Li Lishui's Medium Ontology

A Commentary

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Presented here is a two-part essay written by Li Lishui, published in the film journal *Dianying jishibao* (»The Movie Chronicle«) in Chongqing, China, during the Second World War. By now an obscure name, the author Li Lishui was a journalist and translator in wartime Chongqing who worked for the state operated Central Film Studio. Li participated in the cultural scene in wartime Chongqing, as evidenced in the publications that survive today. In addition to writing for major newspapers such as *Zhongyang ribao*, *Xin shubao*, and drama journals such as *Xiju gangwei*, Li authored several stage plays and translated articles from Russian and English on literature, music, and drama. After the war, Li followed the relocated Central Film Studio to Beijing and contributed to news report and film publicity for the studio. Very little is known about his life afterwards. Like the many petty intellectuals who migrated to Chongqing from the coastal cities during the Second World War, Li is now largely forgotten.

Out of the large corpus of material in Chinese that could be counted as film theory, I choose Li Lishui obviously not because he is considered a canonical figure of modern Chinese cultural history, either as a writer, a translator, a dramatist, or a film critic, although he participated in all these aspects of cultural production.[1] Having little chance to board any authoritative anthology of Chinese film theory, Li's writings are however striking and imaginative, if not hyperbolic, idiosyncratic, and eclectic. The two-part essay, despite its brevity, is reminiscent of what Borges fictionalizes as a Chinese encyclopedia anthologizing a variety of thoughts and knowledge taken from different sources and challenging categorical or sys-

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[1] For Chinese anthologies of Chinese film theory, see Luo Yijun et al. (eds.): Zhongguo dianying lilun wenxuan (Selected Writings of Chinese Film Theory), Beijing 1992; Ding Yaping (ed.): Bainian Zhongguo dianying lilun wenxuan. 1897-2001 (An Anthology of One Hundred Years of Chinese Film Theory, 1897-2001), Beijing 2002. For an English anthology of contemporary Chinese film theory covering the late 70s and 80s, see George Semsel et al. (eds.): Chinese Film Theory, a Guide to the New Era, New York, NY 1990. A new English anthology of Chinese film theory that covers the mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan from the 1920s to the contemporary period is forthcoming from the University of Amsterdam Press.

tematic thinking. A considerable degree of technoscientism is at play when Li draws on a diverse range of scientific terms from biology, chemistry, physics, and mathematics. The author, while conducting a dialogue with the more famous writer and poet Xu Chi, also quotes him verbatim.[2] Any attempt to locate an authorial voice or system of thinking will meet with ready defeat, and I choose this piece in a somewhat perverse gesture to contrast the thin biographical detail with the thickness of media and cultural history the essay registers. Rather than treating the essay as »representative« of Chinese film theory, a term itself subject to much critical reflection, I am presenting it as a fragment/remnant of film and media history that reflects upon and documents, albeit obliquely, the tremendous transformation of film culture in China at a specific historical juncture and a particular geopolitical site. The essay itself also raises conceptual and methodological questions as to what we do with film theory after the challenges it faces with the sea changes in media technology and the reconstitution of the fields of film and media studies in various directions.

Film theory, previously identified with structuralist and poststructuralist approaches at the founding moment of the discipline of film studies in the 1960s, has undergone a significant transformation. The »historical turn« in film studies has problematized the universal claims of generalizing enterprises such as film theory while the resistance against the »Grand Theory« of the poststructuralist paradigm in favor of cognitive science and analytical philosophy, as David Rodowick points out, has effected a »retreat from theory« in identifying theory now with principles and methods drawn from the natural sciences. Meanwhile, the rise of digital media, coupled with the proliferation and convergence of media platforms, rekindled the perpetual identity crisis of cinema and effected a »metacritical attitude« in film theory in search of its object of study.[3] While most of these discussions happen in the dominant terrain of European and American contexts, what constitutes film theory elsewhere remains a question. Does film theory exist in other countries and regions? If so, are we applying the same principles and methods as those at the dominant center of knowledge production for purpose of identification? Are we privileging those that fit within the established parameters while discrediting the others outside these parameters? Or, are we looking for some absolute otherness to established parameters to reinforce these cultures as sources of desirable others and alternative knowledge? These questions, meant to address the peripheral geo-

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2 Xu Chi (1914–1996) was a noted poet, writer, and translator in China. He became known for his modernist poetry in the early 1930s in Shanghai and was an active critic, writer, and journalist in Hong Kong and Chongqing during the Second World War. He was later known for his reportage literature on Chinese scientists from the 1970s to the 1990s. Xu committed suicide in 1996.

3 David N. Rodowick: An Elegy for Theory, in: October 122 (2007), pp. 91–109.

political contexts, end up returning to the center, challenging key assumptions demarcating the territory of a specific discipline or regime of knowledge.[4] Just like modern Chinese intellectuals at the turn of the twentieth century had debated whether philosophy existed in China, to ask the question of film theory is never merely about geographical expansion of knowledge but a rethinking of the categories of knowledge themselves. Li Lishui's essay provides an interesting case for us both because of the »metacritical« quality it shares with contemporary film theory in rethinking the medium of cinema and because of its particular constellation of science, art, and philosophy, which provides a unique perspective in considering the history and future of film theory.

Li Lishui's essay was written during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), which overlapped with World War II but with a distinct constellation. With Japan invading China and taking over the Eastern part of the country, China split into five geopolitical zones under Nationalist, Communist, Japanese, British (Hong Kong), and British-American (the International Settlement in Shanghai) regimes of power, each fostering a distinct film culture. The Chinese Nationalist government retreated from the coastal city of Nanjing to inland Chongqing, a treaty port upstream along the Yangtze River. Nestled in the mountainous region in southwest China, Chongqing quickly rose from a backwater in the hinterland to a new cultural and political center, attracting mass migration of the country's industrial, military, financial, and intellectual forces as well as increasing presence of international news agencies, military and diplomatic institutions, and religious and philanthropic organizations. One third of the country's universities relocated to Chongqing and its suburbs in the period, part of a migration of major publishing houses as well as intellectuals, students, workers, farmers—refugees speaking distinct dialects from all social strata and regions. Chongqing was an immensely dynamic cultural center where political forces clashed and public spheres flourished, facilitated by the proliferation of mass media and intensified social interactions mediated through public performance, screening, art exhibitions, sports meetings, street parades, and radio broadcasting.

During the eight years of war, when Chongqing provided a temporary retreat, the Nationalist government intensified its state building project, with the war providing an optimal catalyst for national solidarity and an excuse for consolidating material and intellectual resources, not the least of which included institutional production of knowledge. In addition to the 39 universities relocated to Chongqing, the Academia Sinica, comprising 10 institutions including physics, chemis-

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4 For a comparative perspective on Japanese film theory, see Aaron Gerow: Introduction: The Theory Complex, in: Review of Japanese Culture and Society 22 (2010), special issue Decentering Theory: Reconsidering the History of Japanese Film Theory, pp. 1-13.

try, engineering, astronomy, geology, meteorology, biology, philology, sociology, and psychology, moved inland and expanded into 14 institutions by the end of the war. The National Translation Bureau (Guoli bianyiguan) sponsored numerous translation projects introducing Western publications in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. High schools, many of which were established particularly to accommodate migrant students and teachers as well as prominent scholars and scientists, became vital centers of cultural interactions.[5] Film studios, three of which were established in Chongqing, prioritized education over entertainment and produced numerous science and educational films aimed at the broader masses in the country, the city, and the military.

Against this context of war, mass migration, state building, and the proliferation of mass media, Li Lishui's mini-essay, with its curious ontology of cinema, makes more sense. Li wrote the essay in response to Xu Chi, a poet and essayist who penned a two-part essay questioning the limit of cinema by reflecting upon cinema's medium specificity and the universal reach of film language.[6] Xu was an enthusiast for Esperanto, a symbolist and futurist poet, and an avid translator who introduced American poet Vachel Lindsay's works to the Chinese readers in the early 1930s. Like Lindsay, who wrote arguably the first film theory book in the United States and who conceived cinema as a modern hieroglyph, Xu was fascinated with the idea of cinema as a universal language although his interest was situated in the particular challenge cinema faced in the wartime hinterland.[7] In his essay *The Limit of Cinema*, Xu proposes a »cinematic Esperanto,« a cinema that deploys a common mass language ranging from incorporating a wide range of dialects to using Esperanto as the ultimate solution.[8] In addition to concerns on

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5   Li Lishui himself taught at one such high school, Jiangjin no. 9 National High School, which accommodated 4,000 students and teachers from eastern and northeast China and trained numerous noted scientists and writers.

6   Xu Chi: Dianying de jixian (The limit of cinema), in: Zhongguo dianying (Chongqing) 2 (1941), pp. 32–34.

7   Xu's interest in cinematic Esperanto taps into both the discourse of cinema as a universal language and the various linguistic movements in China intent on internationalizing and modernizing the Chinese language, including various script reforms, Latinization, Romanization, and the BASIC Chinese Language movements. For a detailed study on these language reforms in relation to social movement, see Yurou Zhong: Scripts of Modernity: The Transnational Making of Modern Chinese Language and Social Reform, 1916-1958, Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University 2013. For cinema as a universal language, see Miriam Hansen: Mass Culture as Hieroglyphic Writing: Adorno, Derrida, Kracauer, in: New German Critique 56 (1992), pp. 43-73; Vachel Lindsay: The Art of the Moving Picture, New York 1915.

8   For more detail on Xu and film exhibition in wartime Chongqing, see Weihong Bao: In Search of a Cinematic Esperanto: Exhibiting Wartime Chongqing Cinema in Global Context, in: Journal of Chinese Cinemas 3/2 (2009), pp. 135-147.

verbal communication, Xu revives the discourse of medium specificity to account for cinema's universal appeal. Evoking Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's portrayal of the limit of an art, Xu expresses his enthusiasm for a »limitless« cinema that would explode the confines of the most synthetic art form (drama) by reaching the widest audience through mechanical reproduction and cinematic techniques such as close-ups and mobile framing.[9]

Both Xu and Li wrote in a moment of crisis for cinema, when linguistic difference, material shortage, and technological difficulties curtailed film production and exhibition in the wartime hinterland and posed particular challenges regarding the intellectual and physical reach of the medium. Xu and Li also worked within the propaganda machine, serving in the two state-sponsored film studios based in Chongqing. Their concerns with the limits of cinema were inseparable from the propagandistic imperative to pursue cinema's widest reach despite linguistic and sociocultural differences. The wartime slogan for cinema, »go to the countryside, join the army, and travel abroad«, testifies to propaganda's particular ambition and the challenge it entailed.

As a response to Xu Chi's »Cinematic Esperanto,« however, Li Lishui's »infinite« cinema seems more enigmatic. Although Xu and Li are similarly interested in a »limitless« cinema, Xu sees cinema as a vehicle of universal language, in terms both of verbal communication and of film's »self-explanatory« medium specific techniques. Li, instead, evokes mathematical terms such as »constant« and »variable« and terms shared across chemistry, physics, and biology—»diffusion« and »osmosis«—in envisioning an infinite cinema that contains a »radiating energy« which could be »broadcasted« and knows no bound. What does he mean by these rather far-fetched proposals in a time of war?

Li's unusual vision seems a classic case of scientism in that he deploys, rather haphazardly, a diverse range of scientific terms with their borrowed authority. Yet to see scientism as a one-way diffusion of knowledge, as Bruno Latour observes, misses the picture when a more dynamic and mediated process of cross-fertilization between science and culture takes place. Bruce Clarke calls it technoscientism, an »epistemologically ambivalent and historically dynamic body of heuristic vehicles and visionary hunches embedded in heterogeneous yet interconnected cultural matrices.«[10] Li's technoscientism, I would argue, both registers and obfuscates these interconnected cultural matrices, three of which I will briefly touch upon here: war, propaganda, and media transition.

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9   Xu Chi: Dianying de jixian (as note 6), pp. 32–34.
10   Bruce Clarke: Energy Forms: Allegory and Science in the Era of Classical Thermodynamics, Ann Arbor, MI 2001, p. 64.

While Chongqing was away from the battlefront, the menace of the war was made an everyday reality by Japanese terror bombings from the air that lasted for five and half years between 1938 and 1943. An atmospheric war was wielded between Japanese instigation of a climate of fear—what Peter Sloterdijk would call »atmoterrorism«—and a virtual defense in the form of propaganda, both aiming to transform the environment of living.[11] If terror bombing represents a new paradigm of war shifting from physical combat to an expanded war zone by filling the air with a pervasive and imponderable menace, propaganda, a modern institution of mass media, provided the counterpart of such bombing in reconstructing space and time through a radical reorientation of mass media.

Propaganda was by no means a denigrated term in wartime Chongqing. The Chinese term for propaganda, *xuanchuan*, a compound made of two verbs *xuan* (›to announce from an authority‹) and *chuan* (›to disseminate‹) had long referred to the propagation of authoritative information and orders in its premodern usage. In the early twentieth century, the term applied more widely to the propagation of religious beliefs and the dissemination of knowledge, information, and thought for educational and commercial purposes as well as for political and military causes. These varied connotations carried over to wartime Chongqing, but propaganda became more emphatically associated with mass mobilization in the service of the war.

To achieve the broadest reach of propaganda, mass media themselves had to become increasingly mobile, moving beyond existing institutional confines and conventional spaces of exhibition. Propaganda in this sense is a theory and practice of circulation, addressing mass media's core concerns of reproducibility and mobility. A model of *broadcast media* was in practice that repositioned cinema in relation to other media in terms of simultaneous dissemination and instant transmission. Beyond theatrical exhibition in the cities, mobile projection became the more flexible and widespread mode of film presentation, often in conjunction with slide shows, live performance, music record playing, and radio broadcasting. As poetry was recited in mass rallies, drama performed on the street, paintings, cartoons, and writings put up on the wall, photographs dropped from airplanes, cinema was embedded in a media ensemble with heightened mobility, constituting a propaganda sphere like radio waves permeating the air. Wireless technology, in a literal and figural sense, provided the technological trope and master metaphor for an intense remediation between old and new media for the widest reach and vastest mobility.

The interconnected matrices of war, propaganda, and mass media in the production of a mediating environment help us understand the conceptual leap Li

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11   Peter Sloterdijk: Terror from the Air, Los Angeles, CA 2009.

makes in shifting from more organic, biological metaphors of the evolution of artistic form/medium to more abstract terms in physics, chemistry, and mathematics. Moving from the organic to the inorganic, or, redefining life in terms of the power of synchronic expansion, Li conceives cinema as an emblem of this new technology of space-time. He takes a creative leap of evolutionary thinking by rethinking the limit of an art as point of growth and breakthrough; yet he puts this spiral development in check when it comes to cinema. Defining time and space, Lessing's two axes for art, as two parallel lines extending to the infinite, Li dislocates cinema and refuses to consider it a medium as static and fixed as a mathematical constant.

Li accounts for cinema's exception to the developmental logic through its special »energy« (*neng*), which radiates in time and space and then can be »broadcasted« so as to exceed any boundary.[12] Using analogies of osmosis and diffusion, Li describes how cinema could break its rigid boundaries and expand and leap to the infinite. The cinematic body, as Li sees it, is immeasurable because it is defined in terms of its realm of activity; it moves, mutates, multiplies, and becomes indistinguishable from its space of existence. That space is the infinite ether, a mysterious world-filling substance, a hypothetical medium since antiquity but central to physics in the nineteenth century. By the time of Li's writing, it was already a familiar cultural metaphor for electromagnetic waves, often associated with radio waves and wireless technology. He suggests, »wherever ether exists, cinema's life is attached.«[13] His claim that cinema is already, »a vibrating art in the air« was made in association with the curious term *wuxiandian chuanzhen* (radio facsimile), which refers to radiophotography soon to be used in Chongqing photojournals.[14] It also registers the rise of television, a topic that emerged in China beginning in the 1920s and received increasing coverage during the war.[15]

More importantly, wireless technology, in Li's conception, went beyond any singular material technology and provided a new conception of exhibition practices. Critiquing any attempt to limit the growth of art and to freeze and rigidify

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12 Li Lishui: Dianying wuxian da (as note 1 in Li Lishui: The Infinite Cinema), p. 5.

13 Xu Chi: Dianying de jixian (as note 6), p. 34.

14 Li uses the notion *wuxiandian chuanzhen* which can be translated as either »radio facsimile,« »radiophotography« or its earlier name »telephotography,« which was introduced to China by Edouard Belin in 1926 during his visit to the country. Radiophotography was used in Chongqing for photo-journals after December 1941. However, since Li refers to »radio facsimile« as a case of cinema, Li could be referring to television, which was translated with multiple Chinese terms, including *wuxiandian chuanying* (wireless transmission of image), close to *wuxiandian chuanzheng*. By the 1940s, news about television was widely circulated in China.

15 On television and telephotography in China in the 1920s, see Weihong Bao, Enflamed: Genealogy of an Affective Medium, Minneapolis, MI 2014, Chapter 3 (forthcoming).

cinema into a static medium, Li stresses how cinema can be shown at different spaces at the same time, enjoying the privilege of simultaneity and infinity, and hence becomes »a mobile art leaping in the air«.[16] This interest in cinema as simultaneous dissemination is intimately embedded in the practices of propaganda. Li's analogy of cinema to ether refers to the broadly understood wireless technology as an intense process of remediation situated within an expansive propaganda network as an ever-expanding, moving, »infinite« medium, like the biochemical process of osmosis and diffusion.

Li's infinite cinema, nevertheless, eventually attributes cinema's global reach to affect. Commenting on Xu Chi's concern about linguistic differences that threatens cinema's wider circulation, Li points out that language is not the only means of expression, and the spatial limit of language can be overcome by the communicability of emotions: »Human kind shares the same soul and similar emotions such as love and hatred, anger and sorrow. This is one of the main bases for cinema's infinity.«[17] Through the perpetual circulation of cinema and by way of affect, the linguistic limit will be stretched such that cinema will form not only a »national vernacular language« (*quanguoxing de dazhongyu*) but also a »global vernacular language« (*quanshijiexing de dazhongyu*).[18]

By this time, the difference between Xu Chi and Li Lishui's »limitless« cinema is more clear: if Xu Chi's cinematic Esperanto concerns the medium specificity of film in terms of linguistic intelligence (visual/verbal communication), Li Lishui conceives his infinite cinema in terms of media presence—cinema is a medium of affect because it is a medium of simultaneous dissemination. Does Li's utopia of infinite cinema anticipate Paul Virilio's nightmare of the administration of fear—the synchronization of emotion resulting from the speed of real time communication, which kills and displaces space and time?[19] I would argue that the contiguity between media presence and affect in creating a mediating environment constitutes a non-neutral, social space that is politically ambiguous, and we might retrace its origin to ether in the transnational circulation of knowledge.

Although ether was conceived as an imponderable, neutral, space-filling medium as the source of matter since the nineteenth century, in its mediated introduction into China since the 1860s, ether was endowed with heightened ethical dimensions as a potential social and moral force. For late Qing Chinese intellectuals such as Tan Sitong, ether was a material but also philosophical foundation for social cohesion with its capacity to transmit thoughts across distances and create

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16   Li Lishui: Yishu de shengcun xiandui (as note 3 in Li Lishui: The Infinite Cinema), p. 8.
17   Ibid.
18   Ibid.
19   Paul Virilio: The Administration of Fear, Los Angeles, CA 2012.

interconnectedness in a shared milieu.[20] Similarly, when Li discusses ether, he characterizes it as *wuji* (boundless universe), a concept in classical Chinese philosophy that refers to the essence (being) of things. *Wuji* has no taste, smell, sound, or color, no beginning or end, and remains non-nameable. Such an invisible entity, however, represents the highest level of Dao (the way) for which no limit can be imposed. It is this fantasy of the production of a qualitative social space by way of media presence, I would argue, that looms large in Li's dream of an infinite cinema. This dream is simultaneously the fantasy of propaganda with its characteristically imperialistic, pervasive, and aggressive manner that matches the terror bombing from the air and alerts us to the political stake of an ostensibly neutral and scientistic imagination of cinema.

Writing at the moment of another crisis of cinema, what does it mean to consider a propaganda fantasy in wartime China as a case of film theory? Reflecting on the future of film theory, Rodowick has argued in favor of a philosophical inquiry against a natural scientific tendency so as to couple an epistemological pursuit with an ethical one. While reality is a little messier than any binary opposition between science and humanities, as we learn from Li's curious technoscientism, Li also reveals to us the equally difficult business of politics, one that demands more critical reflections on our side beyond the concern of ethics. We witness how propaganda theory and practice constitutes a substantial history of media theory and media practice, with its simultaneous radical conceptions and oppressive consequences. The meta-critical attitude that we cultivate today in film theory perhaps should not be limited to questioning the identity of cinema—whether in terms of an anxiety of its death or defensive search for its persistence, permutations, or relocation—but should alert us to the politics of film theory and its historical entwinement with politics tout court.

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[20]   See Tan Sitong: Yitai shuo (On the ether) [1898] and Renxue (An Exposition of Benevolence) [1897], in: Tan Sitong quanji (The Collected Works of Tan Sitong), Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981, pp. 432–434, pp. 289–375.