Escaping Prestige

A Transmedial Reading of Death in L’année Gao

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Abstract

A year after receiving the 2000 Nobel Prize in Literature, Gao Xingjian, who had been exiled from China in 1987, remarked that he had to embark on a “second escape” from the “public’s halo, flowers, prizes, and crown.” In this paper, I argue that Gao’s “second escape” is not a literal rejection of fame, but rather the situating of the monumentalizing effects of the Nobel’s prestige as a subject of his transmedial reflection. In his first major post-Nobel project – l’année Gao (The Year of Gao, 2003–2005), Gao portrays death in five different expressions (paintings, poetry, theatre, opera, and cinema) that echo and respond to each other, thereby presenting a coherent attempt to restore his sense of fragility and autonomy as a Nobel laureate.

Keywords

Gao Xingjian – Nobel Prize in Literature – l’année Gao – transmedia – literary prize culture

1 Introduction

The prestige of the Nobel Prize in Literature is coupled with unprecedented academic and public attention for its winners. Canadian-born American novelist Saul Bellow referred to his 1976 Nobel Prize win as a “kiss of death” (qtd in Kakutani); Saint Lucian poet and playwright Derek Walcott remarked how he was unable to work due to the “demanding” attention of being a 1992 Nobel laureate (qtd in Kirn); Mo Yan, the first mainland Chinese writer to win the Nobel Prize, hoped to have “another Chinese writer to win the...
Nobel Prize,” so as to allow him to concentrate on writing novels again (qtd in Leng).

Similarly, when it was announced that the Chinese-born French writer Gao Xingjian had won the 2000 Nobel Prize in Literature, his life as a reclusive artist residing in the working-class suburbs of Bagnolet, Paris, came to an abrupt end. As Celine Yang (Xilin), Gao’s wife, recollects:

Once the radio had broadcasted the announcement, within 10 minutes, our home was occupied by reporters. Perhaps the reporters had already been on standby outside our building, waiting for the Swedish Academy to make the official announcement. They all wanted to be the first on the scene. A young reporter asked me a few questions, to which I replied: “We will continue on with our lives as usual.” The reporter gave me a look of disbelief. Another female reporter, who appeared to be familiar with the Nobel laureates’ experience, kindly advised me: “Be ready. This is only the beginning.” In a state of frenzy, Gao Xingjian was then taken to the television station, and a crowd followed behind.

Yang Jia 37–38, translation my own

The flooding of media attention did not deter Gao from accepting the Nobel Prize, even though he had claimed that his 1987 exile from China to France allowed him to leave behind his homeland and readers, and enjoy the luxury of patiently experimenting and refining his use of language in his creative work (Gao & Yang 115–116). A year after receiving the Nobel, Gao revealed to his close friend and eminent critic Liu Zaifu about the need to embark on a “second escape” from the “public’s halo, flowers, prizes, and crown” (Liu “taowang” 223) [translation my own]. A paradox thus emerges: If Gao insists that the best position of the writer is at the margins of society (Gao “Cold” 8), why did he accept the Nobel Prize in the first place?

Gao Xingjian has never shied away from awards, funding, commissions, and patrons. Well before winning the Nobel, Gao was supported by the Chinese state-funded Beijing People’s Art Theatre and was a member of the Chinese Writer’s Association. Likewise, in France, Gao received the 1992 Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. Several of his plays were also commissioned by French state funding. In order to continue creating as a writer of “cold literature,” that is “nothing more than an individual speaking or writing and whether he is listened to or read is for others to choose” (Gao “Cold” 2), Gao has always negotiated with the structural forces of economic capital, social capital, symbolic capital, and cultural capital throughout his entire career. Simply put, Gao has always strived to escape to the margins of society, but never outside of it.
As Gao reflexively writes in the play *Escape*: “To live is to escape, to run for your life all the time” (“Man” 14).

In this paper, I argue that Gao Xingjian’s first major post-Nobel project, *l’année Gao* (The Year of Gao, 2003–2005), serves as his “escape,” or detached observation, of the Nobel’s prestige. In the capacity of an artist-in-residence and honorary citizen in Marseille, Gao contributed five original works for *l’année Gao* – *The Way of the Wandering Bird* (a painting accompanied by a poem), *The Man Who Questions Death* (a play), *Snow in August* (an opera), and *Silhouette/Shadow* (a film). Since a recurring theme in these five works is the portrayal of death with different medial expressions, I first juxtapose Gao’s reflections on narcissism vis-à-vis the psychological discussions about fame and immortality, as well as the constructedness of the literary canon. Next, I define transmediality within the context of Gao Xingjian studies, which paves way for an examination of how *l’année Gao* conveys death in five different ways that echo and respond to each other, thereby presenting a coherent attempt to situate the monumentalizing effects of the Nobel’s prestige as a subject of his reflections.

2  
**Gao Xingjian’s Illusion of Post-Nobel Immortality**

Gao Xingjian has described the writer’s self as “chaotic” and “usually in a blind state of selflove” (Gao “Literature” 122). He remarks that “the [s]elf is like a black hole capable of sucking everything in. It’s terrifying” (Lee and Dutrait 743). In his Nobel lecture, Gao also notably suggested that the genocides and mass atrocities of the 20th century were inspired by “the ravings of a very egotistic philosopher,” presumably to be Fredrich Nietzsche and his notion of the Übermensch (Gao “Case” 10). Nevertheless, Gao’s awareness of the chaotic, narcissistic nature of the writer’s self is also an implicit admission that he is susceptible to such narcissism, especially when he is being thrust into global fame.

From a psychological standpoint, narcissism is the need to use “the admirer to solidify self-representations, to maintain grandiosity, and to ward off threats to body and ego integrity” (McCarthy 110). If fame serves as an indicator of achievement, that is you are famous for demonstrating excellence, then fame seemingly becomes a source of recognition that can offer safety and certainty for the narcissistic self, and even “a sense of immortality, creating a self that is no longer ephemeral” (Celedonia & Williams 218). In the age of mass media, the illusion of immortality becomes ever more vivid with the saturation of media. The famed individual is incessantly replicated through images, sounds,
and words, and experiences symbolic immortality that is similar to biological reproduction (Giles Illusions 53). However, the proliferation of media coverage also means that individual achievement is no longer the prerequisite for fame and prestige. As David Giles observes: “The brutal reality of the modern age is that all famous people are treated like celebrities by the mass media,” whether they be artistic geniuses or serial killers (Giles Illusions 5). The allure of modern fame, then, goes beyond a recognition of achievement, and further fulfills the narcissistic temptation of “wishing death away” (Giles “Immortalisation” 99).

As mentioned earlier, Gao Xingjian’s Nobel Prize win sparked a global media frenzy. And on 10th December 2000, upon receiving the Nobel Prize medal and diploma from King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden at the Stockholm Concert Hall, Gao appeared to be in a state of awe: “Your Royal Majesty, is this real? Or is this a fairy tale?” (Gao “Speech,” translation my own). Gao’s remarks are indicative of how the Nobel’s prestige can evoke an illusion of cultural immortality: Is the literary consecration of the Nobel Prize real and permanent? Or is it just a fictional story of Gao living happily forever after as cultural royalty?

Horace Engdahl, then-Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy, and the announcer of Gao Xingjian’s Nobel Prize win, reminds us that no institution, including the Nobel Prize, can singularly canonise a writer. What the Nobel Prize does guarantee, though, is massive public attention, or “immortality of the second grade” (Engdahl 319). Such attention, however, is not necessarily due to the Nobel laureate’s intellectual achievement. Instead, the Nobel’s prestige is a fetishisation of intellectual achievement that generates value through “a state of self-perpetuating well-knownness that can come to surround a producer of literary fiction and trigger commodification of this individual across a number of industries” (Braun 321). Nobel Prize-winning authors, therefore, attain prestige both for their literary achievements, and for their covert transformations into sites of contestation for various Nobel-related capitals. In other words, the Nobel Prize in Literature also serves as an “instrument for negotiating transactions between cultural and economic, cultural and social, or cultural and political capital” (English 10).

Gao Xingjian has demonstrated self-awareness towards the logics of cultural capitalism behind his Nobel prestige: “To some extent, I’m disappearing as a person and becoming a symbol. Of course this symbol is what a lot of Chinese people have been wishing for. People see it as an affirmation of Chinese writers or Chinese literature, or of the Chinese people” (Chen). Gao’s own admission of his transformation from a French émigré artist into a monument for interest groups within and beyond the Sinophone to capitalise upon, echoes Orville
G. Brim’s remarks that the immortalisation of celebrities is a social need of “selecting a famous person to symbolise a cause or an occupation or a category of achievement simplifies what otherwise might be complicated and makes it easier for us to take in” (Brim 76). And such reification is precisely why Gao seeks to embark on a “second escape” in his post-Nobel career. As I shall elaborate below, Gao’s escape from the Nobel’s prestige is transmedial.

3 Gao Xingjian and Transmediality

Gao Xingjian has always been a multi-faceted creator. He is most commonly known for his novels *Soul Mountain* (1991) and *One Man’s Bible* (1999), which feature pronouns as alternating narrative voices, or “flow of language.” As a playwright and theatre director, Gao has advocated for a return to acting and performance by introducing the ideas of “theatrical suppositionality” (*jiad- ingxing*) and “tripartite acting” (*biaoyan de sanchongxing*) with productions like *Bus Stop* (1983), *The Other Shore* (1986), and *Dialogue and Rebuttal* (1992). His ink-wash paintings portray the “inner mindscape” by exploring the space between the figurative and the abstract in works such as *l’Observation* (1994), *Minuit* (1995), and *Regard interieur* (1995).

In light of Gao Xingjian’s longstanding engagement with various forms of creative production, recent scholarship have begun to consider his “transmedia aesthetics” (Lee and Liu). In the early 1990s, media scholars conceived of the contemporary usage of the term “transmedia” to describe works that functioned like entertainment franchises, where characters would appear in different media platforms (Philips 14). However, existing efforts in examining Gao’s transmediality have focussed more on his engagements in different media as independent projects, rather than on the interactions between these independent projects in different media (Cheuk “Review”).

It is first worth clarifying the difference between “intermediality” and “transmediality.” According to Irina Rajewsky (50–53), intermedial aesthetics can be categorised into three types: media combination (a combination of at least two different media expressions like film and theatre); medial transposition (film adaptations, novelizations); and intermedial references (imitations and evocations of the techniques in one form in another form). In contrast, the study of transmediality emphasizes the conveyance of an experience that is only possible when multiple autonomous projects, in different medial forms, interact with each other. In Henry Jenkins’ discussion about “transmedia storytelling,” he refers to a story or vision that is communicated across multiple media platforms for a “unified and coordinated entertainment experience,” with each new
text making a distinctive and unique contribution to the whole. Audiences are encouraged to proactively piece together bits and pieces like a detective, which results in an immersion into a fictional, transmedia universe (Jenkins). In other words, transmedia emphasizes on how a singular theme unfolds across multiple media platforms.

Gao Xingjian’s film Silhouette/Shadow is an example of a work that could be read as intermedial and transmedial. According to Gao, Silhouette/Shadow is “tripartite cinema,” in which images, sounds, and verbal speech “ceas[e] to be subordinate to situations and events of the narrative that are extraneous to the picture” (Gao “Silhouette/Shadow” 182). Instead, the images, sounds, and verbal speech are simultaneously autonomous from one another while combining and contrasting with each other to produce new meanings (Gao “Silhouette/Shadow” 181). Rosalind Silvester adopts an intermedial reading of Gao’s tripartite cinema, observing how, in Silhouette/Shadow, “the filming of the creative act and paintings is dependent on the intertwining of its constituent parts, without changing them, and ultimately produces a formally distinct art-object” (15). In other words, an intermedial reading of the film focuses on how media boundaries and forms are redefined and melded, thereby creating an individual project in a new, in-between medial form such as Silhouette/Shadow. However, Silvester does not discuss the role with which Silhouette/Shadow serves in the larger network of different medial forms in l’année Gao, and how these works create a cohesive experience which otherwise would not exist. In my transmedial study of Silhouette/Shadow, such a uniquely l’année Gao experience refers to the interlocking of death and freedom, as inspired by the overwhelming prestige and fame of being the first Chinese-language writer to win the Nobel Prize in Literature.

4 L’année Gao and Death

The theme of death appears in all five works of l’année Gao: The play The Man Who Questions Death ends with the character That Man convincing the character This Man to hang himself by a noose; the opera Snow in August is largely based on the life of the Sixth Patriarch Huineng, and includes a dramatization of Huineng refusing to pass on the patriarchy before his death; the film Silhouette/Shadow not only features a scene where Gao Xingjian is lying inside an ambulance and being rushed to the hospital, but also a surreal, black and white scene where he encounters a figure wearing a black hood who is a direct reference to the character Death in Ingmar Bergman’s The Seventh Seal (1957); the poem and painting The Way of the Wandering Bird features a painting of a large
black-coloured cross that is similar to a tombstone cross, as well as a verse that morbidly describes the dying moments of a wandering bird:

Have you ever seen an old bird  
Weak, pitiful or anxious  
Who complains, who whimpers  
Who deceives, who cheats  
Without speaking of those who beg to survive

GAO, translation my own

Around the time of l’année Gao, Gao suffered from a serious eye disease (carotid endarterectomy) and high blood pressure (Sze-Lorrain). And yet he continued to paint and rehearse until his health collapsed and had him hospitalized for months. In her recollection of l’année Gao, Celine Yang does not focus on the honour, nor the artistic ambitions related to the event. Instead, she describes this period “a very difficult year for Gao. And also a worrisome year for me” (Yang Jia 54, translation my own). However, upon considering the materialist implications of l’année Gao, the thematic significance of death goes beyond Gao’s physical wellbeing, and forays into his immortalization as a Chinese-French Nobel laureate.

In the official catalogue for l’année Gao, co-organizer Salvatore Lombardo writes in an introductory piece entitled “When a Nobel laureate chooses the South:"

In spite of serious health problems, probably due to physical and mental overexertion following the award of the Nobel Prize, Gao Xingjian well and truly achieves his goals. From July 2003 to July 2004 l’année Gao will become a reality. It was the manifestation of a shared romantic and baroque dream of a unique city and its most famous honorary citizen: Marseille and Gao Xingjian. The South proves itself – Marseille is the cultural planet and Gao Xingjian a genius of modern times.

Lombardo’s simultaneous allusions to Gao’s health and Marseille’s consecration of Gao as a distinguished citizen suggest the dual meanings of the theme of “death” in l’année Gao. While the ambitious timeframe of creating five original pieces of paintings, poetry, theatre, opera, and cinema in one year placed Gao’s physical wellbeing in jeopardy, one could also argue that the politics of Nobel-related capitals had threatened the life of Gao’s creative autonomy. France was collaborating with China on the event l’année de la Chine (The Year of China)
around the same time as *l’année Gao*. It was reported that the French government did not show much support for Gao, who remains a banned writer in China, so as to avoid political conflict and controversy (Yu). This lack of institutional support on a national level, alongside Gao Xingjian’s health concerns, resulted in a six-month delay for the opening of *l’année Gao*.

Meanwhile in Taiwan, Gao Xingjian’s production of *Snow in August* was initially heavily backed by the Taiwan government, as they considered Gao’s Nobel Prize win as a means to promote Taiwan as free and liberal and cultural nation on the global stage. Not only did they heavily fund the Taiwan production of *Snow in August*, but also agreed to bring the production to Marseille as part of *l’année Gao*. But because of the lukewarm reception of the Taipei premiere of *Snow in August*, and perhaps because of China’s intervention, institutional support for Gao’s opera production waned. As I have discussed elsewhere, Gao’s Nobel Prize win transformed him into “a symbol for alternative imaginations of Chinese-ness,” and such transformation led to polarising responses between mainland China and the Sinophone community (Cheuk “Literary” 158). The *Snow in August* production team ended up having to squander for funding and the Marseille performances were nearly cancelled (Chi).

Against the above backdrop, a closer inspection of the film *Silhouette/Shadow*, which is a cinematic portrayal of the creative processes and exhibitions of the poem and painting *The Way of the Wandering Bird*, the play *The Man Who Questions Death*, and the opera *Snow in August*, reveals that the theme of death in the above works could take on a materialistic meaning, one that explores the freedom and restrictions of prestige, canonisation, and institutionalisation.

5 A Transmedial Reading of Death in *Silhouette/Shadow*

*Silhouette/Shadow*, the final work completed and published for *l’année Gao*, is partly developed from the documentary film *A Bird in the City* (*Un Oiseau dans la ville*) (2003). While *A Bird in the City* is a rather standard documentary that presents *l’année Gao* in a linear plot structure, *Silhouette/Shadow* has no clear narrative and is what Gao refers to as “a cinematic poem” (Gao “Silhouette/Shadow” 179). Visually speaking, roughly half of *Silhouette/Shadow* features documentary style footage of painting, rehearsals, and performances, and scenes of Gao wandering around Marseille and Taiwan on foot, or travelling by car, train or even being rushed to a hospital by an ambulance. The other half of the film extensively features surreal scenes of Gao encountering other
solitary figures. Sound effects and the atmospheric music of Xu Shuya, Johann Sebastian Bach, and Bernd Alois Zimmermann provide the soundtrack to such visuals. While there is no verbal narration for the film, the reading of excerpts from the poem *The Way of the Wandering Bird* is comparable to an infrequent narrator of the sights and sounds of *L’année Gao*.

Near the beginning of the film *Silhouette/Shadow*, Gao Xingjian is seen entering his studio. He presses play on a stereo player and Xu Shuya’s atmospheric music fills the background. Gao then uses black ink and white canvas to create paintings for *The Way of the Wandering Bird* exhibition. Zooming into and out of a puddle of ink, Gao’s reflection appears literally within his artistic material and creative process, and further signifies how the paintings, and broadly his creative works, are an extension of Gao’s thoughts and emotions (fig. 1).

As Xu Shuya’s music continues to play in the background, snippets of ruins and abandoned houses from the working-class section of Marseille’s city centre, are interspersed into the painting footage. Suddenly, the visuals of ruins are replaced by visuals of a flying white bird in the sky of Marseille (fig. 2) and the famous Old Port of Marseille. Gao looks up to the sky of Marseille filled with flying white birds. He then walks up a flight of stairs from a back alley in *le Panier*, a popular tourist site and the oldest district of Marseille. The interspersion of Gao’s painting process with visuals of destroyed buildings and historical tourist destinations suggest how his creative process, as an “honorary Marseillais,” is inspired by both the ephemeral side and the timeless side of Marseille.
Such a contrast between impermanence and permanence becomes a recurring theme throughout the film *Silhouette/Shadow*.

Gao Xingjian then puts on a pair of sunglasses, looks up to the sky again. Instead of flying white birds, this time Gao is gazing at a floating white plastic bag. The music stops and is replaced by the recital of the first stanza of *The Way of the Wandering Bird* poem:

If you are a bird  
Nothing other than a bird  
When the wind rises  
You fly away  
Starting wide eyed  
You look into the obscurity of this cursed low world  
Beyond the marshes of boredom  
In flight at night without a precise goal  
Listening to the whistling in the air and beating of the heart  
Such lightness in wandering  

*Gao, translation my own*

*The Way of the Wandering Bird*, as a poem and a series of paintings, are separated into three sections, akin to the stanzas of a poem. The paintings serve as a visualisation of the poem, while the poem serve as a narrative for the paintings. The stanza above pertains to the first section of *The Way of the Wandering Bird* painting exhibition, which is captioned with the opening line from the poem:
“If you are a bird.” As a second-person conditional statement, this line invites the reader, listener, and viewer of *The Way of the Wandering Bird* poem and painting to imagine themselves to be liberated from the troubles of the world, experiencing a type of freedom that is symbolised by a carefree bird wandering through natural scenery of mountains, lakes, seas as portrayed in the black-dominant paintings.

In *Silhouette/Shadow*, however, the visuals accompanying *The Way of the Wandering Bird* poem is a floating white plastic bag (fig. 3). Both the flying bird and the floating plastic bag appear to be wandering in the sky in a carefree state. Furthermore, a plastic bag is arguably “immortal” because of its near-impossibility to fully decompose. Such a juxtaposition brings our assumptions about freedom and immortality into question: Would you still want to be carefree and be immortal if it means that you are a floating plastic bag?

In Gao Xingjian’s Nobel Prize lecture, he remarks “If one exchanges freedom for something else then the bird that is freedom will fly off, for this is the cost of freedom” (“Case” 38). Gao’s association of the free-roaming bird with freedom is a modern adaptation of Zhuangzi’s roc (*peng*), a giant mythical bird which represents a roaming spirit (Liu “Triumph”). What is telling about the above quote, however, is Gao’s dual awareness of the ephemerality of freedom within a capitalistic framework: freedom is not free, and one either trades freedom for other gains, or preserves freedom and bears its cost. Within the context of Gao’s Nobel Prize win, the carefree and immortal floating plastic bag serves as a self-reflexive commentary of how he exchanged his...
pre-Nobel freedom (the bird of freedom) for post-Nobel celebrity (immortal plastic bag).

Interspersed into the recital of the poem and the floating white plastic bag is footage of Gao Xingjian practicing lines with Thierry Bose, the actor of the character This Man in the play The Man Who Questions Death. The image of a floating white plastic bag, which juxtaposes The Way of the Wandering Bird poem and painting, also appears in The Man Who Questions Death. The character This Man blows on a small piece of paper and watches it fly in the air. The flying paper then is replaced by a projection of a floating plastic bag. The character That Man then remarks: “Even if it were only a plastic bag, or just a garbage bag dancing in the wind, it’s still interesting to watch! The look in your eyes imparts meaning; otherwise, all the things in the world would be so boring, so mundane” (Gao “Man” 93). For That Man, the perceived appeal of being a carefree and “immortal” plastic bag is merely the result of a motivated perception in which a narcissistic individual sees what he wants to see to romanticise his existence.

As the title of the play suggests, The Man Who Questions Death revolves around death, but more specifically, the death of one’s narcissistic, conflicting, and cynical ego. Earlier in the play, the elderly-looking character This Man is trapped inside a contemporary art museum. At first, he compares his situation to being a “cultural prison, artistic prison” where he is forced to become a part of the museum curator’s collection (Gao “Man” 78). He is frustrated because he finds contemporary art to be corrupted and commercialised. While This Man remarks that all the pieces in the contemporary art museum are “crap” which “found itself listed in beautifully appointed catalogs and analyzed with the latest critical jargon” (Gao “Man” 81), he later admits that he enjoys the adulation of being canonised:

> Of course like everybody else you can’t help being narcissistic, an exquisite objet d’art that’s been chosen, accepted and admired, an archetype which the imagination, no matter how fanciful, cannot create, a work praised and appraised, analyzed, deconstructed layer by layer, and heaped on with hitherto unprecedented kudos, higher than all that’s been accorded to any existing work.

GAO “Man” 82

The cynicism and self-contradictions in This Man’s critique of contemporary art is echoed by Gao Xingjian’s essay “Another Kind of Aesthetics,” which similarly argues that “contemporary art has totally abolished the literary and the poetic in art” (Gao “Another” 136). Nevertheless, although Gao strives for
detachment from any extra-artistic factors, he has never shied away from awards, funding, commissions, and patrons that recognise his work as a contemporary artist. In fact, the Swedish Academy specifically awards him the Nobel Literature Prize for his contributions to “new paths for the Chinese novel and drama” (Nobel Media AB; italicization my own). Similar to the confession of the character This Man, Gao’s pursuit of “cold literature” is also interwoven with his narcissistic desire for fame.

Such cynicism and contradictions are addressed by the younger-looking character That Man, who suddenly appears in the middle of This Man’s long rant. That Man finds the root cause behind This Man’s polemical critique of modern art lies in his insecurity towards his existence: “You’re too old; you can’t even move your legs. The only thing you’re able to do is to keep rambling on endlessly, only then can you feel that you’re still alive” (Gao “Man” 89). More importantly, That Man is adamant that This Man is a has-been and his life is merely a memory no longer worth revisiting nor leading: “The only thing you can grasp is this tiny bit of understanding: Sooner or later you’ll have to die. What incentive is there to live on?” (Gao “Man” 88).

The interaction between This Man and That Man gradually leads to suicide. In the film Silhouette/Shadow, it includes the performance footage of This Man committing suicide amidst the presence of That Man. The suicide, however, is preceded by a recital of various excerpts from the poem The Way of the Wandering Bird:

You go in circles or go straight, free to choose
With no obligations to come back to the same place
Why be concerned again with measly scruples
No more worries, no more constraints nor grudges
Once the weight of the past is shed
Your liberty is at the tip of your wings
You flutter and twirl as you please

GAO, translation my own

Echoing the sentiments of This Man and That Man, the above excerpt describes the necessity of letting go of one’s past experiences in order to experience freedom like a wandering bird. While the wandering bird is previously juxtaposed with an “immortal” plastic bag, this reading of the poem first compares the wandering bird to dazzling yet short-lived fireworks over an impoverished urban neighbourhood in Marseille and the glamorous Old Port of Marseille (fig. 4). Such a change in the choice of visualisation is more evident in the next recital of the poem:
All that you never had, as ephemeral as unexpected
The slightest wrong step makes you immediately lose sight of it
And you sway again in the half light
Knowing well you are not a bird
Can no longer manage to disengage from the agony
That constantly harasses you from all sides
And the trouble of daily life does not spare you

Gao, translation my own

In this excerpt of the poem *The Way of the Wandering Bird*, the second-person voice realises for the first time that he is actually not a bird, and therefore cannot liberate himself from his troubles. This realisation occurs when the second-person voice understands that his experience of freedom like a wandering bird is ephemeral, which forces him to further question whether he has ever been free from his troubles at all. Visually, the sequence begins with a small, dying firework, followed by a grand, extravagant, and crackling firework routine (fig. 5). Interspersed into the firework footage is a man walking filmed with a shaky camera, large crowds watching the fireworks, and a parking lot filled with cars. It seems to suggest that being a carefree bird is comparable to the intoxicating effects of fame, in which the adulation of the public can bring one's self-esteem to dizzying heights, but it is ultimately brief. These sobering insights are further elaborated in the following excerpt:

A useless struggle
You should at least find a safe harbour
To calm your soul if you still have one
A space somewhere
A universe, neither paradise not hell
Where weightlessness of your senses can land
Gao, translation my own

Rather presuming that the experience of being a carefree bird is permanent and conclusive, the second-person voice now simply wants to soothe his soul and senses; rather than pursuing a permanent liberation from his troubles, he now humbly wants to find a safe space that is neither heaven nor hell. Such coldness towards the notion of freedom is visualised by day-time footages of the urban neighbourhood in Marseille, the Old Port of Marseille, and the Marseille Opera House, where the opening ceremony of *l’année Gao* is held (fig. 6). It seems to suggest that for Gao Xingjian, *l’année Gao* is his haven that is neither heaven (eg Nobel fame) nor hell (eg various traumatic experiences, especially during his time in China).

*The Way of the Wandering Bird* poem contextualises the suicide scene from *The Man Who Questions Death* as a response towards fame and narcissism. Although This Man deems That Man to be evil, the former is gradually convinced by the latter that his only option is to end his life in a dramatic, sensational fashion:

**THIS MAN:** Man is such a fragile and insignificant creature. When it all ends, he’s only worth a few tears, which of course are dependent
upon other people’s goodwill. Other than that, how much is a life worth anyway? A tiny little coin hardly makes a sound when it falls to the ground. How can you force it to make some noise when it drops? Might as well throw it as far as it can go, then at least you’d get some satisfaction out of it!

[...]

**THAT MAN:** Since you’ve wasted your life, let it be wasted from beginning to end. Since life is worthless like dry shit, let it turn into a dreadful mess. Since there is no salvation, death is the only solution.

**THIS MAN:** Let a cowboy become God! And the Madonna a whore! Let all this turn into an advertisement! Chickens or cows, let them all go mad! Let our Earth be polluted all the way! Let the atmosphere burn in fury! Let all geniuses move to the moon! Let all the genes of all the races mutate! Let all the weak die off one by one! Before all this happens, before the new century makes people’s blood boil once more, and before the crowd is once more provoked into a maddening rage, you first kill yourself.

*Gao “Man” 102–103*

On the surface, This Man is tragically committing suicide in order to find permanent peace and liberation from his troubles. However, he insists on ending his life in the form of a spectacle, like throwing a coin to make yourself heard. As
he rides a scissor lift that takes him up into the air, This Man unleashes a series of outlandish remarks that satires religion, the environment, and the human race. That Man, from the perspective of a bystander, nonchalantly remarks that This Man is a hopeless cause, someone who cannot be redeemed, from his narcissistic and cynical thoughts about himself and his surroundings. As such, he agrees with This Man’s suicide. High above ground, This Man hangs himself with a noose (fig. 7).

In the film Silhouette/Shadow, it first shows That Man pouring black ink as This Man hangs himself by a noose. The film then cuts to the footage of the painting exhibition of The Way of the Wandering Bird. As alluded by the juxtapositions of a wandering bird, a floating plastic bag, and crackling fireworks in the sky, the significance of death extends beyond physical mortality, and sheds light towards death as a symbolic self-corrective act towards one's narcissistic ego. According to Gao Xingjian’s description about This Man and That Man, they “are one and the same character” and even though “sometimes the words they speak cut across one another as if engaged in a dialogue, but these are actually the monologue of the same character” (Gao “Man” 76). It is therefore unclear who is the individual and who is the narcissistic ego, and by extension, whether the individual dies or whether the narcissistic ego dies.

The theme of death and freedom continues into the cinematic portrayal of all three sections of The Way of the Wandering Bird painting exhibition at La Vieille Charité. La Vieille Charité is an art museum that originally was a reception for beggars of Provence, as well as a hospital, hospice, and barracks. Further excerpts of The Way of the Wandering Bird are recited, but this time they
are visualised by the black-themed paintings and the white-themed paintings themselves. Of particular importance, though, is the depiction of the third section of the exhibition, which takes place inside a chapel with an oval dome at the centre of La Vieille Charité. Instead of readings from the poem, the painting is accompanied by Johann Sebastian Bach’s *Mass in B Minor* (1733–1738), a musical piece which was Bach’s last major composition before his death. With that being said, *Mass in B Minor* is not a requiem, but rather a piece that evokes the spirituality of the listener. Several zoom-in shots are focussed on a painting of a black cross with birds resting on it. However, when the painting is filmed from a distance, it may appear to be people resting on the cross (fig. 8). While previous scenes of the freedom-seeking individual, the carefree wandering bird, and death have been psychological, Bach’s serene choral and orchestral arrangements introduce a spiritual and even transcendent dimension to the portrayal of death and freedom.

The spiritual tone of the film *Silhouette/Shadow* extends into the rehearsal and performance of the opera *Snow in August* at the Marseille Opera House. Plot-wise, *Snow in August* is a loose adaptation of the canonical Buddhist text *Platform Sutra*. It dramatises the life stories of the Sixth Patriarch Huineng. Although Huineng is traditionally viewed as a religious leader who is essential to the popularisation of Buddhism in China, Gao Xingjian seeks to portray Huineng as a free thinker who liberates Buddhism from religious institutions, and promotes the universal notion of self-salvation (Fong ix). Therefore, even though *Snow in August* is about Gao’s understanding of Huineng and Bud-
dhism, it is not an opera that presents Buddhism as a religion that offers spiritual comfort or support. Instead, Buddhism is “a life experience and an aesthetic” (Gao & Liu 301).

Gao Xingjian’s unconventional approach towards Buddhism is evident in his theatrical vision for *Snow in August*. As can be seen in the rehearsal and performance footage in the film *Silhouette/Shadow*, the production of *Snow in August* cannot be categorised as European nor Asian. Although Gao’s theatre is well-known for its minimalistic production reminiscent of Chinese *xiqu*, *Snow in August* is an opera performance on a full-size stage, with a large cast of over 200 actors, and using large props like tall stone pillars and even a rain machine (fig. 9). At the same time, under Gao’s directions, *Snow in August* seeks to deliver a type of opera that was of “four unlikes” (*si bu xiang*) (Huang 372): unlike Western opera; unlike *jingju* (Peking opera); unlike dance; unlike *huaju* (drama). Such defiance towards conventions becomes a challenge for the performers. For example, Wu Hsing-kuo, one of the most celebrated Peking Opera actors of his generation in Taiwan, plays the lead role of Huineng. During the rehearsals, Gao asked Wu to “simplify again” his theatrical gestures, and do away with his foundational training as a Peking opera performer (Chou 157). Although Gao has casted an experienced ensemble of Peking opera performers, what he envisions is a performance that neutralises the Peking Operatic training, in which the actor is in a state of in-betweenness of his actor’s self and the role that he plays (Chou 127). For Gao, the state of the neutral actor is the state where the actor is truly performing the role, rather than being the role.
In the film Silhouette/Shadow, the most iconic display of Wu Hsing-kuo's performance as a neutral actor is the scene where Huineng is about to die. Wu's movements are simple and unpretentious. In contrast to the other performance footage of Snow in August, there is no dialogue included. All of the conversation between Huineng and his disciples regarding the inheritance of the Patriarch's kasaya robe are edited out from the film. Instead, only Huineng's silent and slow movements in burning his robe, and then passing away in meditation with his two disciplines at his side, are shown (fig. 10). Huineng does not follow the tradition of passing the symbols of the patriarchate to another person before his death because

What's the use of holding on to the robe if there is no Dharma?

Ever since the beginning, there has never been anything. The kasaya robe, like all things, is extraneous to the self. If someone takes the robe and almsbowl and stirs up trouble, then our order will be destroyed. After I'm gone, there will be heresies that will wreak havoc everywhere. But there will also be people who will be willing to brace slanders, and willing to sacrifice their lives to promote the cause and the teachings of our order.

Gao La Silhouette 55–56

The Dharma represents the realization of the Buddha's basic truths of the universe, such as non-self and non-thought. Such realisations are essential to the path of attaining enlightenment, and hence liberation from human sufferings.
Huineng’s decision to break away from the patriarch tradition is centred upon the Dharma. Instead of following the Buddhist institutional practice for the sake of adhering to tradition, Huineng boldly asserts once again that the external objects do not carry the Dharma. Even the *kasaya* robe is only proof of the existence of the Dharma, not the Dharma itself. In addition, Huineng is unable to identify an individual worthy of succeeding the patriarch. And an unworthy successor would only cause chaos amongst his followers over power and prestige. Nevertheless, Huineng appears to be cautiously optimistic, and believes that the absence of a patriarch would result in the spreading of the word of the Dharma to become a responsibility of all individuals.

Since Xu Shuya’s musical contributions are heard throughout the film *Silhouette/Shadow* as well as in the silent death scene of Huineng, it forms an auditory cycle of the explorations of the themes of death and liberty in the poem and painting *The Way of the Wandering Bird*, the play *The Man Who Questions Death*, and *Snow in August*. All three works deal with the relationship between the notions of freedom and mortality: an individual’s narcissism can create an illusion of liberation from all restrictions, including death, like a wandering bird soaring in the air, or an old man being canonised as a piece of contemporary art, or the status as a leader of the Buddhist religion. However, in face of mortality, such illusions immediately vanish, and the individual experiences a symbolic rebirth into a more humble, ego-less version of himself, like the second-person voice who seeks a place that is neither heaven nor hell, or the cold and observant That Man, or a leader-less religion of Buddhism.
The last sequence of the film *Silhouette/Shadow* shows the white plastic bag again floating above a windy beach in Marseille. It is later revealed that the secret of the floating plastic bag is a man hanging it in the air with a fishing rod (fig. 11). The inclusion of this humorous behind-the-scenes footage further affirms the superficiality of the floating plastic bag, and implicitly asks the audience once more: Would you still want to be carefree and be immortal if it means that you are a floating plastic bag? Gao Xingjian offers no conclusion on this. Instead, in the final shot of the film, he walks away from the camera, all alone.

6 Conclusion: Escaping Prestige

Neither freedom nor oppression are presented as absolutes in Gao Xingjian’s creative work. And the Nobel’s prestige, despite its illusion of immortality, is also a conducive source of expression for Gao. Prior to *l’année Gao*, Gao Xingjian had never produced a transmedial project where an aesthetic experience coherently spreads across multiple media channels. Regarding his experience of creating for *l’année Gao*, Gao remarked that he had to be completely immersed in the creative process: “Almost night and day. Without ever taking a day off. A break would interfere with the pace of creation and it would dispel the concentration.” Aside from Gao’s polymathic talents and sheer determination, *l’année Gao* would not have been possible without sufficient cultural capital, and economic capital. It was reported that the City Government of Marseille was prepared to invest one million USD on *l’année Gao*, an unusually large investment of resources on an event devoted to a single artist (Yang “Gao”). The Taipei production of Gao Xingjian’s opera *Snow in August* also received funding of 15 million NTD from the state-affiliated Council for Cultural Affairs of Taiwan (Yang “Gao”). It was only when Gao became a Nobel laureate that he accumulated the necessary capital to materialize a project of such tight timeframe and panoramic scope. To be clear, I am not implying that transmedial content must always involve a large budget. Rather, I argue that Gao Xingjian’s understanding of death is expansive, which therefore requires substantial financial, political, and human resources to realize a transmedial expression of death.

As independent, stand-alone works created for *l’année Gao*, the poem and painting *The Way of the Wandering Bird*, the play *The Man Who Questions Death*, the opera *Snow in August*, and the film *Silhouette/Shadow* all tackle a diverse range of themes with different settings and medial approaches. However, the theme of death surfaces from a transmedial reading of these works as presented in *Silhouette/Shadow*. As I have illustrated in my close-reading of the film, its visuals like the flying birds and floating plastic bag; its soundtrack featuring Xu
Shuya and Bach; and its recital of *The Way of the Wandering Bird* poem, complement with each other to form a web of connections that ties together the painting, the drama, the opera, and the film together as one coherent portrayal of the illusion of post-Nobel immortality. Such an introspective and transmedial reflection about the constructedness of fame and canonisation is what I deem as Gao's "second escape" from Nobel prestige.

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**Works Cited**


