

**Re-globalizing Shanghai:  
The Visual Rhetoric of the Chinese “Global” City**

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This paper aims to explore the ways in which Shanghai’s re-globalization attempt, or “the second coming of global Shanghai”<sup>1</sup>, is ambiguously articulated in contemporary Chinese and world cinemas. Through the investigation of a few representative Shanghai-themed films produced at the turn of the century and in the new millennium, including *Suzhou River* (1999), *The Longest Night in Shanghai* (2007), *I Wish I Knew* (2010), *Code 46* (2003), and *Ultraviolet* (2006), the paper argues that the visual rhetoric of the cinematic city of Shanghai embodies a seemingly contradictory mode that is both nostalgic and futuristic. On the one hand, the cinematic representations of a supposedly re-globalized Shanghai often lead to a nostalgic remembering of the past, a past that was effectively erased by the revolutionary discourse between the 1950s and the 1980s yet refuses to fade away from the tyranny of history. Underneath the spectacle of the city’s rapid development at the turn of the century always reemerge the “ghosts” and memories of the 1920s and 1930s. On the other hand, in a very interesting way, many Shanghai-themed productions, both domestic and foreign, also tend to project Shanghai as a futuristic city that either symbolizes China’s embrace of globalization in the present and its inevitable “rise” in the future or functions to communicate a sense of “otherworldliness,” a place that seems to be only imaginable in science fiction film.

The paradoxical nature of the visual rhetoric of a “re-globalized” Shanghai, this paper further argues, foregrounds the contradiction China is confronted with in its pursuit of globalism. At one level, mainstream filmmaking is actively participating in the official mythmaking that Shanghai/China’s “second coming,” or rather its unprecedented coming, is only made possible through the correct leadership of the Party/State, and there are therefore plenty of reasons for the Chinese people to live contentedly with a sense of amnesia “about the country that existed before 1949, as if the history of modern China began” only when Mao made his famous announcement of the founding of a “new” China some sixty years ago.<sup>2</sup> At another level, however, as mostly articulated in independent/underground cinema, Shanghai/China’s “first coming” in the 1920s and 1930s serves as a critical reminder that both challenges the legitimacy of the Party/State sanctioned globalism and questions the very essence of what one may call China’s “selective re/globalization,” a cryptic calculation that has become increasingly evident in recent years. Judging from this angle, Shanghai’s futuristic image, as projected mostly by Hollywood productions, only plays into the hands of this “selective re/globalization” that is eager to mask itself as a fully

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<sup>1</sup> Wasserstrom, Jeffrey N. “The Second Coming of Global Shanghai.” *World Policy Journal* (Summer 2003), 51-60.

<sup>2</sup> Pringle, James. “Shanghai ticks to the tunes of imperialist past.” *The (London) Times*, 9 June 1997.

integrated member of the global community and to embrace anything “international,” yet at the same time remains pathologically watchful toward many issues that are global.

### **A World without Frontiers: Shanghai as a Space of Flows**

Although what constitutes a global city remains contentious, it is commonly acknowledged that the global city denotes certain erasure of the boundary, both real and imagined, an important notion that defines the age of the nation-state. Central to this erasure is the notion of cross-border flow: the flows of capital, of population, of information, and of images and icons. It is because of these flows that “the local now transacts directly with the global” and the locally built environment of material sites becomes a “microenvironment with global span.”<sup>3</sup>

Known for his sleek treatment of the city and love in contemporary China, Zhang Yibai (b. 1963), a graduate of the Central Academy of Drama, captures the spirit of flow in his first cinematic adventure to Shanghai, *The Longest Night in Shanghai* (ye, shanghai, 2007). Much like Sofia Coppola’s *Lost in Translation* (2003), *The Longest Night* involves an outsider, this time a Japanese hair stylist named Naoki Mizushima (Masahiro Motoki), coming to Shanghai for a music awards show without being able to utter a single word of either mandarin Chinese or Shanghainese. “Lost in translation” and in his indecisiveness on his love life, Mizushima wanders in the streets of Shanghai and gets acquainted with a local female cabdriver after she accidentally hits him with her cab. As it turns out, Lin Xi (Vicki Zhao), the female cabdriver, is equally “lost” in her unrequited love for a handsome car mechanics who is about to get married with another girl. The two “lost” souls, neither capable of speaking a word of the other’s language, embark on a long and soul-searching journey that ultimately ends with a vague suggestion that the two may have found their common language after spending the “longest night” together.



1: Taxi works as a moving camera that floats on Shanghai’s highways.

<sup>3</sup> Sassen, S. “Reading the City in a Global Digital Age: Between Topographic Representation and Spatialized Power Projects.” L. Krause & P. Petro (eds), *Global Cities: Cinema, Architecture, and Urbanism in a Digital Age*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2003. 15-30.

Aside from the fact that the making of *The Longest Night* itself manifests the flow of transnational talents, capital, and consumption as a co-production between China and Japan, the primary setting of the film is the moving cab, which not only renders the narrative a flowing rhythm but metaphorically works as a moving camera that floats on Shanghai's highways and from street to street, enabling the audience to see the shifting/flowing façade of the city's glossy architectures and nightscape. Much of the story develops along the line of a cat-and-mouse game. After a frustrated Lin accidentally hits the wondering Mizushima, which makes him unable to even remember the name of his hotel, she attempts several times to drop Mizushima off on the street, only to find him back in her cab again, as if the two are destined to strike sparks off each other. In one scene, after sending Mizushima to a local police station, Li goes back into her car and sits idly to think through the devastating news that her self-imagined boyfriend is going to get married with another girl the next day. When she opens her eyes, however, the seemingly mischievous Mizushima is once again standing in front of her car. She backs her car violently but a determined Mizushima runs quickly to the back, blocking the backward path of the cab. The cat-and-mouse game ends with the female cabdriver willingly letting the Japanese man back into her "domain," symbolically also into the mesmerizing tour of the flowing façade of the urban landscape of Shanghai again. In other words, this particular scene, while not a spectacular one in the visual feast the filmmaker renders, is central to the development of the narrative, as it secures the bond between the two leads, making it possible for the filmmaker to continue to cinematically track both the traveling paths of the flowing cab and rhythms and hues of the cityscape.

Shanghai's "global" character is also defined in the film by its seamless convergence of peoples of different ethnicities and nationalities who move fluidly into and out of the city. Led by Mizushima, the internationally famed hair stylist, the Japanese team comes to Shanghai and quickly joins the local force to make the awards show a success. Besides the sleek looking backstage where the team adds the last touch of glamour to the performers and contestants, the Cotton Club, a real Shanghai jazz bar, is featured prominently in the film as a hangout place for the business travelers from Japan. Populated by Caucasians, Blacks, Latinos, and Asians, the club functions in the film as a micro-representation of Shanghai where "the landscape of persons" constantly changes and shifts, giving the notion of flow a human dimension.<sup>4</sup> In one scene, the camera follows the wandering steps of one of Mizushima's assistants into the Cotton Club, then zooms in on the jazz bar singer, an Asian-looking woman who later claims "I feel I am always on the road, on a journey." Bound by the same feeling of transience, the two are able to enjoy a brief moment of closeness at the bar when the singer takes her break, during which she murmurs to the assistant: "Hope to see you in Tokyo."

The film's repeated return to the Cotton Club is significant in glossing the "global"

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<sup>4</sup> Appadurai, A. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. p. 33.

coming of Shanghai. Aside from its customer base's cultural and ethnic hybridity, a bar like the Cotton Club could be viewed as a "nationally undefined space," a "deterritorialized" mini-world whose language and grammar is universally understood, and a transient place increasingly experienced in terms of constant "flows" of converging and departing souls.<sup>5</sup> Or, if paraphrasing Marc Auge's analysis of "supermodernity," it is one of those "non-places" that, along with such globally ubiquitous sites/icons as airports, malls, upscale hotels, international brands, and freeways, sees no boundary and frontier between "the here and the elsewhere," as it is both "the here" and "the elsewhere," both local and global, and both contextualized and de-contextualized.<sup>6</sup> It is through the repeated returns to a "non-place" like the Cotton Club that the film/filmmaker is able to "erase" the boundary between Shanghai and other global cities (in this case Tokyo) and then subsequently integrate a "second-coming" Shanghai into the interconnected global networks of great metropolises that go beyond the frontier of the nation-state.

### **The Urban Wasteland and the Ghost of History**

Rewind back to the beginning of this century. When Shanghai was on the way to its "second global coming," director Lou Ye, whose career as a filmmaker differs considerably from that of Zhang Yibai despite their age similarity, the former largely an underground/independent filmmaker who constantly runs into trouble with the government censors, the latter emerging from his TV commercial and music video background with the officially approved debut feature *Spring Subway* (2002), released his noir-style Shanghai story *Suzhou River* (2000). In this instant classic, the "global" city of Shanghai metamorphoses itself from an array of elegantly lit skyscrapers into a decaying and polluted urban wasteland upon which a story of innocent love, betrayal, deception, kidnapping, and identity confusion unfolds. The audience is introduced to the setting of contemporary Shanghai via the voyeuristic camera of an amateur videographer, whose gaze rests upon the ruined buildings, weary onlookers, fighting couples, shabby bridges, and the filthy and polluted Suzhou River.<sup>7</sup> Here Shanghai's architectural landmarks and signifiers of the new promising land of Pudong are intentionally ignored in favor of a decaying landscape marked by ruined buildings and makeshift dwellings on the river.

The marked emphasis on the ruined buildings, or, rather, the ruined-ness of the city, is later compounded by the fact that the kidnapping of Moudan, the girl who jumps off the bridge into the Suzhou River after realizing she has been betrayed by the man she loves, takes place also inside a desolate and about-to-be-torn-down building. Metaphorically, therefore, the camera's unrelenting gazes on the ruined objects invite a double reading. On the one hand, the ruins can be viewed as a substitute for

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<sup>5</sup> Mennel, Barbara. *Cities and Cinema*. London and New York: Routledge, 2008. p. 202.

<sup>6</sup> Auge, Marc. *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*. London & New York: Verso, 2008. p. xviii.

<sup>7</sup> The discussion of *Suzhou River* here is partially based on the author's published article "In Search of the Erased Half: *Suzhou River*, *Lunar Eclipse*, and the Sixth Generation Filmmakers of China." Haili Kong & John A. Lent (eds). *One Hundred Years of Chinese Cinema: A Generational Dialogue*. Norwalk, CT: EastBridge, 2006. p. 183-198.

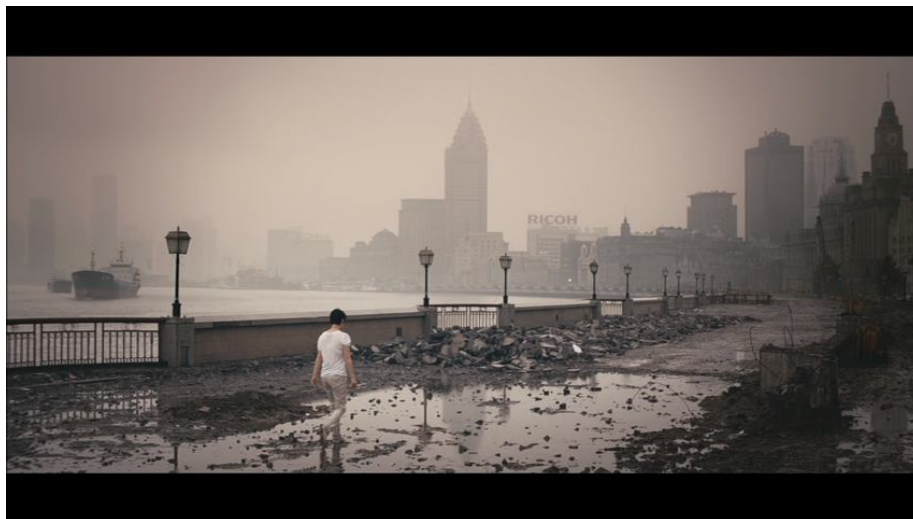
something that is not there. The intentional bypass of the signature skyscrapers of Shanghai suggests a critical scrutiny of the otherwise inflated rhetoric about Shanghai's resurgence/reincarnation as a global metropolis. On the other hand, one is also tempted to add a psychological dimension to the images of ruins. The very fact that the kidnapping takes place inside the to-be-torn-down site indicates there is a close link between physical and psychological ruins. Thus, the ruined-ness of the city has both externalized and internalized forms. Mutually reinforcing, these two forms enable the filmmaker to paint a bleak picture of "global" Shanghai at the dawn of the new century. The ruined sites, both external and internal, provide a vital anchor point at which a cinematic monument could be symbolically built to commemorate what once existed but eventually vanished.



**2: Shanghai metamorphoses into a decaying and polluted urban wasteland.**

It is here that the "ghost" of history finds its entryway to the narrative. Shot in 16mm and then blown up to 35mm, *Suzhou River* possesses a dreamy quality that immediately connects audience with its retro feel. While the images of the flowing river, the run-down warehouses and neighborhood, the narrow alleyways, the ruined buildings, and the narrator's deep voice-over all evoke people's memory of the past, it is the character Meimei, a girl of mystery, beauty, and sadness, who seems to emerge from nowhere but actually brings back the memory of the 1930s when the city enjoyed its "first coming" to the global stage. As the narrator introduces Meimei to the audience and his video camera explores her face and body like a fetishized object, one is tempted to build a connection between her image and a 1930s' singsong girl or dancing hostess. This connection is further enhanced with the soundtrack playing in the background: "Shanghai Nights, Shanghai Nights. / You are a city that never sleeps. / The lanterns are up, and the sounds of the cars. / Song and dance and good times abounding," a 1930s popular song composed by Chen Gexin and performed by Zhou Xuan, the "Golden Voice" of the past. The reemergence of the "ghost" of old Shanghai, or the nostalgic remembering of the 1930s, forces the audience to reflect upon, compare, and contrast Shanghai of the past and Shanghai of the present.

Lou Ye's vision of Shanghai must be shared by his BFA alumnus Jia Zhangke, as the latter directly quotes *Suzhou River's* famous beginning sequence that consists of no fewer than a hundred rapidly assembled shots (many of them put together through jump cuts) of the city in his officially commissioned World Expo documentary on Shanghai, *I Wish I Knew* (2010). Also similar to *Suzhou River*, which is introduced through the voice-over/point of view of an anonymous narrator who remains enigmatic and faceless throughout the film, Jia's *I Wish I Knew* features his regular female lead Zhao Tao who occupies an ambiguous and in-between space in the documentary: neither inside nor outside the story and belonging neither to the past nor to the present. To a large extent, she is a female *flâneur* in Benjaminian sense, strolling along the landmarks of old and new Shanghai and roaming through the past and the present: "The *flâneur* is still on the threshold ... Neither has yet engulfed him; in neither is he at home. He seeks refuge in the crowd... The crowd is the veil through which the familiar city lures the *flâneur* like a phantasmagoria. In it the city is now a landscape, now a room."<sup>8</sup>



**3: Jia Zhangke's *flâneur* walks on the rubbles of the to-be-renovated Bund.**

As the Zhao Tao character walks on the rubbles of the to-be-renovated Bund, stares into the distant cityscape with a pensive gaze, and passes quietly through the scene that restages the historical day the Community army entered / "liberated" Shanghai, one realizes that Jia Zhangke's *flâneur*, rather than being lured by the spectacular display of modernity, is both fascinated and perplexed with the contradictions of history of modern China. She is at the juncture / threshold of the past and present, and, as the English title of the film suggests, only wishes to know how to solve the historical puzzle the city presents. So, instead of presenting a glossing image of Shanghai's "second coming" the organizing committee of Shanghai World Expo so desperately wanted, Jia walked a fine line between his individual take on Shanghai and officially sanctioned vision of the city, and chose to highlight a historical

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin, Walter. "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century." Benjamin, Walter. *Reflections*. New York: Schocken Books, 1978. p. 156.

Shanghai that largely questions the very foundation upon which Shanghai's "second coming" is built. This emphasis on the past, both pre-1949 and post-1949, is evidenced in the film's heavy reliance on the nostalgic remembrance of some of the most iconic figures (or their descendents) of old Shanghai. Through Jia's meditative lens and trademarked slow panning shots, one gets to know the everlasting sorrow and enchanting power the city carries through its dramatic turns of historical events. In one scene, Wei Ran, son of 1940s' Shanghai screen darling Shangguan Yunzhu (1920-1968), whose star glamour reached its apex in such classics as *The Spring River Flows East* (1947) and *Crows and Sparrows* (1949), sits on the empty stage of the historical Lyceum Theater reminiscing his mother's tragic suicide during the heyday of the Cultural Revolution. The stark contrast between the grand empty stage and the small human figure points to a rethinking of the individual in modern China: if Shanghai's so-called re-globalization drama plays out once again on the center stage of history, and if Shanghai's "second coming" is in reality dictated by the inhuman force of the state, then, what is the role of the individual and who can rest assured that the individual won't be swept away by the tyrannical hands of history, leaving no traces behind, just like the morning of 23 November 1968 when Shangguan Yunzhu quietly jumped out of the window and "felt as light as feather and seemed to swirl around in the air?"<sup>9</sup>

### **The Futuristic "Non-Place:" Shanghai De-territorialized**

Continuing the tradition that Shanghai has long been a favorite cinematic signifier in Hollywood representations of China, *Code 46* (2003), a UK production featuring Oscar winner Tim Robbins and Oscar nominee Samantha Morton, also chooses Shanghai to unravel its mystery.<sup>10</sup> In stark contrast to Shanghai being a place of lawlessness, degradation, and exotic backwardness as exemplified in such titles as Josef von Sternberg's *Shanghai Express* (1932) and *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941), the city now represents the "future," a not-too-distant future when cities are the privileged sites of living and they are seamlessly interconnected via ultramodern transportation system yet at the same time highly regulated through the use of "papeles," a global language code that allows the "covered" passenger to travel freely from city to city. As the story unfolds, William Geld (Tim Robbins), a Seattle-based insurance fraud investigator, travels to Shanghai to interview employees of the Shanghai-based Sphinx company from which fraudulent "papeles" might have been smuggled out. As the plane glides smoothly through a desert and lands at the city's airport, William is confronted with a Shanghai that may be described as "realistically unreal." It is "real" because the scenes of William passing through the checkpoint at the airport and getting in the car to begin his "odyssey" in the city, narrated by a non-diegetic female

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<sup>9</sup> Wang, Anyi. *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow: A Novel of Shanghai*. Trans. Michael Berry & Susan Chan Egan. New York: Columbia UP, 2008. p. 285.

<sup>10</sup> For example, between 1924 and 1948, Hollywood produced no fewer than 26 films named after Shanghai. See *New York Times Film Reviews* of the years for a storyline for each film. Not all of them are about the city or set in Shanghai. The city sometimes functions more as a theme or a concept in Hollywood cinema of the 1920s, 1930s, and 40s. Shanghai as a film title in Hollywood probably started with a film called *Shanghaied* (1909) and Charlie Chaplin's silent film *Shanghaied* (1915).

voiceover, were apparently shot on location and easily remind one of the topography of Shanghai. It is “unreal” because the city is now truly globalized in the sense that, while its skyscrapers, freeways, and street neon lights provide a sense of locality, it is populated with a multi-ethnic crowd and seems to be governed by an anonymous global entity that knows no borders and power limits. The streets are deserted, the interiors are high-tech looking, and the working force of the Sphinx company is remarkably international.



4: Shanghai in *Code 46* is transformed into a “traveler’s space.”

The futuristic and re-globalized Shanghai also manifests itself in the language the population speaks and in the film’s purposeful attempt to prioritize such places as nightclubs and subway stations and rides. It seems wherever William travels in the city, he always finds himself residing comfortably in an environment in which communications and understandings are achieved through a global language that fuses with French, Spanish, Italian, mandarin Chinese and, of course, English. This is a city whose dwellers are re-arranged, re-mixed, and re-populated according to the dividing logic of “insiders” and “outsiders,” and a city that is only a signifier of the city itself, whose real sense of locality has drained away over time. While occasional featuring of local restaurants, shop signs, Chinese characters, and people’s faces serve as a reminder that William is unmistakably in the “here and now,” global cities’ universally recognizable signifiers such as nightclubs and subway stations point in the other direction: he could be in any other metropolis in the world, be it Tokyo, New York, London, or Paris. In other words, with its futuristic “to-be-looked-at-ness,” Shanghai in *Code 46* is transformed into a “traveler’s space,” or “the archetype of *non-place*” in which “neither identity, nor relations, nor history really make any sense; ...in which solitude is experienced as an overburdening or emptying of individuality, in which only the movement of the fleeting images enables the observer to hypothesize the existence of a past and glimpse the possibility of a future.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Auge, Marc. *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*. London & New York: Verso, 2008. p. 70-71.





**5: Shanghai turns into what Deleuze termed the “any-space-whatever” in *Ultraviolet*.**

The futuristic feel of Shanghai’s skylines also caught the attention of the production team of Hollywood sci-fi action film *Ultraviolet* (2006). When executive producer Tony Mark spoke about his idea of setting the film in contemporary Shanghai, he described it as “genuinely futuristic,” “architecturally inventive,” and “surpassing anything we could imagine.”<sup>12</sup> Despite this “genuine” love for the city’s architectural wonder, however, Shanghai in *Ultraviolet* metamorphoses into a digitally mutated nameless game space that is completely de-territorialized from its locality and history. While Shanghai’s architectural landmarks, such as the Jin Mao Tower, the Oriental Pearl Tower, and particularly the exterior and interior of the Shanghai Science & Technology Museum, provide ample visual evidences of the place, the cityscape featured in *Ultraviolet* is ultimately a CGI-dominated game space that combines footages and photos of real buildings in Shanghai and lab-designed virtual environment. Here, Shanghai’s cinematic representation has migrated to another realm. Just like the Milla Jovovich character, a disease-modified ultra sexy woman who is capable of doing whatever the director/computer wants her to do, Shanghai in *Ultraviolet* is deprived of any traits that are associated with the notion of “place” (nation, city, street, community, or neighborhood), and turns into what Deleuze termed the “any-space-whatever.”<sup>13</sup>

## **Conclusion**

As China enters the second decade of the new century, its future has never been this uncertain. On the one hand, the rhetoric of a changing China, a “rising” China, and a

<sup>12</sup> “UV Protection: Making Ultraviolet.” *Ultraviolet* DVD, Unrated Extended Cut. Screen Gems Release, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Shiel, Mark. “Cinema and the City in History and Theory.” Shiel, Mark & Tony Fitzmaurice (eds). *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context*. Blackwell, 2001. p. 11.

China that is actively integrating itself into the global system seems to suggest that the “grand coming-out party” of China, as evidenced in Beijing’s successful hosting of the 2008 Olympics and Shanghai’s grand delivery of the 2010 World Expo, does point to a “second coming” of global Shanghai or China. On the other hand, the centrality of the state / Party interests and the Chinese government’s / Party’s calculated efforts to compromise global norms with its own imperatives and agendas indicate that Shanghai’s (China’s) “second coming” is highly conditioned, heavily dictated, and selectively manipulated. This contradictory process of globalization and selective adaptation of global norms are also manifest in the films that prominently feature Shanghai, arguably the most “cosmopolitan” and “globalized” city of China. While mainstream cinema, similar to promotional footages / programs broadcast on China’s mainstream media, tends to put on a smiling face of openness of China for the rest of the world, independent / underground cinema strives to unmask the inherent contradictions the government / Party is facing in its pursuit of globally prominent status. In the meantime, in an ironic and twisted way, Hollywood’s representation of Shanghai being a “futuristic” and global city that is seamlessly tied with a web of world cities around the globe also plays a constructive role in the mythmaking project of China being a fully integrated global force, a rosy face the Chinese government / Party is eager to paint in front of the world community yet could not care less domestically.