

# Spectacle and the City

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# **Spectacle and the City**

*Chinese Urbanities in Art and Popular Culture*

Edited by Jeroen de Kloet and Lena Scheen

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We are living in the time of urban spectacle. Contemporary art projects, booming across the globe, are an integrate part of the rapid expansion of this spectacle. In the last decade, Asian Cities are “catching up” with this wave with even more intense and tsunami-like enthusiasm, along with the unprecedented urban growth, marked by the latest Beijing Olympics spectacles and urban explosion.

Hou Hanru



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## Introduction

### Imagining Chinese Cities

*Jeroen de Kloet and Lena Scheen*

The arts only ever lend to projects of domination or emancipation what they are able to lend to them, that is to say, quite simply, what they have in common with them: bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parcelling out of the visible and the invisible.

– Jacques Rancière (2004: 19)

When a newly independent art paints its world in brilliant colours, then a moment of life has grown old. By art's brilliant colours it cannot be rejuvenated but only recalled to mind. The greatness of art makes its appearance only as dusk begins to fall over life.

– Guy Debord (1995 [1967]: 133)

An old man dressed in a Mao suit walks slowly into The Village, a new shopping area in the diplomatic and rich part of Beijing. He enters an Apple Store and anxiously looks around with bewildered eyes: the man remembers the old neighbourhood that has now vanished completely to be replaced by these icons of global capitalism. Utterly puzzled, he continues wandering, feeling forever lost in the city that used to be so familiar to him.

In his fictional documentary *Beijing is Coming* (2008), the Hong Kong filmmaker Bono Lee tells the story of an old man who returns to Beijing after 30 years. Like so many Asian cities, Beijing has grown dramatically over the past two decades. The unprecedented scale, scope and speed of these changes makes a returning visitor easily lose his or her way – as parks have been replaced by buildings, neighbourhoods have morphed into parks. In Lee's documentary, the Asian city serves as a trope for probing into the alienation that comes with China's speedy march into modernity. But the story steers away from being a one-dimensional critique on the transformation of the city. Instead, it also speaks of the emergence of *new* intimacies that are rendered possible by the changing city. In the story, a love relationship unfolds between record shop owner Jun and a girl named Ling, who are both part of a new generation born after 1980. The girl had planned to study abroad, but she stayed to experience the summer of 2008, to be with Jun; or, as she wonders, maybe she stayed because of the city of Beijing itself. But in the course of the summer, the girl wonders if she really is in Beijing, and says: 'At the end you can't even tell this is Beijing [...] You never

know, maybe the fine weather was artificial too. As everything could be artificial nowadays'.

Which and whose Chinese city, then, are we experiencing in this movie? What is real and what is fake, especially in a place where even the weather is claimed to be manufactured by the authorities? Indeed, at the end of the movie the voiceover articulates the impossibility of representing the city; it claims, while the camera freezes on an old wall of the Forbidden City filled with graffiti, that...

In Beijing, it's quite impossible to search for the past anymore. Everyone's memory about Beijing is so different. I remember one day when I was shooting in Tiananmen Square, what came to my mind was, when Antonioni was shooting here in 1972, there is only one single camera in the square possible. But everyone seems to be shooting by his own phone nowadays. But nobody can claim that his Beijing represents the real Beijing. But then what is the real Beijing? Beijing is only the product of a particular moment.

By the end of the quote, the camera has moved to Tiananmen Square, zooming in on young Chinese tourists who are having their picture taken with the large portrait of Mao Zedong featuring prominently in the background. With the advancement of technology, the possible ways to represent the city have multiplied, the voiceover rightly claims. This claim is articulated within a fictional documentary, which itself attempts to represent today's Beijing. The generic choice itself, deliberately hovering between fact and fiction, between the real and the imagined, attests to the sheer impossibility of 'truly' capturing the changes of Beijing. This self-reflexive gesture comes from a Hong Kong filmmaker, for whom Beijing quite likely represents a mixed space of, on the one hand, possibilities for creativity in its thriving creative scene, and, on the other hand, impossibilities, as it hosts the new authoritarian government that has ruled his own city since 1997. Following the thrust of this fictional documentary, the imagination of the city is bound to be multivocal, complex, contradictory, and, above all, infinite. But is it really infinite? We believe it is not.

By now, over 60 per cent of the estimated 3.5 billion Asian population is living in cities (ADB 2008). It would be naïve to claim, however, that one can thus speak of 2.1 billion different experiences of the city. The experience of a city is intimately intertwined with existing and newly emerging imaginations of the city. One can trace recurring imaginations of the Chinese city in art and popular culture. At times, the Chinese city operates as a space of alienation in which unexpected, intimate relationships may emerge; Taipei for example, in the movies of Tsai Ming-Liang. At times, the city serves as a dystopian space, saturated with memories of a time past, like Shanghai in Lou Ye's *Suzhou River*. But we may also encounter the more lush, cosmopolitan and open imageries of Shanghai in the 1940s in Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution*. Or the city signifies a space of hope on which a bright future is mapped, as we can see in the propaganda material of the Chinese Communist Party. Yet, for visual artist Cao Fei, the future city, which she terms *RMB City*, is one that is already in decay, one driven by relentless speculation. These imaginations are indeed multivocal, complex and contradictory, but, contrary to Bono Lee, they do not seem to be infinite.

As Appadurai rightly claims, ‘imagination has become an organised field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labour and culturally organised practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility’ (1996: 31). Given the social power of imagination, there is an urgent need, in our opinion, to seriously engage with the rapid circulation of imaginations of the Chinese city, which is what this book does. Aiming to steer away from an exclusive focus on Mainland China, our adjective ‘Chinese’ has a cultural meaning and includes places like Singapore, Taipei and Hong Kong. Imaginations of the city are not just mere reflections of a material reality, mirroring the assumed actual cityscape; rather, they are forces that *both* display and construct. Images provide an important symbolic toolbox, they are non-human actors with their own agency, following Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory. In the words of Yomi Braester (2010: 13): ‘It is not the city that gives rise to movies; the cinema is not even merely the continuation of the city by other means, as David Clarke proposes. It is rather films – in direct interaction with political decisions and architectural blueprints – that forge an urban contract and create the material city and its ideological constructs’. Aside from cinema, other cultural forms, such as contemporary art, popular music, fiction and television, also hold such power and agency. The imaginations of the Chinese city in art and popular culture that this book explores are thus not taken as merely mirroring or reflecting ‘reality’; on the contrary, they are part and parcel of the construction, destruction and deconstruction of that ‘reality’. As such, these imaginations are enmeshed in the social, material and political realities that produce Chinese cityscapes.

Having explained our take on the subtitle of this book, a second question that comes up is related to its main title: why ‘spectacle’? What is spectacular about the Chinese city? If we, for a moment, ignore Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*, it is not so difficult to think of Chinese cities as spectacular sites. The hyper-urbanity of Hong Kong, the futuristic skyline of Shanghai’s Pudong, the sensational designs of Singapore’s skyscrapers, the Japanese-style streets in Taipei, the sheer size of Beijing, the speed of changes, the subway lines that multiply year by year, the massive crowds, the 24-hour mega-bookstores: all these are spectacular sites, far removed from the picturesque, quaint and quiet cities of Europe that the authors both grew up in.

For global star architects, China seems to operate as the ideal playground for architectural excesses, be it Herzog and Meuron’s national Olympic Stadium, also known as the Bird’s Nest, or Rem Koolhaas’ CCTV building in Beijing. Koolhaas’ own theorisation of the ‘generic city’ – the place outside of culture in which identity dissolves, a space he baptises as full of new possibilities – takes the Pearl River Delta as its inspiration, as this is the site where new cities can emerge within the time span of only a decade (think of Shenzhen); an example that testifies to the dialectical relationship between imagination and construction.

It is tempting to join the chorus and celebrate the Chinese city, in reading these cities as signifiers of a new future that has shaken off the burdens of the past (Maoist, colonial, or feudal) and that present a line of flight out of the archaic, static and slow cityscapes that characterise Europe. This book resists this temp-

tation. Instead, it searches for more critical, more careful and less celebratory understandings of the Chinese city. While the idea of including *spectacle* in its main title was merely inspired by a more intuitive, and maybe even romanticised, understanding of the Chinese city, as it turns out, this book is more indebted to Guy Debord than we had initially envisioned.

Guy Debord writes of the society of spectacle, driven by the forces of global capitalism. The latter has proved to be a much more malleable and flexible force than he may ever have imagined back in the 1960s, given that in China today, an official commitment to communism can so smoothly be merged with an even stronger commitment to capitalism. The spectacle of the city offers and manipulates modes of longing and belonging and feeds into a machine of perpetual desire. Contemporary Chinese cities evoke a sense of nationhood and cultural belonging, in conjunction with a sense of cosmopolitanism and world citizenship. This is all the more intense when the Chinese city is turned into a spectacular site, such as during mega-events like the Olympic Games of Beijing in 2008 and the Shanghai World Expo of 2010. It comes as no surprise that both of these mega-events were above all visual spectacles. Indeed, the idea of the spectacle itself is intimately linked with the visual; as Debord writes, 'The spectacle is not a collection of images, rather, it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images' (1995 [1967]: 12). What role do visual cultural forms then play in the society of the spectacle? As the opening quote of this introduction already indicates, Debord is highly critical of the separation between art and everyday life; he writes that:

as soon as art – which constituted that former common language of social interaction – establishes itself as independent in the modern sense, emerging from its first, religious universe to become the individual production of separate works, it becomes subject, as one instance among others, to the movement governing the history of the whole of culture as a separated realm. Art's declaration of independence is thus the beginning of the end of art. (1995 [1967]: 132-133)

This helps to explain the Situationists' desire to transform everyday life through its realignment with art in its broadest sense. Taking this as a starting point, we wonder, how is the city-as-spectacle visualised and thus imagined and reimagined, if not contested, in art and popular culture? What are the possible escape routes from a completely commodified cityscape? How to realign artistic expressions of the spectacle with everyday practices?

Before probing these questions, however, we would like to emphasise that when we claim that cities are scopic machines saturated with the latest fashion designs, neon lights, billboards, shop windows, architectures – all fuelling desires that are rooted in the visual – we are not ignoring the importance of other senses in the experience of the city. In fact, by including an essay on sound and one on smell, we made a modest attempt to counter the ocularcentrism that may be conjured by the term 'spectacle' (Jay 1994). The cityscape is a tactile space that immediately and constantly arrests our senses. Take, for example, the experi-

ence of arriving at an airport and taking a taxi to the hotel in the city centre: we are immediately entangled in a complex web of connections, between ourselves and the taxi driver, ourselves and the car (its smell, sound, image, and feeling), ourselves and the billboard that quickly passes by, ourselves and the music playing on the car radio, ourselves and the memories or expectations we have of this place; and these connections endlessly multiply and mutate, involving *all* our senses. In short, the city penetrates us even before we realise it consciously; it engages us in a complex web of connections.

In this sense, we may view the city as a ‘haptic machine’, in Deleuze’s and Guattari’s notion of the machine as ‘a system of interruptions or breaks’ where connections and (subsequently) subjectivities are produced. Deleuze and Guattari want to steer away from the notion of identity as bounded wholes, to resist a mechanical, deterministic way of thinking and instead zoom in on the importance of connections; connections that are by definition unstable, never fixed.

## **Cultural Studies and Area Studies**

The chapters in this book navigate between different disciplines, in particular urban studies, area studies and cultural studies. The latter provides the general thrust of the work presented in this book, and is driven by the basic question posed by Lawrence Grossberg when writing about cultural studies. Grossberg claims that the major task of cultural studies is to simply ask ourselves, ‘what is going on?’. He writes:

The project of cultural studies is to tell better stories about what’s going on, and to begin to enable imagining new possibilities for a future that can be reached from the present – one more humane and just than that promised by the trajectories we find ourselves on. Cultural studies then is a form of conjunctural analysis, which re-describes a context, often viewed with some sense of pessimism and even despair, into one of possibilities, by rejecting all forms of simplification and reduction, and embracing the complexity, contradiction and contingency of the world. (2010: 241)

In order to tell better stories about what is going on, it is of utmost importance to carefully contextualise any analysis, both in terms of time and in terms of space. But these contexts are always dynamic, and ridden with power relations. To quote Grossberg again, ‘contexts are active and even in part self-producing formations, [...] the relations that comprise them are each overdetermined and transitive. Moreover, contexts are always structures in and of difference, or, in more humane terms, structures of power’ (2002: 368). The context of Singapore is not quite the same as the context of, say, New York. This is a trivial statement, indeed, but it is one that is too often ignored.

The issue of locality has rapidly gained importance over the past decades due to the intensified processes of urbanisation. As Lindner argues,

The recent ‘global turn’ in cultural theory and critical urban studies has highlighted the growing impact on the life and development of cities, from new trends in architecture and design, to new patterns of migrancy and Diaspora, to new techno-informational networks of communication and power. At a time when more than half the world’s population lives in cities (for the first time in human history), the relationship between global processes and local conditions is one that positively demands increased scrutiny. (2010: 1)

In particular, economic, social and political lines of inquiry dominate research; but, as the other works in this volume attest, this balance is gradually changing. It has by now become a cliché to claim that globalisation results in localisation.

The global is embedded in the local; they are intimately intertwined and mutually reinforce each other. Taking this position helps to analyse, for example, how the national desire to produce architectural icons that represent the glorious and harmonious future of the nation is directly linked to a global network of star architects, as was the case when China assigned the Swiss duo Herzog and Meuron to design the Bird’s Nest. It also helps us to analyse how such projects produce new classed spaces, or what Hemelryk Donald terms the ‘dirty non-places of declassed workers in China’s harmonious society’ (2010: 134). Underneath the spectacular images of today’s global cities, new ideological fault-lines produce new and increased inequalities that are both local and global. And, as some chapters will show, both art and popular culture help to probe these new inequalities that authorities are so keen to push backstage. Over the past two decades, the nation-state has returned with a vengeance, and it has done so by actively engaging in the reproduction of the cityscape.

What is often lacking in disciplines located outside area studies is a sensibility to the importance of place, resulting in an implicit claim to universalism. In other words, given the dominance of Western cities in urban studies, as well as the Anglo- or Eurocentrism that haunts cultural studies, this book aims to align both disciplines with area studies. It does so not through claiming the unique particularity or essential difference of China or ‘Chineseness’, but rather, through exploring the constructed-ness of place; or, to use Appadurai’s words, by exploring the production of place. It is our contention that area studies (if discussing urban areas) needs the theorisations of both urban studies and cultural studies, just as the latter two need area studies’ sensibility to spatial and cultural context; hence our attempt to traverse these three disciplines simultaneously in this book. In doing so, we aim to resist the denial of coevalness, as Johannes Fabian puts it (1983), that often creeps back in analysis of places outside ‘the West’. Shanghai is *not* on a teleological march towards a form of modernity like that, say, seen in New York, nor is Shenzhen the ultimate laboratory for the future city. Instead, we choose to read these cities as manifestations of alternative, or partly overlapping, modernities, whose materiality changes with the shifting socio-economic and political context: whether driven by local forces, such as the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC’s) ruling authoritarian regime, or by global forces, such as neoliberalism and economic globalisation.



## Spectacle and the City

In the opening essay of this volume, **Ackbar Abbas** connects the notion of the spectacle to the issue of speed. In particular, he uses the later work of Debord, in which the earlier difference that was made between ‘diffuse’ and ‘concentrated’ forms of spectacle merges into the ‘integrated spectacle’. For Abbas, this presents us with a paradox: ‘It is a spectacle that is no longer spectacular, a spectacle that has reversed itself in that it is more covert than overt, a spectacle that is secret’. The work of Zhang Yimou and Jia Zhangke is used to explore the non-spectacular spectacle and its mutations in today’s China. In chapter 2, **Chua Beng Huat** scrutinises how Geylang, the red light district of Singapore, is ‘spectacularised’ in artworks by artists who celebrate the district as the truly Bohemian part of the city. He takes the artists to task for using the district as a trope to critique the project of Singapore, by not only aestheticising and ‘humanising’ the sex workers – ‘as if their humanity were ever in doubt’ – but also by blatantly ignoring the abusive labour conditions that perpetuate Geylang. In the subsequent chapter, **Robin Visser** starts by mapping out Debord’s theorisations on the spectacle, connecting this to two artistic works that have recently received global attention: the novel *Brothers* by Yu Hua and the virtual artwork, *RMB City*, by Cao Fei. She argues that the novel, in particular, uses tactics of *détournement*, a term referring to the fluid language of anti-ideology, as ‘the narrative implies that the spectacle, regardless of its aesthetic form, necessarily conceals the violent power relations upon which it is constituted’.

Whereas Visser suggests that *RMB City* is subsumed by the urbanist spectacle rather than critiquing it, **Yomi Braester** argues that ‘the focus on architectural imaging suggests a more self-reflexive intentionality on Cao’s part’. Braester juxtaposes contemporary Chinese art and cinema with the recurrent use of architectural scale models. Whereas the latter present a utopian city, in which the nation-state, with the close cooperation of internationally renowned architects, celebrates urban growth through new architecture, both art and cinema help to leverage that uncritical neoliberal celebration by exploring dystopian or antitopian strategies that ‘challenge the mimetic relationship between the model and the material city’. In chapter 5, **Jeroen de Kloet** analyses how the government’s policies to promote the creative industries have turned the art zone 798 in Beijing into a spectacular site, where artists exhibit their work in what is assumed to be an atmosphere of criticality and freedom. In search of alternative versions of criticality that are less complicit with the authorities, the chapter engages with contemporary Chinese artwork, including, again, Cao Fei’s *RMB City*. It is argued that not only the works as such, but in particular their rhizomic distribution through the Internet, allows for new and alternative meanings to proliferate that have the potential to disrupt the spectacle.

In chapter 6, **Jeroen Groenewegen-Lau** engages with sound artists from China and explores how they record the sound of the Chinese city, and why and how these sounds matter so much for the way in which we experience these cities. His chapter not only presents an overview of musical cultures in China, but also explores their experimental edges. He shows how important these are to recording

and recuperating the sound of the city, as a tactic against the occularcentrism of our times. In his search for the role of the city in chapter 7, **Stefan Landsberger** presents a historical overview of propaganda posters in China. The absence of the city is often more striking than its presence. On a few occasions, namely during the Beijing Olympics and the Shanghai Expo, the city did feature prominently, indicating China's entrance on the global stage. As it turns out, the countryside, rather than the city, signifies revolutionary success, which is why the Chinese state relies more on rural images to communicate its messages to its citizenry. In the subsequent chapter, **Gladys Pak Lei Chong** opts for a genealogical approach to Beijing as an Olympic City. In her chapter, she analyses how the past is reinvented in the Qianmen shopping street in Beijing, how the present is produced through the construction of the Olympic Green, and how images of a new and hyper-modern Beijing are used to construct a prosperous future. Her chapter attests to the role of the nation-state in managing time and memory. This leads to her question how alternative memories can be rendered possible in the midst of all the symbolic promotion (if not violence) produced by the authorities.

In chapter 9, **Gregory Bracken** moves further south, to Shanghai, to explore how the built environment of this city is being represented in literature and cinema. Shanghai's past is increasingly being mobilised to mark the road towards the future. In this chapter, Bracken uses the traditional Shanghai alleyway house as an example to warn us of the dangers of nostalgia, as the preservation of these houses may in fact destroy the very thing it seeks to retain. In the subsequent chapter, **Margaret Hillenbrand** further theorises the nostalgia 'movement', which has 'bathed the East Asian cultural realm in the rosy glow of yesteryear'. Like Bracken, she also warns of the dangers of a commodified, recursive nostalgia, but shows that cultural productions like the cinema of Miike Takashi and Wong Kar-wai hold the potential to cling to, or conjure up, 'real memories' that are attached to a 'real city', thus helping audiences to feel deeply for the places of their past. In chapter 11, **Lena Scheen** discusses two Shanghai bestsellers portraying gendered subjectivities in a cityscape that is in a state of constant flux and moving towards a high capitalist mode. She scrutinises how the protagonists negotiate these changes, and how this negotiation intersects with gender. In her chapter, the novels serve as paradigms of the society of the spectacle – which in Shanghai is primarily a spectacle of consumerism and frantic growth – to explore the tensions imposed on the individual by this society, focusing in particular on gender, self-searching and agency.

In chapter 12, Beijing cultural activist, curator and blogger **Ou Ning** forcefully critiques the relentless processes of urbanisation that are sweeping China. He points to the devastating consequences for both the countryside and the cityscape. Taking his inspiration from protest movements across Greater China, such as that formed around the destruction of the Star Ferry/Queen's Pier in Hong Kong, he explores possibilities for protest and resistance. His contribution not only attests to the voices of protest that can increasingly be heard within China, but also offers glimpses of hope for a better and more sustainable future. In the final chapter of this book, **John Nguyet Erni** forges a connection between cultural studies and law. He analyses the environmental implications of the slow but

steady destruction of the harbour in Hong Kong and argues that juridical sensitivity to the sensory consequences of what he terms the ‘harbourcide’ of Hong Kong, in particular smell, may help in the development of counter strategies.

We opened this introduction with quotes from Jacques Rancière and Guy Debord. Whereas the latter claims that art’s declaration of independence signifies the beginning of the end of art, that art only appears ‘as dusk begins to fall over life’, the words of Rancière offer more hope; a hope with which we would like to conclude this introduction. Art and popular culture hold the power to inspire change, just as they hold the power to support the ideological status quo. In this book, we explore both roles and possibilities. It may come as no surprise that it is our hope that the arts may help us to imagine a better, more fair, more sustainable, more humane and more liveable city. That they help, in tandem with academic work, to tell better stories about how to live life in a time of rapid urbanisation. It may seem naïve, but we do hope that this collection of essays reflects that critical thrust; and even more so, we hope that this collection will inspire more work on the Chinese city that refrains from either univocally celebrating or critiquing the present, but instead straddles both in the search for a better future.

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