

# The Chinese *Yin-Yang* Thinking in Antoni Tàpies' Artistic Creation

Mei-Hsin Chen

University of Navarra, Pamplona, Spain

The writings and artistic works of Antoni Tàpies (2009; 2011) mirror the influences of the cosmic vision of the Chinese *yin-yang*. Signs, numbers, and creative procedures related to this correlative thought prevail in his art. Tàpies integrated different iconological codes from the ancient Chinese thinking into his art to question the existential meaning of the universe and to express his thoughts on the cultural and socio-political controversies of his time. In other words, the images, media, and techniques that he utilized for his works were extensions of his life experiences intertwined with various socio-historical facts and his personal feelings.

*Keywords:* Antoni Tàpies, theory of art, aesthetics, contemporary art, *yin-yang* thinking, *Book of Changes*

## Introduction: Chinese Thinking and Antoni Tàpies' Poetics

Audiences of Antoni Tàpies' art usually consider it enigmatic, finding it difficult to understand his visual languages. Tàpies did not intentionally seek to be hermetic or arcane. The mysterious or equivocal character of his works derives from the dynamic nature of his artistic creation, which, according to himself, is constituted of the artist, the media he uses, the artwork itself, his audience, and the life experiences of both the artist and the viewer (Tàpies, 2011). Such conception of art is closely linked to Chinese *yin-yang* thinking, which permeates the ancient Chinese culture and leaves its unique mark on the Chinese *Dao* philosophy that Tàpies admired and was influenced by (2009; 2011).

Tàpies' works fuse poor or impoverished materials with signs that unite Western and Eastern cultures to create works covered with graffiti-like expressions. Tàpies' alchemical practice mixes existential and spiritual questions, which are revealed by using varied materials to create his matter paintings or found objects (Pérez Art Museum Miami, n.d.). Beyond communicating, art for Tàpies is expressing, seeking, knowing, seeing, contemplating, meditating, and experiencing the transient and the permanent. This article will examine how Tàpies was nurtured by the Chinese aesthetic rooted in *yin-yang* thinking, whose changing quality characterizes both his works and his creative method.

From his father, Josep Tàpies i Mestres, Tàpies learned about ancient China's classic writings through the book *The Wisdom of China and India*, a work compiled and edited by Lin Yutang (1945). The volume is full of words known in the Western world, such as *Dao*, *Yijing (Book of Changes)*, *yin-yang*, and so on. Lin's book further mentions numerous classical texts that might be less known to the non-Chinese speaking reader in the

second half of the 20th century, e.g., the text of *Huainanzi*, which was extensively commented on by Alan Watts in his posthumous publication *Tao: The Watercourse Way*. Watts' writing considerably influenced Tàpies' aesthetics (Tàpies, 2009, pp. 165-166; Watts & Huang, 1975). Reading these Chinese writings allowed Tàpies to obtain a broad vision of Chinese philosophy and become familiar with *yin-yang*'s correlative thought. Not limiting himself to Lin's publications, however, Tàpies studied other works related to the ideas of Zen, Neo-Confucianism, and Chinese art and aesthetics.

Given the breadth and complexity of Tàpies' artistic corpus impregnated with the *yin-yang* thought, this article will focus on exploring the marks that the *yin-yang* thinking might leave on his works and his unique creative process featured in *Tàpies*, the documentary by New Zealand filmmaker Gregory Rood in 1990, collaboration with the BBC and TVE Catalunya (Serra, 1990; Rood, 2011). Rood's documentary analyzes Tàpies' different vital artistic stages in which the spiritual and ethical character of his works is emphasized (Rood, 2011).

### **Revealing the Presence of the *Book of Changes* in Tàpies' Creative Process Through Gregory Rood's Documentary *Tàpies***

The notion of *yin-yang* is a principle of non-dualistic duality in ancient Chinese philosophy. It describes how the apparently opposing forces in the natural world are complementary, correlative, interconnected, and interdependent powers. In other words, the *yin* and *yang* elements are the same object in two different states. These two primordial states are regulated by a kind of energy that gives life to animate and inanimate things, including works of art and artistic creations (Acker, 1954, p. 11). Along with this complementarity, the perennial transitory, or changing character, is also the essential component of the cosmological thought of *yin-yang*, whose conception has its origin in the *Book of Changes*, in which the two branches of Chinese philosophy, Confucianism and Taoism, have their common root and which exerted significant intellectual and existential influences on Tàpies.

Before becoming a book of wisdom and a treatise on political philosophy and practice, the *Book of Changes* was used as an oracle text for centuries in ancient China. The oldest oracles were limited to "yes" or "no" answers, and this type of oracle is the basis of the *Book of Changes*. The positive response was indicated with a full line "—" and the negative with a broken line "- -" (Wilhelm & Hoffmann, 1976, p. 4). Later, due to the need for more significant oracular differentiation, the combinations of the simple lines were multiplied. In this way, the eight trigrams and, afterwards, the 64 hexagrams were born, conceived as images and changing phenomena that can be perceived in the physical world (Wilhelm & Hoffmann, 1976, p. 8). However, trigrams and hexagrams do not represent things in their state of being, but rather in their state of becoming. Each hexagram has its corresponding numerical sequence, which, together with the whole and broken lines, expresses the universe's cosmic, social, and psychological situations (Wilhelm & Hoffmann, 1976, pp. 419-469). Each line represents a particular situation, hinting at the appropriate personal decision and way of behaving within the given circumstances. However, among the 384 lines are static lines with no intrinsic sense. These lines are represented by the number 7 (positive, or *yang*) or 8 (negative, or *yin*) (Wilhelm & Hoffmann, 1976, p. 38). These two numbers appear in Tàpies' matter painting, filmed by Rood, at the low right corner (Rood, 2011; 17:15). The number 8 is not only associated with the *yin* principle or with negative energy, it also

refers to the total number of trigrams and eighth hexagram—which means union—and, as the *Book of Changes* states, it is about joining with others to complement and help each other by staying together (Wilhelm & Hoffmann, 1976, p. 98). One might wonder if, with these numerical signs, Tàpies wanted to allude to the nature and reality of the conjugal love between himself and his wife, Teresa Barba i Fàbregas.

Above the group number 87 figured in the painting in Rood's film are the numbers 8 and 1 (Rood, 2011, 17:15), which, in my opinion, are akin to the notion of *yin-yang* presented in the *Book of Changes*. According to the *Book of Changes*, the first of the eight trigrams and the 64 hexagrams correspond to the number 1 (Wilhelm & Hoffmann, 1976, pp. 5, 37, 51-57, 469). Both signs mean the creative that should be interpreted in a double sense: in relation with its action in the universe, which expresses the creative action of the divinity, and with its action in the human world, which manifests the creative action of the sage or ruler that awakens and develops things of more elevated nature in men through their creative power (Wilhelm & Hoffmann, 1976, p. 51). Moreover, it is associated with the strong, the sky, the luminous, the active, and the intellectual that comes from the spirit; on the other hand, it represents the positive energy without weakness (Wilhelm & Hoffmann, 1976, pp. 5, 37, 51-57, 419-420).

The number 8 is associated with the *yin* principle, or negative energy, and refers to the total number of trigrams and the eighth hexagram that means union and staying together. This is how the *Book of Changes* explains the hexagram 8: "The waters on the surface of the earth flow together wherever they can, as for example in the ocean, where all the rivers come together" (*I Ching* Translated by Richard Wilhelm", 1950). Moreover, the hexagram 8 is related to the 29, which also symbolizes the water, and to the 48, that means the well, whose sinogram "井" looks like jail bars. We can argue that the number 29 can allude to the 29 Basque and Catalan political prisoners who escaped from the Segovia prison in 1976. The attributes of hexagram 29 include the cloudy, the past, the red, the blood, the heart, the hidden, and the time of hard work (Wilhelm & Hoffmann, 1976, pp. 439-440).

The hexagram 48, which refers to the well, was the center of ancient China's social organization and around which the fields and families were distributed. Thus, the set of all the fields had the structure similar to a magic square, in which the sum of the cross numbers, both diagonally and vertically-horizontally, was 18 (Rood, 2011, 14:01), and this means that the eight families residing in the fields around the well depend on joint work (Wilhelm & Hoffmann, 1976, p. 453). This is how the *Book of Changes* recounts the hexagram 48, meaning the well: "The town may be changed, but the well cannot be changed. The well neither decreases nor increases. They come and go and draw from the well..." (*I Ching* Translated by Richard Wilhelm", 1950). This text alludes to the fact that humankind keeps changing its structure, and that very different coexistence forms emerge throughout history. The image of the well is of life as an inexhaustible and unfathomable source for creating values and is not subject to the rigid circle of mechanical causality. Likewise, in the human soul, there is an inexhaustible supply of life. Nevertheless, life is not equally intense everywhere and in all situations (Wilhelm & Hoffmann, 1976, p. 454). The *Book of Changes* notes that the commitment to creating positive values and changing social structure is man's responsibility. This idea is a constant in Tàpies' writings (Tàpies, 2011). It would not be strange that Tàpies used the signs related to the hexagram 48 to allude to the socio-cultural controversies of his time, and to express the sacrifices that existed in society as a consequence of the political struggles against the Franco regime (Rood, 2011, 13:41-13:54, 14:01).

Each line of the trigrams and hexagrams is called *yao* ("Hexagrama (I Ching)", 2019), whose sinograma "爻" is composed of two forms similar to cross and to the alphabet "X", one of the most common signs in Tàpies' works. The "X" sign seems to be deeply linked to the concept of change (Rood, 2011, 17:34). In the *Book of Changes*, we find two sets of symbols representing the correlative mutation and the transitory character of *yin-yang*: "—x—" and "—o—", which mean, respectively, "*yin* becoming *yang*" and "*yang* becoming *yin*" (Wilhelm & Hoffmann, 1976, pp. 23-26). These symbols mirror the central thought of the *Book of Changes*: the becoming, transformation, and mutation. The foundation that everything that exists changes is represented in the book with *Taiji*, whose original meaning is the ridgepole (Wilhelm & Hoffmann, 1976, pp. 41-42) or the simple line that alludes to the master beam, the entrance to the manifestation, the first division, and the one (Wilhelm & Hoffmann, 1976, p. 3). With the one, the duality, the world of opposites, is born, and the space is divided into an up and a down, a right and a left, and a front and a back (Wilhelm & Hoffmann, 1976, p. 3). These two opposing concepts were applied to the bright and obscure sides of a mountain and river, whose sinograms are respectively "山" and "川". In the case of the mountain (山), the south side is the light and luminous part (*yang*) and the north, the dark and nebulous part (*yin*). In the case of the river (川) seen from above, the front side is the clear and shiny (*yang*) because it reflects the light, and the back side is the shadowy (*yin*) (Wilhelm & Hoffmann, 1976, p. 42). In this way, the two opposite expressions were applied to the fundamental alternative states of being (Wilhelm & Hoffmann, 1976, p. 2). In my opinion, this notion of *yin-yang* is faithfully captured in Rood's documentary, in which we can recognize the Chinese characters of the mountain "山" and the river "川" (Rood, 2011, 12:33, 14:08-14:10). In other words, everything that exists in the natural world is structured based on the transformations of the *yin* and *yang* energies. Later on, when Chinese philosophers pondered the idea of an originating principle of the universe, they came to represent the symbol of *Taiji* with a circle divided into light (*yang*) and shadow (*yin*), whose simple line became the shape similar to the movement of dragon and the alphabetic "S" (Wilhelm & Hoffmann, 1976, p. 41), which is another sign used by Tàpies in his work filmed by Rood (2011, 9:05; 14:25-14:28).

The *Book of Changes* also comments on the symbolism and meaning of the different colors: white, black, bluish black, yellow, dark yellow, red, deep, or intense red, and so on (Wilhelm & Hoffmann, 1976). White is the color of the *yin* principle and simplicity (Rood, 2011, 6:36, 7:52). Black means, paradoxically, the earth or the dirt of the earth, the Heaven, and the intensified darkness. Blue-black represents the Creative. Dark yellow is associated with the dragon, the lightning and the mixture of the dark sky and the yellow earth. The deep or intense red symbolizes the beginning of light or the first hexagram and trigram *Qian*, which also symbolizes the Creative, the Heaven, and the Father. As mentioned above, red is the color of blood and represents the hexagram 29, which is the water and the unfathomable (Wilhelm & Hoffmann, 1976, pp. 439-440). All these colors used to be part of Tàpies' palette, and he incorporated them into the painting that appears in Rood's documentary (Rood, 2011, 6:17-17:34).

The notion of *yin-yang* was later commented on in *Huainanzi*, a text dated from the second century (Graham, 1986, pp. 28-31), and in *Correcting the Ignorant* by Zhang Zai, a Chinese philosopher and cosmologist of the 11th century (Chan, 1963, pp. 495-514). Tàpies was probably acquainted with both texts through the writings of different contemporary sinologists, such as Angus Charles Graham (1986) and Wing-tsit Chan (1963). The *Huainanzi* says: "The superimposed quintessence of Heaven and Earth became the *Yang* and *Yin*.... Heaven

received the sun, moon and stars, Earth received the showers of water and the dust and dirt” (Graham, 1986, pp. 30-31). Zhang developed this notion and wrote that the gradually progressive movement of *yin* and *yang* is transformative (Wang & Ding, 2010, p. 48). In addition to noting the changing character and polarity of *yin-yang*, Zhang emphasized that the elements of *yin* and *yang* are the two modes of existence of the life energy and added that they have three properties: “motion and stillness”; “contraction and extension”; and “coalescence and dispersal” (Wang & Ding, 2010, p. 49). We take the properties of “coalescence and dispersal” as an example to explain how they relate to *yin-yang* thinking. The nature of *yin* is coalescence and the nature of *yang* is dispersion. These two elements are in constant interaction. The disposition of *yang* is to disperse and spread; the disposition of *yin* is to unite and coagulate (Wang & Ding, 2010, pp. 39-57; Chan, 1963, pp. 495-514). Such *yin-yang* thinking is mirrored in Tàpies' creative process. He paid much attention to the two dynamic modes of existence of *yin-yang*. His idea of art as a projection of *yin-yang* thinking extended to the scope of the medium and method he used for his works of art. His creative procedure integrated the energies of *yin* and *yang* through the methods of dispersal and coalescence, which reflect the idea of “one object, but two states” (Rood, 2011, 9:05-11:03).

Tàpies was prone to combining contrasting colors and using expressive materials to emphasize the textures in a way that allowed him to accentuate their inherent qualities. For example, he integrated thick elements in his paintings because they could be manipulated with violence and allowed him to scrape their surface to make his artistic intention explicit (Rood, 2011, 6:17-17:34), revealing that art is not a perfect state but a transformative process and thus underlines the transitory character of everything earthly as narrated in the *Book of Changes* and *Huainanzi*. This last work expresses:

Heavens received the sun, moon and stars, Earth received the showers of water and the dust and dirt... When the *Yang* [energy] prevailed, it scattered to become rain and dew; when the *Yin* [energy] prevailed, it congealed to become frost and snow. (Graham, 1986, p. 31)

Along with the signs, media, and techniques that Tàpies liked to use, this group of actions, “scatter”, and “congeal”, became Tàpies' most essential methods of artistic creation (Rood, 2011, 9:05-11:03, 17:34). The material and formal components he employed to produce his art are seemingly committed to his life experience and his questioning of the meaning and destiny of human existence (Tàpies, 2009; 2011, pp. 66, 542-548).

## Conclusion

Influenced by the idea of *yin-yang*, Tàpies did not isolate his artworks from his creative process and cosmic vision because, for him, the creative act “proceeds from an individual live creature”, as John Dewey notes (Dewey, 1958, p. 82). The visual languages that Tàpies created through calligraphic and gestural procedures were the extension of his life experiences. In my opinion, Tàpies' conception of art echoes the notion of expressive object that Dewey explained in his work *Art as Experience* (Dewey, 1958, pp. 82-105). Dewey rejected the separation of artistic objects from the conditions of everyday experience in which an individual's aspirations, sufferings, and achievements converge. Furthermore, the work of art is not an object or product but an active process that integrates the experience of production (art) and the experience of perception (aesthetics). In other words, the expression of an artistic object is not only what is expressed but the very action of expressing constituted by the process of production and the experience of producing (Dewey, 1958, pp.

82-105; Catoir, 1991, p. 73). Dewey and Tàpies both argue that any authentic experience allows for a better understanding of the aesthetic experience than any artistic object separated from any form of life experience. For both thinkers, there is no dissolution between what is contemplated and what is lived; there is no separation between what one experiences and creates. Terms such as “expression” and “creation” refer to both an action and its result.

The inheritance of *yin-yang* thought seems to be evident in Tàpies' artistic production filmed by Rood (Rood, 2011, 17:34). However, before concluding this text, it should be emphasized that the reading and interpretation of the pictorial work in question remains open, in a limited way, as Tàpies would have expressed (Tàpies, 2011, pp. 178-179).

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