

# A PILE OF GHOSTS: A CINEMATIC HETEROTOPIA OF SPECTRAL URBANIZATION

ELLA RAIDEL

NTU NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY (SINGAPORE)

**Ella Raidel**, Ph.D., is a filmmaker, artist, and researcher. She is an Assistant Professor at NTU Singapore at ADM School of Art, Design, and Media and Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information.

In her interdisciplinary work – films, videos, writings – she focuses on the socio-cultural impact of globalization with a focus on urbanization and Asian cinemas. She is interested in reflexive forms of narration in questioning the representation in documentary films. Her film-making corresponds with her writings on Sinophone cinema for researching the poetics in image-making. Her work has been presented and distinguished in numerous international film festivals, exhibitions, and biennials. She is the co-editor (with Peng Hsiao-yen) of *Altering Archives, The Politics of Memory in Sinophone Cinemas and Image Culture* (Routledge Contemporary China Series 2018) and has publicized on the Malaysian born and Taiwan based filmmaker Tsai Ming-Liang. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4074-3744>

#### **Corresponding Author**

Ella Raidel  
ella.raidel@ntu.edu.sg  
ADM School of Art Design and Media  
81 Nanyang Drive, ART 03-04  
Singapore 637458

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A Pile of Ghosts (2021) Film credits:

Director /Ella Raidel ; Cinematography / Djordje Arambasic, Karel Picha, Vincent Zheng; Sound / Tong Zhang, Huawei Cheng; Editing / Daniel Hui; Sound Design / Sander Saarmets; Color grading / Junbin Chen; Visual Effects/ Benjamin Seide; Actor/ Actress / Charles Yang, Yakira Cang; Production / Ella Raidel ; Associate Producer/ Hongjohn Lin; Production Advisor / Ursula Wolschlagler; Supported by The Austrian Science Fund, FWF, BKA - innovative film, Wien Kultur MA 7, Land Oberösterreich, NTU Singapore

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Fig.1 Film Still *A Pile of Ghosts* (2021), Tianducheng, Hangzhou.

## Ghosts Materialized in Cinema

An uncanny atmosphere establishes the first image of the film, the familiar, yet strange setting of Paris on a rainy day. A broken fountain on Champs Elysees, the iconic Tour Eiffel disappearing in the fog, people hurrying away with umbrellas, footsteps leaving the smutching sounds of mud, rain drops reverberating on the metallic construction of the tower into an eeriness, all these images of the well-known French metropolis appear in a dystopian ambience with a security guard wearing a Red Army uniform overlooking an empty parking lot and directing his gaze directly into the camera. The only visitors on this day is the filmmaker herself on the field research for *A Pile of Ghosts*.

The title *a pile of* suggests a mass of something useless placed somewhere, almost forgotten. The consecutive image sequences reveal more landscapes that have piled up: a

fake Acropolis, a Sphinx that is being plied by construction workers, while visitors are taking pictures of the world monuments in the desert of Gansu province. Lanzhou New City is a gigantic construction site, where for many years the entire mountainous landscape has been flattened and eroded to build a city for multiple universities. The billboards render the vision of a green garden landscape with fountains and lakes. Structures for buildings are erected in great numbers. On every street corner, surveillance cameras on poles are set for the future control, but now recording hardly any human trace. Wide freshly paved streets with newly planted trees are located in the desert. The landscape demands for a metaphorical reading of the Chinese folk classic "The Foolish Old Man Removes Mountains." It tells the tale of a 90-year-old man named Mr. Fool. The mountains were blocking the way to his house, so he determined to remove them to ease the traffic. He was so uncompromising that even though this task could

not be done in his life time, he recruited the generations after him, and one after the other had to finish the resettlement of the mountains. Mao Zedong gave a speech with the same title, *The Foolish Old Man Removes Mountains*, in calling an international united front of the proletarians against imperialism and capitalism in 1945 when the communist China was founded. The new area of Lanzhou, after having changed the natural environment is supposed to be a university town for educating the next generation, which is not only the reverse of Mr. Fool in the classic tale, but Mao's political thoughts against capitalism and on the power of people. The flattened mountain landscape signals that anything, even nature, can be shaped against its grain in the name of progress, people, and communism.

In *A Pile of Ghosts*, the empty cities and transformed landscapes are the staging ground in highlighting the contradictions of our times that are haunted by the ghost of capitalism. The film was compiled during a research project on Chinese ghost cities under the title *Of Haunted Spaces* according to Foucauldian discourses on heterotopias. Several trips to China in search of sites, protagonists and experts were made for making a film on ghost cities. The intention was to find protagonist that would embody the urbanization process through lived experience and take on several roles, such as construction workers, real estate agents, investors or a nail house owner. In making this film, textual materials, plots, and scripts were collected and sampled from real estate advertisements or governmental propaganda for the better future. The fictional content of the texts, the artificial landscaping and casting of actors and realtors demanded a form of film that intersects between the real and the fiction, the limbo zone to materialized ghosts that are haunting the present times.

### Spaces of Contradictory Differences

The art-based research *Of Haunted Spaces* on the ghost cities of China, continues my interest in the rapid urbanization processes of China, and its political, economic and social impact

on a global scale. In my previous films, I have investigated how urban and social realities change under the economic initiatives with China, e.g. in *Subverses: China in Mozambique* (2011). I have demonstrated how the Chinese investments in infrastructure are exchanged for the profiteering of land, mines and labour. The film examines the working conditions and changing ecological environment in Mozambique. In *Double Happiness* (2014) under the promise of a cultural exchange, the Austrian village of Hallstatt is copied and rebuilt mirror-inverted as a real estate project near Shenzhen. The narrative of both films is not a straightforward documentary, but I have developed a cinematic language that intersects with musical, poetry and pop interventions to illustrate how the political is turned into fictional plots, and to make evident that cities and infrastructures are built for speculative reasons. In taking the discursive route of Foucault's idea of heterotopia *Of Haunted Spaces* investigates the phenomenon of ghost cities in China.

Foucault's idea of heterotopia was first developed as a response to Jorge Luis Borges description of a Chinese encyclopaedia (Borges, 1942). Foucault relates here the idea of heterotopia as the impossibility of a language, that can approach imaginary figures, things, and places. A heterotopia of language thus describes the unthinkable, the impossibility of the spoken. Much later Foucault adapted the idea of *heterotopia* in his lecture *Of Other Spaces* (Foucault, 1986) to the context of urban space as a place of difference, a counter-space, that is parallel to the real spaces, yet located outside of all spaces. He categorizes these spaces into six principles, among those a cemetery, a garden, and a prison. A heterotopia per se would be the mirror, which is real as an object, but the image in it extends into a non-existing space.

Heterotopia relates to spaces of contractionary differences. Ghost cities are heterotopias, because they occupy a real space, yet on the other hand they are parallel spaces, outside of society, coming into existence through fabulations, assumptions and imagination. Ghost cities in China hold such

an illusionary space. They have been widely referred to as a phenomenon of the surplus production of capital, the result of rapid urbanization, speculation, and money laundry. The ghost city encompasses the contradictions of power relation, driven by economics, politics, and social and urban transformations. By the same token, the ghost city is a contradictory existence because one can never be certain where it is, when or how long it will be empty. It is a parallel space created by capitalistic imagination.

A ghost city is a mirror of capitalism, that looks like a city, yet is an illusion, it is empty. What is unseen are the underlying mechanisms of the surplus production created through labour, raw materials, and speculation. If the mirror is the perfect heterotopia, these places are even more illusionary than a mirror, they are haunted by the capitalist mode of production, accounted and valued in numbers at the stock exchange. The

urban spaces that surface under the socio-political and economic contradictions nowadays are visible and countable in GDP numbers, the more they are built the higher their value for the surplus they produce. These numbers reflect the success of economic growth. Yet, if these places are the mirror of the hidden path, that something excessive and useless can be built, with the only aim to raise the number in value that is even more illusionary as the reflected non-space of a mirror. Chinese investments in Africa, the copied and the ghost cities, they all carry the different spatial logics of what Foucault has defined as heterotopias, because they contain the idea of accumulating different times, cultures, and countries within one place. To bring these places of illusion into existence, a narrative is created by government, advertisement, tourism or real estate agencies to promote and indicate the place. It is through the commercial scripts that these places come into existence.

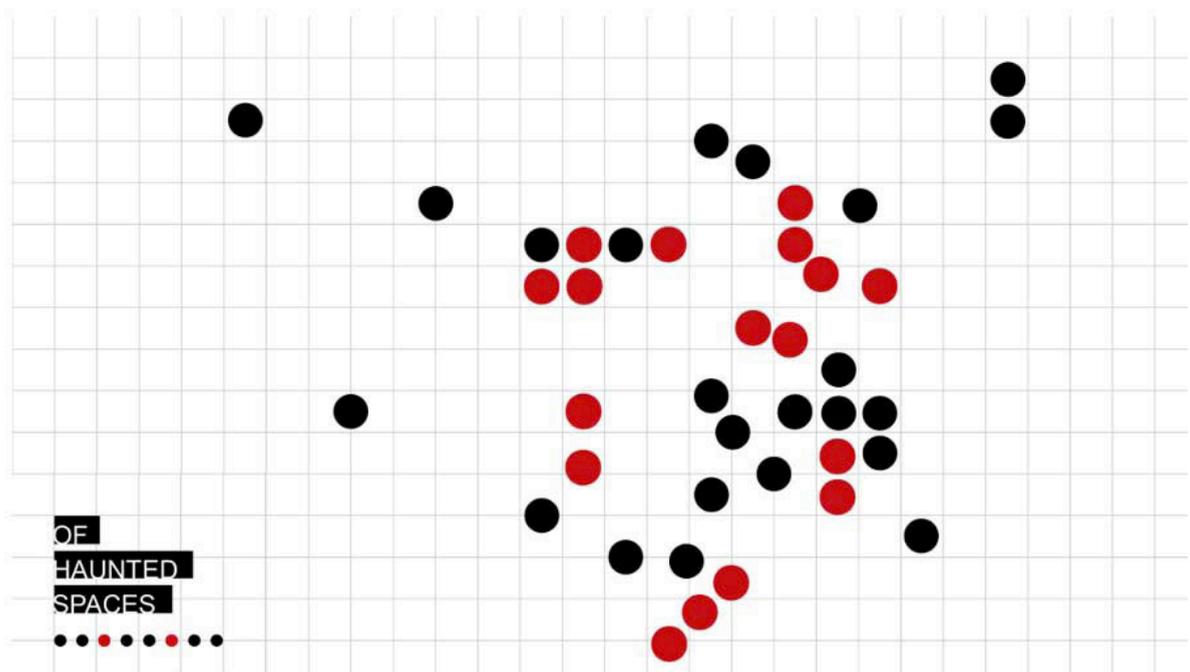


Fig. 2 Ghost map of China by Chen Shiau-Peng for the website [www.hauntedspaces.net](http://www.hauntedspaces.net).

Following the principles of heterotopia, the ghost cities of China signal the crisis of our current world system, that something excessive, over-used can create empty cities. The geographical locations of new ghost cities are on the outskirts and outside of main cities, they appeared first in Ordos, Inner Mongolia, where the first ghost city emerged. Now they are everywhere. Such places are reported along the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), from Africa to South East Asia, similar phenomena crop up through these investments, where empty cities and infrastructures are built for financial gain that can never be repaid. Moreover, heterotopia is to manage and regulate the otherness, people are forced to move in, it is controlled and centralized by the government to decide who is in and who is out. At the same time, the ghost city is also a place of seclusion, creating an entrance that is an exit as well. In the form of a colony, the new ghost city now becomes a colony of global capitalism. Such colonies can surface in numbers all over the world. Finally, the ghost city creates the illusion of prosperity of capitalism, the perverse fantasy prescribed by the government to teach people how to desire to fulfil their lives.

### **Making a Capital Ghost Film through Cartography**

To indicate the topographical relation for the field research, a map of China was conceptualized to symbolize the spectre of the global capitalism. In a collaboration with the artist Chen Shiao-Peng the underlying contours of the map of China were replaced by the abstract form of a Chinese chessboard to depict the speculations on the real estate market. As the real estate market rises and falls, no one can really predict the result. The abstraction of the map not only indicates the illusionary aspect, but also the impossibility to locate the phenomena of these cities. Chen marks the locations of the ghost cities as red and black spots on the grid of a chessboard. The red are active elements, that the researcher has documented, and a new window with photos and text material opens up on the website. The black spots remain idle, as marker for possible

ghost cities. For Chen, the map translates China's power relation and political ambivalence into a chess board game. The locations on the ghost map cannot be precisely indicated, they are speculative. The chessboard-like composition references the rules of power game in controlling and determining who will be players, decision makers, or bystanders.

The topography remains subjective, it traces and documents, shows evidence of the research for filmmaking. Gerald Sim draws an analogy of the topological mapping with that of filmmaking as a form of mapping. "A film can be understood in a broad sense to be a "map" that plots and colonizes the imagination of the public. It is said to 'invent', and as a result, to seek to control" (Sim, 2020). Often the field research was a journey into the unknown. The map on the website is the place that informs about the researcher's path in visiting the locations of the ghost cities, including text and photos. In the film *A Pile of Ghosts* there is no information about the precise locations, all locations become one, as an indication of the symptom of spectral urbanization that could surface anywhere. Therefore, filmmaking creates the mental mapping for the heterotopia of spaces that are the out-side of spatial logics.

The choice for visiting the locations was made through the research of reports, ghost city index, and recommendations of experts. Already in 2010, I started to research the urbanization process on the outskirts of Beijing, by documenting villages and districts that were erased for the purpose of urban redevelopment. No traces of memories and histories were left behind. In the past years of the research *Of Haunted Spaces*, I continued to visit numerous places among those in the Shandong Province, and the East coast where a large number of empty real estate projects were reported. In the area of Hangzhou, Tianducheng, the replica of Paris is located, not far away from Huaxi, the Communist No. 1 Village, the model village for the Chinese communist party. Tianducheng has been a popular location for several art films (Just, 2013), music videos, (Jamie XX, 2015) and documentary films (Benoit & Chelebourg, 2018) because of its absurdity of being a

fake Paris in the middle of China's countryside. Another route brought me to the North-West, to Chongqing, Chengdu, and to the Gansu Province where the Silk Road and the New Road and Belt Initiative have their starting point. At Lanzhou new area, hundreds of mountains were flattened to build a city, with new roads and apartment blocks and a new airport for entering and exiting. Ordos, the capital of Inner Mongolia, another city in the desert, was reported to be the first and largest ghost city in China. It was also the shooting site in my previous film *Double Happiness*. China is in high demand of new cities, yet on the other hand these new places are heterotopias, colonies of capitalism, located outside of easy reach. Whether or not these cities will remain empty, they are the phenomenon of our current time, that changed the landscape of the future.

### The staging of questions

The process of researching for *Of Haunted Spaces* became the script-writing process that led to the making of the film *A Pile of Ghosts* (2021). During the field research the aim was not to achieve a documentation, but a staging of questions, either with actors or protagonists found on site, or finding situations where something was rehearsed, acted, enacted or played out. Castings were arranged to find a protagonist that could embody several roles and play out the contradictions of our current time. In a self-reflexive manner, the processes involved, the setups and characters were staged as if they were behind-the-scenes in the making of the film.

The staging of questions can be traced to Brecht's theories on epic theatre, when staging a play means to provoke incidents of social reality to reveal its hidden meanings. Such a stage can be a character or a site, or the staging can be done through montage. To use Walter Benjamin's understanding of Brecht, a protagonist can be "an empty stage on which the contradictions of our society are acted out. It is through this 'empty', 'consenting', pliant, adaptable 'hero' that some of the principles of *Verfremdung* (alienation) exchanging roles and

identities – may best be enacted" (Benjamin, 1966/1998). Both Brecht and Benjamin were influenced by Chinese theatre plays that make the stage "unsensational" and "dis-enchanting" in underlining Brecht's debt to this technique (Benjamin, 1966/1998, Introduction xiii), because the beholder has temporally disengaged himself or herself from the fictional narrative. In Brecht's epic theatre the comment is done through the performance of gestures and through a viewpoint outside of the actual setting. Here, the self-reflexivity comes into play; we are aware of being in the process of an artistic production and not watching a film or play for pure entertainment. Through the wandering of the protagonist in the searching for the hidden meaning, the everyday social reality is presented and put on the stage to question the effects of the capitalist forces.

The research for the filmmaking resembled a documentary theatre in situ. I was taking the protagonists to several locations that are related to real estate, and let them improvise and interact with the site and the people we encountered. The play was rehearsed, repeated and improvised while we were shooting the film. The dialogues as well as the script are results of these improvisations. In a collective effort with the actors, we were writing the narrative for the film while playing with the sites and its characters involved. I was especially looking for gestures and actions in everyday life that resemble already a performance. Here we are in Brecht's definition of the *Lehrstücke* (learning-play), a form of instruction for actors, where something is acted out from the social reality. These performances are the ready-mades of everyday life, like role-plays, instructions, advertisements, sales agents, training sessions, rehearsals, and castings.

Brecht's concept of the epic theatre is adapted to cinema, for example in the work with actors as social players in the films of Jean-Luc Godard or Harun Farocki. The performances are related to the notion of documentality as the techniques of the self-governing imperatives in contemporary societies (Pantenburg, 2016). They depict "a new type of work that is exclusively

devoted to self-exercise, therapeutic role-play, and instructions for living [...] and in acting out the convictions and ideologies ... players of society, the performers themselves become documentarians" (Pantenburg, 2016, pp. 154). To stage a question in filmmaking means to leave space for thought, to elevate the site for staging, where protagonists can act out through gestures. The cinematic images and sounds are juxtaposed to critique the social reality without directly commenting on it.

Jacques Tati's film *Playtime* (1967) was an inspiration for a city as an empty stage, where the behaviours triggered by modern life are acted out and replayed. In *Playtime* we find this gestural cinema creating situations to re-enact the absurdity of modern architecture, lifestyle, and social relations. Tati elevates the absurdities through the staging of gestures, amplified sounds and mimicry. Moreover, the entire city is recreated as a film studio, to elevate the theatricality of this bizarre world. For the ghost city, supposedly an empty city, these concepts were adapted. *A Pile of Ghosts* (2021) was approached as a play, in finding sites, protagonists and players that would all act out from inside their social reality and conditions of the urban transformation.

The new ghost towns are populated by characters that are affected by the transformation: construction workers that are part of the floating population, that live away from their families for years in order to build these cities under inhuman conditions; often just living on the construction site. Their lives are treated as a raw material; a form of slavery they cannot escape. Their survival is bound to these inhuman working conditions. Giorgio Agamben calls it 'bare life', deprived of all legal, political and social status. Not less oppressed are the employees in real estate trained to promote the value of the property through the repetition of the commercial texts.

These real estate texts serve as a material for creating the dialogues, as their meaning contradicts what they are promoting. The real-estate slogans become the subtext for the film.



Fig. 3 The staging of real estate sales performances.

A rap of slogans praising the rising value of the property on the stock exchange is juxtaposed with the image of an empty city, too far away to be reached; this method creates the counter-narrative to shift the perspective. In those ghost cities, janitors polish the newly built estates – where nothing is used, nothing can be dirty. The empty city creates jobs of emptiness and hollowness, cleaners that are maintaining the tidiness of the empty city. The security personnel are holding their post in front of ruins, real estate ladies are taking tours in abandoned lands to proclaim the profit. Tourists are strolling through the streets of fake Holland, Germany, or Paris, in an eerie, ruined environment. We are in the “Theatre of the Absurd” in a documentary form, that can be best expressed through the protagonists taken from real life. In documenting these places, the research focuses on the performative aspects of the everyday actions, where someone is acting out or re-enacts situations of everyday life. These performances bring forward the underlying social and political contradictions of their living conditions. The real estate serves as a text that is expressed on street signs, billboards, texts and repetitive actions of bodies and objects. Esther Buss describes these aspects in the film description for *A Pile of Ghosts* (2021) as a “circulation of performances through various bodies and objects”. Text fragments on objects such as concrete mixer, advertisements on billboards, and spoken texts from real estate sales are the speaking body in reciting the counting of the numbers of square meters, products and material sizes informing about the newly built, the over-production of the surplus value. The appropriation of words as the cinematic semantics not only relates to the underlying vision and dreams for a new city, but also fabricates the speculative narratives of the film.

The protagonists from construction worker to investment broker are taking jobs in the proclaimed newly urban area, they are *playing space* by following the script that is written for them by government, architects and media cooperation alike. The new city is staged and scripted, and with it the living concepts to pursue a future that calls for investing one’s life to pursue this dream of living.



Fig. 4 A film studio for real-estate advertisements in Shenzhen.

During the field trip a film studio for real estate advertisements on the outskirts of Shenzhen was found. Although the site was not included into the final film, this film studio, like the studio-setup in Jacques Tati’s *Playtime* (1967), contained all the props, requisites and references accumulated from the ghost city research: The setup was in black and white, diffused in blue-grey light like in Tati’s film studio on the outskirts of Paris. A fake Eiffel tower on display, books in the shelves were dummies, the paintings copied from museum catalogues, all fake items to refer to the creation of illusions for image-making. An image of the Hollywood classic *The Waterloo Bridge* (1940) as a decoration next to the bed. An empty corridor with doors leading nowhere but to the exit of the film studio to the outside world where the workers of the image-factory hang out. Like so many new cities that are only built as curtain walls, the façade gives the illusion of buildings, but inside they are raw concrete. The film studio highlights the fact that the new urban reality is scripted and arranged for the advertisements. The workers are assembling and constructing the images for the new city.

We are in the world invaded by images that have infiltrated our reality to fulfil desires and commercial concepts. Hito Steyerl identifies the debris of images as ‘the wreckage of images’ (Steyerl, 2013) that started crossing the screen

and materializing in landscapes, homes and the new urban. According to Steyerl, images don't represent, they start catalyzing action and events, and create the imaginary, that is believed to be our future, a reality that is post-produced, photoshopped, and assembled from commercial catalogues. In bringing text, images, and performative acts into a dialogue, the staging of questions is pursued to catalyse into a critique, a commentary or thought process.

### Filmmaking as Performative Research

As the scope of this research encompasses the haunting effects of capitalism, there is something that cannot be seen, but is rather experienced. The main figure in this research is the ghost that surfaces in several forms: First, as infrastructure that falls into ruins, something useless is built that is waste before it has ever been alive. Second, the mechanics of global capital, the speculation with capital that is arrested in real estate as a form to create surplus value but doesn't exist. Third, the political system of China, where facts have to be altered and blurred through fictions that are created through propaganda according to the communist party in a capitalist plot. Considering the lack of "truth" that can be found under such circumstances, how can one research with the means of "science research", where nothing can be proved? Only through cinema, the phantasmatic machina itself, can be alluded to in fiction and stage these questions of whether the being is haunted, or following Derrida's concept that the ontological became already hauntological (Derrida, 1994/2006).

The ghost is always in the in-between space of reality and illusion, always on the threshold between the visible and the invisible. In other words, ghost can only be witnessed through the absence. In reference to Derrida's *spectro-poetics*, the methods to become and to make, refers to the uncovering of layers of meaning in events or texts, often by pursuing analogies, metaphors, or allusions (Harris, 1994). *Spectro-poetics*, aiming to solve the complex puzzle of capitalism, describe the

ghostly effect on urban development, and the alienation of the humans towards themselves and the changing environment. The research is expressed through the format of a ghost film to indicate that the world becomes gradually porous and infiltrated by the intersection of the real, the fictional and the performance of the working condition.

*A Pile of Ghosts* (2021) is a hybrid form that brings document and fiction together to reflect the ghosts of capitalism and its manufactured collective fantasy. Reality is fictionalized through real estate advertisements, and the imagination is derived from propaganda to Hollywood films. The film structure reflects the research process and starts as a documentation of places all over China. What combines the sites is the absence of life, infrastructure that awaits a future, only narrated through the slogans on billboards that proclaim its profitability. The Eiffel Tower in Hangzhou, the Acropolis and Sphinx in Lanzhou New City, virgin buildings, empty streets combined from all-over China into one sequence, that is followed by real estate ladies driving with their go-carts through the place as their playground. A texturology that is extracted from sites to bodies into a language to narrate the film.

The aim was to make an essay film on Chinese ghost cities, taking Laura Rascaroli's definition on 'How an Essay Film Thinks' (Rascaroli, 2017), in establishing thought as the main focus of a reflexive form of film that is a hybridization between forms of fiction, documentary and visual art. An essay film is directed as a form of intellectual discursive practice to generate ways of thinking and looking as an *opera aperta*. Hearing images and seeing sounds (Trinh T. Minh-ha) opens a synesthetic experience in perceiving images and sounds as interchangeable materials when cinema becomes forms of thought. According to Rascaroli, even the silence and the unseen of an essay film articulates the spaces in-between, the rift of gaps, and the juxtaposition of thought, which transcends the boundary of reason and *moves beyond logocentrism* (Rascaroli, 2017, p.8).



Fig. 5 New landscapes related to the ghost cities in China. Film stills *A Pile of Ghosts* (2021).

The method of between takes the center stage in the Deleuzian concept of the new image of thought (Deleuze, 1989), for example in an edit when an image is cut off abruptly, and the imagination continues to complete it. Because our brain can make connections and associations without seeing it, it completes an image, even if it is incomplete. Deleuze calls the virtual image the *becoming*; "it is the virtuality that is difference in itself." To take Deleuze's concept further, "the irrational cut may present itself in quite diverse visual forms" (Deleuze, 1989, p.248) which include performative acts that are visual or acoustic, such as still images, black or white screens, and an "act of silence", or a "speech act", or an "act of music" (Rascaroli, 2017, p.11). Performative methods are then those forms that create the background, the stage for an "act" that triggers thought processes. It is precisely what I would call a performative documentary, a cinematic thinking that transforms to new formation of reality and illusion.

The form of truth is aesthetically and discursively enacted through techniques more typically associated with fictive cinema. The film becomes a possible model of thought, that crosses the different senses and awarenesses as in *A Pile of Ghosts*. I always intend to think with images as they are autonomous, rather than commenting or analysing the depicted social phenomena. This method aims to follow what J.L Austin has coined as the performative (Austin and Urmson, 1971), defining it as an utterance or language that is not descriptive and constative, but transformative to express meaning in creating an action. If cinema can be approached as a language, a visual and acoustic utterance, then it is transformative and not explanatory. Many scholars have departed from Austin's concept to theorize the performative, that is beyond language, but transcends different fields of playing, behaviour, and gestures that all belong to the speech acts. As in Judith Butler's theory they



Fig. 6 The staging for a ghost film, Film stills from *A Pile of Ghosts* (2021).

are expanded to what defines gender and sexuality or Gilles Deleuze's concept of *performative* as a transformative *becoming*.

Barbara Bolt has pointed out the importance for the arts of such understanding in her essay *Artistic Research as Performative Paradigm* (Bolt, 2016), because artistic practice

is not about facts and figures, but 'force and effect' of the language, she states that "The aim of a performative paradigm is not to find correspondences but rather to recognize and 'map' the ruptures and movements that are created by creative productions. Here the work of art is not just the artwork/performance or event, but is also the effect of the work in the material, affective and discursive domains" (Bolt,

2016). For this research the documentary films no longer represent, but are documents of life that become the virtuality of cinema presence.

The main concern of the film *A Pile of Ghosts* (2021) is not to investigate the effects that cause such phenomena, but to *bring forth* the mechanisms of such drastic transformations in cinematic language. By definition, a ghost is an entity that is eating up its host, such as is the case with the capitalist force that seems unstoppable, yet is destroying the world. In this commodified world, every aspect from labour to leisure is increasingly scripted and invaded by fictionality. Therefore, this research must be done through *performative acts* bringing forth the haunting effects in film.

Moreover, filmmaking as artistic research is poetic research - as the Greek word, Poesis, means "to make, to generate - an action that transforms". The notion of Heidegger's *Aletheia*, meaning the revealing of truth through poesis, contributes to such a knowledge that is not based on facts, but revealed through the image-making (Heidegger, 1977). The process fosters practice, an investigation that allows to take detours, and search for the unsearchable that comes forward through the making. The main difference between scientific research and artistic research is that science-as-research always strives for a repetition of the same knowledge while in artistic research we can think of it in a different way. The truth claim is not at the forefront of the interest, but rather how the artistic language can bring forward a difference, and function as a transformative tool. Bolt exemplifies this in one key idea evolving around the ideas of art and research as performative, and says that "the performative needs to be understood in terms of the performative *force* of art, that is, its capacity to effect 'movement' in thought, word and deed in the individual and social sensorium. These movements enable a reconfiguration of conventions from within rather than outside of convention" (Bolt, 2016) if we take filmmaking as such a convention then cinema is such a "movement" of thought.

In a Deleuzian sense of thought-process, cinema is a "movement" in image, the thought-machine per se. "The cinematic image does not represent movement but moves itself: 'cinema does not give us an image to which movement is added, it immediately gives us a movement-image'. This auto-mobilization of the image creates a direct link from cinema to the movements of thought." (Huygens, 2007) Cinema has to free us from what he calls "the representative image of thought", it does not represent, illustrate or give an answer to a certain subject, but expresses from within through cinema as an act of becoming (Huygens, 2007). In my practice of filmmaking as artistic research, I understand my films as such models of thought. I use tableau images, performative acts and re-enactments as methods to stage questions. Cinematography and the treatment of sound related to reality, all contribute to movements of thought that are able to stage questions rather than present explanations.

## Conclusion

*A Pile of Ghosts* starts with images of landscapes, that are shaped by speculative capitalism, and real estate agents are the guides that are describing and indexing the newly built areas through numbers and descriptions. The film plays the fantasy of the protagonist Charles and turns illusionary when the female protagonist as a ghost visits the Swallow Hotel owned by Charles in real life. His house is the last in an area soon to be demolished in Chongqing's rapid gentrification, and often found in the Chinese expression, *ding-zi-hu* (literal meaning, nail household) as the owners of the homes refuse to move and the houses are left standing as a nail is driven into a piece of wood. In resisting the authorities and the demolition of his existence, he transforms himself into a fictional character of his beloved Hollywood movie, *The Waterloo Bridge* (1940), that he has watched thousands of times and memorized every parts of the script. This film plays an important role in the transition of China from communist to a capitalist ideology, as it was one of the first films that entered through the open-door policy of Deng Xiaoping (1978-1984). The romance and



Fig. 7 The haunting of a Hollywood classic, Film stills *A Pile of Ghosts* (2021).

the glamour, the songs and the actors became iconic for a generation and their transition, and Charles imitated the main character Roy (Robert Taylor) in style, clothing, and gestures to pay tribute and remember the times when he watched the film with his mother. Charles is not a fictional character, but he embodies the political, economic, and social changes and stages himself as an actor. He is the 'empty stage' on which the contradictions of capitalism are being acted out.

Starting from Charles' performativity, the film was done in the in-situ improvisational manner. A female visitor, being projected as the leading actress of *The Waterloo Bridge*, is introduced to enter into a phantasmic dialogue with Charles in replaying some sequences and shots of the very film. Interwoven with the lines of pre-scripted texts from the real estate agents and the phantom like couple meandering through sites, landscapes, and cities to show the documented reality of China's urbanspace now. In this cinematic heterotopia the narrative is fragmented, the sounds of the Hollywood film mixed with the sound of destruction are reverberating through the walls as if it the acoustic space of scattered recollection from reality and fiction as Capitalism entered the country at the same time with Hollywood cinema, both creating the desire for the utopia that is now dystopian.

The imaginary content of fictional worlds is not only the cultural phantasy of a Hollywood movie and the affectionate romance but also the destruction of the environment and landscapes by the surplus spectral consumption of the global capitalism. *A Pile of Ghosts* (2021) explores the reality of the Chinese ghost cities as places haunted by capital, but also illustrates the mechanisms of the society of the spectacle, 'a world of vision, the product of the mass dissemination of images that create the content for a *Weltanschauung* that is gradually disintegrating and impoverishing. In mixing and merging real life stories, the appropriation of Hollywood glamour the personal fantasy of Charles, this narrative can only be a speculative one due to the spectral structure of phantasmagoria. For me, the poetic approach is not accidental, and it is a pertinent way to present the very prosperity of the speculative economy in the *reel* world of Charles.

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