

## ***Shi*-nematic Afterimages: Semiocapitalism and Chinese cine-cities**

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It would not make good commercial sense to point out that parts of our recent book on the becoming-cinema of Chinese cities already seem outdated, unless doing so would help cement our claims that the on-going changes in China are amped-up by a form of speed-fueled capitalism, cut up by modern technostructural forms of “semiocapitalism.” The latter being a term we borrow from Franco “Bifo” Berardi (2011, 2015) to enfold semiosis, immateriality, cognitive attention, and nervous energy into our considerations of what currently counts as productive labour and economic activity (Fleming & Harrison 2020, 4ff). Indeed, in *Chinese Urban Shi-nema* (2020) we previously montaged together a series of dynamic shots of modern “machines for living” (including a national history museum, a Sino-foreign university, shopping mall complexes, and a new “Old town”) that we experienced as citizens of Ningbo (宁波): A processual Chinese city that we framed as a *universal singular* during its transitioning from a second-tier into a “new Tier-1” city (2010-present). Blending empirical data, fictocritical methods,<sup>1</sup> film-philosophy and other interdisciplinary approaches stimulated by our time living and working in the PRC, we were there inspired to cross-fertilise the Chinese concept of *shi* (勢) with a detoured notion of “cinematicity,” to help build a multiscale model of contemporary life

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<sup>1</sup> A term that signals that our work is not so much a technical report of objective facts but – much like our data – emerges through a situated and reflexive style of writing, or a contextualised first-person experience that embraces performative experimental methods in-formed by critical thoughts and concepts. Fictocriticism is often associated with genre-bending, genre-blending, “genre-defying” or “non-genre” (see e.g. Hass, p. 101) forms of writing, which can get mapped alongside other loosely defined practices including creative criticism, gonzo-anthropology, para-fiction or ethnographic fiction. These commonly strive to engage with the wrinkle that emerges between the so-called disinterested academic scholar and the invested and entangled participant (see e.g. Brewster 1996, p. 29; this wrinkle also is embraced in some psychological research, e.g., Busch-Jensen and Schraube, 2019, p. 226).

in postsocialist urban China (more on which shortly). Throughout, we also took pains to hang relevant examples of Chinese film alongside the various architectural arrangements we explored--pairing examples of “aspirational realism” (see e.g. Berry 2009) with the high-end “Chinese Dream” apartment showrooms, for example, or Jia Zhang-ke’s bricolage Shanghai Expo film with the fragmented architectural form of a prize-winning history museum assembled from the repurposed debris of old demolished Ningbo streets-- in order to illustrate how cinematic principles were moving into transversal co-composition with the material fabric of China’s contemporary urban psychogeography; realising or actualising something akin to the blurring of distinctions between screen sights and city sites, if not city sights and screen sites. In a similar grain, this paper revisits the ever-shifting ground of the “branded” (see e.g. Zhang et al 2020) entrepreneurial port-city of Ningbo (and its embedded info/sign economies), in a gesture that combines the book re-view form with an attempt to fashion a novel form of “*Shi*-nematic afterimage.”

### **On Afterimages: *Shi*-nematic, cinematic and otherwise**

To introduce what a *Shi*-nematic afterimage might be to those unfamiliar with our previous work, we can begin again by mapping out a moving kaleidoscopic picture of three dynamically interfacing and superpositional terms: *Shi*-nema, cinema, and afterimage. To work backwards from the latter, “afterimage” emerges in English as a compound that articulates the adjectival or temporal preposition “after” (which also might etymologically mean behind, or against) with the suffix “image”: the etymon of which derives from the Latin *imāgō*, meaning a copy, or likeness. In physiology and psychology, the notion of an afterimage can refer to a range of different sensory and psychological phenomena; the most common or garden variety being the lingering (positive or negative) visual impression that hovers in our eyes after exposure to an illuminated screen/scene. These being a material memory or embodied impression of visible stimulation upon the back of our eyes. Also worth briefly lingering on in this regard is how, as Alain Badiou reminds us, the term image itself derives from the psychology of perception;

wherein to have an image of something is to have a mental copy of it (2013, 222). Ergo, most images are always-already a certain species of afterimage; in that the brain (re)produces a mental image of a prior perception-image focused by the body's sensory apparatus. Consequently, in the psychological and physiological sense, hard and fast distinctions between images and afterimages shift into a form of superpositional regress. Something that becomes complicated further when we tack on encounters with technological image-making apparatuses like the cinema.

Indeed, distinguishing between images and afterimages is yet more complex, if not multiplex, if we recall that early experiments with photochemical image-making processes, like the Daguerreotype, inspired descriptions of a "mirror with a memory" (Holmes in Sutton 2009, 2). Or, that early experiments with the cinematograph (and its likes) toyed with the aporetic dislocation between the "there and then" of photochemical inscription and the detached "here and now" of projected perception. An idea that continued to impress mid-to-late Twentieth century European theorists of photography and cinema such as Roland Barthes (1981) and Andre Bazin (1960), who saw the photochemical image embalming spatialized time or mummifying change, by indexically wresting light-images out of the present and shipping them into the future for later preservation-perception. In contemporary studies of memory and trauma, documentary images are still often framed in these terms. Consider the title of Joshua Hirsch's monograph *Afterimage: Film, Trauma and the Holocaust* (2004); a book that maintains that cinematic (after)images of the European Holocaust allow modern viewers to bear witness to the horrors of the past.

Beyond discourses surrounding documentation and indexicality, fiction cinema has often been read as a form of afterimage in another sense; with artists being understood to create films and stories that are consciously or unconsciously imbued and shaped by real world influences. For example, Kris H. K. Chong draws inspiration from Richard Aloysius Blake's *Afterimages: The Indelible Catholic Imagination of Six American Filmmakers* (1999) to show how the work of mainland Chinese filmmakers betray afterimages of their own spiritual and cultural traditions

(2018). Beyond spiritual or religious background radiation, a given film, or group of films, might also be read symptomatically indexing present sociopolitical stressors and processes (see e.g. Nyen 2007). For example, Ning Ying's *Mín Jǐng gù shì/On the Beat* (1995), Lou Ye's *Sūzhōu Hé/Suzhou River* (2000), and Jia Zhangke's *Sǎnxiá hǎorén/Still Life* (2006) have all been read--along with the work of China's "Urban Generation" more broadly--as artistic responses to sociopolitical upheavals impacting the PRC at the turn of the millennium (see e.g. Zhang 2007; Fleming 2014). As with these films, we are also primarily concerned with the convergence of cinema and processual urban psychogeographies in the wake of "Capitalism's Second Coming" to China (Li 2016, 5).

While the millennial cameras of Urban Generation filmmakers famously captured the traces of previous traditions under erasure and the production of scarred and rubbed "any-spaces- whatever" (Deleuze 2005), they also concomitantly bore witness to the sprouting of what we previously described as the "any-now(here)-spaces" of global capitalism (including international hotels, shopping malls, and simulacral commercial architecture). A landmark film in this regard is Jia Zhangke's *Shìjiè/The World* (Jia Zhangke, 2004), which we previously paired up with the contemporaneous appearance of the "first and best" Sino-foreign university campus in Ningbo: The University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC). Particularly because both these urban media embed simulacral architectural assemblages that evoke a foreign elsewhere during a period when China began opening up to the flows of global finance, products, images and bodies. Jia's film is famously set in the Beijing World Park/Běijīng Shìjiè Gōngyuán, a theme park that plays host to miniature consumable (read picture friendly) versions of global landmarks such as the Taj Mahal and London's Houses of Parliament. Comparably, the transnational "academic theme park" (Jenkins 2011) that popped up in Ningbo that same year now boasts a similarly simulacral copy (albeit real size) of a branded English building (which was itself already a 'Classical Revival' simulation) at the heart of its campus. Significant here is how this Ningbo version of Nottingham's 'Trent Building' or otherworldly architectural feature was later incorporated into Chen Kaige's 2012 hyperrealist *Sōusuǒ/Lost in the Web*, as part of that film's

load bearing mise-en-scene, in a story about China entering a simulacral world of post truth online image circulation and consumption.

Bearing these incurving hyperreal images of contemporary urban China and Chinese cinema in mind, it is key to stress that throughout *Chinese Urban Shi-nema* we frame “the cinema” as being far more than just films. Indeed, our critical intervention entails negotiating and detouring a bustling crowd of influential cinema-city thinkers (that include Walter Benjamin (1999), Guy Debord (1983), Jean Baudrillard (2010, 2019), Anne Friedberg (1993), Jonatahan Beller (2006), Yomi Braester (2010), Jean Hillier and Kang Cao (2013)) to show how modern Chinese cities are best understood in relation to the evolution and mutation of cinema and capitalism; in that we all now “move through the world left in the wake of cinema” (Clarke 2007, 29), and tread within streaming semiocapitalist attention economies (see e.g. Beller 2006; Crary 2013; Berardi 2015); which play out on visual technologies and image-making machines/screens of all shapes and sizes. To pick out the words of the film-philosopher William Brown as a guiding thread on this occasion, we expose how over the long course of the twentieth century cinema came to profoundly restructure and discipline global imaginaries to the extent that “the cinema” increasingly became the “measure of reality as opposed to reality becoming the measure of cinema” (2019, 231). Which is to say, the contemporary capitalist urban world has itself become a form of cinematic afterimage.

Recognition of such might return us to our conceptual knottings, and specifically the möbian twist of images-afterimages that emerges between screen sights and real world sites, if not *vice versa*. An example from the world of tourist studies might help further guide our discussion here. For, notions of “cinematic afterimages” are often enough mobilised in this field to account for the appearance of popular real-world destinations for film fans. Famous afterimage examples in the US context would include the Philadelphia steps that the eponymous pugilist bounds up in *Rocky* (John G. Avildsen, 1976) (see e.g. Plate 2017), or more recently the Bronx stairs that the titular *Joker* (Todd Philips, 2019) dances down (Ellis 2019). The branded converse

footprints added to the former site speak back too to the practice of branded celebs marking the Chinese Theatre's "forecourt of the stars" in Hollywood; which in turn might occasion consideration of another weird blend of Chinese simulacra and Hollywood practices. Here, the construction of the world's highest glass-elevator ride in Zhangjiajie National Forest Park in China, which grants tourists a dynamic floating approach of the "Avatar cliff," which appeared in the aftermath of James Cameron's highest grossing blockbuster cinema of attractions.

These entangled examples help illustrate how real world locations become physically transformed and repackaged as fractalised (after)image-making sites/sights in their own right, destined to become mimetically posed in or memetically re-imaged by non-film stars and amateur igeneration filmmakers in a performative form of cinematic-afterimaging.<sup>2</sup> A logic that appears inverted in a recent example of a short transnational "Chinese microfilm" that appears to bait the production of touristic footfall to the branded city of Ningbo. Consideration of this short film, produced by a group known as the "Ningbo Urban Memory Lab" (NUML) whose headquarters are located within the Faculty of Science and Engineering at UNNC, can also serve here to help us introduce the concept of *shi*-nema.

Key to focus on here is that *shi* (勢) is often linked to a form of configural arrangement in art and architecture designed to probabilistically encourage certain desires or outcomes (see e.g. Jullien 1995, 14-15; Hillier and Cao 2013). Influencing our understanding of *shi* most prominently is sinologist philosopher Francois Jullien (1995) description of the notion as the inherent potential at work in configuration or a "*potential born of disposition*" (p.27; emphasis original) and his arguments that indeed "it is only through *shi* that one can get a grip on the process of reality" (p. 31). With such in mind, it appears significant that the NUML short film was posted to the Facebook page of UNNC Global, where it appears outside of China

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to mention how sequels, reboots, and transnational adaptations form yet other species of industrial cinematic afterimage, or how our own psychological perceptions might be temporarily altered by a prior cinematic viewing. We think here of how one can be haunted or possessed by a horror film or documentary, that dialectically modifies the world seen and known in the wake of the filmic encounter.

hashtagged with #City Walk in the Old Bund of Ningbo. An attendant info-package or paratext also informs potential viewers that: “Through this project, we hope to lead more people to search for memories and trace back time, so that more people can learn about the #history of Ningbo.” Significant here is the suggestion that Ningbo is already something of an afterimage, in that city memories (afterimages) need to be actively sought out. Paradoxically, this search for lost time and tracing back of urban memories is included in, and articulated to, the portfolio of UNNC’s progressive globalisation mission. Whatmore, the fractalactic video is branded with the university’s corporate logo, which represents the Nottingham building, that is also simulacraally recreated in the Ningbo landscape today. And while a corporate ideology appears diffused throughout the fifteen second clip courtesy of this branding and site of emission, this is compounded by the hip mash-up TikTok style, which leaps through 18-20 edited framings and/or dynamically zoomed re-framings (occasionally using a drone) of consumable Ningbo landmarks and tourististic shots (more than one cut or movement per second).

The umpteen fragments of video featured in the NUML film are threaded together by images of a group of Chinese students being directed around the city behind a tour guide’s flag. The latter prop, which appears throughout various scenes, even earns itself a close-up within the third shot of the frenetic video. The object implying that there will be a very directed and approved guided experience of Ningbo (don’t worry, students will not drift like flaneurs into the poorer or less savoury areas of the city, and will only visit approved landmarks). Here, an older male Chinese tour guide safely leads the students past several famous landmarks and signs that already feature in Ningbo tourist packages, then around the city’s modern art gallery. In these later scenes expensive modern artworks and exhibitions--which include an iconic Warhol-esque diptych of the Hollywood star Audrey Hepburn--become parasitically *incorporated* into the Sino-foreign university’s branded style. All scenes and surplus signs here become audibly parcelled together by an upbeat corporate background track featuring a female voice repeatedly singing “I know that it’s mine” (Phoebe Ryan, *Mine*). These aesthetic features, that collectively grant the presentation a slick and polished advertisement feel, ultimately serve to overcode – rather than preserve – any ‘memory’ of Ningbo.

Important to recall here is that the *raison d'être* of such productions is to create a memorable video that can economically communicate a core branded message within a supersaturated audiovisual attention economy. The fifteen seconds of consumable attention-time here projects an image of a “cool Britannia” campus offering the branded “Nottingham Experience” to students in the Chinese context (Fleming & Harrison 2020, 139-150). Which is to say, the video might be taken as selling students the scaffolding for potential memories that they themselves could grow when studying in Ningbo. The university itself, and the experiences it promises as a transactive affordance space, thus become the real product being peddled on the back of the “Memory Lab” (a coinage that implicitly endows the initiative with a suitably corporate-scientific sounding name that is also safely removed from the city as object of study). This interplay between memory and experience, past and future indexed by the microfilm is also architecturally compounded within the “Disneyland model” of the UNNC campus itself (see e.g. Fleming & Harrison 2020, 140; Readings 1997: 6) we might add, because down the corridor from the “Memory Lab” in amnesiac Ningbo can also be found the “Hall of Futures,” wherein portraits of graduates called things like “future engineer” and “future architect” are hung.<sup>3</sup> All this to say, this mission statement video also appears to unwittingly attests to how visual “technicity has colonized the unconscious and, in turn, has begun to refurbish the dream form” (Feldman 2015, 143).

Having provisionally mapped out a tangle of ways in which discussions of cinematic afterimages might play, and begun provisionally directing them back towards a discussion of Ningbo “Chinese Dream” *shi-nema*, we are now set to move towards a consideration of our conceptual coinage. As a departure point, it is of metacritical interest to us that in the world of critical thought about cinema, notions of afterimages are also often conceptually mobilised and activated. Indeed, in *Afterimages* (1999) Laura Mulvey collects together various essays that

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<sup>3</sup> These janus faces might also be recognised in the ability of future fee-paying students to now engage with the ‘Urban Memory Lab’ during a UNNC ‘Exploratory Future’ Summer school programme.



allow her to reflect on what an “image of after” or images “from after” mean to her critical thinking about cinema, particularly in the aftermath of her own landmark feminist writing. For Mulvey, a sense of cinematic “afterwardness” must be articulated to how past experience is reconfigured and refracted through subsequent experiences of visualisation and narration. Similar intuitions barb D. N. Rodowick’s edited collection *Afterimages of Gilles Deleuze’s Film Philosophy* (2010), which gathers essays that take stock of the impact and afterlives of Deleuzian “images of thought” in the world (of film-philosophy) after Deleuze.

In evoking these examples we do not wish to suggest that our humble fashionings should be compared to the work of these film-thought titans. No, we simply hope to situate this essay as another form of reflexive exercise in afterimage cinematic-thinking. Of course, we also concede that not as much time has elapsed in-between our initial projection of a *shi*-nematic image of thought and our present return to it here. Meaning that for some this exercise might appear more akin to an academic riff on the “post-credit scene” that has become popular in commercial cinema. Conceded. Albeit, we also take these to be an under-theorised modern afterimage phenomena, which often emerge as seeds of the sequel, if not a prequel (afterimage). With such image-afterimage vortexes in mind, Allen Feldman’s discussion of writing introductions at the end of a research journey also becomes of value here. For, Feldman engages with the images of thought that only truly arrive, or become discernible, when writing “summations, overviews, or eulogies to the ashes of thinking”: Acts that are not so much retrospective, but rather attempts to score “an *afterimage* as a transit point between what has been written and a surplus terrain” that makes introductory writing “an aftermath” (2015, 3 emphasis ours).

### ***Shi*-nematic Methods**

To recap before moving on, this essay surfaces as a critical afterimage and refreshed introduction to our thinking about the convergences of cinema and cities in modern capitalist China. Worth restating here is that our conceptualisation of *shi*-nema as a concept stems from

our interdisciplinary attempts to adequately sound out and map millennial Chinese cityscapes and spectacles while making sense of our experiences therein. Originally, when we both lived and worked in China, we took Ningbo (as much as it took us), as our singular-plural case study. An endeavour that led to us engineering an encounter between David B. Clarke's notion of "cinematicity" (the cinema's automatic imaging and thinking of the city, but also the modern city's reterritorialization of cinematic qualities and properties, see e.g. Clarke & Doel 2007) and the Chinese concept of *shi* (势) (or the 'potential born of disposition' as per Francois Jullien's influential exposition (1995, 14)). The resulting concept allowed us to describe the capture and affective arrangement of urban space and "Chinese Dream" life in a way that probabilistically directed groups and individuals (us included) to (trans)act, perform and desire in predetermined narrative-like scenarios and situations.

This *shi*-nematic afterimage grows out of our daily interactions in one way or another with citizens of Ningbo, and whose on-going friendship and partnerships allows us to (re)engage with the rapidly changing *mise-en-scene* and media streams in the aftermath of the city's transition from a second tier into a "new Tier-1" city. Our following case studies shed new light on the intensified and integrated convergence of visual technologies (or "capitalised machinic interfaces"; Beller 2006, 2021) that support and buttress this transition; while teasing out their affects/effects on Chinese inhabitants' own changing bodies, emotions, cognitions, desires, and social relations within the evolving socio-political economy. These realist soundings of contemporary China focus on certain repeating patterns or motifs that play out at different scales of analysis. As before, we here propose a dynamic fractal diagram to help conceive of and toggle between vertiginous frames and scales of reference; drawing on the formal cinematic technique known as a "Vertigo effect" (the compositing together of an in-camera focusing zoom with a dolly backtrack) to at once draw into our dynamic moving picture the contours of: a global market perspective; that of the broader national territory; a city scale perspective; and the views of group subjects and individual citizens. <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> We refer to our diagram as 'fractal' to emphasise one (but by no means the only) dynamic and relational pattern that we feel both characterises the contours emerging from our materials (either concretely or metaphorically) and in turn offers a way of teasing out or making sense of or modelling what might be shared by and/or relating

As an afterimage of this relational study, we also here return to one Ningbo citizen who has herself transitioned along with the city, from being a single first-time property buyer of expensive real estate in a second tier city, to a married second-time investor/debtor in the “new Tier-1” city. Of particular interest to us on this outing is watching as she joins newly forged proto-communities or subject(ed) groups on social media emerging in lockstep with the development of new-first-tier Ningbo, all of which speed up the capitalist circulation of a calculus of objects, (super) signs, object-signs and image-commodities, furthermore revealing the changing currents of desire and social relations within Ningbo’s evolving semicapitalist economy. Along the way, we describe several social-semiotic phenomena we believe to be characteristic of the *becoming-consumable* of the developing urban and social environment including new forms of showing off, brand trashing, and an array of gestures that offer insights into wider relational phenomena (gestures of contempt, shame, among others).

At the same time, in this fractal-form mosaic study, we take care to hang relevant examples of Chinese cinema (which in its broadest sense we take to mean the media of “moving images” including television shows, web videos and the like *à la* a philosopher of cinema like Berys Gaut (2010)) alongside newfangled architectural arrangements and our social/digital interactivity examples, in order to illustrate how cinematic principles and affects have become disarticulated from actual screens move into transversal co-composition with the material and subjective fabric of China’s contemporary urban psychogeography. By doing so, we hope to build on our accounts of surreal urban simulacral arrangements and the becoming-image of Ningbo, and explore afterimage examples of the becoming-cinema of Chinese life.

### **Picking up where we left off**

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across such diverse materials. Fractal forms are essentially self-same repeating patterns whose recursive dynamic unfolding-while-generating process can be found throughout the natural world. Other patterns include a vertical scale mapping to be explored in more detail below.

To set us on our way, we must evoke another afterimage from *Chinese Urban Shi-nema*, this time specifically lifted from our penultimate chapter (*Casino Capitalism*)—which focuses on the moment when we both departed the PRC in 2018. Back then, some better off Ningbo citizens had conveyed to us that the race to invest wherever possible in what we called “(un)real estate” (buildings and appartements yet to be built, but virtually imag(in)ed through a distributed assemblage of images, models, simulations, films, television series, news reports, and the likes) had already begun, and that “买到就是赚到” (*just buying is earning*), they could “一夜爆富” (*get rich overnight; lit. a rich explosion*). Building on our preliminary soundings of the hyperreal and simulated worlds of real estate showrooms, we then embraced the city’s property market as a diagnostic crystallisation of the nation’s breakneck pursuit of modernisation and globalisation. Fast forward two years and our anticipations about dear Ningbo’s future are indeed coming true, and its simulated (un)real estate products (designed to stimulate the economy) have also become way more pricey (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Simulated (un)real estate products

Certainly, the city's rebranding as a "new Tier-1" city saw the CCP welcome Ningbo's stakeholders to the high rollers table of the Chinese property market. One major consequence of this was a concomitant upgrading of Ningbo's property economy, which was updated with the latest financial technologies of computational capitalism and what Delanda (2000) helps us to perceive as networked technostructures. Indeed, as we noted in 2018, upon purchasing yet-to-be built apartments in housing communities that were imagined through surreal showrooms (as tropical islands, Jet Set harbours, wedding suites, and royal palaces; Fleming & Harrison

2018; Harrison & Fleming 2019) new home owners in Ningbo were receiving “daily canvas calls from agents,” soliciting them to sell on their new apartment for profit. One investor known to us (whose thoughts and experiences we engage through interview and observation methodologies) was informed that she could already earn one million RMB “on the spot if she said yes” to selling the concrete apartment that she had purchased as a virtual simulacra only six months prior; with this potential windfall making the purchase of yet more real estate as a speculative gamble, or future investment, highly desirable. Fast-forward less than two years, and apartments in our participant’s community are presently selling for seven million RMB a piece, increasing her potential windfall to the tune of five million RMB.

Meanwhile, we also noted in 2018 how the available space for new builds in desirable locations around the high-rise city were already becoming increasingly limited. The illustration we offered was that to even enter some real-estate showrooms still open in central locations, customers were required to show proof of owning more than ¥500,000 to be eligible to enter. Recalling the arguments about capitalism on speed, today this figure seems measly when compared to more recent reports of an inflated asset freeze of ¥1,800,000 being required to enter the lottery for one of the remaining saleable plots. Furthermore, feeding into our arguments regarding the synergistic convergences of screen media and city life (or cinematicity), the viewing and purchase of such property is now entirely handled via a smartphone app, which appears to digitise, visualise, and pressurise the apartment buying process in ways that innovate and intensify those we previously described in the book.

Figure 2 (left) shows the graphical user interface of a new real estate app, using one of the latest plots in one of Ningbo’s many “Central Business Districts” as an example. Basically, the home page shows the hyperreal and simulated plot of to-be-developed land (cf. also Figure 1). Noticeably, the complex is articulated to a CBD whose highest glass tower boasts a heli-pad on the roof. In *Shi-nema* we explore the emergent vertical aesthetic and logic which in the commercial, cinematic and real-estate worlds associate height and rising up with success and importance – this being one of the common features of a virtual or abstract diagram we find

dynamically undergirding the distinct architectural assemblages and microworlds which we explored throughout the city. An ideological idea similarly circulated and put into play in serialised “aspirational realist” television dramas such as *Sān Shí Èr Yī/Nothing but Thirty* (Zhang Xiaobo, 2020) and films like *Huá Lì Shàng Bān Zú/Design for Living* (Johnnie To, 2015) (see e.g. Fleming & Harrison 2020: 65-69; Khoo 2019; Berry 2009).

In this interactive *shi*-nematic advert-image for Ningbo we get the suggestion that the super-wealthy now travel by helicopter. The latest super sign for showing off “when luxury cars and yachts are no longer enough to exhibit wealth” (Lu 2014, see also Chan 2019). Implicitly, the super-wealthy need not go down to the Earth at all any more. What is at the foot of these glass towers, on the other hand, is a multistory, mega-mall nest-like complex whose anticipated opening of luxury brand stores has offered developers a major selling point for apartments in the integrated housing community. Underneath the simulated scene in the app, the text notes the standard three-day time window within which users must register and record their asset freeze in order to be in the running for entry into this “Chinese Dream” world. We can also see that more than 6000 Ningbonese have subscribed for the 326 apartments, furnishing the developers with eye-watering funds while leaving each user with around a 2% chance of buying a new home/investment.

Within WeChat groups formed of potential buyers of Ningbo real estate, this subscription process is referred to informally as “shaking the dice” (摇一摇), luckier members proclaiming that just shaking has meant earning (摇到就是赚到). Echoes here of a Casino logic to modern Capitalism. And indeed the emojis/stickers shared in such groups attest to their experience of the astronomical speed of the price increase (upper right of Figure 2), which reinforces the vertical aesthetic and literally takes it to new levels; while the recognition that becoming dirt poor (indeed eating dirt) in order to invest is a worthwhile gamble (Figure 2, lower right).

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*Figure 2. Images associated with a new saleable plot of land*

In addition to these highly desirable and increasingly scarce plots of prime real estate, there are of course less expensive, and therefore less desirable plots, that can be invested in, such as the one we mentioned in our book as “further out from the city and further from being built, [...] out in Fenghua district,” which at least to us was “better known as the strawberry field in between Ningbo and the suburb of Ninghai county.” Rather than showing readers images of the construction work underway, which has been compared to a “飞地” (*landing strip*, meaning nothing but barren land and construction work, or at least, little sign of the community, social infrastructure, or people for which the apartments are being built to house), we might here introduce a photo taken and shared online by another prospective female buyer on her way to visit the construction sites, but who stopped off to pick up some strawberries that caught her eye *en route*.<sup>5</sup>

Consideration of her self-produced image here allows for some fruitful connections with other ideas expounded in our book regarding the intensified desire to produce and consume images within semicapitalist China. For, we earlier drew on Susan Sontag’s idea that in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century social change had ostensibly become “replaced by a change in images,” inasmuch as the production and consumption of images appear to furnish the “ruling ideology” (2008, 178).

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<sup>5</sup> As a side note, our coincidental focus on female real estate buyers in *Chinese Urban Shi-nema* potentially indexes changes in the skewed gendered distribution of real estate wealth/ownership that has been noted to asymmetrically favour (heterosexual) males while structurally excluding women from the property market (see e.g. Fincher 2014).

Worth stressing here is that Sontag argued that a society would only really be considered modern when “one of its chief activities is producing and consuming images”: meaning that images increasingly became essential to the health of *modern* economies, “the stability of the polity, and the pursuit of private happiness” (2008, 153). Notions of private individuals who can own property are of course fundamental to the ideological operations of capitalism, and become mixed up in the atmosphere of our next image. Whatmore, although happiness may also be considered private or subjective, in the following example we can grasp how subjective feelings are also derived via a very public form of showing off, or in Chinese, 装逼 *zhuāngbī* (Li 2017), which demonstrates its common agreed upon cultural understanding. Of significance to what follows, these forms of showing off similarly betray how in modern visual cultures, subjects “feel that they are images, and are made real by photographs” (Sontag 2008, 161). Consider in such light Figure 3, a picture taken in the aforementioned Strawberry field, where we find an interesting placement of shot.



*Figure 3. "Today's strawberries were especially big and sweet"*

To give context, our prospective Fenghua (un)real estate buyer has paused to pick up some strawberries. The field's owner has provided her with a plastic punnet for a nominal price. After a picking spree, some ripe appetising fruits are arranged and displayed in a manner that resonates with the aesthetics and (clichéd) logic of commercial food advertising. But note also the vector from the strawberry towards the tell-tale green logo of a Starbucks cup which remains unmistakable even when rendered out of focus in the background *mise-en-scène*. Is this litter in the strawberry field that the snapper failed to evacuate from her shot, and in which case is an example of our book's arguments concerning the becoming-consumable of the environment under capitalism? While a critique of a littered nature cannot be excluded as a

possible horizon of meaning within the composited shot (it is worth noting that there is not yet—at time of writing—a Starbucks anywhere nearby this landing strip, suggesting this prop has been shipped-in with her and is likely empty), we feel that the cup’s vertical arrangement and centralised (near vanishing point) location within the still life composition signal it is an example of important prop and sign. As per our engagement with selfies and other film-making behaviors in *Chinese Urban Shi-nema*, we would suggest that the image and text-message combo (as part of a longer narrativised stream of biographic images) demonstrates our phone-camera-operator emerging as something of a set designer, montager, scriptwriter, director and absented star of the scenes she constructs—which draw and project self-associations to her (imagined) community of viewers. For, while these are not strictly speaking adverts for the consumable food, drink or space itself, one senses that the purpose of this image is to circulate as part of a longer drip-fed advert for the *lifestyle* of the “fractal celebrity” (see e.g. Beller 2021, 102ff) taking and arranging it.

Here, we take the modern desire to take and project Instagram-like images such as these as symptomatic afterimages of the “becoming image” of the self in modern cine-city cultures (Fleming and Harrison 2020, 219-228; see also Brown 2019, 234). Among other things, these constructed and curated images highlight how “advertising has worked its way into the sign itself, into the image, and into data visualization,” so that they appear to circulate within the semicapitalist economy as a form of, what Beller calls, *advertisign* (2021, 188). This being something that might in turn earn the image-maker validating “soft currency” exchanges of looks and likes (179). Returning to this unitary *shi-nematic* shot of red strawberries and a green branded cup, the latter indeed seems included to be intentionally (semiotically) decoded by its public as a branded *advertisign* that reflects/signifies something about the taste and wealth of the image maker. The fetishistic associations Starbucks commodities once tended to evoke is something we explore throughout different chapters in *Shi-nema*, including the incorporation of an outlet into the simulacral teaching and learning environment of the Sino-foreign UNNC (once the most expensive university in mainland China). In continuation with this, we read the image maker’s inclusion of the Starbucks sign-product as a desire to *zhuāng yī ge bī* (showoff).

However, while Starbucks coffee cups were once “indexical Viagra,” (a term credited to Michael Silverstein) in the rapidly changing urban semioscape of contemporary China, these object-signs have recently gone off the boil somewhat, and are perhaps no longer such auspicious signifiers. Or at least, the Starbucks brand has reached something of a saturation point and has increasingly become semiotically placid if not impotent, as new and comparatively extreme forms of branded “showing off” (via advertising images) have taken hold. Indeed this natureculture (strawberry-Starbucks) image might now appear as a somewhat parochial or gauche attempt at “showing off,” drawing condescension: “Aww, bless” rather than awe.

Similarly awkward scenes are plentiful in the 2021 (Season 13) instalment of the long-standing popular TV series *Xiāng cūn ài qíng/Country Love*, which sets its scene in a small countryside municipality of China’s North East.<sup>6</sup> The 2021 season offers a pedagogical case study in becoming a technologically advanced image-hungry society, with smartphones, video streaming sites, and online supermarkets appearing introduced to this remote village, whose inhabitants demonstrate in a compressed form (afforded by the series format) what happens when the connection between images and money is made clear. For, even the “country cousin” (caricatured by super-wealthy urban actor-celebrities) citizen-subject here comes to realise that looking is a form of labour, and that images can produce value. By such means *Country Love* helps reify and make palpable Beller’s claim that the “mining of human bodies of their power always has been the goal of capital” (2006, 20), by showing villagers scramble to tap into their creativities – singing, dancing, playing the sorna (double-reeded horn), and storytelling – as a means to attract the attention of “outsiders” to whom they may sell the village’s produce (e.g. by unboxing bottled water, beef jerky, and mushrooms). Here, it primarily becomes neural and nervous activity that the attention economy demands and extracts, as prelude to selling material commodities. Returning to our vertiginous blending of reality and fiction, screen sights and the real world, these fictional “main melody” (*zhu xuanlü* or *leitmotif*) storylines of adapting to modern semicapitalist systems also afford Chinese online supermarket giants like

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<sup>6</sup> Summaries of all 34 episodes in series 13 can be found at <https://myasianartist.com/episode-recaps/country-love-13-13>

Taobao advertisement spaces, demonstrating another instance of the blurring between images and advertisements (qua advertisigns), looking and labor in the semicapitalist consumer society. Echoes here too of Sontag's presentiments that a change in ideology is a change in image regimes, and that modernisation is equated with the producing and consuming of images.

As the villagers jump on the semicapitalist consumer society bandwagon, with more or less success, *Country Love* also explores the emergence of new social relations and dynamics in the village, occasioning modern moralistic tales of cyber-bullies, trolls, victims, stalkers, micro-celebrities, and the social problems of broken families, debt, jealousy, and divorce (these often occasioning ethical afterimages of so-called traditional moral attitudes at a content level). Accordingly, the literal health, stability and happiness of the (fantasy televisual) rural community and its inhabitants is equated with their fictional production, circulation and consumption of images, vertiginously illustrating the operations of "ideology presenting itself to itself, talking to itself, learning about itself" within the fractalactic echo chamber of semicapitalist China (Comolli and Narboni 2016, 597). Predictably, happy villagers are shown selling products through online broadcasts, which are watched on cell-phones by other villagers, who Chinese audiences pay money to watch watching, before some opt to broadcast their own videos and thought-images about what they just watched, which their audiences watch, and so on. *Shi-nema* is the Chinese desert of the Real.

### **Trashing brands, or gestures of contempt and shame towards luxury goods**

Having entered again a closed-circuit world in which reality is sublimated to the production and circulation of images and (adverti)signs, wherein the gaps between represented and representation collapse into one another, we wish to turn to another set of images shared and discussed by one of our participants that offers playful contrasts. For, if the squabbling

inhabitants of *Country Love* illustrate the incipient stages of a society's becoming-image, the next images shared with us through one of China's many live-streaming platforms *xiǎo hóng shū* appears to us to illustrate another critical stage of the becoming-image spectrum, and circulate as a form of super-privileged inversion of the fetishistic "unboxing" video trend, and what we can here call a *brand trashing video*. Indeed, while "unboxing" is an online commodity culture trend of recording the initial unpackaging of some special or rare retail box, what the showing off of abundant wealth has led to in modern attention economies is the literal, but still simulated, throwing away of very expensive products, in a kind of elite hybridised form of semicapitalist-potlatch. Consider our example below in which a vlogger – standing in front of display cabinets chock with Hermès handbags - has produced from an Ikea sack several Hermès handbags each worth hundreds of thousands of RMD. The online fractal celebrity here holds them up one by one for the camera, as they comment on each, before affectively tossing them aside with a gesture of contempt (Figure 4). We opt to use the term "brand trashing" here because the *act* of throwing the elite bags away appears to simulate treating the wealthy super-signs as mere trash, whilst also evoking the idea of "trashing" a name or brand qua reputation (cf. the boycotting of Dolce & Gabanna in 2018 following their publicity stunt involving chopsticks which left Chinese audiences fuming and resulted in grovelling apologies from the Italian designers). Bear in mind that owning one of these hand bags is a very real but somewhat unattainable life goal for many Chinese consumers, such as our Ningbo participant, who described a kind of shock and bitterness in seeing this microcelebrity disrespecting these mega brands. In another instance of a form of moralistic afterimage, at the end of this video the vlogger admits to having become bored with the luxury shopping lifestyle and regretting not having invested in an education instead. Presumably a branded one.



Figure 4. Trashing away designer Hermès bags

How such glamorous objects (and subject-objects) whose unattainable attainability resonate with the heuristic commodity fetishism (and aspirational desires) are propagandistically/programatically set out in various “Chinese Dream” lifestyle films, reality shows, and TV series is another subject we address in *Chinese Urban Shi-nema*. On account of this trashing video, we could briefly offer another fresh fractalactic example to compare and contrast with mainstream Chinese visual culture by looking to Mu Xiao Jie’s 2021 *Bīāo Huā Rén Shēng/Standardised Life* aka *Fighting Youth* (正青春). In particular, we can zoom in on an advertisign scene from episode 11 that shows the main CEO of a fictional Shanghai cosmetics firm, whose offices are (surprise, surprise) located atop a Bund skyscraper, begin to unbox a designer Hermès handbag in front of one of her top performing sales directors. During this product placement take on the fetishistic unboxing video, the underling sales director affectively responds “哇噻” (Cool!) “金棕色哎” (Golden Brown) “狼多肉少,怎么买到的” (many wolves, little meat (i.e. scarce) how did you buy it?). As incentive for more hard work, the



CEO gifts this super-sign bag to her sales director, who through an orchestration of images in a subsequent scene is literally left mesmerised and rendered in a dream-like state by her glamorous new bag.<sup>7</sup>

This dreamy bag subsequently appears in a number of scenes, where we can perceive some further variations on the trashing video explored above. In episode 16, for example, the sales director is shown trashing her own suitor's gift (a delivery breakfast) in a wheelie bin as she exits with her prized Hermès bag on her other arm. A few episodes later she has another argument with her suitor at a hospital, as they visit the executive's ill mother. The spat grows physical and ends with the Hermès bag being flung across the floor. An act that solicits an emotional outburst. Pointedly, about the bag, rather than the health issues or the family troubles (episode 35). Viewer's streaming comments culled from a live chat feed superimposed upon the scene during a web viewing include the following:

爱马仕啊 (Hermès bag)

爱马仕包包就这样被扔了吗 (Is the Hermès bag being thrown away like this?)

心疼brkin包一秒钟 (Split-second distress for Birkin bag)

爱马仕别扔啊 (Don't throw Hermès!)

我的包包啊 (My bag!)

爱马仕头一次被这样羞辱 (Hermès being humiliated like this is a first)

那可是爱马仕呀 (Poor Hermès)

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<sup>7</sup> We previously noted how the term glamour comes from Old Scots, and draws associations with witchcraft and casting spells. In particular, casting the glamour is associated with illusions and effects upon the eyes.

可怜了这爱马仕brkin (Poor Hermès Birkin)

Such streaming comments, which anthropomorphise the bag and signal its status a beloved quasi star/character in its own right, allow us to better understand our participant's own feelings when watching the vlogger enact similar actions in his video, and provide a broader context to help explain why their affective actions and gestures went viral in this semicapitalist attention economy.

We can gain yet further insight into the operations of these powerful object-signs (both bags and gestures) if we turn to the aforementioned *Nothing But Thirty* (三十而已). Indeed, in episode 31, bored at being the housewife to her successful husband, Gu Jia (Tong Yao) seeks investment opportunities in Shanghai and must penetrate a rich wives circle for contacts (fù tài tai men, 富太太们). Her first meeting turns to drama when she notices that all the rich wives have the latest Hermès bags (some of which are seen as collector's items worth millions of RMB), whereas Gu Jia only has a more common Channel bag (that cost precisely 50,000 RMB according to the script). In a closing scene to the encounter, the wives assemble for a group photo, each prominently holding their Hermès object-signs in front of them, including Mrs. Fu who displays a rare 2.6 million RMB variety. Confronted by the wealth gap between her and these other wives, Gu Jia subtly/semiotically repositions her own body to shield her cheapskate Channel bag from the look of the camera, and from viewers by extension (Figure 5). This we perceive as a gesture of shame, which directly contrasts the trashing gesture of contempt.



Figure 5. Gestures of shame in Zhang's *Nothing But Thirty*



Figure 6. 富太太们 ('rich wives circle') in Zhang's *Nothing But Thirty*

Figure 6 shows the shameful fashion parade, which helps us to draw spiralling archaeological connections between the cinema and the commercial shop window, which in *Chinese Urban Shi-nema* we discuss in terms of the proto-cinematic scene of commercial cinema (see also Friedberg 1993). Gu Jia later sees in her social media newsfeed that members of the rich wives circle have posted the posed photo online. However, to her horror, she sees that she has been photoshopped out of the (after)image (with one of the many editing apps now enabling consumers to remove undesirable elements from their photos). In a society built on the implanted desire to become-image and attract attention through the mobilisation and

arrangement of signs and supersigns, Gu Jia's shame is to become a literal non-image, deemed a void unworthy of attention, in part due to the lack of (adverti)signs she is able to mobilise and display. Understanding this, she resolves to purchase a Hermès bag to gain access to the magic circle of rich wives (Futaitaimen). Commentary online made during this apotheosis appears to pity the fictional character, though, noting that when she does eventually manage to purchase a handbag by "blowing up" her credit cards and mobilising her Guangxi network, her success will only be fleeting, for it is well understood that the rich wives must alternate their Hermès bags to prove that they actually have access to an ever-moving (cinematic) series of these object-(adverti)signs.

## Conclusions

We have specifically articulated this piece around updated images of selling, buying, and subsequently showing off, the goal being to illustrate that our account of everyday life(styles) remains in a state of rapid (image) flux; meaning, what we have written here is also now likely already out of date. However, we hope that our discussion of warp speed real estate, strawberry fields for Starbucks, and trashing luxury brands has developed our opening remarks about the productive labour and economic activities of contemporary Chinese *shi-nema*; providing a critical afterimage regarding the becoming-cinema of cities, subjectivity and culture in postsocialist China more broadly. Key to stress here is that, whether images and (adverti)signs are being manhandled and trashed or dreamed of and idolised appears beside the point. Because in the last analysis, these manifold examples collectively point towards the totalitarian reign of *shi-nematic* semiocapitalism. And yes, we hear you say, we are showing off a product of our own here too, in a manner that likely reaches you through a screen. Guilty. It only remains to be seen if urbane readers will value or trash our branded notion of *Chinese Urban Shi-nema*.

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