



Research on the Symbols in Jia Aili's Paintings— Taking the “Youthful Figure” in His Series Works as an Example

Yong Zhao

Northeast Normal University, Changchun 130024, Jilin, China.

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***Corresponding author:** Yong Zhao, Northeast Normal University, Changchun 130024, Jilin, China.

Abstract

Jia Aili is a prominent figure among contemporary young painters in China. Born in Liaoning in 1979, he currently resides in Beijing, where he actively engages in artistic creation. Since 2007, his works have attracted significant attention in the international art world and are recognized as a "pivotal force in transforming the new generation of Chinese painters." Jia Aili's paintings often explore themes such as "life alienation" and "existential crisis." In his works, he emphasizes the tragic spirit of actively resisting fate and the beauty of humanity, showcasing an aesthetic that is grand, sublime, and passionate. This paper focuses on the 'youthful figure' in Jia Aili's art, employing Susan Langer's theories and methods of art symbolism to analyze the organic connections between symbols, context, and their meanings in his creations. By tracing the development and artistic principles of his paintings, this study aims to provide new perspectives and references for interpreting Jia Aili's work.

Keywords

"Youth image"; Symbols; Painting; Symbolism

In 2021, Jia Aili's major solo exhibition in China opened at the Tank Shanghai Art Center, featuring his new work "Noon," in which a recurring "youth image" appears once again. Over the 16 years since the artist first depicted this image in 2005, the "youth image" has become a significant symbol in his paintings, embodying his philosophical reflections on life and art. Therefore, this paper will use the "youth image," a typical symbol in Jia Aili's paintings, as a case study to explore its contextual generation, evolution trajectory, and social implications.

1. The Context of the Development of "Youth Imagery"

The theory of "semiotics" was introduced into the field of aesthetics and put into practice by the renowned American philosopher and aesthetician, Susanne Langer. She defined art as "the creation of symbolic forms that express human emotions" (Susanne Langer, 1986). From Jia Aili's artistic journey, it is evident that the artist's choice of symbols stems from his life experiences, as well as his emotional responses and sensitivity to his living environment. Thus, Susanne Langer's "semiotic aesthetics" offers a productive framework for analyzing the contextual development of symbols in Jia Aili's paintings.

1.1 Childhood Experiences and Cultural Memory

Jia Aili's childhood is frequently referenced in interviews and critical articles about him. His great-grandfather traveled in Russia from a young age, while his grandfather was an avid reader of Marxist literature. Before Jia Aili entered

the academy, he grew up immersed in Russian literature known for its tragic epics and elegies. This early family environment and literary exposure laid the foundation for Jia Aili's introspective nature and empathetic disposition.

Cultural memory, defined as the interaction between the present and past within a socio-cultural context, encompasses individual, collective, and national memories, and "sites of memory." According to (Astrid Erll & Ansgar Nünning, 2021). Jia Aili's cultural memory is not merely personal but also collective, forming part of the shared cultural memory of the Northeastern region, particularly among the people of Dandong. From the First Sino-Japanese War to the Korean War, this small city on the Yalu River has endured numerous conflicts and periods of recovery. Jia Aili's home was near the Yalu River, although he did not personally experience these historical events, this shared cultural context has become an integral part of his memory.

Jia Aili stated, "For us, grand historical narratives often lack the true integration of personal emotions or experiences. As an individual creator, you must first empathize deeply and experience profoundly" (Jia Aili, 2022). The visual imagery memories from Jia Aili's formative years have also profoundly influenced him. For instance, images depicting the 1986 Soviet "Chernobyl nuclear disaster" reflect the circumstances of the previous generation living under fear. The artist collects, dissects, and reconstructs these materials, creating new visual imagery from fragments of memories across different stages. For Jia Aili, cultural memory serves as the connection point to past history, the source of his inspiration, and the stage for his creative work.



Image Source: JIA AILI STARDUST HERMIT (2017).

Figure 1. Jia Aili's Creative Manuscripts and Literature Sources.

1.2 Growth and Symbol Selection

After three consecutive years of unsuccessful attempts, Jia Aili was finally admitted to the Oil Painting Department of Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts in 2001, achieving the highest score in his specialized courses. The artist recalls a professor telling him that it is an artist's duty to depict the cruel, desolate, and tragic aspects of life—a lesson that has left a deep impression on him. The six years of study at Lu Xun inevitably left a profound mark on Jia Aili. After earning his master's degree, Jia Aili remained at the academy as a faculty member before moving to Beijing, where he settled in Heiqiao Village.

During his youth, Jia Aili's developmental path was marked by continual change, with successive disorienting experiences profoundly impacting his emotions and psyche. The ongoing influence of childhood experiences and cultural memory, coupled with the complexities of real life, heightened the artist's sensitivity to human existence and inner spiritual emotions. He transformed his own image into the central figure in his works, using art as a medium to respond, depicting the dramatic environmental changes and the crisis of individual alienation. The "youth image" in his works serves as a symbolic prototype of the artist's self-image, where all his emotions are visually manifested and affirmed in this symbolic representation.

2. The Extension and Evolution of the "Youthful Image"

Susan Langer argues: "Artistic creation must follow the laws of 'life form,' which is characterized by organicity, motion, rhythm, and growth." (Susan Langer, 1983). Jia Aili repeatedly introduces the symbolic "Youth Figure"—a representation of his self-image—into various imagined landscapes, where, according to the artist's evolving perception of life and emotional journey, it is sometimes depicted as small and isolated, hidden within desolate lands; at other times, it struggles and is unsettled, intertwined with chaotic reality; and at times, it stands tall, advancing in pursuit of unknown hope. The "Youth Figure" bears witness to the evolution of the artist's paintings and reflects his

continuous transcendence of personal emotions.

2.1 Exploring Symbols: The Lonely Soul on Earth

The series of works from 2006-2007 marks the first phase of Jia Aili's artistic journey. In these early works, the artist consistently adorns the "Youth Figure" with a distinctive gas mask and places it naked in a vast "natural setting," emphasizing the figure's diminutive presence amid the expansive earth and sky.

Jia Aili reflects: "Human beings and their thoughts are insignificant; the sky presses down, the earth supports, and everything we do seems trivial" (Fu Xiaodong & Sun Ning, 2008). In "February Story Forever (Sea)" (Fig. 2), he deliberately diminishes the "Youth Figure," blurring its features to render it a pale, ghostly presence kneeling. The artist uses a figurative approach, presented through a panoramic view and somber blue-green tones to evoke a grand, desolate landscape. The work, imbued with a classical sense of elegiac solitude and melancholy, reflects the artist's feelings of loneliness, melancholy, and self-imposed exile. The "Youth Figure" thus became an enduring symbolic image in Jia Aili's artistic repertoire, representing a recurring motif in his subsequent works.

2.2 Symbolic Extension—Struggling Lives in Chaos

The transition of the "Youth Figure" wearing a gas mask from serene, desolate landscapes to the chaotic and tumultuous "Mad Scene" signifies the end of the first phase of Jia Aili's artistic journey and the beginning of the second phase. The works from 2007-2009 show a significant stylistic shift compared to the first phase.

At this stage, the "Youth Figure" evolves from a small, lonely soul into a prominent, upright figure. Although the character still wears the gas mask from earlier works, it is now brought to the foreground and progressively enlarged.

In "Mad Scene 3" (Fig. 3), the youth carries an old, discarded television and walks through a chaotic, industrialized artificial landscape, enveloped by the cold, absurd, and eerie ruins of scientific machinery. In this scene, with glaring light gray tones blending with an apocalyptic industrial landscape. The release of emotions and inner life seems to burst forth, liberated from the constraints of calm narration, oppression, and loneliness, highlighting the extreme discomfort and struggle of the "Youth Figure." The character wandering through the ruins clearly receives a conscious spiritual reflection through the artist's powerful construction abilities.

2.3 Evolution of Symbols—The Youth Advancing

After relocating to Beijing, Jia Aili embarked on his career as an artist, which marked a significant transformation in both his identity and creative environment. This period saw him exploring new artistic forms, with the "Youth Figure" in his works from 2010 onwards evolving significantly. The once-present gas mask symbol is no longer featured, signifying the onset of the third phase in Jia Aili's artistic journey.

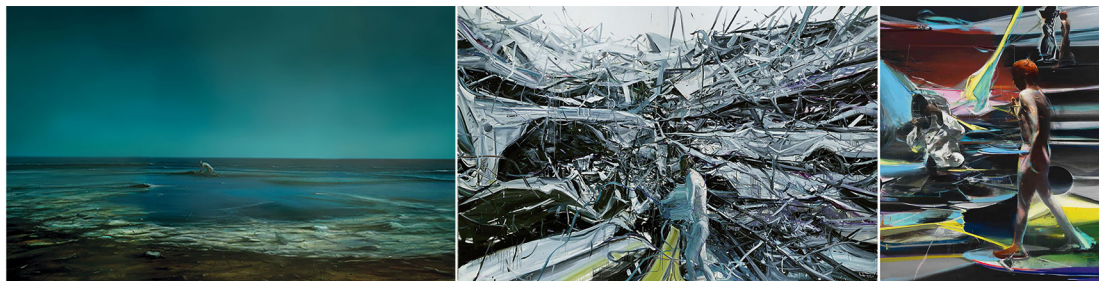


Image Credit: The above images are from JIA AILI STARDUST HERMIT (2017).

Figure 2. (The left) "February Story: Forever (Sea)" Oil on Canvas, 200×300cm×3, 2006.

Figure 3. (The midst) "Mad Landscape 3" Oil on Canvas, 267×400cm, 2007.

Figure 4. (The right) "Untitled" Oil on Canvas, 210×270cm, 2015.

During this phase, Jia Aili constructs a multi-dimensional, heterogeneous space on the two-dimensional plane by manipulating space. In "Untitled" (Fig. 4), vibrant, bright color blocks are inserted into the canvas, floating through the air like flying discs. These blocks seem to either interlock or create new internal spaces by tearing them apart. The artist places the central figure on these discs. This figure remains the naked "Youth Figure" from previous works, but now, it is no longer masked. Instead, the entire head is enveloped in upward-burning flames, navigating fearlessly through the surreal space created by the artist. Complementing this are newly introduced figures in the artwork. The

interaction of different characters and fates adds greater depth and tension to the scene, transitioning the "Youth Figure" from a personal to a more universal destiny.

3. The Symbolic Meaning and Universal Value of the “Youthful Figure”

According to Susan Langer, "Art symbols are ultimate representations—images that cannot be articulated through language and are characterized by their emotional depth, vitality, and distinctiveness." In Jia Aili's works, the "youth imagery" is not a literal depiction or representation of a specific individual. Instead, it serves as a conceptual medium through which the artist expresses and reflects on the human condition. This imagery is imbued with profound symbolic and metaphorical significance, representing broader existential themes rather than individual portrayals.

3.1 Symbolism of Solitude and Crisis

The youth wearing a gas mask is a central figure in Jia Aili's early paintings, serving as a symbolic self-representation of the artist. The gas mask, originally a military device for protection against toxic gases, is associated with war and violence, covering the youth's face with the gas mask seems to deliberately hinder his freedom of expression. Jia Aili places this figure in desolate and barren settings to convey his profound frustration.

British poet T.S. Eliot, in his poem "The Waste Land", describes a Europe ravaged by war as a vast wasteland obscured by clouds, with drained life-giving waters and burning fires of desire, filled with ghostly apparitions. Jia Aili's work vividly reflects Eliot's portrayal of this desolate world. The youth figure encapsulates not just individual fate but also the pervasive pessimism, alienation, and emptiness present in modern society. The artist conveys a sense of helplessness toward reality through grandiose, romanticized imagery.

3.2 The Symbolism of Release and Resistance

"The beauty of tragedy lies in the sublime nature of passion; the essence of tragedy is fundamentally sublime, and any form of tragedy inevitably carries a sense of the sublime" (Xie Bailiang, 2021). In the "Mad Scene" series, the "youth figure" is shown struggling anxiously amid the chaotic wreckage of scientific machinery. While the works carry a tragic core, they also exhibit a strong sense of combativeness and a forward-driving spirit, presenting an optimistic emotional tone—this is a manifestation of the artist's self-awareness.

Faced with the crisis of mental alienation, the artist hopes that youth will rise up, confront the dangers of their environment, and navigate the void of time and spirit with spatial movement, thereby finding meaning in existence. He envisions breaking thoughts out of their confines, battling with the chaotic scientific machinery, tearing through the tumultuous ruins, and crying out to escape the rigid constraints of thought until complete liberation is achieved.

3.3 Symbolism of Hope and Transcendence

Jia Aili often describes himself as a seeker of hope, and the process of artistic creation is also a continuous pursuit and transcendence of consciousness and spirit, both self-consistent and healing. In the third stage of his artistic process, the "youth figure" stands tall and moves forward, like a matchstick igniting thousands of crimson clouds in the dark sky. This represents the new meaning the artist has imbued into the "youth figure," depicting the youth with a powerful force in search of hope, overcoming the despair of tragic adversity, and transcending both the tragic fate and the experience of tragedy. The artist transforms the spiritual quest of humanity into the physical act of walking, further revealing the persistent spirit of pursuing freedom and transcending limits, and the profound awakening under the harsh blows of fate.

3.4 Warning and Awakening to Life

Hannah Arendt posits that "people can acquire rights by birth, transitioning from natural life to political life, but they can also lose these rights; such rights can be stripped away, reducing political life to mere biological existence." (Hannah Arendt, 2021). Whenever the "youth figure" appears in Jia Aili's paintings, it is always depicted in a "naked" state. This portrayal is a symbolic responsibility assigned by the artist, serving as a warning and an awakening to the "bare life" condition of human existence.

When discussing art's engagement with humanity, Jia Aili stated, "In my personal experience, organizing a painting, which involves fundamental elements of art, is a constant interrogation of the most profound and nuanced perceptions

related to human nature" (Jia Aili, 2022). This idea runs through every painting, with every "youth figure" offering a continual prompt for spiritual awareness. As we gaze upon the youth in his paintings, our thoughts seem to align with this survivor who has overcome all obstacles. Though our existence in the cosmos may be as insignificant as a speck of dust, art's illumination offers us insight into the unknown and the future.

4. Conclusion

Jia Aili's creative process reveals the enduring influence of his childhood experiences, cultural memories, and personal growth on his artistic style. In his works, the "Youth Image" represents a symbolic manifestation of ordinary human experience, serving as a medium through which the artist explores and expresses existential themes. This image combines a profound epic quality with a blend of illusion and reality. As Jia Aili places this image in various contexts, its symbolic meaning evolves, illustrating not only the despair of barren landscapes but also the resilience in chaotic environments and the illumination of thought amidst turmoil. Its trajectory mirrors a grand, somber epic and an endless ode to life.

The "Youth Image" symbolizes the artist's profound engagement with art and life, showcasing continuous innovation and self-transcendence. Jia Aili's artistic journey continues, and we anticipate the next chapter in the evolution of the "Youth Image."

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