How to Be Satiated in the Dark

by

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Abstract

*How to Be Satiated in the Dark* is an installation comprised of an animated short film and an observational video that trace the “ghost town” phenomenon in my hometown, Donghai, in Southern China. The ghost town is a geographical and urban phenomenon reflecting how houses and apartments are being built more than demanded. The empty buildings existing in the area make the section where they were constructed gradually resemble a ghost area. With only a few families taking up residence in a largely empty area, those “homes” no longer seem to fit the supposed warm, comforting idea of home. This paper examines the theoretical literature related to the socio-historical context during Market Reform and Land Reform, which sheds light on the ghost town phenomenon in China, the context for rural urbanization and the ghost zone in my hometown, and, finally, discourses on architectural phenomenology, affect, mobility, and the “uncanny.”
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Introduction

What is the meaning of dwelling? In his essay “Building Dwelling Thinking,” Martin Heidegger states that “The essence of building is letting dwell.”¹ Does the architectural residence fulfil the essence of Heidegger’s concept of dwelling today? As he underlines, “[…] do the houses in themselves hold any guarantee that dwelling occurs in them?”² How to Be Satiated in the Dark seeks to understand the ghost town phenomenon in my hometown, Donghai, located in a rural area in southern China, through examining its societal context and architectural phenomenology.

At the age of seven, our family moved from my hometown to Shenzhen to pursue a better life. That was during the time (2000s) when most families would seek to move from rural areas to cities as a result of the urbanization movement of the 1990s. Some families even borrowed money to leave their "frugal lifestyle" behind and migrate to a prosperous city. Since then, my family has been continuously moving and living in different rental places, which has diffused my sense of "home." When my family was living in different rented houses, we were living a tough life. However, my father was still hoping to buy a house. Not until I went to middle school did our family's economic status improve enough for us to settle in a decent apartment in Shenzhen. Since then, our financial condition has improved, which resulted in my being able to come to Canada in 2012.

In 2017, I went back to Donghai for my brother's wedding, which was held in a new villa that my father purchased in my hometown. That was how I noticed the ghost town phenomenon there. The new villa is in a housing complex with 48 others. By the time we moved in, the rest of the villas had remained deserted for several years. As a person who always observes the contradictions between self-perception and the living environment, it came to my attention that

² Ibid, 245.
we were the only family who lit up the house at night in the villa area. While it is undeniable that my hometown is seeing unprecedented economic growth and rapid urban development, I have mixed feelings when seeing the landscape of the ghost zone. On the one hand, I was grateful that the place where I was born is developing. On the other hand, the empty shell could not stop me from questioning the "homes" that are built nowadays.

Before I moved into the villa, I had seen images of ghost towns in provinces such as Henan in China, but I never knew it would happen in my hometown as well. Having a deep emotional attachment to my hometown, where it exists as an anchor that connects past and present in my life, I attempted to inquire into the phenomenon's societal reasons. The personal is political, and vice versa. It is not only a global architectural problem, but also a complicated issue which involves one's perceptual feeling toward living space and family history. I have always believed that family history could connote a dramatic social change under certain conditions. After a conversation with my father, who had always been a hardworking person in my family, I finally understood his motivation behind purchasing a villa in our hometown: as a teenager, he had dreamt of a utopian villa inspired by an English-Chinese dictionary. This is where the project became interesting and exciting to me: it is not a traditional and conventional documentary project that objectively reflects on the societal reasons behind the ghost town in China, but a project that reveals the intertwinement of the societal context of the ghost town, my lived family story, and my own perception through architectural phenomenology and affect.

Last but not least, *How to Be Satiated in the Dark* is also a project that allows me to understand self-consciousness and self-perception. In particular, the question that I ask myself the most is: what is my positionality in this project? How does my “accumulated mobility” affect

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my place identity? And why is documenting my longing through changing urban architecture so vital to me? By revealing the progress of my self-reflection, while acknowledging the socio-political context, I profoundly review my personal mobile history and explore my consciousness in the project.
**Project Description**

There are two components in *How to Be Satiated in the Dark*: an animated short film and an observational video. The animation is the main body of the project, while the observational video exists as a contextual piece for the viewers to overview the ghost zone’s environment. There are three sections in the animated short film: the memories of my lived experiences in my childhood home, my father’s utopian inspiration for building a villa as a success story, and the experience of moving into the villa. Before the narrative for each section, there is a title and a preface. The titles reflect significant subjects in the three sections: myself, my father, and the villa. Each title is followed by three key words that represent the main characteristics of the section. By tracing my deepest and fragmented unconscious memories of my dreams, childhood experiences, and lived family stories, the animation aims to compare the different psychological affects that the ghost zone and my “original shell” brought to me, hence revealing how my psychological belonging is related to my provenance.

**The Animation: A Dream as Preface in Section I**

The title and the three characteristics for Section I are: Me-Dream, Return, Search. This section, which reveals the phenomenological experience at my childhood home, is composed of a dream, the experience of the power outage, and the after-dinner wonder at my childhood home. The section starts with a dream as a preface, which was so horrific that the images left a deep impression on me even after almost a year. The following preface in Section I clarifies the content of the dream:

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5 See Appendix, I.
In the dream, I told mother that I would like to go home to stay for a night. As a sincere Buddhist, she flatly refused. She said that our home lacks a “sense of humanity”, because it has been empty for so long with no one living in it. She would be worried about my “safety” if I went back home alone. Facing her continuous refusal, I did not return. But instantly, I was transferred into an enormous and empty European castle. In the spaces of long and luxurious hallways, featuring massive chandeliers, I was engulfed in darkness. I was hastily searching for something with a strong desire to find it. A great sense of terror pressed at my heart, compelling me to keep searching for this elusive something.6

It might seem like a short dream. However, the anonymous fear of being pushed to seek an uncertain thing resulted in the dream experience being imbued with suffering.

As a person who dreams a lot, I usually have a habit of documenting my dreams as I believe they disclose my mental state. In the current scientific and technological age, most people are not convinced that the function of a dream is to reveal one’s psychological state. However, for me, I have always believed that dreams could be the revelation of one’s psychological condition. In The Interpretation of Dreams, Sigmund Freud argues that a dream is not purely an illusion or a hallucination; it is a concept that requires interpretation.7 In primitive times, dreams were regarded as a revelation of supernatural beings’ intentions8 until Aristotle mentioned that dream formation is a part of psychology.9 The latter part of Chapter 1 of Freud’s study addresses the psychological peculiarities of dreaming by drawing on German philosopher Heinrich Spitta. Freud writes: “The transformation of an idea into a hallucination is not the only departure of the dream from the more or less corresponding waking thought. From these images the dream creates a situation; it dramatizes an idea [...]”10 It is hard to make manifest some genuine thoughts that exist in my unconscious. As Freud points out, in people’s waking states,

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6 See Appendix, /PREFACE-1/.
8 Ibid, 15.
9 Ibid, 14.
10 Ibid, 118.
their thought and behaviour are repressed by social disciplines such as reason, aesthetic standard, or moral judgement.\textsuperscript{11} Hence, the representation of our mental images in the law of association in the dream is “more obvious and complete than in the waking state.”\textsuperscript{12} In a certain way, the dream of the quest reveals the unresolved feelings and thoughts that I have left to interpret from the perception received from the ghost zone. It resembles the revelation of some unprocessed thought that has long existed in my unconscious.

Since I was a child, the frequent moving experiences have occupied my childhood. The unsettling moving and living experiences have had a great impact on the formation of my place identity, which is a substructure of self-identity\textsuperscript{13}, and has left a confusing sense of uncertainty in my life journey. There is a sense of urgency in my unconscious and compels me to search for something, which is not necessarily a physical object, but a formless sensibility. Having created the dream section in the work as an opening, I wanted to create a sense of lure for the viewer when watching the rest of the animated short film: what exactly am I searching for? Why am I on this frightening journey?

The Animation: The “Original Shell” in Section I

The poetic stories that happened in my two childhood homes follow after the description of the dream: the power outage and the after-dinner promenade with my family. I arranged the scenario of a power outage at the beginning because it echoes the ending, which is also a power outage, but it happened in the ghost zone. One of the questions that I asked myself during the production

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, 134.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
of the MRP was: what is the significance of including poetic stories and images from my childhood homes? Gaston Bachelard’s interrogation of the childhood home in *The Poetics of Space* helped me explore this question. Bachelard points out that it is important for a phenomenologist to find their “original shell” as it is their “first universe.”[^14] The house in which we were born has “engraved with us,” and has allowed us to “participate in this original warmth.”[^15] When we were born into this world, the house was the first intimate space that we were attached to. The intimate corners and some signature smell in the childhood home could form our sense belonging, even though we might move into several different homes while growing up. The memory of the power outage in the house where I was born has, always been associated with my mental image. As a kid, I was always excited when the electricity went out because it was the time when my mother would bring out the oil lamp, and children would sneak out of their home and play around with neighbours while the oil lamp was sparkling in the darkness.

The second story happened in the second childhood home, which I still consider as my “original shell” since it was the place in which most of my childhood memories are embedded. It is an oneiric story, illustrating a casual afternoon promenade. Like any other afternoon, we would head down, wander around, and chat with our neighbours after dinner. I specifically included the poetic images of the “flame-lined, fishbone like cloud”[^16] that I saw when I was lying on the “cooling cement that had been scorched by the sun all day.”[^17] Some viewers might be curious about the association of the poetic images and the ghost zone. To me, those were the precious memories of my childhood home that are engraved in me. It is those phenomenological

[^16]: See Appendix, /NARRATION-1.2/.
[^17]: Ibid.
experiences I had as a child, embedded in my “original shell,” that lead me to question the empty “homes” that are being built day after day in my town.

The Animation: My Father’s Villa Dream in Section II

The title and the three characteristics for Section II are: *Father-Fight, Bitter, Project.*18 This section mainly focuses on introducing my father’s aspiration of owning a villa, which was inspired by an English-Chinese dictionary. My father, who is a hardworking man, is always searching for a fancy house as a sign of ultimate success, as many other fathers were during the late 1990s and 2000s. That is why I decided to include him as a significant figure in the animation: he is not only my father; he is also a reflection of the traditional Chinese father-figure.

The preface shows a two-sentence conversation between my father and I: I ask about his living conditions with his family when he was young. His answer reveals a frugal living situation in his childhood home.19 Later, followed by a short text showing that we moved into the empty villa zone, the animation flashbacks to a story that my father had never told us before: his villa dream from his teenage years. When he was a teenager (in the 1970s), his living conditions in my hometown were poor. One day, his brother gave him an English-Chinese dictionary as a gift. He caught sight of the word “villa” in the dictionary with the picture of a luxury bathtub, living room, and basement. Since then, “the imprint of the villa planted the seed of a dream in his heart.”20 As a hardworking person, he was impressed and made up his mind to purchase such a utopian house in the future. Furthermore, his story subtly reflects a political dimension in the

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18 See Appendix, II.
19 See Appendix, /PREFACE-2/.
20 See Appendix, /NARRATION-2/. 
project: the western fantasy found in an English-Chinese dictionary had a great impact on a hardworking Chinese teenager at that time. The spacious and luxurious villas from the dictionary offer a huge contrast with the text from the preface: that of the family of six “squeezed into a home that was 500 square feet.”

The Animation: The Villa in Section III

The title and the three characteristics for Section III are: Villa-Vain, Cold, Bleached. This section corresponds to the power outage in my childhood at the beginning of the animation. The power outage in the ghost zone, which brought me back to the memory of the power outage in my childhood home, allowed me to realize that we were the only lit up house in that area.

The preface, which works as a hint for the introduction to the ghost zone, was a sentence that encapsulated the phenomenon: “These so-called ‘homes’, do not seem like home anymore.” We, as human beings, perceive home as an intimate space, through the psychological mind and the physical body. As Heidegger mentions, in the relationship between human consciousness and space, space is not merely space; we stay in space while our “mental representations of distant things run through our minds and heads as substitutes for the things.”

I experienced the alienation of my sense of connection and belonging after I moved into the home in the ghost zone. It is a compound perception of my personal subjective experiences within the objective structure of the ghost area. The power outage in my two homes - childhood home and the villa in the ghost zone - brought contradictory phenomenological experiences and

21 See Appendix. /PREFACE-2/.
22 See Appendix. III.
23 See Appendix. /PREFACE-3/.
affects to me. What I attempt to show is that the warmth from the neighbourhood during the blackout in my childhood became disenchanted when the blackout occurred in the ghost zone.

The section ends with a short two-sentence text which not only concludes the current living situation of the ghost zone, but also presents a relationship between my father and the product of his teenage house dream: “Finally, after immense effort, he bought the 3-floor villa inspired by the dictionary. However, few neighbours live nearby, and he rarely lives here himself.” In my opinion, it reflects the common status of Chinese businessmen: they worked so hard to fulfill their life goal, which was owning a luxurious house for their family. Yet, they do not have a chance to live in and appreciate their “home” because they are tremendously busy.

The Observational Video

The observational video, which is composed mostly of stable and tracking shots, is presented as a contextual piece that both reveals the ghost zone’s environment and, accompanies the animation. Its structure is relatively simpler than the animated short film. It is divided into two sections: the exterior of the ghost zone and the interior of the houses. The text of the video comes from two sources: the translation of the advertising banner from the ghost zone and the real estate slogan that I chose to reflect sarcasm. When I headed back in the summer of 2019 for the shoot, I found it ironic to see the existing showroom for the fancy empty shell, which was why I decided to juxtapose the advertising slogan with the video. The text, colour, image, and model in the showroom are so powerful that they could activate people’s imagination towards their future life in a luxurious house, which is also what inspired my father’s villa dream. In fact, no matter

25 See Appendix, /ENDING/.
how wonderful the slogan or images of the future houses may be depicted to the potential buyers, they are actually bubbles of illusion delivered by the real estate market.

In the first section, the video is a combination of stable shots and tracking shots, shooting from outside the houses. The sound of the stable shots is from the natural ambient sound outside of the house. When it moves from the stable shots to the tracking shots, the sound from the construction site and the text (either from the translation of the banner or the chosen real estate slogan) are attached. In the second section, the dolly shots are all from the interior of the house; the text is from the chosen real estate slogan, and the sound remains from the construction site.

The Chinese Socio-historical Context

The term “ghost town” or “ghost city” is an invention of Western media.26 By circulating photographic materials or videos online, the use of the expression “ghost town” as an unsustainable development and as cities “without people in the world’s most populated country”27 has become a “journalistic cliché”.28 To some extent, the criticism rings true because newly built properties exceed demand. Yet, the context of the ghost town in China is much more complex than what the expression “without people” indicates. The official definition and description of the ghost town today remain ambiguous since the phenomenon differs depending on the specific area where the town is located.29 In this section, I will draw on the land policies

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29 Ibid, 1270.
implemented after the Chinese Economic Reform of 1978, which offers the general socio-political background behind the ghost town phenomenon.

*The Pitfalls of Modernization 现代化的陷阱*30, which was published in 1998 in China, was later banned by the Chinese government as it was viewed as an anti-establishment book.31 The author, He Qinglian, who is a Chinese economist, thoroughly analyzes and critiques how the Chinese Economic Reform impacted the political and economic structure in Chinese society.

Market Reform was applied during the Economic Reform, which led to substantial economic growth in China. However, the result was achieved by focusing on efficiency rather than equality under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping.32 This policy has allowed some regions to get rich first, which led to the enormous imbalance between the rich and the poor. That was how corruption in local governments became progressively more serious.33 Going back to the 1950s, Land Reform was performed by the Chinese Communist Party: all land was still controlled and authorized by the state, and citizens needed their approval for purposes of use the land. Until 1986, the “Land Management Law”34 (*tudi guanli fa*) revised the old system, which led to the “land-enclosure movement” and the situation of “frenzy over the economic development zones”35 in the 1990s. This movement showed “huge chunks of land were divided up,”36 and it “was basically carried out by power holders at various administrative levels of the country.”37 The land resources, including the municipal area and the rural land, were enclosed in this movement. In March 1989,

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30 He Qinglian 何清涟. *Xiandaihua de xianjin 现代化的陷阱 [The pitfalls of modernization]* (Beijing: Jinri Zhongguo, 1998), https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=ZGVmYXVsdGRvbWFpbnxjaHV3YWX5ndGpGd4OmY4NjYxNjJk2MGE3MlmlOA.
32 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 57.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
the National People’s Congress altered the amendment that showed “no organization or individual is allowed to occupy, sell or buy it in other form transfer land” by adding a new phrase: “the right to land use can be transferred.”38 Because of the leak of this new policy during the land reform, the corrupted local government and privileged stakeholders who abused the power they owned were able to appropriate the land resources and made immediate profit from this move.39

The irrational land policy has led to “tragedy built upon tragedy as land approved for ‘development’ usually ended up being traded from one party to another without ever being put to productive use.”40 He Qinglian offers examples of various incidents to indicate how the movement led to bizarre phenomena. She mentions the article “Why Were the Garden Luxury Apartment Buildings Demolished?”41, published in 1996 in Beijing qingnian bao (Beijing Youth Daily), which pointed out that fifty luxury apartment buildings were demolished only a few months after they were completed, by the China Huaxing Hebei Industrial Development Company due to the lack of buyers. “Only those apartments that were actually sold had their interiors completed while those left unsold remained nothing but empty shells,”42 said the general manager of Huaxing Company. What is ironic is that the company soon decided to erect an office building on top of the flattened luxury buildings after the demolition. Another example she provides is that large pieces of land in the development area were merely populating the landscape, and “baking in the sun” (shai taiyang), in Changsha in 1995. Needless to say, in a broad sense, these reforms and the policies made an enormous impact on Chinese society. In a narrow sense, drawing on the socio-political context behind the ghost town and my project, the

38 Ibid, 58.
40 Ibid, 67.
41 Ibid, 87.
42 Ibid.
aforementioned cases bring me to ask two crucial questions: how does eco-political reform affect individual families in shaping their understanding of “home”? What would be different for individuals if these policies had not been implemented?

Urbanization in 21st Century China

While there are multiple different types of ghost town in China, in this section, I will touch on the specific phenomenon in my hometown, Donghai, which is located in a rural area in the Pearl River Delta (PRD). In particular, I discuss the problems related to the development of urbanization and rural urbanization that merged after the Chinese Economic Reform (1978).

The process of urbanization in developing countries is quite different from urbanization in developed countries in Europe and North America. In the article “Small Town Development and Rural Urbanization in China,” Gave T. Wang and Xiaobo Hu explicitly discuss rural urbanization, which is a new kind of urbanization that occurred in China, along with the background introduction of the urbanization process in developed countries and developing countries. In developed countries, urbanization was mostly caused by industrialization and technological development during the 19th and early 20th centuries. During the process, there was a great demand for labour in the cities. The workers from rural areas were drawn to the cities due to the availability of manufacturing and services jobs. While it took more than a century for the urbanization process in developed countries to unfold, the large scale of urbanization in most of the developing countries only spanned a few decades. Furthermore, in developing countries,

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44 Ibid.
the development of industrialization and technology is not as fast as the development of urbanization there. As a result, the rural residents moved into the cities not because of the demand for labour in industrialized cities, but because of the hope of pursuing a better life resulting from urbanization.\textsuperscript{46}

The problem of urbanization in China is more intensified than that of most developing countries. There were tremendous surplus labour forces in rural areas because farming was considered one of the main productivity sectors for centuries in traditional China.\textsuperscript{47} Rural residents were prohibited from moving to urban areas unless they had a permanent job there from the 1950s until the 1970s.\textsuperscript{48} Even after the Economic Reform (1978), the surplus labour force still increased significantly, and the ability of large cities to take in the labour force was very limited.\textsuperscript{49} Facing the challenges of the surplus labour force in rural areas, the Chinese government implemented the strategy to develop small towns and urbanize the rural areas, in order to prevent the surplus labour force from flooding into the cities and leaving villages underdeveloped.

Although it is undeniable that the process of rural urbanization has brought enormous benefits to the rural areas, the ghost town seems to serve as evidence of an underlying product of “overurbanization.”\textsuperscript{50} However, it is happening in rural areas instead of cities this time. \textit{Tianya Club}\textsuperscript{51} is one of the earliest online forums that provides a platform for people to comment on Chinese societal issues. In the Economic Forum, the host Youtaobang posted a discussion panel in 2019 titled “What is happening to the gradually expanding ‘ghost town’ of small towns and villages?”

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{46} Ibid.
\bibitem{47} Ibid, 77.
\bibitem{48} Ibid.
\bibitem{49} Ibid, 78.
\bibitem{50} Ibid, 77.
\bibitem{51} Youtaobang, “What is Happening to the Gradually Expanding ‘Ghost Town’ of Small Towns and Villages?” Tianya, July 4, 2019, \url{http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-develop-2415411-1.shtml}.
\end{thebibliography}
villages?”.\textsuperscript{52} It was discussed that a large number of rural residents are flooding out to the cities to seek jobs, while the real estate market is still building considerable living residences without a rational plan. The host states that “[N]ow it has been found that more and more small towns and villages are becoming hollow, and there are fewer and fewer young people in the county. Everyone is employed outside [of town].” He further explains that:

In some small counties and small cities, it is clear that the population continues to flow out, resources are exhausted, and there are few job opportunities, but they are still expanding real estate, building cities, and planning big plans, all of which are to build large urban areas with hundreds of thousands, but there is no thinking about how large the local population is. Ghost cities and empty cities spread in some areas, stemming from the heavy dependence on land finance in some areas; this is how the ghost city was born!\textsuperscript{53}

It is always reasonable for the government to issue policies in the name of providing citizens with the possibility of a better life. However, while the government always proposes fantasy scenarios to the citizens, it should rationally consider the number of new homes in light of the existing population, before they promulgate a new strategy into a city or town.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
Documentary Relevance

The Hybrid Form of Docufiction

It has been almost 90 years since the Scottish documentary pioneer, John Grierson, stated that documentary is the “creative treatment of actuality.”54 In the current rapidly ever-changing digital world, digital media are increasingly pushing the boundaries of the “creative treatment” found in Grierson’s definition. “Traditional documentary” was criticized as “oversimplified” in terms of its aims and strategies, which relied mainly on the “machinic dumbness of copying appearances rather than the creative transformations associated with artfulness.”55 In the postmodern era, the emergence of “new documentary”56 has been rejuvenating the mundane format of traditional documentary. In particular, the format that is implemented in contemporary documentary is not restricted to the traditional ones of photography or film, but expended to lexicons such as reinvented fictional scenarios and collective archive57, mixed-media installation58, and the reconstruction of recorded security footages59, among others. By thematically presenting the authentic and historical documented fact, these fruitful and playful contemporary practices invariably collapse the conventional aesthetic of documentary, as well as redefine the “actuality” from Grierson’s dimension of documentary. Even though there was a common belief that traditional documentary films are “conventionally assumed to portray a direct image of the real,”60 its commitments to non-fiction are being challenged and interrogated consistently today. As contemporary documentarians, how do we respond to the blurred

boundaries between fiction and non-fiction in the digital age? Linda Williams’s response to the
discussions about the truth claims of documentary provides an answer: “[…] films cannot reveal
the truth of events, but only the ideologies and consciousness that construct competing truths—
the fictional master narratives by which we make sense of events.”61

The term “docufiction” is a neologism that first appeared at the beginning of the 21st
century, which embraces the “shifting nature of the fiction-nonfiction border” in documentary
studies.62 While it is a contemporary hybrid form that does not officially fit in Bill Nichols’
concepts of the six “modes” of documentary (expository, observational, interactive, reflective,
performative, and poetic), its definition remains generic in the historical record.63 Yet,
docufiction theorists Rhodes and Springer attempt to differentiate the content of documentary
and the fictional narratives as the latter form involves the “use of invented people, places, and
events, even when such people and events are depicted as belonging to the real world
(Realism).”64

A thought-provoking docufiction installation work in this regard is A Place to Read
(2010) by Victor Burgin. It is an astonishing piece that addresses a local coffee house that was
destroyed and reconstructed into a Western modern hotel complex in the late 1980s.65 In fact,
this incident reflects the Turkish historical moment when the Erdoğan government was
expanding its neoliberal market-driven agenda of replacing cultural sites.66 The design of the
coffee house, Taslik Khave, was based on Turkish conventional Ottoman style while also

doi.org/10.1525/fq.1993.46.3.04a00030.
62 Jean-Pierre Candeloro, “Docu-Fiction: Convergence and Contamination between Documentary Representation and Fictional
64 Gary Don Rhodes and John Parris Springer, “Introduction,” in Docufictions: Essays on the Intersection of Documentary and
incorporating Western modernism of the 1940s.\textsuperscript{67} This meaningful traditional house not only signified that Turkey was able to incorporate Western elements while not compromising its own national identity (in the World War II period), but it was also a democratic statement of accessibility for anyone to view the natural landscape from the building. In contrast, people would have to spend a lot of money in this renovated hotel complex to enjoy the landscape today. Burgin not only assembled photographic images from the research and rendered the coffee house, but also utilized multiple persons’ voices to narrate the fragmentary story (from a dystopian science fiction book) of the parallel world in the coffee house.\textsuperscript{68} By using rooted documented factual materials from various sources, he subtly brought the torn down historical house back to reality, as if mourning the Turkish culture which was substituted by the market-oriented Western globalism. Conceptually and strategically, \textit{A Place to Read} is a stunning piece that intertwines the existing documentary record and the invented narrative materials that aim to rebuild the defunct coffee house from the existing past to the inexistent present.

Burgin’s art pieces are mostly about the politico-historical aspect of the building. During designing his art piece, he significantly considered the experience of affect, or the “apparent lack of it, in our first encounter with a place.”\textsuperscript{69} Architectural phenomenology, which refers to physically perceiving one’s consciousness within the built environment, is also examined in the digital fabrication creative process of my hometown. The expression “‘ideological chora’”\textsuperscript{70} mentioned in Burgin’s interview reflects the underlying intention of my project and the use of technology within it: “the subjective space of associations in which the fragmentary dispersals of elements in the cinematic heterotopia may become reassembled and reconfigured has much in

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid, 98.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid, 98-99.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid, 206.
common with the phenomenological and algorithmic-parametrical space of 3D computer modelling.”71 In my animated film, the perceptual experience of constructing the 3D building is inseparable from my physical subjective association that was affected by the mundane building. The helplessness of searching for an uncertain longing is similar to the disappointment of virtually moving inside the abstract and pixelated computer-generated buildings: I am wandering inside the pixelated villa which is within the town where I was born; yet, I was still physically detached from the town through clicking the mouse.

The notion of memory also plays a major role in Burgin’s work. He references Walter Benjamin’s discussion about how the activation of our memory accesses history, instead of showing history “as it really was.”72 This corresponds to Linda Williams’ aforementioned comment on how ideologies within documentary artwork construct the truth of the events. Similarly, my animated film is not intended to show the historical fact “as it really was.”73 By intimately accessing the memory of my family history, I brought to light the central idea of my project – the built environment we are living in is problematic today. In the process of assembling the images from Google Maps, I transformed my childhood home back into reality, and created comparable affective dimensions that the Turkish Coffee house simulation provokes in the viewers. They were buildings that were both designed virtually, but based in reality. We (the Turkish citizens and I) both perceive them as familiar structures that connect with our place identity; yet, they exist as virtually detached and distantly built environments that are inaccessible. Lastly, the representation of the abstract and pixelated point cloud in my animation is similar to my memory process: they are unstable and obscure in the unconscious, yet once the

71 Ibid.
72 Ibid, 208.
73 Ibid.
memory is recalled by chance, they become more and more clear even though they are still fragmented and formless.

Another influential piece foregrounds the emergence of three supernatural protagonists who intricately narrate their personal memories and experiences. The docufiction oneiric style work, *Morakot (Emerald)* (2007), is an 11-minute short film installed in a gallery, created by the well-known Thai independent filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul. This film addresses a historical event by using the ongoing narrative voices of three souls, flying around the interior of a hotel in ruins, *Morakot*, which is an abandoned place offered to the Cambodian refugees who fled Vietnamese colonialism, at the time of the 1980s eco-social crisis in Bangkok. The source material for the narrative soundtrack is from the Danish writer Karl Gjellerup’s experimental Buddhist novel *The Pilgrim Kamanita* (1906), in which the protagonists are reborn as stars, recite one another stories for centuries until they reach nirvana. With the camera slowly zooming in, the occasional dusty flowing pillow adds a sense of fictionality. The heads of the three protagonists sometimes emerge as translucent in the scene, which denotes their nonhuman quality. Through this fantastic fictive imagery, Weerasethakul tells a story that seems illusory, yet subtly connotes the historically documented fact. The ongoing personal voices, which often provide a disruption that pulls the viewer back to reality, serves as autobiographical memoirs.

The docufiction and sci-fi essay film, *After Scarcity* (2018), traces the tremendous impact of cybernetics (the 1950s-1980s), which aimed to experiment a fully-automated planned national economy in the Soviet Union. Working with seven other colleagues, the artist Bahar Noorizadeh seeks to reveal the failure of the political-historical system, which shows inadequacy and inefficiency in reality. Cybernetics in the Soviet Union was a campaign promoting control

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and communication mechanism, and it was initially influenced by America. While it brought public criticism in the 1950s because of machine thinking replacing humanism, the Soviet Union later secretly pursued military computing while accusing the West for pursuing it. Though, the government ultimately found this computerized ideological agenda became a “bureaucratic nightmare” during the process of economic centralization in the 1970s.

This agenda, which led to “global warfare, environmental disasters and rampant financialization,” is suggested by Noorizadeh to “recalibrate, redesign or rewire.” By adopting a new documentary aesthetic, LiDAR technology, and a real-time 3D laser scanning system, Noorizadeh presents an abstract and fictive visual language, yet a clear storytelling narration which touches on the environmental disasters that resulted from the plan. In fact, the aesthetics in this work reflects complications between fictions and functions: the artist is concerned with how the fictional quality of the design plays against the practical functionality of the realization. During the design process, the artist inquired into how the narrative design could possibly retrieve what is absent in the historical record, and how temporal abstractions in design might augment the documented political situations.

Comparably, my animated film embraces the docufiction form, which is an emerging documentary form in contemporary practices. At the time when I graduated from OCAD University, I was looking for alternative media to expand my visual languages as I was no longer passionate about photography, which was the medium that I always used at that time. When I watched the essay film After Scarcity, at Mercer Union Gallery in 2018, I was intrigued by the

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77 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
point cloud visual effect in it. Later, I decided to produce my animation in a similar visual style to this essay film.

While my animated film presents the rooted documented familial events and social background of the ghost zone, I attempt to remix fictional elements by applying collective materials such as my spiritual dream and the eerie sound effects from the preface in Section I, as well as the abstracted and pixelated visual language in the overall film. By combining the urge of questing, the mystery of Buddhism of avoiding the empty home, and the terror perceived in the huge uncanny vacant castle, the atmosphere becomes a fictive folding from the past dream and the forthcoming unknown. During the process of retrieving one’s dreams or memories, what makes the information reliable and valid? Do the dreams and memories categorize as fiction or reality? As Freud discussed in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, when people try to recall their dream, they will unconsciously fill it up with their imagination - from the existing visual materials collected from their mind- in order to make the dream more coherent and comprehensible.80 The animation later follows with the sound of my narrative and the ambient sound effects from my childhood home, which immediately drags the audience from the fictive dream back into the “reality.” By combining the invented materials, including the horrific dream and the unusual form of photographic representation (the point cloud), with the following personal narrative that depicts familial events, I constructed a docufictional animated film that intends to reveal my uneasy psychological experience perceived from the ghost zone.

Autoethnography

When the strategies of ethnography are applied to conventional documentary work, the researchers / artists tend to focus on collecting the facts, preserving meticulously people’s behaviour, and (re)constructing the arguments from the materials. These strategies have been criticized because so-called objective truth could not capture the “lived experience unproblematically.” In the contemporary age, more and more scholars and artists are in favour of autoethnography, which is a “reconceptualisation of ethnography” as personal narrative has gained increasing scholarly validity as a knowledge system for social research. The central component of my project builds on the scholarly interest in autoethnography insofar as it reflects the understanding of my intellectual and emotional capability toward the intimated homes that I have lived in, in order to question the mundane architectural spaces that are being constructed in my hometown, in an autoethnographically act. I not only see myself as an artist who is performing an ethnographer’s role in studying my familial anecdotes from my retentive memories, and the builders’ continually insatiable demands, but also as an autoethnographer who analyzes my personal past experiences by applying the architectural phenomenological approach.

In the video Housewheel (2003), the nomadic Afghani artist Lida Abdul illustrates home as a fragile and unsettling place by her simple gestural performance: while walking and running in the neighbourhood of Los Angeles where she settled down after fleeing Kabul, she dragged a wooden house where two little dolls were placed inside until the house was scattered and destroyed into pieces. Facing the threat from the Soviet Invasion, Abdul had to flee her home

82 Ibid, 477.
83 Ibid, 477.
84 Ibid, 478.
city Kabul, and she has lived in different countries since she was six years old.\textsuperscript{86} The performance video was created during the Taliban regime when Abdul was living in the United States. A Chinese idiom, \textit{liulishisuo} (流离失所), describes a situation when a person has to leave their home and lose a stable accommodation. This is exactly what emerged in my mind when considering this contemplative but straightforward piece. The gesture of dragging the house is akin to pulling a suitcase when travelling to places. Even though the piece did not imply any spoken narrative, the performance itself already narrates the subjective reflection of the artist’s nomadic life, which is akin to autoethnography. It genuinely conveys her sense of home as a figure tied to instability, unpredictability, vulnerability, and hence she defamiliarizes the home as a fragile and “unhomely”\textsuperscript{87} habitation.

In most of Abdul’s work, not only do identity and displacement play a significant role through her gesture, but the built environment is also a central topic she aims to portray. By confronting Afghanistan’s destructed monumental landscape in her visual work, she constantly questions the nation’s image in the West represented as “‘other’/ ‘enemy’/ ‘terrorists’”\textsuperscript{88}, and hence aims to voice Afghanistan’s own authentic story that the West has failed to depict. Likewise, while the ghost town is represented in the Western media mainstream as a ghastly city of abandoned architecture where no one is living, I intend to illustrate a vivid dimension of the ghost town. It is a complex phenomenon that does not apply to a whole city, which is described as an abandoned town; rather, it could apply to sectional complexes in a prosperous town.

\textsuperscript{86} Christopher Olson, “Lida Abdul,” \textit{Border Crossings} 27, no. 2 (May 2008): 90.
\textsuperscript{87} Claudette Lauzon, \textit{The Unmaking of Home in Contemporary Art} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 104.
Countering the images of similar “journalist cliché”\textsuperscript{89} that the news circulates, my MRP aims to subtly decipher the impact of the Chinese Reform and rural urbanization by depicting the significance of an individual family’s anecdotes. Instead of repeating what has been depicted in mass culture, \textit{How to Be Satiated in the Dark} used an autobiographical strategy of revealing familial stories. At the same time, it also draws the audiences’ attention to the ghost town phenomenon.

\textbf{Cinematic Language and Installation Art}

Even though the sequential structure of the observational video is comparably simpler than the animated film, its cinematic language was influenced by contemporary visual art as well. In reverse chronology, the video work \textit{Provenance} focuses on the global trade journey of furniture made in the Indian city of Chandigarh.\textsuperscript{90} The origins of the furniture were part of the Swiss architect Le Corbusier’s ambitious project, which designated for the states of Punjab and Haryana after India received independence from the United Kingdom in 1947.\textsuperscript{91} The chairs and desks, designed by Corbusier and his cousin Pierre Jeanneret for Chandigarh, have recently reappeared at American and European auction houses. The film starts with the present status of the furniture in wealthy apartments in New York, London, Paris salons, Belgian villas, etc. Moving back chronologically, the film traces the journey of the furniture through revealing the documentation in different warehouse auction centres of the world, the catalogue and restoration


process in the furniture cargo ship containers, and ultimately the origins of all the destructive furniture in Chandigarh.  

With the intertwinement of the graceful stable shots and self-reflexive tracking long shots, *Provenance* directs us to the stunning views of the architectures and the Corbusier furniture. The eschewed dialogue or interviews and the few actors in the film bring forward pieces of cultural furniture as the main protagonists. The cinematic language in this film, which elegantly depicts the life of the furniture, resonates with me and provides the visual reference for the cinematic approach to my observational video. In a similar way, my work applies static shots and smooth tracking shots to home in on the uncanny architecture rather than the luxurious. Not only the graceful visuals, but also the cultural message engraved in *Provenance* served as a great inspiration for the observational video. By revealing the accumulative montage of the heritages, which was a technique categorized as “documentary realism”, *Provenance* engages and examines the speculative tour of the art market and its Western aesthetic influences. In my observational video, underlying the cinematic visualization, the real estate advertising slogans function as a sense of sarcasm, implicitly invoking the so-called homes existed as the fantasized bubble. By juxtaposing the quoted real estate slogan with the eerie built environment, I am inquiring about the existing complexity of our cultural aesthetic: what does it mean to promote a European architecture in a small rural town in China, with the advertising line such as “Eastern Venice”?  

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92 Ibid.  
The immersive installation *The Loudspeaker and the Tower*\(^{94}\), by Cairo-based architect Manar Moursi, consists of diverse digital medias. A video projection, which reveals the interview surrounding the topic of contradiction between the religious minaret and its unauthorized practical function, was placed on the room’s righthand side. A neon lighting sculpture, existing as a vertical and minimal metaphor of the apparatus of the minaret, was installed in the centre of the room. On the left-hand side, there was a spinning circular structure with photographs of Cairo’s religious architecture filmed by a video-camera, which accompanies a television on the side and plays the real time recorded image of the circling structure. Her multi-media installation home in on various questions regarding the conflict between citizens and buildings: “How do residents of Cairo challenge authoritative architecture and urban master plans, while creating new meanings for public space and land use? By that token, what shapes can we abstract from these biographical networks of the megalopolis?”\(^{95}\) At night, the minaret exists as sanctioned structures that provide places for worship. As long as the day comes, the residences would improvise the sacred space, as an “ad hoc response”\(^{96}\), into complex communities such as mounted home, corner stores, unpredictable venues, hotels, etc.

Overall, as a playful attempt, the installation *The Loudspeaker and the Tower* dedicatedly creates a dreamlike aura, which attracts the viewers’ attention before they delve into the societal theme of the project. My installation is an attempt to bring a sense of gaiety by recalling the readers’ childhood memories, but meanwhile supported by the intention to provoke their phenomenological contemplation via self-perception and the living space. Ultimately, the viewers would start noticing and comprehending the connection and contradiction between themselves and the surrounding lived environment.


\(^{95}\) Ibid.

\(^{96}\) Ibid.
Methodology

Pre-production: Arriving at the Topic

When I presented my MRP in December of 2018, I was challenged by a professor who suggested not to make it “too nostalgic.” Not until my second presentation to the faculty before my trip back to China in the summer of 2019 did I realize what that sentence meant. In the presentation, I mentioned that my MRP would not be too political, which led to a comment from the professor who later responded: “Nothing is not political.” Indeed, everything is political, but it does not mean that a nostalgic work could not be political. My previous artwork tended to focus on the intimate side of human affective response, which might not sound “political.” However, I am also a person who is sensitive to the relationship between the living environment and personal emotions, which leads me to explore how a phenomenon such as unbridled urbanization impacts my place identity and the conception I have of my hometown.

Arriving at the MRP’s main topic, which is the ghost town phenomenon in my hometown, the initial impact on me was my affective responses toward my provenance. However, the more I delved into the research, the more I became aware of the socio-political reasons that led to the phenomenon. Hence, before my trip back to China in the summer of 2019, I finalized the theme of the project: Tracing my sense of continuity and belonging or unbelonging, through the changing architecture, in relation to the place where I came from—my hometown, Donghai, in Southern China. Specifically, I attempted to answer the following questions: Do we construct the place we live or does the place construct us? What constitutes the ideology of home to family members? How does a lived family life reflect the socio-political gaze?
Architectural Phenomenology, Affect, Mobility, and the “Uncanny”

During the research process, I realized that my long-lasting discomfort with the man-made empty residences, is related to my embodied phenomenological responses in architectural space. As the branch of philosophy that closely examines phenomena, phenomenology, studies the “conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first person point of view.” In The Poetics of Space, Bachelard conveys how the phenomenological approach enables one to feel affective responses to architectural places, especially home. As an intimate dwelling for humans, the home enables us to perceive sensory experiences within architectural spaces. The phenomenological experience of my childhood home, constituted in my memory is so vivid that it brings me to question the “homes” that are being built in the ghost zone. In my project, what I am representing is not an objective space; however, it is space perceived through memory and perception. The empty shell, which is supposed to be the "home" containing the notion of intimacy, is continuously being irrationally constructed in the ghost zone.

Architectural phenomenology is a discipline that reflects “the experience of architectural space”, “the role of the various senses in our perception of the built world”, and “the question of what it means for human beings to inhabit the world.” It emerged in the second half of the 20th century, when the built environment increasingly brought a sense of disquiet to people. Jasper Van de Vijver has used Christian Norberg-Schulz's idea of “loss of place”, which concerns human existential experience within the built environment. What has been lost from the built environment, according to Norberg-Schelz, is related to the situation when a human does not “belong to a meaningful totality”, and becomes “meaningless”, “wordless”, and “homeless” for

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99 Ibid, 297.
100 Ibid.
their experiential existence, and hence “loses his own identity.”\textsuperscript{101} By combining Husserl and Norberg-Schelz’s theory of architectural phenomenology, Vijver points out that “everyday lifeworld’ in the sense that Husserl defined it- a totality of concrete things rather than abstract elements - is ‘lost’ due to the inability of contemporary architecture to construct meaningful places.”\textsuperscript{102} With regard to my project, “meaningful places”\textsuperscript{103} have failed to be constructed within the ghost zone, which resulted in the incomprehensible phenomenological experiences that I had within the bizarre architectural spaces. The sense of “loss of place”\textsuperscript{104} has occupied my experiential existence, and I barely felt a sense of belonging from “a meaningful totality”\textsuperscript{105} while experiencing the residential architecture. While those buildings were meant to be built for creating one’s existential experiences in the so-called “home”, they hardly achieve the notion of “meaningful built place.”\textsuperscript{106}

In addition to architectural phenomenology, the theories on affect in relation to the experience of mobility and place are another crucial framework for my MRP. The power of the affective dimension of places is “first and foremost the creation of a structure of feeling.”\textsuperscript{107} A study shows that “one of the most significant affective states associated with the experience of place and mobility is that of belonging—or not belonging—to the bodies, spaces, or territories one encounters in that mobility.”\textsuperscript{108} Hence, the affective response to space is a huge part of one’s sense of belonging or non-belonging.\textsuperscript{109} These passages convey most of my affective states

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid, 297-298.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid, 298.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid, 297.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid, 298.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid, 341.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.
associated with my mobility experiences. Even though my constant moving experiences are not explicitly noted in my project, they are part of the constitution of my belonging or non-belonging to the places I have inhabited. Furthermore, the concept of the state of non-belonging is significantly related to my project. Most of the studies have covered the relationship between the dimension of belonging and the actual places, but they barely mention the state of non-belonging. In fact, they should not be three separate concepts; belonging and non-belonging are interchangeable and free-flowing, and correspond to each other. The mobility that affects my non-belonging has led me to rediscover and seek for belonging within places.

After all, it is the home within the ghost town that led me to the experience of the “uncanny” - a Freudian term describing the “class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar.” Specifically, Freud summarizes the uncanny as the type of experience in adulthood that “reminds us of earlier psychic stages, of aspects of our unconscious life, or of the primitive experience of the human species.” The first study of the “uncanny” was by E. Jentsch, who described it in German as unheimlich. The opposite of unheimlich is heimlich (also heimlich, heinielg), which originally meant “belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, intimate, comfortable, homely, etc.” In short, the word unheimlich indicates “lack of orientation” when it is associated with the word uncanny. To fully investigate such a psychoanalytically charged term is not my intention here. However, it is worth mentioning that, the psychical process of the “uncanny” not only describes my perceptual affect of living in the ghost zone, but also explains the resulting psychological impact I felt - the dream

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that I included in the preface to Section I. The theory of the “uncanny” shows that the unfamiliar feeling arises from within the familiar, then the unconscious produces an internal conflict that it could not factor into its original category.\footnote{XELASOMA, “The Psychology of the Uncanny,” Nov 6, 2018, video, 9:35, \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WsHkssV4cvQ&t=423s}.} Likewise, living in the ghost zone, the constitution of the “uncanny” emerged as I perceived the unfamiliar within the familiar. Because I was staying in the space I was used to (my hometown), I perceived the sense of intimacy and familiarity; yet, at that moment, the phenomenological experience that was responding to the empty shell felt like the unfamiliar. The overall disorientation affect that has accompanied me led me to the dream I had: hastily seeking a feeling of familiarity / certainty within the uncertainty that has long inhabited me over a long period.

**Animation**

In traditional Chinese culture, it is believed that once a person dies, they will journey through the significant events of their life within their memory and revisit their home on the seventh day of their death. Initially, I aimed to depict the perspective of a ghost, who is returning and looking for a home in the ghost zone. However, due to the lack of technical expertise in animation, and the faculty’s comments indicating that they could not relate the concept of the cultural belief to the ghost town, I decided to only imply it as an inspirational idea and keep the project as simple as possible.
Visual: Point Cloud Animation

During production, the self-learning process of the point cloud animation was one of the obstacles that I faced. I was greatly inspired by the visual style of After Scarcity\textsuperscript{114} before I started the project. In the video, people and architecture were constituted by point clouds as if they existed in a fictional world. I have always been interested in fictional subjects and dreamlike visual artwork. Soon, I was galvanized to explore this appealing visual representation for my project. Even though it was a time-consuming process in terms of self-teaching, I still really enjoyed the journey of exploring this fresh visual language. The unusual form of the point cloud in my three-session docufictional animation is accomplished by photogrammetry, which is the digital simulation process of reconstructing the object or landscape by assembling photographic materials. The sources of the photographs for photogrammetry are from the ghost zone, the Google map images of my childhood home, and the images in my father’s dictionary. The production allows me to rethink my ever-changing relationship with the apparatus (physical or virtual) in two aspects: the indexicality of photography and the position of the camera.

Firstly, the possibility of photographic indexicality is expanded in my lexicon. Indexicality in traditional documentary photography, which is the “decisive moment” produced from the camera, shows the instant moment of crisis to the reader. Not until the emergence of computer simulation did it challenge the single dimension of the aforementioned indexicality. As Victor Burgin discusses in an interview, in the digital age we should constantly redefine indexicality in relation to digital photography in a wider sense beyond what has been delimited by media theorists.\textsuperscript{115} During my digital exploration, one of my strategies was to create moving


images from the photogrammetry of my family portrait and the images in the dictionary. The indexicalities of it are consolidated by various dimensions: the indexicality of the original photograph itself; the indexicality of the process during the creation of photogrammetry; and the indexicality of the movement of the virtual camera in the computer software. For me, photographic indexicality is neither from a singular dimension, nor directly representable from the image. It ought to be something similar to Roland Barthes’ concept of “punctum”\textsuperscript{116} – a psychological process that is registered from the readers’ consciousness, yet in a multi-dimensional aspect. By including the intersecting representation of indexicalities in photogrammetry, I endeavour to arouse the readers’ sensory affect and “prick”\textsuperscript{117} them in the image environment I created.

Furthermore, the position of the camera (physical and virtual) challenges the boundary of photography as traditional 2D material. In fact, I consider my animated film as several forms of photographs that move in a 3D space. While the virtual camera is slowly moving away from the focus of the 2D image point-cloud, there is a subtle perception between photography and cinema in the work. Cinematic heterotopia, a term discussed in the book The Remembered Film by Victor Burgin, means “a hybrid material and imaginary space in which we encounter a heterogeneous variety of fragments of cinema beyond the confines of the movie theatre.”\textsuperscript{118} While I was repositioning the camera as an apparatus within computer-generated practices, the process took me into investigating the divergent structure from the mainstream media. Such an exploration of the alternative is called “uncinematic” by Burgin. Is my animation considered cinema, or cinema of photographic work? I suggest that as artists and cultural critics, we ought

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid, 202.
not to be confined by the general representation of the idea that people associate with the mainstream media culture. The space-time navigation in the animation redefines and reformulates my conception of photography and cinema. By placing the apparatus and composing a narrative optical event virtually, I seek to look at the history of the camera in expanded perspectives.

Changing My Narration

When I was creating the animation, I faced a challenging comment during the final critique in December 2019. A professor, who had not seen my work before, commented that he had a hard time connecting my personal history to the revelation of the ghost zone. Even though I understood his attempt at providing critical feedback, it took me some time to consider giving up on my narration. After I headed back for the second shoot in December of 2019, I was debating if the narration should be replaced by passages from the book *The Pitfalls of Modernization*119, which criticizes the Economic Reform in China. With critical passages from the book, it would not be a sentimental piece that revealed my childhood memory toward my hometown anymore.

Upon returning back from the trip, during conversations with some artists, they expressed that they could relate to my work and encouraged me to insist on the idea even though a few viewers could not understand it. A visual artist is similar to an author who is writing a novel, and the interpretation is left to the reader. In “The Death of the Author”, Roland Barthes argues that reading assigns one single interpretation to the text based on the author's identity and

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119 He Qinglian 何清涟, *Xiandaihua de xianjin* 现代化的陷阱 [The pitfalls of modernization] (Beijing: Jinri Zhongguo, 1998), [https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=ZGVmYXVsdGRvbWFpbnxjaHV3YW5ndGFpGd4OmY4NjYxNjk2MGE3MjlmOA](https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=ZGVmYXVsdGRvbWFpbnxjaHV3YW5ndGFpGd4OmY4NjYxNjk2MGE3MjlmOA).
experience.\textsuperscript{120} He insisted that a reader ought to separate the text from its creator. He states: "Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing."\textsuperscript{121} I agree with Barthes’ idea that the reader should separate the text from the author, as audiences who come from various backgrounds will comprehend the artwork from their own perspectives.

Unquestionably, an artist should be responsible for the content they create, but to keep every single viewers' interpretation in line with the artist's intention for their work is another story. Once the artist puts their work in the public realm, they are leaving the art to perform by itself and be interpreted by viewers. Yet, as a creator, even though it is difficult to expect everyone's full comprehension of my work, I still attempt to adjust my work so that the audience could understand my intention as much as possible.

During the exploratory phase, I attempted to forget about all the exterior voices and revisit my initial intuition when I created the project. After much thought, I relocated the primary intention that drove me to this project: the uneasiness that I encountered in my architectural phenomenological experience within the ghost zone. I realized that my project would not be a conventional documentary, so I decided to keep my narration as it was. In the plot of the animation, I illustrate the conflicting psychological effects by comparing two power outage scenarios in two places: my childhood home and the home in the villa zone. Some individuals argue that it is globalization and modernization that cause my psychological reaction toward the power outage at the ghost zone. They believe that living in a modern condo will drive me to similar disappointments. I was interested in how the audiences rationally reflect on the causality between an objective geographical phenomenon and an individual's psychological and perceptual


\textsuperscript{121}Ibid, 142.
affect. Referencing David Hume’s philosophy, Eric Matthews states that "the idea of causality should not be considered as based on reason, as a rational intuition into real connection in the world, but a rising from our own habits of thinking." What I am portraying is not a scientific and rational approach to study my perceptual connection to the world. Rather, I attempt to illustrate how my collective experiences over time could respond to the dimension of space that I have long been attached to.

**Strategies & Concepts**

During the creation of the animation, I asked myself frequently: how can I create the uncanny experience for the viewers and, transmit a similar perception that I had at the ghost zone? To achieve that, I have added sound effects, which help to support the theme significantly. Sound, which shapes our understanding of the world, is a powerful echo carried within us. Needless to say, producing ambient sound to accompany the visual image is not an easy task. Yet, the biggest challenge for me was to create sound that existed in my mental image in my dream, which aimed to resonate with the viewers. During multiple memory recalls from the dream, I attempted to reexperience it through my mental image. All that I could perceive is a sense of unsettling. Grasping at that feeling, I created the eerie perceptual sound effects of the uncanny in order to put the viewers’ mind in the unfamiliar architectural structures, and perceive my similar uneasiness when I was looking for the unknown thing in the dream.

Furthermore, the text is also one of the significant concepts in the animation. One strategy that I used is that I left every “home” mentioned in the subtitle as a “[ ]”. Not only did I

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leave it as “[ ]” in the text, but I also created a break in the narration every time I need to mention “home” in my voice-over. Strategically, I created a playful interaction with the audience, to draw their attention to the blank space of “[ ]” and the silence in the voice-over. There is one exception, which I left in and highlighted in red, in the preface to Section III: “These so-called ‘[ ]’ do not seem like home anymore.”\textsuperscript{123} It is the one and only place where the word “home” appears in the subtitles. The red also refers to the word “place” in the caption mentioned at the beginning and the ending: “Is this the place?”\textsuperscript{124} and “We were the only lit up [ ] in this place.”\textsuperscript{125} The 3rd red text serves as if the answer to the semiotic riddle: This is the ‘place’ that disoriented me to search for the ‘thing’ hastily all the time. With the combination of colour and text, I aim to add a refreshing dimension to pique the viewer’s curiosity: what is the place or home that she is looking for, and how is this place or home different from any other?

**Observational Video**

In the observational video, the stable and the tracking shots, as well as the text from the real estate slogan, represent the empty shells from the ghost zone. Here, I intended to document these uninhabited spaces which were originally built for living. I eschew dialogue and actors because I hope the viewers perceive the circumstance as it was, without comments disrupting a sense of the uninhabited environment. Visually, I was explicitly inspired by the cinematic language of the video piece Provenance\textsuperscript{126} by the installation artist Amie Siegel. Siegel uses numerous stable and tracking shots to create the poetic environment of the furniture in her film. After researching the

\textsuperscript{123} See Appendix, /PREFACE-3/.
\textsuperscript{124} See Appendix, /NARRATION-1.1/.
\textsuperscript{125} See Appendix, /NARRATION-3/.
technical elements of executing the shots, I used slow dolly shots for the interior of the house, which corresponds to the slow drone footage that I shot from the exterior of the house during the summer trip in 2019.

Initially, my plan for the sound was to leave the ambient sound as it was. After my exploration of placing the real estate slogan in, it created a sarcastic dimension to the piece, which inspired me to adjust the sound. I decided to add the sound from the construction site to add more intensity. The construction site sound appears every time the text appears. The intertwinements of the ambient sound and the construction sound is my attempt to send a message: it depicts the intense darkness / corruption beyond what you see / hear in the space.

Installation

My intended installation, *How to Be Satiated in the Dark*, is comprised of a monitor displaying the observational video depicting the eerily empty shell, and the three-channel animated short film. To let the audience better comprehend the realistic circumstance of the ghost zone that I depicted in the animation, it is necessary for them to watch the observational video before they perceive the animation. Ideally, I hope for the viewers to initially watch the observational video on a monitor, in order to have an overall visual context of the ghost zone. After they get a sense of the environment, they will walk into a room where the three-channel animation will be displayed.

There will be two high quality speakers positioned on both sides of the animation, as sound is a significant component. To avoid a clash between the sound of the animation and that of the observational video, headphones will be placed under the monitor for the sound of the
latter. A curtain will separate the three-channel animation and the observational video, to better enhance the viewing experience.

Due to COVID-19, the physical installation has been arranged as an online exhibition. It will be presented as a physical exhibition at 401 Richmond in the near future. Images of the envisioned installation appear below:

Qirou Yang, *Installation Mock-up #1*, July 2020, Digital Render, Toronto
Qirou Yang, *Installation Mock-up #2*, July 2020, Digital Render, Toronto

Qirou Yang, *Installation Mock-up #3*, July 2020, Digital Render, Toronto
Conclusion

When I started the program, I did not intend to produce a politically relevant MRP. However, upon completing both the visual project and the research paper, I constantly ask myself: how have I changed since entering the Master’s program in Documentary Media? The biggest reward is that I am progressively sensitive to the political stakes around me now. *How to Be Satiated in the Dark* is a project that engages with the discussion of the Reform and Opening-up era, which was a period that led to tremendous change in Chinese society. Comprehending the whole socio-economic structure during that historical period significantly enables me to enhance and reshape my cultural identity. In fact, I feel myself more “Chinese” than before. Shamefully, I did not know much about the political and historical facts about my own country previously. I would often say “I am not a political person.” Even though politics and history classes are part of our mandatory classes until entering university, they are fields that are similar to mathematics or science, that is, disciplines that we have to study only to pass the compulsory exam, instead of studying them because we are genuinely interested. Some friends have told me that they do not know anything about politics, and they do not care either. Indeed, part of the reasons that cause this kind of indifference is that the Chinese education system has trained some of us to treat politics as a mere academic discipline, which has resulted in some graduates becoming uninterested in politics. However, politics is not something that is remote from our personal life; it should be something in our blood.

Even though the saying the “personal is political” is a bit cliché, it is indeed true. Even Guy Debord’s psychogeography or Martin Heidegger’s notion of dwelling, are imbued with politics. Psychogeography is famous for its playful strategy of (re)discovering the mundane and bourgeois city through examining the spectacular society in which “advanced forms of
commodity consumption”\textsuperscript{127} have dominated. Heidegger, who is a pioneer of architectural phenomenology, did not only focus on the poetics of building, but more importantly, his concept of dwelling emphasizes the role of architecture within society. The symposium “Building Dwelling Thinking” (1951) actually happened during the housing shortage after World War II, and he aimed to question the built environment in society through a broader understanding of dwelling from humanity’s perspective.\textsuperscript{128}

The biggest challenge for me is not to be disrupted by the comments from the instructors. There are differences to be made between influences, inspirations, and distractions. And what the comments mean to us depend on how we perceive them. Needless to say, the academic critiques indeed provide us with a fresh perspective to examine our work. However, it is important to consider absorbing the right amount of comments, because at the end, if we keep working on something that originated from intuitive thought, the work will come out naturally and be comprehensible to the viewers.

Even though the initial intention was to install in the gallery, at this stage, I see the animated film as potential to develop into a ten-minute’ short film. The next step, after COVID, will be installing the work in a physical gallery. Placing the artwork in the public realm offers the artists the chance to reconsider their long-term project in a contemporary setting. Because, at the end of the day, artistic and cultural practitioners are not merely producing work for themselves. The final achievement should be shared to enrich society.

Word count: 11674

Appendixes

Script of the Animated Film

I

I
Me

夢，歸，尋

Dream, Return, Search

/PREFACE-1/

In the dream, I told mother that
I would like to go [ ] to stay for a night.
As a sincere Buddhist, she flatly refused.
She said that [ ] lacks a “sense of humanity”,
because it has been empty for so long with no one living in.
She would be worried about my “safety” if I went back home alone.
Facing her continuous refusal, I did not return.

But instantly,
I was transferred into an enormous and empty European castle.
In the spaces of long and luxurious hallways,
featuring massive chandeliers,
I was engulfed in darkness.
I was hastily searching for something with a strong desire to find it.
A great sense of terror pressed at my heart, compelling me to keep searching for this elusive something.

/\NARRATION-1.1/

Is this the place?

When there was a blackout, mother would bring out the oil lamp, place it onto the wooden table, and go back to her housework.

If the lamp was out of oil, we would visit the neighbour’s to borrow some.

This is the place where I was born.

/\NARRATION-1.2/

父親在銀行的工作升職後，政府給了他這個[ ]
When father got a job promotion at the bank, the government issued this [ ] to him.

I remember one summer evening when we went down to enjoy the cool night air after dinner.

Darkness, had not yet seized the still orange sky.

I laid on the cooling cement that had been scorched by the sun all day.

Staring up at the flame-lined, fishbone like cloud that rested amidst the vast sky.
II

父

Father

拼，苦，望[ ]

Fight, Bitter, Project [ ]

/PREFACE-2/

我：“那时候，你住在一個什麼樣的[ ]？”

父：“我們一家六口住在大概 50 平方米的[ ]裡。”

Me: “Back in that time, what kind of [ ] were you living in?”
Father: “As a family of six, we squeezed into a [ ] that was 500 square feet.”

/BACKGROUND INTRODUCTION/

In 2017,
my family moved into a new house inside a villa section which contains 48 more houses.
It was located in our hometown, Donghai, in Southern China.
By the time we moved in, those other houses were all vacant for years.

/NARRATION-2/

兜兜轉轉
我們又搬回到了[ ]鄉

搬進來那晚
父親告訴我們一個他從未提及的故事：
When he was a teenager, he received a Hong Kong English-Chinese dictionary as a gift.

By chance he came upon the word “villa”, with images of a fancy basement and a decorated living room illustrating the word.

Since then, the imprint of the villa planted the seed of a dream in his heart.

He silently determined that one day in his lifetime, he would own a [ ] just like that.
三

Villa

虚，冷，晾

Vain, Cold, Bleached

/PREFACE-3/

這些作為“[]”的建築，看起來已經不再像家了。

These so-called “[]” do not seem like home anymore.

/NARRATION-3/

那晚
又停電了

母親在[ ]裡的不同角落滴下白花花的蠟
再把長條蠟燭粘上去

自小
我對停電有種莫名的興奮感

那晚的蠟燭
讓我找回了兒時油燈帶給我的溫暖

雖然我們
是這裡唯一亮起的[ ]

That night,
the power went out yet again.
In the different corners of the [ ], mother made drips from the candle, like white flowers of wax, and stood the long candles upon them.

Since I was little, I’ve had an inexplicable excitement toward power outages.

And the candle that night, brought me back to the warmth found in the oil lamp of my childhood.

Even though, we were the only lit up [ ] in this place.

/ENDING/

最終, 他買了源於詞典的三層樓別墅。
但是, 沒有鄰居住在這裡, 而花了不少心血的他自己, 也很少住在這裡。

Finally, he bought the 3-floor villa inspired by the dictionary. However, few neighbours live nearby, and he rarely lives here himself after immense effort.
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