

“An Archivist’s Fantasy Gone Mad”: The Age of Exhibition in Cao Fei’s Posthuman Trilogy*

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Abstract

This paper argues that in her recent films, the Chinese artist-filmmaker Cao Fei (曹斐, b. 1978) shows how the futility of art and technologies of exhibition is linked to the danger of overexposure to images without context, and the numbing of public consciousness. In the twenty-first century, the fear of forgetting seems increasingly obsolete in the face of social media tools like Facebook’s “See Your Memories: Never Miss a Memory” feature, which excavates photos uploaded, shared, or tagged on the site years ago, reminding users to “look back” on otherwise lost memories. However, in recent Chinese fiction (Ma Jian’s *Beijing Coma*; Chan Koonchung’s *The Fat Years*; Liu Cixin’s “The Weight of Memories”), the trope of dormant memories remains noticeably prevalent, reflecting an urgent cultural concern about the conscious “act of deleting memories” (Yan Lianke) in the process of recording modern Chinese history. Whether in the form of documentary-style animation (*i.Mirror*, 2007), zombie-horror film (*Haze and Fog*, 2013), or stop-motion train-replica dioramas (*La Town*, 2014), Cao Fei fantasizes about a new posthuman consciousness, whose most serious trespass against humanity is not forgetting, but rather not feeling. Presenting disjointed scenes that call upon instances of trauma and surveillance, Cao’s “posthuman trilogy” films suggest that when cosmopolitan memories become decontextualized, mere images no longer possess any meaningful symbolic power. Further, Cao’s films demonstrate that voyeurism becomes an unavoidable yet inconsequential daily practice in the digital age of exhibition.

Keywords

exhibition, China, new media, museum, posthuman, memory, zombie, trauma

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In an early scene in Cao Fei's 曹斐 (b. 1978) film *Haze and Fog* (2013), an elderly male character played by the documentary filmmaker Wu Wenguang (吳文光) strains to hear outside his high-rise apartment window, as the camera slowly pans to a line of office workers dancing to Psy's 2012 K-pop hit "Gangnam Style." A white sign that reads "For sale" (售 *shou*) in a bold red font sits squarely in the middle of the screen. In a largely silent film punctuated by occasional shouting and instrumental tango music, Cao Fei's reference to Psy's song draws an obvious parallel between the musician's satire of the luxurious lifestyle and expensive real estate of a trendy district in Seoul and the rampant consumerism in present-day Beijing depicted in the film. Furthermore, the scene calls attention to the futility and mindlessness embodied by the synchronized, mechanical dancing of the real estate workers. Yet the potentially subversive qualities of spectacle and vibrant spontaneity that are typically associated with a flash mob-type performance are immediately rejected by the figure of a lone coworker, who fails to notice the scene behind him as he stares blankly at his phone (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Office workers dance to "Gangnam Style" in Cao Fei's *Haze and Fog*. Cao Fei, *Haze and Fog* (2013), video, image still. Courtesy of the artist and Vitamin Creative Space.

Psy's worldwide hit reappears near the end of Cao Fei's 2014 film *La Town*, this time in music video form (Fig. 2). A clip of the song's trademark horse dance plays on a large screen in the late-night museum of La Town, immediately after a female voice narrates in French, "four times at the late-night museum in La Town, I saw people walk around. People walk around, lost in thought among the reconstruction, the

explanations, for lack of anything else” (00:36:15-00:36:39). As the video plays, a male narrator continues, “Why late-night museum?” to which the female voice responds, “four times at the late-night museum of La Town, I can’t see clearly the art works in the moonlight” (00:36:40-00:36:48).



Fig. 2. Psy’s “Gangnam Style” music video on display at the late-night museum in Cao Fei’s *La Town*. Cao Fei, *La Town* (2014), video, image still. Courtesy of the artist and Vitamin Creative Space.

The clip stands out in the museum, a striking contrast since it is a live-action recording of real people, unlike the rest of the film which consists of hand-constructed sets of model train figures, and because it is one of the film’s few references to a concrete moment in time and place. In both *Haze and Fog* and *La Town*, “Gangnam Style” reveals the futility of making cross-cultural connections in an era of globalization: nearly every viewer will instantly recognize “Gangnam Style” and give herself a pat on the back for being familiar with one sign of world culture, but little else may follow beyond the initial nod of recognition. These representations, once stripped of their context, lose all power to make any meaningful impact on the audience, similar to the fictional characters of the real estate worker on his phone or the museum-goers.

Cao Fei, who is from Guangzhou and based in Beijing, belongs to the latest generation of contemporary Chinese artists seen as being more interested in engaging with popular culture than participating in the social critique of older artists such as Ai Weiwei (艾未未). She has commented, “Criticizing society, that’s the aesthetics

of the last generation” (qtd. in Beam n. pag.). Her work, characterized by its preoccupation with the intersections between fantasy and reality, often depicts people trying to escape a mundane existence. For instance, in her 2004 film *COSplayers*, youths dressed as game characters pose and perform in costume, juxtaposed against the backdrop of the Guangzhou cityscape. The lack of obvious political resonance has often been used as a point of critique against commercial mainstream blockbuster films from China, such as Guo Jingming’s extremely profitable *Tiny Times* film series. In Cao’s case, her experimental films, usually exhibited in museums or galleries, have a much more limited reach in terms of audience. However, her films are worth consideration for their element of fantasy, which tends to operate as a powerful form of cultural resistance in Cao Fei’s oeuvre, and for their fixation on the same underlying concern: is it possible for any form of posthuman agency to exist in the globalized economy of the twenty-first century?

Whether in the form of documentary-style animation (*i.Mirror*, 2007), zombie-horror (*Haze and Fog*), or train-replica dioramas (*La Town*), Cao Fei’s three most recent films fantasize about a new posthuman (un)consciousness, whose most serious trespass against humanity is not forgetting, but rather not feeling. Chris Berry has argued elsewhere for the utopian potential of Cao Fei’s earlier work to serve as a form of ethical engagement and participatory art (205). This paper focuses instead on the dystopian vision presented in Cao Fei’s recent films, which I label her posthuman trilogy, for their shared depiction of a significantly altered human consciousness in a post-apocalyptic setting. The three films demonstrate the limits of intermediality in a digital age replete with promises of “medial border-crossings and hybridization” (Rajewsky 44), revealing instead the futility of art and technologies of exhibition, and exposing the danger of overexposure to images without context. In particular, *La Town*, which draws its voice-over narration from Alain Resnais’s *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), plays with the concept of exhibition in the museum context, recalling Andreas Huyssen’s reluctant admission in 2000, “No doubt, the world is being musealized, and we all play our parts in it” (*Present Pasts* 15). In Cao Fei’s version, the museum has been remade as factory, transforming art into commodity, exhibition into industry, and her vision holds special resonance in the case of postsocialist China, during a resurgence of its “museum boom” (“Mad about Museums”). However, despite their experimental art house aesthetic, Cao’s films also allude to elements of a global popular culture, suggesting that the film’s message is not limited to the Chinese case but equally applicable to an increasingly, interconnected audience familiar with processes of homogenization.

Before moving to a more detailed analysis of various cinematic and narrative aspects of the film trilogy, I will briefly explain my conceptual framework. Drawing from discourses in memory studies and the growing field of interdisciplinary posthuman studies, I examine the shifting relationship between digital technologies of seeing and remembering, and the process of determining what it means to be human in the twenty-first century. These fields of inquiry converge in Cao Fei's trilogy to reveal new insight about the role and future of art practices, and what is at stake in becoming posthuman.

History-Writing, Memory and New Media Technologies in Contemporary China

This paper's title recalls Huyssen's rhetorical questioning, "Total recall seems to be the goal. Is this an archivist's fantasy gone mad? Or is there perhaps something else at stake in this desire to pull all these various pasts into the present—something that is indeed specific to the structuring of memory and temporality today and that has not been experienced in the same way in past ages?" ("Present Pasts" 25). Huyssen traces the development of memory studies to the 1980s, a period of growing scholarship on the Holocaust after an initial period of denial and forgetting in the 50s, with its climax during the 90s in what Eva Hoffman calls the "era of memory" (Hoffman 242). In the midst of our globalized understanding of the present-day world, Huyssen ventures a warning about the danger of the "globalization paradox," which he identifies as a process that simultaneously situates the Holocaust as the universal metaphor for genocide and other forms of historical trauma, as it loses its historical specificity: "The global circulation of the Holocaust as trope at once decenters the event of the Holocaust and certifies its use as a prism through which we may look at other instances of genocide" ("Present Pasts" 24). The genocidal atrocities committed under Hitler's Nazi regime in WWII have been linked to events in modern Chinese history, most obviously in the killing and other brutalities committed against the Chinese population by the Japanese in the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-45), but also in the mass deaths that occurred during the socialist period in mainland China under the Chinese Communist Party, such as the Great Famine (1958-61) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-76).¹ Regardless of the nature of conclusions that arise from making these kinds of comparisons, the fact remains

¹ For more historical context on WWII in Asia, see Mitter. For an example of historical scholarship that connects the Cultural Revolution to Nazi Germany, see Mittler.

that recent Chinese history-writing is under intense scrutiny, and in particular, Marianne Hirsch's work on postmemory in the field of Holocaust studies can be particularly illuminating in the contemporary Chinese context.

According to Hirsch, postmemory refers to the once-removed relationship between Holocaust survivors and the second "hinge" generation offspring who lack the actual lived experience of their parents. Powerful memories are transmitted intergenerationally through objects like family photographs, as well as documentary processes such as interview testimonials. The psychological impact of these transmitted memories is so deeply felt that the traumatic experiences "seem to constitute memories in their own right" (Hirsch 103). Postmemorial work thus relies on the reactivation and re-embodiment of "more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression. Thus less-directly affected participants can become engaged in the generation of postmemory, which can thus persist even after all participants and even their familial descendants are gone" (Hirsch 111). In present day China, the dichotomy between the social/national and the individual/familial is not as clear-cut, making it more difficult for the generation of postmemory to persist. In other words, it is risky for individuals to rely on the state-sanctioned version of history, and difficult to build on "archival/cultural memorial structures" that simply do not exist, or are not readily accessible to the public, given the government's reluctance to directly confront the past. In "The Presence of the Past," Ian Johnson delineates the palimpsest-like city spaces in Beijing, where visitors "might be on the site of something old, but the historical substance is so diluted that it feels as if it has vanished" (302), linking the evolution of physical places and social practices to ways that history has been "suppressed, recreated, and revived" in contemporary China (304).

Indeed, a sense of urgency regarding the unnatural distortion of modern Chinese history has been repeatedly recognized as a concern and addressed head-on in essays such as the novelist Yan Lianke's *New York Times* op-ed titled "On China's State-Sponsored Amnesia," which calls attention to the younger generation of "selective-memory automatons" (n. pag.). Yan explains, "[t]he amnesia I'm talking about is the act of deleting memories rather than merely a natural process of forgetting. Forgetting can result from the passage of time. The act of deleting memories, however, is about actively winnowing out people's memories of the present and the past" (n. pag.). The medium of documentary filmmaking offers one powerful alternative to the official erasure of memory by offering "unsanctioned" memories, to draw from Esther C. M. Yau's work on digital video, in the form of

spontaneous modes of representation, such as Chinese independent documentary film's *xianchang* 現場 or “on the scene” aesthetic. However, as Yau points out, the popular mediasphere has become a site of “competing memories,” where digital technology is used to serve a wide range of purposes, and she warns ominously, “[a] different kind of storm is raging, and memories of the past, like the semi-abandoned fields and old houses separated from the altered landscapes of the present, are unlikely to be standing for long as high-rises and mansions shoot up nearby” (158). In other words, new technological modes of memory preservation may prove to be no less vulnerable to demolition than the crumbling villages and *hutongs* 衚衕 (alleys) marked for reconstruction.

A nagging sense of social responsibility toward the traumatic past is one possible explanation for the logic driving each generation's incessant desire to record and document, and aligns with the present-day assumption that digital technology allows for quicker and easier accessibility to data. For instance, the danger of forgetting has been alleviated by new media tools like Facebook's “See Your Memories: Never Miss a Memory” feature, which excavates photos uploaded, shared, or tagged on the site years ago, reminding users to “look back” on otherwise lost memories, and then share those memories with friends by re-posting the old photos on another user's feed. However, total recall, as Huyssen points out, is not a universal goal, for the archival project with its curation processes are inherently subject to manipulation of the ways in which memory is structured. The growing skepticism about the manipulation of history is a repeated concern reflected in fictional narratives, some of which have been banned in mainland China. One example is Chan Koonchung's novel *The Fat Years* (2011), in which the protagonist Lao Chen investigates his friend's assertion about “officially doctored books” (137) by going to the Sanlian bookstore and looking for Yang Jiang's books. Not finding the books there, Lao Chen returns home and goes online to continue his search; failing again, he concedes that Fang Caodi is telling the truth: “[i]n all the bookstores and even on their Web sites, where they claimed to stock every book in the world, of all the thousands of titles listed, Lao Chen could not find one single book that might explain the true facts about contemporary Chinese history” (143). Lao Chen then remarks on the sheer quantity of available books in the present, as compared to the scarcity of the Maoist era: “During the Cultural Revolution and at the beginning of Reform and Opening, there were very few books in the bookstores, and everyone knew that the true facts were being suppressed. But today, thought Lao Chen, there is a profusion of books everywhere, so many that they knock you over, but the true facts are still being suppressed. It's just that people are under the illusion that they are following

their own reading preferences and freely choosing what they read” (143). Lao Chen’s realization highlights a conflicting, less optimistic but related, assumption about digital technology’s consequences on the transmission of information in the twenty-first century.

At the same time that new technological tools facilitate modes of information dissemination, they also facilitate information distortion, whether in the form of airbrushing women’s bodies on magazine covers, or as in the case of Facebook, where the memories on display are actually carefully selected, curated by individual users as part of cultivating their online personae, and the practice of selective memory results in a warped version of reality.² Nowhere has the tension between apparent accessibility and manipulation been addressed as frequently as through the trope of dormant memories in recent Chinese-language fiction and film. Yomi Braester’s work on post-Maoist politics of memory centers around the “privatization and diversification” (435) of individual memory experiences depicted in PRC literature, as exemplified in *The Fat Years*. Chan’s novel points out that the misperception of total accessibility leads to a danger even more pernicious than obvious forms of censorship, such as the outright banning of “poisonous weeds” during the socialist period.³ In another banned work, Ma Jian’s *Beijing Coma* (2008), the narrative travels back and forth from the protagonist Da Wei’s slowly-resurfacing recollections of the late-1980s, to the ten years following the Tiananmen Square massacre when he awakens from his coma in the present-day. A similar story appears in Fang Fang’s 方方 *Ruan mai* 軟埋 (*Soft Burial*, 2016), as the protagonist Ding Zitao (丁子桃) awakens from her coma, struggling to uncover traumatic memories of growing up in the 1950s land reform era. The pathologization of memory and trauma are also the focus of Zhang Yimou’s 張藝謀 film *Gui lai* 歸來 (*Coming Home*, 2014), which was adapted from Yan Geling’s 嚴歌苓 novel, *Lu fan Yanshi* 陸犯焉識 (*The Criminal Lu Yanshi*, 2011), both depicting the devastating effects of the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Cultural Revolution on one family. Speculative fiction has been a

² See for instance William J. Mitchell’s study *The Reconfigured Eye*, which traces how by the 1980s “digital image manipulation was defined as a transgressive practice, a deviation from the established regime of photographic truth” (16). Also, the idea that one image may be used to perpetuate multiple (even false) meanings in the case of fake news going viral was brought to light during the 2016 American presidential election, see Maheshwari.

³ The term “poisonous weeds” (毒草 *ducao*) refers to Mao Zedong’s Speech at the Chinese Communist Party’s National Conference on Propaganda Work on Mar. 12, 1957, an attack against bourgeois ideology, including all literature and art interpreted as being anti-socialist and anti-party: “All erroneous ideas, all poisonous weeds, all ghosts and monsters, must be subjected to criticism.” This is excerpted in Mao (19).

particularly rich realm in which to explore the theme of memory displacement, as exemplified by the aforementioned *The Fat Years*, which is set in China in a prosperous near-future, and follows the main characters as they question society's contentment from its margins, investigating the mysterious disappearance of the month of February 2011. In Liu Cixin's short story "The Weight of Memories" (2016), the burden of memory inheritance is the topic of a series of dialogues between a fetus, his mother, and a doctor. The mother, a migrant worker, passes on her traumatic memories, which in her mind have been rewritten as a series of exciting life opportunities, to her unborn child, who subsequently cannot endure the pain and takes his own life before birth.

In a regulated yet shifting mediascape, writers, filmmakers, and artists have discovered ways to experiment with the possibility of reinvesting memorial spaces with individual expressions of familial, intergenerational memory, attesting to Braester's observation that many post-Maoist writers refuse to subscribe "to a collective identity and common memories," as way of insisting that one's personal experience "cannot be reduced to a single shared viewpoint" (435). As institutions dedicated to serving memory, museums are commonly seen as utopian sites of exhibition and sacred spaces of preservation. Cao Fei's films, however, offer a much bleaker interpretation of suspect memory practices, in which new spaces and media innovations converge, only to fall prey to the same old patterns of dilution and erasure. Her recent films have received critical attention and media coverage on the international art scene, at least partially due to their obvious connections with the zombie trend in contemporary popular culture represented by books, video games, TV shows, and films such as *28 Days Later* (dir. Danny Boyle), *World War Z* (novel by Max Brooks; film dir. Marc Foster), and *The Walking Dead* (comic book by Robert Kirkman; AMC TV series). Effortlessly drawing references to a global pop culture linked to cosmopolitan memories of trauma, Cao Fei's unique aesthetic relies on the basic premise that new digital technologies facilitate intercultural connections. However, this paper demonstrates that on the narrative level, her recent films warn of a near future in which the illusion of connectivity contributes to the numbing of human consciousness.

Discussions about posthumanity in Cao Fei's work tend to emphasize the "post," whether in the form of a hypothetical futuristic being whose existence reaches beyond our current human capacities, such as an artificially reconstructed body like a cyborg or avatar figure; or in the philosophical sense of reinterpreting what it means to be a human being in the twenty-first century and beyond, such as what posthuman subjectivity looks like as a result of the technological changes brought about by new

forms of digital media like internet identity and online communities.⁴ The title of Katherine Hayles's pioneering work from 1999, *How We Became Posthuman*, highlights the historical processes that enable the "continuities and discontinuities between a 'natural' self and a cybernetic posthuman" (5) so that a body and its intelligent machine counterpart are seamlessly integrated, a marked shift that relies on the downplaying of physical embodiment. Hayles argues that rather than recuperating the posthuman into liberal humanism or conceiving of it as "anti-human," one should locate the posthuman "within the dialectic of pattern/randomness and grounded in embodied actuality rather than disembodied information" to reach new levels of understanding the shift from human to cyborg (287).

Rather than focus on the utopian possibilities of posthumanity, Mingwei Song's work on Chinese science fiction reconceptualizes posthumanity as a way of revealing what remains of humanity in the face of new technologies. In fact, Song's observation that posthuman characters in contemporary Chinese science fiction "are virtually indistinguishable from ordinary humans, but at the same time invite a reexamination of how we understand humanity itself" ("Representations" 560) applies to the way that posthumanity is depicted in Cao Fei's trilogy. Song draws from recent works like Han Song's 韓松 (b. 1965) *Di tie* 地鐵 (*Subway*, 2010), and Chen Qiufan's 陳楸帆 (b. 1981) *Huangchao* 荒潮 (*The Waste Tide*, 2013) to make the case that "Posthumanity can also be interpreted as a subversive representation of the human conditions in the context of China's pursuit of power and wealth, a nightmarish counterpart to the 'Chinese dream'" (Song, "Representations" 560). While Cao Fei's posthuman trilogy does feature nightmarish visual and audio elements, such as bloodied bodies and horror film-esque sound effects, her films diverge from such science fiction narratives in that the filmic medium provides more room for visual humor, absurdity, and fantasy. The posthuman figure that Song describes in sci-fi may find herself in the throes of existential crisis, struggling for subjectivity or self-consciousness, such as the teenage girl Xiaomi 0 and her cyborg counterpart Xiaomi 1 in *The Waste Tide*. In Cao's films, by contrast, posthumanity is not a metaphorical stand-in for all human existence, but is rather what happens when human existence persists beyond these philosophical concerns, to the point of not caring or trying. In all cases, however, the posthuman figure is linked to the economic development and perceived wealth of a flourishing China, and the technological tools that affirm its position as a global power.

⁴ See, for example, Hou Hanru on Cao Fei as a member of the "New New Human Being" (新新人類 *xin xin renlei*) generation in "Politics of Intimacy."

Mirrors and Windows: Shattering the Illusion of an Interconnected World in *i.Mirror*

The tripartite animated film *i.Mirror* begins with a black screen highlighted by fluorescent text appearing as if being typed, set to the accompaniment of tapping keys. A yellow glowing subtitle reads “A second life documentary film, by China Tracy,” drawing attention to the tension between the real and the virtual world. The film’s opening sequence then continues with an epigraph from the urban designer William J. Mitchell’s *Me++* in the same vein: “I construct, and I am constructed, in a mutually recursive process that continually engages my fluid, permeable boundaries and my endlessly ramifying networks. I am a spatially extended cyborg” (39). The viewer watches as Cao Fei’s avatar in virtual reality, named China Tracy, interacts with the avatar Hug Yue and navigates the universe of Second Life. The underlying narrative is about overcoming loneliness through the search for love and self-identity, which ends with seemingly comforting messages about hoping for “new possibility . . . in our electronic second life (Part 3, 00:06:15-00:06:29) and “To go virtual is the only way to forget about the real darkness” (Part 3, 00:06:49-00:06:53). Upon closer inspection, however, the utopian vision of attaining posthuman, intercultural connection in virtual reality is shown to be impossible. In a scene that takes place at a fancy penthouse restaurant, Hug Yue’s view of the digital world appears onscreen in the form of a typed message, “It’s one that is dominated by youth, by beauty, and money . . . And it’s all an illusion” (Part 2, 00:07:03-00:07:06). At the end of Part 2, the sixty-five-year-old Hug Yue laughs upon realizing he is old enough to be China Tracy’s father, to which she comforts him by saying, “Well, in SL, we are young forever” and he responds, “Yes, another illusion . . .” (Part 2, 00:09:09-00:09:23). *i.Mirror* uses the medium of documentary film to explore the frontiers of a new space, the virtual world. The posthuman cyborg’s mode of interpersonal communication is by typing onscreen, and all exchanged messages are thus confined to text, or onscreen encounters between avatars. The computer screen, both in the form of typed messages between the two avatars, and the avatar figures themselves, promises the potential of a new kind of mirror, but although *i.Mirror*’s title implies the self-revelatory and self-reflexive act of documenting oneself, the resulting vision is its resounding rebuttal, as Cao Fei’s virtual world is revealed to be no more than a mirror of the real world, operating under the illusion of infinite reach and limitless possibilities.

The theme of alienation in virtual reality is foreshadowed well before the typed exchanges between Hug Yue and China Tracy, as the first part of the film consists of

voiceover narration from a disembodied male speaker reciting lines from Octavio Paz's poem "The Balcony," translated into English and originally written while Paz was traveling in India. The solitary speaker stands on a balcony looking out over Delhi in the middle of the night: "If this beginning is a beginning/ it does not begin with me/ I begin with it/ I perpetuate myself in it/ Leaning over the balcony/ I see/ this distance that is so close/ I don't know what to call it/ though I touch it with my thoughts" (Paz 169). The first-person speaker's alienation is two-fold: he is physically isolated from his dark surroundings below ("Tomorrow they'll have names/ they'll stand up and be houses/ tomorrow they'll be trees" [165]), and moreover, self-alienated, resembling the air before him, "a spongy body/ a promiscuous faceless being [165]." Incidentally, Paz's poem quotes lines from Li Yu (李煜) (937-78), the last emperor of the Southern Tang dynasty, who wrote his poem "Waves Washing the Sand" (浪淘沙令 "Lang tao sha ling") in exile. In Paz's poem, Eliot Weinberger translates, "Never lean on a balcony when you're alone, the Chinese poet writes (167)."⁵ Both Paz's and Li Yu's poems emphasize the transitory nature of time and its deleterious effects on the physical landscape, and consequently, the human psyche, but their relevance to *i.Mirror* lies in the subject's self-delusion and estrangement from reality, as the speaker admits culpability in a line in the first stanza of Li Yu's piece, "In a dream, I fail to realize I am but a guest" (夢裡不知身是客 *Mengli buzhi shen shi ke*). The theme of self-delusion and alienation is echoed in *i.Mirror*, as China Tracy questions her online existence, facing her mirror reflection in a blood-splattered bathroom, wondering, "Is my avatar my mirror?" and seconds later, "Sometimes I'm confusing the RL and SL" (Part 2, 00:06:19-00:06:32). The mirror here is not only a tool of self-reflection, but also a tool of confusion that blurs the boundaries between the real self and the virtual self, or more precisely, a tool that constructs an imaginary boundary where there may very well not be one.

In addition to the computer screen and the mirror, a third kind of ocular display that plays a significant role in *i.Mirror* is the window. Unlike a mirror, which depends on light and refraction, a window depends on its transparency. The figure of the window washer appears in both *i.Mirror* and *Haze and Fog*, seen from interior shots looking outside. In the first example, a female window cleaner perches on a ladder with her right arm raised, viewable only through the cleaned portion of the window (Fig. 3). The preceding shot shows the vertically extending exterior of a series of high-rise towers, and the window washer is followed by an exterior shot looking in on a solitary figure in a high-rise office building through a floor-to-ceiling window.

⁵ Li Yu's original reads 獨自莫憑欄 *Duzi mo pinglan*.

Humans are increasingly enclosed by glass in sleek, vertical spaces that contribute to the illusion of transparency and the perception of being connected to the outside world. But these windows and screens afford individuals the choice to remain isolated and protected from a distance.



Fig. 3. Window washer in Cao Fei's *i.Mirror*. Cao Fei (SL avatar: China Tracy), *i.Mirror* (2007), machinima, image still. Courtesy of the artist and Vitamin Creative Space.



Fig. 4. Window washer in *Haze and Fog*. Cao Fei, *Haze and Fog* (2013), video, image still. Courtesy of the artist and Vitamin Creative Space.

This denial of acknowledgement or human contact is further emphasized as emblematic of social disparity in *Haze and Fog* as a window washer, complete with a hard hat, dangles precariously outside the high-rise with his bucket and squeegee, as the building's inhabitants inside lounge about insouciantly, insistently and silently oblivious to the world outside (Fig. 4). The husband whiles away his time swinging his golf club, while his pregnant wife examines her nails. The window washer and the occupants coexist uneasily but un-self-consciously. Rather than facilitating human interaction, the window acts as a structural barrier for which its function of making visible produces no discernible impact. The window washer figure emphasizes the refusal of eye contact, the most basic sign of human interaction, as the worker outside intently cleans the exterior surface and ignores the interior, while the humans inside avoid acknowledging the cleaner, potential site of interaction, surveillance without impact, seeing without response. By being placed "behind glass," as in a museum exhibit, or onscreen, individuals may find it easier to mentally disengage from the images they are faced with.

The boundaries in flux in *i.Mirror* pertain not only to those separating the SL from RL, or multiple conceptions of the divided self, but also to physical borders. Throughout the film we see symbols of various national currencies, medieval European triptychs, the San Marco campanile and the Chinese pavilion at the 2007 Venice Biennale, slot machines, dance clubs, as well as a sequence in which China Tracy soars through rows of national flags. These easily recognizable symbols of world culture depict an interconnected network that transcends geographical borders and even historical time. Yet the film suggests that the result is not a deeper intercultural or interpersonal understanding among individuals but rather a heightened sense of alienation from others and oneself. The possibility of virtual space serving as a new representational mode that could possibly transcend the social/national and individual/familial memorial forms identified by Hirsch is denied in Cao Fei's vision, as seeing fails to lead to an increased sense of engagement.

Voyeurism in *Haze and Fog*

Moments of voyeurism abound in *Haze and Fog*, many drawn from Cao Fei's short vignettes, such as "Taobao," a story that pays homage to the convenience of home delivery. The story's third-person omniscient narrator describes the housewife character: "She does not like these frequent strangers, but she likes the procedure of ordering goods and opening packages. She shops the world in her home" ("The Residential Quarter" 126). In *Haze and Fog*, the absurd purchasing whims of the

leisure class (watermelon, painfully high stiletto shoes) show up unexpectedly in the building hallway and make a momentary narrative impact, where its otherwise isolated inhabitants encounter the delivery man and the cleaning lady without engaging in any interaction. Giving consumers the illusion of being connected to the world, shopping websites like Amazon and Taobao afford their buyers the luxury of increased insularity. In another vignette titled “Resentful Housewife,” an internet survey about married couples’ sex lives accentuates the housewife’s dissatisfaction instead of giving her a sense of camaraderie: “Any of the minutiae located in the flowery borders of a mainstream website’s lifestyle section may upset her for an entire day, or even longer” (129). A similar critique of the impression of connectedness attributed to social media is embodied by the seventeen-year old security guard at the housewife’s apartment complex, who uses the messaging service QQ on his cell phone to chat with old classmates and strangers from all over China on his shift, but “these things and people now seem distant, and changing, and are no longer relevant to his life” (130).⁶ These textual examples from Cao Fei’s short fiction are fully realized in visual form in *Haze and Fog*, showing individuals from a range of social classes, all ostensibly connected to the world culture of yoga, reality TV, and golf.

Constantly inundated with images and screens, the human population depicted in *Haze and Fog* goes through life in a zombie-like trance, neither truly seeing nor feeling. Scenes featuring sex workers and window washers recur throughout the posthuman trilogy, underlining unavoidable everyday acts of voyeurism and surveillance in a society where privacy is non-existent. Yet the pleasure of voyeurism, derived from sexual excitement or, at the very least, interest, is nowhere to be found, just as surveillance also fails to yield any kind of foreseeable result. In one striking scene from *Haze and Fog*, a sex worker dressed as a policewoman performs for her male client on top of a coffee table as his pregnant wife watches the TV game show *Chinese Dream*, all three figures staring blankly ahead in the luxury high-rise apartment (Fig. 5).

⁶ Cao Fei’s “Taobao” and “Resentful Housewife” are translated and reprinted as “The Residential Quarter” in *Cao Fei: I Watch That Worlds Pass By*, 126-31. English translation of passage from “Resentful Housewife” is my own. Stories originally published in Chinese are online at *Yishu shidai* 藝術時代 (*Art Time*), Issue 33.



Fig. 5. Sex worker in *Haze and Fog*. Cao Fei, *Haze and Fog* (2013), video, image still. Courtesy of the artist and Vitamin Creative Space.

The only audible sound comes from the TV show contestant, who speaks passionately about his perfectly angelic sister, and about how she deserves the opportunity to receive an education. As the policewoman sex worker writhes mechanically below a crystal chandelier overhead, we hear snippets of the young man’s story: “My sister should have a better future, as to me sis, you shouldn’t feel indebted, it was my will, and I am fine now” (00:36:17-00:37:15). At this point, the TV shows a close-up of his sister, who is choking back tears and holding a tissue to her nose as the audience claps. The emotional performance on television stands in stark contrast to the lack of emotional response in the living room, as the pregnant housewife barely registers what is on the TV, just as her husband displays no reaction to the show before him. This contrast between onscreen pathos and total apathy offscreen is undercut by the performative aspect attributed to reality TV, implying a connection between social class mobility and performance shared by the sex worker and the brother and sister pair; the scene closes as the sex worker gives one lingering glance to the sister, who is choking back tears onscreen. Dramatic irony also arises from the points of contrast between visual details of opulence and wealth, such as the chandelier and wine glass, and the story of poverty that is being recounted on the TV by the lower-class contestants struggling to afford an education. In this absurd moment, the two intersecting lines of sight reveal how even the most exciting and provocative content can lose its power. Exhibition, whether in the form of live

performance or recorded reality show, has so completely failed to engage its audience that a pregnant wife can contentedly sit side alongside her husband as he spends time with a prostitute.

Cao Fei's posthuman trilogy demonstrates how technological advancements, such as online amenities and social media, contribute to the creation of a new posthuman being, rather than bring people together. In *Haze and Fog* and *La Town*, the figure of the zombie emerges to take the place of *i.Mirror's* cyborg-avatar. Set against a post-apocalyptic landscape, Cao Fei's conceptualization of the zombie in *Haze and Fog*, the most monstrous and horrific possible play on Xi Jinping's great "renewal" of the Chinese nation, shows the limits of prosperity in the form of materialism. Ways of watching and seeing in the posthuman trilogy films are inextricable from consumer capitalism, as shown in the scene of synchronized office workers dancing to "Gangnam Style" in *Haze and Fog*, with the "For sale" sign as the visual focal point. In the film, global markers of China's cosmopolitan desires, such as luxury high-rises, yoga studios, supermarkets overflowing with choice, and home delivery, have certainly transformed the modern consumer, as revealed by the zombies they live with and have themselves become. Berry has used the term "re-enchancement" to describe the transformative power of art on some of the cities depicted in Cao Fei's films, including the Beijing suburbs in *Haze and Fog* (204).⁷ According to Cao Fei, *Haze and Fog* was inspired, less whimsically, by the simultaneous experience of streaming bootlegged versions of AMC's post-apocalyptic zombie drama *The Walking Dead* while being inundated with air quality reports and the daily necessity of wearing face masks in Beijing in 2011.⁸ These factors come together in her films' depiction of the soul-less zombie state as a stand-in for the global citizen's numb and cold existence.

The most dramatic departure that Cao's film takes from the popular zombie genre is that in *Haze and Fog*, real estate agents, housewives, and delivery men in the suburbs of Beijing appear unaffected in their everyday lives as zombies coexist nonchalantly at their sides: the fact that the zombie is *not* a disruptive presence conceives of the line between human and zombie as imaginary or ambiguous at best. The film features numerous examples of this ambivalence, as individuals go about their everyday lives oblivious, apathetic, and unperturbed by a decaying and bloodied zombie at their side, appearing as part of the landscape, culminating in the real estate

⁷ Berry argues that Cao's works "are part of an effort to not simply depict but also intervene, transform, and even—insofar as it is possible for art to do so—redeem the new city" (204).

⁸ In 2011, air pollution in Beijing was particularly bad in early December. See, for example, the following accounts in English: Wong; Fallows.

agent that lures clients to feed zombies at his open house. Referring to her earlier films such as *Whose Utopia*, a documentary about workers at the Osram lighting factory in Foshan, Guangdong province, Berry proposes, “[i]f Cao’s urban art intervenes in and aims to have an effect on the people who participate in its production, and also perhaps those who see it, does it also have an effect on the city itself, or at least our perception of it?” (214). The version of Beijing depicted in *Haze and Fog* forces viewers to redefine what it means to “live” in a city. Zombies and zombie-like humans manage to survive, persisting even beyond death, enduring intolerable environmental conditions. But rather than transforming the city’s inhabitants into engaged social participants, the city contributes to the individual’s physical deterioration and spiritual malaise. The film viewer’s perception of Beijing, shaped by the endless stream of photos that appear in mainstream journalistic accounts depicting the infamous smoggy skyline, indeed shifts. Pushing our expectations to the extreme limits of horror, the worst case scenario is not death, but its opposite: the persistence of life in a greatly reduced state, with no possibility of death as relief.

Museum as Dystopia in *La Town*

Cao Fei’s work also addresses the question of whether the museum as a conventional exhibition tool and institution contributing to memory preservation can retain its potential as a powerful space in the digital age. *La Town* provides one pessimistic response to Berry’s question about the efficacy of art practices such as production and exhibition. About three and a half minutes into *La Town*, wisps of white smoke appear mysteriously, unfurling from the scene of a crash: a white, high-speed train, marked by its name 和諧號 *hexie hao*, ironically, The Harmony Line, lays on its side, having been derailed (Fig. 6). The object of collision in the scene is none other than Santa Claus, sitting in his sleigh, one of his reindeer bloodied and splattered across the train’s front window, another bloody reindeer carcass lies on the track.

This collision reappears near the film’s end, as the camera slowly pans over the Late-Night Museum of La Town, a museum that exhibits reproductions of many of the objects shown throughout the film, with the clip of the “Gangnam Style” music video discussed earlier. The female voice explains the presence of the bystanders, museum visitors, “The people walk around, lost in thought among the reconstructions, for lack of anything else, the explanations, for lack of anything else” (00:36:19-00:36:32).



Fig. 6. High-speed train wreck in *La Town*. Cao Fei, *La Town* (2014), video, image still. Courtesy of the artist and Vitamin Creative Space.

These lines, spoken in French like the rest of the lines in the film, are taken almost verbatim from *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, with *La Town* standing in for Hiroshima. The museum plays an important role in Resnais's film, as his collaboration with Marguerite Duras originated as a documentary project, and one of the earliest scenes in *Hiroshima* features shots of museum goers trying to make sense of the unspeakable atrocities of WWII amidst photographs and displays of melted bottle caps and bundles of human hair. In Resnais's film, the trauma of the atomic bombings gets displaced and embodied in the sexual relationship between the French woman "Elle," played by the actress Emmanuelle Riva, and a Japanese male architect, Eiji Okada in the role of "Lui." The actuality of what happened in Hiroshima is held at a distance, as the male character was not in Hiroshima when the bombing happened (his family was). Instead the film gives narrative focus to the female protagonist's traumatic love affair with a German soldier in her youth that led to her imprisonment and the punishment of getting her hair shorn, which she likens to the experience of bomb victims losing their hair.

Cao's borrowing of Resnais's film suggests that any aesthetic attempt to truly commemorate historically-specific trauma is doomed to fall short of its aim. As viewers, recognizing Cao's homage to the dated *Hiroshima* allows for a greater appreciation of Cao's awareness of the limitations of cinema of exhibition, perhaps even more fraught in the age of digital reproduction. In *La Town*, in the lines

challenging the female character's insistence on credibility and memory, whether she has seen a place or not, the word *l'hôpital* (hospital) has been substituted with *l'usine*, the factory, suggesting that the former site of potential salvation or healing is no longer sufficient. This deliberate swap implies that in the posthuman age, only sites contributing to the processes of production and consumption are given priority and are seen to provide possible treatment. *La Town* features an elaborate set constructed by Cao Fei's own hand, consisting of miniature model train figures, and loosely narrated in French by an unidentified male and female pair.⁹ An epigraph in English appears at the very beginning of the film: "Everyone has heard the myth of *La Town*. The story first appeared in Europe, but after traveling through a space-time wormhole, reappeared in Asia and Southeast Asia. It was last seen near the ocean bordering the Eurasian tectonic plate, vanishing in its midst as if a mirage" (00:00:06-00:00:19). Cao Fei pokes audaciously at Resnais's *Hiroshima*, as if asking why even pretend that this is a story about an actual place or actual events. Describing the surreal confrontation between a post-apocalyptic near-future and a yearning for a mythical past, the quote suggests that *La Town* is at once every place and no place. As the male voice speaks the first enigmatically insistent line, "Tu n'as rien vu à *La Town*" (you saw nothing in *La Town*) (00:00:42-00:00:44), recalling the opening dialogue between He and She in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*: "You saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing." "I saw everything. Everything" (00:01:19-00:01:23), the viewer cannot help but be reminded of instances of recent and not so recent collective trauma, not only in China but around the world. Cao Fei's films draw from markers of a globalized consumer culture, from the NBC peacock in *i.Mirror* to the collapsed roof adorned with McDonald's iconic golden arches in *La Town*. While the latter is clearly a fictional film about a mythical post-apocalyptic metropolis, it refers to distinct historical moments in time, such as the obvious allusion to the bombing of Hiroshima. Furthermore, the train crash, including its reconstruction in the Late-Night Museum, is a pointed reference to the highly publicized Wenzhou train crash of 2011 in Zhejiang province, in which the Chinese government responded to the incident that resulted in forty deaths and over 192 injuries by ordering the two derailed trains to be buried.¹⁰ Many online commentators such as the blogger Han Han (韓寒) criticized the attempted government cover-up, only to have their posts censored and websites shut down.¹¹ *La Town* depicts the museum as a space in which

⁹ For more on Cao's filmmaking process in *La Town*, see Schultz.

¹⁰ For an English-language account of the Wenzhou train crash, see "Hasty Burial."

¹¹ On July 26, 2011, Han Han published a blog about the train crash titled 脫節的國度 *Tuojie de guodu*, translated by Allan H. Barr as "The Disconnected Nation." He recounted on Nov. 2, 2011

the practice of remembrance is subject to manipulation, in which collective memory gets decontextualized and diluted, highly reminiscent of the “logic of connoisseurship” that Braester reads in the relationship between vintage wine appreciation and “red classic” films in *The Fat Years*—historical objects to be “collected, appreciated in company, and consumed” (444) without inducing further reflection.

The art critic Dong Bingfeng has characterized the development of contemporary Chinese artist film or the “cinema of exhibition” as a progressive movement from film to installation. He argues that film being shown in art museums and galleries “not only symbolizes a new combination of temporality and aesthetics, but also breaks the viewing experience that is led by other forms of visual art on display at art galleries” (75). Dong’s exceedingly optimistic reading of the cinema of exhibition, in which the place of screening has shifted from “the confines of the theatre” to the “liberated” exhibition space (75), proposes its emergence as “a form of resistance to discourses and commercial tendencies found within the mechanisms of the museum system and the art market” (77). This view is flatly overturned by Cao Fei in her posthuman trilogy films, especially in *La Town*, where the museum is indistinguishable from a factory, a manufacturing and profiteering space in which art becomes commodity, and subsequently loses its potential for resistance. Given that the art historian Jean-Christophe Royoux identifies the main goal of the cinema of exhibition as “how to imagine the relationship with the mass public from the art works” (qtd. in Dong 77), *La Town* illustrates that the dystopian museum space fails when it lacks the ability to sustain human engagement. If *Hiroshima Mon Amour* tentatively questioned the possibility of a museum-based or documentary film approach to being able to commemorate the horrors of WWII, then *La Town* outright rejects that possibility, warning of a future world in which the museum with its cinema of exhibition becomes another cog in the memory-sanitizing wheel.

Conclusion

In the last two decades, new forms of digital media have dramatically expanded the ways in which individuals can participate in memory practices. Since the late 90s, innovations in DV technology have reshaped the landscape of documentary film, in

the experience of having his post removed in 格調不高怎麼辦 *Gediao bugao zenmeiban* translated as “What Do You Do If It’s Too Downbeat?”. These are collected in English translation in *Han Han: This Generation* on 217-20 and 221-24.

turn democratizing the filmmaking process, allowing for ease of documentary production and dissemination. Modes of individual storytelling have undergone transformations in the last two decades ranging from the audio and visual to the textual in the form of self-publishing, online literature, and micro(blogs). These new media forms range from independent documentary film, which often has a very limited audience size because of accessibility and appeal, to social media on the opposite spectrum of mass appeal. Despite the respective variations in audience size and potential for social impact, these digital technologies have drastically augmented the ease with which the private can become the public with one click. In a recent case, the actor Wang Baoqiang (王寶強, b. 1984) took to Weibo (微博) to announce his divorce from Ma Rong (馬蓉), publicly exposing her affair with his agent Song Zhe (宋喆). By the following afternoon, his post had been shared over 560,000 times and received over 1.5 million comments.¹² The ensuing controversy surrounding Wang Baoqiang's divorce highlights the contentious relationship between mainstream state-sponsored media and the power of social media as a self-publishing platform for celebrities and netizens. Debates about the incident reveal some of the most pressing issues related to the ethics of exhibition in the age of new media. For one, social media grants a celebrity like Wang Baoqiang narrative control, albeit in limited capacity, in relaying the news of his divorce directly to his more than 28.5 million Weibo followers, freed from the domain conventionally mediated by gossip columns. Secondly, the "Wang Baoqiang incident" raises the question about what is considered a "safe topic" during a time of tightening up, and the slowly shrinking realm of acceptable topics for discussion on social media also reveals the complicated relationship between perceptions of reader interest and availability. "Private" topics may be equated with trivial, meaningless, even scandalous topics, and topics deemed "safe" can quickly become banned. Social media is initially used as an individual's tool of empowerment, then becomes a tool of public shaming.

¹² Wang first posted the announcement titled "Divorce Announcement" (離婚聲明 *lihun shengming*) on his Weibo, which has since been removed, but the image file is easily searchable online. In the following days, the hashtag #WangBaoqiangdivorce (#王寶強離婚 #WangBaoqianglihun) was viewed nearly 8 billion times. See Alice Yan; Koetse. The Wang Baoqiang Incident (王寶強事件 *Wang Baoqiang shijian*) resurfaced in mid-October when the court trial began in Beijing, by which time the hashtag #WangBaoqiangdivorce had received 115 million views on Weibo. Xinhua posted a commentary on October 18, admonishing that "a certain media celebrity" should know better than to "air one's dirty laundry in public" (家醜不可外揚 *jiachou buke waiyang*), whether out of pure ignorance or strategically just in time to promote his forthcoming film, either way participating in the deplorable act of "using family scandal to establish influence," an offense that clearly "violates traditional Chinese morality." Xinhua's commentary instigated a heated online response; see a roundup on *China Digital Times*.

As these new media forms conquer public interest, older, more established practices of information dissemination are feeling the effects of competition. In his essay titled “Reading,” Yu Hua describes the uncanny experience of being inundated with books at Beijing’s book fair in Ditan Park in the present-day, juxtaposed with the scarcity of reading material during and immediately following the Cultural Revolution: “Now, thirty years later, we have moved from an age without books to an age when there is an excess of them—in China today, more than two hundred thousand books are published each year. In the past there were no books to buy, whereas now there are so many that we don’t know which ones to buy” (56).

Yu Hua uses his trademark humor to downplay a discouraging message: just as online retailers and piracy contribute to an overall cultural atmosphere in which books are as dispensable as wastepaper, readers at the Ditan book fair are bombarded by “lectures on classical literature, demonstrations on folk arts, photography exhibitions, free film showings, and cultural performances, along with fashion, dance, and magic. Banks, insurance companies, and asset management firms promote their financial products. . . . In this cramped and crowded space, writers and scholars attend book signings while quack doctors take pulses and dispense advice, scribbling prescriptions just as rapidly as the authors sign their books” (57). As Yu Hua points out, access to information and new media is necessarily filtered and complicit with the consumer marketplace. Regardless of whether new forms of media simply confirm the mass appeal of celebrity gossip in the case of Wang Baoqiang, or distract from meaningful and serious intellectual encounters as Yu Hua argues, the way that humans consume information continues to change. Technology facilitates making transcultural connections but at the cost of viewers becoming desensitized to civilian footage of police violence as an everyday occurrence in mainstream news media. The museum, long viewed as a sacred cultural institution dedicated to commemoration and exhibition, shares many of the goals as these more recent digital media forms. In his monograph on historical museums, Kirk A. Denton writes, “[m]useums and memorial sites offer a particularly visible and public space through which to discuss issues of memory, politicized constructions of the past, globalization and the changing role of museums in postsocialist societies, and the construction of national and postsocialist identities” (9). Denton’s study depicts the museum as a space of possibility, but Cao Fei’s reading of exhibition practices is much more cautious. Referring to easily recognizable twentieth and twenty-first century transnational representations of memory and trauma such as *Hiroshima Mon Amour* and *The Walking Dead*, Cao’s films suggest that when cosmopolitan memories become decontextualized, mere images no longer possess any meaningful symbolic power.

Her posthuman trilogy makes contemporary Chinese art film legible in a global context, but it also reveals that connecting all future worlds, and the practice of fostering intercultural connections, may be a façade for our collective amnesia and numbness.

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