

Vision and Ethics in East Asian Science Fiction: Kobo Abe and Liu Cixin

Sunyoong Lee & Juyeon Son

Abstract: This paper provides a comparative analysis of works by Kobo Abe (安部公房, 1924-1993) and Liu Cixin (劉慈欣, 1963-present). Both *The Three-Body Problem* and “Raccoon Dog of the Tower of Babel” revolve around the problem of sight. Human beings who lose their subjective sight and fall down to be seen only are depicted in two stories, on the levels of civilization level and the unconscious. As Sartre writes in *Being and Nothingness*, “It is shame or pride which makes me live, not knowing the situation of being looked at.” It is an abasement to an unethical dimension when human dignity and the perception of reality are abandoned, and these themes are explored in the two Asian works of science fiction analyzed in the present study.

Key words: Kobo Abe; Liu Cixin; sight; Asian science fiction; perception of reality

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标题：东亚科幻小说中的想象与伦理：安部公房与刘慈欣

内容摘要：论文对比分析了刘慈欣的《三体》和安部公房的《巴比塔的路》。这两部科幻小说围绕想象和视觉问题，从文明层面和无意识层面讲述了人类丢失主观想象后的场景。正如萨特在《存在与虚无》中所言，“让我活着而没有意识到处于被人审视的状态的是羞耻或自豪。”人类如果抛弃了尊严和对现实的感知，从伦理的维度而言这是一种降级或屈尊。

关键词：安部公房；刘慈欣；想象；亚洲科幻小说；感知现实

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Introduction

This paper provides a comparative analysis of works by Kobo Abe (安部公房 , 1924-1993) and Liu Cixin (劉慈欣 , 1963-present). From the late 1940s, Kobo Abe began writing works with characteristics of existentialism, and is one of the best-known post-war novelists for his science fiction and other unique literary works. Liu Cixin released his first science fiction novel in 1999. Since then, he has worked continuously and became famous as the first Asian to receive the Hugo award. Both writers differ greatly in terms of period and subject matter; however, they show numerous similarities in their focus on the notion of “vision,” which comprises aspects of existentialist ethics. The present paper employs comparative study to analyze in detail “Raccoon Dog in the Tower of Babel” by Kobo Abe and *The Three-Body Problem* by Liu Cixin.

Ethics of Visibility and Imagination in “Raccoon Dog in the Tower of Babel”

Kobo Abe, a pseudonym of Abe Kimifusa (1924-1993), was a Japanese novelist and playwright noted for his use of bizarre and allegorical situations. The short story “Raccoon Dog in the Tower of Babel” was written in 1951 and published as a part of Abe’s collection, *The Wall*.

The first chapter of “Raccoon Dog in the Tower of Babel” is titled “I Imagine and Make a Plan.” “To imagine” and “visibility,” leitmotifs of the story¹, are important concepts in Surrealism, which explores the concept of sight. These key concepts also relate closely with the notion of imagination, a controversial and problematic theme in Surrealism. “Dream is a sister of a poem. A dream becomes

1 There has been a few studies on “Raccoon Dog (Badger) in the Tower of Babel,” such as one with a comparative view to Breton’s Surrealist manifesto (Kosaku Ikuda , 1972), a reading about the tower of Babel as an imaginary illusion from which to escape (Toshimi Takano, 1971), a study focusing on the Tower of Babel as a positive dream-world of changing recognition (Hiroshi Watanabe, 1976), and a paper about games of words and transformation (Junghee Lee, 1997). There are opposing explanations of this story in relation to Surrealism. On one hand, like Hiroyuki Tanaka and Mijung Oh, this story can be a denial of Surrealism, and on the other hand, Surrealism is the philosophy of this bizarre story, as claimed by Koichi Ijima . Among preceding research, Chonjija Jo and Reiko Koto focuses sights. Koto points out that this story is about writing, stating that the dog and the hollow man who has only eyeballs are about the principles of imagination and the analysing mind.

a poem through the sculpturing process by a poet's hand.”¹ Using the potential of dreams and the unconscious imagination, Surrealism attempts to go beyond experiences by challenging individuals to enlarge their view of reality and reach transcendence. The problem of ‘sight’ is the focus of Abe's story, particularly from the aspects of the subject and object. The emphasis on ‘sight’ can be found in his fictions such as “The Wall: The Crime of Mr. Karma (壁—S・カルマ氏の犯罪)” and “Counting Raccoon Dogs Before They Are Caught (捕らぬ狸の皮算用, Counting Chickens before They Hatch)”.²

In chapter 1, “Counting Raccoon Dogs Before They Are Caught”, the protagonist, a poet named Anten, writes his imaginings in a notebook called “Skin of an Uncaught Raccoon Dog” (Abe 453). One day, as he sits on a park bench writing in his notebook, a raccoon dog approaches. It bites off Anten's shadow and runs away. Now a poet with no shadow, Anten comes to realize that his body has become transparent. Looking at his reflection in the display windows of a store, he sees that all the parts of his body except his eyes are transparent. His eyeballs, like a pair of “horse flies” (Abe 457), hang suspended in the air.

As he is now transparent Anten cannot be seen by anyone, and he begins to feel weak and valueless. In Chapter 4, Anten believes his odd situation could be a revolution of the material world. He then starts to think of himself as the inventor of a great theory of the universe. At the same time, however, he feels incompetent because he cannot “imagine” his “figure” (Abe 459).

At the moment that I stood on the top of the world like a conqueror and gazed over the great panorama, I felt my heart congeal and becoming earth.

I was disappointed as I could not imagine myself as a hero. Because I found myself an invisible man. (Abe 458)³

Anten is dismayed by his strange situation of having a transparent body, despite thinking he has become a great revolutionary inventor. If individuals are visible

1 Yuan Tian 田原 “People of Border Crossings: Dream and Sexuality” *Border Crossings: The Journal of Japanese-Language Literature Studies* 1 (2014) 19.

2 Sunyoon LEE 李先胤 (2016) *Reading Kobo Abe in the 21st century: The Violence of Water and the Flowing World* (Tokyo: Bensei Shuppan, 2016) 265.

3 Kobo Abe 安部公房 (1951), “Raccoon Dog in the Tower of Babel” *Abe Kobo Zenshu* 002 『安部公房全集 002』 (Tokyo: Shinchosha 東京: 新潮社, 1997) 458. All citations from this work in this study were translated by Sunyoon LEE.

to no one, they do not exist socially. People are recognized both by sight and by imagination.

Image is based on sight and sight is not merely natural, but is built by the words of a society. Surrealists have debated the primacy of words over images or images over words. Despite Breton's important vision of Surrealism as defined by visuality, he privileges writing over vision. On this point, Anten's notes about his imagination in the first scene of "Raccoon Dog in the Tower of Babel" is a metaphor for the two concepts of the word and the image.

Representation is two-dimensional, existing as both a subject of seeing and an object to be seen. Anten believes he has lost his status as a revolutionary because, "If a human body can be transformed, human relations can also be changed. Therefore, ownership and the concept of the individual are subject to lapses. What a wonderful world! It is a perfect freedom and an eternal redistribution" (Abe 460)

An invisible man cannot be the object of sight and cannot be recognized visually even by himself. The way to handle this bizarre, deviant monster is to eliminate him; thus, Anten's neighbors agree to police gunfire. Anten fears for his transparent body, saying, "Yes, I am a uncanny being. More horrible than the Hunchback of Notre Dame, a one-eyed monster, or the man-shaped furniture of Salvador Dali's works. People may faint when they see me, before I call them" (Abe 162).

Just as people's sense of sight is unable to take in every part of the world, so is their sense of hearing. In Abe's story, the melody of Maratof's "Phantom," emanating from a cheap crystal radio that eliminates the bass sounds, is reminiscent of weeping. When sounds come over the airwaves some of them are lost. All senses have their limits.

Eyeballs are like an umbilical cord that must be cut in the "tower" of Abe's story. Mr. Dante, the general secretary of the central committee at the tower, tells Anten in the initiation ceremony ("入塔式")¹ that eyeballs are very dangerous and threaten human existence. Mr. Dante recommends depositing eyes in a bank to attain more freedom in civil life. The character of Jehovah also says, "Eyeballs are detrimental. Human sight burns off our existence like sulfuric acid," adding, "I felt fear from human eyes" (Abe 484). As eyeballs are problematic in the tower, excessive sight and humans souls must be eliminated.

The tower represents a world of people who emphasize imagination, just

1 The word '入塔 = nyutou' (meaning "entering into a tower") is homonym of '入党 = nyutou' ("being a member of a political party"). As a political party (党 = tou) consists of people who share similar ideology, the Tower (塔 = tou) of Babel in this story is a place for ideologists.

like the Surrealists. Abe knows the importance of the imagination and his works famously feature his own unique imaginings, but he is critical of any imagination that lacks a perception of reality.

The relationship between a subject and an object is built on visual figures — the imago of psychoanalysis. Though in Lacan's theory a subject is formed by words, Lacan also emphasizes the role of sight when he discusses the imaginary and the world of illusion. Freud compares the mental apparatus that forms the process of unconscious to an optical instrument.

In the first chapter of the story, Anten sits on a bench in a peaceful park, like the watching man of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*.¹ He is a seeing subject in the center of a park, but at the moment a raccoon dog, the Other, breaks into his world of sight, Anten becomes an object to be seen and loses his shadow. From this sense of crisis, Anten's body chooses to be invisible, becoming just eyeballs. He travels to the tower of Babel guided by a raccoon dog created by his imagination, and his sight and existence are in danger at the tower. Anten nearly loses his sight but manages to escape from the tower of Babel. In the park, Anten opens his eyes and throws his notebook of imagination away. He is no longer a poet, but he has his eyes with which to see the world and the Other.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty says that closing one's eyes and adapting is the start of fear. Abe's representations of sight and imagination in "Raccoon Dog in the Tower of Babel" can be a warning to those not willing to see others or the ruling system of the real world.

Revelation of Ethics in the Vision of *The Three-Body Problem*²

The Three-Body Problem, the first work in a science fiction series by Liu Cixin, was originally published in *Science Fiction World* from May to December of 2006. In January 2008, the story was published as a book, followed by *The Three-Body Problem II: The Forest of Darkness* in May, 2008 and the final work in the trilogy, *The Three-Body Problem III: Death's End* in November, 2010. *The Three-Body Problem* gained worldwide fame when it received the 73rd Hugo Award in 2015. Liu's winning of the prestigious award was instantly labeled "Asia's first" and recognized as "a crucial step for Chinese sci-fi literature as it advances

1 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Part 3, Chapter 1, section 4

2 All English citations are from Liu Cixin 刘慈欣. *The Three-Body Problem* (Remembrance of Earth's Past), trans. Ken Liu (Tom and Dorothy Associates, 2014).

into the world”¹. Several reasons may account for the novel’s selection for the Hugo Award. It vividly describes aspects of China’s unique history such as the Cultural Revolution, while its exquisite scientific theory adds a sense of reality that has fascinated many readers. However, above all, *The Three-Body Problem* profoundness lies in its in-depth exploration of the question what it means to be a human being. The novel therefore allows readers to sense the author’s “deep despair for humans and the painful self-contemplation that has been derived upon it”(Xu Yong 47).²

The story of *The Three-Body Problem* is largely composed of two structures. One is a world of reality while the other is a virtual game space that can only be experienced by using “V equipment.” In the real world, the protagonist, Wang Miao, is a researcher who develops a new nanomaterial. A photography buff, one day he discovers numbers printed on his photographs in diminishing order. When the countdown expands from the photographs to numbers he can see in front of his eyes, Wang is beset by fear. He is anxious that what he can see is invisible to others. He is overcome with a fear of the unknown. The countdown numbers appearing in the vision and the numbers in front of his eyes have been placed there by an unknown opponent who not only knows him but who also has full control over Wang’s body.

In his struggles to resolve the mysterious events that have befallen him, Wang visits Shen Yufei (申玉菲), the most renowned figure of the Boundaries of Science academic association. When Wang accepts Shen’s suggestion to stop the nano experiment, the countdown immediately ceases. Wang thinks about the game Shen was playing during his visit and, spurred on by curiosity, begins to play it himself. Every time he logs into the game, its world weaves in and out of ancient civilizations from the east and west. Times and spaces that cannot coexist in the game world are presented to the game player, and the only unchanging elements are the pyramids and the vision of the ruler. In the game space the visions of other players, especially of the one featured as the ruler, contrast with Wang’s vision who has been evicted from the real world. The game opens with King Wen of Zhou looking at the pyramid ceiling, “his gaze seeming to penetrate the thick stones of

1 “Liu Cixin Santi huo Yuguojiang wei Yazhou shouci huojiang” 刘慈欣《三体》获雨果奖, 为亚洲首次获奖 [Liu Cixin’s *The Three-body* wins the first Hugo Award for the Asians], Fenghuang keji 凤凰科技 [Phoenix Technology], August 23rd, 2015. http://tech.ifeng.com/a/20150823/41461868_0.shtml

2 Xu Yong, “*Santi* : Women shidaide yinyu he jingshenshishi” [Three-Body: Metaphor and Spiritual Epic of Our Time], Yishu Pinglun [Art Criticism] (2015) 47.

the pyramid” (Liu Cixin 44).¹ When Wang logs in again after changing his ID to Copernicus, the pyramid is still there. When Wang joins the battle, Pope Gregory, Aristotle and Galileo are waiting for him. “Their eyes were hidden in the shadows of their deep eye sockets, but Wang could still feel their gazes focusing on him” (131).² When Wang enters a pyramid from another game space and encounters Emperor Qinshihuang, he realizes the Emperor’s eyes are that of “King Zhou of Shang and Pope Gregory” (154).³

The space of the pyramid and the vision of other game characters appear consistently in the game space and these are comparable to Wang’s visions, as noted previously. In other words, the control of Wang’s vision belongs fully to an unknown entity. Wang is clueless as to who has inserted the countdown numbers in his vision and where they are from. The fear created by the unknown being forces Wang to succumb to the order of the mysterious Other to stop the nano experiment. Similarly, Wang is exposed to the vision of others in the game. The eyes of the game characters are fixed on him.

This theme of vision in *The Three-Body Problem* gains another meaning when filtered through the theories of Sartre. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre analyzes the relationship between self and others through the notion of vision. Sartre defines that the Other is “One who looks at me” (autrui est celui qui me regarde) (257).⁴ The existence of this other dismantles the world that exists by centering on the self.⁵ In Sartre’s context, vision cannot simply be limited to the act of seeing through the eyes. Rather, looking is synonymous with the subject of the vision, which is the stream of consciousness of human beings. Therefore, vision is the “power” (puissance) that can objectify everything. Not only does the Other look at one, but

1 目光仿佛穿透了厚厚的金字塔看到了星空。Liu Cixin 刘慈欣 . Santi 三体 [The Three-body Problem] (Chongqing: Chongqing Chubanshe, 2008) 44.

2 他们的双眼都隐藏在深眼窝的阴影看不到，但汪淼能感觉到聚集到他身上的目光。Ibid, 131.

3 他转身看着三位学者，汪淼立刻发现，那是纣王和格里高利教皇的眼睛。Ibid, 154.

4 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1958) 257.

5 It can be easily understood from Sartre’s famous metaphor of the park. In the park where ‘I’ exists, every other objects come to exist as ‘Being-in-itself’ through my consciousness. In this place ‘I’ become the center of reference to assess this space that is park and articles in it. When the Other appears, this Other becomes another center of reference like ‘I’ and interprets the same space, the park. The appearance of the Other creates a hole in the world centered on me to ‘steal’ (voler) my world.

it also looks at one's vision of looking at the Other. Within this relationship, ego is degraded by the Other's vision of an object.

Wang's fear of reality and of the game, or the uncomfortable feeling caused by the vision of others can be easily understood from the context laid out by Sartre. Particularly in the game of The Tree-Body Problem, Wang exists completely as a single object. While he tries to interpret the game world from the inside as a subject, he repeatedly fails the "battle of vision" (*lutte du regard*) while exposed to the vision of other players in the game. The one who attempts a 'transfiguration' from "Being-seen-by-the-Other (*l'être-regardé*)" to "Being-seeing-the-Other (*l'être-regardant*)" is Ye Wenjie (叶文洁). At the Red Coast base she uses the launch system equipment to send information to an extraterrestrial civilization¹. Ye's action is to look at the alien civilization of Trisolaris (Three Body) from an unexpected direction. Therefore, Trisolaris exists as an object within her vision.

The world around Wang is completely divided into two. First, the story unfolds in the two worlds of reality and game. Yet halfway through the novel, readers are bound to realize that the game space is no longer a virtual location. The game of Trisolaris "borrows the background of human society to simulate the development of Trisolaris"². From this point, the story's duality changes from reality versus game (virtual reality) to human civilization versus alien civilization, situations rife with conflict.

This battle of vision is more than a contest rivaling which of the two civilizations is superior. Rather, the battle provides an opportunity for both civilizations to reflect on themselves. The historical event of the Cultural Revolution has irreversibly damaged Ye. Her father died tragically in front of her eyes. Long after the incident, she returns to the Red Guards who killed her father. Yet, they too were victims. Some drowned in the river and others suffered severed arms from being run over by a tank. The miserable youths of the Red Guards were becoming a forgotten past in the name of history. While the Red Guards were the core of the Cultural Revolution, they were as much victims as those who were persecuted during the period. Ye concludes that the only hope of saving civilization on Earth lies in "bringing a superior civilization from elsewhere in the universe into the human world" (228).³ On the other hand, this conclusion also reflects the

1 The message says civilization on Earth is trying to overcome difficulties and make a beautiful future and that it would like to communicate with other civil societies in the universe.

2 作为一个游戏,《三体》只是借用人类的背景来模拟三体世界的发展。Liu Cixin 刘慈欣, 171.

3 将宇宙间更高等的文明引入人类世界. Ibid, 228.

thinking of the era that the depth of history and the development of civilization do not guarantee social ethics. Every victim from the historical event of the Cultural Revolution suffered again in the name of the new era. For a human to be human, a social safety net is necessary so that one can console others, treat their wounds, and bear the pain together. Yet civilization, or the history that should play such a role, were on the contrary erasing stories in the name of civilization and history.

Ye believes that Trisolarian civilization is the key to solve the immorality embedded in Earth's civilization¹. If so, how is Trisolaris superior to civilization on Earth? It was Listening Post 1379, a low-status member within the Three Body civilization, who receives Ye's signal. While Trisolaris enjoys advanced technology, the lives of its denizens appear hardly better off than that of an Earthling. Although the necessities of life are ensured, Listening Post 1379 has to spend his time alone in a cramped space. Coitus with the opposite sex is unthinkable for someone of such a low social status and poor working environment. When he receives Ye's message, based on its contents Listening Post 1379 starts to believe that life on Earth is a paradise. When Trisolarian society becomes aware of the signal from Earth, it is determined that life on the newly discovered planet will be destroyed. Therefore to protect this "heaven," Listening Post 1379 replies to the message by saying "Do not answer." When his act is uncovered and he is accused by the Trisolarian leader, Listening Post 1379 responds as follows:

But, Princeps, please examine our lives: Everything is devoted to survival. To permit the survival of the civilization as a whole, there is almost no respect for the individual. Someone who can no longer work is put to death. Trisolarian society exists under a state of extreme authoritarianism. The law has only two outcomes: The guilty are put to death, and the not guilty are released. For me, the most intolerable aspects are the spiritual monotony and desiccation. Anything that can lead to spiritual weakness is declared evil. We must have no literature, no art, no pursuit of beauty and enjoyment. We cannot even speak of live...

1 Ye states, "If they can cross the distance between the stars to come to our world, their science must have developed to a very advanced stage. A society with such advanced science must also have more advanced moral standards." (如果他们能够跨越星际来到我们的世界, 说明他们的科学已经发展到相当的高度, 一个科学如比昌明的社会, 必然拥有更高的文明和道德水准。) In *The Three Body Problem*, the one who thinks like Ye is Chris Evans. He loathes how humans destroy nature in order to develop their own civilization. Ibid, 260-261.

Princeps, is there meaning to such a life? (268)¹

Sartre states that one reflects upon oneself before the vision of the Other. In other words, people reflect on themselves when they feel inferior or are shamed, and such consciousness can only occur from the relationship with the others². In *The Three-Body Problem* the two civilizations of Earth and Trisolaris continue their relationship of vision battle. Yet at the same time the conflicting relationship provides them with an opportunity to look back upon their own civilizations. This opportunity raises a question: If the development of a civilization strips away humanity and destroys nature, is it a true development? Readers are asked to reconsider the essence of history and civilization, and a message is conveyed that the advancement of the human race in the passage of time does not necessarily secure humanity and ethics.

Until the end, the Trisolarians remove the vision of humans. That stolen vision is inscribed with the words “You are bugs.” Yet as Wang gazes at the Huabei Plain covered with locusts, he is struck by a thought. Bugs have never gone extinct, and not once have they been conquered. From the horde of locusts and the thunderstorm Wang gazes over the Huabei Plain, and from the dusk of humanity Ye has seen, readers gain a sense of the dignity of life on Earth. The author once again emphasizes to reflect on human civilization is not merely to despair at humanity but is an act to recover the dignity of life and ethics of civilization.

Conclusion

To see and to be seen are complex problems in philosophy, not only in the area of epistemology, but also within the discipline of perceptual phenomenology. A cognition of things or of others is a basic capability of the human senses. It is made by sensory input such as a sight. This paper discusses how sights are depicted in

1 但，元首，请看看我们的生活：一切都是为了文明的生存。为了整个文明的生存，对个体的尊重几乎不存在，个人不能工作就得死；三体社会处于极端的专制之中，法律只有两档：有罪和无罪，有罪处死，无罪释放。我最无法忍受是精神生活的单一和枯竭，一切可能导致脆弱的精神都是邪恶的。我们没有文学没有艺术，没有对美的追求和享受，甚至连爱情也不能倾诉……元首，这样的生活有意义吗？ Ibid, 268.

2 In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre writes, “It is shame or pride which reveals to me the Other’s look and myself at the end of that look. It is the shame or pride which makes me *live*, not *know* the situation of being looked at.” Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1958) 261.

modern East Asian science fiction and the ethical problems in those literary works.

As a science fiction novel, *The Three-Body Problem* exposes various spectacular scientific imaginings moving back and forth between the reality of Earth and an imaginary universe. The novel also explores the question of what it means to be a human being, emphasizing the notion of vision.

“Imagine” and “visibility” are important words in “Raccoon Dog in the Tower of Babel,” a work of science fiction by Japanese writer Kobo Abe. The concept of sight is also explored in this story. The notion of “sight” related closely to that of “imagination” and both of these concepts are controversial and problematic themes in Surrealism. The problem of “sight” is the focus of Abe’s story, especially from the aspects of subject and object.

Both *The Three-Body Problem* and “Raccoon Dog of the Tower of Babel” revolve around the problem of sight. The two civilizations of Earth and Trisolaris continue their relationship of vision battle in *The Three-Body Problem*. Power holders and raccoon dogs at the Tower of Babel also attempt to remove the sight of men. Human beings who lose their subjective sight and fall down to be seen only are depicted in two stories, on the levels of civilization level and the unconscious. As Sartre writes in *Being and Nothingness*, “It is shame or pride which makes me live, not knowing the situation of being looked at”(261).¹ It is an abasement to an unethical dimension when human dignity and the perception of reality are abandoned, and these themes are explored in the two Asian works of science fiction analyzed in the present study.

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1 Ibid, 261.

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