

## Morphological Fantasies: Posthuman Embodiment in Tian Xiaolei's Video Art

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### Abstract

*This article explores the issue of posthuman embodiment envisioned in contemporary Chinese artist Tian Xiaolei's (田晓磊) two representative videos: The Creation (Chuangzao “创造,” 2015) and Greatness (Weida “伟大,” 2017). Perceived and envisaged from an erotic perspective, The Creation reveals humans' unrestrainable lust and desires for fusing with technology, while Greatness, by taking a different trajectory of remaking a Buddhist mandala, provides us with a set of religious symbolism and reconstructs the spiritual order of a posthuman future, thereby invoking an intriguing affinity between posthumanism and Buddhism with respect to a renewed conceptualization of the human. It argues that both works invite us to experience and ponder on, aesthetically and conceptually, the kaleidoscopic morphology of human corporeality in the posthuman condition.*

**Keywords:** Posthuman Embodiment; Morphology; Posthumanism; Buddhism; Technogenesis

### Introduction

The question of the body or, more to the point, human embodiment has been a critical issue in posthuman discourse (Halberstan & Livingston, 1995; Hayles, 1999; Ferrando, 2014). Posthumanism's redefinition of what means to be human in the technologically saturated present prompts us to think through the possibilities and destinies of human bodies on both material and ontological levels. Even without falling into the epistemological trap of the Cartesian body/mind dualism, the foreseeable indeterminacy of the human body haunts us as humanity enters an epochal fusion of technology and biology that constantly breaches the boundaries of human bodies and the technological realm. Focusing on the issue of human embodiment, this essay aims to explore the uncertainty and ambiguity of bodily figurations of the human in the posthuman condition, whether expected or undesirable, fearful or celebratory. Such ambivalence towards posthuman embodiment has been expressed by N. Katherine Hayles (1999) in her discussion on how we have become posthuman. On the one hand, Hayles critiques Hans Moravec's human consciousness-downloading scenario that dispenses with embodiment altogether. But on the other hand, not unlike how Donna Haraway conceives of the figure of the cyborg (1991), Hayles considers the posthuman as a subversive force that, through its virtual, informatic, and technologized bodies, dismantles the autonomous, gendered liberal subjectivity inherited from the age of Enlightenment.

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Apparently, even without fully embracing human disembodiment, Hayles holds on to the potentiality of the bodily vagueness of posthuman. Indeed, as Francesca Ferrando (2014) inquires, “from a futuristic perspective: will posthumans need any embodiment at all?” (213) It is fair to say that posthuman embodiment remains disputable rather than being philosophically solved. In a more fundamental sense, the present dubitability of human embodiment attests to the need for posthumanist theories that radically challenge any settled conceptualizations of the human and the body, especially those which have been deeply rooted in the context of Western humanism.

With profound concerns about the bodily predicaments posed by posthumanism and even the concomitant transhumanist trends, this article examines the extensions of or beyond the body in the work of the Beijing-based contemporary Chinese artist Tian Xiaolei (田晓磊). Graduated from Central Academy of Fine Arts in 2007, Tian has emerged as one of the most experimental Chinese new media artists in contemporary China.<sup>2</sup> With expertise in digital media, his artistic practices have experimented with various forms of media, including installation, game, virtual reality (VR), video, 3D digital printing, sculpture, and so on.<sup>3</sup> What lies at the core of his multi-media creation is his complicated fascinations with the relationship between life and technology and, in particular, the possibility of *new species* generated by the blending of technology with human bodies. Mingling elements of history, religion, science, technology, and the human body, Tian's work speculates on a future world filled with cyborgian specimens, creating a kind of hyperreality comprised of half-myth and half-prophecy. Centering on two of his representative videos: *Greatness* (Weida “伟大,” 2017) and *The Creation* (Chuangzao “创造,” 2015), this article investigates humanity's erotic desire for hybridizing with technology on one hand, and the virtual deification of human-tech cyborgs, through which a posthuman spiritual order is imagined, on the other. It argues that Tian's multi-media creations invite us to imagine and experience, aesthetically and conceptually, the kaleidoscopic morphology of human corporeality in the posthuman condition.

Prior to delving into Tian's artwork, it is worth noting that Tian's creative engagement with the posthuman discourse is not uncommon in contemporary Chinese art world. Artists from the mainland such as Lu Yang (Shanghai), Yiyun Chen (Shanghai), Chen Guo (Shanghai), as well as Taiwan-based artists Pei-ying Lin, Paul Gong, and Kuang-yi Ku are equally prominent figures who have been working extensively at the intersection of art, life sciences, biology, religion, and so on. The intermingling of human body and the technology, the issue of posthuman subjectivity, as well as the relation between Buddhism and technology also lie at the heart of some of their works, especially Lu Yang's artistic videos (Gao, 2021). Focusing on Tian's videos, this essay aims to present an exemplary case of a larger artist and cultural landscape that is yet to be explored in a hyper-technological contemporary Chinese society.

On the other hand, it is also necessary to situate Tian's artwork in the socio-economic, political, and cultural context with which they are embedded. While the posthuman discourse primarily originates from a Western intellectual context, the problematics of the body in the technologically transformed Chinese society have their cultural particularities and historicity. In the post-socialist Chinese context, as Xiao Liu (2019) has argued, China has had active

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<sup>2</sup> Tian's imaginative work has won him the “Wang Shikuo Award” (an award named after a well-accomplished revolutionary artist Wang Shikuo (王世阔) in twentieth-century China), one of the most important awards in contemporary Chinese art world.

<sup>3</sup> Most of Tian's artwork and professional activities can be found on his website: <http://www.tianxiaolei.cn/>.



“participation in the global production and circulation of information technologies and discourses” (35), especially its fantasies of a cybernetic body connecting between human body and the information environment. Liu examines *Qigong*, for instance, in the way that it was imagined as a channel through which extrasensory powers can be obtained and studied scientifically as “somatic science” (39-82) in the 1980s. Drawing on a wide range of artistic examples, Ari Larissa Heinrich (2018) provides an inspiring analysis on the artistic representation of medically modified bodies and their biopolitical implications in a postcolonial Chinese context. It is not hard to see that the question of human body and their entanglements with medicine, information technology, and cultural imageries has constituted the nexus of cultural production pertinent to the potential fusion of biology and technology in contemporary China. Contextualizing Tian’s work within its societal and cultural circumstances therefore provides a more informed perspective that will shed more light on the specificities of Tian’s artistic experiments. This essay will show that Tian’s multi-media engagements with the human body is not only deeply rooted in the cultural conditions of Chinese society but also characterizes global life in the age of technological acceleration.

### ***The Creation: Morphological lust and hybrid bodies***

Splicing human with machinic gadgets in his fantastical envisioning of hybrid bodies, Tian visualizes the combination of human and technology from an erotic perspective. In Tian’s conception, humanity’s craving for technology is insatiable and unstoppable, which is emblemized by a kind of sexual interplay between the organic and the mechanical. In his single-screen video *The Creation* (2015)<sup>4</sup>, he creates technologically modified posthuman figures who are as capable as gods and represent a new species of human-machine integration at the same time. Unfolding in a music video (MV) format, *The Creation* provides an audiovisual spectacle teeming with metallic arms, skeleton-like upper bodies, extended metal bar-like nipples, testis dangling like metallic balls, spliced body parts, brains connected to aluminum-alloy tubes, bellies full of gadgets, and so on. The organic entirety of the human body has been turned into an organic-machinic hybridity. As its title ambitiously suggests, these figurations of the posthuman are created as unprecedented embodiments of a new hybrid species (Tian, 2020). In one scene that mimics the process of sexual intercourse, *The Creation* features a nude man having sex with a pink table and slapping at the objects that are constantly flying toward him. Not unlike in a video game, all the objects are comprised of organic and technical devices. Situated within a uterus-shaped club, the man has to hit the objects ceaselessly as they bounce up from the table. While the man gets obsessed in exterminating these unruly objects, his reaction becomes more and more manic as the game moves on at a progressively faster pace and the objects become increasingly aggressive. Such a visual travesty of a copulation between the human body and technological devices casts an amorous light on the intimate interactions between human and technology. In so doing, *The Creation* suggests that bodily interplay has become the de facto nexus of human-tech interpenetration. In *The Creation*, humanity’s obsession with technology is expressed through a somewhat animalist behavior that is as sensational as it is seductive. As Tian puts it, “this symbolizes the motivation to continuously create new technology, or to give birth to new things. [...] It’s a metaphor for how we can’t reverse or hold back this hybrid combination of technology and humans. It’s an unstoppable force” (Tian interviewed in Jubb, 2016). Here, integrating with technology is perceived by Tian as an everlasting human instinct that is a mixture of

<sup>4</sup> Available at: <https://v.qq.com/x/page/r0858finkkj.html>.

uncontrollable lust and yearning. In such bodily intimacy and reciprocal saturation of the organic and the technological, a new kind of posthuman being is given birth in both literal and metaphorical senses.

In her discussion of the relation between bodies and machines, Rosi Braidotti (2002) points out that “the simulation of the human is especially strong in the extent to which the technological other imitates sexual organs, activities and energies. Machines fulfill a fundamental libidinal structure, which mines the workings of sexual energy” (217). This resonates nicely with Tian’s visualization of technology as sexual others that arouse libidinal energies and sensations. Of course, the feminized feature of the pink table reveals a critical commonality between Tian’s rendering of technological others and the female robots or humanoids prevalent in science fictional imageries.<sup>5</sup> This highly sexualized and gendered operation displays that the female other is, as Braidotti points out, “firmly under male control and fully subjected to male desires” (219). While subscribing to her critique, I want to emphasize the point that male libidinal desires depicted in *The Creation* are in fact very unmanageable, by which I mean that the male figure is by no means in full control of his lust for the technological other. Quite the contrary, the unruliness of technology as well as the uncontrollability of the human figure run through this electrifying visualization. That is to say, the gender problematics in *The Creation* cannot overrun its underlying intention to unravel a collective condition in which technology’s fleshly and sensual allure for humans is irresistible.

Seen from such an erotic point of view, Tian’s posthuman hybrid bodies are realizations of the collapsed boundaries between the organic and the technological. Here, the technological is by no means limited to the sense of technological companions or sexual others such as sex toys, robotic maids, humanoid robots, or virtual partners promoted by sectors of the artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality (VR) industries but needs to be broadly defined as technological entities writ large. Tian’s sensual aestheticization of human-technology intercourse not only refers to the sexual relations that humans will probably develop with machinic devices, but also connotes humans’ intrinsic disposition of intermixing with technological entities on a corporeal level. Per Tian, humans and technology have first and foremost been evolving in a process of mutual domestication. In his reflection on the relations between humans and technology, Tian talks about his own pathological addiction to phones and computers. “It seems that I am using this technology, or I am inventing this technology, but it turns out that this technology is using me, turning me into its slave or controlling me. This is a process of mutual control,” and such control is addictive, rendering people subordinate to it: “it spreads like toxicity and the process of domestication will gradually lead to bodily transformations” (Tian, 2020). As humans domesticate technologies as part of ourselves, so does technology domesticate us in turn. This mutual domestication is psychologically obsessive and enticing, as well as biologically seductive and inexorable. Through envisioning possible hybrid bodies in an entertaining and lewd visual language, Tian affectively reifies human fantasies of and insatiable desires for technological entities, which are not merely extensions of but are becoming constitutive parts of the human body.

According to Tian, the mutual domestication of humans and technology is just the first, elemental layer of their co-evolution. As they proceed in their profoundly intertwined evolutionary lines, technology will become prostheses of human bodies, and ultimately the

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<sup>5</sup> To just name a few recent examples: the female voice character Samantha in *Her* (Dir. Spike Jonze, 2013), the female robot Ava in *Ex Machina* (Dir. Alex Garland, 2015), and the female virally infected “posthuman” Mimi 1 in Chen Qiufan’s *Waste Tide* (2013).



two will fuse with each other (Tian, 2020).<sup>6</sup> As such, prostheses will inevitably lead to human augmentation. But this still is not the end of the journey. In Tian's perception, prosthesis will evolve into the complete fusion of technology and the human body, which can even be transformed before birth, as manifested in the fast-pacing applications of biotechnology in human conception and reproduction. Human enhancement will in the long run become an active, self-motivated upgrade of humans to the extent that there will be no distinction between human bodies and their technological counterparts (Tian, 2020). Apart from the intercourse scene, *The Creation* as a whole presents a virtual wonderland in which posthuman cyborgs dance, flirt, and make love with each other, suggesting that humans and technology have somatically welded together and, more importantly, their co-evolution has entered a reproductive stage that has ushered us into a posthuman status of being. As Braidotti (2002) puts it, in the cyber universe "the link between the flesh and the machine is symbiotic and therefore can best be described as a bond of mutual dependence" (223). That is to say, the organic and the machinic are no longer distinguishable in the posthuman future.

Hence, it is not hard to see that *The Creation* shows that the human-technology relation is as ontological as it is biological. Based on his research on prehistoric technology in relation to the developments of human cognitive and linguistic faculties, André Leroi-Gourhan (1993) has made it clear that we must recognize that "human technicity [is] a simple zoological fact" (106).

For Leroi-Gourhan, techniques are both biological and artifactual. Techniques constitute both gestures and materials, even if the materials are the body and intelligence of the user. In this sense, the human has already been technical in body and mind. The mutual imbrication of the technological and the biological, in my point of view, constitutes a posthuman ontology. In his articulation of the relation between machine and organism, Yuk Hui (2019) remarks, "humanity is not a consistent and everlasting substance, but rather accidental. [...] The concept of the human is a contingent historical concept. We are already posthuman when we subscribe to the view that the human is a technical existence" (212). Considering technology not only as biological but also existential, Yuk Hui foregrounds the fact there is no opposition between technology and humanity, but rather their co-evolution and interpenetration compose the very existence of the human. Posthuman in this sense does not necessarily refer to a temporal "after" of a certain human condition but denotes a more fundamental recognition of the embeddedness of the human being and the technological world (Wolfe, 2010, xv-xvi).

Transhumanist Anders Sandberg (2013) argues for the rights of morphological freedom and considers such freedom as an extension of one's right to one's body, which should include the right to modify one's body according to one's desires (56). More fundamentally, he holds that "morphological freedom is not going to eliminate humanity, but to express what is truly human even further" (63). Somewhat different from Sandberg's positivist and optimistic attitude toward the morphological changes allowed by biotechnologies, the morphological fantasies envisioned in *The Creation* postulate that technology has dissolved human essentialism with regard to both its centrality and status as the evolutionary endpoint on this planet. Morphologically speaking, as *The Creation* attempts to demonstrate, the human has

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<sup>6</sup> Tian even takes hearing aid as an example to illustrate his point, saying that "as a prosthesis, a hearing aid not only helps people with hearing loss to hear what they cannot hear, but also let them hear what people with normal hearing ability cannot hear" (Tian, 2020).

already been a rather elusive category. In this sense, *The Creation* is not merely a quasi-transhumanist celebration of human-tech hybridity but an aesthetic rendition of the corporeal interpenetration of humans and the technical realm that unravels both the subtlety and strenuousness of the ever-evolving human morphology.

### ***Greatness: A posthuman Mandala***

If the human lust for technology, the conscious and unconscious internalization of technology into human bodies, as well as the mutations resulting from the mutual domestication of humans and technology have altogether constituted recurring themes in Tian's works over the past years, the virtual deification of posthuman cyborgs has undoubtedly been another. As I have shown, in *The Creation*, Tian provides a broad spectrum of hybrid bodies that showcase the morphological variety of a new cyborgian species. In this section, I delve into the posthuman reconfiguration of a Buddhist mandala created in Tian's video *Greatness* (2017)<sup>7</sup>. *Greatness* represents a thematic continuation of his previous works, although it does away with some of his frequently adopted artistic metaphors and approaches, such as sex and gamification to explore the variegated compositions of human body, lust, and consciousness alongside technology. Specifically, I analyze how *Greatness* invokes the question of divinity in posthuman discourse, as well as how it pushes against the cultural boundaries between posthumanism and Buddhism (given the fact that posthuman discourse originates in Western philosophical and intellectual contexts). What makes *Greatness* stand out is its ambition in sketching out a posthuman mandala built upon artistic and religious traditions of both East and West. Heavily hinging on appropriations from canons, *Greatness*, as I will demonstrate, aims to reconstruct a spiritual structure and symbolic order of a human-tech world wherein the provenance of humanity, including the human body structure and constitution, and religious cosmology have to be articulated anew.

Tian's single screen video *Greatness* begins with a mimicry of the fresco painting *The Creation of Adam* (Michelangelo, 1508-1512) that illustrates the Biblical creation narrative from the Book of Genesis in which God endows life to Adam, the first man. But unlike the painting, God and Adam drawn from the Christian narrative have been transformed into cyborg-like figures, who not only possess partially metallic brains, but also are gender-neutralized with replacements of mechanical grafts throughout their bodies. The white-bearded God in the painting has metamorphosed into an immortal cyborg, whose sacredness and vitality are derived from an utterly technologized human brain. Floating alongside other planet-like objects, the suspended positioning of God and Adam caricatures a futuristic scenario, in which hybrids of the organic and the mechanic are no longer bounded on Earth but are able to dwell on other planets or even travel freely in the cosmos.

Tian's redrawing of the Genesis narrative seems to remind us of the futurist Ray Kurzweil, notably his buoyant envisioning of humanity transcending its biological limitations through informatic and biotechnology (2006). As depicted in the opening scene, the technologized human brain has surpassed the Biblical God's divinity and replaced Him as the new creator of the posthuman species. The revised birth of Adam bids farewell to Christian theology and embraces the eventual triumph of a human-tech godlike symbiosis. It is no longer God but the cyborgs that have become the ultimate sources to bestow life and post-humanity. In a

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<sup>7</sup> Available at: <https://www.bilibili.com/video/av69016744/>.



similar vein, *Greatness* moves on to an anatomical manufacturing scene, with two huge Chinese characters “制造” (*zhìzào*, literally manufacturing) embedded in the background, imitating the drawing *Vitruvian Man* (“The proportions of the human body according to Vitruvius,” circa 1490) by Leonardo Da Vinci. The drawing was based on the correlations of ideal human body proportions with geometry described by the ancient Roman architect Vitruvius. According to Vitruvius (1914), the human figure is the principal source of proportion in the classical orders of architecture, and the working of human body is analogous to the rules assigned by nature: “nature has designed the human body so that its members are duly proportioned to the frame as a whole,” and therefore can be taken as the rule of architecture, so that “in perfect buildings the different members must be in exact symmetrical relations to the whole general scheme” (95). If *Vitruvian Man* inaugurated the very chapter of humanism and scientific rationalism in a critical moment of the Renaissance, *Greatness*’s vivid riff on the drawing points toward a posthumanist envisioning of the human body and the order from which it draws. In *Greatness*, it is no longer the painter who is trying to deduce the operating patterns of nature or the cosmos from the proportion of human body. Rather, it is a round, electronic pen needle controlled by invisible hands that is designing and producing the body and generating the life of a posthuman cyborg. The geometric form of the human-tech body has elevated itself to the order of the universe instead of simply being analogous to it. In the meantime, the moving gear wheels on the right precisely demonstrate the perpetual motion of this manufacturing machine. In other words, the organic-machinic symbiosis has ascended to the position of engendering and empowering everything. Indeed, when the irreversible domestication of human and technology amounts to rewriting the genesis of humanity, humanism, and scientific rationalism, *Greatness* appears to reinforce a kind of (trans-)humanist illusion that resonates with Kurzweil’s overt confidence in technology.

However, what is at stake here is that Tian’s rearticulation of human genesis, as well as his making of the analogy of human-tech body to the order of the universe are, in my point of view, not attempts aimed to unbind materiality and embodiment altogether, or even ultimately to get rid of biological bonds to achieve enhancement or even immortality as implied in Kurzweil’s extensionist view of technology. Rather, Tian is concerned about the possible synthesis of human and technology bringing about a religious reconfiguration that goes beyond simply human augmentation being allowed by technology. Indeed, a biological revolution among humanity initiated by technology seems inescapable (Bostrom, 2005; Kurzweil, 2006). But *Greatness* is by no means merely a transhumanist scenario in which humanity has ultimately overcome its biological limits and evolved into a posthuman God by itself. From my perspective, the implications of *Greatness* are at least twofold: on the one hand, what needs to be pointed out is that it is not simply humanity but human-tech hybrids that play a dominant role in Tian’s posthuman future. That is to say, Tian’s imageries have decentered the human by reassembling and displaying the potentialities of human-tech imbrication, as mentioned in my discussion on *The Creation*. On the other hand, representing a cyborg God signals “a symbolic turn in religious imaginaries” (Ferrando, 2019, 645). As Ferrando has astutely pointed out, in a posthuman world, the notion of the divine evolves as much as human and nonhumans do (2019). “Religions will need to re-think their theological approaches in order to allow for different types of subjectivities and embodied entities to partake in the religious quest” (645). As such, religious imageries will have to integrate the new forms of bodies into their symbolic orders as the physical and the symbolic are intertwined. In this sense, *Greatness* can be considered as an attempt to develop “a religious

symbolism in tune with [the] current conditions of existence, accessing God as a hybrid form of biology, ecology and technology, virtuality, and physicality” (648). If synching with technology requires a redefinition of the human and a renewed understanding of human embodiment, *Greatness* foregrounds the necessity of reconfiguring the divine realm that should no longer center solely on humanity or the image of humans but on the prismatic amalgamation of the biological and the technological.

It is at this conjunction that *Greatness* moves forward to incorporate Buddhist iconographies into this new symbolic order it intends to reframe. Not unlike Haraway, Tian unavoidably touches upon the questions of gender (as manifested in *The Creation* as well) and genesis when he integrates a Buddhist mandala into Western Christian tradition. Right after the remaking scene of the *Vitruvian Man*, *Greatness* cuts to a close-up view of a female womb, with stable guard-like skeletons placed on each side and two nude bodies holding a rectangular brick, on which several bricks stand in line and an egg is positioned on the left end. They altogether are placed in front of the womb alongside other things such as animals and gadgets floating in the air. The womb is apparently adapted from the iconography of the Buddhist “Thousand-Hand Guanyin” (Qianshou guanyin 千手观音), a bodhisattva of compassion, revered as the Goddess of Mercy, which is also a recurring theme image in many of Tian’s works. However, the appearance of the human is not revealed here, but merely the womb itself. Interestingly, as the first piece from the bricks collapses, which leads to the gradual fall of other bricks, the egg stands still. This might be the most confusing moment in *Greatness*: does it imply that the reproduction of the new human-tech species continues although it might happen completely outside female bodies, human wombs in particular? Or, on the contrary, is it the manifestation and metaphor of the last resort to which humanity might turn despite its possible conquering over countless biological barriers? Or does gender really matter at all as Haraway (1991) envisions a world without the trouble of gender and even without a Christian genesis of humanity? The implications remain uncertain.

*Greatness* continues to cut to an imitation of Auguste Rodin’s *The Thinker*, the well-known nude male figure of more than life size sitting on a rock with his chin resting on one hand as though deep in thought. This cliched representation of philosophy is now conducted by a completely prosthetic metallic brain with a sculptural human body. Dwelling somewhere in the universe, the thinker is forever surrounded by astronauts, metals, and animals hanging in the air, whose meanings the thinker appears to be unable to fathom. At the intersection of Western philosophy and Buddhist contemplation, Tian introduces a half-Buddha, half-astronaut figure spinning around in circles, with a line of unconventional Chinese couplets, the so-called Martian language<sup>8</sup> displacing on either side of him as if the codes of religion and folk culture have been scrambled by the cipher of science. Again, Tian reworks another rich iconography of the Buddhist Bhavachakra, *The Wheel of Life* to contemplate cause and effect, birth and rebirth through the cycles of life. A gender-neutral prayer wheel powers a cog that activates the Thousand-Hand Guanyin, whose head has now become a spinning brain, surrounded by a halo in a mobile mashup of religion, philosophy, and machine. This reaches the climax that a hybrid brain becomes the only thing to which religion and philosophy might ultimately refer.

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<sup>8</sup> Martian language (*huoxingwen*, 火星文) is the nickname of unconventional representation of Chinese characters online. “Martian” denotes that which seems strange, foreign, and idiosyncratic to mainstream culture. The Martian language is very popular in cyberspace and often used to demonstrate personality or pass Internet censorship.





In the process of redoing *The Wheel of Life*, Tian inserts a gigantic female face with a deep fracture in the middle, whose origin is unclear. But this screaming, astounded and yet charming face appears to allude to the expressionist art series “The Scream,” a caricature of the tormented inner world made by the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch in 1893, when Sigmund Freud was investigating unconscious phenomena. An agonized, nearly lunatic modern man is nevertheless transformed into a female chimera (in the sense of Haraway), combining her alluring beauty and elegance with lost amazement. Discharging from her brain are various objects, metal-like strings, a Chinese character “命” (*ming*, life, fate, or destiny), a Buddha, and so on. On the one hand, Tian seems to suggest that the synthetic feature of the human brain, of which biological components are no longer found, to be the most substantial elements of human consciousness, psyche, body, and even life. On the other hand, the Chinese script “命” encapsulates the inescapability of human-tech blending.

As exhibited altogether in the last scene of *Greatness* (see Figure 1), what Tian seeks to create eventually is a Buddhist mandala through a phantasmagorical collage of imageries that symbolize the spirit and the order of a posthuman universe. According to the iconographic tradition of the Buddhist mandala (which implies a “circle” and, by extension, a “world”), the basic form of most mandalas is a square with four gates containing a circle with a center point. Mandalas are said to be symbols of the spiritual essence of the universe.<sup>9</sup> In other words, mandalas serve as cosmic representations and embody the potency of the entire universe: typically, a mandala presents a central Buddha figure, who is surrounded by a pantheon of subordinate deities, positioned in a geometric composition. This galaxy of supermundane beings is to be interpreted as a manifestation of the Universal Buddha or the Brahman of Hinduism, the primordial One from which the universe emanates and to which it returns. In short, the mandala serves as a cosmic diagram, a spiritual blueprint of the universe. As such, it schematically maps the origin, operation, and constitution of the cosmos by disclosing its pattern of spiritual forces. Beginning with the genesis of humans and the rise of humanism and scientific rationalism, then proceeding from religion and philosophy to the synthetic brain that bears the psyche and consciousness of humans and machines, *Greatness* revisits and nearly renews the entire trajectory of human history and religious cosmology through the lens of the posthuman. By redrawing a Buddhist mandala comprised of posthuman figurations, Tian guides us into a posthuman cosmological order wherein all entities have to be reborn, reproduced, or remanufactured from scratch. The old order created under the notion of Western humanism, Christian theology, and even Buddhism needs to be interrogated and invented anew to be in tune with the posthuman paradigmatic shift. To be in accordance with this shift, human embodiment has thus become a wide range of constantly evolving possibilities rather than something that can be easily nailed down and determined.

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<sup>9</sup> Despite their discrete iconographic genealogies, mandalas are cosmic diagrams that are aimed to represent Buddhist doctrines, as well summed up by Kimiaki Tanaka: “it is very difficult to define the mandala in a way that is applicable to all examples of mandalas ranging from the earliest stages to late tantric Buddhism. Here, I define a mandala as an icon that represents the worldview of Buddhism, or Buddhist cosmology and philosophy, by arranging Buddhist deities in accordance with a specific pattern” (Tanaka, 2018).

**Figure 1.** The last scene of *Greatness*: a Buddhist mandala, with each remade iconography positioned in circles on each side of a square.



*Image.* Courtesy of the artist

### **Spirituality of technogenesis: Posthumanism and Buddhism**

Interestingly enough, Tian's outlandish collage of posthuman corporeality and Buddhist symbols also prompts us to think through the philosophical and epistemological affinities between posthumanism and Buddhism. In her discussion on the relation between posthumanism and spirituality, Ferrando (2016) highlights several ancient spiritual traditions, including Buddhism, that resonate with the non-dualistic and non-hierarchical approach of posthumanism. For her, the posthuman does not suggest any "techno-utopianism" any more than it engages in "luddism." Rather, "the machine is not the other, since the human itself is seen as a process developing within a material net, a hybrid, a constant technogenesis" (248). More crucially, she moves on to point out that the non-separateness of the human and the technological realm is also a spiritual issue. As Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori (2005) states, "From the Buddha's viewpoint, there is no master-slave relationship between human beings and machines. Man achieves dignity not by subjugating his mechanical inventions, but by recognizing in machines and robots the same buddha-nature that pervades his own inner self" (179–180). Human-machine merger in this sense is as spiritual as it is corporeal. When the physicality of the human body evolves, so does the spiritual realm that epitomizes such a mutation. As Ferrando argues, the deification of cyborgs has become a necessity for the new subjects and new forms of life to approach spirituality in the posthuman future (2019). Indeed, the deification of cyborgs also means human self-deification (as manifested in transhumanist envisioning of future human beings) insofar as humans are conceived as becoming cyborg. However, by displaying the deification of cyborgs, *Greatness* opens a new dimension of commonality between posthumanism and Buddhism, because Buddhism both represents deities (as in the Buddha figures in a mandala) and insists that Buddha nature is intrinsic to humans and other beings, that is, the deity is not fundamentally other than the human being



as in Christianity, for example. In other words, the affinity of posthumanism and Buddhism displayed in Tian's work reveals that *Greatness* is not to glorify the potential deification of human beings blending with technology, but to foreground the profound imbrication of human body and the technological realm in the first place. *Greatness* therefore is not a transhumanist fantasy of human cyborgs as such. Instead, it provides us with a Buddhist perspective of understanding the technogenesis of both being human and posthuman, because posthumanism ultimately does not point to human self-deification through technology but reveals the fact that technology is constitutive of humans and human body.

Hence, the confluence of posthumanism and Buddhism in Tian's work rests on a shared understanding of being human. According to James J. Hughes (2019), the Hindu-Buddhist notion conceives of the universe as "billions or trillions of years old, collapsing and re-materializing in regular cycles, all as a natural process without a Creator God. There are many worlds with intelligent life in the Buddhist universe, and humans appear and evolve as just one of these species" (654-655). Here, Hughes presents a Buddhist conception of the evolution of life in general, in which humans as organisms are nothing but a transient species on the evolutionary spectrum that most likely will open up the possibility of a posthuman species as illustrated and exhibited in Tian's audiovisual imagining. Although Hughes (2019) attempts to argue for the compatibility of Buddhism and science, in particular, Buddhism and technologies of human enhancement (2019) and eventually, moral enhancement (2015). What underlies his formulation is not so much simply a transhumanist promotion of the ideas and praxes of the human enhancement project as an emphasis of Buddhism's "distinctive deconstruction of personal identity" (2019, 659) and thereby unmasking "the illusion of a continuous, discrete self [as] the cause of suffering" (2019, 653). As such, the fundamental affinity between Buddhism and posthumanism is a communal perception of what is human and its profound indeterminate and ephemeral nature.

In this sense, Tian's reconstruction of a posthuman diagram not only invites us to revisualize the divine realm of a posthuman future but also evokes a profound acknowledgement and appreciation of a post-humanity that has already been inherent within humanity (Ferrando, 2016). Just as Hughes astutely remarks, for Buddhism, "humans are intended to achieve a posthuman state through their own efforts" (2019, 655; see also Hughes, 2007). This speaks nicely to Tian's conception and visualization of how humans have been predisposing themselves to being mingled with their technical counterparts. Through its virtual deification of cyborgs, the posthumanist reconfiguration of a Buddhist mandala in *Greatness* reconstructs a spiritual and symbolic order as well as a cosmology that have already been implicit in the Buddhist tradition but also goes beyond its innate anthropocentric concerns (Ferrando, 2016).

Redrawing Christian theology and making it part of a Buddhist posthuman cosmology, *Greatness* also places religion and posthumanism in a conversation that needs to take place when humanity as a collective is facing the technological condition of the current era. As Elaine Graham states (2021), "religion continues to feature within discourses and representations of posthumanism" (25). By conceptualizing a "postsecular paradigm" framework, Graham suggests that it is possible to "regard religion as *both* inimical to scientific progress and human advancement *and* as the source of ancient wisdom that continues to inform understanding of what it means to be human—and by extension, posthuman" (25). As I have shown, religiosity is not necessarily incompatible with, let alone inimical to, posthumanism or science. Graham is certainly right that religions are still capable of equipping

us with more resources to form new understandings of what it is to be human, and of course posthuman, despite the difference in religious traditions from which our wisdom might be derived. It is in this sense that I consider *Greatness* as an exhilarating artistic attempt to delineate a future possibility for the spirituality of a posthuman existential condition—or to use Ferrando's more captivating phrase, a technogenesis (2016, 248). As such, the posthuman condition not only illuminates the trajectory of human morphology but also has pervaded into the spiritual realm, thus opening up new avenues of thinking through humanity and its embeddedness within the technosphere.

## Conclusion

Immersed in the wonderland teeming with posthuman cyborgs fantasized in Tian's videos, one is encouraged to reflect upon questions about what it means to be human and the potentialities of posthuman embodiment in a world of hybrid beings and fluid boundaries. Tian's futuristic depictions of the human-tech symbiosis points toward the fact that "the possibility of radical fusion with technologies, such that technologies don't merely surround us, but actually constitute a fundamental part of who we are, in our bodies and in our selves" (Madison, 2018, 5). Per Tian, at the forefront of the coupling relations of the human and the technical realm lies lust, libido, and sensuality that lead to humans' bodily co-evolution with technology. At the same time, the same corporeal morphology provides us with a fundamental impetus to reimagine the spiritual and religious realms. Both erotic and religious dimensions epitomize the visions of the posthuman and its constitutive dyad of the organic and the technological. Ultimately, it is via bodily intermingling between the human and the technosphere that a posthuman universe offers a way out of the confines of humanist subject formation, thereby opening up new possibilities of human embodiment and the spiritual order of a new species waiting to be named and defined anew.

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