

Book Review

Jeroen de Kloet and Lena Scheen (eds), *Spectacle and the City: Chinese Urbanities in Art and Popular Culture*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013, 278 pp.

Nowadays Chinese cities are characterised by fast and regular changes, which affect not only the urban landscape, but also people's experience of the city. Amsterdam University Press published in the series *Cities and Cultures* a vibrant collection of works, which come from a workshop at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA) and at the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS). Entitled *Spectacle and the City: Chinese Urbanities in Art and Popular Culture*, this collection offers an interdisciplinary look at this particular phenomenon from the perspective of art and popular culture. The fascinating assumption surrounding the book is the connection between the experience of the cities and the imagination about the cities (p. 12). Thus the book addresses how imaginations affect people's experience of Chinese urbanities, by delving into the ways in which art and popular culture depict recent urban changes. The heterogeneous group of authors provides the reader with the possibility of exploring the theme from different angles. It is interesting to note that the collection does not limit its focus on Mainland China, but rather it also includes cities like Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taipei.

The idea of city-as-spectacle is presented in the title as a key element encompassing the contributions. However, the definition of spectacle rooted in Guy Debord's account does not play the same fundamental role in all chapters. In the introduction the editors, Jeroen de Kloet and Lena Sheen, try to elucidate and unify the theoretical underpinnings of the contributions (pp. 13-15). Debord's connection between art and everyday life is supplemented by Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory from which the book retrieves the idea that non-human actors, such as images, hold their own agency. The concept of "haptic machine," which stems from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, is also mentioned to frame the city as a particular machine (p. 15). In addition, the introduction traces a more intriguing clarification about the interdisciplinary outlook of the book. By addressing the "production of place", the ambitious goal of the collection is to "align" urban studies and cultural studies with area studies (pp. 15-16). The specific reason for this stimulating alignment is to move beyond a rigid definition of urbanisation rooted in the

claim for universalism and modernity. Hence the cities are interpreted “as manifestations of alternative, or partially overlapping, modernities” related to both local and global pressures (p. 16).

The thirteen chapters of the collection compose a dynamic path of exploration among different representations of Chinese urbanities. The first chapter focuses on speed and space. The author, Ackbar Addas, stresses the fact that media like architecture and cinema “perform” space, rather than represent it, by shaping a “spatial history” (p. 22). The Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony directed by Zhang Yimou and the film *Still Life* by Jia Zhangke are taken into account as two clarifying examples of distinct ways of performing spaces. In the second chapter, Chua Beng Huat critically examines a specific effect of the Singaporean process of aestheticisation in art: the condition of sex workers is covered by the way in which some artists frame the red light district of Singapore, since they depict it as a critique of the lifestyle of the middle class. The author of the following chapter, Robin Visser, considers two different artworks, a novel by Yu Hua (*Brothers*) and a virtual artwork by Cao Fei (*RMB City*). This contribution, by delving into Debord’s notion of spectacle with reference to the city, uncovers the fact that resistances can take place only if the spectacle does not completely control social spaces (pp. 57-58). In the fourth chapter, Yomi Braester explores art and cinema in China that are against the “neoliberal apotheosis of the consumerist city”, which is shaped by architectural scale models and their “urbanistic utopia” (p. 67). The strategy adopted by the artists has an “antitopian” perspective challenging the “mimetic relationship” between the model and the city (p. 73). Jeroen de Kloet, in the subsequent chapter, focuses on creative industries and their Chinese policies. Even though the art zone 798 should represent a place for free creative experiments, it is an example of space where “global capital, the art world and the nation-state are conflated” (p. 78). Hence the author addresses *RMB City* as a different space that “forges new possibilities of thinking and living the urban” (p. 92).

In the sixth chapter, Jeroen Groenewegen-Lau retrieves the concepts of *derive* and *détournement* from Debord and the Situationism in order to consider some sound artworks. Hence he uncovers their contradictions and questions their possibility of shaping an anti-spectacular critique. Chinese propaganda posters in the last 60 years are the theme of the seventh chapter. The author, Stefan Landsberger, undertakes a visual research about the images of the city and the countryside with a focus on the urbanisation and the policies elaborated to foster its development. In the eighth chapter, Gladys Pak Lei Chong examines how a new image of Beijing has been shaped in the 2008 Olympic Games. The politics of reappearance and disappearance affect the past and the future, since “the ‘old’ Beijing is being remade and then represented in the package of New Beijing” (p. 136).

The city of Shanghai in literature and cinema is scrutinised by Gregory Bracken in the subsequent chapter. The contribution highlights the fact that the spectacle of global consumption drives the way in which the built environment is preserved and reshaped. In the tenth chapter, Margaret Hillenbrand addresses fast urban changes in relation to their memories: the idea of “past as home” implies a preservation of the “really remembered city” (p. 179). In the following chapter, Lena Scheen takes into account *Shanghai Baby* by Wei Hui and *Sandbed* by Ge Hongbing. The author explores these two Shanghai novels in order to clarify how the protagonists experience urban changes as linked with gender and social constraints. Urbanisation and opposition movements are the topic of the twelfth chapter. Here the author, Ou Ning, frames the city as “a vivid form of life with diversified cultures and pluralistic spiritual needs” (p. 219). In the last chapter, John Nguyet Erni delves into the “harbourcide” in order to provide “an alternative reading of Hong Kong’s environmental decay” (p. 227). In doing so, the contribution faces the issue of “a cultural crisis of the senses” by linking cultural studies with environmental law (p. 228).

The book takes Debord’s definition of spectacle as a lens for the analysis. However, the contributions develop its potentiality in different directions. The power to subvert the spectacle, for example, is interestingly questioned in the third and in the sixth chapters where the authors address, respectively, the conditions for spaces of resistance and of anti-spectacular critiques. Some complementary issues are presented across several chapters. In particular, some authors provide an intriguing exploration of the topic of nostalgia in order to shed light on the relationship between people and the past in a thought-provoking way. For example, the first chapter clarifies that nostalgia does not involve only the generation of the elderly, the fifth chapter considers nostalgia as a part of specific productions subsuming within global capitalism, the ninth chapter uncovers preservation and reconstruction as currently driven by global consumption, and the subsequent chapter attempts to point out cultural productions that could have the power to keep memories alive.

All in all, I think that the reader can benefit from the significant level of heterogeneity of the book, as it contextualises the theme of the city-as-spectacle in different places and with respect to several forms of art and popular culture. However, a weakness of the collection is probably that the thirteen chapters are not arranged into thematic parts, which would have improved the organisation of the contents and driven future debates more efficacy. Considering the far-reaching interdisciplinary objective of the book, namely the reframing of both urban studies and cultural studies with area studies, I think it succeeds well enough in this attempt. As a result, the authors avoid comparing the contexts that they examine with a concept of modernisation that is supposed to be a universal process and point of

reference. Hence, the book offers a thoughtful overview of the representations of Chinese urbanities, by pinpointing their diverse features.

In conclusion, the collection successfully exemplifies a promising field of application for Debord's concept of spectacle. By placing the idea of city-as-spectacle in Chinese contexts and representations, it problematises urban changes in a dynamic and vibrant way. In doing so, the book warns the reader that, as it is also remarked in the introduction, the power of art and popular culture can be adopted "to inspire change" or "to support the ideological status quo" (p. 19). Even though a different organisation of the book would have simplified the reading, I am confident that the contributions have the potential to provide scholars with valuable insights to continue developing the debate as well as to contextualise the topic in other regions.

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References

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