Foreshadowing the Future of Capitalism: Surveillance Technology and Digital Realism in Xu Bing's *Dragonfly Eyes* (2017)

How has the development of surveillance technology and its normalized intervention into our social structures and daily lives impact our imagination of the future? Does the “total view” of the intense yet impassive gaze of surveillance cameras, combined with the mediated intimacy of social media videos, foreshadow deeper social alienation or the fulfillment of individual desire? In order to address such questions, I take the Chinese artist Xu Bing and his team's film *Dragonfly Eyes* (*Qingting zhi yan*, 2017) and its surrounding media culture as a case study to demonstrate how surveillance footage and various modes of cinematic ontology, digital realism, and temporality work in a contemporary socio-political-medial context. Composed by Xu and a group of collaborators, *Dragonfly Eyes* is the only existing feature-length fiction film constructed completely from surveillance footage. As a highly reflexive film, *Dragonfly* epitomizes and embodies the precarious potentials of the digital future of capitalism, both invigorating and bleak, expressive and corrupt.

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“Visible surveillance”¹ is the product of two phenomena. First, it is imposed by public institutions and commercial establishments, with or without the knowledge of those it monitors. Second, webcam-generated video streams and social media engender cultures of self-exposure and self-surveillance. As surveillance technology develops, its interventions into social structures and daily life are normalized. How does this impact our understanding of the present and our ability to imagine the future? Does the intense yet impassive gaze or “total view” of surveillance cameras, combined with social media’s dislocated intimacy, foreshadow deeper social alienation or the fulfillment of individual desire? How does the convergence of surveillance and audiovisual media impel renewed understanding of artistic creativity and political imagination in contemporary mediascapes? In order to address such questions, I take the Chinese artist Xu Bing and his team’s 81-minute found-footage film *Dragonfly Eyes* (*Qingting zhi yan*, 2017) and its surrounding media culture as a case study to demonstrate how surveillance footage and various modes of cinematic ontology, digital realism, and temporality work in a contemporary socio-political-medial context.

In *Surveillance Cinema* (2015), Catherine Zimmer examines how “technology and narrative have come together in cinematic form to play a functional role in the politics of surveillance” (Zimmer 2015, 2). Since the 1980s, film essays, documentaries, and experimental videos composed of images from different types of surveillance cameras have explored issues such as personal privacy and the uncertain political and technological future.² Another set of films have developed a “surveillance camera aesthetic” or utilize surveillance footage from closed-circuited television (CCTV), dashboard cameras,

and live-streaming videos in order to obscure the boundary between fiction and nonfiction, for instance, *Influenza* (Bong Joon-ho, 2004)³ and *Look* (Adam Rifkin, 2007), among others. Still other recent commercial films, such as *The Great Buddha +* (Huang Hsin-yao, 2017), feature fabricated surveillance footage as a foil to the narrative and critique of corrupt capitalist mechanisms and political systems.⁴

Dragonfly Eyes (hereafter *Dragonfly*) is an extraordinary case even in comparison to the aforementioned examples, which incorporate surveillance footage, construct content around the topic of surveillance, or mimic a surveillance aesthetic. *Dragonfly* is the only existing feature-length fictional film constructed completely from surveillance footage.⁵ Captured from 1999 to 2017, the more than 10,000 hours of footage sampled in the film have been publicly available online in China since 2015.⁶ *Dragonfly* involved years of preparation and an enormous investment of time, capital, and labor by a group of collaborators. Thus, it should be considered a collective work; the globally renowned Chinese artist Xu Bing developed the ideas, and a team of data collectors, screenwriters (Zhai Yongming and Zhang Hanyi), editors (Matthieu Laclau and Zhang Wenchao), sound designers (Li Danfeng), and a composer (Yoshihiro Hanno) contributed to the making of the film. Before *Dragonfly*, Xu Bing worked in a variety of media, including woodblock prints, calligraphy, ink painting, and installations. His major concern across these works is how to construct new meanings by assembling and transforming “found materials,” whether words, images, concepts, or industrial debris. For instance, Xu’s *Book from the Ground: From Point to Point* (2003–ongoing) is a “graphic novel” compiled from symbols, signs, icons, and emojis drawn from the public sphere (such as social media

and road signs), and its symbolic language is intelligible to almost anyone—an attempt to transcend the barriers of literacy based on language with “the universality of visual language.”⁷ Xu’s large-scale *Phoenix* sculptures were also collaborative works built by Chinese migrant workers, intimating that collective creativity triumphs over the confines of subjectivity and the bourgeois concept of individual authorship (Tan 2012, 183–84). Scavenging construction remnants evocative of their sources and contexts, and transforming these into spectacular and monumental phoenixes, Xu and workers imbued the sculptures with a “rebirth.”⁸

Although conceived as a feature film from the start,⁹ *Dragonfly* incorporates fictional film, documentary, and video art. As with Xu’s earlier conceptual works, *Dragonfly* mobilizes a similar approach and working method by utilizing cinematic techniques such as editing and voice dubbing to transform the assemblage of “found footage”—surveillance footage—into a fictional film at once real and uncannily unreal. Xu’s primary interest is in the reinvention of language, not in creating compelling narratives (Frazier 2018, 78). Many significant factors link Xu’s aforementioned work with *Dragonfly*: for instance, their labor-intensive, painstaking, monumental quality; their characterization as “narrative pastiches made from found materials” (Kraicer 2018, 49); their transformation of something from banal to something extraordinary; and their use of meaning-making procedures to respond to socio-cultural issues in contemporary society. As Pao-chen Tang argues, as much in *Dragonfly* as in his *Forest Project* (2005–ongoing), “Xu seems to have been fascinated by the tension between existing materials in the world and their potentials opened up by artistic repurposing” (Tang, unpublished conference paper).

Dragonfly follows two fictionalized characters: a young woman, Qingting (“Dragonfly” in Chinese), and her coworker and admirer, Ke Fan. Qingting deserts a Buddhist monastery and enters “real” secular society, working various low-paying jobs in a dairy factory, a dry cleaner’s, and a restaurant. After receiving plastic surgery, she achieves internet stardom as a “web celebrity (*wanghong*),” live-streaming performances and interacting with virtual followers who pay real money to purchase virtual gifts to please her. However, the “plastic surgery” scandal plagues her and she is terrorized by vicious and anonymous online attacks. Qingting (now with the new name, Xiaoxiao) commits suicide. Ke Fan, recently released from prison, has been looking for Qingting and discovers she has died. After his own plastic surgery, he returns to Qingting’s Buddhist temple as her reincarnation. The transposition of one character’s identity onto another through life, death, and rebirth suggest a Buddhist theme: a life cycle, or samsara. On the one hand, the “cycle” narrative poses a critique of the linear, developmental temporality of capitalist modernity and challenges mainstream fictional film’s linear narratives “in a Möbius strip-like structural gambit” (Kraicer 2018, 49). On the other hand, the retreat back to the monastery potentially eschews truly incisive social analysis. Alongside this temporal ambiguity exists a tension between the film’s visual inconsistency (different real people in different shots “playing” Qingting and Ke Fan) and aural consistency (dubbed dialogues allow the audience to recognize consistent characters) that invites further critical attention. How does this tension reflect the intricate structures and layered perspectives of surveillance in relation to digital realism in and beyond *Dragonfly*? In the following sections, I will address all these issues.

I. “Post-Panoptic” Surveillance and the “Attention Economy”

Academic and popular discussions of “surveillance” conventionally begin by addressing a top-down mode of Orwellian dystopian totalitarianism or the unidirectional Bentham-Foucauldian models of panopticism and self-discipline (Lyon 1994, 2003, 2006, 2018; McGrath 2004). Meanwhile, digital technology’s role in informational capitalism means that data surveillance has drawn much recent attention and critique (Zuboff 2019), as “human existence is reduced to digital traces and metadata” (Parks 2015, 13). However, surveillance and media studies scholars acknowledge that the dynamic interplay of surveillance in contemporary society is more diverse, discursive, and decentralized—in other words, we are living in “post-panoptic” times. Surveillance is no longer something that can be discussed in the mode of a purely unidirectional or top-down activity in which surveillance is something done *by* the state, the market, or the voyeuristic predator to the citizen, the consumer, or the victim (Zimmer 2015, 73). Instead, “anybody may watch anybody, anytime, [and] anywhere” (Koskela 2003, 299). Panoptic ideas have been destabilized by new digital technologies, especially home webcams; the complexities of power relations are foregrounded as a result (Lyon 2006, 15). Thomas Mathiesen contrasts the panopticon’s model of the “few watching the many” with today’s mass media of “the many watching the few”—he calls this new transparency the “synopticon” (Mathiesen 1997). Similar neologisms such as “polypticon” (Allen 1994, 145) and “omnicon” (Groombridge 2002, 43) have also surfaced.

It is in this evolving framework that Xu Bing has explained why *Dragonfly* explores the complexity of surveillance in its narrative and aesthetics beyond

simplistic binaries. Xu recounts that when interviewed in the West, he is usually asked about surveillance in terms of top-down political control of a “totalitarian regime” imposed on its citizens (Xu 2019, 130). However, he considers the usual Orwellian understanding of surveillance as already incapable of unravelling the intricacy of contemporary situations since most surveillance apparatuses are controlled by corporations and individuals. At least 99 percent of the footage used in *Dragonfly* was uploaded to publicly accessible databases by private entities—not governmental agents (Xu 2019, 130). The connotations of “surveillance” are also shifting. Many people seek to establish connections with the world through newly available live-streaming technologies, hoping to improve their lives. The world of “surveillance” has expanded to a much larger and richer realm.

A corporeal and socially acceptable gaze is usually reciprocal, yet the surveillance gaze mediated by technology produces a dissociation of the seeing/being seen dyad. However, surveillance can also offer a new way of seeing and being seen, as Carolyn McKay argues, by presenting an appealing tool and platform for visual artists through which new modes of perception and observation create new modes of representation and exhibition (McKay 2013, 336–37). Reflecting on these new means of surveillance, *Dragonfly* touches on significant popular cultural and media phenomena in contemporary China and beyond. The film highlights the dystopian effects of rampant consumerism in an unruly, socialist-turned-capitalist social world. It insightfully juxtaposes disparate forms of surveillance as: 1) institutional surveillance in public spaces, both governmental and commercial; 2) social and cultural surveillance that, in a metaphoric sense, shape repressive trends and values, especially

discourses around gender and age; and 3) self-surveillance through live-streaming and other social media.

Surveillance is omnipresent and omniscient, especially in urban spaces. In China, an estimated 200 million surveillance cameras have been installed for security purposes; the number is over 245 million globally. The film's title "dragonfly eyes" not only invokes the female protagonist Qingting/*Dragonfly*'s perspective and experience, but also functions as a metaphor for the multifaceted "eyes" of surveillance cameras; as noted in the film, a dragonfly has 28,000 eyes which blink 40,000 times per second. Unlike dragonflies, however, surveillance cameras never blink. With their dispassionate, "unblinking gaze" (Zimmer 2015, 1), surveillance cameras present a world in which tedious, repetitive, and mundane daily activities coexist with abrupt, dramatic, and even shockingly violent events. As Jennifer Burris argues, surveillance is a visual model of "intimate alienation." Although surveillance represents the insinuation of cameras into once private spaces, its aesthetic is characterized by boredom, ambiguity, and a lack of expression (Burris 2011, 152).

In neoliberal, global-technological capitalism, the commodification of visibility is integral to the politics of surveillance (Zimmer 2015, 75), the impassive yet alienating gaze of which can be turned into a means of profit-making through "self-surveillance." Responding to the hyper-commercialized popular-cultural obsession with beauty and youth, *Dragonfly* figures plastic surgery as both a fad and an investment.¹⁰ The trend intensifies and at the same time is intensified by the objectification of the female body and retrograde status of women in contemporary China, after the more progressive gender discourses and governmental policies of the socialist period had been weakened. As

suggested in *Dragonfly*, women are only regarded as potential sexual objects in the capitalist-patriarchal system, and social and cultural surveillance reduces their value to mere "appearance." Thus, in *Dragonfly*, suffering from discrimination and disempowerment because of her "plain looks," Qingting finally convinces herself: "You either need to change your way of thinking, or change your appearance." She invests in plastic surgery, and her "improved" appearance becomes capital, a means of profit-generation facilitated by "live-streaming," a new medial tool of self-surveillance that fetishizes youth and glamor. Live-streamers become attractive and desirable commodities in a dominant male-chauvinist heterosexual gender discourse, selling their looks, performativity, and sexuality. Therefore, they are simultaneously *promoters of commodities* and *the commodities they promote*, the merchandise and their marketing agents (Bauman and Lyon 2013, 32). However, does the film's title "Dragonfly Eyes" suggest Qingting's vision, agency, and subjectivity? As one critic notes, it is "not that security cameras see too much, but that women do" (Grbich 2018, 36). Nevertheless, Qingting/Xiaoxiao's agency is compromised in the middle of the film as the narration shifts from her first-person yet omniscient perspective to Ke Fan's, as her story and death are witnessed and told by him.

As Paula Albuquerque argues, webcam-generated video and live-streaming bear witness to the fact that surveillance practices are increasingly internalized; people appear to welcome the presence of cameras, thereby accepting the constant exposure of everyday life (Albuquerque 2018, 30).¹¹ Young women who live-stream potentially channel the hedonistic desires of mostly male virtual followers whose "social value" and self-esteem depend upon their

“purchasing power.” At the same time, since “members of the society of consumers are themselves consumer commodities” (Bauman and Lyon 2013, 34), consumers are also dehumanized and alienated within a system that reinforces and reproduces social divisions. Ross Abbinnett argues that as “media technologies ... reoriented the desire of human beings, a new epoch of techno-psychical manipulation begins in which culture industries take control of the reflective and aesthetic faculties of each individual” (Abbinnett 2018, 5). Desire is created, standardized, and overdetermined by consumer capitalist exploitation of technology. New forms of self-exposure demonstrate the dangers of narcissism, of being consumed by unproductive self-absorption in a society of loners caught in a vicious circle of aimless self-adoration, as Jean Baudrillard has warned us (Baudrillard 2002, 482). The “virtual” and the “real” are intertwined, just as digital realism can be unreal. In Paul Virilio’s view, the webcam is part of this transfiguration of everyday life; it is essential to effect a split in primary reality by developing a *stereo-reality*, made up on the one hand of the *actual reality* of immediate appearances and, on the other hand, of the virtual reality of media trans-appearance (Virilio 2000, 15).

Self-exposure is an economy in the digital era, one that Anthony Giddens has called a “weightless economy;” as pleasure-producing entertainment, it operates according to different principles from the industrial economy that preceded it (Hutton and Giddens 2000, 1). It has also been defined as an “attention economy” in which attention and stardom become the currency and goal (Goldhaber 1997; Beller 2006; Peters and Seier 2009; Wise 2002, 430). Cyber-visuality turns a profit within the frame of aggressive capitalism, becoming “an increasing practice of self-staging and self-stylization, which

in turn is considered a trademark of digital mass culture” (Peters and Seier 2009, 188). In a world of self-exposure through social media, being seen becomes a matter of privilege and desire, and the link between personal performance, celebrity, and surveillance is mediated by the corporate structures of technology (Lyon 2018, 70–71). Live-streaming has become a fast-expanding economic sector in China that has given birth, for instance, to training centers and textbooks teaching people how to become internet celebrities and has made significant contributions to local economies (cf. Xu 2017a). In *Dragonfly*, Xiaoxiao/Qingting and live-streamers use the self as a creative and economic resource and a neoliberal self-marketing tool. Yet live-streaming also commercializes and dehumanizes young people and their interactions. Chinese filmmaker Hao Wu’s documentary *People’s Republic of Desire* (2018) captures the live-streaming industry and features live-streamers showcasing their talents in virtual showrooms, searching for fame and fortune in the digital idol-making media environment. These live-streamers are vulnerable to exploitation as they are easily manipulated by commercial corporations and agents eager to ensure maximum profits.

In live-streaming, intimacy and privacy are for sale; the practice records the entry of global technological capitalism into the intimacies of personal life. Work and private life are now subject to mediation (Peters and Seier 2009, 189). The private is public, to be celebrated and consumed by countless “friends” as well as casual “users” (Lyon 2013, 19). *Dragonfly* links the commodification of technologically-mediated intimacy to the invasion, complication, and redefinition of privacy. In the case of Xiaoxiao, work

Fig. 1: *Dragonfly Eyes* (Xu Bing, 2017). Courtesy of Xu Bing studio.

Fig. 2: *Dragonfly Eyes* (Xu Bing, 2017). Courtesy of Xu Bing studio.

and private life seemingly converge. She displays herself in front of the webcam in an intimate setting such as a bedroom, and this becomes her “work.” Exposure becomes a selling point to attract voyeuristic (male) followers.

Mark Andrejevic conceptualizes such live-streaming spaces as “digital enclosures.” While capitalism has always worked by means of enclosures (for instance, fields and the factory floor), the new digital enclosures include leisure spaces that become work spaces in which one’s leisure time and activity are transformed into labor (Andrejevic 2004; Wise 2002, 430). Capitalist exploitation in the digital age has become more disguised and more severe. Although live-streamers expose most of their lives onscreen, they may need to protect their emotional privacy (and true identity in some cases) from the general public. For instance, in *Dragonfly*, Xiaoxiao professionally and coquettishly flirts with and extracts money from Ke Fan over the internet, but she never reveals her identity (as Qingting) or her true emotions to him. He is just another customer, one who would potentially pay for her camouflaged cyber-personality. The characters are locked in a neoliberal regime of performative capitalism, where human life is distinguished by constant, technologically-enhanced performativity (Abbinnett 2018, 7–8). While Xiaoxiao’s performativity might suggest a strong sense of artificiality, for her enchanted followers she represents the real and even the ideal.

Live-streaming can also be understood as a practice that expands rather than delimits the visibility of its users. As David Lyon claims, “surveillance is clearly enjoyable, empowering and playful for some, and this should be appreciated for the meaningful cultural phenomenon that it is” (Lyon 2018, 24). For lower-class young people lacking social,

financial, and cultural capital like Qingting/Xiaoxiao, live-streaming provides opportunities for social mobility and material abundance in an “attention economy” facilitated by new technology and media. This potential is exemplified by the Chinese “desktop documentary” *Present Perfect* (Wan mei xian zai shi, Zhu Shengze, 2019), edited from 800 hours of live-streaming footage available online. The film features five subjects who are mostly marginalized people, such as men with disabilities and a female migrant worker, and who are almost invisible in public spheres and mainstream commercial media. At times, they may appear undesirable—the opposite of surgically-modified glamorous online celebrities—but they are also therefore likely to be exoticized for their “abnormality.” They live-stream their daily lives, explain their unfortunate situations, and communicate with their followers without being promoted and manipulated by any corporate organizations; they are the few fortunate ones who get attention among numerous spontaneous, individual users of live-streaming platforms popular through China (such as *Douyu*, *Douyin*, *Kuaishou*, *Huya*, *Bilibili*, *Xigua*, among others).¹²

The popularity of the subjects of *Present Perfect* is not only symptomatic of the widespread embrace of capitalist self-surveillance media around the globe, but also reveals some of the cultural, social, and historical specificities of contemporary China. Most of the subjects are from rural villages or small towns, and some are migrant workers living in another city. Their experiences epitomize Chinese social issues such as the urban-rural divide, mass migration, and social stratification. In a relaxed and intimate atmosphere, and in sharp contrast with the spectacular artificiality of “web celebrities,” they live-stream mundane routines such as eating, working,

walking, and chatting. By establishing online communities, these live-streamers seek emotional connections and mutual understanding, even though some of their followers' interest may be based in curiosity or even voyeurism. In *Present Perfect*, a disabled young man finally overcomes the trauma of being bullied in childhood and his enduring sense of humiliation; after being encouraged by another disabled live-streamer and his own cyber followers, he visits public spaces from which he has isolated himself for years and later finds a factory job in another city. As Zygmunt Bauman has shown and as this case bears out, the fear of disclosure has been eclipsed by the joy of being noticed. For certain underrepresented groups, the promise of enhanced visibility chimes with social recognition and proof of a valued, "meaningful" existence (Bauman and Lyon 2013, 26, 110). In this sense, live-streaming makes the invisible visible and renders the ignored present, even striking. It allows people to claim a foothold in an admittedly alien and inhospitable world. For such persons, live-streaming expands their social boundaries and enhances their sense of subjectivity and self-empowerment.

While these modes of self-surveillance are deeply entwined with postindustrial, neoliberal global capitalism, older forms of surveillance persist within our changing economic structures. The surveillance technology used in the cattle farm in *Dragonfly* where Qingting first works recalls Karl Marx's argument about monitoring factory workers to ensure their compliance as a disciplined labor force in industrial capitalism. Marx's insight is vividly demonstrated in Charlie Chaplin's film *Modern Times* (1936), when Charlie takes out a cigar in the restroom of the factory, only to be sharply rebuked by the boss who suddenly appears on a big telescreen on the wall. For Marx, surveillance was

located within the struggles between labor and capital; its purpose was to maintain control on behalf of capital and maximize technical efficiency (Lyon 1994, 25). The temporalities and technologies of industrial capitalism coexist within, and are even magnified by, new forms of capitalism. In *Dragonfly*, the surveillance technology employed to monitor workers mirrors that of the factory but is much more advanced. As Ke Fan explains, the manager can remotely scrutinize workers and cows via his smart phone from another country, unconfined by physical distance. Electronic surveillance also suggests the forces of standardization and impersonalization in industrial and post-industrial capitalism alike, as both workers and cows are called by numbers rather than names, and both eat the standardized food in the factory every day (although the cows get greater variety).

In *Dragonfly*, such scenes of standardized surveillance convey a sense of "realness" due to the illusion of simultaneity, "telepresence," and instantaneity; however, the low-resolution, sometimes monochrome and silent imagery also creates a feeling of artificial mediation or "unrealness," because "many sensory and spatial dimensions are lost" (Wise 2004, 428). How should we understand the tension and complexity of surveillance footage in relation to temporality, cinematic ontology, and digital realism? These issues will be the subject of the next section.

II. Digital Realism: The Ultra-real and the Unreal

Beyond its engagement in social commentary, *Dragonfly* is a reflection on and re-understanding of the nature of digital images. As the film shows, the deeply haunting strangeness of technologically-mediated reality can be so real that it becomes unreal.

When it comes to the ontology of photographic realism, it is necessary to turn to the French film critic André Bazin. Bazin argues that, in comparison to traditional visual forms such as painting, photography and cinema are ontologically more realistic since the image is an automatic mechanical reproduction devoid of direct human intervention such as a painter's hand; the operator may select the camera angle but does not artificially change the nature of image reproduction (Bazin 2005). Since the late 1990s, the revaluation of classical film theory including Bazin's has itself taken place against the development of digital technologies that have once again foregrounded fundamental, or rather ontological, questions about image-based media (Hassan 2017, 38). Francesco Casetti, for example, argues that in moving from analog to digital, we may assume that the end of the "photographic era" does not necessarily imply the end of a realistic attitude, as long as digital imagery restores the texture of reality and creates the realistic effect with formal devices or thematic components (Casetti 2011).

Following Bazin, on the ontological level (if we do not emphasize the photochemical-digital transformations) footage generated by surveillance cameras might be regarded as totally self-generating and autonomous, a kind of ultra-realism, since it is devoid of any human intervention, even the cameraman selecting camera angles or shot scales. Surveillance cameras are used for practical purposes rather than aesthetic ones: they have fixed angles, positions, and framings; they are almost always static, with high angles and long shots; and they cover the largest possible spatial and visual spectrum in order to collect the maximum information within their range. As Paola Baretto Leblanc argues, "[p]aradoxically the surveillance

camera is there to assure that nothing significant occurs ... visibility here is associated with deviation; the image only has perceptible value if something abnormal occurs" (Leblanc 2009, 104).

And yet, Xu Bing realized that the images captured by surveillance cameras are at once vivid and peculiar, transcending our traditional notions of photo-aesthetics (cf. Xu 2017b). Leblanc also considers that the surveillance image, when removed from its preventative or repressive functions, "allows a poetic of the ordinary to bloom" (Leblanc 2009, 108). *Dragonfly* draws attention to the fact that a "surveillance camera" is not a fixed entity; rather, such cameras are diverse and subject to technological development and transformation. For instance, in *Dragonfly's* database, the footage recorded in earlier years (pre-2000s) is silent, black-and-white, and in low resolution with fixed camera positions. Later footage is in color, with higher resolution and even some sound recording. The most recent surveillance cameras feature night mode and automatic zooms, which are capable of tracking and stretching the camera lens using embedded AI technology (Xu 2019, 131). These distinct phases and kinds of surveillance footage make the visual quality and texture of *Dragonfly* heterogeneous. Speaking of the film's images, Kraicer notes that "some [are] sharp, some very compressed, some heavily pixilated, some with smooth motion, others jumpy or seemingly plagued by constant jitters" (Kraicer 2018, 49).

In a digital age, "realism" is not just indexical or ontological but "perceptual," "a correspondence-based model of cinematic representation" (Prince 1996) and "an impression of reality" (Gunning 2007). The illusion of reality and the impression of "the real" created on screen were both pivotal in classical Hollywood cinema. As Xu has observed, in most fictional films images

are manipulated to create a realistic illusion. This was not the case when moving images were first invented with the purpose of reflecting and reproducing reality (Xu and Zhai 2017). In this sense, surveillance footage might be considered a return to the origins of moving images with their long takes. And yet this formulation is complicated in *Dragonfly*, for which Xu and his team used found footage to effect a reversal of conventional filmmaking. Instead of turning actors into fictional characters and creating an illusion of realism from human-made footage, Xu transformed real people into actors and constructed a fictional narrative from automatic footage—the hyper-real becomes unreal precisely because it is too real. Furthermore, the assorted low-resolution footage pulled from different temporalities (suggested by timecodes imprinted on the surveillance images) creates a layer of visible mediation, a kind of alienation effect. For instance, in some surveillance footage, visual staccato and freeze moments disrupt the smooth reproduction of space and temporal duration, accentuating the texture, materiality, and medium of surveillance video.

The production of *Dragonfly* itself was marked by disruption and experimentation. At first, Xu and his team erased the timecodes and edited the video according to the principles of classical fictional cinema, but found this made the film too smooth. It had lost its edge and power, since all the elements worked towards Hollywood-style perceptual illusory “realism” with typical causality in narration and continuity in editing devoid of tension. Later, the collaborators realized that they needed distance from realism and went in the opposite direction, generating a sense of alienation that ultimately emancipated the narrative (Xu 2019, 131). In *Dragonfly*, many fragmentary shots of people and

places from all over China are edited together into a linear narrative that serves to transform the spatial into the temporal; the final film temporalizes the spatial. But the film also preserves the various timecodes and source information embedded in its pixelated surveillance images, juxtaposing different temporalities and breaking the illusion of visual continuity and temporal consistency. The film’s sense of perceptual and cognitive confusion, then, can be understood as a manner of contemplating and critiquing the illusion of realism in mainstream cinema.

According to Xu Bing, since the surveillance footage does not provide recurring figures or characters, Qingting’s and Ke Fan’s voices had to be consistent in order to ensure the audience’s aural identification of the characters. Herein lies the film’s energetic audiovisual tension: visual inconsistency and aural consistency. Different real men and women captured in surveillance footage become the two main fictional characters in *Dragonfly*, for which “individual differences are blurred as involuntary actors in disparate locations are written into these singular protagonists” (Grbich 2018, 32). The film’s audiovisual tension and volatility echoes its main characters’ unstable appearances and uncertain identities, constantly reinvented and fluid. The film’s interest in “plastic surgery” adds another layer of meaning to its assemblage of miscellaneous surveillance footage; in addition to the sociopolitical and symbolic significance discussed in the previous section, the thread of “plastic surgery” in *Dragonfly* provides visual inconsistency with narrative pretext. Through plastic surgery, Qingting becomes Xiaoxiao, and Ke Fan becomes Qingting. On the surface or in substance? What are their “true” identities? Qingting visually becomes Xiaoxiao, yet her voice does not change

and is recognized by Ke Fan; Ke Fan becomes Qingting and returns to the monastery where an older nun tells him/her: “your look hasn’t changed, but your voice and tone are those of another person.”

As the film highlights, human identity becomes malleable and indistinct as much in virtual life as after “plastic surgery.” And the transformation of one’s identity—conforming to the trends of commercialization in contemporary capitalism—is completed through a “beautification” of “look/surface/appearance” that can “defy” even surveillance technology. In the beginning of *Dragonfly*, a rich businessman’s investment in “renovating” the temple leads to the destruction of an ancient ginkgo tree and the *fengshui* of the temple. This violent “plastic surgery” of the temple disturbs the nun Qingting’s spiritual equilibrium and catapults her into the secular world, where she later goes through “plastic surgery” herself without, however, being bothered by the change of her own facial *fengshui*. Ironically, although surveillance technology uses facial recognition software and other algorithm-based tracking tools on a massive scale, plastic surgery makes the implementation of “facial identification” challenging, either because young women after plastic surgery look too much alike or because their faces no longer match their identity documents. Both human eyes and surveillance eyes are defeated. In *Dragonfly*, a police officer faced with images of young women with identical faces in his efforts to trace Xiaoxiao after her disappearance, remarks: “if we can’t tell them apart, what chance do surveillance cameras have?” Both human eyes and surveillance eyes are defeated by such physical alterations. “Plastic surgery,” that is, creates a sense of anonymity, albeit

unintentionally, echoed by *Dragonfly*’s deliberate assemblage of visual traces randomly created by physical presences in material reality.

Dragonfly is intentionally fragmentary and visually disorienting; however, sounds suture and anchor these fractures. Voice dubbing and sound design are vital to construct a consistent fictional narrative with relatively convincing characters. Sound design (including dialogue and ambient sounds) here differ from standard fictional films. Reconstructing silent surveillance footage into a narrative and creating a credible soundscape was entirely achieved during postproduction in the studio. All dialogue in *Dragonfly* was written and dubbed—as Xu claims, “it may be one of the most ‘soundtracked’ films ever made” (Xu 2017a). The sound designer Li Danfeng recounts the team’s efforts to construct dialogues to ensure their narrative function, to sync the voice actors’ tone, pitch, and timbre to their characters, and to adjust the texture and volume across different acoustic spaces. Although the voice acting has been criticized as amateurish, this very quality again creates an alienating distance resonant with its “surveillance look.”

Moreover, sound design and editing were intertwined in the process of making the film. The sound designer and editor constantly communicated in order to inspire each other (cf. Li 2018). As with the film’s editing, the voice layers also suggest complicated perspectives and address the multiple mediations that occur within the narration, including the partial perspective of the characters and the police who investigate Xiaoxiao’s disappearance as well as the omniscient perspective of the computer hub. In the middle of the film, with a title announcing “three years later,” the perspective switches from Qingting to Ke Fan, who gets released

from prison and starts looking for Qingting. We see (and hear) a few police officers in the surveillance footage examining other surveillance footage in front of a computer screen. They fast forward and rewind, zoom in on certain shots, and freeze specific images as they attempt to figure out whether Xiaoxiao jumped from a bridge or was pushed. We also hear an omniscient robotized voiceover analyzing human activities and natural environments. This voice sounds half-human and half-AI, manifestly artificial, an obvious surveillance metaphor. The sense of acoustic “authenticity” suggested by amateurish voice acting and the sense of the “unreal” evoked by the computerized voice are at once in juxtaposition and tension.

In comparison to the understated and realistic sound design in *Dragonfly*, the film’s editing is more pronounced and occasionally flamboyant. Surveillance footage can be formulaic, repetitive, and monotonous. In Steven Shaviro’s words, “video surveillance ... watches over even the emptiest expanses of space, and it registers vast stretches of time in which nothing whatsoever happens” (Shaviro 2003, 36). Surveillance footage only gains new meanings after the editing process. In *Dragonfly*, editing techniques commonly used in fictional films—such as analytical editing, continuity editing, and parallel editing—are dexterously employed.¹³ In contrast to the ordinary emptiness of surveillance footage, the film’s election and assemblage practices depict a world in which there is always something happening or about to happen. Action either serves the film’s narrative functions or, in a series shocking montage sequences, “turn[s] everyday life into a theatrical spectacle” (Hillier 1996, 102). For instance, contingent natural and human-made catastrophes emphasize the “unrealness” and absurdity of

reality. Under such circumstances, the most mundane footage could look suspenseful, since unexpected disaster can explode in the next second. According to Xu Bing, most surveillance footage is so quiet that it becomes scary or eerie; once something happens, the footage is instantly beyond our control and imagination, proving that we live in an unpredictable world. Although not directly related to the plot, the disaster collages comment on the love story between Qingting and Ke Fan and act as a foil to the characters’ sentiments; in a chaotic and corrupt world, romantic love, privacy, and intimacy seem both fragile and trivial (Xu 2019, 133).

The display of “more ‘pure,’ plotless montages” (Kraicer 2018, 49) of sensationalist violence and horrors such as fatal accidents, car crashes, and explosions even includes a viscerally unsettling real death. *Dragonfly* opens with a long take in which a girl falls into a canal and drowns. We witness the whole silent process of her death in real duration under the indifferent gaze of the surveillance camera. Towards the end of her struggle, the film manipulates temporality by fast-forwarding to the result: the serene surface of the canal that had just swallowed a human life. As one critic points out, “this footage is as horrific as it is banal and dispassionate, for it is real” (Frazier 2018, 78). The choice foregrounds questions of ethics and exploitation in nonfiction footage, that is, “the ethical tensions of appropriating the surveilled lives of strangers for creative pursuits” (McKay 2013, 334). This is reminiscent of André Bazin’s essay, “Death Every Afternoon,” in which Bazin argues that like the sexual act, death is in its own way the absolute negative of objective time, the qualitative instant in its purest form. It must be experienced and cannot be represented without violating its nature. “The representation

of a real death,” Bazin observes, “is an obscenity, no longer a moral one, rather a metaphysical one. We do not die twice ... [It is] an intolerable sight not so much for its objective horror as for its ontological obscenity” (Bazin 2003, 30).

The ethical issue of this opening sequence is magnified by its repetition, as the girl dies on the screen every time *Dragonfly* is shown. However, in Shelly Kraicer’s view, the contextualization of such sequences allows them to activate and implicate our ethical self-questioning; it is this ambivalence-generating mechanism that makes the film so disquieting and disorienting, and gives it a novel destabilizing power (Kraicer 2018, 49). Andrea Lingenfelter notes that Buddhist concepts and themes—the idea that human beings exist in an endless cycle of life and death and rebirth—are central to the film and embodied by the relationship between Qingting/Xiaoxiao and Ke Fan (Lingenfelter 2018). As Ke contemplates at the film’s end: “Will I have Qingting’s past, or my own future?” With its re-sue and re-editing of surveillance footage, *Dragonfly* stages a claim about the possibilities of new life.

Conclusion

Dragonfly edits, aestheticizes, and transforms surveillance footage of various types. Attending to the discursive sociopolitical connotations of such footage while utilizing shot blocks and soundtrack to enhance new meanings, the film raises questions about the ultra-real and unreal technological mediations of informational capitalism’s present and future. The highly metaphorical story in *Dragonfly* holds together its assemblage of dispersed and silent surveillance footage, as does the film’s reliance on scripted and dubbed dialogues, fabricated ambient sounds, and voiceover narration. Surveillance in *Dragonfly* is not just

a top-down instrument of political manipulation, but also a profit-making and distraction-inducing technology that anticipates a dystopian vision of nihilism and sensorial indulgence imbued with an old form of religiosity: Buddhist samsara, within whose discourse “reality” is “illusory and impermanent” (Rayns 2018, 19). The crew was also able to track, identify, and contact most of the real people appearing in the film to obtain their permissions for image rights, facilitated by GPS information appearing on the footage, yet another layer of surveillance.¹⁴

Making a fictional film without actors, a cinematographer, studio, or shooting process, Xu and his team have practiced a new model of “filmmaking,” one which is only possible with contemporary developments in digital technology and media, that is, the availability of surveillance footage databases. As Xu notes, no single image was made or manipulated by human agency in *Dragonfly*—instead, “surveillance cameras all over China are all our cameramen” (Xu 2017c). Xu links this filmmaking method with recent so-called “sharing economy” business models in technological capitalism (Uber, Airbnb, Postmates, and so on) (cf. Xu 2017c) that use computational support to provide a platform to connect labor forces, consumers, and commodities, without the need for “raw materials” or hiring a large number of workers. As the twenty computers in Xu’s studio incessantly collected and downloaded surveillance footage, his studio was connected to all of China, which in turn became an enormous film set. This practice inspires a new understanding of the so-called “boundaries of reality” (Xu 2017d). And the distribution of *Dragonfly* further connects the “local gaze” of surveillance footage from different places in China to a global community of spectators of *Dragonfly*

in art galleries, and film theaters, and international film festivals. Thus surveillance seems to “transcend both spatial and temporal barriers” (McCahill 1998, 41).

Surveillance images are intended for the future. They suggest the contours of the social imagination under capitalism. According to David Lyon, “in the present, ironically, presence is downplayed in the paradoxical unreality of ‘real time.’ While the surveillance camera captures certain images in the instant the event occurs, it is its role in the future, not the present, that counts. Yet that future is itself seen in simulated forms” (Lyon 2006, 14). *Dragonfly* begins to consider that surveillance images could alter our view of history if the past were preserved only or primarily in the audiovisual archive. There is a mystical cosmic concept of “geo-magnetic recording” in the film that magnetic fields can preserve what happens in certain times and places, and even project the “truth” to a future time and space. In Xu’s words: “these even supernatural and unexplainable phenomena have been recorded

by surveillance cameras, only if we could preserve these images to future generations (these are automatically deleted and overlaid by new ones!)” (Xu 2017d) If surveillance is installed to prevent something from happening in the future, yet surveillance footage (if preserved) becomes an archive for the past; when surveillance footage is viewed, there is always a strong sense of “the present.” “Surveillance” encompasses ideas about predicting and controlling the future, ideas inflected with technologically determinist tendencies. The primary purpose of surveillance is to foresee, prepare, and control for the range of possible outcomes that could result from present actions and conditions (Gates 2017, 188). With more advanced surveillance gadgets and strategies, would the overproduction and increased circulation of surveillance images suggest a hyper-surveillant audiovisual future and hyper-mediated intimacy? As a highly reflexive film, *Dragonfly* epitomizes and embodies the precarious potentials of the digital future of capitalism, both invigorating and bleak, expressive and corrupt.

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1/ This is distinct from “data-surveillance,” which designates the systematic collection, analysis, and categorization of data from citizens, mostly without their knowledge, for purposes such as security and marketing. Data-surveillance results in the requisition of personal privacy, racial discrimination, and commercial manipulation. See Lyon’s *The Electronic Eye* (1994) and Zuboff’s *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019).

2/ For instance, *Der Riese* (Michael Klier, 1984, 82 min), *In Order Not to Be Here* (Deborah Stratman, 2002, 33 min), *Faceless* (Manu Luksch, 2007, 50 min), *We Live*

in *Public* (Ondi Timoner, 2009, 91 min), *Low Definition Control—Malfunctions # 0* (Michael Palm, 2011, 95 min), and *The Road Movie* (Doroga, Dmitrii Kalashnikov, 2016, 67 min).

3/ The beginning credits state: “the images used in this film were captured by the large numbers of observation cameras and CCTV security systems found in Seoul.”

4/ Others include *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998), *EDtv* (Ron Howard, 1999), the science fiction film *The Running Man* (Paul Michael Glasser, 1987), and so forth.

5/ In a Chinese context, similar works include *Disorder* (*Xianshi shi guoqu de weilai*, Huang Weikai, 2009, 58 min), a documentary constructed from footage made by amateur videographers in Guangzhou, and *Whose Eyes* (Tan Tan, 2011, 15 min), a four-channel video work about daily violence and moral degeneration in contemporary China composed of both surveillance footage and staged shots imitating surveillance footage. For more information, see Braester’s “The City as Found Footage: The Reassemblage of Chinese Urban Space” (2016).

6/ According to the credits at the end of the film, some footage was captured outside of mainland China, for instance, from Taiwan, Afghanistan, and Spain. The film features Xu Bing’s statement: “I have wanted to make a film from surveillance footage since 2013, but I had no access to the necessary resources. Since 2015, surveillance cameras in China have been linked to the cloud database: countless surveillance recordings have been streamed online. So I took up the project again. I collected a huge amount of footage and tried to use these fragments of reality to tell a story.”

7/ For more information about this project, see: <http://www.xubing.com/en/work/details/188?classID=12&type=class> [accessed January 15, 2020].

8/ Xu Bing and Chinese construction workers created the installation work *Phoenix* from 2007 to 2010. It features two monumental phoenixes (each measures approximately one hundred feet long and together weigh twelve tons) fabricated entirely from materials salvaged from construction sites in urban China, including demolition debris, steel beams, tools, and remnants of the daily lives of migrant laborers. The mystical birds bear witness to the complex interconnection between labor, history, capital, and commercial development in contemporary China. Both in the West and in China the motif and mythology of the phoenix correspond to the idea of rebirth. The installations were exhibited briefly outdoors at the Today Art Museum in Beijing, and then at the Shanghai World Expo in 2010. In April 2013, the internally illuminated birds premiered outside China when they were suspended mid-air inside MASS MoCA (Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art). For more information, see: <https://massmoca.org/event/xu-bing-phoenix/> The Phoenixes were also exhibited in the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in Morningside Heights, New York City for one year in 2014. For a more deliberate discussion of this work and its political connotations, see Junjie Jiang’s “The Doubleness of Sight/Site: Xu Bing’s *Phoenix* as an Intended Public Art Project” (2018).

9/ Emphasized by Xu Bing in an interview (cf. Lee 2018).

10/ It is also a practical storytelling device on which I will expand in the next section.

11/ In China, as Renren Yang argues, “although the security camera intends to overawe criminals and preempt possible crimes, the public in a viewer society nevertheless have developed a habitual insensitivity to the existence of those discreet camera-eyes” (Yang 2017, 263).

12/ For a list ranking the most popular Chinese live-streaming platforms in 2019, see: <http://www.enet.com.cn/article/2019/0716/A20190716948154.html> [accessed January 13, 2020]. Live-streaming sprouted in the early 2000s in China and exploded in 2015 and 2016, during which more than 700 live streaming platforms appeared; later it developed into a more centralized industry monopoly. It started with video gaming and expanded to live-streamers chatting with viewers, singing, and eventually exploring new business models such as e-commerce. 17% of all people

in China have watched a live-streaming video. Live-streamers make money from “tips,” and sometimes tipping or gifting becomes a competition to flaunt wealth, to fight for attention and to induce envy from other viewers. It is a fantasy sold to the working-class viewers, to make them believe that they brought one of *them* up the social ladder with their collective power. Some factory workers spend a considerable portion or even *all* of their salary on tipping their favorite live-streamer. For more information, see Siyi Chen’s “Is This Real Life: The Live Streaming Craze Explained” (2019).

13/ The professional French editor Matthieu Laclau and Japanese composer Yoshihiro Hanno who worked on *Dragonfly Eyes* had both worked on Jia Zhangke’s *Mountains May Depart* (*Shan he gu ren*, 2015), and were recommended by Jia to Xu.

14/ There is a statement in the end of the film as such: “we have obtained the image rights of most people who appear in this film. However, there are still a few people we haven’t been able to reach. If you should be any of them, please kindly contact us at qingtingzhiyan@163.com.”

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