Erin Y. Huang. *Urban Horror: Neoliberal Post-Socialism and the Limits of Visibility.*

Durham: Duke University Press, 2020.

AGUSTÍN RUGIERO BADER

China has recently been the object of a considerable amount of scholarship addressing logistics, human rights, governance, and the implementation of new technologies—to name a few. It has emerged as a place of both anxiety and alterity, qualities being bestowed upon it as the echoes of the collapse of the Soviet Union seem to finally dwindle. Despite the West's attempts to entrench an "End of History" narrative—one where Western liberal democracies mark the endpoint of human evolution (Fukuyama 1992)—China has remained a notable point of opposition for this self-trumpeted teleology, a towering other, a new inscrutable contender. As Erin Y. Huang puts it, "the common rhetoric used to describe China's state capitalism, authoritarian capitalism or state neoliberalism indicates not adequate frameworks or proper names but a shadow archive of conceptual proximities that capture the difficulty of remapping an emergent power structure after the collapse of existing geopolitical imaginaries in the Post-Cold War world" (Huang 2020, 19). In her latest book, *Urban Horror: Neoliberal Post-Socialism and the Limits of Visibility*, Huang attempts to reckon with some of China's complex sociocultural realities through the logic of the "post-," approaching the nation and its dominant cultural narratives through a dissection of its own anxieties and fears.

Grounding her work in China's film industry—comprised of films made within the PRC as well as in the many countries and zones of exception around it—Huang proposes a reconceptualization of horror through the framework of the "post-." The "post-" is characterized by Huang as "a perpetually extended present that renders the categories of past, present, and future obsolete;" it is "an active cultural field that is continuously remade to rehearse the desires and anxieties of an era" (Huang 2020, 15). In the often muddled discussion of Sino-politics, the post- serves as "a sliding signifier that mediates the relationship between China's past and future, while both are subject to infinite reconstructions" (Huang 2020, 16).

In the search for a way of conceptualizing these ever-shifting anxieties, Huang discovers in horror, as both an affective mode and as a genre, a particularly fruitful point of departure. Her specific interpretation of horror is borrowed from Friedrich Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in England* where, struck by the incomprehensible speed and violence with which Manchester mutated before his eyes, he wrote: "Everything which here arouses horror and indignation is of recent origin, belongs to the *industrial epoch*" (Engels 2009, 65). To

Huang, horror is not just an emotional reaction but an affect that opens up "a phenomenological channel of perception that introduces the body as a perceptive surface where the external conditions of capitalist abstraction are producing a new kind of human sensation, appearing whenever a gap is opened between one's imagined interior reality and the perceived external world" (Huang 2020, 9). This phenomenological approach to rapidly mutating landscapes and the way they touch upon the body as a surface places Huang's work at the crossroads between the work of Henri Lefebvre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, both of whom feature heavily in her book. The ever-shifting reality of the "post-" finds an ideal setting in the deployment of what Huang terms "economic and political zones of exception (e.g., special economic zones and special administrative regions)" (Huang 2020, 19) where urban horror emerges as a reactive affect. *Urban Horror*, therefore, does not confine itself to mainland China, thriving also in places like Taiwan and Hong Kong, the latter being central in Huang's commentary on the Umbrella Movement's 2014 protests detailed in the book's introduction.

The book is divided into five chapters plus an epilogue, each analyzing different configurations of horror that encapsulate the dissonance between these inner personal realities and the external world. Although Huang does not conceptualize horror exclusively as a set of artistic conventions and themes, but rather as an affect that negotiates between this interior and exterior, some genre staples are present across the films cited: ruined and abandoned buildings, dispossession, pandemics, ghosts, corpses, and self-mutilation.

Chapter One, "Cartographies of Socialism and Post-Socialism: The Factory Gate and the Threshold of the Visible World" considers the shift in regimes of visuality of the factory from the Lumières's *La Sortie de l'Usine Lumière à Lyon* (*Workers Living the Lumière Factory*, 1895) to Zhang Meng's *Gang de qin* (*The Piano in a Factory*, 2010). In her discussion, she utilizes Harun Farocki's analysis of the Lumières's film to trace how the camera has travelled from the outside of the factory to its insides. While in the former the workers, in a perpetual state of fugue from the factory, evoke "an unapproachable site of industrial horror," and are thus framed exclusively from the outside; in the latter, the camera's "entrance through the factory gate frames the perception of a landscape composed of workers' deteriorating bodies, which provides the medium for seeing post-socialism." (35). Thus, with the camera's penetration of factory space, "socialism recedes into spectral nostalgia for an anticipated industrial modernity that was never complete in the first place" (35). In lieu of the lost futures of the Chinese industrial revolution, Huang's commentary on *The Piano in a Factory*, Jia Zhangke's *Ershisi cheng ji* (*24 City*, 2008), and Wang Bing's *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks* (2003) highlights the way the factory and the factory gate—a mediator between what is seen and what is left unseen—affords a historically grounded perspective on Foucault and Lefebvre's differing definitions of heterotopia and its potentialities.

Chapter Two, "Intimate Dystopias: Post-Socialist Femininity and the

Marxist-Feminist Interior" offers a discussion of female dispossession in Li Shaohong's *Lian'ai zhong de baobei* (*Baober in Love*, 2004), a film that playfully—and darkly—subverts the success of *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (*Amelie*, 2001). Through Li's authorial figure, Huang draws connections between the accelerating mutations of pre- and post-2008 Olympics Beijing, and the impact they have in the precarization of women's livelihood in this urban setting. The inseparability of horror and the female body enables the appearance of what Huang calls gendered urban horror: "a new affect that is discovered at the moment when the new logic of post-socialist Chinese urbanism abruptly arrives, leaving no time and space for ruminating the evolved structure of gender violence" (81, emphasis original). The inside-outside horror dynamic of *Baober in Love* finds its urban replica in the gendered dynamics of interior decoration, which Huang dissects through Li's 2007 film *Men* (*The Door*). Ultimately, her discussion of ordinary intimacy reflects on how bodies mediate the creation of "the current iteration of a market-oriented world" (100).

Chapter Three, "The Post- as Media Time: Documentary Experiments and the Rhetoric of Ruin Gazing" tackles one of the central issues of the book: how the different times of the post- are "produced and transmitted in the era of hypermediality" (101). Her analysis prioritizes documentaries because of the genre's desire for reality, which "generates a wide variety of technologically mediated temporalities wherein exist the heterogenous relationships and attitudes toward the rationalized time of capital" (102). She departs from textual analysis of Chantal Ackerman's *D'Est* (*From the East*, 1993) and its formal experimentation with time into the pervasiveness of "ruin gazing" in contemporary Chinese independent documentary cinema. She writes that "the sights of ruination, gentrification, disappearance, and destruction create screen events of time that are displayed with different velocities, durations and rhythms" (115). Because ruins are privileged by mediatic representations of time, Huang's work through the post-foregrounds them as a productive site for the encounter of Paul Virilio's "eternalized present" and Mary Ann Doane's "real time." Through the image of ruin-in-reverse—"a technique of reversing the linear progression of the event that creates the effect of turning back time" (131)—Huang attempts to rethink the relationship between temporality, destruction, and disappearance. Her discussion of Cong Feng's *Di ceng 1: lai ke* (*Stratum 1: The Visitors*, 2012) and Huang Weikai's *Xianshi shi guoqu de weilai* (*Disorder*, 2009) positions ruin gazing in the context of post-socialist China's urbanization and its ungraspable temporalities. In her approach to ruin films through the post-, Huang's "multilayered and multimediated concept of time" serves as an injunction to think about "new methods of spatio-temporal critique" (145).

Chapter Four, "Post-Socialism in Hong Kong: Zone Urbanism and Marxist Phenomenology" returns to the special administrative region through the work of Fruit Chan and Ann Hui. In Huang's Marxist-tinged analysis of the former, Hong Kong emerges as an eternally mutating non-place (Marc Augé's term), where human bodies constantly run the risk of disappearing, or being

left behind. In *Na ye lingchen, wo zuoshangle Wang Jiao kai wang Dapu de hong van* (*The Midnight After*, 2014), the main characters are confronted with an inexplicable pandemic that makes bodies explode into thin air. As Huang puts it, "in a city that has lost its human inhabitants, new relationships between bodies and cities are formed" (147). The chapter then commits itself to the collection of "images, people, temporalities, and spaces that are associated with the production of the affect of horror . . . that appears when transcontinental urban transformations are taking place under the flexible interpretation of the post- in post-socialism" (149). This includes all those cast away by the systematically deployed zones of exception—not a way of adapting but "a governing strategy" per se (152). Huang discusses the "city without bodies" which "exerts a haunting presence in post-handover Hong Kong cinema, bringing into focus the emergent tension between the politics of dispossession and strategies of repossession" (156). It is through the positioning of the emergent landscape of "bodies-spaces" associated with "an affective mode of excess" as forms of resistance that Huang calls for a repossession of disembodied urban spaces (183). Often effaced human corporality comes to the fore in non-normative configurations to remind spectators of their own bodily existence and the space it occupies in societies of the "post-."

Finally, in Chapter Five, "The Ethics of Representing Precarity: Film in the Era of Global Complicity" Huang approaches Malaysian Taiwanese filmmaker Tsai Ming-lian's work through the optics of urban horror. She argues for a view of his work that highlights how aesthetics of precarity—ruin, poverty, dereliction—are put forward to address widespread issues of dispossession, and how they are commodified for consumption. According to Huang, when film penetrates conservation spaces such as museums, it "probes a new web of relations between collaborating neoliberal institutions that are interested in producing feelings as commodifiable experiences and image-making as a practice of resistance" (185). Tsai's work reckons with dispossession, producing "prolonged and intensive looks at objects, scenery, and human bodies and faces that, through the camera's mediation, lose their prefigured signification and transform into a sight that is not yet thinkable" (192). The depiction of the trivial and the futile emerges in Huang's view as a criticism of the desire to represent the less privileged (194), which becomes an inscrutable on-screen presence, a "crypt—a kernel of knowledge that remains incommunicable through language" that begs for yet defies interpretation (209).

The epilogue offers a final thought on how the conceptual constellation Huang has brought forward can be used as a framework for further study of "elsewhere, nowhere, and nonplaces" as strategies of governance (221). The diverse corpus of films discussed foreground different ways of understanding the disjunction between the ever-changing, ever-present logics of the "post-" and their perception by lagging, confused human beings. Through this framework, Huang makes a compelling attempt at diagramming a universal malaise that seems to be intensified by the contin-

gent nature of the various Chinese geographies visited by her work. In spite of its locality, her lucid reconceptualization of horror as a term invites new ways of thinking about how researchers might approach the surge of generational anxieties expressed in global image productions. These tools, grounded in Marxist phenomenology, embodiment, and affect, can be richly repurposed to think about the post- in a way that untangles the labyrinth of contingencies, exceptions, and spectralities that shape contemporary images. It is in this ever-returning affect, this echo that rings louder every time, that *Urban Horror* offers a new way of listening and seeing through the collapse of the frontiers of present, future, and past.

References

Engels, Friedrich. 2009. *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Edited by David McLellan. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fukuyama, Francis. 1992. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press.

Huang, Erin Y. 2020. U*rban Horror: Neoliberal Post-Socialism and the Limits of Visibility*. Durham: Duke University Press.