



ISSN: 2222-4955 (Print)
ISSN: 2222-4963 (Online)
CODEN: AMSDFK

Advanced Management Science (AMS)

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.7508/ams.02.2022.70.72>



ARTICLE

POETIC JUSTICE IN THE AGE OF TECHNOLOGY: A STUDY OF CHEN QIUFAN'S SCIENCE FICTION WRITING

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History:

Received 29 July 2022
Accepted 7 September 2022
Available online 19 September 2022

ABSTRACT

Nussbaum's theory of "poetic justice" is based on the idea of empathetic imagination and the emotion of compassion and love, and advocates the active involvement of literary imagination in reality, reflecting on the state of existence and the relationship between human beings and society. In today's era, technology is facing an unprecedented crisis while enhancing human well-being at an astonishing rate of development. Chen Qiufan's "science fiction realism" novels are rooted in real life, focusing on the mental state of the underclass, and constructing and reflecting on the "post-human" era, calling for "poetic justice" in the technological era with scientific imagination and emotional feelings. It calls for "poetic justice" in the technological age with scientific imagination and sensual emotion, advocates reasserting the banner of humanistic concern, guides the public to pay attention to the contradictions and dilemmas of the present era, and provides an effective value reference for the reconstruction of the future technological social order.

KEYWORDS

Poetic Justice; Chen Qiufan; Science Fiction Realism

1. INTRODUCTION

"Poetic justice" is a concept revived by jurist Martha Nussbaum on the basis of "poetic justice" proposed by British critic Thomas Reimer, initially as a supplement or subversion of utilitarianism in economics, with the solution of social governance problems as the starting point. Literature was only cursorily mentioned as a bridge or link. Later, it was developed into a literary critical approach and research perspective through continuous interpretation, advocating "reconstructing the ethical position of literary imagination, exploring the rational normative function of literary emotions, and calling for the return of compassion, benevolence, public rationality and justice. "The core of this approach lies in the participation of literature in public life, which enables the literary imagination to actively intervene in reality and reflect on the state of existence and the relationship between human beings and society^[1]. At the same time, "poetic justice" is also contemporary, i.e., the way of literary participation in public life and the need to reconstruct social order are adjusted accordingly in the face of different characteristics of the times. Science fiction, with imagination and science as the core of its creation, is one of the most suitable genres for literature to participate in public life and promote "poetic justice" in today's technological era. The imaginative space and unique perspective of science fiction provide many effective references for the resolution of conflicts and dilemmas in the present era, as well as the reconstruction of the future technological social order.

Since its inception in the late Qing Dynasty, Chinese science fiction has been charged with a historical mission beyond literature. In "The Future of New China", Liang Qichao called for science fiction to travel

upward along with science, to break the ideological shackles of China's old culture, and to bring a new vision to society. Liang and Lu opened up a two-way road for the development of science fiction, and injected a social responsibility that closely followed reality. Chinese science fiction has developed along this bipolar path, and although it has been steeped in Western romantic and liberal ideas, and has experienced hardships and controversies, it has never left the creative soil of the real world and social life. Successive generations of science fiction writers have, in different ways, used the pen of science fiction to concern themselves with real life and social life. Among the new generation of Chinese science fiction writers, Chen Qiufan is a representative of those who focus on writing reality in the form of science fiction. In 2013, he won the Global Chinese Science Fiction Nebula Award for his novel "The Deserted Tide", and the following year, his novel "Year of the Rat" was selected as one of the annual science fiction and fantasy anthologies in the U.S., which has a high international reputation in the field of science fiction literature. For his "new wave" style of writing and unique perspective on reality is known by readers as the young version of "Chinese William Gibson. In Chen's novels, most of the protagonists represent the underclass of society and are set in a future society with advanced technology, witnessing the dark picture of human distortion and loss of morality in the technological age. The author often wraps the core of science fiction with religious trappings, reflecting on the real human life in the dystopian science fiction events, reflecting on the evils brought by technology to human beings, advocating the care of the underclass, the importance of ecology and the restoration of humanity, and calling for "poetic justice" in the age of technology with literary imagination and sensual emotions.

2. LITERARY IMAGINATION ROOTED IN REAL SPACE

At the 2012 Nebula Science Fiction Summit, Chen, (2013) pointed out in his speech that “science fiction is the greatest realism at the moment”^[2]. Science fiction uses open realism to provide a window for the imagination to write about realities that are not written about in mainstream literature.” This statement was then refined by science fiction writer Han Song into the concept of “science fiction realism”, which was gradually accepted and confirmed by the science fiction community. As an advocate and practitioner of “science fiction realism,” Chen Qiufan has been committed to developing literary imagination in a space where reality and the virtual are intertwined. His novels are usually based on daily life and set in a specific historical context, facing the human society in the near future, thus depicting a science fictional picture rooted in reality and above reality at the same time.

The novel “The Flower of Shazui” is set in the near-future city of Shenzhen, which is similar to Hao Jingfang’s Beijing, which is folded into three layers of space. “What is separated by the barbed wire fence is not only the flow of people and traffic, but also laws, welfare, tax policies, infrastructure and identity.” The two separated spaces are a metaphor for the stratification of modern society. According to Darko, (2011), “metaphor in science fiction deals indirectly with a major issue of concern to the social addressee by setting up a set of seemingly unrelated concrete and possible scenarios”^[3]. The author writes in an exaggerated metaphorical manner about the future separation mechanism in Shenzhen and the resulting class conflicts, which ultimately point to the challenges that his empirical world is facing or will face.

The protagonist of the novel lives in Shazui Village, a real-life residential village located in “Guan’nei”, but in the story Shazui Village is more like a “coagulated dense forest” emitting an air of terror, a product of rapid urbanization, where Chen Qiufan develops Chen Luanfan’s own imagination of the near-future urban landscape: a room in the perpetual darkness, only a “handshake” distance between buildings, roads as narrow as capillaries, the direction of no rules, an air of corruption permeates it, penetrating into everyone’s pores. A large number of foreigners struggle to make a living here, trying to find a place in the high-tech, high-wage, high-class life of Shenzhen, but gradually in the city into a confused orgy of the senses, with the erotic nature of the technological products “body film” to rush, in the cramped red-light district to linger.

The science fiction space under Chen Qiufan’s writing is often like “Shazui Village”, which can find “prototypes” in the real world. For example, the electronic waste island Silicon Island in “Desolation Tide” is built on the basis of the author’s hometown Guiyu. In works such as “Open Light” and “The Fish of Lijiang”, the author directly sets the writing space in the “office room” of the future big city, depicting the story of the protagonist who goes astray after facing tremendous work pressure in a suffocating work environment. The future city constructed by the author’s literary imagination, and the future “deep drifters” or white-collar workers in the office rooms, who live in the extremely harsh space and lose themselves, are in fact a surreal reflection of the first-tier cities in China such as “North, Guangzhou and Shenzhen” and the drifting and confused foreign workers. It is a surreal reflection of the drifting and confused migrant workers in China’s first-tier cities, such as the North, Guangzhou and Shenzhen.

As a means to strengthen the subjectivity of writers, “poetic justice” emphasizes the writers’ sensitivity and insight into real life, and their literary creativity from an individual dimension to participate in and explore public life. Chen Qiufan witnessed the whole process of development and change in his hometown when he was young, and experienced the life of “drifters” as an adult, so his rich life experience and keen ability to care for reality enable Chen Qiufan to start from his own experience and create a strange creation in the science fiction text, focusing on the urban development problems and survival pressure under the process of urbanization. As a writer as a “voice”, although he writes about virtual space, he is always concerned about the real space.

3. FOCUS ON THE MENTAL STATE OF THE UNDERCLASS

The utilitarianism of economics criticized by “poetic justice” declares that “only facts are needed, not imagination; only reason is sought, not emotion”, and utilitarians such as Rawls try to connect the paradigm of economics with public life, pursuing only profit maximization and

ignoring human emotion. Human beings are no longer regarded as ends but tools, and individual differences are set aside in the race for fame and fortune; groups at the margins of society or at the bottom no longer have human rights or even the right to live, and humanistic concerns no longer exist. The “poetic justice” advocated by Nussbaum is based on the imagination of empathy and the emotion of compassion and love, which is a correction of the distorted social order under the utilitarianism of economics, and a call to regain the care for human groups, especially the underprivileged groups.

Unlike traditional realist literature, which requires the portrayal of typical characters, Chen’s “science fiction realist” novels usually do not focus on a specific character to create a “typical” character, but on the portrayal of the whole group, as Tang, (2018) said. “Science fiction is not about characters, but about human beings, not about personalities, but about commonalities.”^[4]. In the novel, Chen, (2020) focuses on a group of people with certain commonalities and representativeness, such as wage earners, prostitutes, and losers who do not adapt to the laws of society: they either have congenital physical defects, or psychological defects caused by the pressure of survival, or become “mutants” due to certain accidental events. In a society where technology is advancing at an alarming rate, they are being squeezed or ostracized, and they appear more confused and anxious. In addition to writing about their survival plight, the author focuses more on the mental state of this underclass group, and uses it to project the psychopathology of modern people, and delves into the pathology to further explore the evil of human nature^[5].

The protagonist of the novel “Animal Watcher” is named “Luther”, which is a resonance of the English word “Loser” (loser). “Luther, a real estate agent, represents a group of people living at the bottom of the city and workplace, where “money comes first”. The social law of “money first” and the pressure of survival make Luther anxious all day long. A bionic product test gives each tester an animal trait according to his or her demands: Luther, who has the ability to work alternately in the left and right hemispheres of a dolphin’s brain, improves his work efficiency and his monetary desires are realized; Chantelle, an obese bus conductor with low self-esteem, has a super-concentrated pheromone perfume extracted from a rare deer species, and her sexual attraction is enhanced as never before, making her vanity and desire for manipulation satisfied. The other testers also struggle with different mental symptoms and desires at the bottom of society, but as the testers’ dependence on bionic technology products deepens, their desires and greed expand, even to the point of consuming their lives to gain more benefits, their humanity is gradually consumed and alienated into beasts, eventually falling into a situation of killing each other. The author uses the title “Animal Watcher” to observe not animals, but humans who have lost their humanity and become animals. Although the whole story is shrouded in a treacherous atmosphere and the tone of the writing is cold, the author still has a compassionate heart beneath his rationality, caring about the mental alienation of the underclass under the oppressive society and revealing the psychological impact of the “original sin” mentality, which exists in human beings as a whole and as a collective unconscious, on human spirit and behavior. It also reveals, from a deeper psychological perspective, the influence of the “original sin” psychology, which exists in the collective unconscious of human beings as a whole, on human spirituality and behavior.

As the recipient of literary works, the reader is another identity pointing to the individual dimension in the theory of “poetic justice” in addition to the writer, who is the “voice”. “The ability to imagine what is feels like to wear shoes that do not belong to you is also the ability to imagine the emotions, aspirations, and desires that others may have in their situation”. In “Farewell to Utilitarianism” and “Cultivating Humanity,” Nussbaum emphasizes the importance of readers’ empathetic imagination in cultivating public empathy and morality^[6]. Chen, (2020)’s science fiction novels, although structured in a future society, most of the dystopian events caused by technology as the center of the narrative, but not a “pavilion in the air”, the reader in the process of reading the work can still be given the ability to imagine, into the writer’s science fiction world, experience the writer intended to portray the difficult life and mental state of the underclass characters, such as In The Animal Watcher, Luther, who is anxious and even alienated by the pressure of his job; in The Recursive Man, Old Chen, who is ostracized and misunderstood and moves to the margins of society, suffering from mental loneliness and eventually dying; and in The Year of the Rat, Pea, a college student who is not understood by everyone and considered a “freak”^[5]. Through feeling

the inner state of the characters in the novel, the ability of empathetic imagination is brought into play to experience the world of experience of the underclass in reality they represent, and the reader's empathy is called upon, thus playing the role of "poetic justice". "People have the ability to enter the world of the distant other through imagination", moreover, Chen, (2020)'s science fiction is based on reality, and it is not difficult for readers in the era of advanced technology and the loss of humanistic care to generate emotional resonance, and in the body of each fictional character can more or less see their own shadow, from this level in this respect, the world of the "other" is not so far away^[5].

4. CONCEPTION AND REFLECTION ON THE "POST-HUMAN" ERA

In recent years, with the introduction of Siri, AlphaGo and other artificial intelligence products, the dream of human beings to move towards the era of "strong artificial intelligence" is no longer unattainable. In recent years, with the introduction of Siri, AlphaGo and other artificial intelligence products, mankind's dream of moving toward the era of "strong artificial intelligence" is no longer unattainable; while genetic engineering, biochips and other technologies have given mankind the opportunity to realize the desire for human-machine intergration and genetic recombination. The term "posthuman" - which is still vague - is appearing more and more frequently in the discourse of science fiction authors and even sociologists.

The current understanding of "posthuman" is broadly interpreted as a "human worker" created and transformed by modern technology, while in a narrow sense it refers to a hybrid born from breaking the boundaries between human, machine and animal, or a "human worker" transformed by virtual reality, genetic engineering, etc. In a narrower sense, it refers to the "cyborgs" who transform themselves by various information technologies such as virtual reality and genetic engineering. The "post-human" era is a future in which the consciousness of human subjects and their lifestyles have changed under the influence of advanced science and technology. According to Darko Sullivan's theory of "cognitive strangeness", science fiction works combine strangeness and cognition, and explore the aesthetic effect of strangeness on top of the rational and logical cognitive field^[3]. It is on the basis of current technological development that science fiction writers have developed their aesthetic literary imagination and creativity to develop various ideas for the "post-human" era.

In the postscript of "The History of Future Illness", "Seven Billion Roads to Post humanity", Chen Qiufan discusses whether there is a clear boundary between human and machine, between human and post humanity, whether the "artificial intelligence" created by human beings will one day manipulate the direction of human evolution or even enslave human beings, and whether genetic engineering and other technologies will make human beings He expressed his worries as a science fiction writer and as a modern human being. He admits that his creation is a preview of the "post-human" era.

In his novel "Cloud Lover", the author creates a virtual dating game similar to the Turing Test, in which the heroine develops a one-way love with a chatting AI and believes that the AI seems to understand her feelings better than humans do. The author's conception of AI manipulating human society gradually deepens as the creation progresses. Until the appearance of the 2013 novel "The Deserted Tide", Chen (2020)'s character, Xiaomi1, who is a complete intermingling of human and machine, realizes the future imagination of the "post-human" era after human consciousness is completely replaced by machines^[5].

The novel "The Deserted Tide" is written on Silicon Island, an island of electronic waste caught in the wave of globalization. The labor force is squeezed to the maximum by local clans and the government, losing their right to speak and personal freedom, and even their dignity as "human beings" is lost. Xiao Mi is accidentally infected with an electronic virus and becomes a victim of the game between the clan forces and transnational capitalism. In the text, Xiaomi1 is the product of genetic engineering, artificial intelligence technology distortion and vicious competition between forces driven by interests in the near future era. Xiaomi 1, the author uses Xiaomi 1's mouth to make a critique of human civilization's blind pursuit of technological progress - "I am chance. I am inevitable. I am a new mistake...I am the call of a young and persistent human civilization for a leap of evolution. I am the non-random vortex of modern technology swirling in a flood of self-

organization."^[2]. Xiaomi1 tries to lead the "garbage men" to overthrow the clan and government forces, and the "garbage men" uprising at the end of the novel brings the story to a climax, in which the author also injects rational reflection. How many disasters have modern technology and industrial development brought to mankind? What is left of human subjectivity in the "post-human" era? Beyond the text and within the reality, these questions deserve everyone's reflection. The author exposes the multiple conflicts in a straightforward manner, not to create hostility, but to present criticism in a loving way as much as possible, and to lead people to pay attention to public issues such as the construction of social order and the protection of human subjectivity in the age of technology with a literary imagination that transcends the times." Imagination is also a kind of reflection, and knowing how to reflect is the progress of thought"^[7].

5. CONCLUSION

In this era where technological concepts such as blockchain, big data analytics, artificial intelligence, and genetic engineering are emerging, technology is changing human life and even rewriting human destiny at an astonishing rate of development. However, while technology is enhancing human welfare, it is also exposing it to an unprecedented crisis. In recent years, negative events such as the "gene-edited baby incident" and the "Siri wiretapping case" are slowly unveiling a darker corner of the technology era, confirming Amara's law: people always overestimate the short-term benefits of a technology, but underestimate its long-term impact. The law of Amara: people always overestimate the short-term benefits of a technology and underestimate its long-term effects. The evil of human nature has become more rampant through the hand of technology. The modern society, where meritocracy and speed of development are paramount, is playing out the evil scenes of the future often depicted in science fiction works, "The era we are living in is more science fiction than science fiction" Chen, (2020), and as Chen (2018) says: "Every era has its own worried wise-guys, to say something despised and crazy, to worry about something that never seems to happen"^[5,8]. Chen Qiufan's "science fiction realism" novels, whether oriented to the future or the real world, seek to give voice to "poetic justice" through literary imagination, and the emotions and reflections on human nature contained in his works may not be aimed at providing solutions to the problems caused by technological development. The emotions and reflections on human nature contained in their works may not be aimed at providing the ability to solve the problems caused by technological development, but rather at guiding the public to pay attention to the problems, to raise the banner of humanistic concern again, to face the unknown future, and to build a more "beautiful" and "good" human world.

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