digital culture, where individuals are both the subjects and enforcers of surveillance. Byung-Chul Han extends this idea, arguing that modern societies are no longer disciplined through external force but rather through internalized self-optimization. Individuals voluntarily participate in systems of control by engaging with social media, constantly performing and curating their online identities.

We imagine ourselves to be free agents, yet our lives are continuously recorded, analyzed, and manipulated. In this system—it simultaneously creates certainty and breeds suspicion. "Truth contains a centripetal force that holds a society together, but information contains a centrifugal force that destroys social cohesion" (Han 16). The more information we consume, the less stable our perception of reality becomes. Under what Han describes as "infocracy," a term that encapsulates the control exerted through the overwhelming and incessant flow of information. In this environment, truth is no longer an objective concept but a constructed narrative shaped by those who control the dissemination of information. The political and social consequences of this are far-reaching, with increasing difficulty in distinguishing factual content from misinformation. Han's work challenges us to reconsider how information is consumed and shared, calling for a return to the ancient Greek concept of *parrhesia*—a courageous and responsible form of speech that challenges power and misinformation, advocating for critical engagement in our increasingly complex digital world. This critique of infocracy serves as a warning about the consequences of our passive consumption of information and the necessity for individuals to engage actively with the information they encounter. "The crisis of truth shakes belief in the facts themselves.

Opinions 'can differ widely' but still be 'legitimate as long as they respect factual truth'" (Han 19). Han's insights suggest that only through intentional and responsible engagement can we reclaim our ability to discern truth, preserve democratic ideals, and combat the influence of manipulative data systems.

## 2.2 道 The Way

Modern society often equates freedom with autonomy and individualism, reinforcing the belief that it involves overcoming threats that endanger one's very existence, particularly in relation to the mind.

Today, the concept of freedom has been framed as one of the most central philosophical concerns. While this may seem like an overwhelming challenge, the notion that personal freedom stands in opposition to forces of restraint or constraint—whether imposed by other people, the state, or modern technology—was not a concern for ancient Chinese thinkers. Instead, they saw human desire as the primary obstacle to social harmony and equality. In the case of Daoism, authentic freedom exists in only one guise—the onto-cosmological.

Zhuangzi's concept of freedom is challenging to define using modern Chinese terminology, as the commonly used term *ziyou* (自由) did not exist in his time. While *zaiyou* (在宥) conveys a sense of leisure or indulgence rather than a comprehensive theory of freedom. Instead, Zhuangzi frames freedom as an onto-cosmological ideal rooted in Dao, articulated through three heavenly principles: heavenly differentiation (*tianni* 天倪), heavenly measure (*tianjun* 天均), and heavenly harmony (*tianhe* 天和). This perspective detaches freedom from human-centered ontology, dissolving reliance on social and ethical norms. In this view, true freedom is not about escaping constraints but about transcending selfhood, embracing Dao through forgetfulness, and engaging in spontaneous transformation with one another (Chai 139). When harmony pervades all things, the sage achieves the ultimate state of uninhibited roaming (*xiaoyao you* 逍遥游), where all distinctions fade, and existence becomes fluid and interconnected.

### 2.2.1 Cosmological Freedom

Here is an example of an Eastern-Western philosophical dichotomy: Zhuangzi's view of freedom fundamentally challenges Western notions of autonomy, emancipation, and self-determination. Rather than framing freedom as overcoming external constraints—whether societal, political, or metaphysical—Zhuangzi presents it as an onto-cosmological state, one that dissolves individual agency and selfhood into the spontaneous flow of Dao. Zhuangzi argues that freedom is neither a transcendental gift nor an existential struggle but an alignment with Dao's natural spontaneity (ziran 自然).

Key to this understanding is the rejection of human-centered frameworks of being. Zhuangzi critiques attempts to define freedom through the human experience of choice, will, and opposition, showing that the ontic-ontological dichotomy of human existence inherently limits such perspectives. “The terms shen 身 and ti 體 refer to the physical body while ji 己 represents the empirical self. To which of these should freedom point? The matter becomes even more complex when we take into consideration the qi 氣 sustaining one's personhood, let alone those components that can be used to further refine what exactly personhood entails—inborn nature (xing 性), emotional composure (qing 情), spirit (shen 神), and form (xing 形)” (Chai 141).

Human finitude generates the desire to transcend physical limitations, leading individuals to imagine freedom as an eternal, spiritual omnipotence—whether through deification, the pursuit of immortality, or the illusion of control over existence. However, such frameworks ultimately reduce freedom to a human-centric ontology, imprisoning it within the very constructs it seeks to escape.



“To speak of the revealing of Dao as an emerging from and returning to that which is free, is to be entombed in the presupposition that an onto-cosmological difference exists between the free and not-free. More fundamentally, the assumption that freedom only pertains to the human guise of being, rather than all beings, would appear irrational to Zhuangzi” (Chai 143).

Zhuangzi offers rather than defining freedom as an overcoming of constraints, he situates it within the unknowability of Dao, a mystery that liberates without revealing itself. Daoist freedom is not about emerging from or returning to a state of being but about dissolving the very distinction between free and unfree. The assumption that freedom pertains only to human existence is, for Zhuangzi, irrational; freedom is not a possession but a cosmic harmonization of all things, realized through the great awakening to the nothingness incipient in all things. True freedom vanishes as a concept.

## Chapter 3: Methodology and Practice – Desire, Power, Control in New Media

My qualitative, research-creation approach integrates interdisciplinary studies to critically examine power dynamics and control inherent in surveillance systems. Central to this methodology is my immersive film installation (titled *The Grid*). : *The Grid*, the installation consists of interconnected artworks forming a cohesive whole, rather than separate, standalone pieces.

Drawing upon concepts such as Digital Panopticon and Phantasmagoria, I also incorporate Chinese calligraphy to Daoist thought as a contemplative practice, providing a counterbalance to digital acceleration to facilitate deeper reflections on intimacy and autonomy. Through sculpting, I aim to critically analyze and rethink the power dynamics inherent in surveillance capitalism, information overload, desire production in contemporary society.

When I was in elementary school, my group of friends—Yixi, Shengwen, and Yangfan—and I often gathered to watch animation shows on VCDs using the TV. One day, I was away visiting my grandma, so I missed one of our exciting gatherings. When I returned, my friends seemed more excited than usual. Yixi eagerly narrated the story of that day:

### Short Drama #3

FADE IN:

EXT. SHENGWEN'S HOUSE - EARLY AFTERNOON

The sun hangs lazily over a quiet suburban street. Cicadas buzz faintly in the heat.

INT. SHENGWEN'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

SHENGWEN (10), YIXI (10), and YANG tiptoe through the house, carrying snack bags and a set of DVD titled: *Yaiba: Samurai Legend* (1993).

INT. SHENGWEN'S HOUSE - HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

They approach a slightly open door – inside, faint SNORING is heard.

YIXI (whispering)

Your dad is asleep.

Shengwen nods. They slip through the door.

INT. SHENGWEN'S HOUSE - DAD'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

They move quietly toward a bulky, CRT TELEVISION set sitting on a dresser. Shengwen grabs the remote, clicks the power button. The TV flickers to life – but it's NOT the animated series they expected. On the screen: confusing, adult imagery – flashes of NAKED BODIES. Yixi gasps.

YIXI (whispering, wide-eyed)

There are naked people!

The boys freeze, unsure whether to laugh, scream, or bolt. SHENGWEN fumbles for the remote, frantically flipping channels.

Empty snack bags scatter the floor. The boys lounge around, the earlier shock turning into giggles and whispered jokes.

SHENGWEN's dad awakens, he calmly turns off the TV and takes out the discs from the DVD player then breaks the disc.

SHENGWEN'S DAD

Hmm, ugh... This was put in by a thief.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

Even though I wasn't there, their story made it feel like another unforgettable day, spent between the strange and the ordinary.

FADE OUT.

This experience later made me reflect: *What is television capable of showing us? Who decides the content we watch, and how does this content ultimately impact each of us?*

### 3.1 The Grid - Component #1

For my installation, I began collecting every TV set I could access. Television is not merely a device that transmits reality to us; it is itself a powerful medium. Nam June Paik saw TV as a powerful technology that could be repurposed creatively, transforming the traditionally one-directional nature of television into an interactive, reflective, and subversive experience.

In the context of video art, this meant utilizing the unique properties of television—such as real-time broadcasting, closed-circuit feedback loops, and electronic manipulation—to question the medium itself and the viewer's relationship with it. Paik's works like *TV Buddha* illustrate this vividly, as the artwork creates an immersive and contemplative environment, blurring lines between observer and observed, thus critiquing media-driven surveillance and self-perception.



Fig. 2. Nam June Paik, TV Buddha, 1992, mixed media sculpture, James Cohan Gallery. Art Basel, [www.artbasel.com/catalog/artwork/54254/Nam-June-Paik-TV-Buddha](http://www.artbasel.com/catalog/artwork/54254/Nam-June-Paik-TV-Buddha). Accessed 28 Apr. 2025.

Television as a medium opened possibilities for new ways of seeing, experiencing, and interacting with the world, positioning the viewer as an active participant rather than a passive consumer. In my installation, *The Grid*, the arrangement of analog TV monitors, depicting a woman attempting to escape her surveilled reality, aligns closely with Foucault's concept of panopticism. This setup underscores the cyclical nature of surveillance and power. Building on the inherent qualities of digital imagery, Erica

Balsom, in *On the Grid*, suggests that every digital image is a grid. Balsom notes that the 'grid' has a long history connected to knowledge and power - as a technique of seeing, viewing, positioning subject as object to be studied.

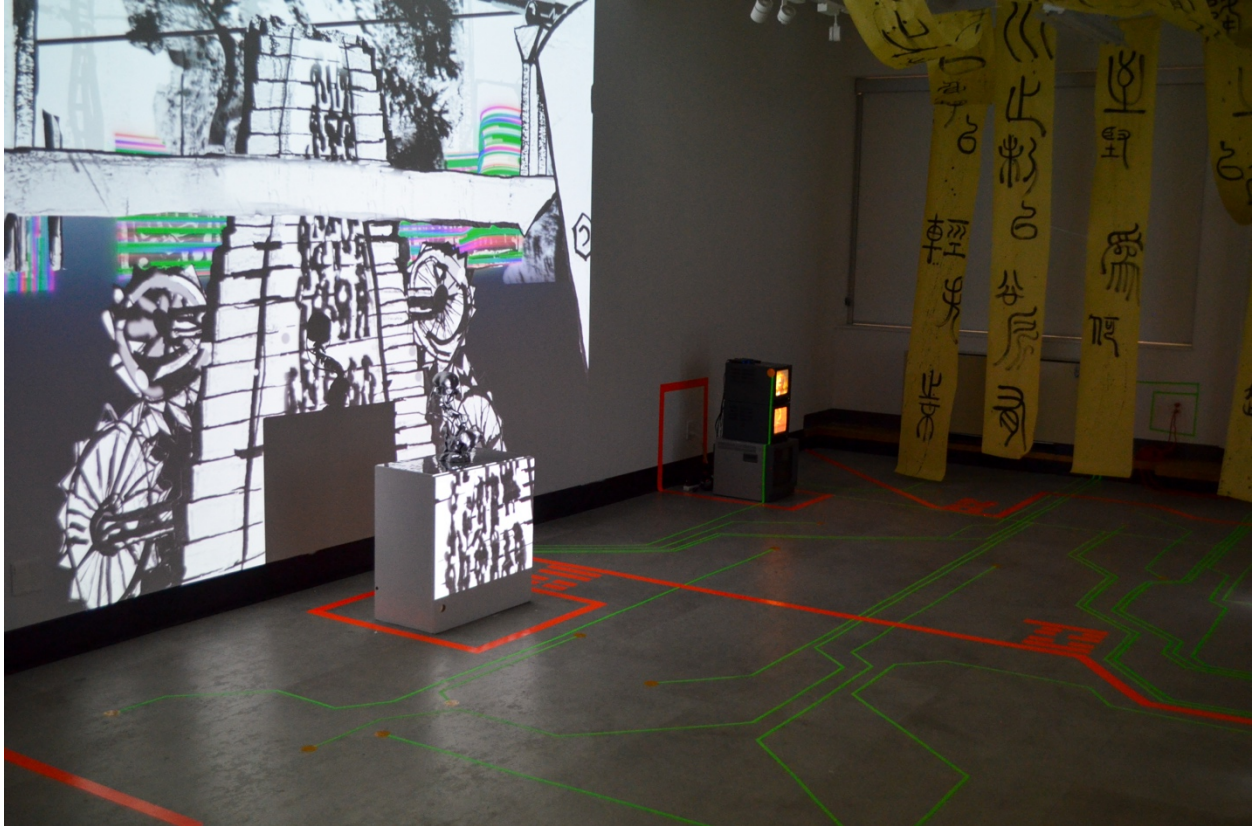


Fig. 3. Detail 1 of Desire Path. Film Installation by the author, 2025.

The grid has a long history as a technique of the knowledge/power nexus.





Fig. 4. Albrecht Dürer, Draughtsman Making a Perspective Drawing of a Reclining Woman, ca. 1600

Dürer's woodcut offers another fable of power. The grid is a trope for thinking about a contemporary habits, an existence lived at the intersection of technology and power. ... We have passed to the other side of the screen: no longer the artist, organiser of the visual field, we are now the woman before him, plotted on axes, rendered knowable and manageable within a mathematical space (45).

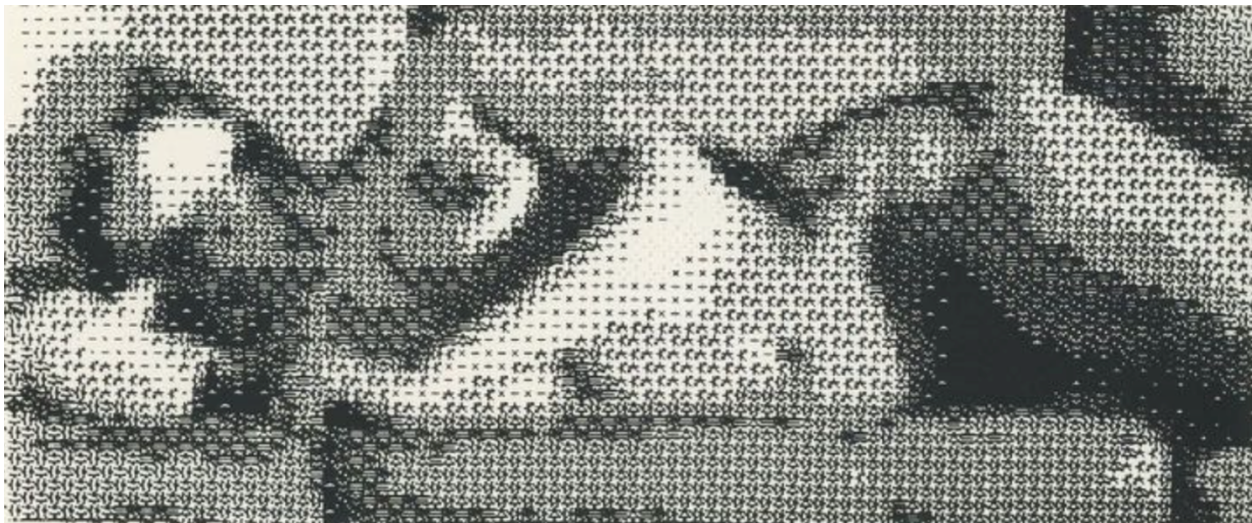


Fig. 5 Leon Harmon / Ken Knowlton, Computer Nude (Studies in Perception I), 1967

And yet we are not simply passive objects of administration: as a diagram of power, the grid is a technique of management, an image of algorithmic control, but in its reticular expanse, it also offers

vectors of movement, connectivity and subversion. It is, in other words, an ambivalent figure, situated at the fraught junction between the contingency of human life and the calculability of digital technologies. ... There are lines on the grid, but empty spaces, too (51).

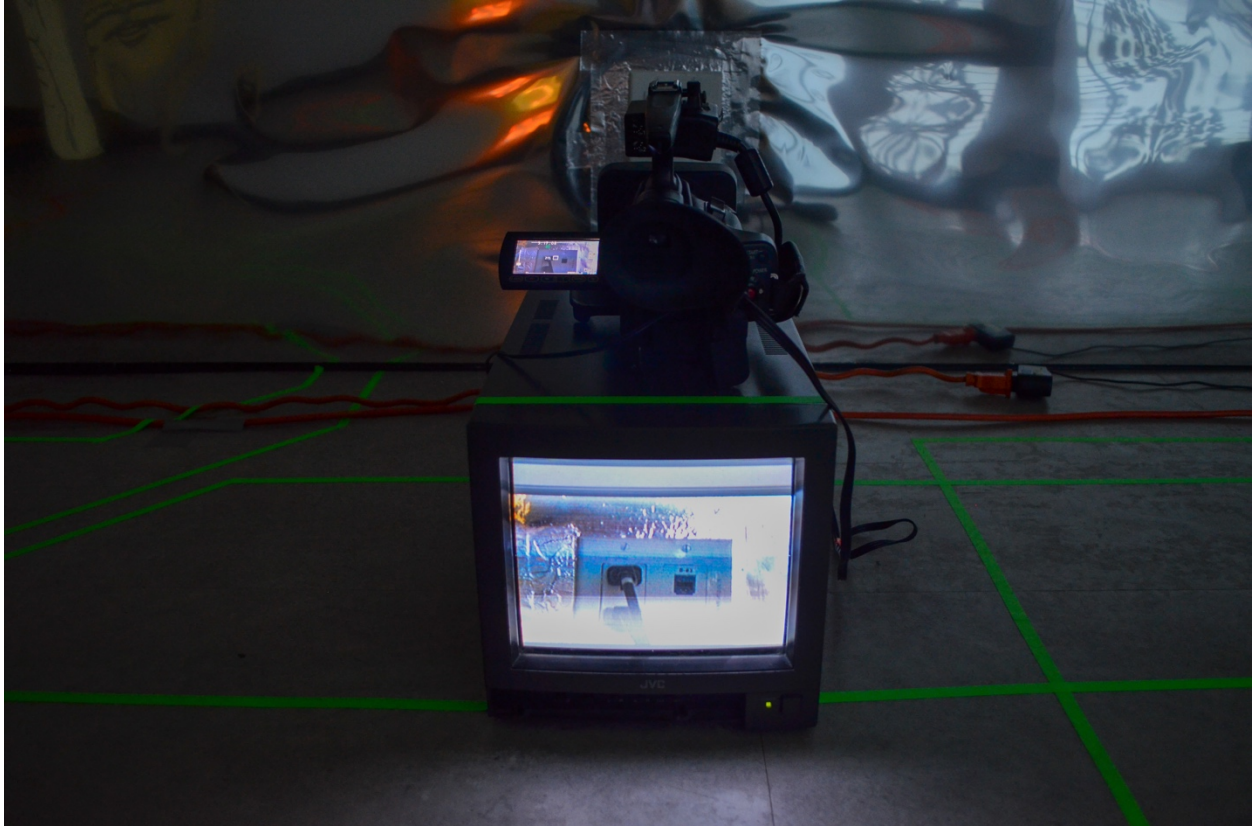


Fig. 6. Detail 2 of Desire Path. Film Installation by the author, 2025.



### 3.2 Phantasmagoria – Component #2

Today, the wonder of our physical experiences and digital space is increasingly blurred. The gallery space offers a visceral journey, guiding participants along a desire path that encourages non-linear movement. Media philosopher, Oliver Grau, in *MediaArtHistories* (2010) states, “As of the mid-seventeenth century, the *laterna magica*, or magic lantern, provided the means to tell stories in projected images; however, from the outset when the device was in less scrupulous hands, it was employed to deceive, terrify, and manipulate naïve spectators” (142–43).



Fig. 7. Étienne-Gaspard Robertson's phantasmagoria, Paris, 1797

Immersion has a long history and is inextricably connected with art, architecture, and symbolic systems; cave paintings can be considered early immersive environments, and medieval churches are equally aimed at creating a transformative enclosure for their visitors through a combination of architecture, light, and symbolism.

To achieve immersion, I intend to design a way of sensing movement. When no one moves, the film

project runs at a normal speed, depicting a continuous descent from the surface through decayed infrastructures, industrial pipes, and surreal liquid formations until reaching the core of the digital panopticon in the film world. However, increased movement accelerates the film, culminating in chaotic, high-speed imagery while a female voice pleads, “Slow me down, slow time down for us. Don’t leave me, stay.” The sound, emitted from specific spatial locations, compels participants to adjust their behavior, encouraging them to slow down to alter the cinematic tempo. If one or more individuals stand in designated positions, the film slows, requiring an unspoken collaboration between participants to counteract acceleration.



Fig. 8. Detail 3 of Desire Path. Film Installation by the author, 2025.

By orchestrating body movement, sound, and visuals, my installation activates sensory experiences that prompt the audience to confront how digitally integrated illusions regulate perception, enforce engagement, and reshape our relationship with time. Ultimately, the work questions whether we can

reclaim agency in an era of hyper-accelerated media consumption — or if we are already conditioned to surrender to its speed.



## Chapter 4: Desire In Film Studies



Fig. 9. Detail 4 of Desire Path. Film Installation by the author, 2025

## 4.1 The Critique of the Short Dramas

The global rise of TikTok-style short dramas (MIT Technology Review, 2024) illustrates a fundamental shift in narrative consumption. These bite-sized narratives, often structured as 70 one-minute episodes, function within an algorithmic logic, prioritizing engagement over depth. which capitalizes on dopamine-driven engagement loops to manufacture continuous desire.

This format has gained significant traction, particularly in the Chinese market, driven by multiple factors:

- **Algorithmic Favorability** – Platform algorithms prioritize high engagement, reinforcing formulas that maximize watch time.
- **Audience Behavior** – The demand for dopamine-inducing content fosters an expectation for rapid emotional shifts every 5 seconds.
- **Commercial Viability** – The episodic nature of short content increases monetization potential, allowing brands and influencers to integrate advertising seamlessly.

Since 2020, short dramas have proliferated across the internet at an astonishing rate. Based on my observations, TikTok short dramas typically follow a model where users first encounter free clips on social media and are then directed to paid platforms to watch the full content. This business model has proven to be highly successful. A quick search of related news reveals figures such as "The top-grossing show on FlexTV can bring in \$2 million a week, while the production costs less than \$150,000"(Frater). Financial reports from these platforms indicate that short drama viewership has already exceeded tens of billions, with some productions becoming viral sensations. While this type of content was relatively rare a few years ago, major video platforms have recently entered the market, recruited professional actors and

invested in higher-quality productions. They are now using the short drama format to create content akin to traditional television dramas. This emerging online cultural ecosystem is rapidly gaining momentum.

The core logic behind short dramas lies in their ability to stimulate the senses and cater to audiences' desires, which is ultimately what drives viewers to pay for them. Short dramas function similarly to food and sex—they fulfill fundamental human instincts that are closest to animalistic needs. The very purpose of short dramas is to provide immediate and intense sensory pleasure to as many people as possible, in the shortest amount of time and in the most direct way.

From a production perspective, creators of short dramas are not burdened with any deep artistic or narrative responsibility toward their audience. Every emotion, and storyline, is condensed to the most basic and universally understood level—appealing to the shared human experiences that many can relate to. As a result, instead of seeing a wide variety of themes in short dramas, we observe a reflection of human commonalities—more specifically, the most primal and fundamental needs of human nature.

If there is any distinction among short dramas, it is not the diversity of subject matter but rather the difference between male-oriented and female-oriented content. A quick glance at the recommended short dramas for men and women on these platforms reveals two entirely different worlds:

- **Male-oriented short dramas** focus on themes of "rising to power"—a protagonist who starts off as an ordinary or even lowly figure suddenly gains wealth, power, and respect through a fortunate opportunity, eventually achieving his dreams.
- **Female-oriented short dramas** center around "romance and destiny"—for example, a girl from a poor background discovers that she is actually the long-lost heiress of a wealthy family. Through intelligence and strategy, she reclaims her rightful place and finds love. However, these



stories often contain dramatic twists—a seemingly perfect life turns out to be an illusion, her husband secretly loves someone else, or she, once an unremarkable "ugly duckling," unexpectedly becomes the beloved of an extraordinary man.

These short dramas precisely target audiences' psychological needs, aligning perfectly with the format's fundamental logic: to satisfy the most basic and instinctual human desires in the simplest and most straightforward way possible.

Aristotle once said that humans are unique because we exist between two extremes—we have both beastly instincts and divine aspirations.

“For if he be without self-restraint, he is like a beast; and if he be more than man, he is like a god.”

(ὁ μὲν γὰρ ἄγαν ἅγιος καὶ ἀνήμερος οἷον θηρίον τις ἐστίν, ὁ δ' ὑπερβάλλον ἄνθρωπον θεϊός τις.)

*Nicomachean Ethics (Book VII, 1145a20-30)*

This leads to a question that I find very interesting: What connects Raphael—the genius of the Renaissance—to TikTok short dramas? Although TikTok short dramas and Raphael's paintings may seem like polar opposites, they share a fundamental pursuit: the search for universal desire in human nature. Both aim to capture something that resonates with as many people as possible, something deeply human that transcends time, culture, and individual experience.

The difference is in how they define *universality*. TikTok short dramas find it by stripping human nature down to its simplest, most instinctive desires—the things that require no explanation, no deep thought, just an immediate emotional reaction. This is why certain tropes keep appearing: the underdog's rise, the

impossible love story, the sudden twist of fate. These are not complex reflections on human existence; they are the raw, unfiltered fantasies that anyone can relate to, no matter their background. By lowering the bar to the most basic human instincts, TikTok dramas ensure that almost everyone finds something familiar in them.

Raphael, however, takes the opposite approach. His search for universal desire isn't about simplifying human nature to its most primal form; it's about elevating it to its highest potential. He paints not just human figures, but ideals—beauty, grace, divinity. His version of the universal human experience is not about what we all feel at our most basic level, but about what we all aspire to be. His paintings don't just depict people; they depict humanity in its most perfected, transcendent form.

At their core, both Raphael and TikTok dramas ask the same question: What does it mean to be human? The difference is in their answers. One finds universality by looking at what connects us at our lowest common denominator, while the other finds it by reaching for the highest. When there is a totalizing narrative (a universality proposed by the media systems), we are in a closed loop, airless. It is this power that attempts to control our uniqueness and impose a universality.

The question embedded in this is "Whose 'universality'?" For Whom is this 'universality' empowering and who is not included?

### 4.1.1 Establishing Gender Neutrality: Challenging Stereotypes in Algorithmic Narratives

The binary narrative that dominates TikTok-style short dramas reinforces outdated gender stereotypes, under the guise of universal appeal. The rigid segmentation between “male-oriented” and “female-oriented” stories not only reproduces but amplifies essentialist gender roles—men as agents of ambition and conquest, and women as vessels of destiny, beauty, and romance. These patterns suggest a cultural template that aligns male fulfillment with external power acquisition, and female fulfillment with internal emotional validation.

This split mirrors deeply embedded patriarchal structures: men are positioned as doers, women as feelers. The algorithm becomes complicit in this reproduction, coding desire along binary lines. Such design not only limits representation but also alienates those who do not conform to conventional gender roles—nonbinary individuals, queer identities, and even women or men whose fantasies fall outside these tropes.

By defining genre and engagement through gendered psychographics, these dramas suppress the potential for more nuanced storytelling. For instance, why must the female protagonist’s journey always hinge on beauty, lost inheritance, or romantic betrayal? Why must the male’s always end in dominion, wealth, or power? These archetypes constrain the imagination and deny audiences the possibility of gender-neutral emotional exploration, where vulnerability, ambition, affection, or power are not assigned to one sex.

To establish gender neutrality, we must question the algorithmic ethics behind content recommendation and creation. Gender should not be a categorical filter for narrative design; rather, stories should transcend rigid binaries, embracing a spectrum of identities and experiences. This means platforms and creators alike must challenge the very formulas that currently secure engagement metrics—replacing them with new narrative paradigms that reflect the plurality of human desire.

Without this shift, short dramas risk becoming a closed loop of pre-digested fantasies, reinforcing a culturally and economically convenient myth of universality—one that empowers a narrow demographic while rendering all others invisible. As Judith Butler has argued, gender is not an essence but a performance. The stories we consume, and the structures through which we consume them, rehearse and reproduce these performances daily.

It is time to break that loop.

## 4.2 Misrepresentation of Indigenous and Racialized Communities in Cinema History

For example, Hollywood's portrayal of Indigenous communities reflects the cultural and political influence of the entertainment industry, demonstrating how film operates as a tool of soft power. The global reach of Hollywood determines which narratives are amplified and how Indigenous identities are framed. This paper, and thesis research analyzes the dissemination and influence of cinema from both film history and new media's historical development, highlighting how soft power is intrinsically linked to a nation's economic and political dominance—dictating whose stories are told, how they are framed, and the impact they have on audiences. This leads to an ethical dilemma: How can filmmakers create meaningful emotional experiences without excessively depicting violence and cruelty? For instance, in *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023), director (Martin Scorsese), the retelling of genocide, heartbreak, and horror forces Indigenous communities to relive historical atrocities. However, if such portrayals simply reproduce the spectacle of suffering—showing murdered Indigenous women without deeper critique—does this, in turn, normalize violence against them?

The question is there will never be one fixed meaning in these events that happened on screen, meaning will depend on how people make of it. In media studies, Stuart Hall asserts that representation is the way in which meaning is given to the things depicted. Representation shapes understanding by encoding power dynamics rather than neutrally depicting events. As Hall states, “The production of meaning means that there is a kind of symbolic work, an activity, a practice, which has to go on in giving meaning to things and in communicating that meaning to someone else” (ChallengingMedia). Media exerts control by determining which representations dominate public discourse, shaping our perceptions, identities, and societal structures.

## Short Drama #4

FADE IN:

INT. CARMINE'S STUDIO - NIGHT

The room is bathed in a dim, ominous red light, casting deep, elongated shadows across the faces within. LU, 24, dressed in a green bomber jacket, dark long hair, black jeans, and sneakers, is intensely focused at a computer, the screen's glow the only light in the room. The tense silence is shattered by a sharp shout.

CARMINE (O.S.) (irritated)  
Where's my damn camera at!?

LU (scrambling)  
Just a minute!

Lu stands abruptly, his movements frantic as he searches the cluttered room. He glances at CAROLINE, who nervously takes a drag of her cigarette, her anxiety palpable.

LU (V.O.)  
I'm screwed...

Heavy footsteps grow louder, thundering toward the room. The door flies open as CARMINE, 34, a once-celebrated actor whose fame has been tarnished by drugs and violence, bursts in. He's wearing luxurious black boots, dress pants, a dangling cross, and sunglasses. His disheveled blonde hair partially obscures his face. His entourage, a mix of snickering and stern-faced men, follows him.

CARMINE (bursting with anger)  
Where the hell is my camera, huh!?

LU (nervously)  
It... It was right there, I swear.

Carmine steps menacingly close to Lu, towering over him.

CARMINE (frantically)  
It was right there? Really? Are you kiddin' me? There's nudity on that camera, and if anyone sees this, I'm fucked—seriously fucked.

Carmine continues to storm across the room, his voice booming.

CARMINE (raising his voice)  
This guy's gotta be kiddin' me...

HENRY, 23, dressed in a black hoodie and sweatpants, enters.  
Instantly, Carmine grabs him by the collar, his rage unchecked.

CARMINE  
Where is the camera?

HENRY  
I don't know.

Carmine slaps Henry, sending him sprawling to the ground. He drags Henry across the floor, heading for the hallway.

CARMINE  
(gritting his teeth)  
Ya son of a bitch!

The crew encircles Lu, their presence menacing. A tall, imposing man steps forward, his voice chilling.

MAN (coldly)  
Strip.

FADE OUT.



### 4.3 Perfect Days: A Meditative Reflection on Presence in Cinema

Imagine striving toward a dream, for years making sacrifices, and finally getting the opportunity to achieve it. But as success nears, ambition shifts from motivation to burden. This is Carmy's reality, the protagonist from the TV series *The Bear* (2022)—every achievement is immediately replaced by the next challenge. In chasing his dream, he pays a steep price—chronic stress, outbursts at those around him, and pushing away one of his true sources of happiness. He alienates those helping him, yet he feels close to success, hoping that once he attains it, satisfaction and peace will follow.

How often do we become like Carmy, so consumed by the pursuit of success or self-improvement that we forget to enjoy the journey? When a goal demands so much, it can overshadow every other part of life. Carmy's struggle with ambition is a theme that cinema has explored time and again, about the cost of ambition. Cinema often explores this struggle. Films like *The Wolf of Wall Street* show a society that rewards ambition, even through deceit, while *Citizen Kane* explores the emptiness beyond success. These are just a few examples of films that celebrate ambition or warn of its pitfalls.

Ambition can stem from a genuine desire to improve the world, achieve personal fulfillment, and live a meaningful life. When pursued with awareness of its cost, it can be valuable. However, ambition becomes a trap when it arises from the need to prove one's worth or escape emotional or physical hardship. While ambition promises much, stories repeatedly show its high price. If success doesn't bring the expected satisfaction, was it worth it? What about those who don't achieve society's definition of success and feel shame as a result? Many successful individuals find contentment, yet numerous films—often created by those who have achieved success—reflect the real burden of ambition. Likewise, many still striving for success question if the path they are on will truly lead to fulfillment.

The Japanese word *komorebi* has no direct English equivalent. It captures both the phenomenon of sunlight filtering through trees and the feeling of appreciating it. This delicate pattern of light often catches the attention of Hirayama, the protagonist of Wim Wenders' film *Perfect Days* (2023) about a Tokyo toilet cleaner. In a cinematic world filled with ambition-driven narratives, *Perfect Days* stands as a quiet contrast.

Wim Wenders' film follows Hirayama, a Tokyo toilet cleaner, who finds joy in routine and small pleasures. Unlike conventional narratives driven by ambition, *Perfect Days* embraces stillness and presence. In a culture obsessed with optimization and achievement, this film offers a rare alternative: fulfillment through mindfulness.

One day, Hirayama's niece unexpectedly arrives, having run away from her mother, who belongs to a world of conventional success. As they ride bikes together, she asks if the river leads to the ocean. Instead of focusing on the destination, Hirayama gently shifts her attention to the present moment. While there's nothing wrong with wanting to reach the ocean, constantly thinking about where we could be makes us miss where we are. This quiet moment encapsulates one of life's most profound yet difficult lessons.

*Perfect Days* finds beauty in the ordinary—Tokyo's streets, the design of public toilets, and everyday routines. It asks the viewer to slow down and see the world as Hirayama does, appreciating the mundane rather than treating it as something to escape. His contentment in a seemingly uneventful life challenges the idea that boredom is something to be avoided; perhaps, it is our aversion to stillness that keeps us trapped in the endless pursuit of something more.

Mindfulness is not about surrendering to a sense of worthlessness; rather, it is a deep affirmation of the value found in even the smallest moments of life. Paradoxically, embracing stillness can be one of the most challenging paths, especially in a world that constantly pushes us to optimize, improve, and achieve

more. While hustle culture demands productivity, simply sitting with oneself in silence for 20 minutes can feel like a far greater challenge.

Being present does not mean abandoning all ambition or aspirations. Seeking a perfectly ascetic, monk-like existence in pursuit of mindfulness is, ironically, another form of ambitious perfectionism. True presence is not about rejecting ambition but about detaching one's self-worth from external measures of success.

Many inspiring narratives suggest that confidence alone could unlock greater achievements, reinforcing the idea that ambition is essential. But what if one never achieves those dreams? Or simply does not desire to be great in the conventional sense? *Perfect Days* serves as a quiet counterpoint, reminding us that a meaningful and fulfilling life is not dependent on accomplishments recognized by society.

Hirayama's quiet contentment offers an alternative vision—one not defined by triumph over hardship but by embracing life as it is, with grace and equanimity.

Our social media feeds constantly showcase exceptional lives, making ordinary existence feel insignificant. But true meaning often lies in the unglamorous, unseen moments. If we let external narratives define our worth, we risk missing the richness of everyday life. Every second matters. Next time is next time. Now is now.

## Chapter 5 Dao and the Contemplative Art Practice

I remember that my very first bed was a drawing board. My father, an artist, was also my mentor, shaping my curiosity and engagement with art from a young age. Our home was filled with art supplies—ink brushes (毛笔), ink (墨水), and Xuan paper (宣纸), also known as rice paper—objects that felt both ordinary and mysterious to me as a child. Even now, he continues his daily practice of calligraphy (书法) and landscape painting (山水) in his studio, a routine so familiar yet once so distant to me. At the time, I couldn't fully appreciate what he was doing—at least, not until much later.

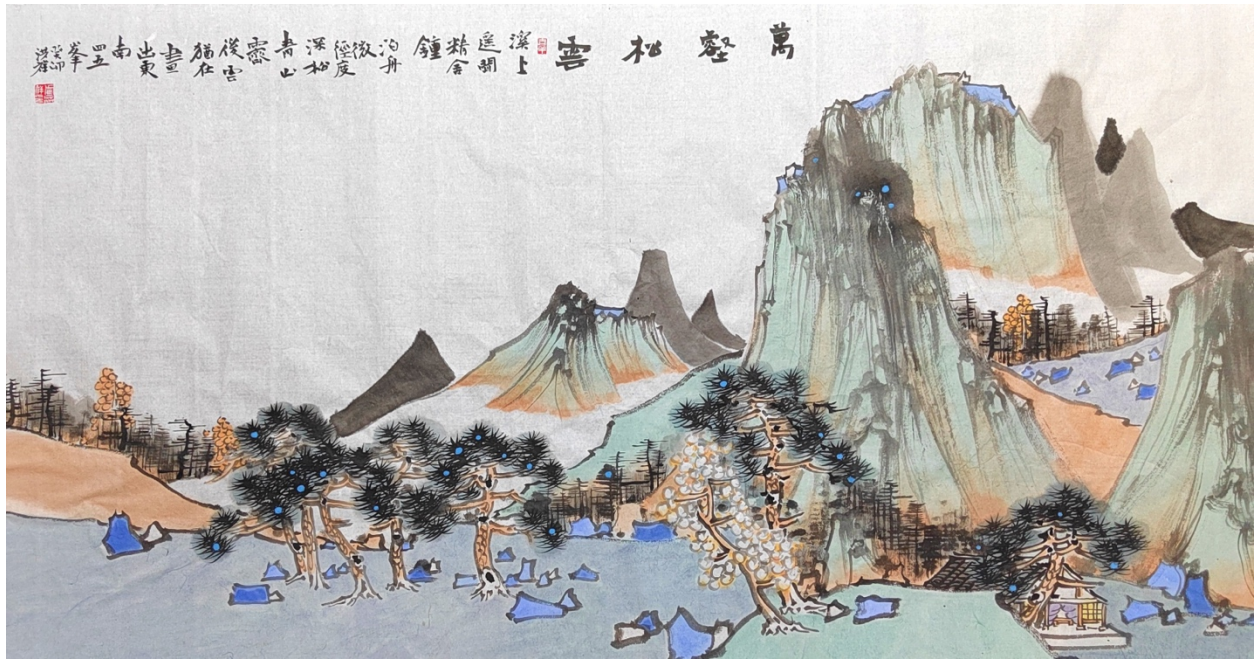


Fig. 10. Hong Xiang Lu, Clouds and Pines Over Myriad Valleys [万壑松云], 2025. Courtesy of the artist.

When my father practiced calligraphy, he always stood, holding his breath in deep concentration. I was fascinated by the way he wrote, but even more curious about the ancient Chinese texts he was copying. Most of his work, he told me, was—imitations of classical inscriptions and calligraphic masterpieces. However, having grown up only recognizing simplified Chinese characters, I often found myself lost in the ancient texts.

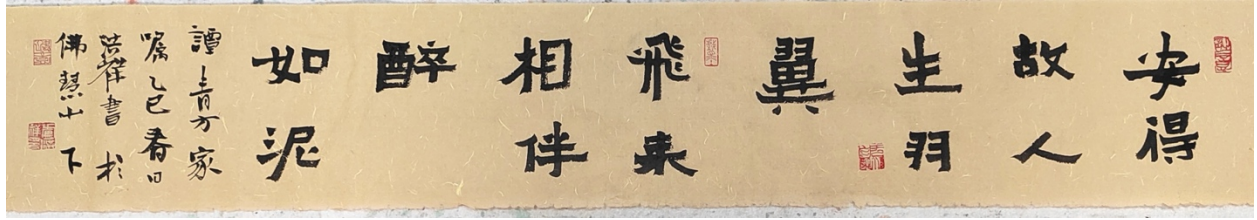


Fig. 11. Hong Xiang Lu, Gift to friends [贈友人], 2025. Courtesy of the artist.

Still, I understood that Chinese writing originated from pictographs. Throughout history, numerous attempts have been made to reform the script. The Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE) promoted small seal script (小篆) as the standard, preserving many pictographic elements. However, by the early Han dynasty (202 BCE – 220 CE), clerical script (隸書) had emerged, transforming characters into more abstract forms for easier writing. Following the Han period, regular script (楷書) evolved from the cursive influences on clerical script, becoming the primary form of written Chinese.

Over time, Chinese calligraphy played a crucial role in standardizing character forms across different regions. Today, simplified characters are used in mainland China, Singapore, and Malaysia, while traditional characters remain in use in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau. Despite these variations, the historical and artistic essence of Chinese calligraphy continues to bridge the past and present, a tradition my father embodies with every stroke of his brush.

To honor my family’s tradition and ancestral knowledge, I have now taken up the ink brush and rice paper myself. It is my turn to reconnect with where I come from, to explore what this practice means to me and within the broader context of art and culture.

## 5.1 Shan Shui 山水 - The Philosophy of Chinese Landscape Painting

In ancient China, landscape painting and the ideal of the hermit-scholar reflected a profound longing for escape and spiritual retreat, especially in times of political turmoil or personal setbacks. By the late Tang dynasty, landscape painting had become an independent artistic genre, symbolizing the desire of cultivated men to withdraw from societal chaos and find solace in nature's impermanence.

This artistic tradition was deeply intertwined with poetry and philosophy, embodying a belief that nature provided a sanctuary from human instability. "In the realm of aesthetics, the idea of Dao, or the Way, a transcendent natural principle working through all things, has inspired artists and poets who have sought to represent nature in its raw wholeness or have depicted vast landscapes within which human structures and pathways, overwhelmed by mists, mountain faces, and water vistas, hold a tiny and precarious place" (Roberts 1).



Fig. 12. Fang, Congyi. Cloudy Mountains. ca. 1360–70, [The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.]

Fang Congyi, a Daoist priest from Jiangxi, traveled extensively in the north before settling down at the seat of the Orthodox Unity Daoist church, the Shangqing Temple on Mount Longhu (Dragon Tiger Mountain), Jiangxi province. Imbued with Daoist mysticism, he painted landscapes that "turned the shapeless into shapes and returned things that have shapes to the shapeless."



According to Daoist geomantic beliefs, a powerful life energy pulsates through mountain ranges and watercourses in patterns known as longmo (dragon veins). In *Cloudy Mountains*, the painter's kinetic brushwork, wound up as if in a whirlwind, charges the mountains with an expressive liveliness that defies their physical structure. The great mountain range, weightless and dematerialized.

Imagine you hold this painting in your hands, leaving your world behind and entering the world of the picture. As you unroll the scroll, it unfolds almost like a movie.



Fig. 13. Detail 1 from Fang Congyi, *Cloudy Mountains*, ca. 1360–70. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The first thing you see is a foreground promontory on which the roof of a temple surrounded by trees can be seen. From that temple, we look into a vast, watery expanse that leads to distant mountains almost dissolving into the clouds. We then move down to the very tip of this foreground spit of land.



Fig. 14. Detail 2 from Fang Congyi, *Cloudy Mountains*, ca. 1360–70. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

We see individual grass blades. Looking beyond that foreground into the distance, we see mountains emerging from the mist. We encounter trees that are far smaller in scale. Even though we're moving just a matter of inches, we've covered an enormous distance. The mountain peaks suddenly leap into this middle ground space like some huge dinosaur rising almost to the top edge of the scroll. The trees at the base of the mountains become smaller and smaller.

The clouds rise further and further. The mountains seem to diminish in weight and substance until we see just a trail of faint blue ink that ultimately disappears so that the end of the scroll is completely blank. The water, the sky, the clouds merge into a single, empty void.

There is not a single human in the scroll. Only that temple and the familiar landscape of trees and rocks in the foreground anchor us in reality. We have gone from the solid world into this confrontation with the ultimate emptiness of life.



Fang Congyi presents a Daoist manifestation of qi, or “cosmic energy,” as a powerful yin-yang diagram(Augustin). The painting takes us to a world that reaches to eternity. So, we're confronted with our mortality. Life begins out of emptiness and ends in emptiness. And that brief period in between is what we have to live with.

## 5.2 Seal Script Dao De Jing 篆书道德经

In traditional Chinese culture, calligraphy is more than merely a means of transmitting textual information. It serves me as a unique methodological practice—one that involves bodily engagement, meditation, and contemplation. “Unlike written words formed from alphabets, Chinese characters convey more than phonetic sound or semantic meaning. Traditional writings about calligraphy suggest that written words play multiple roles: not only does a character denote specific meanings, but its very form should reveal itself to be a moral exemplar, as well as a manifestation of the energy of the human body and the vitality of nature itself” (Delbanco).

Within my practice, calligraphy has become a research methodology, not simply through writing characters, but through a contemplative and embodied state. This involves carefully preparing the paper, grinding the ink, and blending brush and ink with bodily gestures and mindful awareness. As described in Tang Dynasty texts: “Calligraphy by those good in brush strength has much bone; those lacking brush strength have much flesh. Calligraphy with ample strength and subtle flesh is sinewy and sage-like; that with much flesh and little bone is called ink-pig. The strong and sinewy writer embodies sage-like quality, while the weak and insubstantial writing indicates sickness. Every writer proceeds according to the rhythm of their own respiration and internal energy (Qi).” Thus, calligraphy not only reveals outward visual forms but also the artist's internal states and character.

Furthermore, the dynamism of Qi in calligraphy is vividly illustrated through metaphors from nature. Tang dynasty texts describe brushstrokes as a drop of dew glistening from a needle, a shower of rocks falling, geese gliding through the sky, or a dragon startled into motion. These natural metaphors emphasize how calligraphy embodies dynamic energy, turning both the act of writing and viewing into a timeless dialogue across different temporalities.



Fig. 15. Detail 5 of Desire Path. Film Installation by the author, 2025.

Therefore, my creative approach to calligraphy follows a Daoist philosophical stance, embracing spontaneous interactions between brush, ink, and body rather than pursuing rigid, goal-oriented methods. This approach becomes even clearer when I present my calligraphy as spatial installations, positioning works high within gallery spaces to encourage viewers to look upward, invoking the contemplative posture traditionally associated with temples or sacred sites.

Ultimately, calligraphy functions as a research methodology deeply embedded in the act of practice, energy flows, historical dialogues, and philosophical contemplation. “Despite its abstract appearance, calligraphy is not an abstract form. Chinese characters are dynamic, closely bound to the forces of nature and the kinesthetic energies of the human body” (The New York Times). calligraphy allowing me to seek new forms of balance and expression situated between tradition and contemporary technological developments, between written language and spatial experience.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion – A Riff, Not an Ending

In the world I’ve created—metallic horses with wings made of code, glowing wires pulsing like veins—freedom doesn’t end, but it also never truly begins. What you’re seeing isn’t a moment of escape, but a loop. A repeating circuit between ancient stories and modern machines. The Pegasus here doesn’t represent freedom. It is movement disguised as release—an illusion of flight that only deepens the trap.



Fig. 16. Desire Path. Screenshot 2 of Digital Video by the author, 2025.

In today’s digital world, what we often call “freedom” is just control speaking in a softer voice. The wires in these images aren’t paths to escape. They are proof of connection—of being watched, guided, and limited. The dream of leaving the body behind, of flying free, becomes another way to be tracked and managed.

This is a rift.

It's a tear, rippled in the paranoid surface of freedom.

A refusal to end, to make meaning simple.

This approach also shapes how I make films. My work with collage, rotoscoping, and archives is not just technical—it's a kind of thinking. I don't treat old footage as history to be preserved. I use it as a tool to build new stories, where meaning is always shifting depending on who sees it, how it's shown, and what surrounds it.

Desire in my films doesn't follow clear rules. It isn't something given from outside. It grows from within. My characters don't chase fixed goals or clear endings. They exist in a thoughtful space, where the focus is on accepting the self rather than meeting outside demands. They don't declare their gender or role. They are messy. Unreadable. They resist being labeled. In doing so, they push against systems that try to define, organize, and control people. They create space for a new way of being—a dangerous, necessary one.

Making films and building installations is also a physical act for me. It's not just about ideas—it's about touch, rhythm, and being present. In these moments, time feels less like a straight line and more like a living loop. My installations aren't meant to explain. They invite others to feel, explore, and find their own meanings. It's a shared experience where clarity is replaced by curiosity.

In the end, freedom, power, and desire in my work are always shifting. They don't settle.

They open questions instead of closing them.

And so this is not a final message.

It is a turning point.



A pause.

A glitch that opens space for something new.



Fig. 17. Detail 6 of Desire Path. Film Installation by the author, 2025.

### Short Drama #5

#### INT. COSMIC DATA CHAMBER – TIMELESS

A glowing, surreal space where **anatomical wires** pulse like living veins. Neon threads curve through a translucent, biomechanical void. In the center: a **pedestal** with a shimmering CLOUD SCREEN flickering—looping fragments of sky. Above it floats a **hollow body**, part-human, part-machine, with its head bowed.

From the pedestal, two **SILVER PEGASI** emerge. They're shimmering, corrupted, half-formed and violently beautiful.

**FIGURE W** (they/them), nude but unreadable in gender, sits within a harness of bio-tubes, arms slack. Their skin flickers between chrome and flesh.

One PEGASUS screeches. A metallic, broken sound. The pedestal vibrates.

FIGURE W

(softly, to no one)

You told me wings meant escape.

But I've only flown in circles.

A faint HUM. A voice, soft but surgical, echoes from everywhere.

SYSTEM VOICE (O.S.)

Flight authorization denied.

Your identity remains unverified.

Try again. Say who you are.

FIGURE W

I don't want a name.

I want out.

The PEGASI stamp their hooves mid-air. One dives through the screen, disappearing into clouds.

SYSTEM VOICE (O.S.)

Safety not guaranteed.

Re-entry not permitted without compliance.



FIGURE W reaches out. Their fingers dissolve into light before touching the remaining Pegasus.



Fig. 18. Detail 7 of Desire Path. Film Installation by the author, 2025.

FIGURE W

Then I'll unmake the sky.

They rise. The wires snap. Alarms glitch and stutter.

The remaining PEGASUS opens its wings.

FIGURE W (CONT'D)

This body is not mine.

And neither is yours.

Let's become something else.

They leap—into the unknown, into the glitch, the Pegasus carrying them into the disintegrating void.

**CUT TO:**

**THE SKY** — a reflection, no longer the pedestal screen, but real. Open.

**FADE TO WHITE.**

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