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# **Representations - Practice - Spectatorship**

**A Study of Haptic Relations between Independent Cinema and  
Market- led Urbanization in contemporary China.**

**Andreas Tibrand\***

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**Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies  
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\*Andreas Tibrand was a student on the Masters Programme in Asian Studies, Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies, Lund University between 2005-2007. This is his Master thesis.  
E-mail: [andreastibrand@yahoo.com](mailto:andreastibrand@yahoo.com)

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## Abstract

This text attempts to describe and analyze the haptic relations between non-official, i.e. independent, cinema and market-led urbanization in contemporary China. From the theoretical context of recent scholarship on Visual Culture and film history, it is argued that motion pictures and the Visual are in fact crucial to modernization. Using the theories of Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau the text explores how (social) space and cinema are linked in a reciprocal visual-spatial production. Based on a fieldwork period and visual studies the cinematic-urban nexus and have been studied from the concepts of *representation*, *practice* and *spectatorship*. That is, the relation between independent cinema's critical and challenging representations and the spectacle of hegemonic economy. The sensory interaction and actual production of independent cinema within marketized (social) space and informal distribution's creation of new types of spectatorship. The text shows that independent cinema has managed to develop and evolve out of relative marginality to temporally produce an alternative vision and independent space between state and market. However, nothing has indicated that this process is a part of a wider development of civility or civic responsiveness.

Keywords: China, production of space, social space, modernization, motion pictures, film, visual culture, everyday life

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## INTRODUCTION\*

This text attempts to investigate and reconsider the relations and development of the modern City and the Visual. More specifically, the text concerns the relations and development of non-official cinema and market-led modernization/urbanization in the context of contemporary China (P.R.C.).

My working assumption is that non-official cinema in China constitutes a response to the social crises and fragmentation that have developed out of the market-led modernization project. Non-official or independent cinema in this way constitutes a *cinema of crisis* that has developed out of and in response to social crisis.

The practice of cinema cannot be understood merely as “text” or representations separated from social production/activity of society as a whole. Hence, in a given (modern) society cinema is conditioned to the same material base and social relations of production as all other forms of production. However cinema can relate to the material base and social relations in a critical way. I will therefore argue that this *cinema of crisis* embodies a critical understanding of (social) space and the (social) relations it contains by constituting an alternative and critical methodology/ practice of (social) space.

Benjamin (1989, 1992, 2005) was one of the first to investigate the sensory linkages between the Visual and (urban) spatiality in the modern context. The visual-spatiality of urbanity was again raised in the 60s by the Situationists and Tschumi (1996) from a user/actor perspective. It was Lynch (1960), though, who popularized the visual aspect of urbanity from a planning perspective. Motion pictures had nevertheless been used by urban and social reformers as planning and lobbying tool since the 1930s (Gold & Ward, 1997). (See *The City* (1939) by Ralph Steiner and Willard van Dyke<sup>i</sup> on urban sprawl and *Arteries of New York City* (1941) by Encyclopedia Britannica Films, on traffic planning). By today the Visual and the *image* have become central to urban economy and governance (Broudehoux, 2004). Urban iconography has in fact become a valuable asset for regional economy.

Mostly, cinema’s connection to the city has been understood in representative terms as “text” or passive sociological artifacts (for example Durmaz, 1999). But from this perspective we “learn more about the image through the city, than about the city through the image” (Abbas, 2003:143).

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Recent research has nevertheless reassessed this understanding, from silent film research (Gunning 1986, Bruno 1997a 1997b, Farquhar & Berry 2005) and visual culture (Barber 2002, Snickars 2001, Lippit-Maizuita 2005) cinema has become the subject of socio- material and historic-material scholarship. The basic assumption is that *to each mode of production there is a corresponding mode of visual production* (Virilio 1998, Crary 1992). Accordingly the practice of cinema has been a significant indicator, participant and producer of modernization. Again, cinema and modernity, the modern city, constitute each other because they are made up of the same material base and social relations.

Similarly, social crises of modernity have been the crises of cinema, impacting both social and cinematic development. Deleuze (2003a:211, 2003b:xii) and Barber (2002) have argued that cinema in the West and in Japan developed, as cinemas of crises, responding to social crises of post-war modernization, i.e. Italy 1948 (*Neorealismo*), France 1958 (*nouvelle vague*), Germany 1968 (*das neue Kino*) and Japan (*Nuberu bagu* or Japanese new wave).

Abbas develops Deleuze's concept to a global perspective by using Hong Kong cinema at its most vital as a case in point. During this critical period, roughly 1984-1997, which led up to the handover/return, the city with its inhabitants became the subject of cinema<sup>ii</sup> and other types of artist practices (Abbas 1997, Clarke 2001). By responding to social crisis rather than concealing or being absorbed by crisis (like mainstream-entertainment motion pictures), cinematic practice developed into a self-reflective and critical methodology of (social) space. Abbas (1999) argues that this is a *cinematic* ability that defines *cinema of crisis* as such.

Against this preliminary framework, this text intends to explore the sensory nexus of haptic and reciprocal relations between contemporary non-official cinema and market-led urbanization in China. That is, how non-official cinema as a *cinema of crisis* responds to *social crisis*. More specifically I will study how this *cinema of crisis* responds to new conceptual categories of social space ("public" –"private"), from urban marginality to phantasmagoric visual consumption. And how these spaces relate to the production of cinema.

## THE PROPOSITION

Visual-spatial production will in this text be studied from three conceptual categories *representation*, *practice* and *spectatorship*. The first refers to how space is conceptualized, represented and mediated through visual discourses.

The second to how non-official cinema based on location filming and non-professional actors incorporates existing space and social relations into its practice. The third deals with the distribution and logistic of non-official imagery to various types of spectatorships.

In connection to these categories I will consider issues of cinema and civil-public space (Donald 2000, Virilio 1996), civic awareness (Ou 2004) and privacy (Pang 2004, McDougall 2001) suggesting reconsideration because of the complicity in the Chinese context.

This text incorporates an inter-disciplinary body of works and a fieldwork period in Shanghai and Beijing (September 1<sup>st</sup> – November 1<sup>st</sup> 2005) with the beneficial and financial support of SIDA (Swedish International Development Corporation Agency) in the form of a MFS (Minor Field Study) scholarship. The fieldwork encompasses observations, visits and interviews with relevant people outside the official film framework (one director, one distributor/curator and one critic).

Filmic material has been drawn from a wide range of resources (from street vendors to overseas, mail-order and internet) in various places (China, Hong Kong SAR, Japan, Germany, Sweden, Denmark). Like Abbas I understand this filmic material as “empirical evidence of an understanding of space but also that such evidence is not necessarily evident and only emerges through a visual-spatial critique” (2003:142). In many ways this text is an attempt at such critique.

Theoretically this analysis rests heavily upon Lefebvre (1991a, 1991b, 1996), Abbas and de Certeau (2002) whose thoughts might need some additional explanation and clarification. Therefore the remainder of this chapter will deal with this.

Some readers might find that concepts central to this text like *the urban*, *urbanism* and *everyday life/quotidian*, are not satisfactory discussed in the introduction. A number of concepts are however intentionally omitted in favor of an open-ended discussion throughout the text.

The main text is divided in two parts. *Part I: China through the Eye of Modernity* provides a short background on the visual-spatial history of modern China. It attempts to cover the significance of cinema for early modernity as for urban quotidian.

*Part II: The Cinematic City* covers the origins of non-official cinema, *independent cinema*, and outlines patterns of the social nexus between cinema and the city. According to the division above, this section is divided into *representation*, *practice* and *spectatorship*.

# SPACE – HISTORY AND METHODOLOGY

## Space – A Brief History of

Realizing that the geometric study of space merely outlines quantifiable features and that structuralist (sociologic, linguistic and anthropologic) research outlines things *in* space, the sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre called for a theory *of* space, the physical, mental and social aspects of space.

To Lefebvre, space is a socio-spatial continuum constituted – or *produced* – by the social relations it contains, arguing that “(social) space is a (social) product” (1991a:26). Because (social) relations of production constitute (social) space, it cannot be reduced to its geometric features or the separate elements it contains. Lefebvre continues; “every society – and hence every mode of productions with its subvariants (...) - produces a space, its own space” (p 31). (Social) space is thus historically determined and the *history of space* is in fact central to Lefebvre’s theory. Lefebvre bases his historic-materialistic study on historical shifts in modes of production from *absolute space* to *historical space* to *abstract space* (ibid:229-292).

In short, *abstract space* is the space of neo- capitalism, founded when “labour fell prey to abstraction” and commodity fetishism (ibid: 49), clearly referring to *The Capital* (Marx, 1999). Space is “*abstractized*” and divided (*alienated* in Marxist terminology) under the neo-capitalist realm, through marketization, commodification, speculation and exchange value. This increased the importance of symbolic capital, representations and image (fetishism). Abbas observes that “[t]he more abstract the space, the more important the image becomes [...] and the more dominant becomes the visual as a mode” (1997:9). Following the ever increasing importance of representations and images, abstract space soon becomes signified by visual oversaturation due to the central role of visual and symbolic production.

Also, the significance of image and imagery within *abstract space* cannot be understood simply literally, but in relation to socio- economical usage, dissemination and maintenance in *everyday life*. Debord (1983: §1) summed up this recognition, paraphrasing Marx; “[i]n societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*.” And that “[t]he spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images” (ibid: §4).

Lefebvre argues, with Marx in mind, that increased importance of the visual in (*fetishized*) *abstract space* serves to conceal its own conditions of production and relation/organization of labor (1991:313):

Abstract space *contains* much, but at the same time it masks (or denies) what it contains rather than indicating it. It contains specific imagery elements: fantasy images, symbols which appear to arise from ‘something else’. It contains representations derived from the established order [...] Such ‘representations’ find their authority and prescriptive power in and through the space that underpins them and makes them effective.

Worth noting is also that the exercise of power in abstract space shifts from policing the mass to surveillance of the individual. According to Deleuze (2006) power relations are maintained by the fluctuations between inclusion and exclusion, or *access*, within (abstract) space. Though this model will not unanimously apply in China today, hegemonic power can manifest itself in different forms through different channels simultaneously. That is, both as disciplining of the masses (Foucaultian model) and control of the individual (Deleuzian model).

## Space – Methodology of

Central to Lefebvre’s theory is the methodological trioka developed to study social space and production thereof: *spatial practice*, *representations of space* and *representational space*.

1. *Spatial practice*, which embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation. Spatial practice ensures continuity and some degree of cohesion. (Lefebvre 1991:33)

Lefebvre also calls this *perceived* or physical space, because “[t]he spatial practice of a society secretes that society’s space [...] (ibid: 38). It relates to the structural and productive forces of a given society.

2. *Representations of space*, which are tied to the relations of production and the ‘order’ which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and to ‘frontal’ relations (ibid: 33).

This is *conceived* space or “conceptualized space, the space of scientist, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers [...] all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived” (ibid.). In short, this refers to how prevailing power relations through theory, ideology and knowledge conceptualize the linkage between power and production (of space).

3. *Representational spaces*, embodying complex symbolisms, sometimes coded, sometimes not, linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life, as also to art (which may come eventually to be defined less as a code of space than as a code of representational spaces) (ibid).

This is directly *lived* space, subjected to power and/or domination through *representation of space* (ibid: 38).

Roughly these categories refer to - 1 - the particular historical and material conditions of a society, - 2 - how this society is governed, managed and planned through ideological and/or coercive means and - 3 - *everyday life* in that society conditioned by the first and second category.

### **Everyday Life**

*Lived – representational space* - is a central concern in Lefebvre's writings, because "[...] a theory of social space encompasses on the one hand the critical analysis of urban reality and on the other that of everyday life" (1996:186). Despite the emphasis on urban *quotidian* or *everyday life* (Lefebvre 1991b & 1996), Lefebvre remains somewhat conflicted towards the city dweller, a "[...] user, who is both a conservative and a subversive figure in the reproduction of social relations [...]" (Kofman & Lebas 1996:41).

Everyday life since Wirth's 1938 article (1971) has been subjected to considerable scholarship, in particular from the 1960s and onwards. During this period, urban theorists such as Lynch, Jacobs (1992) and Gehl (1996) influenced New Urbanism<sup>iii</sup> discourses, ultimately failing to deliver any theoretical contribution beyond the popular scientific. In parallel more critical and reflective theories and practices were developed by Lefebvre, Tschumi (1996) and de Certeau (2002) among others.

Like Lefebvre de Certeau (2002) emphasizes social relations of *everyday life* in socio-spatial production but, unlike Lefebvre, he argues that consumption and the consumer are equally significant for the production of social relations. Furthermore, de Certeau differentiates between *strategic* and *tactic* social production. *Strategy* refers to dominant relations of power (political, economical and military) and the institutions and sites they exercise power through (from political and corporate headquarters to shopping malls). *Tactic* refers to how space is made up by the social relations/activities of its users. It is a *methodology* of urban *quotidian* relying on negotiation, manipulation, improvisation and loopholes in strategies. However, *tactics* are not subversive as such, because they have no goal or ideological program beyond their own fulfillment.

# PART I: CHINA THROUGH THE EYE OF MODERNITY

## The Vision Machine

Cinema in China was initially, like elsewhere, one of many forms of visual technology and attractions constituting the urban visual- spatiality. The popular visual culture encompassed shadow-plays (*dengyingxi*), peep-shows of war paintings and pictures of faraway lands, foreign magazines and pornographic material. The social framework for visual culture was the streets, with adjacent sites like teahouses and public baths constituting “public space” for daily economy, spectacle and social/political agitation (Wang, 1998). In this “public” context cinema developed and established *sites of spectacle*, i.e. teahouse- movie theatres.

The domestic curiosity (*wanyir*) tradition soon incorporated cinema into the local context spawning the opera film (*xiqu pian*) (Farquhar & Berry 2005:30). The opera genre infused escapist spectacle distant from social and political turmoil (Zhang, 1997:218) with a Republican, nation(alist) discourse (Farquhar & Berry: 30). From a broader perspective early cinema is signified by the need and desire to infuse the local and daily life and with the vision of modernity and modernity of vision (Snickars: 15 & 161).

The attraction of cinema was often modernity itself, from the everyday life of modernity to the exoticism of faraway places. Early cinema’s exhibitionistic capacity of addressing and stimulating spectators through attraction and spectacle illustrates the definition of Gunning’s (1986) *cinema of attractions*. Cinema became a vision machine for subjects to see and be seen – to participate – through cinematic illuminations, in modernity.

1.



2.



Consequently cinema has been considered as a form of exploration and interaction with the modern city, of rhythms, choreography and behavior (Barber, Snickars, Löfgren 2001). Works such as Dziga Vertov’s *Man with*

*the Moviecamera* (*Chelovek s Kinoapparatom* 1929), Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin, Die Simfonie der Grosstadt*, 1927 and Chaplin's *Kid Auto Races at Venice* (1924) are representative of such explorations. In China social turmoil and political struggle left little room for this kind of self-reflective and formalistic experimentation (Zhang 1997:219). By this time, however, narrative film genres were established like the domestic *wuxia pian* (sword fight films) (Yang 2003), slapstick, *Romance of a Fruit Peddler* (*Zhi guo yuan* / *Lagong zhi aiqing*, 1922), and melodrama, *The Tenderness Market* (*Zhifeng shichang*, 1933) both Zhang Shichuan, and *Kisses Once* (*Qinghai zhongwen*, 1929) by Xie Yunqing.

Filmmakers nevertheless did respond to social crisis, mixing genres and politics, moving towards a new type of realism (Zhang 1997) like Wu Wongyang and his social melodrama *The Goddess* (*Sheng nü*, 1934). One of the most significant pioneers of the realist impulse was Lai Man-Wai, documenting Sun Yat-sen's anti-warlord campaigns and later the Anti-Japanese War. Though largely forgotten (and ignored) by mainland scholars, Lai's chronicles are important artifacts of modern China<sup>iv</sup>.

## Specters

Despite the triumphant depiction of the modern over the corrupt world of the warlords, a more unsettling side of cinema and modernity unraveled. That is the filmic image as an instrument of destruction, from the chronographic rifle and repeater photography<sup>v</sup> derived from Colt's revolver mechanism to contemporary high tech weaponry and radar images. Modernization of warfare created, through photography and aeronautics, "*invisible weapons that make things visible*" (Virilio 1998:98).

Scientific and 'rational' destruction, using topographic and symmetric images tracing troop movements, bomb accuracy and target acquisition, signifies the most destructive outcome of the *abstraction* of space. In the streets cinematographers from Lai's Lianhua Film Company and Joris Ivens (*The 400 Million*, 1939) followed close quarter battle and destruction during Japanese aggression and the civil war. There is an uncanny recognition of the familiar amid the ruins – shops, apartment buildings, department stores and city transportation - spaces of everyday life. The *attraction of destruction* illuminated darkened movie theatres with the unsettling apprehension of devastation and atrocities as inseparable from modernity.

3.



4.



As war ended, the urban landscape as it once was existed only as fluid moments and specters on celluloid strips and photographs, in the virtual space-time of cinema. While this would provide critical ground for cinema in the West (as discussed by Deleuze and Barber p 63), the *politicization* in Maoist China would not.

### Politicization of Space

After proclaiming victory in 1949, the Communist embarked on a massive command-economic modernization and urbanization project. Command-economic urbanization focused on heavy industrialization and self-sufficiency, transforming the cities into production bases according to a hierarchic urban network under central coordination (Lin 1999a). *Politicization of space* or *politicized space* thus distinguishes itself from *abstract space*.

Central to the politicization of space and time (see Wang 1995) was the politicization of *everyday life* in the socio-spatial unit *danwei* (*work unit*). In practice *danwei* was devised as a *compound* centered on the work place/production. Within its walls all aspects of life were provided for: work, healthcare, education and leisure. In this space party politics could exercise increased influence on everyday life through *hukou*, personal files, and central standardization of living quarters, rationing production, quotas etc (Bray 2005:119). Since socio-economical activity was concentrated to the interiors of the *danwei*, the streets ceased to function as social arenas and were mostly used for transport (Sit 1995:290).

However, the compound as such, Bray argues, is a pre-modern *spatial practice* rooted in Chinese history (:24-34)<sup>vi</sup>. But unlike the socialist city, the “traditional” city was characterized by *area specialization*, the functional differentiation of production and services (Gaubatz, 1999:1497).



The command economic urbanization, on the other hand, created generalized urban structures without specialized sectors or functional differentiation. The cities developed a general and homogenized urban fabric without distinct zones (Gaubatz 1995:32). Though “the work-unit compound-based city (...) was never realized in its ideal form (Gaubatz, 1995:31-33), politicized space subsumed society as a whole and escalated into the Cultural Revolution (CR).

## The Spectacle of Socialism

The film industry was also politicized under the command-economy, with party cadres overseeing all aspects of production, from script to distribution (Cornelius, 2002:46). The experiences of the first communist film group in Yan’an proved to be decisive for the development of the politicized aesthetics and themes of *socialist realism*. Rather than crude party propaganda, socialist realism made up a politicized popular culture that “reasserted the ideological legitimacy of a socialist everyday world” (Zhang 1997:220). A socialist “pop culture” that increased the politicization and supporter base that escalated into the CR.

Since urbanism and cinema relies on a continuum of (social) activity, the CR collapsed both. Cinema production halted and 1400 films were immediately banned (Hao 2000). As for the urban, the moment of collapse has already begun when social inertia sets in.

Scholars of the Visual and spatial (film, architecture and social sciences) have, unlike Bray, a tendency to interpret politicized everyday life through its monumental representations/ representative spaces, like the Tian’anmen Square or the Red Square in Moscow<sup>vii</sup>. There is a tendency to misrecognize these monumental representations of power also as representational/lived space, interpreting society through the representative-monumental. This misrecognition of *representations of power* is in fact the *power of representations*.

## Transformation and Fragmentation of Space

Central to the market-led reforms is space because “[i]t would not be possible to build up a market economy without the commercialization of land” (Xie, 2002). Though space is a privileged commodity, the transformation of *politicized* to *abstract* space is not essentially different from other forms of (fetishized) commodities. Market-led urbanization began to constitute a new economic topography of spatial differentiation and *area specialization* of CBD:s (Central Business District), landmark structures<sup>viii</sup>, new residential districts,

development zones and foreign enclaves (Gaubatz, 1995:47-56). These new economic spaces often manifest the *placeless* or *non-place*, a homogenized visual-spatiality of global capital accumulation (Augé, 1995)<sup>ix</sup>.

While these spaces have created a diversified city, the fragmentation of space has drastically altered everyday life, through gentrification, ghettoization, urban renewal and (forced) relocations<sup>x</sup>.

Bray argues that the hub of social and economic life shifted to the *xiaoqu* (residential unit with communal services) and to the streets with the appearance of *getihu* (small private business) (Bray: 167). Fragmentation/transformation also opened up large margins of informal spaces and settlements throughout the urban fabric (Zhang 2001). An outcome of this is the increased mobility and socio-economical use of streets following the separation of work and the home (Gaubatz, 1995).

The *publicness* of streets is by default not comparable to a (liberal-democratic) western conception of “public space”. Because of the often ambiguous status of space between the state and market, *public-ness* in China is of a more indistinct character, subjected to continuous negotiation and user *tactics*.

## **The Class of 82’ and entertainment films**

When the class of 82’ graduated from the reopened Beijing Film Academy (BFA), as the first post-CR class, the film industry was also being reformed. Some observers have maintained that the industry has adjusted to the competitive market (Hao 2000), but it is quite clear that this is not the case. The pre-1989 period nonetheless saw the establishment of the class of 82’ or “the fifth generation”<sup>xi</sup> and the (selective) introduction of foreign film theory (Hu 1998).

Within this framework the fifth generation came together to modernize Chinese cinema. This project sought to explore the individual subject position vis-à-vis the state and to conceptualize “nationhood” in post-Mao China (Zhang 1997). Films like *Yellow Earth* (*Huang tudi*, 1984) by Chen Kaige and *Red Sorghum* (*Hong gaoliang*, 1987) by Zhang Yimou are indicative of this cinematic subjectivity in their use of distant (mentally, physically and socially) locations as allegorical and symbolic space.

The Tiananmen crisis marked a departure towards specialized (overseas) audiences of “world cinema” abandoning the modernist project (Zhang 1997:207). There were however indications of stagnation well before the crisis of 1989 (Forestier, 1989). While most films by the group were banned following the crisis, they continued to be distributed abroad for economic

reasons (Pickowicz 1995:211). The 1989 crisis didn't disrupt the production of the fifth generation significantly; e.g. Zhang Yimou: *Ju Dou*, (1990), *Raise the Red Lantern* (*Da hongdeng long gaogao gua*, 1991), Chen Kaige: *Life on a String* (*Bianzon bianchang*, 1991).

These productions of the 90s however display a tendency towards more spectacular entertainment films like *Shanghai Triad* (*Yao a yao dao waipo qiao*, 1995), *Not one Less* (*Yige dou buneng shao* 1995), *The Road Home* (*Wode fuqin muqin*, 2000) and the extravagant *The Emperor and the Assassin* (*Jing ke ci qin wang*, 1999). Though the latter failed commercially the 2000's would be marked by a development towards big budget spectacles proving that the "[n]ew entertainment film is not only a post 5<sup>th</sup> phenomenon but a 5<sup>th</sup> generation invention" (Zhang 1997:270).

Following the success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (*Wohu canlong*, 2000) by Taiwanese Ang Lee, a new type of Chinese- language entertainment film, comprising trans- Chinese casts was established. Most notably *Hero* (*Yingxiong*, 2002) and *House of the Flying Daggers* (*Shimian maifu*, 2004) by Zhang Yimou, and *The Promise* (*Wu ji*, 2005) by Chen Kaige<sup>xii</sup>. This type of film emphasizes spectacle and emotion with a strong normative and "politicized" content. These films have also been severely criticized for this, *Hero* for its apologetic tone and borderline fascist message (Chan, 2004), and *The Promise* for its outrageous marketing and blatant use of market manipulation (Zhang, 2006).

## **PART II: THE CINEMATIC CITY**

### **INDEPENDENT CINEMA: ORIGINS AND STYLE**

As the film establishment turned to box-office extravaganzas another type of cinema started to develop in the cinematic void. These filmmakers did not form a group or collective project in the sense of their predecessors and therefore labels like "the sixth generation" or "urban generation" are misleading (Cindy Zheng Xin 2005-10-14 & Alice Wang 2005-10-14 recorded conversations). The post-89 development is better categorized as *informal* and/or *independent cinema* (Bérénice, 2003, Zhang 2004, Cui, 2005, Jia Ting, recorded conversation, 2005-10-22). In this independent cinema there is no declaration of purpose or unifying project. One director suggests that it is in fact the fragmenting individual subjectivism and diversity that "unites" and defines contemporary independent cinema (Jia, recorded conversation, 2005-10-22). Also, the independents came from increasingly

varied personal, educational and professional backgrounds compared to the class of 82 (Zhang, 2006).

Informal cinema is independent because it has developed as a non-official/non-sanctioned cinema from shifting positions outside the official framework/industry. Until the 2000s only state-run film studios were sanctioned to make films, outlawing any other form of production (Reynaud). Relations between filmmakers established within the system and those working independently are often strained (Tao, 2001, Zhang, 2001, Yang 2003). As of 2002, the reformed *Regulations on the Administration of Movies* (2001) are enforced, still allowing swift and arbitrary decision making, executed through Article 25 with its vague definitions on content and technical regulations<sup>xiii</sup>.

### **Independent Cinema as a Cinema of Crisis**

The foundation of independent cinema is not a collective project, but a developing response to escalating social crisis and fragmentation. It's a *cinema of crisis* embodying a *cinematic* development, a self-reflective subjective exploration of social space. Since *independent cinema as a cinema of crisis* responds to social crisis it generally deals with different types of contemporary everyday marginality - sexual, ethnical, economical and social. The same marginal spaces that independent cinema developed and materialized from transformed into a *tactic cinematic practice*. These marginal and hybrid spaces provided the independents with a subjective position vis-à-vis both state and market. From this position independent cinema developed its *tactic* use of space through the use of location shooting<sup>xiv</sup>, non-professional actors, low budgets and cheap equipment.

### **Proto- Independent Documentaries**

Though Wang Xiaoshuai and Zhang Yuan are the first well-known independents, the independent impulse originates in the 80's. At this time a group of young CCTV workers led by Wu Wenguang (*Bumming in Beijing, Liulang Beijing*, 1990) (Reynaud) came together to develop a Chinese documentary style<sup>xv</sup>. The group wanted to assume a "reflective and self-assured subjectivist" position vis-à-vis party media through independent production, "no longer serving as a mouthpiece to official ideology" (Zhang, 2004:4). In practice they had to adopt a more pragmatic and tactic approach, working from inside and outside the system simultaneously.

## The 90's - First Tier Independents

Similarly the *first tier independents* like Wang Xiaoshuai and Zhang Yuan operated from positions inside and outside the system. Wang Xiaoshuai made *Frozen* (*Jidu hanleng*, 1997) under a pseudonym (as “Wu Ming”) in order to secure the release of *So Close to Paradise* (*Biandang, guniang*, 1994) [official release 1998] that had been suspended in bureaucratic limbo for three years (Wright, 2001, Kochan, 2003). With the nostalgic *Beijing Bicycle* (*Shiqi suide danche*, 2001) and gritty *Drifters* (*Erdi*, 2003) Wang further departed from the sanctioned, shooting underground with foreign funds.

Zhang Yuan’s filmography displays a more linear development towards the realm of the approved. Initially financing his films by making music videos he followed up the banned gay chamber drama *East Palace, West Palace* (*Donggong xigong*, 1997) with the less controversial *Seventeen Years* (*Guonian huijia*, 1999) (Corliss, 2001) and the humorous documentary *Crazy English* (*Fengkuang yingyu*, 1999). In the 2000s Zhang established himself as mainstream with *I Love You* (*Wo ai ni*, 2002) and *Green Tea* (*Lücha*, 2003).

5.



6.



## The 2000's - Second Tier Independents

As the first tier lost momentum and/or turned “legitimate”, a younger group of filmmakers started out. They had increasingly diverse backgrounds; Jia Zhangke from BFA (but not directing department) (Olsen, 2001), Cui Zi'en a novelist and gay rights activist turned filmmaker (Wang Qu, 2004), and some with overseas experience like Li Yang in Germany (Tao, 2003) and Henri Seng in Sweden.

Materially and economically the growing access to cheap digital technology (DV cams and desktop editing<sup>xvi</sup>) significantly altered the conditions for these filmmakers in terms of production, distribution and screening. Jia Zhangke has been the most prominent champion of digital technology, shooting the feature *Unknown Pleasures* (*Ren xiao yao*, 2002) on DV, following his 16mm

debut *Xiao Wu* (1997) and epic *Platform* (*Zhantai*, 2000). Also the officially endorsed, though independently financed (Niskanen, 2005), *The World* (*Shijie*, 2004), was filmed on DV.

Other filmmakers took the possibilities of DV further, assuming a more independent position or even activist stance, distancing their practice further from the industry. Cui Zi'en has produced a digital *oeuvre* (notably *Men and Women* (*Nannan nüniü*, 1999), *Enter the Clowns* (*Chou jue deng chang*, 2001), *The Old Testament* (*Jie yue*, 2003), *Feeding Boys*, *Ayaya* (*Aiyaya, qu buru*, 2003) completely on the margins of the market and state solely for informal domestic distribution (pirated discs and/or cineclubs) and the film festival circuit (Wang 2004). Others that have been drawn to this position are He Jianjun, *Pirated Copy* (*Manyan*, 2004) and Andrew Cheng, *Welcome to Destination Shanghai* (*Mudidi Shanghai*, 2003) and *Shanghai Panic* (2001).

DV has had a significant impact on contemporary artists using film to explore and experiment with urban space (Hou 2005). This medium provided artists like Cao Fei (*COsplayers*, 2004) and Zhao Liang (*Social Survey*, 1998) means to break away from the performance art of the 90s. It has also been noted that cinematic subjectivity often is reflected in the persistent interest in the modern artist as a subject (Cui), for example *Frozen*, *Quitting* (*Zuotian* 2001), *Dirt* (*Toufa luanle*, 1994), and *Post- Revolutionary Era* (*Hougeming shidai*, 2002, Zhang Yang).

Digital technology enabled subjective and independent practice that disrupts the cultural hegemony, as artist-cum-activist Ou Ning (2004) (see *San Yuan Li*, 2003) argues. However, independent practice is not necessarily the same as civic or civil awareness/consciousness. The material emancipation of digitalization that has “moved film closer to individuals rather than the industry” alone does not promote civic consciousness or a growing civil society (Zhang 2004:25). Thus the corporate promotion of DV (like the “DV-Generation” of Hong Kong Phoenix TV) has had little significance for independent filmmaking (Wang, recorded conversation).

Paradoxically, low-cost digitalization now seems to displace cinematic subjectivism for conventional genres like action, sci-fi and horror, yielding to normative visual consumption (Jia, recorded conversation).

## Negotiation

Though independent practice developed out of *tactic* rather than “moral, political or aesthetic” concerns (Jaffee 2004a), the impact has been recognizable in exactly these fields. The Bureau and Corporation have risen to the challenge by independent production, seeking out new and more efficient

channels to maintain cultural and economic hegemony. Following the 2002 reforms, a group headed by Jia Zhangke engaged in direct negotiations with the Bureau for further reforms, resulting in a new reform package in 2003<sup>xvii</sup>. As a result Jia shot *The World*<sup>xviii</sup> with approval and formal distribution. But beyond this the reform package has yet to be realized and the Bureau has not acknowledged or released a number of “banned” films into distribution as agreed upon (Alice Wang, recorded conversation).

Imperative to note is the controversy surrounding Lou Ye’s (*Suzhou River*, *Suzhou he*, 2000) unsanctioned screening of *Summer Palace* (*Yiheyuan*, 2006) in Cannes with Wong Kar-Wai and Zhang Ziyi in the jury. Though generally not perceived as an independent (because of works like *Purple Butterfly*, *Zi hudie* 2003) Lou Ye’s film dealing with the Tiananmen crisis earned him a five year ban from endorsed projects and part of the revenues confiscated (Bai 2006).

For the time being this signals a firmer official grip on domestic production. There is nevertheless constant activity between the independent/underground and the official between framework, insubordination and cooption. Mounting uncertainty, the blurring of boundaries and regulations continue to signify independent cinema. These “negations” have created an ambiguous space for the independents, in the obscure territories of market and beyond the scope of the state.

### Criticism and Critics

Independent and not-so-independent films are, from time to time labeled as “subversive” or “rebellious” by foreign critics and also by domestic scholars (Lin 2002 & 2005). Western scholars have, since the 1960’s, had a tendency to misinterpret all use and incorporation of existing spaces (location shooting or site specificity) in art and film as “politically conscious” or “subversive” (see Kwon, 2004). This critique has in turn been criticized by Chinese artists and filmmakers, uncomfortable with western labeling as misdirected or ignorant (del Lago, 2000, Henri Seng, 2005-11-06, recorded lecture & Zheng, 2005-10-14, recorded lecture). One critic has remarked that more attention has been paid to “ideological implications” of the films than to the films themselves (Cui, 2005).

The critique of western discourse has been developed by Jaffe (2004a & b) and Barmé arguing the symbiotic relation between exoticism and/or orientalism and the export of *packaged dissent* (1999:179, 2003a, 2003b)<sup>xix</sup>. In essentially agreeing with this assertion and the hazards of absorption into the “world cinema” paradigm, I nevertheless want to comment on the critique.

Barmé interprets this process as the inevitable end of cinematic development, thus emphasizing “ideological implications” and falling into the same trap as his adversaries. I would rather argue, like Dutton (1998), that this highly problematic relation of packaged dissent is a critical and urgent matter that filmmakers and critics alike need to respond to. But that this alone does not spell the end of the cinematic.

Within the domestic film-community independent films are sometimes accused of inaccurate and misperceived (“too dark and depressing”) portrayals of China. But the reform era is characterized by fragmentation, the very lack of collective/uniform experience; therefore the issue of *misconceived realism* is somewhat inaccurate. Furthermore, while critical representations of social relations are not specific for the Chinese context, they are however new to the domestic context. This critical distinction is pointed out by various members of the independent community (Tao 2003, Zheng recorded conversation & Wang recorded conversation).

### **Impact of Independent Film**

Independent films have had a noticeable impact on official and mainstream entertainment films, from urban relation dramas like *Spring Subway* (*Kaiwang chuntiande ditie*, 2003) to horror, like *Suffocation* (*Zhixi*, 2005) and mildly entertaining satire *Chicken Poets* (*Xiang jimao yiyang fei*, 2002). There are also films that deal with issues of modernization like *Mountain Patrol* (*Keke xili*, 2004) and *Basic Interests* (*Xian tianyou*, 2005), a “human interest story” and crude caricature of rural plight.

## **REPRESENTATIONS**

The commercialization of space transforms the city into a site of consumption and space itself into a fetishized commodity. Presentations and representations have therefore become imperative for urban governance in the global *economy of images*. Under urban arbitrage strategy *urban image construction* is central to the packaging and selling of space (Broudenhoux, 2004). The interaction between global economy of images and image construction generates a New Economic Vision (of space). This vision is comprehensively presented at sites like Beijing Planning Exhibition Hall and Shanghai Urban Exhibition Planning Hall. Here New Economic Vision is assembled and mediated through models, animations and simulations, creating a phantasmagoric experience of the “Global City”. The Vision assumes a discourse of a



formalized/programmed – utopist – urbanism. In this sense the Vision mediates consensus and consent<sup>xx</sup> between state and market for the commercialization and marketing of space.

7.



8.



### New Economic Vision

The Vision is manifested through urban redevelopment and renewal programs, administrated by five year masterplans<sup>xxi</sup>. The social consequences are often traumatic because of the level of destruction and exclusion that follows. Graham (2004:14) has even argued that massive engineered and sanctioned demolition involves “war-like levels of violence, destabilization, rupture, forced expulsion and place annihilation”. Social costs have risen after privatization of redevelopment management, leaving many residents unable to afford relocation housing (Abramson 1997). Also important informal *subeconomic*<sup>xxii</sup> groups living and working without proper permits lack any rights to the space they use and thus to compensation (Zhang, 1997).

Mounting social tensions following demolition/redevelopment projects have not, of course, left urban governance and economy unaffected. In fact, the immense destruction and increased homogenized – *placeless* – visual overload, threatens to devalue the city’s imagery. This relation in market-led urbanization contains an impending displacement of the city’s image(s) in the global flow of images/image economy. Abbas (2000, 2002) argues that the spectacular or Global City must achieve equilibrium between the global/international/placeless and the local-historic. Accordingly History and Heritage have become assets for comparative advantage in place-and image construction. Regarding Shanghai Abbas says (2002:51):

[B]oth “old” and “new” are simply different ways of recreating Shanghai as a City of Culture in the new global space. In such a

space, cultural and historical issues can be fused, and confused, with political and economical interests.

In other words, “old” – History/Heritage – and “new” – Modernity/Progress – are consolidated in the economic spectacle and ideological discourse of the New Economic Vision. Abbas (2002) characterizes the discourse as the *imagined reappearance* of an “essentialist” Chinese city. “Imagined” because it is not an actual *reappearance* but a selective and essentially anti- historic (i.e. nostalgic) (re)development and preservation strategy. The spectacle of *reappearance* is thus characterized by an “historic amnesia” induced by omission and concealment of problematic and/or disturbing versions of the past, and present (Abbas 2002:49). *Reappearance* as a socio-spatial strategy conceals the very (social) crisis that enables it.

### **Alternative Representations**

In response to homogenized version(s) of modernity and unreflective consumption of History and Heritage, alternative versions/ representations are being produced in art (Visser, 2004), literature (Lu, 2004) and of course cinema. It has for example been suggested that *nostalgia* might provide artists, activist and urban residents a tool to examine *reappearance* from a subject perspective (see Liu, 2004). Zi Liang’s *Last House Standing (Fangdong Jiang xiansheng*, 2004), a documentary shot on Beta<sup>xxiii</sup>, can be seen as attempting this. The film is a nostalgic memento of an eccentric loner living in central Shanghai, in an old house scheduled for demolition. Though subjective nostalgia is tempting, Dai Jinhua warns how *imagined nostalgia* is used within the economic spectacle to make and sell goods and ideologies. Nostalgic imagery is even adopted by global enterprises like McDonalds and Pizza Hut in the local context (Dai 1997, 2004). Nostalgia is consequently just another form of “historic amnesia” emerging in the void of ideology and identity in post- Mao China.

Some documentarists have used a more ethnographical method to record “history” because “the Chinese official authority does not want us to remember the history, we non-official people should remember on our own” (Shen, 2005). The subject of the DV documentary *Grandpa Jing and his Customers (Jing daye he tade lao zhugu*, 2003 Shi Runjiu,) is the old barber Jing and the district Houhai, Beijing, where he has lived and worked since the 50s. The film shows Jing’s daily routines in the area and records his conversations with customers in their homes or in their working places. Shi draws up a non-disciplinary “ethnography” of the district, its residents and

history, and how it relates to market-led modernization. Aspects of daily life omitted in the nostalgic version of the *hutong* city and spectacle of *reappearance*.

### Sic Transit Gloria Mundi<sup>xxiv</sup>

Wang Bing's seminal DV documentary *West of the Tracks* (*Tiexi qu* 2003) portrays social transformation with an unprecedented depth and scope (556 minutes long!). The subject is daily life and the looming closure of the Tiexi heavy industry district, Shenyang, where reforms and soaring resources have rendered millions unemployed (Lu, 2005). The film is composed of long sequences of deserted industryscape and disintegrating socialist modernization, decaying steel skeletons and concrete structures marked by an absence of people and (meaningful) production.

Like the photographs of Atget (illustration 9), who around 1900 captured empty spaces in Paris, the images of Wang Bing become "standard evidence for historical occurrences, and acquire a hidden political significance" (Benjamin, 2005, § IV). Through these images, crisis is not concealed but recognized and represented as social crisis. The film constitutes a "political", or rather, an *ideological*, critique of the legitimacy and ideological constitution of new economical spectacle. In its aesthetic methodology, like Benjamin's *ruins of the bourgeoisie* (Benjamin, 1992:57), the ruin epitomizes the contemporary rather than the past. The New Economic Vision and fundamentals of commodity economy are perceived as ruins even before decay has set in.

9.



10.



Similarly, the concept of ruin characterizes Henri Seng's documentary *Beijing, Beijing* (*Peking, Peking*, 2003). The cityscape seems suspended in time between vast construction sites and immense demolition sites. Urbanization is

visually epitomized by fusion and confusion of the partially completed and partially destroyed, suspended in a moment of ruination.

Conceptualization of the Ruin seems like a central aspect of independent cinema's aesthetic methodology. The ruin of marginal urbanity is the location of Jia Zhangke's destitute anti-heroes and the environment in Wang Xiaoshuai films. Equally, the human body is often treated as a site of decay and ruination, socially and mentally in the documentary *Empty Cage*<sup>xxv</sup> (Jiang zhi, 2002) or physically in *Quitting*.

### **There is a Crack in Everything**

Together independent films make up alternative collections of images. Neither better nor more authentic, they examine the economic spectacle of New Economic Vision and the forms of destruction it legitimizes. The cinematic aesthetic of the ruin is a *methodology* for reexamining and reframing contemporary economic vision, articulating a critical (and ideological) position vis-à-vis the spectacle that conceals crisis – rather than social crisis itself (!), a methodology that extends to the site of the human body and the space of the human mind.

Furthermore, the aesthetic of the contemporaneous ruin resonates in a deeper uncertainty of the appearance of space itself. Abstract space appears as uncanny and unfamiliar versions of the past – History and Heritage – and alienating phantasmagoric versions of the present and future – New Economic Vision. The contradictory appearance of space thus becomes a source of uncertainty and confusion. These specters of uncertainty bear resemblance to those of war (see above), calling the appearance of space itself into question. In this respect ruin aesthetics create a space for reflection and reconsideration of spectacular urbanism and social concepts of urbanism.

## **PRACTICE**

The New Economic Vision and commodification of space have turned the city into a “dreamland” of material desire with limited and unequal access to commodities and services (Schein, 2001). While access is limited, the infinite spectacle of consumption over-saturates urban space. The dream-landscape of consumption constitutes through malls, department stores and exclusive boutiques, a marketized continuation of the compound. Following area specialization and gentrification such sites are linked to appropriate demographic groups or market segments. From simple social services to elite

compound catering for all aspects of life in a luxurious and spectacular fashion (like *New World*)<sup>xxvi</sup>.

In practice the socio-economic backbone of everyday life is located in the publicness of the streets through *getihu* (small private business) and “compound wall economics” (*yuanqiang jingji*) (Bray: 170)<sup>xxvii</sup>. Streets are also used for exhibitions of fashion, auctions, competitions, games and spectacle. The publicness of the streets is itself largely made up by informal socio-economic production and activity. Tactic use of publicness’ visual realm is reflected in the “advertised” phone numbers scattered on walls around Chinese cities.

Though appearance and causes of crisis are concealed in abstract space, the existence of crisis transpires through informal/marginal spaces. Its appearance increases with the growing discrepancy between need and access - *relative deprivation* - the transformation of status symbols into needs (Rigg, 2003:193).

These discrepancies provide independent cinema with form, content and a sensory connection to the urban. *Independent cinematic practice* develops out of this *haptic* relation, to marginal and informal spaces, in response to social crisis. Independent cinema is thus not merely a representational method but an alterative practice/methodology of urban space that rejects uncritical absorption into abstract space.

An understanding of the haptic nexus of cinema and city must be based on the material conditions and practice of independent cinema. The most crucial aspects are the incorporation of *non-professional actors/performers* and (informal) *location filming*.

## Performance

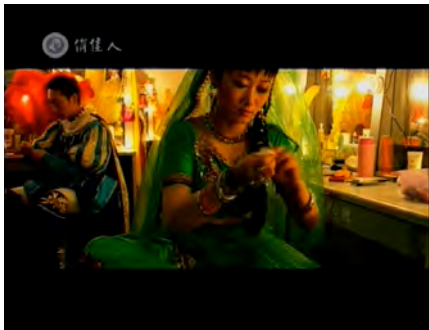
The increased interest in the individual subject and the use of non-professional actors reflects the increased attention of individual bodies in the city’s dream-landscape. The relation between body, space and image has also been privatized, marketized and commodified along market-led reforms.

In abstract space, bodily performance and its image attain a central social significance. Vaide (2003) observed that his interviewees (“urban youth” in Shanghai) often visited malls for the purpose of seeing and being seen, rather than shopping, a method of observing that resonates in the publicness of abstract space. This is symptomatic of how contemporary *body culture* (Brownell, 2001) or *body cult* (McDowell, 1999:36) operates through regulative discourses of behavior and performance, normative concepts of modernity and “modern behavior”.

Regardless of genre, fiction or documentary, the haptic and sensory proximity between cinema and city has changed through this transformation of corporeal status. The changing relation of body-space-image is epitomized in independent cinema by the use of non-professional actors and performers, bearing in mind that modern concepts of acting differs from traditional concepts.

Jia Zhanke in particular has used non-actors and performers and related themes, most notably in *The World* (10) and *Platform* on the lives of dancers and theatre workers. Similarly in *Xiao Wu*, the female lead character is a hostess at a karaoke bar and in *Unknown Pleasures* (9) the female lead works as a dancer, endorsing a vodka brand at local events.

11.



12.



This emphasizes the *performative act* itself rather than what it represents. The performers do not impersonate or mimic in a representative sense; they perform modernity by their very onscreen presence. Rather than being absorbed by normative conceptions of modernity the performer's body becomes a site for reflection of what it means to "be modern". It's a response to the corporeal aspects of social crisis. In this sense the performer's body becomes a haptic/sensory connection between cinematic and urban space. And this connection enables cinema to critically frame the significance of modern performance as a performance of the modern.

### Location Filming

Informal location shooting constitutes a very direct form of socio-spatial participation. It is a *tactic* form of production, including negotiation and manipulation of the environment, well corresponding to de Certeau's definition<sup>xxviii</sup>. Relative large-scale productions like *Beijing Bicycle* (shot on 35mm) demands continuous negotiation/dialogue with locals and neighborhood committees (Tang, 2002), while streamlined DV productions,

like that of Cui Zi'en and Andrew Cheng, can be filmed wholly or partly without any consent.

Because of the informal/illegal character of these productions there are always challenges and threats to the production (Jaffee, 2004b). Documentarist Hu Jie, for example, claims to have been incarcerated and assaulted while shooting a documentary on mine workers (Shen 2003). On the other hand, the production of *Blind Shaft* (*Mang jing*, 2003), also on mine workers, gained the “permission” of local authorities. But without official endorsement and hence special equipment the crew ran into physical dangers in the mines (Tao, 2003).

To further clarify the haptic nexus between cinematic and urban space we shall examine the *oeuvre* of Cui Zi'en. The micro-budget DV features of Cui Zi'en typically deal with sexuality and homosexuality in particular. They are typically erratic features shot on locations around Beijing like the dysfunctional heteronormativity in *Men and Women*, the “fassbinderesque” darkness in *Enter the Clowns*, *The Old Testament*, and commodification of the body and sex in *Feeding Boys*, *Ayaya*.

These films itinerate spaces of homosexual encounter and activity, random bars, restaurants, apartments, anonymous streets etc. But these spaces do not respond to standard discriminatory and normative discourses of (modern) publicness or exclusive/inclusive (homo-)sexual ghettoization<sup>xxix</sup>. The cinematic tours the erratic visual-spatial terrain and publicness of the city as undisrupted. Unlike the restrictive and discriminatory character of the ghetto (brilliantly depicted in Du Habin's *Beautiful Men* (*Renmian taohua*, 2005) or *East Palace, West Palace* (*Donggong Xigong*, 1997, Zhang Yuan) publicness opens up a hidden field of opportunities for individual users/hustlers with the right knowledge or *access*. The cinematic is here constructed through the spatial logic of *queerscape*.

Queerscape takes form when sexuality is used as a vehicle for transgressing and/or dismantling physical and socio-organizational boundaries (Leung 2001:426):

Queerscapes refer to the contingent and tangential uses of public space by sexual minorities and to public acts and expressions of desire, eroticism, and sexuality that momentarily disrupt what heterocentric ideology assumes to be an immutable, coherent relation between biological sex, gender, and sexual desire.

It is a tactic methodology of space using publicness as “*emergent sites of possibility*” (ibid: 426). The queerscape is a category of *lived/representational*

space that deconstructs conventional socio-spatial boundaries (of *conceived/representations of space*). As a method it disturbs the “Deleuzian” model of surveillance (as well as the “Foucaultian”) by creating informal social networks and access points. It is a kind of inversion or reversion of prevailing power relations.

By assuming queerscape (practice, performance and spatial-logic) into his cinematic practice, Cui Zi'en, by the same token, creates (reproduces) conditions for queerscape. Queerscape and the cinematic are practiced/produced through each other, a haptic relationship where both constitute an “emergent site of possibility” for the other. They are in other words situated through each other.

As suggested by Leung (2001) the queerscape as such serves to clarify tactic relations of social activity within social space stretching beyond that of sexuality. Such tactic relations constitutes cinematic practice and space in the works of Jia Zhangke, here dealing with restless and destitute youth, and relative deprivation in marginal urbanity. Or, in He Jianjun's *Pirated Copy* (*Manyan*, 2004) where the socio-spatial logic of disc piracy is an active part of the film and, again, vice versa.

All these examples illustrate the haptic nexus between cinema and city, that independent cinema is in fact an alternative methodology of urban space, and how the practice of independent cinema participates in social production/relations of the spaces it subsumes. By assuming a space and its relations, cinema participates in its production and vice versa; the spaces subsumed participate in the production of independent cinema. The cinematic and urban constitute each other.

13.



14.



### Cinematic Geography

Urban and cinematic are constituted and situated through the other. And the cinematic is a methodology of space operating through a nexus of



performance and location filming. The films are in this way “empirical evidence for an understanding of space” as proposed by Abbas (2003). This socio-spatial understanding in its cinematic form makes up a form of geographic knowledge. Bruno has (1997b) argued that cinematic space constitutes “[a] frame for cultural mappings, film is *modern cartography*.” *Independent cinematic practice* is a *cinematic geography* of the spaces, activities and social relations subsumed. The cinematic methodology of urban space produces cinematic geography, a knowledge and understanding of social space, expressed in cinematic space. This understanding of social space in reform-China is non-disciplinary and cannot be understood as “text”, or topography, or geometry. It accommodates the spectator/user to particular urban experience and a methodology of the urban.

## SPECTATORSHIP

Spectatorship is a crucial aspect of the reciprocal nexus of cinema and city. It contains the spaces for spectator activity/participation and the distribution and logistic of vision. From collective spectatorship of politicized space, a fragmented spectrum of spectatorship is taking form, from “public” to “private”, that does not necessarily respond to western-liberal theory. Donald (2000:142) has argued that film watching in China functions as a *virtual* public space of symbolic and collective spectatorship. This echoes the modernist concept of cinema as a civic arena, a public space analogous to the city square, the *Cinecittá* (Virilio 1996:75). However the fragmented spectrum of spectatorship seems unable to establish such homogenous civic spectatorship. Equally the ambiguity of privacy is fragmented across a contradictory spectrum (McDougall 2001, Pang 2004).

### Part I: Publicness of Cinema

As in other countries the movie theatre and its public/collective role is displaced by the Cineplex’s<sup>xxx</sup> homogenized version of modernity.

[...] cinema consumption does not mean simply watching a movie; they also require that movie houses be equipped with other ancillary facilities, such as retail departments, lounges, and washrooms (Lin, 1999b).

This assertion indicates the Cineplex’s emphasis on consumption and lifestyle, and the proximity to upscale malls and plazas. Rather than popular

culture, these institutions diffuse politic-economical spectacle, maintaining hegemonic cultural discourses<sup>xxxii</sup>. This develops spectatorship into lifestyle consumption, an expressed concern of local film workers (Wang, recorded conversation).

In response, film or cineclubs started to appear in the early 2000s, again with increasing access to (relative) cheap digital technology. These clubs were initially, like the underground music scene, established as bars/cafés (Efrid, 2001). Here independent films and foreign films could be “publicly” screened and discussed for the first time, connecting filmmakers, audience and *minjian* (folk/non-official) critics. Without these spaces any further development of independent cinema seems unlikely. Unlike the rock-clubs, cineclubs have since then either disappeared<sup>xxxiii</sup> or been transformed towards *professionalism* and/or *specialization*.

## **22 FILM - Professionalism**

22FILM studio was founded in 2003 in north Houhai district by BFA graduates as a cineclub with basic production facilities for digital/DV productions. During 2005 when many cineclubs disappeared the 22 FILM reorganized and specialized in production and distribution rather than screenings.

The activity is concentrated to distributing, selling and leasing equipment and co-producing. This signals a shift towards professionalism and accommodation to economic reality. Professionalism is also reflected in the ban on sensitive topics (political, social and sexual issues).

In many ways 22 FILM represents a part of independent cinema that seeks legitimacy and recognition within the established cultural hegemony. This process contradicts liberal theory, since legitimacy and recognition are achieved through mutual affirmation, cooption and acknowledgment rather than civil society (Jia, recorded conversation & printed material).

## **HART - Specialization**

HART Centre of Arts was established 2001 as an interdisciplinary art space in the 798 art district in Dashanzi, Beijing<sup>xxxiii</sup>.

The center’s film branch developed from a bar/caf /cineclub hosted by curator and cofounder Cindy Zheng (Xin). HART specializes in screenings, distribution and some production. The centre operates independently earning revenues from sales, admissions, international corporation and coordination of

events. The centre has a broad screening record including many premieres, and Q&A's with filmmakers of varying prominence<sup>xxxiv</sup>.

From this independent position no holds are barred on film content; the focus is cinematic quality and continuation. Through specialization on distribution and spectatorship HART provides a space and forum for filmmakers and spectatorship between market and state constraints, attempting to consolidate the fragments of independent cinema (Zheng, recorded conversation & lecture)

For all the necessity of independent screening spaces it cannot be argued that these clubs make up public or civil space in Donald's sense. Audience groups are too small and fragmented for a sense of collectiveness or manifestation of public experience. What these clubs achieve is rather the foundation of independent spectatorship, professional or specialized, eluding both state and market.

## **Part II: Piracy and Privacy**

Private spectatorship has rapidly developed with the access to technology and unmonitored distribution of informal/pirated material (Pang, 2004). The MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) estimates that 95% of home entertainment in China is made up of pirated Optical Disc (OD) material (MPAA, 2004). The organization identifies the reasons as a general lack of understanding of IP rights, state leniency, as well as censorship and import quotas. This liberalist criticism nonetheless fails to connect piracy and "the global diffusion of consumerism under an unequal distribution of world wealth" (Pang, 2004). It furthermore conceals copyright as a tool for censorship for corporations and states alike.

A central aspect of piracy is that regulation of content and production is displaced beyond corporation and state<sup>xxxv</sup>. Most informal production facilities have relocated from the south of China and Hong Kong to countries in the region with lower costs and weaker law enforcement (Pang: 110). This labor utilization rests on the global division of labor as created and maintained by multinational capital and corporations. Significantly, production/labor condition does not differ greatly between informal/counterfeit manufacturing and legitimate production (Chang, 2004).

## **Logistics of Vision**

The distribution of informal OD material is channeled through street vending and small shops. The economic ecology of the informal sector is sensitive to

the local environment and demands despite, or perhaps, because of the lack of (central) coordination<sup>xxxvi</sup>. While street hawkers tend to carry a small generalized stock, shops are more responsive to the local clientele. Suburban stores catering to local residents generally sell a mix of mainstream films and domestic dramas series. Around universities and academic institutions stores usually carry, except for the usual stock, significant quantities of “world cinema”, particularly Japanese TV dramas and animations (*anime*). In areas with a large proportion of foreigners, shops usually carry titles for these groups. Following *area specialization* some stores aim at keeping at wide and diverse stock attracting customers from other districts.

Street vending operates through the sub-economic publicness of the street for informal distribution, and constitutes a business governed by “rules” largely incomprehensible to outsiders. Worth noting is that these informal activities at present seem to contradict Virilo’s assertion of private spectatorship (*Telecittá*) as passive and lacking social exchange (1996:75).

The relationship between informal distribution/piracy is the subject of the He Jianjun’s erratic episode film *Pirated Copy* (*Man Yan* 2004). Shot on location in Beijing on DV the production reassembles Cui Zi’en’s methodology but also makes unauthorized use (from *Pulp Fiction* and *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*) of film material.

As *cinematic geography* this film itinerates the subeconomic terrain of distribution but also spaces of private spectatorship. It is a cinematic geography of social space drawn up by the discs’ trajectories, intersecting, transgressing and overlapping space. And it is a filmic mapping of the social relations of overpasses and underpasses, street intersections, anonymous streets, bars, and private spaces.

The trajectories draw upon the functional separation and conceptual dichotomy of “public” distribution and “private” spectatorship. But given the ambiguity of space in China these distinctions are not stable but interchangeable, and appear as fluid categories. Boundaries between inside and outside, “public” and “private” appear and disappear. However, the trajectories channel unmonitored and non-politicized material, creating a sphere that is private in the sense that it is beyond the state. Pang (:114) argues that:

[n]o one group is in control of the films being pirated, distributed, and watched, and no one identifiable form of power—political, civil, or commercial—can manipulate movie-watching activities in China, since numerous people participate in this low-tech, low-cost business.

So, the vast access and distribution of pirated material not only creates a sense of privacy but also challenges or interrupts the exercise of hegemonic power. But, as Pang points out, “piracy by no means creates a self-empowerment of the people...” since movie piracy is “non disciplinary” (:114). Piracy or informal distribution has no purpose or intention beyond capital accumulation. It is also here liberal theory fails to provide a comprehensive analysis of piracy. There is nothing in the process that indicates a concern for civil consciousness.

Filmmakers caught between state regulations and market demands (which may or may not coincide) use this non-disciplinary-ness tactically. By selling their works directly to informal OD manufacturers, they use trajectories and channels of informal distribution to reach the private type spectatorship. While gaining some revenues they nevertheless give up a great deal of control of their work<sup>xxxvii</sup> (Zheng, recorded lecture).

The lack of centrality and discipline defining the informal sector, does not keep material (in circulation) beyond current demand. There are no methods for preserving and archiving films, which means that many ultimately will be lost.

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## Spaces of Spectatorship

As we have seen there is no unified experience of spectatorship, from the politicized and normative spectatorship of official movie houses and/or Cineplexes to independent screenings and private viewing of pirated material. There is little support for the argument that cinema participates in the public space or creation of civic space in the sense of Donald and Virilio. And on the other hand, non-disciplinary private spectatorship does not by definition create a civil “self-empowerment of the people”.

The cineclub and private spectatorship constitute a non-disciplinary and alternative type of spectatorship, an independent spectatorship. Independent

spectatorship provides a social framework for relations of alternative spectator relations marginalized between state and corporate interests. Paradoxical, the ambiguous and marginal space of independent spectatorship for now appears more stable than the (interchangeable) socio-spatial “public” - “private” dichotomy.

## THE CINEMATIC CITY – CONCLUSIONS AND NEW POSITIONS

This text has attempted to reconsider and re-contextualize the reciprocal nexus of cinema and social space, specifically the haptic relations between *independent cinema* and market-led urbanization in contemporary China.

The working assumption has departed from Lefebvre’s theory of (*social*) *production* of (*social*) *space* and the (*social*) *relations* of this production. Along the lines of recent scholarship (of Visual Culture) I have further argued that visual production, motion pictures and cinema in particular, participate in the production and manifestation of space on the same conditions as any other form of (socio-spatial) production.

Against a wider socio-historical context and modernization theory, Chinese independent cinema is defined as a *cinema of crisis* because it has emerged as a response to and from *social crisis*. That is, as a reflective *cinematic* response to rapid and asymmetrical market- led modernization. This situates *independent cinematic practice* in an ambiguous/hybrid position between state and market.

I have approached the haptic-reciprocal nexus of the cinematic and the city linked by a (preliminary) conceptual triad of *representation*, *practice* and *spectatorship*.

Firstly and in terms of *representation*, independent cinema acknowledges the appearance of social crisis resonating in a growing uncertainty of space itself. Caught between the disappearance of old space and *reappearance* - the formalized image of new urban economy - *ruin aesthetics* have become a method for independent filmmakers (and other artists) to epitomize social space. In turn this *aesthetic methodology* asserts a critique or ideological criticism of official, politic- economical versions of everyday life and urbanism.

Secondly, the *practice* of independent cinema is a (*social*) *methodology* of urban space operating through a corporeal nexus of performance and (informal) location filming. This practice is based on the discrepancies and fluctuation of post-Mao space, as an alternative independent urban practice accommodating spectators to independent vision. The cinematic furthermore

provides an empiric understanding of space and its social relations, in the form of *cinematic geography*.

Thirdly, informal and independent logistics and distribution of vision across a fragmented spectrum of *spectatorship* have generated various types of responses. These responses range from the hegemonic vision of the Cineplex to alternative categories of visions of clubs and private spectatorship. Among these categories there are positions that, though independent, do not correspond to western-liberal notions of “public”, “civic” or “private” space.

Coming together as a non-disciplinary but coherent system of production, distribution and imagery, the tactic, critical and possibly ideological production of independent cinema does not formulate a civic public space in the sense some have proposed (Donald, Virilio, Ou). Neither can cinematic space, for the same reasons, be regarded as a kind of “heterotopia” (Foucault 1967).

Though independent cinematic practice and material emancipation of digital technology constitute an independent position vis-à-vis state and market, this position is not *per se* egalitarian or a move towards civic consciousness. It is merely an independent, and to some extent, privileged position not necessarily implying an agenda beyond its own reproduction.

In a wider context it is also important to recognize the temporal aspect of independent cinema that its practice is shaped by current conditions that will eventually change. When, and for whatever reasons, the critical momentum runs out, the question is to what extent and in what form independent cinema will have contributed to marked-led modernization and urbanization.

In conclusion I hope that this text will widen the conceptual context of visual-spatial as well as social research and related issues, problems and backgrounds. This text merely serves as an outline for reinterpretations of the modern relations between image and space, cinema and city in the Chinese context. Ideally this text will participate in a broader effort to open up this field to new and alternative interdisciplinary perspectives and scholarship. And hopefully this text has arrived at such new positions, leaving a range of unresolved issues on the past and present of Chinese cinema and its social significance.

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Narrated by Lewis Mumford (!).

<sup>ii</sup> See the films of Wong Kar- Wai, Tsui Hark, Ann Hui and John Woo.

<sup>iii</sup> see [www.newurbanism.org](http://www.newurbanism.org)

<sup>iv</sup> Some fragments are assembled in Choi Kai-kwong's *Lai Man-Wai: Father of Hong Kong Cinema*, 2001

<sup>v</sup> A well preserved example of the chronographic rifle model "MG Camera" of a rather late date (1925) by Aerophoto is on display in Berlin Film Museum.

<sup>vi</sup> Traditionally the Chinese city was divided into administrative compounds where social control and social welfare were organized according to the *baojia* system. The same relations of power prevailed in the spatial practice of the courtyard house. But rather than drawing "exceptionalist" conclusions, Bray suggests that this shows how the spatial practice of the compound has been appropriated by various forms of power relations from pre-modern times to market-led modernization in the post- Mao era (Bray, p 124).

<sup>vii</sup> The monumental is not reserved for political spectacle; consider the unreflective celebration of capital accumulation manifested through the monolithic skyscrapers of the world's financial centers.

<sup>viii</sup> For example the new National Theatre in Beijing, known as "the Alien Egg", by French architect Paul Andreu, or the new CCTV building designed by superstar architect Rem Koolhaas, also in Beijing. Shanghai's Pudong district has like Hong Kong Island, become a screen for the city to project its megalomaniac celebration of capital accumulation.

<sup>ix</sup> As defined by Augé *non-places* and the *placeless* do not mean non-existent places but spaces that exist opposite to a local cultural context. They do not contain "memories" and appear in the same form around the world, however never in a completely "pure" form. Non-places are distinct realities produced by global capital accumulation. They are so to say the spatial practice of global capital flows.

<sup>x</sup> Sit points out that social clustering and ghettoization existed to some extent under state socialism but under different conditions and not in the same form or scale (p 295-313).

<sup>xi</sup> See Clark (2005) for detailed descriptions of the schooling experiences of this class, ranging from examinations, curriculum, and student films etc.

<sup>xii</sup> Similar trends of semi-mythic spectacles were produced throughout Asia, like the Korean *Musa* (2001) Kim Sung-su, and *Bang Rajan* (2000) Thanit Jitnukul, in Thailand.

<sup>xiii</sup> Regulations on the Administration of Movies (2001), article 25 prohibit:

"(1) That which defies the basic principles determined by the Constitution;

(2) That which endangers the unity of the nation, sovereignty or territorial integrity;

(3) That which divulges secrets of the State, endangers national security or damages the honor or benefits of the State;

(4) That which incites the national hatred or discrimination, undermines the solidarity of the nations, or infringes upon national customs and habits;

(5) That which propagates evil cults or superstition;

(6) That which disturbs the public order or destroys the public stability;

(7) That which propagates obscenity, gambling, violence or instigates crimes;

(8) That which insults or slanders others, or infringes upon the lawful rights and interests of others;

(9) That which endangers public ethics or the fine folk cultural traditions;

(10) Other contents prohibited by laws, regulations or provisions of the State."

For a complete review in English: [http://www.chinaculture.org/gb/en\\_artists/2003-09/24/content\\_26914.htm](http://www.chinaculture.org/gb/en_artists/2003-09/24/content_26914.htm)

<sup>xiv</sup> The use of actual locations and site-specificity rather than soundstages in studios.

<sup>xv</sup> Actually documentary film-making in the modern sense of the word had hitherto never existed in China.

<sup>xvi</sup> Though DV cannot compare in terms of quality to that of 35 mm standard stock, the cost of working with 35mm demands a huge production apparatus.

<sup>xvii</sup> Filmmakers are no longer obliged to submit the full script before filming; a 1500 word synopsis is sufficient.



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- <sup>xviii</sup> Worth noting is also that this film was shot on DV cam which previously did not conform to the standard film quality (35 mm) stipulation in article 25.
- <sup>xix</sup> Barmé's concept of *packaged dissent* is interesting and well-worth developing; however Barmé's own text does not theoretically develop beyond the circumstantial and anecdotal.
- <sup>xx</sup> Worth noting is that Lefevbre argues that abstract space depends more on consensus than any space before (1991: 57).
- <sup>xxi</sup> For an English summary of the Shanghai's current five year masterplan visit: <http://www.shanghai.gov.cn/shanghai/node8059/ShanghaiProspects/index.html> .
- <sup>xxii</sup> Sassen's (2003) concept for the sector and population catering to the centre in terms of daily services and goods.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> A professional recording format developed by SONY.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> *Thus passes away the glory of this world.*
- <sup>xxv</sup> A short documentary following a homeless and mentally ill young girl.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> The *New World* complex caters for all aspects of life in an exclusive compound containing a hotel, stores, restaurants, bars, recreational facilities (ice skating!) and permanent living quarters.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Bray characterizes the latter as old *danweis* operating businesses by turning the compound outwards toward the streets or inverting the space into shopping strips.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> We should also remember that location shooting requires permits and that such are restricted in most countries.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Interestingly enough Cui Zi'en's films never deal with discriminatory issues.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Also Multiplex or Megaplex.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Regulated in the fifth chapter of *Regulations on the Administration of Movies, Chapter V, Distribution and projection of movies.*
- <sup>xxxii</sup> During my fieldwork clubs closed down at a rapid pace.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> The 798 has, as a compound, been very successful at establishing itself on the margins of the new economy, now housing TV shoots, various festivals etc. A veritable culture business has grown out here, as well becoming something of a tourist spot for foreign, as well as domestic tourists. Unlike similar communities previously 798 has been left more or less alone by the authorities. Commerce and tourism probably contribute to this as well, as the relative low peripheral land value. However the area is rumoured to have been scheduled for demolition in time for the 2008 Olympics.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> For a list see <http://www.hart.com.cn/Eb%20film.htm> (in English) or <http://www.hart.com.cn/Ca%20%B5%E7%D3%B0.htm> (in Chinese, selected)
- <sup>xxxv</sup> The accession to the WTO and China's aspirations in international politics have produced little more than occasional anti-piracy campaigns and sweeps, and the construction of the brand new SIPO office (State Intellectual Property Office of the People's Republic of China), rhetorically situated between the BFA and Beijing Film Studio (BFS).
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> The economic ecology is also sensitive to hostile environments, such as the areas surrounding the BFA, BFS and the SIPO offices where the informal distribution of films would be embarrassing since all three of these are state institutions The ecology is also sensitive to sudden and/or temporary changes in the environment; one fine example would be the circumstances surrounding the centennial anniversary of Fudan University in Shanghai during 2005. As the foreign guests, professors and academics arrived, local DVD shops were either temporarily closed or forced to remove their DVD/VCD stock. The reason for this was, most likely, the sensitive issue of IP rights.

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## ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Lai Man-Wai: Father of Hong Kong Cinema
2. Lai Man-Wai: Father of Hong Kong Cinema
  
3. 400 Millions, The
4. Lai Man-Wai: Father of Hong Kong Cinema
  
5. Frozen
6. Drifters
  
7. Shanghai Urban Exhibition Hall, 2005-09-11, private photograph
8. Shanghai Urban Exhibition Hall, 2005-09-11, private photograph
  
9. *Rue de Maure* (circa 1900) Atget, Eugene
10. West of the Tracks
  
11. Unknown Pleasures
12. The World
  
13. Shanghai Panic
14. Men and Women
  
15. Pirated Copy
16. Pirated Copy

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