

Imagining Possible Futures in the Work of Cao Fei

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ABSTRACT

Cao Fei's widely celebrated career presents a critique and exploration of China's rapid urbanization and its consequences for human life and the natural environment. Cao's works are very focused on urban environments, but they maintain an ongoing concern with the implications of urbanization and globalization for human self-expression. This paper examines later works, namely *Haze and Fog* (2013) and *La Town* (2014), with a focus on their uncanny defamiliarization of urban life as a vehicle for ecological critique, followed by an analysis of earlier works such as *Cosplayers* (2004) and *Whose Utopia* (2006). In all four projects, Cao highlights the fragility and potential crumbling of a neo-liberal, globalized China, through the lens of human residents' engagement with infrastructures along with commercial and cultural spaces. While her more recent work suggests apocalyptic outcomes for these historical and political-economic processes, her earlier work is more committed to portraying alternative possibilities for the future through self-expression in unlikely settings. The ultimate outcome of Cao's pioneering work is a strong case for the human potential to imagine otherwise, to create new futures within strongly predetermined histories, and to perform new possibilities within rapidly expanding and decaying urban spaces.

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Cao Fei's multimedia work offers an intensive engagement with the transformation of modern-day China from a nominally communist country to a state-capitalist system that competes within global neo-liberalism. Her art works engage with the consequences of this transformation for the residents of China's major cities, presenting dystopian *and* utopian scenes in which built environments, images of nature, and human self-expression collide. This paper focuses on Cao's more recent, dystopian projects, followed by an analysis of her earlier works, which have a more pronounced emphasis on performance and self-expression. In both periods, Cao's projects present a globalizing and neo-liberal China as a site of rapid transformation and re-imagining, where built infrastructure and humanity reckon with the consequences of the increasingly precarious political-economic conditions of global capitalism.

Uncanny Transformation and Defamiliarization

Cao Fei's frequent and various uses of cityscapes throughout her career directly metropolitan studies' interest in the political and economic drivers of urbanization, specifically with respect to the rapid expansion of Beijing at the end of the twentieth century and the turn of the twenty-first century. In works such as her short film *Haze and Fog* (2013) and her series of miniature urban set pieces in *La Town* (2014), Cao juxtaposes dense collections of high rises with uncanny scenes of human drama, often with the suggestion of incipient violence and destruction. The latter element nearly always has a whimsical, playful element—discussed in more detail in the section focusing on performance and interactivity below—but this element enriches the artist's serious political engagement with the rapid transformation of China in the context of global capitalism. Drawing on the work of Smithson (1996), Stojkovic (2013) describes Cao's use of urban landscapes as “ruins in reverse,” defined as the depiction of “new urban developments in the process of being built as *rising* into ruins” (p. 363). This concept captures the inherent contradictions of rapid urbanization, which

proceeds not as a straightforward or linear process of development or renewal, but instead produces a strange combination of density and void. Cao successfully attains an intergenerational transmission of memories through her art, eliciting a profound psychological effect (Hirsch, 2008). China's self-image is inextricably tied to capitalism (Zhao & Keane, 2023) and selfhood impacted by its political past (Thomas, 2015). It is a situation that prompts artists like Cao to interpret how the country's culturally modernity is evolving rapidly toward an unknown future (Haddon, 2018; Snels, 2022). The work is a profound exploration of how the "national culture interprets and imagines its moments of unfolding" (Haddon, 2018, p. 115). Stojkovic (2013) elaborates, "The 'cityness' represented in the photographic practices discussed, under such terms, can be viewed as invested with the inability to articulate rapid processes of change in the real time of their unravelling" (p. 364). In her 2013–2014 works, Cao dramatizes this inability while successfully overcoming the limitations of visual arts, not only by using videography but by staging scenes of uncanny transformation.

One such example of this technique can be seen in *Haze and Fog*, which makes heavy use of incongruous juxtapositions as the film progresses toward a zombie. The film, like virtually all of Cao's video output, does not rely on traditional plotting but instead on evocative images that are metaphorically suggestive of a central group of themes. The monumental task for artists is to preserve the memories of the past amid rapid changes that are altering social practices and landscapes (Yau, 2010; Fok, 2011). Cao follows the deep desire in the Chinese art landscape to mediate the nation's social development (Ferrari, 2012). Chinese artists are driven to "comment on, reflect upon, or directly intervene in social processes" (Lu, 2015, p. 284). In indulging this interest, Cao's *Haze and Fog* represents a strong attempt towards generating individual, original as well as innovative perspectives and way of life (Hanru, 2008). In the case of *Haze and Fog*, the operative themes include the crisis of pollution in the increasingly dense city of Beijing, which also functions as a stand-in for China's other major urban centers, including Cao's hometown of Guangzhou. Notably, only the title cards of the film identify Beijing as the setting. Otherwise, well-known Beijing landmarks are conspicuously absent from *Haze and Fog*, making Beijing the real, historical referent of the film and, simultaneously, a metonym for Chinese urbanization and its inexorable environmental impacts. Presenting the city in this way defamiliarizes the real, concrete city and enables Cao to present Beijing "back to itself" through a process of uncanny mirroring. For instance, in one shot from the film (*Haze and Fog 08*, 2013, Figure 1), an unidentified man plays guitar in an overgrown field as the ruins of traditional Chinese architecture loom in the background; a half-observed (presumably) dead body lies in the foliage several feet away from the man, whose face is smeared with blood. This image from the outskirts of the city is a favored trope in Cao's work, as she frequently plays with the intersections of quasi-"natural" scenes within urban landscapes.



Figure 1. Cao Fei, *Haze and Fog 08* (2013)

Despite its use of horror fiction tropes and apocalyptic, otherworldly imagery, *Haze and Fog* engages with a real history that was fresh on the minds of audiences—especially those living in Beijing—at the time of its release. Davidson (2020) explains, “‘Airpocalypse’ has become the city’s signature problem as air pollution toppled the US EPA scale at 755 in January 2013, well beyond the 500 maximum on the scale” (p. 90). With this in mind, the defamiliarization in the images works because it starts from a familiar baseline. Much of the video takes place outdoors, while indoor scenes occur in luxury high-rises under construction. The latter images (e.g., Figure 2) work to “enable viewers to fully ‘know’ themselves in the everyday life of the new, clean luxury environs of the metropolitan estates through Cao’s video capture of the rapid socio-economic transformation of China” (Davidson, 2020, pp. 91–92). The artist’s work reflects on China’s past and current social character and tells audiences a lot about what the Chinese society has become (Hoerning, 2022). Such postmemorial work reactivates and articulates “more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression” (Hirsch, 2008, p. 103). It provides insight into the evolution of spaces whose nuanced history is suppressed, recreated as well as revived in the Chinese society (Johnson, 2016). Take the example *RMB City*, which acts as a mirror that helps individuals “see where they are coming from, discover some of the ‘connections’ that fill the pale zone between the real and the virtual” (Mo, 2010, p. 6). It’s a process that tackles the unnatural distortion of the contemporary Chinese history (Chau, 2017).



Figure 2. Cao Fei, still from *Haze and Fog* (2013)

This interpretation identifies an important part of the role of the high rises in *Haze and Fog*, but only part of it. Crucially, the in-progress status of the buildings in which certain scenes take place underscores the film's aim to depict (and metaphorize) a city in flux. In other words, it is not simply that the film reflects "everyday" environs with apocalyptic overtones; instead, the piece draws a direct connection between the *construction* of those environs and the "fog" that brings about a zombie apocalypse.

The outdoor scenes in *Haze and Fog* further contribute to the connection between the familiar, lived experience of Beijing residents and the apocalypse metaphor, a connection that remains tenuous yet powerful as a commentary on urban pollution. As with the foliage growing around the ruins in Figure above, Cao uses incongruous images of "nature," often in the form of animals, to convey a fractured relationship between built environments and natural environments, the latter of which have virtually disappeared in the process of rapid urbanization. As Figures 3 and 4 exemplify, scenes of towering buildings and human society in disarray, respectively, are punctuated by the uncanny presence of an animal statue. The peacock statue in Figure 3 captures the viewer's attention as an out-of-place object, and in turn, the statue accentuates the surrounding smog while underscoring the ecological costs of urbanization. The shot in Figure 10 features a tiger and a bear mounted on a frame of a building and a rock sculpture, respectively. The scene blends human-made and quasi-"natural" visual tropes as the surroundings for the bloodied, frantic zombies climbing the rocks. In both images, the critical aspect of the animals is that they are artificial simulacra of "nature" amidst definitionally artificial landscapes.



Figure 3. Cao Fei, *Haze and Fog 09* (2013)



Figure 4. Cao Fei, *Haze and Fog 10* (2013)

While Cao's interest in simulacra is instrumental in *Haze and Fog*, it is even more thematically prominent in *La Town* (2014), which depicts a similarly apocalyptic series of city scenes, but this time in the form of small-scale

models and clay figurines. As with *Haze and Fog*, the scenes thematize urban decay, societal breakdown, and occasionally the suggestion that the natural environment is reclaiming the city. The latter theme is evident in *La Town: Train Station* (2014, Figure 5), where human figures are depicted in a flooded train station, one rowing a boat and others perched in the shallow water of the platform. A camel awaits next to a robed figure, simultaneously invoking globalization and suggesting the emergence of alternative modes of transportation after the built infrastructure of the city has given way to environmental destruction. Returning to Stojkovic's (2013) use of the term "ruins in reverse," *La Town: Train Station* presents the inverse of this dynamic, by suggesting that the "town" depicted is descending into ruination. This interpretation applies not only to public services such as transportation infrastructure, but also to images that more clearly invoke global capitalism. For example, in *La Town: Sales Center* (2014, Figure 6), a lone person sits on the roof of a defunct shopping center surrounded by rubble and whose roof has begun to sprout plant life, on which roughly a dozen cows graze. Rather than "rising into ruins," (Stojkovic, 2013, p. 363), the shopping center has been overtaken by the uncanny, if not physically impossible, return of agriculture.



Figure 5. Cao Fei, *La Town: Train Station* (2014)



Figure 6. Cao Fei, *La Town: Sales Center* (2014)

La Town presents an unmistakable critique of economic globalization as the underlying force transforming Beijing and other Chinese cities. Cao's critique is not an unequivocal rebuke, but rather a reflection on what happens if and when the products and structures of globalization break down. In the vision of *La Town*, such a process does not involve a reset or reversion to "nature." Indeed, as the stills above show, the remnants of global capitalism linger within the uncanny scenes of ruination. In another example of this pattern, a theater with an open roof has "Gone with the Wind" listed as "now showing" (Figure 6). Inside the theater, revelers pole dance while, outside two figures carry what appears to be a rolled up rug. This scene lacks the rubble and other evidence of destruction prominent in other images from *La Town*, and instead focuses on reappropriation and performance as features of a post-globalization urban landscape. On the whole, *La Town* presents what Foucault terms "heterotopias." Unlike utopias, these spaces exist simultaneously within the recognizable "real world" and "apart from it," thereby defamiliarizing the real (Berry, 2015). The spectacles of climate apocalypse in *Haze and Fog* and the depictions of ruination and revelry in *La Town* confront viewers with somewhat otherworldly versions of the Chinese city. Nonetheless, despite the frequent inclusion of uncanny images of nature, the images offer a recognizable vision of an immediate future—and, indeed, a present, in the case of *Haze and Fog*—in which viewers live.

Performance in Liminal Settings

If *Haze and Fog* and *La Town* present dystopian heterotopias drawn from present-day China, Cao Fei's earlier work engages with the more utopian potential of otherworldly fantasy, while still anchoring that fantasy realm within the recognizable real-world of Chinese urban life. According to Chau (2017), Cao Fei's work hinged on the intersections between reality and fantasy. Considering her earlier works is helpful to understand the darker themes in Cao's later work, as it helps to reveal a certain exuberance that does not disappear in *Fog and Haze* and *La Town*, but rather becomes less emphasized. As *Cosplayers* (2004) and *Whose Utopia* (2006) both show, and as her later groundbreaking work with *Second Life* (2007–2015) fully realizes, Cao has always been interested in immersive and interactive fantasy worlds as vehicles for understanding the real world through a process of defamiliarization. While much of the scholarship on Cao has focused on her experiments with *Second Life* (e.g., Berry, 2015; Clemens, 2011; Hanru, 2007; Jim, 2013; Merlin, 2018; Scott, 2016; Thomas, 2014), namely *i.Mirror* and *RMB City*, her earlier video projects dramatize the liminality of Beijing, suspended between a futuristic utopia and the dystopias she depicts in her later works.

Cao's video project *Cosplayers* is as invested in youthful fantasy as it is in the incongruity seen above in her later works. Stojkovic (2013) rightly notes that the cityscape in *Cosplayers* serves as a backdrop for the "fragile portrayal of youth fantasy" (p. 362). For example, in *Tussle* (2004), the performers are shown in what might be a flooded freeway or a bayou built for storm waters. The characters are poised for a fight while a cow and a zebra (both fabricated statues) look on placidly. Notably, the characters are in motion, as evidenced by the water splashing around them, while the animal statues sit still in undisturbed water. A similar discrepancy is noticeable in *Deep Breathing* (2004, Figure 7). As with *Fog and Haze*, Cao carefully treads the fine line between locality and universality in her portraits of youth fantasy. In its opening shot of an overpass, the film "constitutes an exemplary 'non-place' of contemporary urban life: it could be virtually anywhere" (Clemens, 2011, p. 115). Meanwhile, multiple shots in the film feature skyscrapers under construction in the background, representing the fervent forward motion of an increasingly dense urban landscape. In a sense, the incongruity between the animal statues and the urban settings is a red herring. The real incongruity exists between the youthful fantasy of role-playing and the frenetic pursuit of growth and profit in a state that has increasingly leaned into neo-liberalism and global capital (Wang & Valjakka, 2015). Nonetheless, both of these processes represent a certain exuberance. Ironically, the otherworldly role-playing of the characters in *Cosplayers* represents an attempt to reclaim the local amidst the inexorable processes of globalization (Merlin, 2018). In effect, the work dramatizes the tensions between space and time by presenting cosplayers who exist within the temporality of present-day China and yet occupy spaces that are both within and outside of political-economic history.



Figure 7. Cao Fei, *Deep Breathing (Cosplayers)* (2004)

Whose Utopia (2006) similarly unsettles the relationship between political-economic realities and the lived experiences of the human beings within those realities (Sleek, 2021). Set in a light bulb factory in Cao's hometown of Guangzhou, *Whose Utopia* begins with striking shots of the assembly line and later gives way to dancing scenes featuring improbable characters. The dancers are improbable both because of their incongruity with the industrial setting (e.g., a ballerina in Figure 8) and by virtue of their position within the factory (e.g., the janitor in Figure 9) (Berry, 2015). Merlin (2018) evocatively describes the opening shots as follows: "The dictated route of the light bulbs conveys the idea of eschatological necessity driven by an unstoppable and invisible force" (p. 51). The notion of eschatology is fitting, particularly in light of her later works depicting the apocalyptic versions of Chinese cities. Nonetheless, *Whose Utopia* is ultimately hopeful, not in the sense of expecting a positive future, but in its capturing of unexpected modes of expression within the present—both spatially and temporally. In *My Future is Not a Dream 05* (2006, Figure 8) and *My Future is Not a Dream 03* (2006, Figure 9), both stills from *Whose Utopia*, presents dancers engaged in exuberant self-expression within the sterile environment of a factory. The titles of these stills introduce a rich ambiguity around futurity and reality. Superficially, the notion that one's future is not a dream suggests that the future is achievable. At the same time, the dreamlike juxtapositions of *Whose Utopia* suggest that there *is* an alternative future available within the present, accessible through heterotopic performance and self-expression.



Figure 8. Cao Fei, *My Future is Not A Dream (Whose Utopia)*, 2006



Figure 9. Cao Fei, *My Future is Not A Dream (Whose Utopia)*, 2006

Conclusion: Imagining Otherwise

Cao Fei's multimedia output has revolved around consistent themes of rapid urbanization, globalization, and the effects of global capitalism in post-Mao and contemporary China. In her dystopian renderings of Beijing, Cao's art works juxtapose images of "nature" within cityscapes marred by pollution and violence. Despite these works' use of real cities as their referent, they remain committed to the portrayal of the Chinese city as a universal signifier of neo-liberal capitalism intersecting with local life and the bounty of human expression therein. These modes of expression occur through simulacra and heterotopias. Such themes are especially prominent in Fei's earlier works, *Cosplayers* and *Whose Utopia*, where staged performances occur within an otherworldly city and a light bulb factory, respectively (Wu, 2021). Cao's work ultimately presents a historically bounded critique of political-economic processes through which collective human life is inexorably shaped, but nonetheless insists on the human capacity to imagine otherwise.

Conflict of Interest

There are none to declare for all authors.

Acknowledgments

We thank Gerald Jia Ding, Ph.D. Candidate in Comparative Literature at Stanford University for providing insight for this study.

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