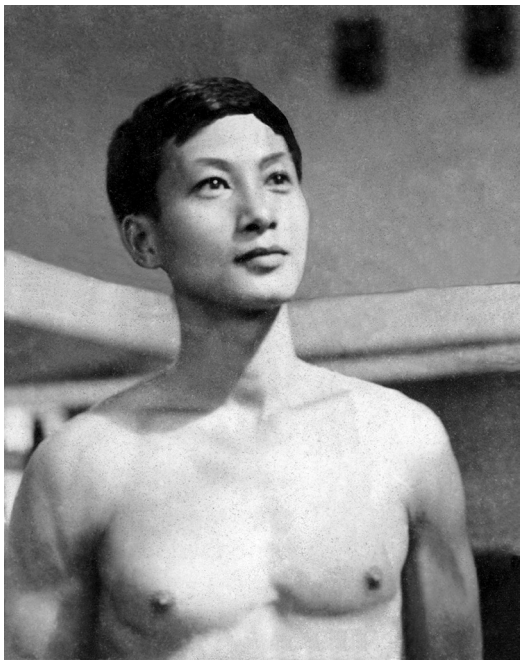
Peter Ainsworth, *The Seductive Avoidance of Cause and Effect: Dinu Li's Film Trilogy, The Anatomy of Place (2007- 2017)*

Peter Ainsworth lives and works in London. He is a Senior Lecturer in Photography at University of Portsmouth and is currently undertaking a PhD in the Visual Cultures Department at Goldsmiths University, London with a working title to his thesis as, *Allure, Reception and Affect of the Contemporary Photographic*. His work has been exhibited internationally and is held in the collection of the Museum of Fine Art Houston. He has been awarded a Pavilion Commission, Flash Forward Award, and was the recipient of the inaugural Dazed and Confused Emerging Artist Award.



Dinu Li *Nation Family* 2017
single channel video installation with sound
14'16 min looped

They have lost that power of metamorphosis immanent to the act of ceremony.
- Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, 1990.

There is a deliberate attempt, in Dinu Li's film trilogy, *The Anatomy of Place* (2007- 2017) to complicate and question notions of authenticity regarding the narratives of place that we rehearse and ritualise. In this sense the project becomes an anthropological exploration of, what Bruno Latour refers to as, 'crossings' and 'category mistakes', that proliferate the assemblages of actors and agents determining 'modes of existence'; such as the gap between an individual expectation of justice or retribution from the societal construct of the law. Affinities of Li's project emerge in the exploration of the borders underlining strictures and structures of what Latour terms the 'moderns' project: the assertion that humans continue to liberate themselves from non-human agents or nature. Specifically, in Li's films, through the interplay of serendipity, coincidence and forms of obliqueness are of central concern in the work. Though research focused, the film trilogy in itself is not about the production of knowledge for the spectator, but rather repositioning specific coherences in relation to constructs of identity in order to question the manner in which understandings are inhabited in lived experience.

Throughout the trilogy questions are asked of the contemporary and historic ideological identity of the Chinese state. Notions of nationhood in this context, perceptions of home and the lives of individuals living within and without this society are of central concern. Moreover, the films comment on an inability to pin down definitive statements of place through the multiple and often conflicting political, societal, economic and cultural inheritances used to apprehend an essence of contemporary China. An exploration of where art may be used to resonate networks of disjointed image, oral translations, half-remembered narrative, constructed archive and, what appears to be, empirical fact.

Present in the work is an interest to problematise the document; the archive conceived as an active agent, but also an engagement with appropriation and reconfiguration as points of creative departure. In *The Anatomy of Place* a deliberate blurring between present, past and future, between memory, fantasy and ideology, between self and state, between narrative, narration, archive and fact are evident. This is highlighted through Li's use of various technical and visual devices. Super8 footage of contemporary Chinese tourist resorts, which now occupy the space of the rubber plantation central to the narrative of *Nation Family*, appears as archive

material from the early 70's. Li's reconstitution and revision of political cartoons in *Family Village*, from the heroic communist narrative to the contemplation of quixotic replication of the UK town of Dorchester called 'British Town', in the former industrial land to the west of Chengdu, Sichuan Province. Images of archetypal understanding of Chineseness are articulated and questioned. Collective regimentation, Edenic bamboo, ceremonial practices, controlled labour and landscape are pictured and referenced in an attempt to complicate our understanding of what constitutes place in and of itself, and more particularly for Li.

For Li an essential experience of contemporary China is a confused state of flux. In the three-screen projection of *Ancestral Nation* Li uses a series of visual devices that focus the spectator on the manner that actions are constructed; one scene is reflected in another and the duration of clips are changed and slowed. This acts as a prelude to both *Family Village* and *Nation Family* where uncomfortable juxtapositions between ratified and unacceptable, normative practice and transgression are foregrounded. This speaks of Li's concerns of signs, symbols and signals used to highlight non-verbal, non-linguistic constructions of meaning which may transcend immediate conditions and circumstances. The complexity of political, logistical, social or material arrangements embodied in different forms and at different temporalities.

In *Ancestral Nation* Li samples prayer sticks to create a soundscape that pervades the three-screen installation. Forbidden during Mao Zedong's leadership, but soon after his death re-emergent, these objects are used in temples where prayers for wealth, health and prosperity are offered. The sound at once detaches us and is emergent from actions depicted in the films. This soundscape is contrasted with both the absent sound of the melange of organised disorganisation (embodied in the scene outside Guangzhou station) and the structured coherence of the actions performed by, amongst other actors, the military in the context of the ceremony marking Confucius' birthday at Qufu. An equivalence, or perhaps ambivalence, is created between states of inertia whereby a body at a point in time is seemingly resistant to any change and operative agents which unbalance it. This concern is also pointedly metaphorized in *Nation Family*, 2017 where a square of light is filmed in time-lapse crossing a narrow external corridor. The rigid shape shifts our attention across the terrain illuminated. This gradual process, sped up in post-production, ends with a black screen and references Li's absent protagonist Nation's ability to improvise; 'and sometimes he even made up his own songs'.

In *Nation Family* three mixes of 'Lara's theme', from the 1965 film, *Doctor Zhivago*, are played at different and pivotal stages of the video which evoke particular cultural memories. The Chinese adaptation of the song viewed on a flickering black and white TV in a domestic hotel interior, equivalent to a conceptualisation of the Friendship Hotel. This is the only version used that has lyrics; the saccharin sense of desire and expectation evoked is mediated through state-controlled broadcast, 'Somewhere a hill blossoms in green and gold, And there are dreams, all that your heart can hold' (Jarre and Webster, 1966). The filmic 'original' version is used to establish the theatrical stage of the rubber plantation by Li in the creation of a site-specific installation. In this act there is perhaps a tangential equivalence between the use of loud speakers across areas of the Chinese state to disseminate information, the performative act of Li in the context of his sound intervention, the contemporary usage of the site of the labour camp as a holiday resort and the audio trace of Butlin's ubiquitous 'wakey-wakey' call which permeated British holiday camps of the early 70's. But the subjects addressed in Li's film are not those who contemporaneously inhabit the site, the leisured present, but the sepulchral trace of a political past.

In *Nation Family*, the inability of the narrators to interpret the disappearance of Nation and to reconcile his potential escape to decadence culminates in a dream sequence. Ray Conniff's easy listening disco version of 'Lara's theme' appears as the soundtrack to this fantastical interlude. Referential to the low-tech glamour of a Pans People routine, shot for *Top of the Pops* in the early 1970's, complete with dancers in chiffon capes, sequin studded Lycra, spot-lit sun, coloured lighting gels, kaleidoscopic filter effect and lingering cross-dissolves. The plants used as props elicit the rubber plantation in the studio space and have equivalence to the palm tree pattern printed on the curtains of a vacated interior focused upon in an earlier section. The interlude is incongruous as we are left to fathom where it resides in the unfolding narrative and thus becomes emblematic of idiosyncratic, illogical, and non-sensical order that the wider project connotes.

Parallels are drawn between fictive states, speculations, perceptions of the West and reference to individual resistance through imaginative utopia. The intermission seems referential to the manner that the protagonist of Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985), evades the hands of his torturers by escaping into a personal fantastic reality. Despite the fact Lowry has left his body, broken and traumatised sitting in a torture chair, in a cooling tower, (in Croydon), in his mind the heroic narrative of escape is played out. But whereas in *Brazil* we are left with no doubt as to the fate of Sam Lowry, Li's protagonist Nation has

just illusively disappeared. Though violence is only tacitly implied in Li's narrative, the otherworldly, the spectral, is something that re-appears throughout the trilogy. A sense of unreality even pervades the archival material that Li uses to fix a sense of historic place. *Nation Family* for example, starts with a photo of Nation apparently listening to the radio. On closer inspection however, the radio is not a radio at all, but a painted brick with a bamboo shoot acting as an aerial.

Li's references to haunting are ever present but ethereal, located to specific place but perhaps not to specific time or act. In *Family Village* the disembodied voices of the children reciting, in unison, a Chinese translation of *Pure Imagination* from *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971) place direct relation between the strictures of ideological education and the heroic narrative of individuality. The translation of cultural identity, embodied in such a deadpan manner reminiscent of education systems where repetition and conformity are placed in higher priority than individuality and creative thinking. As Li states:

The children reciting 'Pure Imagination' in my mind are more like phantoms, haunting the forest and anyone wandering inside, entrapped by the omnipresence of a repetitive mantra. I've never managed to make-up my mind, if the voices are real children inside the forest or if it's figments of the solo boy's own imagination.
- Li, Personal Communication, 04/05/18.

The Anatomy of Place presents the spectator with a dialogue between what Jean Baudrillard defines as seduction and provocation. Seduction, according to Baudrillard allows things to come to bear, appearing in secret, 'dual and ambiguous'. Provocation 'calls on you to reveal yourself as you are' (Baudrillard, 1990, 174). In the films there seems to be a complicated relation between cause and effect, where relations, fictive and unreal, are placed alongside what appears to be witness testimony and the indexical; an enactment of what Baudrillard describes as 'the ecstatic real' though in the work of Li, something stands beyond the image, beyond the hyperreality, primordial though remaining inaccessible. Though ceremony may enact society, the embodied spectral points to another kind of reality or knowledge beyond understanding.

The underlying concepts of *The Anatomy of Place* seem to replay and complicate the concept of ceremony in the interplay between, or comparison of, highly conventional and perfectly arranged connections with the experiential; in the structuring of relation, to the seeming disorder of time, action and movement. For Li the act of ordering, in a societal, aesthetic or creative sense, runs at times both in parallel with, and in contrast to, how things occur to us in consciousness. Ceremony in Li's work functions as a performance of worldmaking in that it embodies an attempt of perfect ordering. However, this process also becomes the opposite of subjective desire and objective chance. Within ceremony we are told what to do, a system of rules rather than those of value or interpretation. Li's use of occurrence and similitude bring these junctures to the fore.

What interlinks the concerns of Li's film trilogy is a repeated engagement with the ritualistic and the relation of dominant ideological constructs to those whose lives enact them. In *The Anatomy of Place* the murky interplay of what constitutes the symbolic and what the actual becomes the focus and exploration. The manner that the films operate is through creating seductive connections between seemingly incongruent narratives and temporalities; relations that avoid clear-cut denotation of cause and effect. In the context of Li's work what seems to be reflected back at the spectator are notions of where intensity of meaning and resonance may reside in our anatomising of place. Positing whether in the act of observance arbitrary constructions of society are revealed, or whether indeed it is coincidence that underpins the real in-itself. What is apparent is that signs do not necessitate a contract of exchange with each other but become, what Baudrillard references as 'a pact of alliance'. In the work of Li nowhere does one law of meaning reign but what we experience is the junctures between interconnections of appearance.

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DANIELLE ARNAUD
123 Kennington Road
London SE11 6SF
Tel +44 (0) 20 7735 8292
www.daniellearnaud.com