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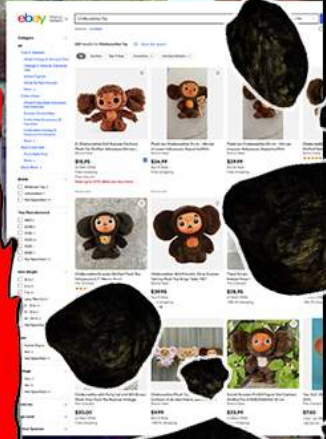
Contents

Statement From the Editors

Welcome to the inaugural issue of *Stachka!*

Stachka! Is a journal of Marxist-Leninist Film Studies and Visual Culture. We aim to make accessible new scholarship that advances theory and practice at the intersection of visual media and communist politics. Work published in *Stachka!* will seek to advance anti-imperialist, feminist, anti-racist, decolonial, and class-conscious perspectives in film and media analysis, emphasizing cultivating a constructive and inclusive environment for underrepresented voices. Analysis ranging from Marxist cultural theory applied to American and European Cinema, to historical content on the cinema of socialist states, to appreciation and discussion of Third Cinema is welcome. In addition to traditional articles, *Stachka!* aims to publish visual art, interviews with filmmakers and creators, short essays, reviews, and festivals. *Stachka!* especially encourages submissions from young scholars and scholars from diverse backgrounds. However, anyone is welcome to submit their manuscripts. We accept English, Standard Mandarin Chinese, Spanish, and Russian language submissions.

Solidarity,
Stachka Editorial Team

VISUAL CULTURE

Photographing the Past and Future of Lebanon:
The Potential History and Visual Afterlives of Beirut's War-Damaged Buildings

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Abstract

Beirut, Lebanon, is a city in constant construction and reconstruction, it seems. After surviving multiple wars, with the Civil War of 1975-1990 as an arguably most impactful example, Beirut has been left with buildings riddled by bullets. That these buildings still stand is incredible, because they have survived not only the material damage of the war but also the various 'rebuilding' projects which have taken place since the end of the war, most of which were (and continue to be) headed by private companies such as state-founded Solidere. These buildings are some of the most photographed sites in Beirut; even when they are not the focus, they linger in the background, both physically and figuratively. As a case study, this paper examines the photography of an unfinished, decrepit cinema popularly called "the Egg." In doing so, this paper seeks to investigate how visual cityscapes create a sense of morale and identity, as well as pasts and futures. The Egg's afterlife as a ghost of a city that never came to be, drawing on Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's concept of potential history, troubles conceptions about how public memories and aspirations are negotiated, particularly visually and in the so-called Global South.

Introduction

It is hardly debatable that Lebanon has been plagued by crises in its recent history, to put it lightly. Images of these tragedies, from civil wars to invasions,

to economic collapses and the degradation of its infrastructures, to a hollow government and a blast in 2020 which threatened to decimate much of its capital, Beirut. The cityscape in Beirut has been implicated, an unconsenting participant, in narrative-making projects about the problems the country and city itself have faced, particularly through photography. Many histories are lost and found, broken down and reconstituted with each of these images. Following Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's theoretical framework of potential history as "a commitment to attend to the potentialities that the institutional forms of imperial violence—borders, nation-states, museums, archives, and laws—try to make obsolete or turn into precious ruins,"[1] this article examines the images of Beirut 'ruin'—namely the abandoned 'Egg' cinema in downtown Beirut—and what potentialities images of ruin come to obscure and uncover as they are captured and circulated across different contexts and by various actors.

To investigate Beirut ruin photography, this article focuses on the lives and afterlives of the bullet-riddled buildings in Beirut which remain standing after the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990). These buildings' continued presence seems paradoxical, perhaps even 'honorable,' at first because they have survived not only material damage from the war but also the various 'rebuilding' projects which have taken place since the end of the war, most of which were (and continue to be) headed by Solidere: a private company founded by former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.[2] These buildings form an interesting case study of how public memory is negotiated and constructed and how visual languages and images shape morale and identity (even if 'broken') for Beirutis and the Lebanese at large. Their lives and afterlives form an interesting case study of how public memory is negotiated and constructed, and how visual mediations of notions of decline and decay are structured in the 'Global South.' The central questions this article asks are: How do these buildings appear in popular photography?[3] What are the afterlives of these ghostly figures in light of the various traumas and aspirations that the Lebanese state and people hold? And what claims do images of these buildings make about Beirut as a city and capital, about Lebanon as a nation-state, and about the history and future of Lebanon?

This article revolves around one example of these now-iconic buildings: the 'Egg,' also known as the 'Dome.' This case study is centered around analysis of photos of this building presented online, which come from both mainstream media (journalism and news) and social media through examining the top results of the Egg on Google Images in Arabic and English.[4] In making sense of the Civil War beyond reductionist conceptions of crisis, this article returns to Azoulay to reframe the war, its impacts, and the conditions which have arisen since its end as a "Regime-made Disaster," which she defines as

> [...] disasters that are generated and reproduced by the structure of a regime based on differential rule. These disasters affect the entire

> body politic of the governed, though differentially … These disasters do not only affect the direct victims and are not 'their' problem, part of 'their' history, as if the catastrophe in question takes place in an offshore territory … Understood as regime-made, citizens are not only mobilized to perpetrate them, but they are also impacted by them, though differentially, and like the regimes that perpetrate them, they are precisely what the entire governed population has in common.[5]

When the war is understood through this framework, a clearer image emerges of the varying contributions of the state, private companies, and the general population, as well as non-living entities such as buildings—an inanimate, 'dead' limb of the body politic, in a way—in making sense of the past and the future vis-à-vis the war.

Furthermore, to situate photography's role in concretizing narratives (particularly around such "regime-based disasters"), this article looks to and complicates Azoulay's argument that "[t]he photographic shutter contributes to the reproduction of imperial divisions and imperial rights and is used as lasting proof that what was plundered is a fait accompli."[6] Specifically, this article posits that the variety of photography of the Egg both reproduces narratives of decline and trauma as "fait accompli" while offering a visual language of imagining a different future which does not banish the past, as 'redevelopment' initiatives like Solidere does.

The Lebanese Civil War

The Lebanese Civil War (though not the only civil war in Lebanese history)[7] was the outcome of crystallizing regional conflicts and global political tensions which had come to a head by 1975, including the aftermath of the establishment of the state of Israel, the heightening Cold War, competing Arab nationalist movements, and the proliferation of what has been termed 'political Islam.'[8] The internal matters of sectarian tensions—the result of uneven power and wealth distribution between Muslim and Christian sects historically—the presence of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and Palestinian resistance fighting within Lebanese borders, and opposing nationalist movements structured much of the fighting which took place in Lebanon during the war.[9]

As historian Haugbolle Sune argues, "[w]hat is habitually referred to as the Lebanese Civil War was in fact a series of more or less related conflicts between shifting alliances of Lebanese groups and external actors, who from 1975 to 1990 destabilized the Lebanese state."[10] Nonetheless, as with all wars and despite disagreements, popular historiography delineates a start and an end of the Lebanese Civil War: its start is said to be the April 13, 1975 clashes between

the Phalange party and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO),[11] and its end is generally accepted to be the October 1990 defeat of the Lebanese Army by the Lebanese Forces (Maronite Christian faction) in the "War of Elimination" which the Army's leader Michel Aoun had launched in January earlier that year.[12] One of the most impactful political outcomes of the war was the Taif Agreement,[13] which established a new division of representation in the Lebanese parliament whereby specific numbers of seats were assigned to newly legally recognized sects in Lebanon to ensure a 5:5 Christian-to-Muslim quota.[14] Many hoped this would ameliorate power imbalances and prevent future sectarian conflicts. As fighting dimmed and the Civil War was officially marked as over, arguments and proposals for how to make sense of the war and move on from it immediately emerged. One which has prevailed has been one of 'redevelopment,' headed by Solidere.[15]

Solidere

It is impossible to walk around Beirut's downtown streets without noticing Solidere's impact, even before knowing of Solidere. Perhaps one of the first times an outsider may learn of Solidere would be encountering the now-abandoned St. George Yacht Club and Marina, which has been sporting a large "STOP SOLIDERE" sign since at least 2009.[16]

Figure 1. Ballester 2009. "Saint Georges Hôtel Stop Solidere"

Solidere—an acronym for 'Société Libanaise pour le Développement et la Reconstruction du Centre-ville de Beyrouth,' which translates to 'The Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of Beirut Central Dis-

trict'[17]—was founded as a private joint-stock company on May 5, 1994,[18] by Rafic Hariri, then-prime minister of Lebanon.[19] A set of laws legislated between late 1991 and early 1994 to allow for a private real-estate firm to handle all reconstruction in downtown Beirut, bypassing issues of property ownership and inheritance.[20] Solidere was not the company already imagined by these laws,[21] but it became the private company to lead redevelopment. The goal was to 'rebuild Beirut'—as Saree Makdisi puts it, Solidere presented itself "as a healing agency"[22]—but the plan initially entailed total demolition of the downtown area.[23]

Solidere continues to operate in the present, having even opened a sister company, Solidere International in 2007.[24] According to Solidere's own website, "Solidere's role is manifold; land developer, real estate developer, property owner, property and services manager and operator. The Company is establishing a solid base for prosperity in the city center through its value-added activities."[25] Its current board of directors is largely made up of technocrats and politicians, all are Lebanese nationals, and most are educated in North America or Europe or at elite institutions in Lebanon such as the American University of Beirut.[26] One Hariri family member remains on the board—Nader Hariri,[27] Rafic Hariri's nephew.[28] From the very beginning, Solidere has claimed an attention to history as a grounding for its future-facing projects. Solidere's first-ever slogan was "Beirut—An Ancient City for the Future,"[29] and the company continues to reference a commitment to historical preservation, even dedicating a section on its website to "History and Culture,"[30] with a page on "Archaeology."[31] A "Heritage Trail," marking fifty historic sites around downtown Beirut with bronze medallions, is promised on the website as well,[32] though its completion status is unclear. Beirut residents have voiced their support or rejection of Solidere's plans since soon after the company launched. This is evident in Makdisi's recounting of the two distinct discourses she had witnessed in 1994: those who "mourn the loss of the old city center," and those who "claim that the old city center had been left beyond salvation by the end of the war … this particular reconstruction plan was and is the only possible option."[33] Nowadays, however, most Lebanese—speaking anecdotally and based on media narratives—are dissatisfied with Solidere, believing its work to be a flattening force in a city already razed to the ground many times over.[34] As such, the buildings which have evaded Solidere's grasp have come to take on added afterlives as symbols of resistance to the Solidere order.

Case Study: Depictions of The Egg
Background
The structure which has come to be known as the "Egg" or the "Dome" is an abandoned or unfinished cinema (narratives seem to conflict,[35] as do larger

public memories of the city) within an unfinished multi-use complex planned as the "Beirut City Center" (BCC).[36] The BCC was dreamed up by Lebanese modernist architect Joseph Philippe Karam.[37] Accounts of Karam's life are scant, but the website run by his estate narrates that he was born in Beirut in the immediate aftermath of World War I and the formation of the French Mandate for Syria and Lebanon.[38] It goes on to state that he witnessed the creation of the Republic of Lebanon at the end of World War II and the emergence of a prosperous postwar economy and optimistic nation in his early twenties.[39] As the Egg shows, Karam's style, mixing bold curved shapes with angular structures and aiming for functionality over ornament, drew on modernist European architecture like the work of Le Corbusier, the Bauhaus school, the International Style, and Brutalism.[40] Furthermore, like Le Corbusier's buildings, the BCC was constructed primarily of concrete.

The BCC was designed with two tall towers, planned to house shopping and office spaces to accompany the cinema, but only one tower was finished.[41] Construction on the BCC began in 1965 but was halted, and never finished, with the outbreak of the Civil War in 1975.[42] The one tower which was realized during construction was demolished sometime after the end of the war, and now the Egg stands alone within a radius of unoccupied, flattened, unused land in downtown Beirut near Martyrs' Square. An early advertisement for the to-be-constructed BCC shows an illustration of the egg-shaped cinema in the embrace of the two tall towers which were to hold a shopping complex. Though the surrounding streets are bustling with cars and pedestrians, the background behind the BCC is empty; there is no city behind it, only a white void. This allows the BCC to stand out, though it also removes it from space and time—arguably overcoming history and facing the future.

Solidere has been the administrator of the Egg since around the 1990s and continues to be.[43] It limits access to the structure, but people have always found a way in, including through underground parties in the 1990s.[44] After decades of casual interaction with it, the Egg was drawn back to the public sphere during the October 2019 anti-government protests, during which an "Eggupation" of the space took place and included community gatherings, teach-ins, and late-night parties.[45] It can be said that the Egg is a character in the regime-based disaster of the Lebanese Civil War and its aftereffects. If the Civil War, as a regime-based disaster, is "ongoing" and "at one and the same time the expression of the differential principle of the regime and what stabilizes it,"[46] then the Egg is a part of that tapestry, as a holder of the recorded and potential histories it knows, and as a visual reminder of the never-ending war through which the Egg still lives.
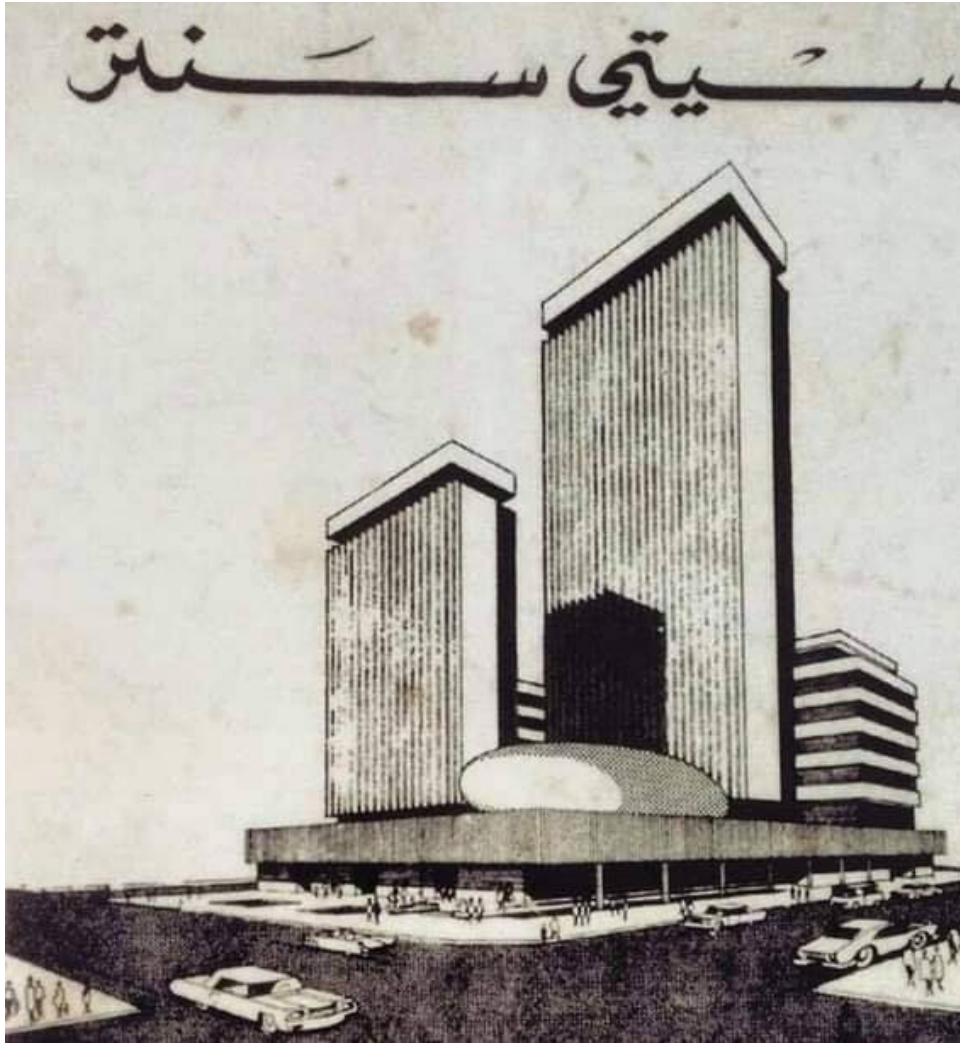
Figure 2. *Beirut City Centre Dome Cinema in Beirut, LB - Cinema Treasures* 2020

Photography

When looking up "the egg beirut" on Google Images, in English and Arabic, the results come from various sources, global and local, ranging in genre from online encyclopedias (e.g. Wikipedia) to digital media articles (e.g. Failed Architecture[47]), travel blogs (e.g. Atlas Obscura[48]) news reporting (e.g. The National[49]) and stock images (e.g. Alamy), as well as social media sites and image-sharing platforms (e.g. Instagram, Flickr, and Pinterest).

Scanning the first few results (my screenshots cover about eighty images across both searches), common tropes and imageries emerge, while divergences too stand out. Most images of the Egg appear recent, though they are intermixed with a few speculative proposals for its reconstruction as well as historical photos of the structure and a few images of other war-damaged buildings, which are often grouped together as a larger canon of visual testimonies of the profound impact of the war. The perspectives of the photos differ: some are of the exposed parts of it, which would have been connected with one of the towers,
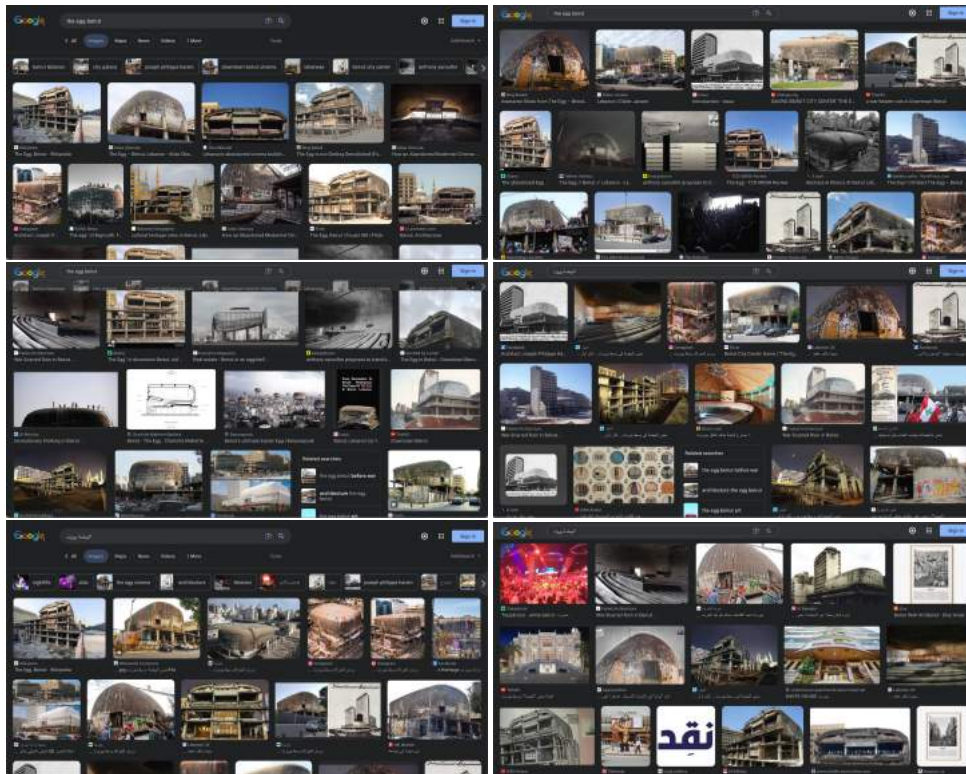
Figure 3. All screenshots were captured by the author on December 14, 2023.

while others are of its facade, a covered, seamless egg shape. Most images are of the outside of the egg, but a few of its interiors, its concrete rows of seats facing an empty wall where a screen would have stood.
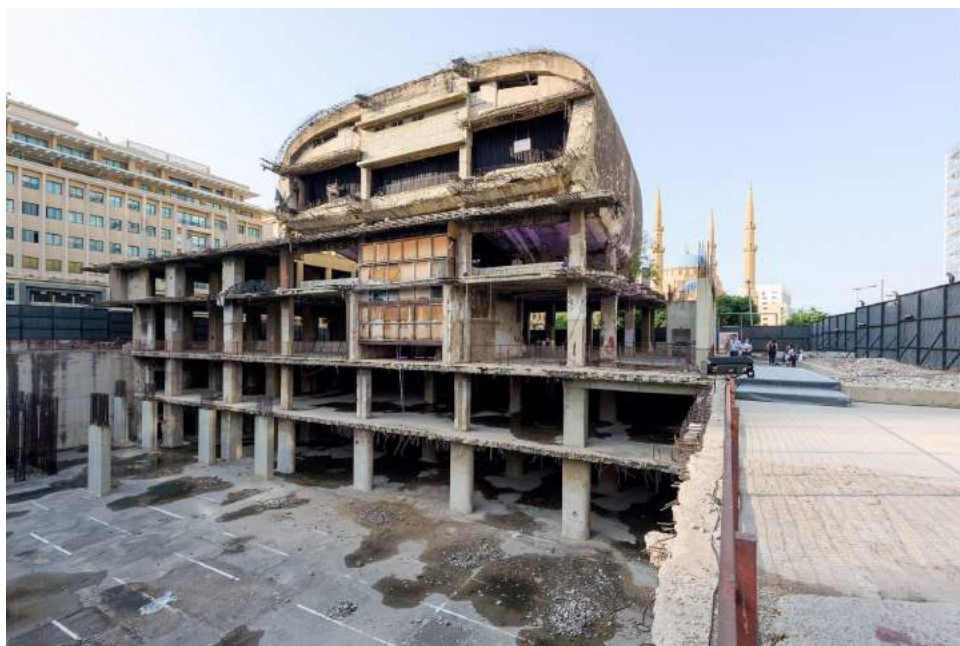
Figure 4. Emmeca 2023 "The Egg" Source: Wikipedia.

The top result is the first photo on the Egg's Wikipedia page. It captures the Egg's exposed back, taken right at the edge of the fencing which keeps

visitors from falling into the pit where one of the towers used to stand—forming the foreground of the image. The Egg is in the middle ground of the photograph, with Mohammad Al-Amin Mosque, a relatively new mosque built in 2008, and residential buildings appear in the background to either side of the Egg. A few pedestrians pass through the walkway to the side, where a patchwork of sidewalk, makeshift stairs, and somewhat tall, opaque fencing. The Egg's interiors appear to have been used for a gallery exhibit at the time, as indicated by a sign reading "Plastik Gallery." This exhibit, titled "MonuMental," was created by Saint Hoax,[50] the anonymous artist known for his satirical "POPlitical art."[51] The exhibit showed oil paintings of Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, and Kim Jong Un in drag makeup, surrealist portraits of Lebanese singer Fairouz and Princess Diana, and an inflatable 'statue' of Donald Trump as a tank, among other works.[52]

This photograph was taken on October 22nd, 2018, a few days after Monu-Mental closed.[53] October 2018 was a time of relative calm in Lebanon. Though the U.S. State Department designated Lebanon as a Level 3 "Reconsider Travel" Travel Advisory at the time,[54] due to "crime and terrorism threats,"[55] now raised to a Level 4 "Do Not Travel,"[56] the country was relatively safe and its residents, though disgruntled and frustrated at the state's handling of the economy[57] and political corruption,[58] lived fairly normal lives.

The composition of this photograph is similar to other photographs of the Egg. The Egg stands in the foreground as a ruined structure while more pristine buildings peek out from the background. It appears in disrepair, covered in bullets, with metal rods sticking out. Its building uncovered materials convey the scale of the damage it carries while implying a limbo state between destruction and reconstruction. Its drab grays and cool-toned beiges contrast with the clean, untainted warm beiges and poppy blue and white in the other buildings in the photo. The presence of these other buildings situates the Egg in its physical location while reinforcing its difference as old and ruined unlike the new and uninjured developments that appear to encroach upon the decrepit structure. Taken as a whole, the contradictions within this image appear as a larger representation of how downtown Beirut has been cornered into becoming a site of tension between traumatic histories and optimistic aspiration while suffocating all attempts to uncover what else has been and what could have been.

This photograph, taken at a slight low angle from a 45° point of view, is reminiscent of much of the photography of the Egg. Interestingly, a similar angle appears in the depictions of the Egg in early advertisements of the structure, both illustrations and photographs.

In addition to the illustration presented earlier in the article, a photograph of the structure, taken after the cinema and one of the towers were completed,

Figure 5. The original captions read: "A hundred stores. In a hundred days, you can win hundreds of prizes at the City Center."

shows the BCC from a similar perspective. This old image,[59] however, takes place in front of the complex, likely because that is its facade, and because its open back would not have been visible at the time. The reversal of the position of the camera while maintaining its low angle suggests a continuity to the Egg from an onlooker's perspective, a continuity which links the past with the present, lost dreams of wealth and modernity with ruin and despair. Such proposed continuities paint a picture of what history has been canonized, leaving around its edges openings through which to peek and imagine other histories.

Another top result is a closer view of the Egg, only depicting the cinema itself.

Figure 6. Mackenzie 2019. The photograph originally comes from AFP by way of Getty. It was taken by Patrick Baz and dated November 5, 2019, Baz 2019.

A banner of the Lebanese flag stretches across the floor. This photograph was taken on November 5, 2019,[60] just two weeks after October 17, 2019, revolution broke out.[61] The "Eggupation" which forms the background for this image—why the flag was put up inside the Egg—became a physical manifestation of the revolution, as protesters filled its hollows in a trespassing act of reclaiming inaccessible, private spaces across the city.

The Egg takes up the majority of the composition of the photo, though a corner of a yellow-beige residential building appears behind the Egg. The Egg, captured at a somewhat low angle, seems to beam with pride as its national flag lies on its chest. However, no protestors appear in the photo, but the Egg nonetheless takes on a liveliness suggested by the flag's striking red, white, and green, which contrast to the Egg's gray concrete and the full blue of the sky behind it. The Egg's exposed side, although it is technically the back of the building, takes on a face-like quality with its open features, and seems to gaze directly into the camera. There is something of a living quality to this image: the installation of the flag—a first for the Egg—and its depiction head on from a low angle fuel a sense of vivacity. This view of the Egg stands out from the usual angles and depictions of it. In all, this photograph lends an optimism and energy to the Egg as it participates in aspirational revolutionary dreams of what could be and what could have been. Such optimism opens up possibilities to reinforce reductionist binaries of free-oppressed and sound-damaged, but they also allow for other potential histories to become visible.

Conclusion: Reaching Out to the Past and Future Visually

The abandoned, damaged structures of Beirut stand out in their sterilized environment as sites of constant recollection and speculation between daily remembrance and possible demolition. In this hybrid space, these buildings, like the Egg, form visual reminders of the history which Solidere buries under new layers of rubble—ones caused by demolition in the name of 'redevelopment' and 'reconstruction.'

The common, widely circulated views of the Egg form a canon of narratives about Beirut and the war. But photography does not always and necessarily reinforce the status quo, or even intentionally subvert it. With the proliferation of certain angles of the Egg and the recurrence of particular images of its 'decay,' contrasting the Egg's present condition with the dreams of modernity its architect imagined, new, different images of the Egg inevitably reveal the cracks in dominant historical narratives. Such cracks may not radically transform historical narratives on their own, but their emergence allows for buried potential histories to surface, ones where Beirut is not necessarily free of struggle but nonetheless rejects the idea of the necessity of tragedy. As Azoulay conceives of it, "potential history is not an attempt to tell the violence alone, but rather an onto-epistemic refusal to recognize as irreversible its outcome and the categories, statuses, and forms under which it materializes."[62] Potential history aims to keep memory and the past alive, to not relegate the past to a faraway temporal land out of reach. The potential history of the Egg and therefore Beirut keeps alive their overt and obscured memories of the war, violence, and the consequences of imperialist, neoliberal, and capitalist projects. Potential history does not do so by dwelling on painful memories but by imagining the past, present, and future as non-linear, as coexisting and constantly in negotiation. As such, potential history rejects the tendency to turn one's back on the past; instead, it demonstrates that imagining futures does not necessitate the removal of all traces of the past, and is not only a forward-looking exercise.

In common narratives about the Egg, it is a once-used cinema which has been hollowed out and abandoned, and while some manage to sneak in, it is not officially accessible. During the occupation of the Egg in October 2019, Beirutis who had grown up knowing the Egg only in its present deterioration got to enter the former cinema and imagine the other histories and futures they were never allowed access to. Upon entering the Egg in October 2019, one protestor remarked that "[p]ublic spaces [are] coming back to the people … Before, walking in the street we would look at it and say: 'Ok, it's a building. We don't know what it is.' Now we can enter it, and see how people before us lived."[63] The trespassing of those who hold and seek potential history onto the site of the banishment of these potentials are what can spark new positions for the photography of the Egg, and this new photography in itself opens up more

possibilities for a more expansive engagement with the Egg's potential history.

Notes

1 Ariella Azoulay. 2019. Potential history: unlearning imperialism [in eng]. London: Verso.

2 Profile: Rafik Hariri. 2009, February. Accessed March 28, 2024. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2009/3/1/profile-rafik-hariri.

3 Here, I study popular photography as the top results on Google Images considering its primacy as a source of photography in popular consumption.

4 For the search in each language, I captured the top forty or so results, which I selected because I estimate it to be equivalent to the first two or so pages of a usual Google search. Google Images features a continuous scroll without pages, so I chose to cover what I believe is a sufficient survey of top results for this article.

5 Azoulay 2019.

6 Azoulay 2019.

7 Examples of other civil wars include the 1858-61 First Lebanese Civil War and the 1958 Second Lebanese Civil War. See Edgar O'Ballance. 1998. Civil War in Lebanon, 1975-92 [in en]. Springer. ISBN: 978-0-230-37468-3 xvii.

8 Haugbolle Sune. 2011. The historiography and the memory of the Lebanese civil war [in fr], October. Accessed March 28, 2024. https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/fr/document/historiography-and-memory-lebanese-civil-war.html.

9 Sune 2011.

10 Sune 2011.

11 Sami Hermez. 2017. War is coming: between past and future violence in Lebanon [in eng]. The ethnography of political violence. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania press. ISBN: 978-0-8122-4886-9 xi.

12 Hermez 2017, xi.

13 The agreement was signed on 22 October 1989, but the fighting continued until the end of the aforementioned War of Elimination. See John Nagle and Mary-Alice Clancy. 2021. Power-Sharing after Civil War: Thirty Years since Lebanon's Taif Agreement [in en]. Google-Books-ID: hkxDEAAAQBAJ. Routledge, November. ISBN: 978-1-00-048674-2.

14 Nagle and Clancy 2021.

15 Sune 2011.

16 The earliest evidence I could find of this sign are images from 2009. See Ballester 2009.

17 Sara Darwich Abboud. 2018. TO PROJECT IN A BORDER ENVIRONMENT: BEIRUT - LEBANON. Master's thesis, Politechnico de Torino, September. https://webthesis.biblio.polito.it/8603/1/tesi.pdf, 43.

18 Saree Makdisi. 1997. Laying Claim to Beirut: Urban Narrative and Spatial Identity in the Age of Solidere [in en]. Critical Inquiry 23, no. 3 (April): 661–705. ISSN:

0093-1896, 1539-7858, accessed March 28, 2024. https://doi.org/10.1086/448848. https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/448848, 675.

19 Profile: Rafik Hariri 2009.

20 Makdisi 1997, 670–675.

21 Makdisi 1997, 672.

22 Makdisi 1997, 675.

23 Makdisi 1997, 670.

24 About solidere [in en]. Accessed March 28, 2024. https://www.solidere.com/corporate/about.

25 About solidere, Emphasis by author.

26 Board of Directors [in en]. Accessed March 28, 2024. https://www.solidere.com/corporate/about/board-directors.

27 Board of Directors,

28 Hariri Family [in en]. Accessed March 28, 2024. https://egypt.mom-rsf.org/en/owners/individual-owners/detail/owner/owner/show/hariri-family/.

29 Makdisi 1997, 662.

30 History and Culture [in en]. Accessed March 28, 2024. https://www.solidere.com/city-center/history-and-culture.

31 Archeology [in en]. Accessed March 28, 2024. https://www.solidere.com/city-center/history-and-culture/archeology.

32 Heritage Trail [in en]. Accessed March 28, 2024. https://www.solidere.com/city-center/history-and-culture/heritage-trail.

33 Makdisi 1997, 662.

34 Melissa Plourde Khoury. 2017. The Egg: Memory and Visual Structures Within Representations of an Iconic Lebanese Ruin [in en]. Visual Communication Quarterly 24, no. 1 (January): 3–14. ISSN: 1555-1393, 1555-1407, accessed March 28, 2024. https://doi.org/10.1080/15551393.2016.1272417. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15551393.2016.1272417, 4.

35 Reports on whether the Egg was finished but abandoned or unfinished conflict. Most narratives (including the stories I have heard personally from Beirut residents) call it an unfinished cinema, but some articles refer to it as abandoned after being in use for a few years before the war (despite the full shopping complex being unfinished). See for example Melissa Plourde Khoury, "The Egg: Memory and Visual Structures Within Representations of an Iconic Lebanese Ruin," Visual Communication Quarterly 24 (2017): 3, which states that "Only one of the two towers was actually built. Nonetheless, the cinema and shopping centers below it were open for several years. The Egg was one of many thriving cinemas during the years just before the war," whereas Sinno 2020, calls it "an unfinished cinema built in the 1960s."

36 Khoury 2017, 3.

37 Khoury 2017, 3.

38 Joseph Philippe Karam [in en]. Accessed March 28, 2024. http://www.joseph-philippe-karam.com/.

39 Joseph Philippe Karam,

40 Joseph Philippe Karam,

41 Khoury 2017, 3.

42 Khoury 2017, 3.

43 Khoury 2017, 4.

44 Lebanon protest teach-ins revive pre-war landmarks [in en]. 2019, October. Accessed March 28, 2024. https://www.france24.com/en/20191027-lebanon-protest-teach-ins-revive-pre-war-landmarks.

45 Mackenzie 2019.

46 Azoulay 2019.

47 Failed Architecture is a digital media production company with the goal of "reconnect[ing] architecture with the real world." They state their work as: "Through articles, podcasts, Situations, a Twitch stream and more, we support an international network of writers, editors and critics committed to challenging dominant spatial narratives and exploring alternative realities." See About Failed Architecture [in en]. Accessed March 28, 2024. https://failedarchitecture.com/about/.

48 About Atlas Obscura [in en]. Accessed March 28, 2024. https://www.atlasobscura.com/about.

49 About Us [in en]. Accessed March 28, 2024. https://www.thenationalnews.com/about-us/.

50 Saint Hoax MonuMental [in en]. 2018, October. Accessed March 28, 2024. https://www.artsy.net/.

51 Ameer Daou and Hala AlSalman. 2018. Instagram Artist Saint Hoax Talks Trump, Kim Kardashian, and Being POPlitically Incorrect [in en], October. Accessed March 28, 2024. https://www.vice.com/en/article/4384gp/instagram-artist-saint-hoax-talks-trump-kim-kardashian-and-being-poplitically-incorrect.

52 Syrian artist creates subversive works of famous faces ++REPLAY++. Accessed March 28, 2024. https://newsroom.ap.org/editorial-photos-videos/detail?itemid=7844f5ecff671e6354f8534d55ef0b08.

53 The exhibit was on display between October 11 and 14, 2018. See Saint Hoax MonuMental 2018.

54 Lebanon Travel Advisory. 2024. Technical report. US Department of State, January. Accessed March 28, 2024. https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/lebanon-travel-advisory.html.

55 Amir Bibawy. 2018. These countries have the highest threat levels [in en-US], April. Accessed March 28, 2024. https://www.usatoday.com/picture-gallery/travel/2018/04/02/these-countries-have-the-highest-threat-levels/33472751/.

56 Lebanon Travel Advisory 2024.

57 Economic institutions like the World Bank considered Lebanon's economy stagnant and "sluggish" at the time, while inflation was at a higher level than previous years. See, Lebanon. 2018b. Technical report. The World Bank, October. https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/756401538076843074-0280022018/original/mpoam18lebanonlbn2.pdf.

58 Political action against the state's shutdown of Pride events earlier that year took place in May. See, Lebanon: Police Shutter Pride Events [in en]. 2018a, May. Accessed

March 28, 2024. https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/18/lebanon-police-shutter-pride-events.

59 Trans: "a hundred stores. in a hundred days, you can win hundreds of prizes at the city center.". Tweet Within one hundred days beginning April 20, every five-pound purchase from any City Center earns you an entry into the Grand City Center Lottery. Hundreds of prizes await you. First place: a 125-pound Fiat; second place: a round-trip airplane ticket to London; other prizes include Philips televisions, sewing machines, Norge refrigerators, Philips record players, Philips transistors [radios], etc. and hundreds of different prizes. Yes, make any five-pound purchase at City Center and win hundreds of prizes. City Center, the largest shopping complex in the Middle East, contains hundreds of different stores: clothing stores, sweets shops, restaurants, a patisserie, a snack bar, a supermarket, shoe stores for men and women, etc." [Translation by author]

60 Baz 2019.

61 Mackenzie 2019.

62 Azoulay 2019.

63 Protests bring Beirut's abandoned Egg back to life. 2019 [in en-GB]. Reuters (October). Accessed March 28, 2024. https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN1XA1GP/.

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Trans: "a hundred stores. in a hundred days, you can win hundreds of prizes at the city center.". Tweet.

FILM ANALYSIS

Masculinizing and Emasculating in Domestic Space:
Comparative Studies of *Homebound* (1967) and *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023)

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Abstract

By comparing the gender division of labor in domestic space in both *Homebound* (1967) and *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023), I address the issue of masculinizing and emasculating on the counter gender with a spatial perspective. First, physical mobility decides the prior access to the public sphere as well as the position of the householder psychologically. Also, the typical and conventional vertical structure of "home" in both films visualizes the gender hierarchy and its collapse within the domestic space. The vertical structure embodies the historically inherited phallus worship symbolically. In this sense, it encounters the requirement of a new space structure that claims gender equality. Approaching the ideal model with practice case of functionalism in architecture, I recount the controversy of the radical equality at the geographic level practiced in communist society by architecture and other supporting mechanisms, which drives the interrogation of the essential association between capitalist structure and male subjectivity since the former, including the basic concepts of private property and liberal market-based competition, is designed and extended by the latter in a biologic sense.

Henri Lefebvre demonstrates that a space of modernity is highly gendered. In a spatial analysis, space is perceived in three dimensions: the geometric, the optical,

and the phallic.[1] The capitalist metropolitan governs people in a patriarchal or-der. From the dissemination of commodified news and the appearance of public space in Paris in the 17th and 18th centuries to the market-based competition in neoliberalism in the postcolonial period, the male is the subject agent while the female, as the subject counterpart, is theoretically excluded. Some scholars argue that patriarchy and inequality only have been built from the agricultural period since based on archeological studies about the hunter-gathering culture thousands of years ago, women participated in the hunting activities and shared the domestic work with men.[2] Intensive progress in the historical period established the boundary of the works between internal and external, domestic and social, private and public. The world outside of the "home" is merely designed by men: economy, politics, transportation, education, and recreation, are male-oriented. Space is produced by violence.[3] Following Lefebvre's framework, women are vulnerable, spatially enslaved.

In the discourse of gender and space emerging from the 1980's to the 2000's, two waves of feminism reshaped the question from equality to difference (Jane Rendell 16), forming a kind of sexual politics and challenging the existing narrative in multiple disciplines, be it history, sociology, visual media, and architectural theories. From this view, architectural design can be interrogated and criticized as it determines men as the center of the home, a private space, and linked up to organize a patriarchal vernacular society.[4]

It is intriguing how the capitalist metropolis, driven by a demand for abundant labor, flattens the gender discrepancy to some extent through intensive unified management and standardized urban planning, which renders the predicament for male group who has been the controlling role so far. This process commodifies the labor in a general sense, thereby contributing to the emancipation of females from the confines of domesticity. More importantly, the dismantling of mobility limitation triggers females to be integrated as independent subjects in both senses of economy and social identity.[5] The power pattern between the sexual dimorphism of humans seems to be ramshackle recently. Also, the discourse of transgender, bisexuality, and queer punch the patriarchy together. When women are endowed with more masculinity and the dichotomy gender balance has been broken, what will happen? Issues of gender shifting and the reversal of the masculinity trend, are playing an increasing role in cinema. Some films tell us that the men will *suffer* a kind of *conversion*, turning back to domestic space. Thus, the question should be: What do films suggest about this 'conversion'? How is emasculation visualized spatially? What kind of ideal "home" space can be envisioned and represented in the cinematic field?

This article, compares two films *Homebound* (1967) and *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023) in terms of the demonstration of "home" in both spatial and gender dimensions. Though produced in different periods and countries, these two films share some

formidable aesthetic and theoretical recognition of space, especially their techniques of symbolizing masculinity. Following this comparative analysis, this article enters a discussion about an ideal gender-equal space, which refers to a revelation and distilled insights from architecture in communist society.

Masculinizing Female and Unisex Alpha

Homebound (1967), directed by Lee Man Hee, a pioneer of Korean film, talks about the marital infidelity of the wife of a disabled veteran. She meets a reporter in Seoul regularly. The young reporter encourages her to elope with him, getting rid of her prosaic and tortured life, but after struggling, she comes back home in the end. Comparably, *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023) anchors the cheating issue with the lens of sexual diversity. This is a story about a fall. The husband died in front of their house and could not be confirmed whether it was suicide or homicide. With the query from the prosecution in court and the deepening into the investigation of his death, the affair of the wife with girls has become powerful evidence for killing her husband. In the end, the child's testimony of his father's suicide prevents her from jail.

I would like to start with the depiction of domestic work as the masculine process, as the gender division of labor in a family in these two films is opposite from the conventional cognition. Both display a story about a nuclear family, in which the husband has turned back home while the wife tends to be more external. In *Homebound* (1967), a disabled war veteran and writer lives with his wife. Since he can only move in a wheelchair, his wife substitutes for him to deliver his scripts of novels weekly to the press, which is located in the center of the city, far from their house. In comparison, *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023) illustrates a family of three living in a cabin far from the city. Their child, Daniel, lost most of his sight after an accident in his 7-year-old. His father, out of guilt since he thought he should be blamed for Daniel's accidental blindness, decided to homeschool him from then on. To balance child care and career, he cancels most of his music classes in school and continues the musical creation at home. On the contrary, his wife, a writer, undertakes the work of socializing, communicating with publishers, and operating the household finances.

In both stories, the husband is situated negatively in the domestic space, in other words, not quite voluntarily, which is the conventional domain of women. Conversely, the wife is entering the outside world to support the household ostensibly or managerially.

By associating with a third person outside of the sexual relation within marriage, the female characters tend to be more stable and positive, particularly, I emphasize the spatial sense of "outside". As mentioned above, the wives are kicked out of the domestic domain to substitute their husbands to face temporalities, involving resources, information, material, and relationships, in other words, a process of

being socialized.

For Habemas, the appearance of the public sphere is accompanied by the establishment of the private sphere simultaneously. A "pure" public sphere implies a complete privatization of civil society since there is a sense of liberation in terms of politics and economy from rule by state authority.[6] In the public sphere, people can talk about politics, art, and market publicly and freely since they can possess and dominate their property liberally, which is based on the successful operation of private law. In this sense, "home" is classified into the private sphere and obviates the surveillance of any other agencies. It is a space dominated by those family members who participate in both the public and private spheres because these people, I would like to call them Alpha, with their property, traverse between different spheres, express their ideologies freely, and associate with other similar liberal Alpha regularly and broadly. Usually, the Alpha role is played by the male in a family since the agricultural period based on their better performance in intensive labor work.

In *Homebound* and *Anatomy of a Fall*, we see women as the bridge connecting the private and public spheres as the dominant subject (Alpha) in their family. In the smallest social unit "home" in the conceptual sense, the steady hierarchies between family members did not change until the power of mass media broke the privileged access between the private sphere and public sphere, state socialization, and society nationalization intertwined. The private sphere has been meddled by external organized powers. Compulsory education, military conscription, and labor unions are embodiments of the interference. With the external impact and the advent of the intellectual era, the gender issue became conspicuous and polemical when interrogating the hierarchical structure of a family. Let us concretize the sphere into a geographical sense: space, since events happen in different spheres requires different spaces as well. It is undisputed that private space is available and manipulated by the connection with public space, but the crux is, does gender matter in the process of connecting? Why can't we admit that a female is the Alpha once she becomes the connecting and supporting character in her family? Alpha is unisex.

Thus, from the geographic sense of home, the hierarchy is dependent on their mobility between different spaces. Masculinity can be owned by either gender once it grasps the initiative of space design. That's what the modern capitalist liberal market and public space taught us.

Emasculating House Husband and Psychological Incapability

In both films, since the male characters are locked in the cage named domestic space, both suffer a long-term mental collapse, which triggers the culmination of contradiction when knowing that they are cheated by their perfidious wives. In this section, I would like to articulate the linkage between the mental emasculating and physical incapability of male characters.

At the beginning of *Homebound* (1967), the disabled veteran fell from his wheelchair when he heard a military song and recalled the scene of war where his squad was wiped out and he lost his legs. The crippled legs as an embodiment of the shadow of the war lock the veteran in the room upstairs and forces him to face his incapability permanently. Some other films made by director Lee Man Hee also reflected or projected the traumatic memory of the Korean War from 1950-1952: *The Marines Who Never Return* (1963), and *Aimless Bullet* (1960). After the war and coming in the 1960s, was a golden age for the Korean film industry to discover different genres of films as well as to ruminate the tremendous impact of the war. From then on, North Korea became a symbolized issue, a contrapuntal space in South Korean film.[7] The incapability of the veteran seems to project the incompleteness of the nation. The repeated nostalgia of patriotism in the film also conducts and emphasizes a sense of impotence under the outside oppression, which is embodied by his useless legs. Also, the emasculation of male characters projects the harsh rule of military dictators from the 1960s in South Korea. With the soaring development of industries and intensive surveillance of Park Chung Hee government, the anxiety, self-suspicion, and alienation of men has been represented multifaceted on screen during this period. The extramarital affair of their wives can be considered as a challenge toward the superiority of male character.

In *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023), though the scene of the husband is quite less, the feckless moment of her husband can be told from a couple's quarrel which is reappeared in court by her husband's audio recording. The husband complains his time has been deprived and that his contribution to this family has not been emphasized by his wife, accusing her of betraying and indifferent attitude to all the frustrations he met.

Obviation of the emasculating. In both films the scene of the collapse moment and the traumatic memory of the male character are hidden deliberately, instead, remaining the blank space for the audience to imagine. In *Homebound* (1967), when the husband recalls the scene of war and his squad withdraws, all we see is his dull staring at the ceiling when sitting in his wheelchair, hearing the military song playing in the house. The scene of war is erased from the screen. So does in *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023). The director applies an exquisite transition from the scene of the court to the imaginary quarrel in their house, and deliberately back to the court at the exact moment when their debate comes to climax. Only the sound of the fight leaves viewers to imagine, which not only helps to maintain the suspense of who made the sharp boom in the recording but also moderates a sense of ferocious conquering and violence between the two.

The obviation of direct collision weakens the sense of masculinity of the male to some extent. By dividing their initiative conquering and violent nature from their whole entirety, their impotence is more conspicuous. Especially in *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023), the avoidance of his masculinity is in stark contrast with his wife's

extramarital affair with a young girl. It should be considered as another collapse moment for the husband when he finds that his wife has an affair with a girl. When his wife's character, as a masculine (butch) one in a homosexual relationship, has been realized and introduced to their heterosexual relationship, their relative sexual position seems ramshackle. In the above statement, we know that the husband guards their house, playing a feminine character in the sense of social gender. It is universally acceptable that social gender is a stereotypical impression of gender, and everyone can do anything they want. But the biological sexual performance lands a bitter punch on his self-identity.

The feeling of being insignificant and being dominated by others in an intimate relationship may relate to the metaphor of castration anxiety. It is a well-known Greek myth that Oedipus killed his father and married his mother, which has been introduced into psychoanalysis studies by Sigmund Freud to develop the concept of castration anxiety and other extending theories. There are different stages of the anxiety formation. A male child is motivated to make his mother a sexual fantasy at first, which cannot be countenanced by the child's father, and the child is threatened by castration. In the following stage, the child struggles with the Oedipus conflict and identifies with their father, accepting the fact that it is wrong to have sexual desire for his mother, which grows a sense of sexual repression. In the later years, his inclination toward his mother continues there, but due to the fear of castration, he would object to having a sexual desire for his mother. Rather, a sense of displacement is produced when he finds he can have sexual desire for other females who would not trigger the castration anxiety in himself.[8] Briefly, castration anxiety represents a growing process with repression and displacement. We can see that during the primary stage when the child realizes he cannot be the imaginary phallus to refill/pleasure his mother's lack because his father owns the "real phallus."[9] This is that moment that child realizes he is powerless and useless in the intimate mother–child relationship. The recognition of lacking real phallus in mother–child relationships, in other words, losing domination in this relationship, appears with the castration anxiety simultaneously. Though in adulthood he learns to displace the emotion of being with other females, the castration anxiety continuously impacts him when he feels like losing control of his partner.

In practical rather than imaginary and symbolic contexts, the threat is raised by the broken hierarchy in sexual relationships since the penis owns the dominant role in sexual intercourse. Based on the castration theory, a female is considered as the one who has been castrated already. In this sense, the penis owns a superior position in sexuality while the female is biologically decided to be inferior to the male in context of the traditional sexual intercourse.

Resistance of Emasculating and Spatial Embodiment of Gender Hierarchies

Different from the permanent taboo of sexual desire towards his mother, confronted with the crisis of being powerless in both marital relations and sexuality, male characters react differently. In *Homebound* (1967), when the husband notices that his wife has an extramarital affair in Seoul and tryst with the third person when she delivers his script, he kills her beloved dog Bess to redeclare his control.

Even though he is resentful of her adultery, he feels great misery and less courage when his sister persuades him to divorce. It's a complicated codependent relationship. His physical defect is replaced by his wife while he creates the attachment to his wife mentally as well. In the end, his wife turned back home, giving up the chance of elopement with the young reporter. The husband accepts his "impotence", which means metaphorically, being insignificant in the intimate relationship, and succumbs to the twisted condition of their gender hierarchy.

In *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023), the husband chooses to suicide by jumping off their four-story house to end his failure. Though there is not a confirmed scene to replay his suicide, according to the wife's and their child's testimony as well as the abnormal behavior before his death, it is safely concluded that at least he owned the suicide tendency. In this film, the husband has taken pills for years since his child lost his sight after the accident. Being a househusband, he has been afflicted by the guilt and responsibility of this family for so long that he made outbursts in the quarrel with his wife. The shattered knowing of his wife's affair frustrates his priority in
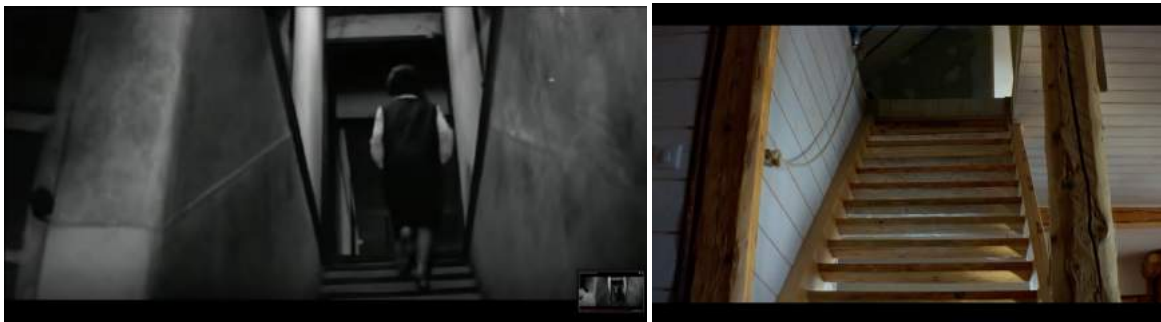
Figure 1. The close-up of the stairways of their house. Left: the wife goes up to her husband's room to deliver the medicine, *Homebound* (1967). Right: A scenery shot of the stairways after the fall, *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023).

both sexual and family structure. To some extent, suicide is a radical expression of one's oppression. In this sense, it can be considered as an ultimate resistance to the emasculating tendency.

Interestingly, both films deploy vertical structures and narrow stairways to represent the home, which also makes the hierarchy visual. In *Homebound* (1967), the husband lives alone on the second floor and the wife comes up the narrow stairways to bring medicine for him every day. Following the woman, the camera's point of view looks up from the first to the second floor. Similarly, in *Anatomy*

of a Fall (2023), when the wife sits in the first-floor lobby talking with a female editor, suddenly, we hear loud music coming from upstairs and we know later that this is played by her husband who stays alone in the attic, the vertically top place of their house. Her husband is unseen during the whole scene and only the sound is conspicuous, which is too conspicuous. Intentionally or not, in the

Figure 2. Left of Upper line: The wife knows her dog was shot from second floor. Coincidentally, camera is also from the second floor to view this scene. Right of Upper line: in *Homebound* (1967), their house is a multistory structure. Left of Lower line: The attic where the husband works alone. Right of Lower line: A picture of the front view of their house, which is multistory structure as well. *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023)

beginning, the male character is assigned to the unseen top place geographically. The vertical structure of their home represents the gender hierarchy within a family. The masculine power is symbolized by the top room.

In both films, the expression toward the emasculating is bonded to the same vertical structure. It has been discussed above that the husbands in these two films react differently when facing the loss of power in the original gender structure. In *Homebound* (1967), when the wife bitterly asks the maiden who's the killer of her dog, the maiden tells her that she heard a shot from the second floor. Thus, we know it is her husband, who cannot go downstairs by himself, who killed her dog by shooting from upstairs to redeclare his domination of the home. Coincidentally, in *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023), the falling from the attic employs the vertical structure to complete her husband's final expression and complaint, as well as achieving the symbolic falling of masculinity in the wrestle between genders.

Symbolized Patriarch in Domestic Space:
Penis Worship and Vertical Structure of House

How does verticality enter the gender discourse and become a visualized symbol of hierarchy?

Verticality produces the upper-lower space for overlooking and looking up, different from the horizontal planimetric which is neutral space, vertical space born with a sense of hierarchy. That naturally relates to an archaic sense of reproduction worship. From anthropological and archeological studies, we know penis worship appeared in various regions in the world from the prehistoric age, which makes the male's reproductive organ to be the symbol of virility and displays a biological desire for regeneration. People utilized the erection as the standard of a male's reproductive ability. The male doll with an erect penis can be seen in many ancient pottery sculptures around the world. It's not only a physiological phenomenon but also a cultural symbol being integrated in different contexts.

When bodies are laying down, only the penis erecting, declaiming a power of resisting gravity and nature, as well as dominating their own will as an entity from nature. Verticality seems to represent a resistance toward the powerful gravity and the volatile nature. Thus, when people build the statue of their guardian or the palace for their Savior, lord, or governor, who deserves their highest worship and admiration, the architectures tend to be magnificent, *pumposo*, and most important, towering.

In this sense, the erecting condition of the penis shapes human's recognition of power in the visual dimension. Lefebvre names it "phallic verticality", a visualized "phallocratic" authority to all the spectators.[10] And male who owns this organ is considered as the owner of power as well. Some female organs are also the symbol of reproductive worship, but since the physical change of the organ during mating is obscure, it's not so astonishing as the erection of phallus.

The sense that vertical represents masculine power has been brought into house design. A house as a detached residential building that owns watering, ventilation, and maybe heating systems in cold regions, is an individual geographic unit. Usually, two or three floors with a basement is a default choice. Multistory is not only economical but also aesthetic when you plan to build a house by yourself.

To return to the relation between householder and domestic space. It is acknowledged that at least from the agricultural age the patriarchal society has grown up. Males become householders in a family. Considering every family as a single unit geographically located in a community, we can see that the whole society is under the masculine order. Every single house represents the patriarchal domination that operates in a single unit. Thus, people are dominated by masculine power from double dimensions: within a patriarchal society ideologically and within a house geographically.

The detached house isolates itself from other interferences and makes sure of

Figure 3. Left: Bronze Herm, unearthed in Arcadian, Greece. ca. 490BCE. Collected by the MET. Photo available at: 11-02-2023. Herm is a kind of sculpture with a head and above a plain, squared low section, on which the erecting male genitals also be carved. Middle: *taozu* (pottery statue of phallus), unearthed in Fujian, China. ca. 4000BCE. Photo available at: 11-02-2023. (*zu*), which is considered as hieroglyphic word representing penis in ancient Chinese, evolves to represent ancestors, kinships in modern Chinese. Right: Local Souvenir in a store, a doll with an erecting phallus, Cuzco, Peru, Photo by author, date: 07-14-2023.

the operation of masculine power. Householders can manipulate everything behind the house gate successfully. In both films, we see that stories happen in a detached house, which is a traditional type of residential building and still popular in many regions of the world. Directors assign the conflict between gender hierarchy within a family to be visualized through the vertical structure of a house. Not enough. The exchange of gender division of labor has been performed by utilizing the viewer's perception of house space as well.

The house is a physical stage for performing the power pattern. The obviation of men's impotence and the outburst in the end are conveyed by the vertically hierarchical structures of their house. But the crux is, when the platitudinous discourse about gender has changed, the domestic power pattern shifted, and the hierarchies within a family have broken, what kinds of orientation should the spatial design turn to? Further, what kind of new order should be executed geographically? What's the new recognition of the relationship between space and gender? Is there a conceivable model of de–hierarchical gender space? Taking a controversial but constructive idea, functionalist architecture, into account

Gender De-hierarchized? Rethink of Functionalism in Architecture

Functionalism architecture argues that functionality should be prior to the aesthetics and other values in design. A building should be designed around the purpose of functionality to ensure people's demands of living. The typical building of functionalism is multistory with numerous similar units. All the functional sections (fitness room, laundry, restroom, etc.) are connected within the main living area to
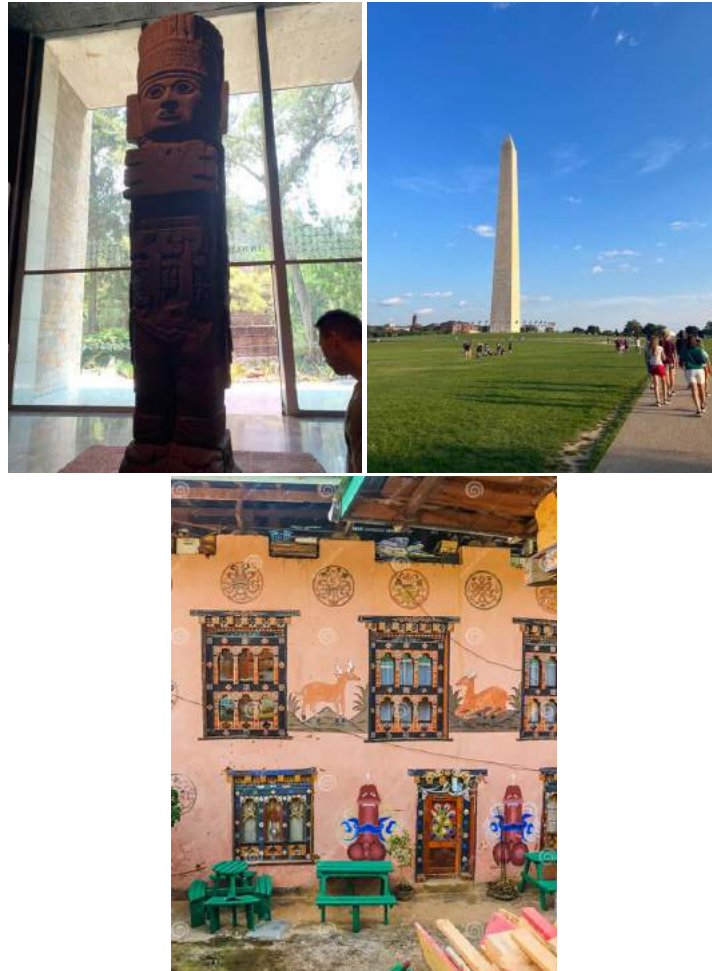
Figure 4. Left: An Atlantean figure (represents the Toltec warrior), belongs to Toltec Culture, a 483cm height humanoid sculpture, collected by National Museum of Anthropology (Mexico), available at:11-02-2023. Photo by author, date:07-19-2023. Right: Washington Monument, Obelisk, 500-foot-tall column. Photo by author, date: 08-08-2023. Bottom: Wall Painting of Phallus, Chimi Lhakhang, Bhutan. It displays a religious belief of phallus fertility in modern Bhutan, which is also a good case that vertical structure of a house visualizes the penis erection. Photo resource, available at: 11-04-2023.

cater to the demands of residents. It's an efficient way for a collectivist living. The concept of skyscrapers comes from functionalism as well. This architectural style prevailed in the Soviet Union in the 1930s and some other socialist countries.

Though radically, functionalist theories serve for capital to construct colossal exploitation machines and extend the crack between classes, functionalism is still one of the mainstream styles in modern architecture design. Especially in places where people are gathering, like cities. Nevertheless, functionalist architecture renders an ideal spatial equality when anchored in different superstructures. To some extent, functionalism makes the living space to be standardized and unified by posing people into the same type of units. The hierarchy within a family has been replaced since people living in identical units in the same building, under the unified administration. This community achieves the goal of egalitarian utopian geographically.

Figure 5. Left: Painted pottery 7-storey funerary building with storehouse, unearthed in Jiaozuo, China. ca. 25-220CE. Collected by Henan Museum, available at: 11-02-2023. Middle: Old Jacob Rapalaye House, in Queens, United States. Photo date: 02-15-1927.Collected by New York Department of Records. Available at: 11-03-2023. Right: Prince House (Flushing), in Queens, United States. Photo date: 04-20-1927. Collected by New York Department of Records. Available at: 11-03-2023.

There is a spontaneous association between functionalism architecture and communism since personal expression is subject to efficiency and equality in this context. Take typical functionalist architecture planning for example. Before the economic reformation in China, in 1978, the Planned Economy had been executed for 30 years which made the distribution of goods, services, production, as well as the lands directly decided by plans.[11] Without the currency and the real estate market, people live in residential buildings allocated by their workplace, which involves state-owned companies, factories, or government agencies. The allocation rules vary according to different workplaces but generally, the priority of room choosing is seniority-based. The longer your working age, the shorter waiting line you deserve. If a couple is in the same workplace, the length of the waiting line would depend on the one who is a longer working age. No inheritance, no transfer. Once you move to a new workplace, the room should be returned. It is quite an equitable mechanism since gender and class factors have been excluded. The position of householder did not belong to a single gender, instead, a unisex cooperative production mechanism has been established within a family.

If the couple belongs to different workplaces, they can only obtain a unit from one of these two workplaces, which is also unrelated to their gender but focuses on other dimensions, like location, room size, etc. However, this case implies that the couple's private information, be it their occupation, their partner, or their property, is open to all workplaces and other upper organizations. There is a higher surveillance agency that utilizes these private information data to manipulate the macro allocation smoothly. Thus, it challenges the argument about the divergence between the private sphere and the public sphere. In China, we call the collective residential area "dayuan", a compound belonging to a socialist work unit, a "danwei".[12] People who live aggregative here are all employees or employees' families of the company. It's a

quasi-"company town,"[13] equipped with infrastructure like kindergarten, hospital, stores, and recreation facilities.[14] The majority of residents' living demands can be satisfied here. Within dayuan, people are extremely intimate. Information sharing through the intentional observation of intimate group living, daily chit chatting, and other deep-rooted interpersonal relationships. Everyone lives a transparent life.

Understandably, the barrier between the private and public spheres disappears from the pursuit of egalitarianism. When getting rid of the masculine hegemony and breaking through the shackles of gender hierarchies of domestic places, we're confronted with the insecurity of private space since equality needs to be supervised by external forces. Further, beyond every single unit dwelled by every family, there is a quasi-authoritarian power that overrides the whole unit group (or the society in a broad sense) to ensure equality at the grassroots level. Thus, the rethinking of the functionalism architecture, which is an obsolete and flawed idea, is also an interrogation of the feasibility of decentralization as well as a revision of the paradigm of gender equality in the spatial sense.

Some scholars suppose an architecture designed for gender equality to be executed in a capitalist society. Dolores Hayden elucidates the idea of an organization of gender egalitarian society, in late 1980s.

The basic logic is by setting public childcare center, lightens the burden of childcare with the wives,[15] which *de facto* resembles to the statement of "socializing housekeeping" in Soviet Union: public canteens, laundries, and kindergartens liberate both male and female labor from individual family and turns the chores to be a "collective housework."[16] Fundamentally, most of the existing designs of pursuing gender equality is radically same with the communist model which pursue an all-round equality.

Though the communist model failed due to the existing supply fall short of the public demand, Soviet Union manifested an ideal futuristic living mode, especially for the discussion of decentralization and chasing equality. The allocation policy of uniform residential buildings is still working in North Korea nowadays. Identical residential buildings with only differences in colors are everywhere in Pyongyang. People are encouraged to move into these apartments to enjoy the unified heating, watering, and other amenities. Particularly, some buildings in unique shapes with different bright colors, standing along the main road in Pyongyang, are the exclusive residential buildings for awarding those excellent people, including scientists, soldiers with meritorious service, and outstanding athletes. It is alleged that besides the room size, there is no difference between their units and other citizen's units.

Though existing socialist modes are flawed, theoretically, communism renders a radical paradigm of geographical gender equality. But what if we address an egalitarian space in a relatively subtle sense within the existing frame? Is it an equivalent exchange between gender equality and the private sphere? When society invades the private sphere, which has happened in modern society through the

Figure 6. Left of Upper line: Mirae Scientist Street Residential Building, the apartment for out-standing scientists and professors. Photo by author, date: 06-05-2019. Right of Upper line: distant view of the building and other apartments along Taetong River. Photo by author, date: 06-05-2019. Lower: Satellite map of Ansan Street, on both sides of which are the scientist residential building, government office, and teacher apartments. A typical occupation-oriented planned block. Google map, available at: 11-02-2023.

impact of social media, does the insistence on the barrier between the public and private sphere still make sense? The rethinking of communist equality gazes back to capitalism itself and makes an inquiry about the structure: under patriarchal control, capitalism is designed based on male motivation biologically. Thus, the rhetoric of the private sphere, the market–oriented liberty, as well as the competition, are all out of the instinct of buck/male animals from a biological reproduction perspective.

Like Spivak said, the subaltern classes have been overrepresented by other sub-jects.[17] The rethinking of gender identity, the redesign of rules, and the reshaping of social structure are exigent to be completed, especially by female themselves. In this dimension, these films which project the shift of gender power patterns within the marital relationship offer a great view to discuss these questions as well as a disseminated appeal of gender equality through mass media.

Conclusion

In both films, *Homebound* (1967) and *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023), the husbands make a conversion of turning back to the domestic space of a family due to some contingency factors while the wives *de facto* become the access linking domestic and outside space and, by accident or not, having affair with third person. Because of the long-term restriction of domestic space and recognizing the cheated issues, husbands are forced to confront their incapability, which triggers a mental collapse of their masculinity and renders their emotional outlets of resistance through violence: by killing their wife's pet, or by suicide.

We see the shift of gender power patterns coincides with the transition of domain spaces. Women became the ones connecting internal and external, private sphere and public sphere. The breakdown of gender hierarchy within a family is led by the change of their mobility in different spheres. The shrinking of male characters' space triggers a structural emasculation which achieves the peak when they realize their exclusive control within a sexual relationship has been suspended by their wife's extramarital infidelity. Through the lens of psychoanalysis, the emasculation is rooted in a projection of castration anxiety.

Intensively, both films demonstrate the husbands' response/resistance to the overturned gender hierarchy in a symbolic expression with the help of a vertical structure geographically. Male characters are assigned somewhere upstairs off-screen at first to convey the mysterious sense of power within a home. However, by engaging the vertical structure, the shooting and falling from upstairs visualize the collapse of their masculinity and dignity. The gender hierarchy in a family is associated tightly with the geographical vertical structure of a house. A multistory house is a symbolized architecture which can be traced back to the penis worship in the prehistoric age. The phallus erection, visualizing the power to resist natural gravity, has been engaged in a patriarchal society as subtle power within the family, the

smallest units of groups, to execute the male governance. Thus, people suffer the double governance involving both general orders of patriarchal society and gender hierarchy within geographically domestic space, "home" in other words.

When back to the broken gender hierarchy in domestic space, a new spatial design for gender equality is necessitated. In this sense, functionalism in architecture sparks an interrogation of the tradeoff between radical equality and the private sphere deprived. Referring to some functionalist architecture and supporting mechanisms in a typical communist context, the contradiction between gender power patterns has been transformed into the doubting of capitalism, overarchingly, which is based on the male motivation of reproduction in a biological sense and is unconducive to female development.

It is polemical what kind of perspective in a film can be considered as a feminist perspective. Lots of scholars argue that visions in modernism offer privilege and

authority for male since there are gradually increasing cases of the female body being commodified in visual media these days.[18] Even in these two films, the narrative of the women concentrates on their affairs and the relationship with men to project men's incapability, rather than focus on the women's own identities. Female is still considered as the counterpart of the subjectivity of male. It is a necessitated and continuous discussion about the resistance of female power within the existing structure. How to make the virtual sense of gender issues cross the border from the screen into the physical world is also worth contemplating.

Notes

1 Henri Lefebvre. 2013. *The production of space.* 33. print. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 285.

2 Cara Ocobock Lacy Sarah. 2023. The theory that men evolved to hunt and women evolved to gather is wrong. Scientific American, November 1, 2023. Accessed March 29, 2024. https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-theory-that-men-evolved-to-hunt-and-women-evolved-to-gather-is-wrong1/

3 Lefebvre 2013, 302.

4 Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner, and Iain Borden, eds. 2007. *Gender space architecture: an interdisciplinary introduction.* Repr. von 2000. The Architext series. London: Routledge, 227.

5 Doreen Barbara Massey. 2001. *Space, place, and gender.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota press, 179–180.

6 Jürgen Habermas. 1999. *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society.* 10. print. Studies in contemporary German social thought. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 74.

7 Travis Workman. 2015. Other scenes: space and counterpoint in cold war korean melodrama. *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 7, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 28–40. Accessed March 29, 2024. https://doi.org/10.1080/17564905.2015.1035002, 38.

8 Irving Sarnoff and Seth M. Corwin. 1959. Castration anxiety and the fear of death. *J Personality* 27, no. 3 (September): 374–385. Accessed March 29, 2024. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.1959.tb02360.x.

9 The theories about "imaginary", "symbolic" and "real" phallus refers to David Macey. 1988. *Lacan in contexts.* London: Verso, 182-193.

10 Lefebvre 2013, 287.

11 Chengri Ding. 2003. Land policy reform in china: assessment and prospects. *Land Use Policy* 20, no. 2 (April): 109–120. ISSN: 02648377, accessed March 29, 2024. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0264-8377(02)00073-X. https://linkinghub.elsevier.com/retrieve/pii/S026483770200073X, 109-120.

12 The definition of "danwei" refers to Qian Zhao's argument in Qian Zhao. 2017. Self-organization in planned danwei and dayuan: a case study of the transitional houzaimen neighborhood of nanjing in urban china. In *Proceedings 24th ISUF 2017 - city and territory in the globalization age.* 24th ISUF 2017 - City and Territory in the Globalization Age. Universitat Politècnica València, September 27, 2017. Accessed March 29, 2024. https://doi.org/10.4995/ISUF2017.2017.6010.

13 Different from most of the company towns in the western context, being associated with state-owned plants/factories which is based on natural resource and decline when the resource is exhausted (Garner 1992), dayuan in China not only refers to the dormitories of industrial factories but also involves the residential area for administration agencies, hospitals, police offices, and other national administrative organizations.

14 There is a referrable graphic mapping of the infrastructure of a dayuan in Zhang Mengke's paper. They remapped the dayuan compound of a chemical factory in Beijing and displays the change of different infrastructures in both socialist period and reforming period. See, Mengke Zhang et al. 2021. Property rights redistribution and the spatial evolution of the chinese danwei compound: a case study in beijing. *J Hous and the Built Environ* 36, no. 4 (December): 1585–1602. Accessed March 29, 2024. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10901-020-09810-z

15 Dolores Hayden. 2000. *The grand domestic revolution: history of feminist designs for american homes, neighborhoods, and cities.* 8. print. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Pr. ISBN: 978-0-262-58055-7, 272-3.

16 Mary Buckley. 1981. Women in the soviet union. *Feminist Review* 8, no. 1 (July): 79–106. ISSN: 0141-7789, 1466-4380, accessed March 29, 2024. https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.1981.13. http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1057/fr.1981.13, 89.

17 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. 2023. Can the subaltern speak? In *Imperialism,* 171–219. Routledge

18 Massey 2001, 232.

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NEW MEDIA

The Soviet and Post-Soviet Anthrobscenes:
Speculations from Cheburashka to Khokhulya

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Abstract

This paper seeks to investigate the representation of and presence of non-human animals through the framework of new media theorist Jussi Parikka's conceptualization of the "Anthrobscene."Additionally, an examination of Marxist-Leninist thought concerning both environmentalist policies and practices of early childhood education is essential to formulating a well-rounded understanding of the innate political nature of these anthropomorphic representations and, in turn, how the treatment of animals, both domestic and wild, are considered reflexively by the Soviet state and the current Russian Federation through both a Soviet example (*Cheburashka* the abstracted and unspecified mouse-cat-primate creature) and a more modern environmentalist mascot (*Khokhulya* the Russian desman), both of which are duly reflective of their political contexts and social imaginings. Through an analysis of historical contextualizations and the modern *mascot* representation of the animal as a means of either social or philosophical change as well as practical environmentalist aims under the new capitalistic system post-1990s, Cheburashka and Khokhulya respectively serve to articulate and exemplify a comparison between the ideological functions of both economic systems within the broader field of animal and early childhood media studies.

The Desman and the Brown Mouse

The symbol of the animal has long been applied and reapplied in both revolutionary media and cinematic propagation, as well as its corporate decay—its remains are scattered across a rapidly industrializing and urbanizing world. Recently, the

Nature Ministry of Kaluga Oblast in the Russian Federation invented a regional mascot entitled "Khokhulya" (*Хохуля*), resembling an endangered Russian desman (*выхухоль*): a semiaquatic mammal inhabiting the Volga, Don, and Ural river basins resembling a common shrew in order to promote environmentalism in the region, located in the central zone of the East European Plain. This is not an entirely new phenomenon, as anthropomorphic critters have long been associated with a kind of distinctly Russian (or Soviet) nationalism, namely, Cheburashka (*Чебурашка*), a fictional creature conceived by Soviet writer Eduard Uspensky in his iconic 1965 children's book, *Gena the Crocodile and His Friends* (*Крокодил Гена и его друзья*). While Khokhulya is relegated to niche internet virality on specific corners of the internet, Cheburashka served as a cultural template for Soviet children, brought to life through claymation and even in more recent computerized adaptations. Therefore, a natural comparison can be drawn between the Soviet and post-Soviet anthropomorphic models and their physical engagement with space and memory, specifically within the context of post-industrial media archaeology theory when applied both to communist and socialist economic and industrial models and in the wake of the Soviet Union's monumental dissolution.

The end of the Soviet Union in 1991, as a response to a perceived political stalemate and backsliding economic growth, led to a festering cultural and emotional stagnancy. The generation raised on Cheburashka in the late 60s, 70s, and 80s with films and television programs such as: *Gena the Crocodile* [*Крокодил Гена*] (dir. Roman Kachanov, USSR, 1969); *Cheburashka* [*Чебурашка*] (dir. Roman Kachanov, USSR, 1971); *Shapoklyak* [*Шапокляк*] (dir. Roman Kachanov, USSR, 1974); *Cheburashka Goes to School* [*Чебурашка идёт в школу*] (dir. Roman Kachanov, USSR, 1983), as well as more recent adaptations, including a 2023 semi-live-action version directed by Dmitry Dyachenko. Occasionally hailed as the "Soviet Mickey Mouse," Cheburashka served as both a politicized aspect of many people's childhoods but also a notable emphasis on kindness and principles of collective humanistic relationships being a necessity between diverse peoples, despite differences in appearance, place of origin, and so on, retrospectively emulating Marxist-Leninst ideals of collaborative and inter-cultural exchange. In Lenin's work, "Dogmatism and 'Freedom of Criticism,'" published in 1901 in *What is To Be Done?*, he writes:

> We are marching in a compact group along a precipitous and difficult path, firmly holding each other by the hand. We are surrounded on all sides by enemies, and we have to advance almost constantly under their fire. We have combined, by a freely adopted decision, for the purpose of fighting the enemy and not of retreating into the neighboring marsh, the inhabitants of which, from the very outset, have reproached us with having separated ourselves into an exclusive group and with having chosen the path of struggle instead of the path of conciliation. And now

some among us begin to cry out: Let us go into the marsh! And when we begin to shame them, they retort: What backward people you are! Are you not ashamed to deny us the liberty to invite you to take a better road! Oh, yes, gentlemen! You are free not only to invite us but to go yourselves wherever you will, even into the marsh.[1]

This perspective monumentally illustrates and defines the dogmatic and determined principles that the Bolsheviks would seek to emulate. Namely, they would strive wholeheartedly to achieve an idealistic future rooted in the unity of the proletariat even in the face of tremendous adversity, identifying the perceived backwardness of the oppressive and ostracizing bourgeoisie class. The consistent moral value attributed to the Cheburashka filmic franchise is the importance of being "in the company of others as opposed to benign lonely," idealizing the notion of the "*субботник*," which refers to voluntary work undertaken on Saturdays in Soviet culture.[2] Though associations of work and life are intertwined, the symbolism of collective achievement and prestige in Soviet infrastructure and process remains consistent throughout most Cheburashka-centric television series and films.[3]

The Anthrobscene and "Factory Culture"

The question then arises—how can an animal be so critically intertwined with the realities of industrialization and the growth of factories and what I shall term "factory culture" in tandem with the cautionary rhetoric of media theorist Jussi Parikka's conceptualized "Anthrobscene"?[4] The historicized memories of anthropomorphized creatures, be they wholly fictional or somewhat inspired in truth, are simultaneously inhabited by the creatures who, in turn, continue to shape and redefine the remains of their fictional counterparts. Anthropomorphized subjects of their industrialized environments, particularly residential urban strays, must be understood and quantified as equally important contributors to the Anthropocene and notions of deep-time in media archaeology. Their media significance in commercial products, social media, and their lives spent among the technological rubble left behind by human development serve as symbolic signifiers of humanity's media history, and, under capitalist conventions, it, in turn, influences the commercialization of urban livelihood and dynamics. Given the inevitability of physical decay, should Parikka's re-conceptualization of the Anthropocene as *Anthrobscene* through a media archaeological framework be re-examined to accommodate the importance of animal life and representations in tandem with the human tendency to anthropomorphize as a means of solace within the constrictions of a late-capitalist post-Soviet political system, particularly within the context of urban life and its non-human residents?

As the Soviets came to experiment with the merging of social individual life and the country's rapid industrialization by the 1920s, the issue of differentiation within

the working class became a relatively consistent source of contention between party members. Party leadership made an effort to maintain an identifiable and consistent social homogeneity in order to prevent members of the working class from segregating themselves politically based on their individual backgrounds or occupations. The conflicts of the older generations who had previously worked before 1917 in industrial fields and the newer generations who had formulated their early identity around Marxist-Leninist ideologies were not homogeneous, as some workers, due to a combination of factors, were, quite simply, more experienced in their respective fields and were more accomplished craftspeople. Reports show that older workers perceived the incoming generation in the late 1920s as "uncultured, unskilled, and politically illiterate elements who knew little about the history and discipline of the factories."[5] However, such new members were not truly unfamiliar with industrial work and were nonetheless subjected to repeated incidents of discrimination and harassment in the workplace. As industrial power developed and stabilized in the wake of such tremendous political and structural change within the country, there was a need for social stabilization between proletariats. How could one balance individual discipline and the demands for productivity in collective labor? Additionally, the question arises of how workers, even beyond the contexts of the Stalin period (1922-1953) of the USSR and later generations, served to immortalize their participatory experience in collective labor.

The "Anthropocene,"in its traditional geological definition, is identified as a marked time when human activities significantly impact geological development to constitute a distinct change, highlighting the species' collective influence on the formation of the planet's geological strata. In a subversive reimagining of a traditionally geological concept, Parikka came to redefine this scientific concept as his very own "Anthrobscene" in his 2014 manifesto, conceptualizing the geological underpinnings of media art in tandem with scientific-technological planetary developments as "paleontologies that deal not only with the earth but the earth after the appearance and effect of modern science and technology."[6] He further wrote that underground and submerged realities are the most intriguing components of this "Anthrobscene" and, subsequently, the technological and artifactual remains of the tangible. With ongoing urban redevelopment projects across many major cities globally underway, abandoned, unowned, or outdoor animals, be they feral or domesticated, transform themselves into ghostly, liminal creatures of technology and media's past, interacting with or living among literal urban garbage. Furthermore, stray animals or urban wildlife have transformed into what Marx rightfully identified as a living, animated commodity,[7] capturable on camera and potentially anthropomorphized by the humans who engage with them daily. This behavior on the part of their human neighbors rapidly accelerates their decay into archaeological artifacts and are prone to reinterpretation and reutilization as a result of, as Hertz and Parikka describe, a kind of "planned obsolescence,"[8]

which is inherently ethically flawed framework when interacting with sentient, living creatures.

The Issue of Subjectivity

Animal environments are, therefore, shaped by "purely subjective realities"[9] akin to humans, though human perception and anthropomorphism of animals have natural limitations under this praxis. Animal life, therefore, becomes an object of the city and the urban environment amid rapidly expanding, globalized networks of biopower. Philosopher Michel Foucault describes this kind of lifestyle as "the right to make live and let die,"[10] although this biopower controls and reproduces life, shaping it across a network of dispersed, diverse domains. Technology itself is not a matter of time or linearity, but through its own time, it operates, functions, and establishes its sense of monumentalism and symbolic significance. A most intriguing phenomenon regarding Cheburashka's distribution and reception includes the wide array of homemade dolls available from online sellers across the modern Russian Federation and other post-Soviet states in the modern age. Notably, most of these dolls have no synchronous or regularized representation or physicality— they are the products of homemade crafters or other sellers local to a region, town, or community. For digital consumers and browsers of Soviet memorabilia, many of whom reside in the geographic and social West, these dolls possess a charmingly homespun look, arguably evoking sensations of *anemoia*,[11] a phenomenological experience that is described as a feeling of yearning for a past one has never before experienced.

The archaeological legacy of Cheburashka, be it tangible dolls or digital ghosts for sale on sites like *eBay*, are, per the traditions of media archaeological theories, experienced as an ongoing, self-referential phenomenon of memory, digitizing and self-digitizing on an immortal virtual plane. Media archaeology, as an emergent science in itself, remains unequivocally monumental, not based on narrative, focusing on "technological conditions of expressions than on the content of media."[12] Therefore, in the context of animal concerns and welfare, there is a question of maintaining relationships between animals and humans even in the midst of massive global infrastructural changes to harvest materials to, in turn, generate new media. In these animals' worlds, Donna Haraway writes that multi-species interactions can transform into "face-to-face mutually opportunistic and affectionate relationships with critters who are no more and no less alien presences on this land than [one's] human household …becoming worldly just as much as any other entanglements do."[13] The oddness of modern characters, such as Khokhulya, the Russian desman, is of note here— many critics of the creature have found him aesthetically unpleasant and even rather uncannily frightening. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, in tandem with a sharp uptick in poverty, the Database of the Russian Federal Agency of Game Mammal Monitoring, which consists of up
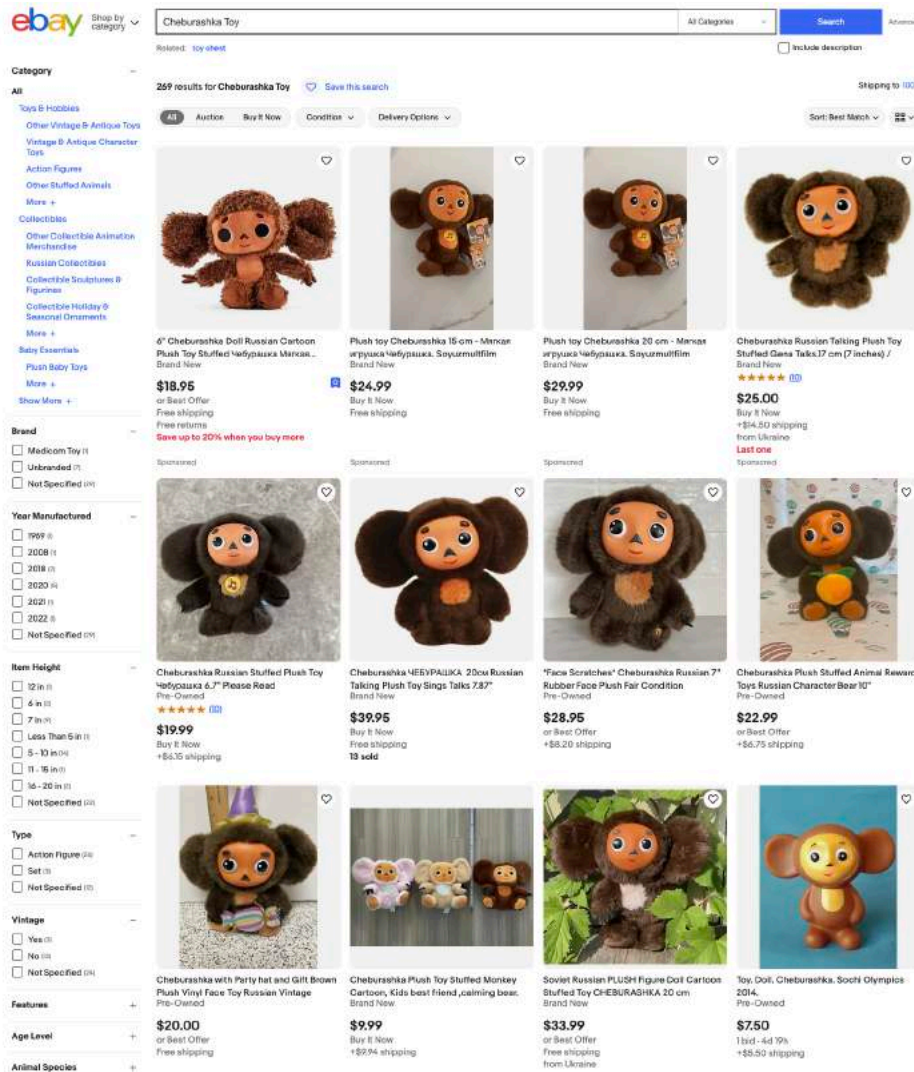
Figure 1. Screenshot of various Cheburashka dolls available for sale on Ebay—many of these dolls were handmade and not mass produced, and are typically sold by sellers based in Russia and other post-Soviet states.

to 50,000 transects monitored and updated annually, showed a strong decline in population growth rates of eight documented large mammals.[14] Efforts to promote endangered representations of wildlife as mascots, such as in the case of Khokhulya, are evidence of a broader environmental struggle that federal subjects of the modern capitalistic Russian Federation must come to grapple with in the coming years.

When presenting Parrika's conceptualization and theory of the "Anthrobscene," an oversimplified understanding of animals as kinetic beings with agency and objects of capture, documentation, commercialization, and, subsequently, congruent decay alongside the technological objects they inspired is a potential epistemological outcome. The question of cats,[15] perhaps some unique examples of urban animal characters,[16] frequently comes up in such discourses of intersections between the rural and feral and the domesticated and familiar, often psychologically substituting for the role of the "baby." This identifiable pattern and "its extension beyond

the mother-infant relationship context" does speak "to the efficacy of baby-like appearances in eliciting alloparental care and may explain why [people] feel the urge to hold and care or anything that resembles a baby."[17] Finally, as Parikka writes in his piece on media zoology, humanity must be able to conceptually interweave on a material level concerning geopolitics[18] and potentially ecologically unsustainable practices under certain geopolitical conditions.

Animal Theories of the Earth

The idea for a human-influenced archaeological epoch was initially proposed by the geologist Antonio Stoppani, who formulated that humans would be responsible for and, thereby, initiators of a specific geological period in Earth's history. In his 1873 work, *Corso di Geologia*, he described how "such layers derived not only from earth's prehistory but were attributes of a planet unearthed by human technologies and then covered with the ruins of those inventions."[19] The deep temporality combined with the spatial and temporal is elaborated in James Hutton's *Theory of the Earth* (1778), which describes how the strata signify the existence of profound temporalities under layers of granite. Hutton proposed this essential theory of radical immensity and a promise of change: "All is predetermined as part of a bigger cycle of erosion and growth."[20] Archaeologists, therefore, have the unavoidable task at hand to contend with "paleontologies that deal not only with the earth but the earth after the appearance and effect of modern science and technology."[21] While non-humans also experience the epoch of human activity, there will remain inevitable remnants. Hopefully, later archaeological remembrance of animal influence on human life and livelihood through technological waste remains. Interwoven in technological discourse are concerns for animal welfare, proposals for extending ethical considerations, and inclusion of non-humans in urban environments in certain contexts and conditions.

Cinema and, subsequently, all media must be considered more than spectacle or technical monstration; instead, they must be considered a complex ideological network and machine that manipulates time and space. Through the utilization of these factors, "ethical and political attention to animal realms of perception, sentience, and meaning-making" can, therefore, shift cinema studies to media studies and "animal capital" to "animal worlds."[22] Focusing on the material production of what will become a massive conglomerate of minerally made consumer items cluttering the future fossil record is essential to media archaeology. It is driven by a sense of entrepreneurial, borderline-optimistic attitude and "seeing the world in terms of material and immaterial malleability." The history of technology can provide a story of media, even unintentionally. Statistics about minerals themselves can provide a narrative for media's development, as the West's global imperialist demands for raw minerals have resulted in "the increase since the 1990s in the consumption of indium, peaking in 2008; the growing numbers for import and

consumption of silicon since the 1950s; a similar increase in consumption of rare earth minerals since the 1950s."[23] Unused media does not necessarily become a sedimented layer of fossils for media archaeologists to excavate. However, it remains "abandoned, forgotten, stashed away, and yet remains a toxic materiality that surpasses the usual time scale we are used to in media studies."[24] Such devices, therefore, become less about the time of use than the practices of disuse and, in turn, the development of systems for recycling or to further obfuscate the sites of disposal from the collective public or state image. The mining industry, in particular, has likely some of the most negative environmental impacts on modern-day Russia, as emissions from manufacturing, electricity, gas, and heat supply account for roughly 84% of emissions across the nation,[25] resulting in further conflicts between social movements, indigenous peoples, provincial and national government and administrative bodies further complicate and exacerbate this already volatile field of resource (and waste) production.[26]

Media technologies are, in essence, a long story of experimentation with different materials, much like the work of medieval alchemists, from glass to selenium to copper to selenium; an understanding of these geological processes is essential, especially their waste products. The transistor-based tech culture would only be conceived with the energy acquired through accusatory processes developed and established over time. The mapping of an animal as a media form, referring to the animal as a "relay station of perceptions and sensations," is inherently politicized and connected to physiological and experimental investigations of humans as a "perpetual system."[27] More explicitly, technological norms and systems are always designed to accommodate human beings and animals; therefore, they undergo a mutation process to survive within the artificial limits established by their technological and heavily polluted late-capitalist environment. The co-determination of media and nature relates to the way that earth minerals and resources are inherently essential for media devices to eventually become media, as well as how humankind's relationship with the Earth is "mediated by the epistemological framing of advanced media."[28] Media participates in earth minerals' archaeological and geological extraction processes, further perpetuating this production cycle and arguably requiring the intervention of the endangered mascot form to anthropomorphize the potential harm of further development. The extension of life to its inorganic processes stems from Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy that life consists of an array of dynamic patterns of variation and stratification, posing that geology is far more dynamic than static dead matter. While the intensities of the Earth's geological history may have been, on an archaeological level and especially within the context of deep-time studies, fixed or locked into place, the geophysical narrative of history remains turbulent and, at times, violent. Deep-time geologists operate on a vast, almost unimaginably large linear scale greater than the timescale of human presence, plants, and other archaic microorganisms. The essential concept of the

Figure 2. A promotional image of Khokhulya the Russian desman posing next to a Kaluga Oblast-officiated sign that reads, "Here stands a [pathway] …in honor of the 75th anniversary of the great victory over the Nazi (lit. fascist German) invaders!"

Anthropocene is inherently, undeniably, environmental. It must be environmentally understood to be adequately defined by the "technological condition."[29] Media archaeologists must conceptually weave together an understanding of geopolitics and ecological practices in their media work to understand resource depletion and, of course, its impact on the other lifeforms residing alongside humankind, especially animals and other organisms at risk for extinction or significant population decline. Therefore, the relationship between geology, Earth, and art remains significant– it is "fundamentally conditioned by the existence of inorganic life" and remains "expressive in an ontological sense" without human interference.[30]

The Saint-Petersburg Russian Society for the Protection of Animals was founded in 1865, shortly after the Emancipation Reform of 1861, in which Tsar Alexander II formally abolished serfdom as an early organization that had voluntary association remained active among the Russian Imperial elite, who were engaged in a "wider program of nineteenth-century Russian selective cultural internationalization known as "Westernization"—a term describing the varied efforts of a subset of the Russian elite to "improve" their country by bringing it firmly into the western family of nations."[31] Although ideological Westernization remained a long-standing objective of the Russian elites, the historical achievement of Ivan Pavlov's (1849-1936) experiments on canines highlights a later Soviet development of the act of relating the animal to oneself and the field of human psychology. Later, Vladimir Durov (1863-1934), an accomplished and iconic figure of the Russian circus,

published his own methodological handbook for training animals, which centered on a method of rewards and encouragement, believing that "the infliction of pain on animals only created resistance and led to refusal of cooperation."[32] However, he also believed that he could communicate with his pets and circus animals to a degree bordering on 'telepathic,' and his methods have been deemed somewhat pseudoscientific, albeit well-remembered and often recognized as even uniquely Soviet.

Animals and the Iconographic

Animals have been essential in the history and practice of the moving image and its development, from the proto-cinematic studies of animal motion by Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey to the love for cute animal videos on shorter-form video platforms such as YouTube and TikTok. It is in this enigmatic realm that Khokhulya primarily resides. To photograph and transform an animal into a media object requires a unique chance encounter or heavily controlled and meticulously coordinated capturing on film. These animals, incapable of communication with their captors, highlight a kind of "poignant passivity" that defines their simultaneous power and weakness of this *techne*, as "the photographer can easily mistake the inability to captivate the animals as the power to do so."[33] As Laura McMahon writes, "there is arguably something special" about the recent cultural movement that shapes the interrelations between animals and the moving image, which is, in part, "because of a fascination with moving images of animal life that dates back to the proto-cinematic studies of Muybridge and Marey and persists today in the proliferation of wildlife television programming and animal videos online."[34] Similarly, the archival, testimonial, and indexical nature of photography, cinema, and social media tells of human desires to document, preserve, and enjoy as recreation, with the survival and perpetuation of species that presumably drive animals to thrive in urban landscapes. There may be alternate ways to understand the disappearance of animals and liminality through the urban context by analyzing the presence and influence of stray cats in media and street photography, as "the effacement of animals may not be the most appropriate way to deal with the photographic animals or animals whose images have been archived, copied, and repeated via the *techne* of photography,"[35] reflective of Cheburashka's misfit origin story as a stray in his own right, as depicted in an early scene in *Gena the Crocodile*.

Undeniably, the practices that maintain the unsustainable state of technological development and networks violate ethical standards and have been a cause for humanitarian concern since their beginnings. The political economy of capitalism has direct media archaeological impacts, especially in its presentation and establishment as a "methodology of lost ideas, unusual machines, and re-emerging desires and discourses searching for elements that set it apart from mainstream technological excitement"[36] while still, of course, appealing to modern economic

demands or ecological contexts and limitations. Cats and the cat-like, humans, and other urban species have lived together since the dawn of the urban environment, and their long history has resulted in a complex social, ecological, and ethical scenario. A growing number of research studies portray cats (and cat-like creatures) as well as other stray or feral animals living in the urban environment as a potential danger, a *predator*, a depleter of manufactured, man-established resources, or even *disease-ridden*. Simultaneously, stray animals may sometimes make up the personality or cadence of urban life, resulting in an overwhelming ambivalent, sometimes conflicting, attitude about animal presence in cities,[37] further obfuscating and blurring the lines between the beloved domestic creature (*домашние любимцы*: lit. "domestic favorites/pets") and the pre-revolutionary human-like familiar (*любимсты*: lit. "favorites"), while the creatures outside of the household were identified as tools (*ручной*: lit. "manual/by hand") and regarded for their functionality in industrial and farming life.[38]

Anthropomorphizing Labor

Additionally, consideration of the non-human act of labor must be addressed regarding animal presence onscreen and in the media. The uniquely dynamic nature of cinema's simultaneous visibility and invisibility is central to the "exertions and flows of cinema in general and the various laboring bodies that shape it."[39] However, it is also important to note that animal labor is often repressed and challenging to see or quantify in cinema and media archaeological analysis. The transformation of materials in knowledge and practice has always corresponded with modern capitalistic values, characterized by the regulation of these materials and their eventual metamorphosis into operational, technological devices that undergo a "regularization of processes of material reaction and metamorphosis."[40] The media culture of systematized electronic waste management also differs from tangible, *real-world* objects, and practices of sorting and preservation lie in the realm of traditional museum culture, which had previously been a framework to establish the treatment of consolidated archaic objects—however, media archaeology and urban analysis, especially in the field of animal studies. At the same time, the real-life landscape can document results from meticulous combinations and formulations of earth minerals stratified to uphold capitalist convictions and conventions, namely, upholding systems of class, power, and even oligarchy[41] through this mass urbanization. While media waste may be an unavoidable reality, it is also a sign of societally planned obsolescence, which, as a concept, can only be implemented under modern capitalist systems and economic models. Another element in understanding toe effect of media obsolescence is environmental and ethical, as extracting such dangerous materials is almost exclusively achievable through extremely oppressive labor laws. This global flow of waste is often from Western post-industrial countries to post-colonial Asian and African nations, in turn,

Figure 3. Photograph taken in Pripyat, Ukraine on September 18, 2016, depicting a faded poster with Cheburashka cartoon in the Jupiter Factory (завод Юпитер), Pripyat, an abandoned city in Chernobyl Exclusion Zone via Stock Editorial Photography.

reveals "the twisted logic in which media objects affect the lives of people after their use" and "how they intertwine with flows of consumer objects."[42] Social scientists in academia have historically represented the Soviet Union as a place that is dirty and in stark ideological and physical opposition to the *advanced* West. However, this does not entirely encapsulate the broad experiences and consequences of the USSR's rapid industrialization and scientific accomplishments. Throughout the Soviet bloc, raw materials were scarce and difficult to come by. Many industries were established to collect and reprocess recyclable materials for reuse, labeled by the socialist government as "secondary materials," handled under the authority of the State Committee for raw materials and technical supplies, later carried out depending on the volume and properties of each particular kind of waste. For example, wastes from textiles and clothing were widely utilized for the production of non-woven materials, such as "floor coverings for houses, materials for road construction in the marshland and in the extreme North, warming material for clothes, heat and sound insulation for motor vehicles and caterpillars" with a total output of "about 90 million square [meters]" of recycled and repurposed materials.[43] Notably, Cheburashka and other anthropomorphic creatures were also symbolic inhabitants of these Soviet factory worlds [Fig. 3], propped up to boost morale and positively and collaboratively emote a broader production culture.

Media materialism can cover both insignificant glass or plastic particles to larger broken or outdated tech units, and understanding these can determine a new understanding of how these media forms materialize. Therefore, Parikka's application of Haraway's term "medianatures" is most appropriate, referring to how Haraway established an argument about "naturecultures," which is defined loosely as "a continuum of the material semiotics and production of nature as deeply embedded in the cultural."[44] Media ecological theory is vital in its own right and has the undeniable animal influence to thank for its uniqueness and challenging ethical significance. Parikka summarizes this idea by applying Donna Haraway's notion of "medianatures." These "medianatures" challenge philosophers, film theorists, and academics to think of nature and culture as incorporated and intrinsically bound together through a "topological continuum."[45] Understanding medianatures across ecological spheres is essential to analyzing the current political economy of the new material forces influencing digital culture and its development, as influenced by dialectical materialist thought as the original praxis of the dominant, intended Soviet ideology, defined through laws such as "(1) the behavior of a system of interactive forces, (2) the pattern of which is with the advent of some critical increment so modified that a novel set of laws is exhibited, (3) which set, furthermore, includes the contraries of laws which have been exemplified in previous states of the system."[46]

The Feral Creature: an Alien Other

In the 1980s, French psychoanalyst and political philosopher Felix Guttari raised a question about the various spheres through which we need to work to understand the constitution of the contemporary politico-aesthetic constitution and their ethical significance.[47] In the pluralization of worlds in media formats, particularly of a cinematic[48] nature, there is a kind of privileged representation of animals as objects of use, as the potential creative adheres to the "very gambit of biopower (as identified by Wolfe in his engagement with Foucault)" and "through modes of durational attentiveness"[49] these animals are consumed by the mechanical unit. Theoretical studies tend to assume that stray cats, the most straightforward example of animal-urban dynamics, are an *alien* species, even coded as or directly identified as invasive. However, despite their exceptional predatory skills, invasive species ecology remains flawed in its dismissal of media influence on the perception, treatment, and livelihood of such stray, roaming, or wild animals. Khokhulya, in particular, is modeled after a Russian desman, which is both an endangered and simultaneously strange, elusive creature that some may argue lacks a certain degree of aesthetic appeal. Despite his human-like behavior and apparent feud with Losyash (*Лосяш*), an elk who operates as an additional mascot for the Kaluga region, and internet debates regarding whether Kapa (*Капа*), a water droplet, is truly in a mere secondary role to Khokhulya, the desman, and his wildlife friends have nonetheless taken to platforms such as TikTok, creating a reel to the Friends TV-show theme

and "putting an end to any rumors of rivalry among them once and for all."[50]

Figure 4. Kapa the water droplet antagonizes Khokhulya by pulling his tail at a community educational event.

Parikka's conceptualization "medianatures" describes the intersection of media and nature, explicitly including animals and ecological depletion, emphasizing the intersections of these issues and rejecting any dismissal of the importance of these intersections. The production of ecological knowledge has always been "entangled with mediatic concerns,"[51] and access to knowledge and information remains an important consideration. Collaborative work between humans and animals is necessary to ensure health and diversity, enhance wildlife habitats, and ensure the quality of life for the creatures residing within urban life's boundaries. As Haraway writes, "No easy unity is to be found on these matters, and no answers will make one feel good for long." However, she also notes that "there are vastly more attachment sites for participating in the search for more livable "other worlds" (autres-mondialisations) inside earthly complexity than one could ever imagine when first reaching out to pet one's dog."[52] Additionally, cybernetics,[53] the science of communications and automatic control systems in machines and living things, remains an essential context for the realization of animal studies, especially in entomology and agriculture, backed by an emphasis on psychological, perception, and social aspects of a natural, undomesticated animal life even in the face of

artificial and radical physiological changes as a result of heightened pollutants. As established in Robinson and Knight's *Cybernetics, artificial intelligence, and ecology* (1972), it may be inevitable that

> …Industrial use of excessive amounts of limited natural resources and concomitant overproduction of pollutants and waste products will, it is hoped, lead to a real diminution in the disruption of our ecosystem. The survival of the biological species including mankind is dependent on such action. But there is more. Man and animal will continue to be exposed to a variety of substances not encountered during their evolutionary development, and continuing efforts must be made to determine whether such materials are capable of causing genetic alterations reflected by permanent changes in physiological and/or behavioral characteristics. Subtle, easily missed changes caused by long-term exposure to low concentrations of pollutants, contaminants, and substances ingested voluntarily for other purposes can be particularly dangerous.[54]

Even if there is a concern for animal welfare, the management of communities of animals living in city environments must be realized, and a preferred outcome must be established. However, the cat's welfare remains pertinent and pressing under these conditions. When contending with these animals, some things must be taken into consideration, namely, "the interest of feral cats as an independent population/culture" and how these interests can "be reconciled with the needs of different groups of urban residents."[55] When domestication becomes an impossibility, these animals become incorporated into the fabric of urban policy, and the maintenance of communities becomes necessary to maintain urban life for humans and animals alike. Media ecology transports the theoretical academic agenda regarding animal and ecological studies to media and film theory, as it is "a zoegraphical writing of media studies from an alternative perspective of animals, energy, resources, and waste."[56] An ecological comprehension of political economy, ethics, and aesthetics must be established in an approach borrowed from the theories of Félix Guattari to broaden animal research and enhance its relation to the materiality of media. This approach provides an expanded mode to map specific cultural techniques and epistemological objects, extending a focus from just animals as individuals in their own right but demanding a broader perspective on the nature in which mediatic ecology and ecological problems are articulated in the modern industrial era in which capitalism has dominated as the ideological framework of global production post-Soviet decline.

Biopower and Biowaste

When approached with a comprehensive understanding of resource depletion and a high-tech material scientific approach to media, political and economic struggles and statistics become more critical and obvious. The mapping of biopower globally and in urban, artificial environments is "both an extension of Foucauldian methodology and also something that needs to be thought through specific mediatic and knowledge techniques."[57] When considering animals and knowledge about animals, technology is used as a medium for education and measuring, remaining instrumental in establishing a relation to ecological resources, described in Heideggerian terms as a "standing-in-reserve.'"[58] Specialized units will eventually return to nature as electronic waste, emphasizing these connections between epistemological and ontological devices. This "poetic thrust"[59] of technological advancement towards unearthing raw minerals reduced Earth from a place of mythos, animistic narratives, and overwhelming vastness to modern engineering, science, and technological media systems. Metals such as copper became a crucial, invaluable resource, and many early copper mines were quickly exhausted of resources by the start of the 20th century, even before any popular socialist revolution. New drills were needed to dig deeper; thus, technology utilizing more mineral resources[60] from deep within the planet was developed. Parikka writes that "inside the Earth, one "finds a metallic reality, which feeds into metal metaphysics and digital devices. Besides the speculative stance, one can revert back to empirical material too."[61] Human labor[62] and urban landscapes also experience and undergo the consequences of earth mineral resource extraction and its resulting media archaeology– ranging from factory work in modern-day socialist China to mining in Africa, the use of these "special economic zones" as a means to creative "intensive free market zones" through "dubious lack of labor protection laws."[63] If humans are not protected, it can be assured that animals, be they strays or wildlife, are affected more severely by the consequences of mineral extraction and, subsequently, what can be identified, at the very least by Parikka, as potential media-centric exploitation that could, perhaps, be contradictory to conservationist or environmentalist efforts proliferated by the state or provincial government.

Screening and Digitizing the Animalesque

Animals serve as spiritual embodiments of movement and life but simultaneously are rendered as passive objects, lacking an interior world or a fully operating sense of self and consciousness. The late 19th century witnessed the "articulation of animals and ecology as a relay point where the social was negotiated," and ideas of human sociability and sociological features could be articulated through its relation to animal worlds, "with an eye towards the psychological, urban, and technological contexts."[64] Free-raging feral cats in urban environments are remarkably individualist, with anthropomorphic traits and, some may say, elaborate

personas and personalities of their own. Unlike other animals, they are very different in controlling and subjugating and do not conform to established conventions of cat-like domesticity or domestic associations. The ethologist Jakob von Uexküll (1864-1944) described a concept of the *Umwelt*,[65] or "environment-world,"which has influenced various other philosophers and thinkers on the question of animal influence on human worlds, including Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961). By rejecting the Cartesian model of the animal[66] as an instinctual, mindless machine, Uexküll perceived animals as constantly engaged and active in worldly perception and whose perception was based primarily on observing effects in real-life scenarios, essential tactics for survival. With a pre-revolutionary long-term association as Russia being an abstracted site of casual evil and cruelty towards the lower-class serfs,[67] even Americans such as Henry Bergh would be so horrified by the casual cruelty towards carriage horses in St. Petersburg in the 1860s that he would go on to found the ASPCA in April of 1866.[68] This is what makes Cheburashka's emergence and proliferation throughout Soviet society so significant– as the "Soviet Mickey Mouse,"abstracted and delineated from conventional species-identification, quite literally emerges from a crate of oranges in a grocery store in what is implied to be Moscow. He is loved, given a name and identity, and blessed with a new life and endless possibilities for his self-identification through the values and ethics of a distinctly Marxist spirit.[69] A potentially dangerous facet of animal studies and media archaeology is the

Figure 5. Still from Gena the Crocodile (1969). Cheburashka being discovered by a shopkeeper in a crate of oranges, unsure of his true origins.

potential use of animal life for utilization by humans in abusive or potentially harmful contexts. More specifically, "the ways in which animal life is bio-politically governed in both material and representational terms."[70] Animal imagery may be recycled, mass-distributed, converted into an array of products, and, subsequently, back into human capital. Therefore, the idea of "animal capital" signifies "a tangle of biopolitical relations within which the economic and symbolic capital of animal life can no longer be sorted into binary distinctions."[71] To understand the disappearance of animals in the modern world is to acknowledge that the "spectacle of captivity [has] not yet considered many other aspects of human-animal relationships, which involve human's integrated existence with pets, the forever invisible slaughtered animals, and other affective poignancy."[72] Additionally, the advent of screen technologies can provide a technical means of seeing and hearing are the results of meticulous experimentation with minerals and their processes, sharing in an attitude of fervent experimentation, all in order "to make the geos expressive and transformative"[73]

Conclusion

From the beloved Cheburashka to the underwhelmingly lukewarm Khokhulya, the Russian desman, animals, and animal-esque symbolism may always have a role to play in popular political landscapes and the symbolics of Marxist revolutionary and capitalist post-revolutionary cultures. Parikka's "Anthrobscene" could be described as "a concept that maps the scope of a transdisciplinary problem,"[74] particularly the usefulness and applicability of the technological solution. He argues that a comprehensive understanding of the humanities could serve as a valuable tool to understand further the significance of the larger scientifically identified and documented Anthropocene and its environmental implications, which remain most important above all else, dictating the course of humankind's future on this planet. The agenda of media obsolescence and the establishment of vast territories quite literally drenched in toxic residue due to this phenomenon examines transversal links across the semiotic, referring to a comprehensive study of residual matter in real-life urban environments and media. A lack of understanding of non-humans, especially in media, cinema, and archaeology, therefore implies a lack of agency recognition. Through media, branding, consumerism, and marketing, animals transform into moving vessels to imbue life, vision, and capital. Individuals with a smartphone can, for example, photograph a stray cat, a flight of pigeons, a stranger's dog, or a rat on the train tracks, among others. Photography "may further amalgamate this denotation in the age where almost every human being can easily capture animals… and circulate these images via the online social network."[75] This simple action, therefore, will inevitably transform the animal into a commodity and symbol, removing the sense of autonomous identity and transforming the animal into something akin to an idea or product for social or political currency.

Media ecology rendered through an animal studies framework thereby recognizes the utilization of the natural organism and nature as a natural resource, forever connecting media's historical narrative regarding its development as an ecological issue. Material ecology is the raw material for hardware and technological units, ranging from archaic cables to cell phones. Simultaneously, it is a unique epistemological framework that can map climate change while providing further resources for ongoing environmental depletion. This material constitution of hardware in terms of production and the material cycle of electronic media technologies will, no matter what, result in material waste– this much is unavoidable. To broaden animal research and enhance its relation to the materiality of media, an ecological comprehension of political economy, ethics, and aesthetics must be established in an approach borrowed from Guattari and expounded upon by Parikka while implementing the socio-economic philosophies most relevant to each society during their respective time. This approach provides an expanded mode to map specific cultural techniques and epistemological objects, extending a focus from just animals as individuals in their own right but demanding a broader perspective on the nature of mediatic ecology and ecological problems articulated and rearticulated in *anemoiac* digital retrospectives, such as Westerners craving their own little Cheburashka doll or ironically re-circulating vaguely humorous images of a semi-grotesque Russian desman suit, that proliferate and re-proliferate popular culture, regardless of their actual popularity and social influence in the broader world.

Notes

1 Vladimir Il'ich Lenin. 1987. *Essential works of lenin: "what is to be done?" and other writings.* Translated by Henry M. Christman. New York: Dover Publications, 3.

2 Juan Valdera-Gil and Francisco Gil. 2014. Ideological socialisation in the childhood: cheburashka. 13 (December 29, 2014), 92.

3 In their essay, "Political Animals in the Modern World: An Investigation of the National Animal Symbol,"Jintao Zhu and Gregor Ilsinger argue that there are three distinct approaches to understanding the modern definition of a nation. Namely, primordialism, as defined as a natural bond emulated by kinship; modernism, which upholds the modern construct of a nation-state in the modern era; and, finally, perennialism, which dichotomously argues that the establishment and formulation of the nation-state is not a natural part of human nature. The modern Khokhulya similarly emulates these ideals but is generally less aesthetically savory and emotionally compelling in the public eye. (Zhu and Ilsinger 2023)

4 Contextualizing Parikka's work through photographic analysis set forth by Dr. Fiona Luk-wa Law's work in deconstructing Hong Kong-based cat street photography (Yuk-wa Law 2017), Lauren McMahon's *Animal Worlds: Film, Philosophy, and Time* (McMahon 2019), and Donna Haraway's *When Species Meet* (Haraway 2008), one can acquire a better understanding of the implications of Parikka's theories on animal representation and commodification in film and media.

5 Hiroaki Kuromiya. 1985. The crisis of proletarian identity in the soviet factory, 1928–1929. *Slavic rev.* 44 (2): 280–297, 285.

6 Jussi Parikka. 2014. *The anthrobscene.* Forerunners. Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 6.

7 Marx defined the "commodity"in *Das Kapital: Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (1867) as, first and foremost, a wholly externalized object that satisfies human needs. The exchange rate through which a commodity is sold or traded is entirely dependent on given conditions, as determined by immediate human need. The consideration of animal (and human) life as commodified and utilized for its *use-value* is notable here, particularly in the mediating processes between mankind and nature. When referring more specifically to animal life, Marx wrote that, in a broader discussion of the linen as simple Equivalent, that "It is as if alongside and external to lions, tigers, rabbits, and all other actual animals, which form when grouped together the various kinds, species, subspecies, families etc. of the animal kingdom, there existed also in addition the animal, the individual incarnation of the entire animal kingdom. Such a particular which contains within itself all really present species of the same entity is a *universal* (like animal, god, etc.)" (Marx 1981, 26.)

8 Garnet Hertz and Jussi Parikka. 2012. Zombie media: circuit bending media archaeology into an art method. *Leonardo* 45, no. 5 (October): 424–430, 429.

9 McMahon 2019, 3.

10 Foucault quoted in McMahon 2019, 14.

11 In identifying this presumed *longing* for a past and history that is both comforting and simultaneously *foreign*, it is crucial to note that Cheburashka and its affiliated characters are nonetheless a universally-known and very much beloved part of contemporary post-Soviet cultures.

12 Hertz and Parikka 2012, 427.

13 Haraway 2008, 281.

14 For example, the grey wolf population increased by 150% while the roe deer population underwent a dramatic decline attributed to the "erosion of wildlife protection enforcement" (Bragina et al. 2015)

15 Cat-like creatures are included in this definition.

16 As the discourse surrounding the presence of stray animals in urban environments continues, other feral or wild populations threatening endemic species are not always considered; instead, they focus on the animals most visible in the public eye. These animals become either a tool for modernization or textual configurations prone to human use. Examples of visual animal representations are found in fictional characters, fandom merchandise, branding materials, and real-life animals inhabiting and occupying urban environments. These animals influence media historiography not only through interference with tangible objects, such as residing in abandoned buildings, loitering in cluttered alleyways, or frequenting local establishments, but also by taking on the role of cultural contributors in their own right rather than solely recipients or objects of the spectatorial gaze of humankind. Cheburashka's broader cultural impact, in particular, is utterly undeniable, as the character "thrived in a world of paradoxes," demonstrating that "a desire to belong is normal" and that "it is okay to be a little odd" (Richards 2021). Parikka recognized that the photographic lens is not only a material object through which the act of looking is treated as

a souvenir but through which "spectatorship is self-criticized by an increasing awareness of the underlying separation of the performative act of looking and the action itself, especially in the context of animal studies where social change is constantly inspired by the conscious and conscientious advocacy of animal rights and welfare" (Yuk-wa Law 2017, 57).

17 Marta Borgi and Francesca Cirulli. 2016. Pet face: mechanisms underlying human-animal relationships. *Front. Psychol.* 7 (March 8, 2016)

18 Therefore, the Marxist perspective on animal life and involvement in domesticity (in all its banality) can be questioned and considered, especially when, during the early revolutionary years, many traditional household pets held strong bourgeoisie associations among members of the Bolsheviks. As described in the dog-training manual, *The Shepherd Dog at the Service of the Kolkhoz* [*Овчарка на службе в колхозе*], a "Kolkhoz"being a collective farm, identified the importance of prioritizing "working"breeds, primarily German Shepards, referred to using the term "овчарки"(lit. shepherd dogs) to avoid any potential associations with the USSR's WWII-era enemy (Заводчиков 1952).

19 Parikka 2014, 6.

20 Hutton quoted in Parikka 2014, 18

21 Parikka 2014, 6.

22 McMahon 2019, 20.

23 Parikka 2014, 7.

24 Parikka 2014, 28.

25 Alexey Knizhnikov et al. 2021. Environmental transparency of russian mining and metal companies: evidence from independent ranking system. *The Extractive Industries and Society* 8, no. 3 (September 1, 2021)

26 This criticism is not exclusive to the Russian Federation or the USSR. In fact, most industrialized or industrializing countries grapple with the struggles of material production and material waste.

27 Jussi Parikka. 2013. Media zoology and waste management – animal energies and medianatures. In collaboration with Mediarep.Org and Mediarep.Org. Publisher: [object Object], 529.

28 Parikka 2014, 540.

29 Parikka 2014, 26.

30 Parikka 2014, 8.

31 Brian Bonhomme. 2010. Russian compassion: the russian society for the protection of animals–founding and contexts, 1865-75. 259, *Canadian Journal of History* 45 (2): 259+

32 Andy Byford and Henrietta Mondry. 2015. Love, service and sacrifice: narratives of dogs and children in the soviet 1930s. Publisher: University of Melbourne, Department of Russian and Language studies, *Australian Slavonic and East European studies : journal of the Australian and New Zealand Slavists' Association and of the Australasian Association for Study of the Socialist Countries.* 29 (1): 63–89

33 Yuk-wa Law 2017, 55.

34 McMahon 2019, 12.

35 Yuk-wa Law 2017, 55.

36 Hertz and Parikka 2012, 427.

37 While cats (or cat-like creatures) may have a negative association with feral colonies or overcrowded, dirty animal shelters, they simultaneously are an infamously popular tool for capitalist marketing campaigns, such as *Hello Kitty* and even Tony the Tiger, the anthropomorphic tiger mascot for Kellogg's *Frosted Flakes* cereal, or even less well-known examples such as Hikonyan the cat, created by the Japanese local city government of Hikone to promote community unification and dwindling tourism, not at all unlike the mascot Khokhulya. There is no certainty that such objects and the media produced to market these images will eventually conglomerate in a physical, real-world landfill or potentially a digital one, lost to history as a deleted or discarded media symbol. As a collective species, cats or cat-like creatures have a notably popular series of reaction emojis. They have become popular subjects of gifs in informal interpersonal digital communication within the context of phone and text-based interpersonal exchange. Furthermore, the Soviet space dogs– particularly an amicable yet tragic stray named Laika– remain relevant to historical discussion and cultural symbolism. However, Laika the Space Dog was real, and Khokhulya and Cheburasha reside in the realm of fiction and digitality. Whether Laika became immortalized and transformed into a symbol and signifier in her 'second life' is solely up to individual interpretation and sensitivity regarding her tragic death.

38 Amy Nelson. 2006. A hearth for a dog: the paradoxes of soviet pet keeping. In *Borders of socialism,* edited by Lewis H. Siegelbaum, 123–144. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 124.

39 McMahon 2019, 104.

40 Parikka 2014, 37.

41 By definition, *oligarchy* refers to a small group of people who control a country. In the case of the modern Russian Federation, these oligarchs are members of former Soviet republics who took advantage of the USSR's dissolution and the onslaught of privatization, though it is arguable that their power and control of various industries has been more or less contained under current leadership, especially in the environmental fields.

42 Parikka 2014, 539.

43 Staly V Dudenkov. 1985. The recycling of the wastes of production and consumption as an aspect of the environmental protection in the ussr. In *Appropriate waste management for developing countries,* 95–100. Springer, 97.

44 Harraway quoted in Parikka 2014, 539.

45 Parikka 2013, 527.

46 Lewis S. Feuer. 1949. Dialectical materialism and soviet science. Publisher: [The University of Chicago Press, Philosophy of Science Association], *Philosophy of Science* 16 (2): 105–124, 105.

47 Parikka 2013, 529.

48 This includes both Cheburashka films and television programs in addition to Instagram Reels, YouTube and TikTok– all of which occupy and perform cinematic traditions by way of narrative, filmic style, and other organizational aspects.

49 McMahon 2019, 201.

50 Alexandra Curtis. 2021. Not all eco-heroes wear capes. Russian Life. Accessed April 10, 2024. https://russianlife.com/the-russia-file/not-all-eco-heroes-wear-capes/

51 Parikka 2013, 529.

52 Haraway 2008, 41.

53 A more expansive definition of the term is inclusive of the "animal" as as aspect of "machine." This identification and classification of the term is actually self-referential–circular casual systems have innate outputs and inputs, such as feedback systems, that consistently self—regulate and can be applied to an analysis of both biological and mechanical processes.

54 Herbert W. Robinson, Douglas E. Knight, and American Society for Cybernetics, eds. 1972. *Cybernetics, artificial intelligence, and ecology: proceedings of the fourth annual symposium of the american society for cybernetics, [held oktober 8 - 9, 1970].* Proceedings of the ... annual symposium of the American Society for Cybernetics 4. New York: Spartan Books, 312.

55 Filip Jaroš. 2021. The cohabitation of humans and urban cats in the anthropocene: the clash of welfare concepts. *Animals* 11, no. 3 (March 5, 2021): 705.

56 Parikka 2013, 537.

57 Parikka 2013, 520.

58 Parikka 2013, 520.

59 Parikka 2014, 13.

60 For example, the Gumyoshevsky mine (*Гумёшевский рудник*), located in the Ural Mountains, had already been exhausted by the 19th century. Other examples of exhausted mining plants includes the Polevskoy Copper Smelting Plant (Полевской медеплавильный завод), which underwent an attempted reorganization into an iron plant after 1870 until being officially shut down in 1923 (via uralmines.ru/gumeshevshij-rudnik).

61 Parikka 2014, 14.

62 Pests, food supplies, hygienic products, and other waste concerns are logistics of urbanity, constituting a regular individual's daily life. The lives of citizens and societies, however, are never entirely separate from the influence of the animal. The lives of cities and societies were never separate from animal life, always linked on the material level, even if not previously recognized in sociological work. China, as only one anecdotal example of a contemporary urban case study, is understood as the epicenter of the "global chains of production and abandonment of media technologies," having been designated as a topic of conversation in international politics of trade and labor (Parikka 2014, 27.). The material history of media is expansive and invasive, including the copper industry, which played a significant role in developing and establishing most forms of telecommunications, particularly in its usage in wiring. In cities around the world whose economies depend on at-home production of technological units, especially Chinese cities such as Foshan's Nanhai District, these "technologies and media materials never die: it is the place where scrap metal gets processed" (29).

63 Parikka 2014, 540.

64 Parikka 2013, 533.

65 This theory of the environment or "surroundings"as a study in communication and signification can also be translated as "self-centered world,"as different organisms and species may have different interior, individualized worlds despite sharing a common broader environment. Jakob von Uexküll was also notable as a founder of biosemantics as

a legitimate research field and the Institut für Umweltforschung (Institute for Energy and Environmental Research).

66 This Cartesian theory states that animals do not deserve direct concern or care because they do not possess a consciousness that is comparable to a human one.

67 Although serfdom was legally abolished on the 4th of August, 1789, serfdom was deeply ingrained in Russian culture, particularly in the pre-revolutionary monarchical rule of the various Tsars and would have likely still strongly influenced non-Russian perceptions of the country's 19th century culture.

68 Bonhomme 2010.

69 Spirituality is not implied here in the literal or structural (religious) sense. Rather, this discusses what Marx would identify as more of a revolutionary urge—as he writes in the Confidential Communication on Bakunin in 1870 regarding the English, "What [the English proletariat] lack is the spirit of generalization and revolutionary passion" (Marx 1870). The use of this word in translation, although only appearing four times, appears frequently in this text communicates the appropriate meaning of this word in a broader context.

70 McMahon 2019, 19.

71 McMahon 2019, 19.

72 Yuk-wa Law 2017, 55.

73 Parikka 2014, 38.

74 Parikka 2014, 26.

75 Yuk-wa Law 2017, 54.

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NEW MEDIA

Technofeudalism or Technosocialism?
WeChat as Socialist Alternative to Platform Capitalism

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Abstract

The emergence of Chinese platform technology, WeChat (微信) an application that singularly incorporates functions of messaging, social media, financial services and more, marks a new development in the construction of Chinese socialism and the Chinese nation-building project. What then of the Western critiques of platform technology and their interaction with political economy: technofeudalism and platform capitalism? This article argues that these analyses which successfully critique the way Big Tech platforms have manifested as technologies for capitalist extraction in the West do not accurately account for the function of WeChat in China's system of socialist development. Notably, both platform capitalism and technofeudalism presuppose that platform technologies emerge out of neoliberalism. Arguing that WeChat's advancement and success is partly attributed to China's rejection of neoliberal austerity politics and policy, this article looks to WeChat as a potential alternative to Western modes of digital capitalism.

In his recent book, Yannis Varoufakis touches upon the case study of WeChat (微信) as perhaps the most advanced technology of what he calls "technofeudalism."[1] This article seeks to expand Varoufakis' work, developing a technofeudalist theory of an *everything app*–i.e. an application or platform that combines social media, communications, and financial services.[2] Accepting Varoufakis' central premise, that a new system (technofeudalism) is replacing neoliberal capitalism, this article's analysis identifies why China has excelled at developing a functioning 'everything app,'

while the West lags behind. Comparing the Chinese model of the everything app (WeChat) to its American counterpart (X), one can see how the "free market" style of American neoliberal capitalism is hindering the development of successful technofeudalist technologies. The new stage of capitalism or technofeudalism emerging is replacing neoliberalism by discarding foundational structures of the neoliberal order–a reduced role of the state, open borders, transnational trade, the US dollar standard. China's mixed-market economy and political system is more conducive to the development of the technofeudalist mode, precisely because it is not attached to the neoliberal austerity politics of the West and because of the socialist state's suppression of a traditional capitalist class. The case of the "everything app," illuminates a new future where the state plays a central role in managing a national digital financial system, with rigid (digital) national borders, and increasing centralization on ever fewer platforms, cloud fiefs,[3] or everything apps.

On Platform Capitalism and Technofeudalism

The two prevailing theoretical frameworks of Left-critique of the emerging Big Tech platforms are "Platform Capitalism"[4] and Technofeudalism. Though these theories have some limited import in describing the emergence and function of a technology like WeChat in China, I intend to show that neither body of theoretical work effectively accounts for the role of the Chinese state in creating the conditions for WeChat's creation and daily operation, nor the socialist politics guiding its application. But first, let us define these two traditions of thought, and where they may be helpful. In his book-length project on the topic *Platform Capitalism*, Nick Srnicek describes an emerging phenomenon in new media and its relationship to political economy. His argument goes,

> with a long decline in manufacturing profitability, capitalism has turned to data as one way to maintain economic growth and vitality in the face of a sluggish production sector. In the twenty-first century, on the basis of changes in digital technologies, data have become increasingly central to firms and their relations with workers, customers and other capitalists. The platform has emerged as a new business model, capable of extracting and controlling immense amounts of data, and with this shift we have seen the rise of large monopolistic firms.[5]

In this model, as capital seeks to recuperate the profits lost form a decline in production, they shift to a data or information model of accumulation which centers digital platform technology.

The technofeudalism argument, pioneered by Greek economist Yannis Varoufakis, takes a similar premise one step further; not only have capitalists moved away from the productive mechanism of traditional capitalism, but they have also

moved away from capitalism proper, to an entirely new mode of production predicated on this data-surplus model. For Varoufakis, "Technofeudalism is synonymous with the universalization of exploitation and with the shrinking of the value base in proportion to the rise of cloud rent's share of all incomes."[6] How do we reconcile this narrative, which relies on the wholesale replacement of production (capitalism) with data-surplus extraction (technofeudalism), with a Chinese economy that, while engaging with global markets, maintains a robust manufacturing base and a mechanism of socialist development resisting this totalizing exploitation described in the technofeudalism model?

Traditional narratives of platform capitalism accept a Euro-American framework of neoliberalism as their origin of development. I argue that this teleology which extends out of Bretton Woods through neoliberalism and onward to something else (perhaps technofeudalism) is not a fitting history for the development of both platform technology and political economy more broadly in China. WeChat poses a real problem for both the critics of so-called platform capitalism and its Western proponents.[7] Namely, WeChat is part of a regulatory network and mode of governance that completely breaks the paradigm theorists of platform capitalism take for granted. The precarity of the gig worker central to Uber and Task Rabbit, or the advertising model of accumulation at the core of the Facebook and X profit model, simply do not apply to the function of WeChat and the greater project of what one can call "socialism with Chinese characteristics."

What then can we say of WeChat? In a sense, WeChat and its parent company, Tencent, has created the technofeudalist platform Western capitalists could only dream of—massive data collection and aggregation, a nearly complete synthesis of application use and the transactions, both social and financial of daily life—but this picture is only accurate at a glance. WeChat may have integrated modes of personal and private property and mechanisms of finance Western capitalists would envy, but it is also profoundly bound and regulated by the restrictions and impositions of the state. By integrating with local municipal infrastructure at its base level and integrating with the more expansive network of national identification, WeChat is entangled with a kind of governmentality of Western capitalists' nightmares.

This gets us to the core of my argument, the essence of which is this: neoliberalism hinders the development of pure technofeudalism, and socialism with Chinese characteristics develops technologies that may seem technofeudalist but operate under a completely different system of political economy that resists this characterization. Western capitalists have failed to create a platform the likes of WeChat precisely because the remnants of neoliberal capitalism in the West prevent the necessary state involvement and centralization to realize it. Conversely, the Chinese mode of governance and political economy at the very core of the development of WeChat and its use-cases, suppress the capitalist class, or what Varoufakis may call "cloudalists" enough to prevent the total realization of the technofeudalist vision

outlined by those who favor this theory of economic development.

The turn from neoliberalism to the next stage of production beyond it, at least in the case of China, is not technofeudalism per se, or even "technofeudalism with Chinese characteristics" as Varoufakis cheekily called it,[8] but some form of techno-socialism. WeChat reflects the core aspects of the Chinese form of political economy, a market socialism that combines limited forms of private property and capital accumulation under close government and party regulation, and a robust apparatus of central planning practices. Looking closely at WeChat, we see a technology that yes, operates under some of the tendencies of the technofeudalist mode of platformism and data collection, but also one that erects rigid national-digital borders and a general adherence to the Chinese national project of building a transitional socialist state.

A Classical Marxist Reproach

I suggest here a return to Marx, who was careful not to conflate a part of the means of production (machinery/technology) with the mode of production (slavery, feudalism, capitalism, technofeudalism, socialism, etc.)[9] It is clear that a technology like WeChat would lend itself well to a kind of idealized form of technofeudalism, however our analysis breaks down when we begin to assert that there can be something like a technofeudalist technology. Theories of platform capitalism are sound because they emphasize how platforms are deployed and operate as mechanisms of capital accumulation and of the extraction of surplus value from workers. Firms like Uber and TaskRabbit adhere nicely to this kind of description. On the other hand, theories of technofeudalism argue that the whole mode of production has shifted, that capital is no longer the central object, and rather surplus is extracted from labor activity happening on the platform itself (i.e. data collection). Neither theory captures a totalizing platform like WeChat entangled and embedded in a state-socialist project. WeChat contains the division of labor (social relations) of technofeudalism and the technological component of platform capitalism (means of production) but the class relations of neither.

Referring to the advent of the factory system during the industrialization of Europe, Marx claims that these changes in the technological conditions of production, "alters its character. The principle of machine production, namely the division of the production process··· now plays a determining role everywhere."[10] In this sense, the advent of a technology like WeChat and other platform technologies, that reconstitute the form and elaboration of the productive process, does indeed alter the character of social relations. However, Marx does not claim that the advent of these technologies alone marks a total change in the mode of production itself. To follow Marx's analysis, is to recognize where platforms reconstitute labor formations and how new social relations are accentuated, but not to make such reckless claims as

Varoufakis's technofeudalism.

As for platform capitalism, Marx's account of the influence of the steam engine may be the appropriate analog.

> This industrial revolution, which advances naturally and spontaneously, is also helped on artificially by the extension of the Factory Acts to all industries in which women, young persons and children are employed. The compulsory regulation of the working day, as regards to its length, pauses, beginning and end, the introduction of the relay system for children, the exclusion from the factory of all children under a certain age, etc., necessitate on the one hand more machinery and the substitution of steam as a motive power in the place of muscles. On the other hand, in order to make up for the loss of time, an expansion occurs of the means of production used in common, of the furnaces, buildings, etc., in one word, a greater concentration of the means of production and a corresponding increase in the number of workers conglomerated in one place.[11]

The advent of platforms, and the digitization of the economy, like the advent of the steam engine and industrial revolution, inaugurates a new industrial and social milieu for labor. In the West, where neoliberal capitalism is the predominant mode of production, this accumulation of labor on increasingly few platforms alters the social form of labor toward data collection and advertising and condenses the capital and wealth of a shrinking group of capitalists with ownership in the Big Tech sector. However, this is not the story of WeChat in China, as neoliberal capitalism is not the dominant mode of production. The digitization of the Chinese economy emerges out of a different set of concerns and motivations from the West that ultimately structure themselves around the enrichment of the whole society and the construction of socialism in the 21st century.

Chinese Neoliberalism?

Theorists providing a more detailed account of China's digital development and technological modernization equate these phenomena to "neoliberalism" or Chinese "state capitalism."[12] Where the historical outline of how this political tendency of modernization initiated by reformer Deng Xiaoping[13] and the rapid innovation of digital technologies and platforms, accurately accounts for how and why something like WeChat came to bear, this right-wing misappropriation and misreading of the Chinese national project is not only reactionary, but factually inaccurate. China's development is markedly not neoliberal, and as I have tried to show, WeChat is evidence of this. In addition, the charge of state capitalism is an ultra-left analysis which applies equally to Lenin's New Economic Plan (NEP) as it does the

combination of central planning and limited market activity in China.[14] Despite the reactionary miscalculations which label the Chinese economy "neoliberal" or "state capitalist," these analyses from Chinese critics of WeChat capture an important aspect of China's national planning that may provide a window into how and why China's digital development has so exceeded Western peers.

Rather than engage in a full-scale critique of the many claims against Chinese socialism, or the potential of the socialist character of a market economy, let us use the example of WeChat as evidence itself against the narrative of Chinese neoliberalism. Notably, the techno-nationalist character of Chinese digitalization resists the key promises of neoliberalism which seek to globalize production and make labor transnational. Additionally, the WeChat infrastructure incorporates state-owned infrastructural elements as a central feature of its operation, contrasting the neoliberal model of privatization and the independence of financial institutions from state regulation. The emergence of WeChat and its success in China is evidence of the precise nature in which China is not like the neoliberal economies of the West, where the lack of state involvement and central planning in the economy prevents advanced platform technologies like WeChat from developing.

Digital Identity Infrastructure and the Biopolitical Critique

The state entanglement of China and its digital technology apparatus stems from the national program referred to as the "whole-of-nation" system (举国体制).[15] In the case of WeChat this system is elaborated in the integration of the platform with public services and infrastructure, and most notably the digital identity infrastructure.[16] To access the full capabilities of WeChat, Chinese nationals must verify their national ID with Tencent, as well as their financial identity (i.e. banking information). These are features that are inaccessible to non-Chinese nationals and partially reinforce the digital borders I have referenced. The criticism of China's movement towards the rapid development of digital technologies and their interrelation to an expansive state digital infrastructure stems from an invocation of the Foucauldian theory of governmentality.[17] While it is true that the expansion of this data infrastructure and its embeddedness with digital identity does have implications for the kind of population management Foucault critiqued, these critics are guilty of moralizing this analysis in a way that is likely unproductive at best, and highly reactionary at worst. Much like the Marxian theory of technology which refrains from making any moral judgement on advancements in technology themselves, but rather frames the question of technology within the discourse of the mode of production, governmentality is a universal quality of the state with no inherent moral negativity. We may choose to criticize an unjust application of power, be it sovereign or biopower,[18] or with kinds of predatory surveillance, but it is dangerous for the Left to develop a general allergy to power and authority.

Critics of China's digital-governmentality that the centrality and scope of WeChat's application and use-case amplifies, refer to the Chinese political orientation towards digital technology as "cyber-sovereignty," invoking the biopolitical discourse.[19] This term is not categorically false, that is, the CCP stance toward the regulation of digital activity, including speech, positions the state as the sovereign of the polity. These critics fail to acknowledge the centrality of a sovereign in the digital space outside of China and in the West. Notably, the capitalists and security state interfering with the so-called "free flow" of information and ideas. Within the context of the Chinese political and social system, "scrutiny on the Internet"[20] as it is euphemistically described by party leaders, runs the risk of mass censorship and other regrettable consequences of the power of the state. Conversely, the Chinese model of "public scrutiny" in the digital space, is not contrasted in Western spaces with freedom, but with private scrutiny. Where Western platform users are not subject to digital identity verification, suppression of online speech and economic exploitation via data-harvesting are centrally operative in platform capitalism in the West.

The biopolitical nature of China's digital identity infrastructure, which WeChat utilizes is not something to dismiss out of hand, lest we fall into the orientalist trap of ascribing an inherent malevolence to the Chinese mode of governance, or the route of Orwell, uncritically rejecting so-called "authoritarianism." Rather than moralize the emergence of WeChat, and its accompanying apparatus of digital infrastructure and Chinese Communist Party policy as biopolitical governmentality (bad), let us engage with this form of governmentality as an alternative to the governmentality of the West. The digital sphere of communication in the West is not free from surveillance, biopolitics, and modes of data-governmentality. All these features are present, but operating in inefficiency, decentralization, and un(der)regulation. This is to say, the mode of governmentality operative on platforms like X (Twitter) also involve data collection, surveillance and the like, but lack the centralization and efficiency of the Chinese state. Does this make them better, or less harmful? Of course not, while the state may not always have good intentions, under socialist principles, as is the case in China, the state has a responsibility to improve the conditions and status of the working class. Conversely, a platform like X is controlled chiefly by the South African capitalist Elon Musk and is loyal only to the espoused liberal principles of "free speech" as they are selectively applied by X's content moderation team.

Digital Development and Infrastructuralization

According to China's "14th Five Year Plan for National Informatization,"

> Accelerating digitized development and building a digital China are inherent requirements for meeting the changed circumstances of a new development phase, grasping the opportunities of the information rev-

olution, building new advantages for national competition, and acceler-
ating the creation of a modern Socialist country; they are strategic steps
in implementing new development ideas and promoting high-quality
development; and they are a necessary road to promote building a new
development structure and building a modern economic system.[21]

WeChat, will necessarily play a major role in propagating the digitization of China,
as the predominant platform for both China's citizens' daily use and the platform-
of-choice for the New Media Matrix for Government Affairs which hosts a vast
network of platformized official government bureaucratic accounts (政务号).[22]
Unlike the models of technofeudalism or platform capitalism which stress the role
of capitalists or cloudalists in extracting value and accumulating wealth from users'
data, the model and apparatus of which WeChat is a part can be better understood
as operative of socialist nation-building, which incorporates elements of central
planning and market activity. When we approach WeChat from the perspective of
Chinese state goals and economic development, sometimes referred to as China's
Great Road (中国大路),[23] WeChat becomes evidently dissimilar from Western big
tech platforms in societal function. From a user interface (UI) perspective one can
understand WeChat as an advanced form of what already exists in Western social
media platforms, but as political economists the operation of these platforms in their
mode of production and their relation to the state are blaringly divergent.

WeChat, and the national model of digital technology infrastructuralization in
China stresses three main features: platform protectionism, government control and
(semi)nationalization.[24] We can attribute WeChat's success to these three pillars;
three pillars that Western Big Tech capitalists will fight to prevent. WeChat, and
in particular its financial services component, WeChat pay, runs counter to the ba-
sic principles of neoliberalism (global trade, deregulation, etc.) WeChat prioritizes
national markets; "platforms are likely to make trade-offs with state authorities⋯
in exchange for being allowed to continue to operate in the national market."[25] In
addition to the prioritization of domestic markets resisting globalization, WeChat
plays an essential role in a functional political nationalism. "WeChat increasing[ly]
resembles a public utility, through its active collaboration with Chinese authorities
in the development of public services (e.g. ID cards, city administration, etc.),"
and "Tencent chairman Ma Huateng serves as a deputy on the National People's
Congress, and his company hosts Communist Party committees in its offices."[26]
I suggest we view this integration of the Chinese political project and the digital
media environment of WeChat, not as the Chinese government and CCP paternal-
istically hamstringing digital industry and the personal freedom of users. Rather,
by incorporating WeChat's development into the broader political and economic
project of modern Chinese nation-building, China implements Marxist-Leninist
ideology, rejecting the model of Western liberal-democracy that let's capitalists ex-

tort the masses and direct technological development to their own benefit.

Conclusion

For socialists, and (critical) supporters of the Chinese path of national economic development, WeChat provides an opportunity to study closely the possibility of an advanced platform technology free from many of the insidious trappings we identify in American Big Tech platforms. Perhaps missing from the rich discourses of technofeudalism and platform capitalism, which correctly provide incisive critiques of developments in Western political economy, the Chinese alternative is a happy complicating factor in this otherwise pessimistic image. As an extension of China's long-term project of the "four modernizations" WeChat is in part evidence of the success of socialist nation-building, of lifting millions out of poverty.[27] Of course, WeChat is only one small mechanism in this project which began years before the successful revolution in 1949, but an accurate account of WeChat situates the technological advancement within a greater social and political project that first sought to industrialize a feudal nation of workers, soldiers, and peasants, and now seeks to expound on that legacy by building the world's most advanced digital economy.

As for the critiques laid at the feet of WeChat, Tencent and the PRC economic model, there is no doubt workers in China have endured hardship throughout this industrialization and now digitalization phase of development. American workers too, have suffered the effects of de-industrialization, as Global North capitalists moved manufacturing to the Global South. Varoufakis refers to this exchange between East and West in Technofeudalism as a "dark deal," in which workers in both regions experience "different miseries, [under the] same recycling process."[28] Without effacing the very real struggles of the Chinese working class, and of the marginalization of China's workers, this macroeconomic analysis, glossing quickly between the radically different economic and political systems with overarching negativity loses sight of the core principles of Chinese political economy. The "dark deal" narrative ignores the real interests and benefits Chinese workers enjoy because of the PRC's measured participation in global markets. WeChat emphasizes the precise ways in which Chinese WeChat users are not subject to the same exploitation as the users of American Big Tech platforms. Under a socialist model of development, WeChat users are not the cloud-serfs of the West, nor is the primary mode of accumulation coming at the extraction of cloud-rents. Varoufakis' theory of "technofeudalism with Chinese characteristics," to which he only dedicates a few pages,[29] only holds to bear in total ignorance of Chinese political and economic aspirations, socialism, and its historical and political contingencies.
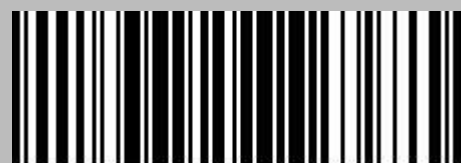
Notes

1 Yanis Varoufakis. 2023. Technofeudalism: what killed capitalism. London: The Bodley Head.

2 Connie Chan. 2015. When one app rules them all: the case of WeChat and mobile in china. Andreessen Horowitz, August 6, 2015. Accessed February 21, 2024. https://a16z.com/when-one-app-rules-them-all-the-case-of-wechat-and-mobile-in-china/, Weiying Peng and Wilfred Yang Wang. 2021. Buying on weixin/WeChat: proposing a sociomaterial approach of platform studies. *Media, Culture & Society* 43, no. 5 (July): 945–956. Accessed February 21, 2024. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720968460.

3 Varoufakis 2023

4 See, Nick Srnicek. 2019. *Platform capitalism.* Reprinted. Theory redux. Cambridge Malden, MA: Polity.

5 Srnicek 2019, 11.

6 Varoufakis 2023, Appendix 1.

7 Frank Pasquale. 2016. Two narratives of platform capitalism. *POLICY REVIEW,* Srnicek 2019.

8 Varoufakis 2023, 131–4.

9 Karl Marx, Ben Fowkes, and David Fernbach. 1981. *Capital: a critique of political economy.* v. 1: Penguin classics. London ; New York, N.Y: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review.

10 Marx, Fowkes, and Fernbach 1981, 590.

11 Marx, Fowkes, and Fernbach 1981, 604–5.

12 Wayne Wei Wang. 2023. China's digital transformation: data-empowered state capitalism and social governmentality. *Afr. j. inf. commun. (Online),* no. 31 (June 30, 2023). Accessed February 21, 2024. https://doi.org/10.23962/ajic.i31.16296, 1.

13 John Ross. 2021. *China's great road: lessons for marxist theroy and socialist practices.* New York: 1804 Books at the People's Form.

14 "A sort of 'restoration' in terms of theoretical and ideological thought took place after the introduction of the NEP, and the concept of the transitional period once again gained status, replacing socialism. In theoretical terms, socialism was removed one step further from being attained as well."(Krausz 2015, 337). This statement represents the classical critique of the NEP and so-called market socialism, however, as (Ross 2021) shows the Chinese "opening up" ushered-in by Deng Xiaoping, can be seen as an advance toward socialist development rather than an explicit step away from socialism towards "transition."

15 Wang 2023, 2.

16 Wang 2023, 2.

17 Michel Foucault. 2008. *The birth of biopolitics: lectures at the collège de france, 1978-1979.* Springer.

18 In the case of WeChat we are dealing with a biopolitical power structure. See, Michel Foucault. 2003. *" society must be defended": lectures at the collège de france, 1975-1976.* Vol. 1. Macmillan.

19 Jean-Christophe Plantin and Gabriele De Seta. 2019. WeChat as infrastructure: the techno-nationalist shaping of chinese digital platforms. *Chinese Journal of Communication* 12, no. 3 (July 3, 2019): 257–273. Accessed February 21, 2024. https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2019.1572633, 268.

20 Xi Jinping (习近平) quoted in Plantin and De Seta 2019.
21 Johanna Costigan and Graham Webster, eds. 2022. 14th five-year plan for national informatization. Translated by Rogier Creemers et al. *Stanford Cyber Policy Center Freeman Spogli Institute,* DigiChina (January 24, 2022): 1–60, 5.
22 Wang 2023, 4.
23 Ross 2021.
24 Plantin and De Seta 2019, 269.
25 Plantin and De Seta 2019, 269.
26 Plantin and De Seta 2019, 269.
27 Plantin and De Seta 2019, Ross 2021.
28 Varoufakis 2023, 152.
29 Varoufakis 2023, 131–4.

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