

Cao Fei: Ghosts of Hongxia Theatre

The acceleration of history: let us try to gauge the significance, beyond metaphor, of this phrase. An increasingly rapid slippage of the present into a historical past that is gone for good, a general perception that anything and everything may disappear—these indicate a rupture of equilibrium.

—Pierre Nora¹

In 2015 Guangzhou-born artist Cao Fei was on the hunt for a new studio in Beijing. Scanning through advertisements she came across a photograph of the Hongxia (red dawn) Theatre in the city's northwestern district of Chaoyang. Painted white and red the building was built in a style characteristic of the Soviet-era architecture that had come to pervade certain industrialized neighbourhoods in the city during the post-war years of Sino-Soviet alliance. The listing immediately piqued her interest and in the subsequent four years Hongxia Theatre became not only her studio, but also the centre of a rigorous process of historical mapping.

Stepping into *Blueprints*, Cao Fei's exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery (March 4 to May 17, 2020) and her first institutional show in the UK, one is immediately transported out of London's Hyde Park and to Beijing. More precisely, one finds themselves in the foyer of the Hongxia Theatre, where, in Lynchian fashion, the artist has meticulously recreated a reception area, juxtaposing the different intensities of her chosen objects. Against a deep, red velvet backdrop, she has positioned the theatre's original curved mahogany reception desk, over which float large gold Chinese letters: 星河灿烂人间影画. Translated as "in our splendid universe, motion pictures reflect our reality," this was a philosophical provocation commonplace in many Chinese cinemas during the 1970s and 1980s. Adjacent to the reception desk she has included an original ATM machine from the Hongxia Theatre. The glowing ATM screen displays her new film by Cao Fei titled *Hongxia* (2019), which consists of interviews with former factory workers who discuss the Soviet presence in Hongxia district during the 70s and the collaboration between China and the USSR in the factory production of computers and other new technologies.

Integrated alongside Cao Fei's reproduction of the Hongxia foyer is an array of magazines and journals depicting "model citizens"—many of whom are women—at work in the factories that would have once surrounded



Cao Fei, *Blueprints*, 2020, installation view at Serpentine Gallery. Photo: Gautier Deblonde. Courtesy of the artist and Serpentine Gallery, London.

the cinema. For the artist there is no hierarchy among the objects in this room. Archival materials are given equal weight to Cao Fei's own film and photographic works, demonstrating both a mode of thinking that engages many different levels at once, and the embeddedness of her process in shared knowledge and research.

Central to *Blueprints* is Cao Fei's 2019 feature-length film, *Nova*, a retro sci-fi exploration of memory, isolation, and love. For her, *Nova* is at its core an ill-fated love story between two computer scientists, one Chinese and one Russian, but also between humankind and its desire for progress. In a fictional town called Nova in an undisclosed year, the film tells of Sino-Soviet cooperation in the invention of new technologies and strategies for growth. After completing her work helping to construct China's first computer system the female protagonist, a Russian scientist, is forced to leave Nova to return home. Deeply traumatized by the sudden departure of her male counterpart and lover, a Chinese scientist with whom she has had a child, implicates his own young son in a secret international project. The boy is launched into cyberspace where he becomes trapped, a digital specter floating somewhere between past and future, memory and the reality of the present. Slippery and ephemeral, we see in *Nova* how love in its various forms can lead ultimately to destruction. *Nova* demonstrates Cao Fei's observational aptitude and her ability to translate the experiences of a given milieu into a rich and immersive experience.



Cao Fei, *Nova*, 2019, video, 109 mins. Courtesy of the artist, Vitamin Creative Space, Guangzhou, and Sprüth Magers, Berlin.

Opposite page: Cao Fei, *Nova*, 2019, video, 109 mins. Courtesy of the artist, Vitamin Creative Space, Guangzhou, and Sprüth Magers, Berlin.



Cao Fei, viewer experiencing *The Eternal Wave*, 2020, virtual reality. Photo: Gautier Deblonde. Courtesy of the artist and Acute Art, London.



Avatars have figured prominently in Cao Fei's work, from China Tracy as a digital embodiment of the artist herself in the 2008 work *RMB City* (a virtual city created in the online world of Second Life) to *Cosplayers*, a 2004 work that explored the relationship between real life players and their digital avatars within the world of interactive gaming. In each instance the artist reveals the paradox of the contemporary online experience: we are alienated by the notion of hyper-connectivity. *The*

Eternal Wave (2020)—a title borrowed from Wang Ping's 1958 film about an underground CPC telegrapher—is a newly commissioned virtual reality (VR) work in which the "player" is transported into the *Nova* storyline. As players don the hefty Vive headset handed to them by an invigilator on standby, they find themselves standing in the middle of a small, cozy room—the white tiled kitchen of the Hongxia Theatre. Though the first-person virtual experience is designed for the player to feel in control, Cao Fei's narrative guidance is undeniable and creates the same meta-playing experience as with a user-controlled avatar. Two large metal pots bubble on the stove—signaling the recent presence of someone in the kitchen—and when the player is prompted to open the refrigerator it is lined with row upon row of Chinese cabbages, a symbol of wealth and prosperity in East Asian culture. The kitchen is the heart of the home (or theatre-cum-studio) and in each thoughtfully crafted virtual interaction, Cao Fei activates nostalgia and sentimentality as a path to memory.



Cao Fei, still from *The Eternal Wave*, 2020, virtual reality. Courtesy of the artist and Acute Art, London.



Operating as a film within a film, *The Eternal Wave* establishes an omniscient perspective from which the player can observe the convergence of different timelines and narratives. Despite its being Cao Fei's first foray into this medium, the virtual reality world she has created is truly engrossing, conveying an expansiveness that has not been achieved to date by an artist working in VR.



The player, following another prompt, reaches for a plaque hanging on the kitchen wall and abruptly the environment begins to change. Shadows grow longer, the comfort of the kitchen begins to dissipate, and the player is transported to the tense server room at the Nova laboratories. Machines hum and whizz, Chinese and Russian scientists are hard at work, but there is a feeling of foreboding in the air. The player happens upon our protagonists locked in steamy embrace, hidden from sight by server towers, before being taken through a series of other *Nova* environments. *Eternal Wave* ends on a dark note when we are brought back to the Hongxia Theatre. A ghostly usher takes us to our seat on the balcony of the cinema, Wang Ping's 1958 film plays hauntingly on the screen ahead, and apparitions of both the Russian scientist and young boy appear, proclaiming messages of despair.

Cao Fei, still from *The Eternal Wave*, 2020, virtual reality. Courtesy of the artist and Acute Art, London.

Cao Fei's four-year-long research project into the histories in and around the Hongxia Theatre in Beijing reveals the knotty relationship between memory, history, and technology. Without her careful investigation and archiving, the not-so-distant past of this cinema and the people and places that surrounded it would have in time dissolved. Whether a result of a loss or erasure of physical archives, or an increasingly externalized form of remembering in the age of psychotechnologies, the process of

disremembering figures centrally in *Blueprints*. Technological innovation prompts us to pose questions about the fundamental structuring of memory in contemporary culture: how are we individually and collectively implicated by new developments in information-capture and the external storage of memory? Does history still exist, and from where do we construct our understandings of the present and the future?



Cao Fei, still from *The Eternal Wave*, 2020, virtual reality. Courtesy of the artist and Acute Art, London.

Whose Utopia (2006), the earliest film included in the Serpentine exhibition, is a three-part meditation on the alienation experienced by factory workers in China's Pearl River Delta—the low-lying area surrounding the Pearl River estuary between Guangdong province, Hong Kong, and Macau, which is often referred to as “the world's workshop.” The film's first chapter begins with a montage of scenes from the OSRAM Lighting Factory: machine arms grasp glass tubes placing them into outstretched rubber holders, machine nipples secrete a milky white substance—a phosphor coating—into awaiting vessels, a ribbon machine moving furiously produces more than 50,000 lighting tubes in one hour. Each gesture functions as part of an assembly line of which human workers form the final stages. What begins as a stark and machinic depiction of factory life shifts quickly into something reminiscent of Lars Von Trier's 2000 musical film, *Dancer in the Dark*, which traces the life of Selma, a Czech immigrant working in a factory in 1960s America. Though surrounded by bleakness, both Von Trier's Selma and the characters interviewed in Cao Fei's film engage their imaginations as a means of taking control of reality. In one instance, an interview with a group of seven young men working at OSRAM reveals their dream of forming a rock band. In the film and in the large-format photograph displayed adjacent to the screen, the group pose together



Cao Fei, *My Future is Not a Dream 02* (From *Whose Utopia* series), 2006, inkjet print, 120 x 150cm. Courtesy the artist, Vitamin Creative Space, Guangzhou, and Sprüth Magers, Berlin.

dressed in matching white t-shirts, each printed with a Chinese character, coming together to form the phrase “my future is not a dream.” The potency of *Whose Utopia* lies not only in the film itself but also in the process of becoming through which it was made. The film was shot between 2005 and 2006 during which Cao Fei spent extensive periods of time getting to know the workers. Through conversations and interviews with her characters, Cao Fei is the force that activates their imagination both on and off screen. By encouraging workers to think and to dream, and by making these dreams real through film, she imbues her characters with agency. *Whose Utopia* unlocks the relationship between visibility and power, a relationship that, as film and cultural theorist Rey Chow states, is crucial in the postcolonial non-West, and that is made unavoidable by the medium of film.²

In her 2018 film *Asia One*, Cao Fei continues her research into the rapid processes of industrialization in China, and its impact on human subjectivity. *Asia One* tells the story of the only two human factory workers at a high-tech warehouse outside of Shanghai, where robots and other sleek machines run the show. In tracing their relationship to these advanced technologies and to each other, we see the artist again exploring the themes of alienation and love in times of rapid social change. She handles her characters with pathos, and though we see the film’s humans and robots disco-dancing under a banner that states, “humans and machines, hand in hand,” there is no genuine connection—there is no love in an age of artificial intelligence

Cao Fei’s films hit hard in their ability to articulate the impact of recent processes of modernization on humankind. Though the narratives she deals with are specific to China, the themes she addresses are ubiquitous to contemporary life. *Blueprints* can be viewed as a testimony of the rapid industrialization, the proliferation of new technologies, and the intense

Cao Fei, *Asia One*, 2018, video, 63 mins., 20 secs. Courtesy the artist, Vitamin Creative Space, Guangzhou, and Sprüth Magers, Berlin.



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changes to urban life that have occurred in China since the 1980s, as well as a meditation on their impact on individual and collective subjectivity. In particular Cao Fei places an emphasis on our ambivalence and on the emergence of a new kind of amnesia that has resulted from the techno-capitalism of today. For her, however, there always remains hope and humanity. In uncovering lost or forgotten pasts, such as those of the Hongxia Theatre, she looks back in order to look forward: the cinema is a blueprint for a different present, a different future.

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Notes

1. Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* no. 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory (Spring 1989), 7.
2. Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 6.