Book Review

Hye Jean Chung. Media Heterotopias: Digital Effects and Material Labor in Global Film Production. *Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018.*

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In February 2013, visual effects company Rhythm & Hues famously declared Chapter 11 bankruptcy merely two weeks before receiving the Academy Award for Best Visual Effects. Journalists and film scholars observed this occurrence as emblematic of the present industry dilemma—even as Hollywood was producing highly successful films that relied heavily on the talent of VFX companies, those same companies could not expect security in an industry racing to remain competitive against studio pressures. Hye Jean Chung's *Media Heterotopias: Digital Effects and Material Labor in Global Film Production* (2018) interrogates this underlying tension between the material realities of the labour involved in digital filmmaking and industry efforts to obscure these mechanics in service of a "seamless" product. Adapting Foucault's concept of heterotopic spaces, Chung devises the theoretical approach of "heterotopic analysis," which regards digital cinema as a meeting-space of global bodies, resources, and spatio-temporalities that retain their material traces onscreen despite efforts otherwise. Over the course of five chapters, Chung applies her heterotopic analysis to films along four different axes: mapping, modularity, monstrosity, and materiality.

In the introduction and first chapter, Chung articulates her method of returning to the materiality of the cinematic medium, the involved labour, and the sites of production by perceiving these meticulously-hidden sutures in digital cinema. She interrogates the industry's aesthetics of "seamlessness," which obscures the heterogeneous elements of production combined into a "flawless" digital image. The development of computerized processes is often followed by false notions of dematerialization and the elimination of human workers. This frequent slippage of meaning between digitization and automation becomes particularly problematic when used to service the industry's ideological agenda to obscure its foundational labour. Visual effects companies' specificities in style and software tend to be erased and subsumed, as they are considered conduits ultimately meant to deliver the director's vision (Chung 2018, 20). These contributing factors lead to a contradiction between the rhetorical and aesthetic emphasis on the seamlessness, magic, and automation of digital filmmaking technologies versus the reality of an increasingly transnational and collaborative workflow that relies on the global circulation of economic resources, technical expertise, and cultural labour.

Though rendered invisible onscreen, this labour leaves perceptual traces of residual materiality, what Chung terms "spectral effects," derived from Derrida's hauntology, which posits spectrality as a mode of critique capable of addressing

issues of social justice and ethical debt. To deepen her analysis of "spectral effects," Chung draws on Foucault's notion of the "heterotopia," which juxtaposes "in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986, 25). He uses the metaphor of the mirror to illustrate: the mirror is an object existing in reality that shows oneself the absolutely real space that one inhabits via one's relation to the space around them, yet simultaneously makes this place absolutely unreal, since this perception is understood through a virtual space on the other side of the glass. A heterotopia may serve two possible purposes: to "create a space of illusion that exposes every real space…inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory," or, conversely, to "create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled" (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986, 27). Hye Jean Chung then poses the term "media heterotopia" to describe a "digitally-enhanced audiovisual realm of representation that superimposes layers of diverse spatialities and temporalities" (Chung 2018, 37). Regarding digital cinema in this fashion is to use *heterotopic perception*, which recognizes that multiple spaces and temporalities coexist in the mediated realm of cinematic environments. Such a realization is necessary to deconstruct the illusion of digital seamlessness and recognize the labour and materiality undergirding contemporary filmmaking.

In chapter 2, "Heterotopic Mapping," Chung explores how media heterotopias function as audiovisual indexes of complex geopolitical relations and concerns. She examines the spatial conceptions of the world in *The Fall* (Singh, 2006) and *Ashes of Time Redux* (Wong, 2008). As conceptual and visual maps, these films indicate the material sites implicated in the interrelated, but often conflicted, narratives of the film's diegesis and its production history. In interviews on *The Fall*, director Tarsem Singh repeatedly emphasized the geographical diversity of the production process, which included location shooting in twenty-four countries. The geographical and cultural specificity of these sites, however, is rendered irrelevant in the film's diegesis; instead, these sites are used to perform a transnational landscape as spectacle and to enhance the fantastical and exotic effects of the film, particularly to Western audiences. Drawing from Fredric Jameson's concept of cognitive mapping, Chung considers how the fictional universe of a film can orient viewers to their global situation. In *The Fall*, factual trajectories of travel are erased to "produce a simulated journey that presents an ideal vision of a readily malleable and maneuverable world" (Chung 2018, 59). In the case of *Ashes of Time Redux*, ruined remnants of the original negative were stitched together through digital restoration. The resulting film becomes a "secret archive or depository of film history" that embeds in it spectral traces of the global network of cinema culture, and material connections to a past Chinese diaspora (61, 69). *Ashes of Time Redux* constitutes a heterotopic map containing traces of the transnational trajectories of the original film that combines the material remnants of analog media (celluloid film) with digital media. It merges the binaries of local/global, national/transnational, and material/virtual in the "mediated space of the film and its material afterlife" through a "globally dispersed, digitally-enabled process of excavation and resurrection" (74). With these two films, Chung demonstrates how films can mediate or perform a global geography created by new transnational connections.

In chapter 3, "Heterotopic Modularity," Chung turns her analysis to science fiction films that composite live action and CGI to create "alien" spaces, which manifests a spatiotemporal perception that is heterogenous and textured, as opposed to homogenous and empty. Her analysis focuses on three films, *Avatar* (Cameron 2009), *Oblivion* (Kosinski 2013), and *Interstellar* (Nolan 2014). The composite environments in *Avatar* are characterized by a convergence of materiality and modularity. The film's virtual environments are built upon practical sets to create a realistic, visceral effect behind the digital images. Each composite element is also modular, or capable of being moved and manipulated, allowing for work on different components of the image to be geographically distributed between

companies. Approached with heterotopic analysis, the composite reveals the *thickness* of the multiple layers that form the image—the materiality of the location and materials constituting the image, as well as the globally-dispersed digital workflows that produce it. This thickness is also represented in the material manifestation into digital light and sound waves, the file size, and time it takes to render them (Chung 2018, 87). Chung also discusses how global media industries are integrating digital technologies that restructure the Fordist production model into a nonlinear and geographically-dispersed workflow that exemplifies a post-Fordist model of flexible accumulation. She examines how pre-production, production, and post-production no longer exist as distinct phases, but intermingle across timelines. Drawing from Vivian Sobchack, Chung contends that sci-fi films represent the interconnectedness of technology and one's experience of time in space, and that technology deployed in the capitalist mode creates "new spatial and temporal forms of 'being-in-the-world'" (79). Furthermore, film industries have an ecological impact on the natural environments, thereby contradicting popular perceptions of the intangibility of cinematic images. Despite attempts at erasure, the underlying processes and actors inevitably leave traces in imaginary and material forms.

In chapter 4, "Heterotopic Monstrosity," Chung moves her analysis from composite spaces to composite bodies, examining The Monster as a manifestation of a national imaginary that simultaneously enacts transnational cosmopolitanism in its circulation and reliance on international collaboration. *The Host* (Bong 2013) and the *Godzilla* franchise's historical references, settings, and monster design position the films as specifically East Asian cinematic objects, but the monsters themselves are sites of transnational spillage in technical expertise and in concept. Undergirding both narratives is U.S. economic, geopolitical, and neocolonial interference abroad that has led to national disasters. The monstrosity of these films, Chung argues, is the fear generated not by different bodies and their accompanying identities, but by their intermingling. Concluding the chapter, Chung observes that contemporary monsters embody the pervasive current dread around increasingly globalized networks and digitized environments, as their unpredictable mobile existences transgress systems of control.

In chapter 5, "Heterotopic Materiality," Chung transitions into an analysis of heterotopic sites created within digital cinema, where transnational trajectories of labour, resources, and media images converge. Through an analysis of *The World* (Jia 2004) and *Big Hero 6* (Hall and Williams 2014), Chung demonstrates how contemporary digital cinema can "perform digitality in conjunction with how it performs globality" (141). Whereas *The World* criticizes the fetishization and commodification of global mobility through its emphasized distinction between real and virtual realities, *Big Hero 6* utilizes high-budget computer animation to erase the seams between these two realities and celebrate the dissolution of cultural boundaries. *The World* was shot in two theme parks in Beijing and Shenzen featuring meticulous recreations of international landmarks. Chung considers these parks metonymic spaces for two cities known for their cosmopolitan aspirations and exercising of market capitalism. They constitute hyper-real spaces in which globally dispersed sites are situated together in an assemblage of a transnational imaginary. The film contrasts this to the reality of the park's migrant workers, for whom aspirations of geographical and social mobility are limited by structural inequalities that efface their labouring presence. Following other scholars' efforts to disengage the term "cosmopolitan" from lingering connotations of elitism and privilege, Chung coins the term "virtual cosmopolitans" to describe those who traverse national boundaries via digital means. By simultaneously highlighting and hiding the "labor of producing and maintaining the illusion of a transnational imaginary," the eponymous setting of *The World* embodies both functions of Foucault's heterotopia (150). It constitutes both a space of illusion revealing the illusory nature of real human spaces, and an other real space as perfect and meticulous as ours is disordered.

In her conclusion, she discusses Arjun Appadurai's concept of "the imagination as social practice" and Rick Carter's notion that visual effects' role is to create a space that is not merely fantasy but "a reality constructed with the power of imagination" (179). Chung suggests that financial motivations are inadequate explanation for the overwhelming use of digital effects in contemporary cinema, and instead this indicates a desire to represent worlds "dominated by pure possibility" (180). Contemporary cinema's pre-occupation with digital death and reincarnation reflect the increased merging of human bodies with CGI or translation into code to form cyborg hybrid entities. Chung reasserts heterotopic perception as a critical strategy to counter the illusory nature of digital seamlessness and uncover its material underpinnings.

The strength of *Media Heterotopias* lay in its detailed film analyses that compellingly connect narrative, thematic, and production elements to contemporary experiences around digitized connection and pressures to "become" global. Sections on individual films would be excellent sources of production information and theoretical interpretation following a viewing of one of the films analyzed. A weakness of the work, however, is in its efforts to draw sustained connections between labour-undermining practices and aesthetics and the dynamics that produce them. Given its activist inclinations, *Media Heterotopias* could use more analysis dedicated to how capital becomes concentrated in the hands of a few, which creates a class of global elite that actively shape digital filmmaking production on an infrastructural level that reproduces an economically dependent and politically weakened workforce. Furthermore, certain concepts referred to in *Media Heterotopias* would benefit from additional explanation. Ideas of the virtual, Other, cyborg, and "media" itself have been applied along many different axes, and could use more clarification to service Chung's particular arguments. Similarly, "media heterotopia" is used repetitively and with lessening effect, a possible pitfall of the concept which Chung herself notes in the introduction. If one accepts that contemporary cinema is an amalgamation of technologies, locations, materials and agents, the theoretical next steps are not particularly clear. Overall, *Media Heterotopias'* ambitious effort to "reassert the materiality of global film production" serves as valuable encouragement to deconstruct the ever-more refined illusions of unity in international film production through new approaches in thinking and viewing. The breadth of ideas and the quality of research presented in Chung's work regularly enlightens, just as it orients us towards the political stakes of filmmaking.

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