

Book Review

Of Haunted Spaces: Cinema, Heterotopias, and China's Hyperurbanization

Ella Raidel. With contributions by Itty Abraham, Ute Meta Bauer, Marlene Rutzendorfer, and Weiying Yu. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, 2023. 125 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-98-11-85893-2.

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This review examines *Of Haunted Spaces: Cinema, Heterotopias, and China's Hyperurbanization* by Ella Raidel, a publication that bridges cinematic practice and critical urban studies. At the centre of the book is Raidel's exploration of China's "ghost cities"—monumental yet uninhabited urban developments that serve as both subjects and stages for her films. More than an artist monograph, the volume engages with multidisciplinary perspectives, featuring contributions from scholars such as Ute Meta Bauer, Marlene Rutzendorfer, Itty Abraham, and Yu Weiying. These texts situate Raidel's hybrid documentary-fictional films within broader conversations on heterotopia, speculative urbanism, postcolonial theory, and architectural cinema.

Raidel's situated filmmaking is treated as a reflexive method—part research, part poetic intervention—where cities are read as palimpsests of erased histories and speculative futures. Her works, particularly *Double Happiness* and *A Pile of Ghosts*, construct cinematic cartographies of global capitalism's afterlives, where the urban environment is not merely depicted but activated and investigated in a variety of ways. The publication's careful interplay between still images, interviews, and essays enriches the reading of Raidel's films as ideological and aesthetic inquiries into spatial transformation, migration, and marginalisation.

Foregrounding Raidel's engagement with cities like Maputo, Beijing, and Singapore, the review reflects on how her films interrogate the politics of realism, modernity, and memory of each city's everyday. The publication reveals how Raidel's visual lexicon offers new ways of seeing and experiencing urban space beyond state-driven or press written narratives. *Of Haunted Spaces* stands out as an essential contribution to the intersection of film, urbanism, and cultural critique, where cinematic form becomes a means of exposing, destabilising, and reimagining the built environment.

One of the most striking elements of *Of Haunted Spaces: Cinema, Heterotopias, and China's Hyperurbanization* by Ella Raidel is its opening image—a concrete-embossed text reading “Real Life,” likely from one of China’s ghost cities. Initially conceived as ambitious urban developments designed to replicate Western metropolises as markers of affluence and influence, these ghost cities have become both the setting and subject of Raidel’s work. This review examines how the publication navigates Raidel’s artistic practice, considering the ways in which her films engage with theoretical discourse through the scholarly texts that analyse them. More than a conventional artist’s monograph, the 125-page publication extends beyond a singular reading of Raidel’s work, instead it unfolds a dynamic, multidisciplinary dialogue that positions her research-driven approach within broader artistic, cinematic, and theoretical frameworks.

Of Haunted Spaces is a compilation of essays on Ella Raidel’s creative practice where each piece simultaneously engages with larger themes of urban transformation, the Anthropocene, and forgotten spaces that have faded from our memory. The book is structured as a series of interrelated visual and textual dialogues, interweaving pictorial images with analytical essays. These contributions by scholars not only provide diverse disciplinary perspectives on Raidel’s hybrid filmmaking approach but also engage with her observations of contemporary urbanisation in a nuanced and poetic manner—moving beyond the simplified commonplace narratives of mass production, human rights issues, and environmental concerns in urban cities. What makes this publication particularly intriguing for me is how each essay sheds a different light on the way film and the camera function as ideological apparatuses, capturing “reality” while simultaneously constructing open-ended narratives. This interplay between fiction and truth is a key motif in Raidel’s work, where this tension is made visible in how the book can be read and viewed. The strategic placement of images, corresponding to each essay’s thematic concerns, further serves to reinforce and draw out the book’s overarching narrative in exploring each city’s underexplored spaces.

Ute Meta Bauer’s introduction, *Unfolding the Cinematic Real*, establishes the framework for understanding Raidel’s work, emphasising the perspective that in films like *Double Happiness* or *A Pile of Ghosts* the fictional imagery is “embedded in the mundane and repetitive exercises of reality, as if the camera were rehearsing actions with her actors.” This observation remains particularly prescient throughout the publication, highlighting how Raidel’s films blur the boundaries between staged performance and documentary realism. For example, this is evident in her use of film sets for Japanese and Korean soap operas as both the setting and subject in *Double Happiness*. Bauer, a curator and scholar in curatorial practices and museum studies, found this juxtaposition particularly compelling and goes on to contextualise Raidel’s cinematic practice within the essayistic filmmaking tradition, where documentary and fictional elements coalesce to challenge notions of realism and representation. Her essay distinctly introduces and positions Raidel’s films as performative, where reality is constructed and staged, blurring the lines between observation and intervention. It is through the unfolding of each small story and the way she constructs “realities” observed both by the actors and the filmmaker that an invented fictionality emerges, firmly adding a reflexive dimension to her filmmaking.

Complementing this introduction is Bauer’s interview with Raidel, *Situated Cinema: The City as a Text*, which reveals the filmmaker’s methodological approach and relationship with each city. Here, the artist’s voice comes through, as Raidel reflexively describes cities as “texts”—sites of historical layering, cultural narratives, and political transformation. Her films do not merely document but actively engage with these urban phenomena, often through guerrilla-style filmmaking techniques that capture the transient and ephemeral nature of hyperurbanisation. The concept of the city as a “text” reinforces the idea that urban space is a “palimpsest”—an overwriting of previous histories, policies, and aspirations, with traces of the past still visible in the present. This interview was particularly insightful in deepening an understanding of Raidel as a traveller/filmmaker and the intentions behind her work. Through the cinematic image, she

attempts to transform these ghostly infrastructures into legible markers of global capital and ideological projection. Rather than aiming to be purely informative, she seeks to create what she describes as “sensible forms of expression.”

In the short film *Slam Video Maputo* (2009), Raidel recounts how she accompanied local music video producers to their filming locations, where she met a group of Slam Poets. Over time, these poets became collaborators in her films, contributing to the creative and narrative process extending her relationship with her subjects and the city. While this section can be read as a sharing of her fieldwork practices, it simultaneously presents an insight into Raidel’s methodology, sharing how her films emerged from her field trips to China. Her performative strategies were not only shaped by the limitations she faced but also developed as creative methods to navigate these constraints, allowing her to engage with urban spaces in innovative and improvisational ways. These strategies became practical working methods, enabling Raidel to access restricted locations without permits while simultaneously activating these spaces through improvisation and reenactments with her characters. Through her working methodology, Raidel subtly constructs a visual lexicon of China’s evolving cityscapes, with each film contributing to this expanding cinematic vocabulary. This lexicon is elegantly presented in the book through a dedicated section, where eight of her films are highlighted, each accompanied by a brief description and a carefully selected film still, offering a concise yet evocative representation of her artistic and research-driven approach. This collection of photographic images serves as a poetic extension of her films, effectively integrated to create a visual essay-like segment. I found that this addition not only enriches the publication but also provides a moment of pause, allowing one to engage more reflectively with Raidel’s cinematic themes.

Continuing with *The Poetry of Haunted Spaces: Ella Raidel and the Documentary Melodrama*, urban theorist Marlene Rutzendorfer examines the aesthetic and thematic elements of Raidel’s films, categorising them as sensible forms of expression or documentary dramas that develop their own syntax of architectural filmmaking. This categorisation proves insightful in reading her works as aligning to ideas of these forgotten spaces as “heterotopias.” Raidel’s films, like *We’ll Always Have Paris*, are slow and contemplative films where they each transcend mere documentation, instead they crafted melancholic and poetic narratives that explore urban decay and transformation. These filmic narratives consistently examine and position architectural spaces and urban landscapes as quiet figurative elements or even central figures, exploring the relationship between space, movement, people, and time. From this, one gathers a sense that Raidel treats architecture as an “active character” rather than a mere backdrop or stage, where one finds it difficult not to be intrigued by the setting presented in each film essay. Rutzendorfer goes on to highlight the melancholic beauty inherent in Raidel’s cinematography—an artistic and cinematic style shaped by her extensive experiences in Asia and her deep engagement with East and Southeast Asian cinema. A significant inspiration is Taiwanese filmmaker Tsai Ming-liang, whose minimalist storytelling and thematic focus on urban alienation have influenced Raidel’s creative perspective. Through composition, sound, and pacing, she manages to evoke an eerie resonance with her version of ghost cities, making these spaces feel both alive and abandoned through her framing and narration. The essay astutely aligns her approach with *architectural filmmaking*, where the built environment serves as both a narrative and ideological construct. By considering these formal elements, Rutzendorfer highlights the affective qualities that imbue Raidel’s films with a haunting poeticism and intimacy. This interplay between sound design, montage effects, and visual framing is therefore crucial in understanding how her films operate on both a documentary and performative level in being “consistently in dialogue with Chinese independent cinema.”

Postcolonial theorist Itty Abraham contributes a different perspective in *Double Vision: China from the Outside-In*, situating Raidel’s films within postcolonial and geopolitical discourse.

Lending weight to a more theoretical discussion, Abraham examines Raidel's trilogy—*SUBVERSES China in Mozambique*, *Double Happiness*, and *A Pile of Ghosts*—as cinematic inquiries into China's transnational urban expansion. He introduces the *Chinese Dream* as both an introspective and externalised narrative, reflecting China's "double vision" in its global influence and urban ambitions beyond its borders. Raidel's films navigate the intersections of national identity, global capitalism, and architectural mimicry—themes that resonate with Abraham's own broader interests in postcolonial state control and infrastructural politics. He argues that her work provides a critical lens on China's urban imagination, juxtaposing domestic megaprojects with overseas infrastructural developments. This dual perspective is presented in the depiction of familiar spaces in *SUBVERSES*, which reveals contradictions in modernisation—where ambition meets abandonment, and utopian ideals transform into dystopian realities. Central to Abraham's analysis is how Raidel presents this tension between official narratives of economic progress and the material realities of urban displacement through these disquieting films. Her films manage to capture the layered complexities of China's infrastructural ambitions, exposing how hyperurbanisation is both a local phenomenon and, more crucially and critically, a globally resonant situation.

Hong Kong-based curator and writer Yu Weiying brings her views of the visual "cartography" of global capitalism in contemporary China through her essay *Ghost Infrastructurality*. Her research explores the intersections of nation-state dynamics, speculative urbanism, and cultural memory, particularly in the context of China's rapid development. Yu examines China's ghost cities as "performative entities" that embody the failures of speculative capitalism, where she turns to them as forms of "speculative fabulation to tell alternative stories of the earth that go far beyond its lauded narrative." She argues that these urban infrastructural spaces are not mere anomalies but symptoms of overproduction, forms of inert materialisation that reflect the unsustainable cycles of urban development. Raidel's *A Pile of Ghosts* especially captures this reality by portraying abandoned urban landscapes as haunted remnants of economic ambition. Yu's concept of "ghost infrastructurality" is thought-provoking in how it seeks to reframe these urban environments as "speculative sites" rather than passive ruins. Though uninhabited, she suggests these infrastructures remain active participants in China's ideological and economic narratives—silent witnesses to failed projections of prosperity. Succinctly put across by the author, Raidel's films, through their careful documentation of these abandoned developments, expose how architectural and infrastructural projects, once symbols of national progress, deteriorate into vacant monuments of miscalculated ambition. The essay is particularly illuminating in how she considers Raidel's films as deeply engaging with the idea of "subtractive spaces" in the Anthropocene, as they focus on the ruins, voids, and ghostly infrastructures left behind by global capitalism, urbanisation, and ideological projection. As the final critical essay in the book, it reinforces and deepens our understanding of Raidel's cinematic approach. We come to understand her films as not mere documents of architectural feats or urban expansion; rather, it examines the spaces that emerge through processes of removal, displacement, and abandonment. This was crucial in allowing me to reflect on the conditions and situations in Singapore, where I am particularly intrigued by creative explorations of what has been lost, erased, or left in limbo within the city-state.

In the same way, *The Seven Step Verse* (2022), a cinematic virtual reality (VR) film, explores Singapore's shopping malls, employing performative interventions by dancers and artists to reveal the hidden dimensions and often-overlooked aspects of everyday urban life. Through such an immersive approach, Raidel examines themes such as alienation, migration, and the fragmented impacts of modernism on Singapore's hyper-urbanised public spaces. Much of her more recent research explores the use of VR as a tool for performative interventions in public spaces, particularly interrogating the complex relationships between bodies, memories, and the urban environment. *The Seven Step Verse* serves as a compelling example of Raidel's exploration

of Singapore's psychogeographic dimensions, one that resonates with my own perspective on how it expands her research in architectural filmmaking to examine recurring themes of urban transformation, displacement, and marginalisation within the city she resides in. By focusing on working with contemporary artists and modernist shopping malls such as People's Park Complex, Golden Mile Tower, and Sim Lim Tower, the film underscores how these once-iconic structures—initially conceived as symbols of Singapore's social and economic progress—have now faded into relics of a past vision, repurposed by maid agencies and shop owners from other Southeast Asian countries. What emerges from this, and Raidel's broader body of work is not merely a record of urban spaces, but an evocative meditation on the infrastructures that create, sustain, and ultimately abandon these modern architectural landscapes. For me as a scholar focusing on Southeast Asia, the cinematic image in her more recent pieces thus becomes both a method of mapping and destabilising these spaces, offering counter-narratives that challenge the official discourse on urbanisation. Through Raidel's lens, these buildings are no longer passive remnants of a bygone era, but active sites of inquiry—spaces where histories, economies, and social dynamics continue to intersect in unexpected ways in the multicultural Southeast Asia city-state.

In reviewing *Of Haunted Spaces*, one embarks on a journey through Raidel's cinematic and theoretical landscape, much like the act of walking through a city—an experience she aligns with Georges Perec's notion of reading the urban environment. Just as Perec encourages an attentive engagement with the everyday texts of the city—advertisements, billboards, street names—Raidel's work transforms these fragmented narratives into a cinematic practice that is embodied, performative and at times virtual. Her films do not merely document urban spaces; they reconfigure them, offering alternative ways of seeing and understanding the hyperurbanised landscapes of contemporary China and beyond. In this way, I interpret Raidel's "situated cinema" as more than a method of observation—it is a transformative and reflective act. Her work compels the viewer to engage with both the private and the public, the real and the spectral, revealing the hidden infrastructures and power structures that shape our world. Just as her films expose the contradictions of urban modernity, they also offer a space for reflection, prompting us to question how cities are experienced, constructed, and remembered.

Looping back to the concrete-embossed text reading "Real Life," the real life depicted in Raidel's films is both tangible and spectral, each exposing the constructed nature of urban dreams and their inevitable erosion in its own performative and everyday form. Her work is simultaneously silent and thought-provoking, navigating the liminal space between presence and absence. Where each film captures the transient, often illusory nature of hyperurbanisation, hinting at the ideological forces that work behind the scenes in shaping and redefining these evolving landscapes. By intertwining film, art, and research, Raidel creates poetic and contemplative speculative images and narratives that interrogate the shifting landscapes of contemporary urbanisation—an inquiry no doubt shaped by her decades long lived experiences and fieldwork in Singapore, China, and other Asian and African cities. More than a mere documentation or critical evaluation of these spaces, this publication succeeds in stitching together Raidel's cinematic approach, bringing to life her critical examination of the politics of image-making. Through her lens, urbanisation is not just represented, but actively played out, performed and interrogated, enabling us to re-experience cities in new ways.