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Selling (un)real estate with “*Shi*(勢)-nema”: Manipulation, not persuasion, in China’s contemporary cinematic-cities

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Abstract

Investigating what has been called the *mise-en-scene* of Capitalism’s Second Coming in China, this essay explores how cinematic principles have become divorced from the medium of cinema and can be found operating within contemporary Chinese urban spaces in order to increase the efficacy of real estate showroom settings. Specifically, we explore the effects of affectively distributed networks of human, architectural and nonhuman ‘actors’ that appear to be arranged in such a way as to manipulate and impact the thoughts, feelings and actions of potential buyers. To best expose the effectiveness of these modern urban assemblages, we engineer an encounter between the Chinese concept of *shi* (勢) – described by sinologist-philosopher François Julien as the “*inherent potentiality at work in configuration*” – and that of cinematicity, wherein the cinema and city are recognised as co-determining and mutually enabling site/sights.

Keywords

Cinematicity; Chinese Cities; Affective Architecture; Assemblage Theory; François Julien; Real Estate Showrooms; 勢 (shi)

‘Selling (un)real estate with “Shi(勢)-nema”’: Manipulation, not persuasion, in China’s contemporary cinematic-cities

Arguments for the political efficacy of film have always held onto the idea that film must move off the screen into the world

Pratt and San Juan (2014,13).

“Cinema” means a fully mediated mise-en-scene that provides humans with the contexts and options for response that are productive for capital.

Zhang (2005, p.xxx)

1. Introduction

Diving into what has been called the *mise-en-scène* of Capitalism’s Second Coming in China (Li 2016, 4ff), this essay blends empirical and theoretical methods to illustrate how ‘cinematic’ principles have become disarticulated from the medium of cinema and can be found operating within contemporary Chinese urban spaces (and subjectivities), in this instance to increase the efficacy of expensive real estate showroom settings. Using participant observation, video recording, and interview methodology, we offer a fresh perspective on emblematical showrooms, framing them as techno-political *mediums* and *modes*: defined as affectively distributed networks of human, architectural and nonhuman ‘actors’ that are arranged in order to manipulate and innervate the thoughts, emotions and actions of potential buyers—after pulling them into action driven narrative ‘set ups.’

This material could be viewed as advertising discourse and analysed through a framework for multimodal discourse analysis (e.g. Kress & van Leeuwen 1996; Forceville & Urios-Aparisi 2009). But here we approach the real-estate showroom from perspectives more central to a field often described as Film Philosophy. In doing so, we update and repurpose a range of what we might call ‘assemblage’ or ‘agglomeration’ models that a long line of thinkers have brought to the study of urban environments, affective socio-politics, and their impact upon human agency (see e.g.

Smith and Walters 2017; Dovey et al 2017; Fleming 2016; Hillier and Cao 2013). This allows us to uniquely engineer a new encounter between the Chinese concept of *shi* (勢), and discourses surrounding the mutually enabling sights/sites of the city and the cinema. For, as per our mastheads, we here show how the “cinema” has also spread beyond the screen and its array of industrial institutions within China today, and increasingly appears to have subsumed urban culture, in order to help make it productive for capitalism (Beller 2006, 26).¹

1.1 Chinese Cinematicity

If we were to try and distil the ever-expanding corpus of interdisciplinary work that gravitates around the liminal space situated in-between the cinema and the city, the city and the cinema, we might assert that: *The cinema and the city coil into a Möbius strip*. Echoes here of Deleuze’s (2005b, 116) assertion that the world today “looks to us like a film”, and Clarke’s (2007, 29) notion that we now “move through the world left in the wake of cinema”. Arguably, beyond the work of Debord (1983), the most sustained argument of this type belongs to Beller (2006), who exposes the co-extensive ‘cinematicity of capital’ (2006, 12-28ff). Indeed, in *The Cinematic Mode of Production*, Beller (2006) charts the ways in which a process of becoming-image—associated with the evolution of capitalism—began inculcating the ‘cinematization of social relations’ and ‘the cinematization of the subject’ throughout the 20th century (14, 26). Here, the cinema increasingly institutes ‘the emerging paradigm for the total reorganisation of society and (therefore) the subject’ under capitalism (13).

It is with regard to such models that we here posit a *fractal-form*² relationship interconnecting the state, cinema, society and subject within contemporary China. By such coin, we expand Beller’s historical argument to show how “capital as an evolving system of organisation, production, and *exploitation*” (22) has become cinematic in the contemporary Chinese context. Accordingly, our argument shows how in modern Asian cultures where spectacle and visuality reigns, “social theory needs to become film theory,” albeit with distinctive Chinese characteristics (Beller 2012, 2).

Articulating such debates to Chinese capitalism and cities has already been a latent theme undergirding much Chinese cinema-city scholarship. Reconsider in this light the ending of Fan's *Cinema Approaching Reality* (2015, 222), wherein –after literally and metaphorically shanghaiing ‘Western’ film theory by passing it through the defamiliarizing prisms of Chinese and Buddhist philosophies– Fan unbuttons André Bazin's (2007 [1967]) famous ontological question regarding ‘What is Cinema?’ to pose instead an enigmatic Zen-like riddle concerning ‘What is not cinema?’. Our consideration of Chinese urban landscapes gestures towards the very heart of this incitement. For, if we are to follow Fan in his claims that Chinese theorists understood cinema as a mode that is forever *approaching the real*, we here uniquely foreground how the opposite appears ever more true today, in that the new urban realities of China increasingly betray a complementary movement towards becoming cinema(tic).

By making such claims, this essay falls into a broad but thin seam of cinema-city works that explore notions of *cinematicity*.³ However, while the majority of works penned in this grain tend to use films as their starting point for considering the cinema's “automatic thinking of the city,” (Clarke and Doel 2016, 3) we trace the inverse line of the Möbius strip on this outing, by foregrounding the concrete city's own quasi ‘film-thinking’ (Frampton 2006). For, if one framing of these cinematicity debates demonstrates that the “criticality of film is thought and made to work through urban space” (Pratt and Suan Juan 2014, 7), we explore the complementary reverse shot (as such), wherein urban settings appear arranged and configured so as to direct human actors to perform and (re)act in designated ways courtesy of contrived affective film-like situations. To take a point advanced by Geraldine Pratt and Rose Marie San as our departure, then, we might say that while film truly operates as an ‘archive of urban space’ (2014, 11), it is growingly a truism today that Chinese urban spaces reveal their own concomitant archiving (and repurposing) of cinematic tropes and affects.

Braester (2010) makes an analogous claim in his book-length study into the convergence of cinema and urbanity since the 1949 foundation of the People's Republic. As Braester notes, Chinese films, “in direct interaction with political decisions and architectural blueprints” began to “forge an urban contract and create

the material city and its ideological constructs” (2010, 13). Braester’s book concludes with a consideration of the novel urban realities emerging around the 2008 Beijing Olympics, that became symptomatic of the most rapid and unprecedented period of urban growth and development the world has ever witnessed. Braester’s observations in turn illuminate how cinema began influencing and in-forming the lived spaces, psychic reality, and urban psychogeography of China’s first tier megalopolises. By introducing impressive images of elsewhere that subsequently impacted the look of the newly emerging glass and light architectural structures, and, as Li similarly demonstrates elsewhere, by offering pedagogical narratives that helped contour the new neoliberal subjectivities that would populate these new-fangled capitalist spaces (Braester 2010; Li 2016).

Of course, after 2008 China looked to be on the brink of an economic catastrophe, and had to weather a crisis in capitalism. Importantly for us here, the bulldozing of old, and the rebuilding of new Chinese cities and urban infrastructure played a foundational role in stabilizing both the Chinese and global economy. As David Harvey’s (2016) analysis shows, the CCP began supporting an unprecedented system of debt-financing, which allowed for increased urban development and the mass employment of labourers: designed to help prevent China from sinking economically. Harvey and Bill Gates’ both claim that shortly after the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, between 2011 and 2013, China poured more concrete than did the US during the entire 20th century (Gates in McCarthy 2014; Harvey 2016, 1). This picture helps us to outline the rapidly and radically transforming urban *mise-en-scène* of Capitalism’s Second Coming in China, and through which the property market mutated into ‘a veritable casino of speculative volatility’ (Harvey 2016, 3).

However, while the most radical urban changes appeared as a consequence of abandoning the planned models of a Maoist economy in favour of capitalist globalization, these developed in tandem with a concomitant revolution in the culture’s existing visual and optical regimes *à la* Braester. For, as Braester notes, the new look of the modern Chinese cities became increasingly moulded and shaped by what were heretofore ‘novel observation practices, imaging technologies, and concepts of visualisation,’ key amongst which was the cinema (2010, 1).

If Braester (2010) and Li (2016) recognise the cinema playing a privileged role in shaping new ‘urban contracts’ and subjectivities, and Harvey’s observations highlights China’s political drive to ‘spatially integrate the economy,’ we can here interconnect the two positions by enfolding both inside Beller’s fractal-form *techno-capital* pattern: wherein co-extensive capitalist and cinematic regimes blend culture and industry, looking and labour and help institute a profitable network of optical and affective collaborations and spatial practices (2006, 12).

In the last analysis, then, we might be thought of here as exposing a triangulation of capitalism, cinema and urbanity that encloses the subject in a manner that recalls the writing of Debord and Beller regarding societies of the spectacle and their imagistic attention economies. Urbanity being rendered a culture industry setting that harnesses cinematic modes of production to render reality an imagistic commodity fit for capitalist consumption. To demonstrate how, we explore specific forms of urban assemblage that can, like cinema, be interrogated as *media* (e.g. Pratt and San Juan, 2014, 6).

1.2 From Cinema to *Shi-nema*

Today in China, the dramas of real life can increasingly be found playing out within the contrived *mise-en-scène* of a mediated attention economy. The performative dimensions and cinematicity of selfie-culture offering but one clear and oft commented upon aspect of this larger shift. Other forms, as we will shortly discover, conspire to envelope participants within pressurised ‘action-image’ narrative structures—replete with suspense, conflict (the ‘duel’), and crisis moments—that appear engineered to inspire probabilistic (re)actions (qua transactions) (see Deleuze 2004).

In beginning to unpack how these event-acts come to operate, we first consider the theatrical notion of *mise-en-scène*. When applied to the critical study of cinema, *mise-en-scène* is translated into ‘staging an action’ or ‘placing on stage’. Of importance here, this is primarily linked to the deliberate arrangement of figures, props, costumes, lighting, colour, and scenery in order to optimally communicate meaning (elsewhere subject of multimodal discourse analysis; Kress & van Leeuwen 1996). Bordwell and

Thompson (1990, 146-147) describe *mise-en-scène* as cuing our expectations, or being deployed to “guide our attention, our understanding, and our inferences about what we see”. Here, the strategic arrangement of heterogeneous elements and qualities harbour psychic agency, in that they collectively provoke movements of thought or association in the viewer.

Frampton (2006, 175ff) updates these principles to describe how different films “think”, or else encourage viewers to think during the screening encounter. In this context the *mise-en-scène* reveals transversals with Deleuze and Guattari’s (2004a,b) notion of *agencement*: which in its most common English translation into ‘assemblage’ loses its inbuilt etymological sense of harbouring ‘agency.’ Buchanan (2015) thus suggests ‘arrangement’ is a better translation, especially if thought of in terms of a ‘working arrangement,’ which implies an on-going negotiated process rather than a static situation. For Deleuze and Guattari (2004b, 23) assemblages/arrangements are dynamic and distributed admixtures, weaving together “semiotic, material, and social flows simultaneously.” Such descriptions illuminate further resonances with cinematic *mise-en-scène*, which in turn recall Bennett’s (2010, 23ff) description of assemblages as “living, throbbing confederations” of human and inhuman forces. Of particular pertinence here is Bennett’s reworking of assemblage theory to incorporate the sinologist-philosopher François Jullien’s sustained engagement with the Chinese notion of *shi* (勢).

Bennett (2010, 35) notes that *shi* (勢) was originally a Chinese military term used to describe: “a good general who must be able to read and then ride the *shi* of a configuration of moods, winds, historical trends, and armaments: *shi* names the dynamic force emanating from a spatio-temporal configuration rather than from a particular element within it.” Within *The Propensity of Things* Jullien (1995) traces how the notion of *shi* drifts over thousands of years from early descriptions bound up in the art of war, to account for many other Chinese arts, crafts and practices: including landscape painting, calligraphy, religion, poetry and literature. Within and across these different domains, *shi* exposes and exploits the “*inherent potentiality at work in configuration*” (Jullien 1995, 14-5). For us, the value of this under theorised concept is that it refers to “*a potential born of disposition*” (emph. orig.) and most

often “consists in organising circumstances in such a way as to derive *profit* from them” (27; *emph. ours*).

Although he does not engage with cinema, we can creatively extend Jullien’s analysis to account for the “setting of an action” in film (and cities). After all, could not the descriptions of *shi* as a “poetic atmosphere” also be applied to the function and power of *mise-en-scène*? (Jullien 1995, 130). To this end, we might momentarily turn to contemplation of 费穆 Fei Mu’s (Eng. Fey Mou) masterful cinematic techniques, and his building and theorisations of *xuanxiang* (悬想 ‘suspension-imagination’) and *kongqi* (空气 ‘atmosphere’). Fan (2015, 12) notes that Fey devised these two key concepts (casually in his writing, but more ‘rigorously’ through his films) to describe the affective and intellectual properties of Chinese cinematic *mise-en-scène*. Of import to us, Fan links expressive and affective film-thinking to the writing of Deleuze, with respect to how his cinematic *mise-en-scène* make tangible the flows of desire, and appear to conflate the actual and the virtual. Reconsider in this light, then, Jullien’s (1995, 84) description of *shi* effecting to open “up that which is concrete to that which lies beyond it, and for conveying through what is represented the suggestion of something ‘beyond’”. Like *xuanxiang* and *kongqi*, *shi* gestures towards the efficacy of configurations, deployments, set-ups, and dispositions, which in and of themselves reveal propensities that affect the subjects encountering them (Jullien 1995, 16-17).

Beyond art and warfare, though, *shi* is also a strategic concept applied to the organisation and operations of Chinese socio-politics. Therein, *shi* discloses aggregated potentialities cohering around the structures and flows of power. In these realms, the concept again betrays significant resonances with Deleuze and Guattari’s modelling of assemblages, which Buchanan (2015, 382) reminds us, were originally designed to map the “flows of power.” Comparably, Jullien (1995) notes that *shi* should be understood as a “*shaping of effect*” or as “a policy of conditioning affects” (37) for the successful management of power and “the most common patterns of behaviour” (69). *Shi* thus provides a general theory of efficacy, and “stands as a perfect example of how one can manage reality” (25). It is precisely for these reasons

that Jullien asserts that historically “[m]anipulation, not persuasion, was the Chinese way” (69).

Brian Massumi’s (2015) discussion of an ‘abductive politics’ also becomes a relevant touchstone here, in that there is an obvious proto-politics bound up with the arrangement of pre-personal affect, or the felt reality of social relations. Consider in this light an article captioned ‘Thinking Chinese Strategic Spatial Planning with Deleuze,’ wherein Hillier and Cao (2013) move beyond the writing of Jullien to forge connections with affective Chinese writings, which offer manifold examples of *shi*-like concepts relevant to strategic Chinese spatial planning. Hillier and Cao (2013, 394) there enumerate *shi qi* (士气) “organisational morale”; *min qi* (民气) “public support”; *jing qi* (景气) which “implies economic vitality”; and *qi shi* (启示) which “implies mental force or energy, including intentions and emotions”: and implore contemporary urban planners to use these principles in their “tweaking” (392) of Chinese urban assemblages, to help nudge their human traffic, “to tackle a situation ahead of its actualisation: That is, to ‘steer it gently’ (Jullien 1995, 126) in a desired direction” (395).

Our study links these various concepts to the multiple ‘reals’ (or overlapping realities including corporate realities, buyer realities, agent realities, family realities, governmental realities, national realities, etc.) that stack upon and co-constitute what we here playfully call agential *shi*-nematic urban configurations: whose deliberate *set-ups* contrive towards generating virtual fields, channelling the flow of desire, and igniting desired human actions.

2. Methodology

To diagram these affective technologies, we report the experience of a Chinese woman living and working in the Chinese city of Ningbo (where she was born). This self-employed small business owner was selected because we were acquainted with her and we knew that she was considering purchasing real estate and visiting showrooms around the city. She gave informed consent to become a key participant in our research, thereby providing an opportunity to collect empirical data.

Before our intervention, however, this woman had already been documenting her showroom visits naturally on her cell phone with photos and short video clips, either to post in the newsfeed of her WeChat account or to record details of apartments potentially of interest. She granted us access to this material, which constituted a preliminary archive for us to explore. The promotional posters, leaflets and flyers she had either procured from the different sites or had been sent to her social media accounts were also shared. The richness of this initial data-set alone suggested to us that a case study based on our key participant would be the appropriate method of research.

As our enquiry developed, this key participant further agreed to discuss her experiences with us and allowed us to accompany her on showroom visits. The discussions happened through various formats, ranging from informal conversations (from which we took notes) or to semi-structured interviews (which we recorded). We conducted some of these recordings with her inside the showrooms and during apartment visits (occasioning video recordings where appropriate). These face-to-face interactions helped us to contextualize the cell-phone data, improve the depth and accuracy of our interpretations, and evaluate the representativeness of this person's experience.

By scrutinising her experiences and the material we collected, our analysis aims to document not only how certain high-end showrooms are physically (actually) and conceptually (virtually) constructed as cinema-like *modes*, but also how their affects/effects appear articulate to broader and more distributed spheres of influence that suggest the commonality of such apartment-buying experiences in China today. Our analytical framework outlined above combines Chinese cinematicity with the

concept of 勢 *shi* to help trace how these apparatuses inculcate a *mise-en-phase* (Stam 2000), wherein our visitor to the showrooms becomes pulled into a fractal-form processual arrangement, and begins resonating and (re)acting in tandem with a massively distributed *shi*-nematic capitalist-conglomerate. That is, she becomes a functioning part of a larger structure, by responding and react to such spheres of influence, which constitute flows of power and desire.

3. (Un)real estate: In the *mise-en-scène* of commercial manipulation

In this section we draw on our corpus to explore the affective politics of *shi-nematic* showrooms as nested capitalist spaces within the wider *mise-en-scène* of Chinese capitalism. We report on the practices that took place in such showrooms, and which our participant became involved in, via a range of affective and situational manipulations. These include, amongst others, the creation of *kongqi*/atmosphere, the generation of *xuanxiang*/suspension-imagination, affecting *shi qi*/organisational morale, *min qi*/public support, *jing qi*/economic vitality, and *qi shi*/mental energy. Together, such manipulations conspire to ignite and channel the flows of desire in order to encourage the (collective) act of buying an expensive apartment (that is yet to be built). As such, we can recognise these arrangements as nested and embedded economic-worlds. Certainly, Thrift (2010, 290) reminds us that “economies must be engaging: they must generate or scoop up affects and then aggregate and amplify them in order to produce value, and that must involve producing various mechanisms of fascination.”

In what follows, more specifically, we see how various forces, mechanisms, and overlapping affective fields impact and distract our participant from the reality of buying something that is non-real (or not-yet-real, like these apartments that are advertised and sold before being built). This happens by unleashing and putting into circulation a range of actual human actors, non-human agents, and glamorous objects that become permeated by a penumbra of ‘virtual images’ (here dream or fantasy images including of ‘other selves’) that generate the promise of becoming actualised if and only if a purchasing (trans)action (or in fact multiple) takes place.

Bearing this framework in mind, consider Figure 1, taken on the camera-phone of our participant upon arriving at a showroom named *Ningbo Bay City* – a relatively expensive property development given its location along a river bank and near the main train station. The image captures a specific arrangement of bodies, costumes, commodities, and objects upon a Ningbo street corner, to attract and greet potential apartment buyers as they approach the salesroom for the compound apartments.

Figure 1. Approach to the Salesroom

The luxury lifestyle association generated by the pleasure craft, the Porsche, the Rolls Royce, in combination with the Western female models dressed in elegant evening gowns provide us with several glamorous objects and subject-objects whose unattainable attainability resonates with the heuristic commodity fetishism most overtly peddled by today's Hollywood and Huallywood films (the latter term being increasingly used as a way to reference China's transborder commercial film industry while acknowledging the pervasive influence from Hollywood). It is worth recollecting here that from old Scots the term 'glamour' drew associations with witchcraft, wherein 'casting the glamour' was associated with magic spells, and spell binding (Thrift 2010, 297-8).⁴

In this specific case, the attention-grabbing spell-binding arrangements are set out to generate a series of virtual associations and imaginings, in keeping with the operations of the contemporary Chinese Dream and more distributed lifestyle options and aspirations. To refer to Thrift (2010, 299): 'So glamour is selling. *It is manipulation*. It is seduction. It is a certain form of deception. But it is something more too. It is meticulous selection and control' (emph. ours). As such, we can again articulate the arrangement of glamorous objects, actors and surfaces with the aforementioned Chinese principles of *shi*.

The opposite side of the showroom entrance contains different but thematically related affective arrangements. Figure 2 shows the use of sand, surfboards, sun loungers, and the smells of a real BBQ to greet potential buyers with more exotic

lifestyle associations. The other incidental background costumes –the *carte bleu* chef operating the grill and the uniformed security guard replete with white gloves (protecting the merchandise)– are likewise deployed signaletically within the overall scenery. In both inter-connected instances we find props and materials strategically arranged in a manner that recalls the *mise-en-scène* principles of window dressing, theatre and cinema. They generate hyperreal and virtual images of a fantasy elsewhere: the dual jet-set harbour/secluded beach front that constitutes a unique selling point for this particular complex.

Figure 2. Secluded beach scene

On exiting the street and moving towards the showroom space, another image captured by our participant shows how visitors must pass onto a red carpet, which leads into a polished marble foyer, where a quartet of women adorned in floor length formal gowns perform a classical musical arrangement on string and wind instruments, afore an upsurge of exotic perfumed flowers (Figure 3). Here again, the affective and communicative principles of theatre and cinema are detoured and deployed to generate an ambient mood and tangible atmosphere of Western luxuriousness.

Figure 3. Welcome foyer of salesroom

As one transitions from the urban environment into the sales room, evermore affective *shi-nematic* arrangements begin to nudge the visitors' associations towards a fantasy context of luxurious lifestyles, beautiful people, glamorous possessions (handbags, diamonds, etc.) that gravitate around the virtual target (a lifestyle apartment). This first entails providing visitors with a quasi-‘establishing shot’ (or a long-shot) of the building complex, which is represented in miniature within the confines of the showroom. Figure 4 captures how this is realized through the use of a scaled maquette of the grounds that illustrates the spatial organisation of the complex-to-be, framed before a wall map which offers customers a shift in perspective, specifically a bird’s-

eye-view of wider urban context. Like a contrived cinematic fade, both framings carefully select which aspects of the city to include/exclude from the portrayal, and by intensifying and exaggerating colours and spaces, emphasise the unique and exclusive apartments on sale.

Figure 4. Maquette and wall map perspectives

While these showroom models clearly offer viewers a clean sweeping view of the entire complex to be, it also becomes fruitful to consider them in light of broader practices concerning miniatures in China. We think here of Marzia V. Varutti's (2011, 13) work which notes that the widespread use of miniatures in contemporary Chinese theme parks and museums exposes "the materialization of the gap between ideology and reality," by revealing an "expression of the unfulfilled desire of turning human beings into manipulable, docile objects." Anagnost (1997, 161) similarly engages with the popularity of miniatures in Chinese culture, noting how their diminutiveness "does not correspond to a 'reduction of significance' but is rather emblematic, a container well suited to 'aphoristic and didactic thought'", which offers a form of "transcendental perspective akin to what Benedict Anderson calls the 'bird's-eye-view' of modern mapmaking." (Anagnost 1997, 162). A return to Figure 3 reveals an intensification of these principles, as the ensemble appears to montage two different forms of these mastering images into a single arrangement. Of particular relevance to us here, Anagnost (1997, 165-166) describes the scale-shift granting the model an

object-nature, lending to it a sense of distance, as if viewed from a long way off, a distance essential to the "objective" gaze of the viewer, that curious "combination of detachment and close attentiveness." In this sense, then, its diminutiveness installs a similar effect to the glass panes that separate viewers from commodities on display, "endowing goods with the distance that is the source of their objectness.".

Several miniature models found within these showrooms employ diminutiveness *and* glass casings to doubly distance and objectify the fantasy homes being

displayed/framed. Such discussions thus conjure a long history of cultural and cinematic critics—such as Friedberg, Eckert, Benjamin, Eisenstein and Beller—that foreground the historical role windows and shop fronts played in moulding and anticipating emerging cinematic modes of attention grabbing, viewing, and desiring (e.g.

1993, 5.). Beyond simply offering viewers a full sweep of the complex to be, then, these forms of looking produce affective potentialities for action, because the “mode of display that reveals while it veils and withholds is one that manufactures desire” (Anagnost 1997, 165-166).

In addition to similar principles being put to work in several other showrooms visited by our participant, each showroom exhibited slightly different styles of cinematicity courtesy of their modal *mise-en-scène*; with ‘genre’ clusters determining the name of the complex where potential customers could live, the style of cityscape they would inhabit, and by association the characteristics of the (fantasy consumer) lifestyle their new purchase would allow them to buy (into or inhabit). An apartment complex called *Bali Sunday*, for instance, used its *shi-nematic* showroom to mobilise a Southeast Asian theme that generated an atmosphere of travel, adventure, relaxation, and exotic/erotic island living. Inside the showroom-apparatus, dark wood panels and wall beams combined with soft furnishings such as ornamented nooks, round-cage chandeliers with dimly lit candle lanterns, and ornate curtained doorways with wooden carvings (Figure 5). This interplay suggests that the developers aimed to create a culturally rich and touristic *shi-nematic* Balinese atmosphere.

Figure 5. South East Asia/tropical island themed showroom

As potential buyers venture further into the set-up, the developers typically required customers to interact with an ever-growing number of affective media, which encourage them to synaesthesially engage with the materiality of the apartments and its complex. In this case, a broad and informed “network of texts, technologies, artefacts, and architectures” that must be understood “interpenetrating human values, ideas, and interactions”, albeit working in parliament to inculcate certain “patterns of possibility” (Fenwick and Edwards 2011, 714-725). It is in these affective worldings that the subject-consumers become captivated and activated (as per the *mise-en-phase*).

To offer one example here, we can turn to images collected from our participant's phone which grant insight into how the apartments were being modelled as part of a larger affective matrix. These are taken inside a showroom from a development called *Family Time*. As was common, this came replete with various embedded full-scale model apartments, which customers enter only after being taken through the various other stages of the showroom. In the linear progressive journey towards these inhabitable spaces, we can detect links to the principles of efficacy Jullien (1995, 138) observed in Chinese landscape scrolls: which forced viewers into a progressively unfolding experience, wherein at "each stage and even in the most minute details of the depiction" there lies an "alternation of *opening and closing* [that] imparts a vital rhythm" (cf. Hillier and Cao 2013, 393).

Tentative connections may be drawn here to the logic of layout designs that have been observed in Ikea. Salvini (2009) argues, for example, that such logic 'aims to induce [buyers] to feel part of a whole evolutionary process referred to as immersive or 'experiential shopping.' (Salvini's 2009, n.p.). Compared with our current data, moving through the showroom might encourage visitors to experience similar psychosocial affects based on the pre-determined sequentiality of the showroom tour. Therein, participants negotiate a series of overlapping fields that trigger associations and imagination (Thrift 2010, 292). In these instances, and to momentarily use Thrift's language, 'the difference between products and environment' became evermore slight (290). No doubt, like an IKEA store, potential buyers are here calculatingly steered through a range of 'inspirational displays' that invite customers to enter and inter-act with film-like sets that enfold 'fresh ideas with product combinations, contemporary interior design suggestions' that inculcate 'a strong emotional experience' (Potente and Salvini, 2009, 38). Similar to an unfolding rhythmical film or a landscape scroll, the spatio-visual path through an IKEA or *shinematic* showroom is also pre-determined and temporally mapped out in advance. Accordingly, these *worlds* betray certain practices of *rendering prominent*, as they bring together:

humans and nonhumans in all kinds of distributed combinations, giving rise to a particular style of going on that consequently focuses passions. These distributed combinations will be full of stock characters and icons, surfaces and colours, which feed on a particular historical unconscious. And they can

trigger off all kinds of effervescent imitative behaviours, mimetic fields that can spread rapidly (Thrift 2010, 295)

What becomes most striking about these Chinese versions are the specific cultural and lifestyle associations the developers use to impact and manipulate visitors as they pass through the *shi-nematic worlds*. While the other showrooms we discussed sought to extract potential buyers from China by setting up otherworldly fantasies, the *Family Time* arrangement tried to impress on its visitors everyday Chinese socio-political stresses: and by so doing, increase certain forms of acculturated pressures that are ideologically conducive to buying/selling apartments.

Consider in this respect Figure 6, a collage of photos collected on our participant's camera-phone during a visit to *Family Time*. In it we can see how a wedding suite *mise-en-scène* is distributed across the office, bedroom, and bathroom of the showroom to help leverage the purchase of an apartment: since the socio-political norms of China suggest that only men with apartments will be considered eligible bachelors. By so doing, the showroom helps trigger, activate or involve other supporting players in these lifestyle scenarios, over and above the potential purchasers. Indeed, as our participant moved through this space, accompanying members of her party appeared compelled to start asking about her relationship status, and specifically, her future marriage plans.

Figure 6. Salesroom bedroom with wedding suite *mise en scène*

A narrative that unfolded during an interview with X offers additional evidence of the discourse in China equating eligible bachelorhood with possession of real estate. Consider X describing how the parents of one of her female friends will not acknowledge her boyfriend's marriage proposal until he buys an apartment:

X: her parents, they don't want her to marry a 'mei you fang zi de ren' (“没有房子的人” literally ‘a no-have-apartment-person’) in Ningbo. So it doesn't matter where it is, she just needs an apartment; it doesn't matter big or small, or good not good; but in Ningbo she definitely needs an apartment [...]. Her

parents just consider does he have an apartment or not, can he buy an apartment in Ningbo or not. This is the most important... The parents' minimum requirement is that the man buys an apartment.

This further emphasises how the showroom calculatingly interweaves powerful ideological passions and loaded socio-political symbols for maximum effect (related to the landscape of the unfolding Chinese life-journey).

4. Staging actions: Or, Action-Image *shi-nema*

So far we have explored the layout and logic of showrooms, and how these activate supporting actors to begin playing their own affective roles. But we are yet to foreground the main socio-political plays and practices unfolding within these settings and show how their logic can also be explained based on a broader network of social, cultural, and political factors. To do so, we must now zoom in on how an emerging narrative began to sweep up our participant and unfold before her. At times we must also zoom out, to highlight and interconnect different fractal scales of affective-ideological force (power) and pressure, since these also hold importance for understanding how broad the scope of our findings are, and the extent to which such practices operate across much of China.

In his explication of a common format for 'action-image' cinema, Deleuze describes narrative and space encouraging a movement from an opening situation (S), through the intermediary of an action (A), toward an improved or transformed situation (S'). Importantly, the action itself, as Deleuze describes it, can be thought of as a form of *duel*: 'a duel of forces, a series of duels: duel with the milieu, with the others, with itself' (Deleuze 2005, 146). This incurving of milieu into an individuated actor-narrative-duelling-network is also a principle we can relate to the dynamic and dramatic processes we find our participant subjected to as she passes through the *shi-nematic* apparatus. To explain how, we now draw on our documenting of our participant as she interacted with various set-ups, including a range of intense and emotional experiences and crisis moments emerging courtesy of agents, family

members, other buyers, owners, developers, and a whole host of non-human actors and intensive environmental practices: such as bidding cues/queues, rapidly evolving price walls, and real concrete matter.

As a starting point for these considerations of our participant's action-image drama, we might flash-back to what we can only retroactively understand as a form of opening situation (S): A morning meeting point with estate agents and other potential buyers. Known in Chinese as a 看房团 (*condo tour*), the meeting point was a large impersonal hall in which a crowd jostled for position in lines leading off to different coaches, where people were subsequently branded with stickers to determine which company they belonged to for the day.

Upon arrival at the showroom site, customers were thereafter marshalled for a group-photo opportunity in front of the complex. A large red banner was then unfurled with the tour operator's logo emblazoned upon it, before the act of framing and photographing the group served to forge the disparate cast of strangers into a proto-community. Thereafter, the group image provided the real-estate company with a free promotional shot. The complicit bodies of the on site actors becoming a sight that endorsed the company, while operating as an affective force (in an attention economy) that was circulated to other potential buyers via social media, feeding into the on-going promotion of the apartments, and contributing to the pressure on other would be buyers to join in, or risk missing out. Here, the participant's *mise-en-phase* finds her becoming part of the *mise-en-scène* of the wider *shi*-nematic assemblage.

From consideration of one mediated image we might now jump to a scene that we recorded following our participant as she ventured into the complex. Notably, the path from the coach to the showroom is lined with large trees, freshly planted for the occasion, and dressed in plastic cherry blossom. While these work to create an ambient *kongqi*/atmosphere they also serve to screen out the construction site that is visible in the background. Within the recorded video, the ambient visual atmosphere of the cherry blossoms is audibly perturbed by disruptive speakers which relay a loud combination of 'Gregorian chants with contemporary electronic...arrangements', and whose aural intensity invokes an altogether different form of *xuanxiang*/suspension-

imagination: more commonly associated with competition and battle (evoking the origins of *shi*).⁵

On entering the showroom, our participant is allocated an agent who guides her around and introduces her to the technical details of various models, wall maps, and miniaturised apartment displays (as per the other showrooms). X is then ushered towards the back, where a crowd is gathering to be involved in the first real-time evolving drama or duel. In the video, we see a series of oblong diagrams—whose rows and columns contain numbers—suddenly become visible, spread across the back wall of the showroom. Figure 7 presents a collage of this arrangement, which constitutes what we will refer to as a ‘Price Wall’ – the oblongs represent the different tower blocks in the development, while the rows correspond to different floors of the building, and the columns indicate different pricing options; whether middle or outside apartment, which direction it faces, combined with what kind of repayment plan might suit different customers. The exclusivity of this price wall is instantiated by gold-plated stanchions with plush red velvet ropes that hold back the crowd now hustling to take snapshots on their smartphones, whilst also allowing privileged access to agents authorised to update the wall. The last shot of the collage captures the moment an agent gradually covers up apartments on the Price Wall with a red sticker announcing 已售 *ji shou* ‘sold out’, adding pressure and urgency to the dynamically transforming situation.

Figure 7. Perspectives on the ‘Price Wall’

The suspense and drama created by the Price Wall was a precursor to the ‘Bidding Queue,’ which constitutes another form of duel more akin to a *television* game show. Once an agent had helped a potential buyer identify a suitable apartment on the pricing wall, they could then serve to represent the said buyer in a bidding queue. Thereafter, a line of agents formed behind a microphone stand, each waiting his/her turn to bid on behalf of their customer. Beyond rousing curiosity, this queue sustains forces of suspense and waiting (time as enemy and dwindling competitive resource) as the pressures of time and financial competition mount. In the queue, the agents likewise appear to compete against each other (in another form of duel). A video from

X's phone captures both the agitation of the agents (who are on commission) and the anxiety of the customers (as they oscillate between the emotional positions of active participant and passive viewer).

Coupled to this, the physical layout of the scene was effectively configured such that the bidding queue/cue and the manager's desk occupied the opposite extremities of the showroom; thus occasioning bids to be made over a loud speaker, so that all the human actors assembled within could hear the developing (and enveloping) events. The specific arrangement here amply demonstrates how the participation of nonhuman actors and agents interpenetrates and becomes "infiltrated with human intensities (interest and desires, knowledge authorities, fear, and so on) in assemblies of the social" (Fenwick and Edwards 2011, 716). That is, we can detect how the agency of nonhuman things "matter, not as discrete and reified objects with properties, but as effects and dynamic materializing processes that cause them to emerge and act in indeterminate entanglements of local everyday practice" (721).

While these earlier narratives aimed to seduce the participant, as a potential deal began to close, contrasting pressuring narratives emerged as the developers sent another unsolicited piece of information directly to her personal WeChat account. This was an image containing a grid of squares, which were said to represent all the remaining apartments in the two main tower blocks. Within this, a section had been circled with a green highlighter, which apparently ring-fenced a series of apartments from general sale by the manager, who they were informed had decided that he wanted to keep *these* apartments to resell later, after property prices rose. Predictably, as if part of a harried plot device, our participant's dream apartment was enclosed within the circle. Thankfully however, she was offered one last chance to salvage her selected apartment, because luckily, there was one final meeting with the manager at 9am the next day to decide.

In this narrative development the image of the targeted circle serves to literally create a pressurised spatial and temporal situation, which threatens to disrupt or derail the dream narrative—if our actor does not respond to the latest duel with her own rapid re-action. In this latest development we sense how the spheres of influence expand in time and space, with the behind the scenes director-actors associated with the *shi-*

nematic assemblage creating and manipulating an unfolding story to drive forward another action-image duel (A), that threatens (and therefore hastens) the occasion of a positively transformed situation (S'). However, we might also take pause here to begin mapping how even more remote forces associated with the milieu likewise appeared to incurve and operate upon the story too: this being the background radiation of the larger fractal diagram. Indeed, only later did it also become apparent to X that a range of more dispersed actors and extras were subtly exerting their own influence upon their unfolding situation-action. Consider in this light the transcript below, where X explains some of the reasons why, with hindsight, she committed to her investment so quickly.

X: There was a lot of news from the government, they were saying stuff related to apartments, so right now buying an apartment just got ... in relation to the government apartment ... relatively good [...] The down payment is now 20%. Before it used to be 30%. [...] Also, the bank repayment plans are relatively cheap [...] For example we need to pay a [government] fee. I've got a university diploma so I can use it, if the fee is 500,000 RMB I only need to pay 200,000.

X here explains how the national news she was exposed to at the time—covering domestic markets and politics—affirmed the need to purchase property quickly. For a limited window of time, the minimum requirement for a security deposit would be 10% lower, due to bank interest rates being lowered, and a one-time special deal for graduates like her being released to stimulate purchasing.

In the end, like most commercial action-image cinema, our participant's *shi-nematic* adventure concludes with a 'Happy Ending.' In the attention economy and *mise-en-scène* of this cinematic-capitalist world, her purchase would not be complete without her sharing an image of the signed contract with a local audience on her WeChat account, replete with the caption “今天是个好日子。所有的一切都是礼物” (Today is a good day, everything is a gift).

Conclusion

This paper has offered a radical new take on an ephemeral real-estate capitalist epiphenomenon common in contemporary China. Seeing cinema and capitalism as mutually implicated and enabling forces, we engineered an encounter between the Chinese concept of *shi* (勢) and that of *cinematicity* to create a conceptual framing of what we here call *shi*-nematic apparatuses. Through this framing, our observations of a Chinese person going through the apartment-buying process in her city showed how agential assemblages nested within China's contemporary urban milieus employ a distributed network of actors, objects, and affects—generating and activating dreams and desires that sweep up various actors. In particular, we demonstrated how the showrooms in our data-set deployed effective affective forces of not only persuasion but more importantly manipulation to encourage visitors to (trans)act in a (mutually) profitable manner.

This case study potentially sheds light on the more general workings of one of the world's largest and quickest growing real estate markets, showing how it engineers intense cinema-like casino-capitalism scenarios for its subjects. Since such showrooms are a fixture in cities across urban China today, additional case studies would help establish to what extent our observations are shared across different people, showrooms, and cities.

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Figure captions

Figure 1. Approach to the salesroom

Figure 2. Secluded beach scene

Figure 3. Welcome foyer of salesroom

Figure 4. Maquette and wall map perspectives

Figure 5. South East Asia/tropical island themed showroom

Figure 6. Salesroom bedroom with wedding suite *mise en scène*

Figure 7. Perspectives on the ‘Price Wall’

¹ As our engagement with Beller (2006) will make clear, we are thus re-framing ‘cinema’ as being far-more more than just films, recognising it as something akin to the substratum of contemporary social perceptions, relations, subjectivities, and desire.

² A fractal is a self-similar mathematical pattern which repeats itself at different scalar levels, so that it essentially exhibits the same repeating form whether it is viewed at smaller or larger scales.

³ See inter alia Beller 2006; Clark 2016; Geiger and Littau 2013; Williams 2016.

⁴ Thanks to Andrew Jarvis who reactivated this point during a paper entitled ‘Hex contagion: weird realism in *The Falling* (Morely, 2014)’ delivered at the *Film-Philosophy* conference in Lancaster, July 4-6, 2017.

⁵ In this case, the track *The Mass* by Era: a ‘new-age music project’ sometimes associated with competition and battle ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Era_\(musical_project\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Era_(musical_project))).