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Cao Fei

* 1978 in Guangzhou, CHN – lebt/lives in Peking/Beijing, CHN

La Town, 2014

Renate Wiehager

Utopia mon amour
Cao Fei. La Town (2014)

Starting at the end: the paradise, the museum, the bomb

Reading Cao Fei's new film *La Town* starting at the end, the artist dismisses us, after a 35-minute journey through miniaturized dark dystopian environments, with two bright, visionary images: the paradise (2 min) and the museum (4 min). Cao Fei permits us a glimpse of a paradise that is like a picture-book dream: the camera pans over a sunny green meadow where people are relaxing, picnicking, bathing and having fun. CUT. The museum. At min 36:00, the camera pans along the perforated facade of a contemporary, modernist exhibition building. In the interior, we can see things that we recognize from the long and sometimes apocalyptic-looking main section of the *La Town* video – objects, situations and people, uncrowded and with plenty of space around them. But this time, they are frozen artworks: they have been repurposed, their meaning changed. There is a tower of supermarket trolleys, an "Occupy" sign, a video of people dancing, a giant octopus, and a truck, with people. We recognize the politician with the red flag, the pair of lovers, the express train, and the funfair. From off-screen, we hear the voices of the lovers, which accompany and structure the whole video. She: I call your name softly. He: starts to sing, softly – "the world collapsing in 'Indispensable'" ¹

The concluding sequence of *La Town* shows people drifting down from the sky. This picture is an, almost comforting, reversal of another image: the pressure waves from the atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, which flung people hundreds of meters up in the air. It is an image that has become imprinted upon the visual memory and imagination of the 20th century like a signature or seal.

Before showing us this final image, however, Cao Fei has us pass through dystopian scenes: images of horrors anticipated, experienced, or remembered.



¹ Pipo des Mare, *Indispensable*, Recording in Beijing, June 2014. Lyrics, voice, guitar : Pipo del Mare. Guitar: Marco.

An attempt at a retelling in film script form
La Town (Whispers of Love from the Abyss) [41min56sec]

The magic of miniature railways and their modeled worlds springs from a fantasy of supreme power: a single human being – a giant or giantess – can build a whole world, can govern it, keep it moving, bring it to a halt, or destroy it. Cao Fei bought all the miniature decorations online from traditional German railway model-maker companies – figures, urban scenes, city buildings, a supermarket, a station, home furnishings, a striptease bar, a McDonald’s drive-in – and set them up on a worktable two square meters in size to create a whole city for our imagination: a city called La Town. I made myself very small, so that I could be eye-to-eye with the people in La Town, and wandered through the city – the sunken city destroyed by war and catastrophe that we wish we could forget, which could also be the dreamed-of city in which we want to live one day – through the medium of my eyes and ears.



[01:05]

NIGHT. A city of miniature models, with miniature people from the model kit. Tracking shots of individual scenes of destruction, decay, traumatic emptiness and loneliness: houses, streets, cars.

VOICE *She: La Town. A child can walk around it. He: Cold, the cellars are cold. She: They are cold, summer like winter.*

[02:20]

VOICE *She: On the second day, history tells us– I'm not making it up, from the second day on, certain people crawled from the depths of the earth, and from the ashes. They were captured on film for all time. I saw them. I saw them. The reconstructions were as authentic as possible. The films were as authentic as possible. The illusion quite simply, is so perfect.*

SOUND consistently metallic, cold. The tempo steadily speeds up.

We see smoke rising. The camera focuses on individual people: brawny ranger types, a tightrope dancer with a white parasol, a policeman. The band appears for the first time: about 10 musicians in naval-type uniforms, sitting on the partially wrecked roof overhang of what is plainly a filling station.

Cows on a water tank; a modernist building. Total lifelessness and stillness.

[06:45]

The first moving element to appear in the picture is the flashing illuminated sign on a hotel. Workers on a grassy hill.

[07:34]

The camera circles around a ruined building, observing two naked lovers engaging in a sexual act on a roof, followed by workers, a Father Christmas, and a mugging outside a casino.

As the camera circles more rapidly, the music becomes louder and more urgent. SILENCE. The only sound comes from what appears to be cowbells.

Once again, the camera circles a ruined building. There is a camel standing on the roof. A prostitute is arrested.

**[10:00]**

DAY. Suddenly, we see a green park, with a picnic in progress. Within the frozen scene are some children on a swing, which is in motion. Panning shot of a McDonalds snack bar. A woman is sitting on its broken roof, with animals around her: it is like a little farmyard.

SOUND. Animal sounds are heard, mingling with the constant, colder sounds. A man, bleeding. We hear gasping breaths.

BROAD DAYLIGHT. Only now do we notice that it has suddenly become light again. Panning shot of a replica of the classical Venus de Milo sculpture in a fountain basin. The little plaza, with other copies of ancient sculptures, begins to rotate like a disc. A graffiti sprayer in front of a large and colorful wall. A large octopus in a living room.



[14:00]

The La Town station. The platform is like a bright stretch of water, framed against light blue. A camel, some travelers, and then an express train arrives.

Birdsong and bright sparkling sounds with an echo. Assorted animals: a kangaroo, a turtle. The cries of children ring through the air. A carousel turns, as does a Ferris wheel. It is a friendly day.



[16:32]

VOICE

She: Listen to me...Like you, I know what it is to forget. He: No, you don't know what it is to forget. She: Like you, I am endowed with memory. I know what it is to forget...Why deny the obvious necessity of remembering?

We see the view through a window into an open arrangement of modern, fully intact apartments, side by side. We see the contents of the kind of residential “machine” commonly seen in Beijing and all over the world. We see a wheelchair user, a washing machine, a man falling, and a naked woman near a bathtub, watched by a man. A clothes rail with an array of clothes hanging from it. Lonely women in empty living rooms, or at the sink, surrounded by small children. A man is sitting at the table, reading the paper. There is a coffee pot on the table.

The two lovers last seen on the dilapidated roof are now in bed, making love.

VOICE

Conversation between the off-screen voices: a man and a woman. Their words circle around the two lovers, who they seem to be observing; they speak ever faster and with ever more passion: *“I meet you. I remember you. Who are you? You're destroying me. You're good for me. How could I know La Town was tailor-made for love? How could I know you fit my body like a glove”*, an intense amorous whisper.

[19:23]

SOUND Bloody protests at the fence in front of the house; the protesters are shouting, chanting and screaming. People alone on the steps.



[20:00]

VOICE *She: I don't know who it is. Every day he passes by at 4:00 and coughs.*

An airplane hangar. The band is sitting high up on an overhang in the architecture. Next, there are police, and spectators who are waving. A head of state exits the plane, and takes up a position at a speaker's podium. The background is a large red flag. A whale swims around the hangar.

NIGHT: A movie theater advertises *“Gone with the Wind”*.

The camera looks through the door of a striptease bar. The dancers are spinning around the poles, whilst shooting for a porno film is in progress. The waving people from the hangar are there. There are police as well.

SOUND: Disco rhythms, which steadily speed up. Suddenly, police sirens, and a moving illuminated sign that reads LIVE SAVERS.

CUT

[25:22]

SOUND: City noises, dissonant, numbing the ears, beats that sound like echoes underwater.

Workers. Supermarket. A building site.

NIGHT. The supermarket revolves. Screams. Injured, bleeding people. A disaster movie atmosphere. Wholesale destruction.

[28:35]

ALL QUIET. Then, the sound of telephones, sirens, street noise, followed by fire, explosions, protests, shots, injured people lying on the ground.

[30.00]

VOICE *She: I don't remember anymore ... He: How long? She: an eternity ... The cellar is small, too small. Hands become useless in a cellar ... He: I see the ink. I see the daylight. I see my life. Your death. My life that goes on. Your death that goes on She: I yearn so badly for you I can't bear it anymore. He: Are you afraid? She: Yes, wherever I am, in La Town ... He: of what? She: of never seeing you again, ever, ever.*



[31:46]

NIGHT. Everything is turning slowly.

[32:55]

CUT

The camera moves over a green river valley landscape. A peaceful paradise: people bathing and having fun.

VOICE *She: It will begin again ... just as the illusion exists in love, the illusion you can never forget, so I was under the illusion, I would never forget La Town ...*

Shadows pass over this paradise.

[35:00]

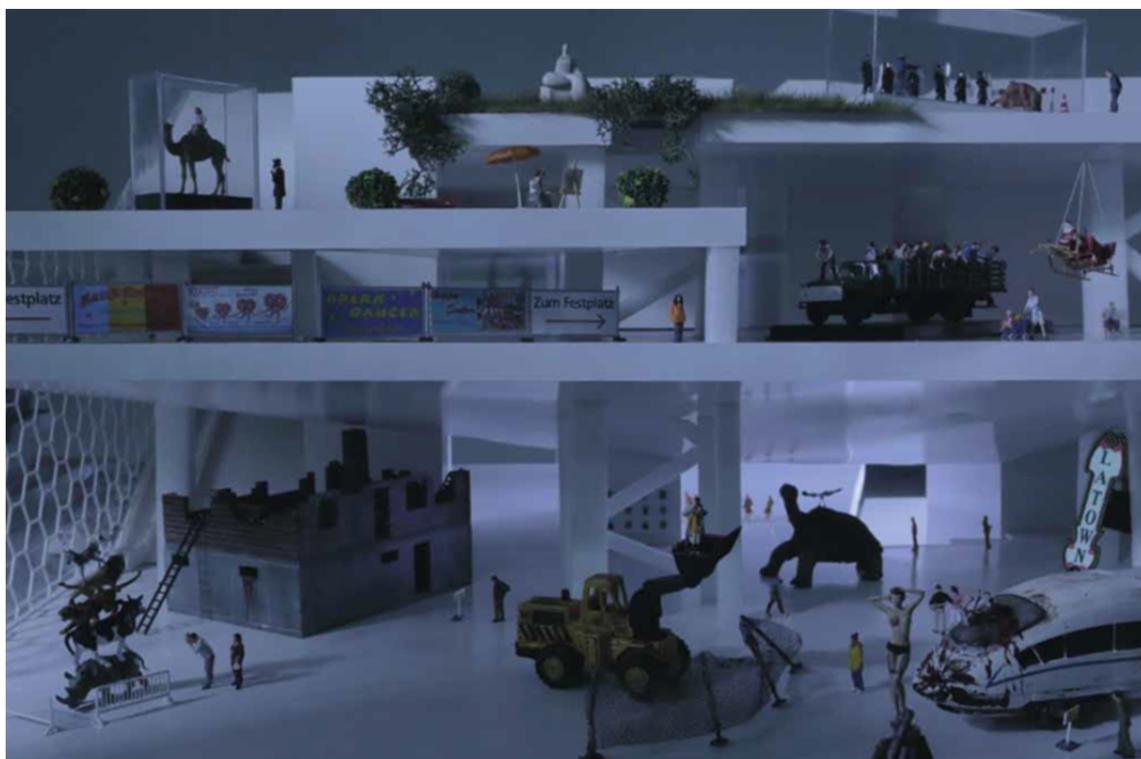
Station, with water covering the platform. Once again, the band is present.

[36:00]

In the museum. The artworks: a tower of supermarket trolleys (a reference to Olaf Metzel's Berlin tower, which was made of barrier grilles and supermarket trolleys), an "Occupy" sign, sequences of serial images, a big video of dancers, a big octopus, an oversized copy of Albrecht Dürer's self-portrait, a truck, with people. Also in the museum are the politician with his big red flag, and the pair of lovers: we now suddenly see that they are a variation on Jeff Koon's Cicciolina theme. The express train, the ruined buildings, and an animal pyramid à la "The Street Musicians of Bremen" are also here. The illuminated sign that reads "La Town". The funfair.

VOICE He: *Why are you in La Town?* She: *I'm acting in a film ... People don't know I'm in the cellar ... They pretend I'm dead. Dead, in La Town.* He: *Do you scream?* She: *Not in the beginning. I call your name softly.* He: *But I'm dead.* He starts to sing, softly, *"the world collapsing in 'Indispensable'"*.

People drift down from the sky.



Hiroshima mon amour. Duras/Resnais

The appalling horrors of the Second World War. The horror of people and of the world when confronted with the dropping of atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki – these have indelibly stamped themselves, like a watermark, into the souls of the nameless young French woman and the nameless Japanese man. These are the protagonists whose meeting, in Japan in the summer of 1957, is depicted in Marguerite Duras/Alain Resnais' film *Hiroshima mon amour*. The intimate close-up at the start of Resnais' film and Duras's script is most disturbing: the camera shows us the man's shoulder and throat, as he bends over the woman. Her hand caresses him, then her fingers dig into his skin. Next, we see what appears to be dew on skin – but no, it is snow, or ashes. Are we looking at two people who love each other passionately, or two people in a fight to the death, doomed to perish?



Speaking as if to herself, she tells him about what she saw in Hiroshima: The real city, which she has visited; the site of the catastrophe, which she knows of through media reports; the film set of the film that she is acting in – none of these realities is more real than the others: they overlap one another in her mind. The man, who has returned home after fighting in the war, negates what she says in a monotone: “no, you saw nothing in Hiroshima”. Both people, the French woman and the Japanese man alike, are seeking to liberate themselves from their fated roles in history through their brief physical encounter, through their speech and replies, their monologue and answering monologue. As a girl at the end of the war, the woman had lived in Nevers in France, where she fell passionately in love with a German soldier who died in her arms, killed by French bullets. From that moment on, she was an outcast, forced to hide in cellars. The Japanese man almost lost his wife and children at Hiroshima. The French woman sees him, expressing every single syllable, as “Hi-ro-shi-ma”, whilst he sees her as “Ne-vers”. These people who have emerged from the defining catastrophes of their age are hidden behind the fates dealt out to them by these historic catastrophes, and therefore cannot recognize one another; they cannot understand one another, or come together as lovers.



In their book and film, Duras/Resnais show images of the catastrophes (of the Second World War) as if they were images of recent, still-present history, a stilled, museum piece past, distanced through the medium of film. The woman tells of the evidence of the atomic obliteration that she saw in the museum in Hiroshima, but the next picture reveals that what she has described is the far from unadorned reality of the film in which she is acting.

He: You saw nothing in Hiroshima, you don't know what it means to forget.

The references in Cao Fei's *La Town* to “Hiroshima mon amour” – the similar construction principles – have a striking impact on the relationship between image and text. Cao Fei takes the French language, and whole passages of text (with slight modifications) from Duras' film script, but she also uses its contradictions of image and text. Resnais, himself, saw the verbal part of his film as an important way of creating distance – an intervention to limit the fascination exerted by the film's images. In Cao Fei's film, similarly, the disembodied voiceover frequently slides over the film images, without making contact. Just as in “Hiroshima, mon amour”, the refusal of the text and the image to fuse into a single entity made it shockingly clear that no voice has the power to explain what the images show, and that these horrors can never be made into any kind of empirical history. The text and image do not always contradict one another, but neither do they form a coherent whole – an impression reinforced by rhythmic repetitions and unconventional intonations, by words spoken like psalms and used in an unfamiliar way. Just as with “Hiroshima, mon amour”, the text of *La Town* is not a real dialogue: it is a kind of dream, a kind of voice from the unconscious mind, a toneless, whispered murmur, a whisper of love from the abyss. There are moments when one follows the abstract modulations of the voices, without paying any attention to what they are saying. The voices' stories

are threadbare and dubious, and are often invested with false pathos. One is never certain when they are lying and when they are telling the truth, nor does one know whether they themselves know. These accumulated stories – narrated directly or indirectly, or merely hinted at – are like the film’s visual collection of odds and ends, its detailed miniature objects. In addition to the fragmented narration of memory fragments, we are aware of a pervasive fragmentation, an isolation of the individual elements and miniature figures that disrupts our automatic seeing habits. The gliding and sometimes hysterical camera movements, the heavily stylized intonation from off-screen, the movements between images and texts that never quite agree: all of this gradually crystallizes the impression that there are wounds that no amount of time will heal, that the reality is inaccessible, repelling both images and words. The more opaque and porous the story (or stories) of La Town become, and the more abstraction replaces the linear narrative, the more marked and definite the camera’s strange antics become: the shifts in focus, the restless light and dark color scheme. (The image design elements, such as the gloomy colors and the low-key lighting, are very reminiscent of neo-noir films). The soft focus that repeatedly passes across the images blurs the outlines of the miniature figures, making them strangely sketchy and undefined.

Wisps of mist appear, further obscuring the view. Out of the indistinct outlines, the miniature items that make up the post-apocalyptic metropolis emerge from somewhere and fade into these stories of sex & crime. This miniature world appears to be dominated by bitter battles over wealth distribution: blood-spattered clothing, maltreated bodies, detached limbs. The music that accompanies the film reinforces its bleak and hopeless atmosphere. Its hollow sounds create an uncanny note, an acoustic memento mori. We can hear the sirens of police cars and fire engines mingling with these leaden sounds. Simply by being plastic toys, the items militate against the appearance of reality, taking the story into an imaginary realm. Beneath the veneer of stylistic hypertrophy, the model reveals, not only the power structures of a crisis-hit time, but also a non-dependable reconstruction of its history – fragments of the past that are unable to enter into a synthesis with the disordered present day, the gulfs between man and woman, documents and fiction, depiction and imagination... (F.H.)²

“Invisible Cities” (1972). Italo Calvino. The inferno of human society

When we watch Cao Fei’s video La Town, she places us right in the midst of her images of an envisaged, incipient, recently past or threatening – perhaps we don’t know? – catastrophe. In the first section of the film, the camera, as it moves through the pitch-black streets of La Town, shows signs of destruction, but the human figures within the scenes appear unaffected. In the second part of the video, we see daylight, a playground, classical-looking fountain statues in a rotating plaza, a funfair. In the film’s third part, the camera roves through homes in an apartment block – a reference to Cao Fei’s film Haze and Fog (2013). Here, the normality of ordinary everyday life prevails. Only in the final part does the scene acquire a mood of apocalyptic destruction: demonstrators, injured people, fire, sirens.

² Friederike Horstmann, Berlin, e-mail to the author from July 9, 2015.

In interviews, Cao Fei has repeatedly mentioned her early interest in the film “Hiroshima mon amour”. This is very unambiguously reflected in the composition of the French spoken dialogue (with English subtitles) that provides the acoustic accompaniment to *La Town*. Cao Fei uses sections and passages from Marguerite Duras’ book, merely altering individual words: “Hiroshima” / “La Town”; “animals” / “people”; “the city” / “La Town”. The dialog between the man and the woman, sometimes monotone and impersonal, sometimes passionate and intimate, reflects, on a linguistic and auditory level, the symbolism of the two naked lovers in the film, who we see first on the roof of the ruined building, then in the apartment, and finally in the museum. In *La Town*, the love between two people – simultaneously a linguistic and a physical “act” – provides the antithesis to the anonymity, coldness and brutality that we see repeatedly appearing in the depicted human society.

Another of the artist’s references is to Italo Calvino. In his fantastical and fairytale-like text “Invisible Cities” (1972), Calvino takes the reader on a journey around the world, in the style of Marco Polo telling of his journeys. Marco Polo, the 13th-century Venetian who travelled to Asia, tells of (and invents) utopian notions of cities to satisfy the demands of his patron Kublai Khan, the Emperor of China. As the emperor forces him to embark on ever more detailed narratives, Marco Polo changes tack and instead begins to deliver images of the hell that surrounds us, a kind of inferno of human society. He concludes with the words: “The hell of the living is not something that is still to come. If there is one, it is what is already here, the hell we live in every day, that we make by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the hell, and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of hell, are not hell, then make them endure, give them space.”

“La Town, struck by unknown disaster – where without sunlight, time froze. Polar night was all encompassing, so the few instances of white nights have been momentarily recorded in the town’s history. Yet, through the drifting of time and space, various countries have rewritten La Town’s history, and details have been neglected. Now, the story of the small town’s past – love affairs, politics, life, demons and disasters – have all been sealed beneath the museum’s vitrines, the historical “specimens” becoming an authoritative but limited interpretation of this town’s history.”
(Cao Fei)³

³ This quotation from Cao Fei’s introduction to her film *La Town* is in the context of her museum motif: “At a place called the ‘Night Museum’, open only after dusk, various artefacts about ‘darkness’ are on display. There is the American horror film ‘30 Days of Night’, Chinese artist Chu Yun’s installation ‘Constellation’, and surprisingly, there is even the iPad app game for ‘The Godfather. The current exhibition is about *La Town*. [...] Everyone has heard the myth of *La Town*. The story first appeared in Europe, but, after traveling through a space-time wormhole, reappeared in Asia and Southeast Asia. It was last seen near the ocean bordering the Eurasian tectonic plate, vanishing in its midst as if a mirage. *La Town*, struck by unknown disaster [...] Night town; is there something happening? What kind of story does it carry? What forces caused such distortions in space and time? Visitors quietly wander between the displays. This is just the first exhibit of the summer; there will be more interesting shows to come. At this moment, from the cinema screen of the ‘Night Museum’ drift a few lines of dialog: The Stranger: ‘Bar the windows. Try to hide. They’re coming.’ Eben Olemaun: ‘They? Who are they?’” (Cao Fei)

*The world is not made for the utopias of human beings.
The design of the “Night Museum”*

The worlds of the model railway enthusiast are pleasant, beautiful, sunny worlds. The rail connections function, the trains run on time, the landscape is pretty, the houses and villages are neat and in good repair. The people are happily working, or waving. Even if a fire should break out, it only serves to demonstrate the speed and efficiency of the fire brigade. If a train is derailed, then this event and the business of setting it to rights highlights just how effective the system is in putting everything straight, and in getting everything back on track.



Cao Fei takes this pleasant model railway world and uses it as the basis for a human community, a “world community” – reduced down to a miniature scale as La Town, where a happy coexistence is no more than a promise, a brief interlude in the unrelenting tide of a violent, destructive history. Her model also adapts two other artworks with a spiritual affinity to her own ideas that have provided her with inspiration – the literary/filmic reflexive art of Duras/Resnais, and Calvino’s model utopian cities. She transposes these artworks out of their original context in 20th-century Europe, and into our present-day globalized world. The search for authenticity (so often futile in reality), memory as the imparter of meaning, and the viability or otherwise of political and social utopias: all of these find a temporary place in the “Night Museum”, the museum that Cao Fei takes us to visit in the film’s final sequence. When one considers that the policymakers of China are building thousands of new museums in an attempt to compensate the hundreds and thousands of people who work in the factories in China’s great cities, with their populations of millions, for the terrible fears with which their everyday lives are filled, one is uncertain whether the final image offered to us by Cao Fei is intended to be seen as a utopia, or as a manifestation of trauma.
