

Acceleration, Excess, Techno-Scavenging, and Moving Image Reclamation

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Acceleration and the Disjunction of Technology: Material Technology and Social Technology

We are accelerating toward a historical inflection point, an epoch unfamiliar to existing human experience—no one can say for certain when or where this turning point will arrive. The acceleration is comprehensive: technological innovation, the pressures and anxieties of daily life, the incessant outbreak of conflicts and catastrophic events, and an increasingly turbulent and polarized world... The climate crisis, too, is a consequence of acceleration—human impact is approaching the limits of Gaia’s capacity for regulation in both speed and scale.

Among all these forms of acceleration, the rapid advancement and replacement of technology plays a pivotal role. New technologies bring convenience in areas such as transportation (high-speed trains), communication (social media), intellectual labor (AI), and material provision (commerce logistics), along with an ever-increasing array of spectacular visual experiences... Yet at the same time, the everyday temporality remains tense and compressed. Compared to today’s many conveniences, people in the era of inconvenience actually possessed more free time, more opportunities for direct, face-to-face interaction. On one hand, convenience seems to reduce time consumption; yet to enjoy these conveniences, we must invest even more time. Theoretically ‘liberated’ by new technologies, our time has instead become the very resource those technologies further exploit. Accelerated time has displaced the spaces once held within slower time, but the key issue is this: it has not led to liberation, only to more tasks, and to a deeper, more unfillable void. The preconditions of freedom and liberation are autonomy and subjectivity—neither of which can be attained within a passive structure of existence, unless alongside material innovation we also pursue innovation in ‘social technology’, so that human beings may become the main body, rather than being devalued and manipulated by technology.

Acceleration fragments time and makes time inorganic. As time is besieged by acceleration, ‘collisions’ and ‘accidents’ become more frequent. An accelerated system demands ever greater systemic stability to maintain normal operations, yet the ‘social technologies’ that undergird society lag far behind material technologies themselves.

Space—whether physical, social, or psychological—is likewise undergoing accelerated ruination and destruction. This process of ruination signals the fracturing and dissolution of the foundational bases of social order. Excavators have replaced cumbersome wrecking balls, more efficiently demolishing residential neighborhoods. The scourge of capital and political regime accelerates on two fronts. Even after a decade or two of acceleration, it shows no sign of halting. More and more brand-new real estate developments rise up—in city centers, along desolate railways—while many of these buildings stand unlit at night, their rooms empty. Surplus does not curb the driving force of capital; in fact, the accelerated production of ruins serves to justify its operations: where there are ruins, there is reason to build—and in the name of building, one can manufacture even more ruins, in endless repetition. These acts of ‘construction’ cause ever more areas to become unnecessarily ruined, even when those places are home to vibrant lives closely interwoven with their surroundings.

Cities have become outward expressions of technology—permanently in a state of ‘renewal’ under various pretexts (nowhere is more zealous about ‘renewal’ than the city that I currently live in). They become unvaryingly legible, monotonous, filled with tall structures sheathed in glass—visible, yet untouchable. Flatness seems to serve merely as the backdrop to these vertical projections; verticality, in turn, conceals the poverty and arrogance of flatness. Beneath this verticality, within the planar realm, disappointment spreads subconsciously—this is a ruin in a dual sense: the physical destruction of space, and the ruination of historical depth. Behind it all lies a brutal, barbaric will—one that commands everything in the way of ‘progress’ to prematurely perish, in order to serve the short-term interests and delusions that arise in the minds of a few.

On an already uneven road, acceleration leads to further loss of control. The engine of production has lost its brakes, continuing to churn unstoppably. Everything is marked by a limited lifespan. Continuous change is required—forcing people to adapt to the new and abandon the old—so that new technologies can have room to develop. But humans do not inherently need such a space. The speed of technological progress has vastly outpaced social progress, yet it appears to have become the ultimate measure and focal point of that progress. Compared with technological ‘innovation’, the frequency of social innovation is several orders of magnitude lower.

We do not understand the meaning of this acceleration. It merely signifies the accelerated consumption and squandering of people and resources. Because of the deep disjunction between technological development and social progress, and under the mandates of social governance, the promise of new technology to benefit ‘everyone’ is nothing more than an illusory ideal. It opens up a seemingly new direction by perfunctorily addressing old problems, while leaving the substantive issues of society untouched. The logic of obsolescence–renewal–accelerationism attempts to divert attention from urgent questions of life and society by steering the vehicle into an uninhabited wasteland. Meanwhile, the development of ‘social technologies’ that might solve those problems is deliberately set aside.

Acceleration molds us into delivery couriers cornered by time itself. The very structure of the system ensures that the delivery persons cannot be winners. Only with sufficient expendable physical strength can they survive in such a high-speed regime. The tasks are endless—no tasks, no survival $\Leftrightarrow$ more tasks to secure your survival $\Leftrightarrow$ but too many tasks deplete your survival $\Leftrightarrow$ your survival exists for more tasks $\Leftrightarrow$... Overload drives people to exhaustion, draining them completely. Only by stepping outside this system, away from its oppressions, might one live with relative autonomy and freedom. The courier’s conquest of time and space does not truly liberate *you*—the consumer—from your own state of temporal oppression. You reside in another subsystem of the larger temporal oppression system, while the courier belongs to yet another. Acceleration intensifies the sense of defeat, though it offers some small rewards as compensation.

Acceleration has corrupted time. In our youth, we once experienced a more relaxed, less externally pressured temporality. That slower time often gave rise to a more acute sense of self. One might also say that this so-called ‘natural time’ was merely a relatively stagnant stage of development, when forward momentum and resources were insufficient—objectively producing a less interrupted condition. Today’s time is increasingly artificial: the night is no longer for rest but for overtime work. This is an industrialized time that has been visibly accelerated and compressed, no longer resonant with human biological rhythms, but rather dictated by production and commerce, sustained by a process that engulfs everyone in its ongoing churn. Time and

growth have lost their composure. Things and processes that depend on long-term, stable environments and soil—such as cultural accumulation—struggle to take root. They sprout repeatedly, only to wither just as quickly.

The pervasive anxiety generated by acceleration cannot be compensated for by new technologies. Or more precisely, it calls for a kind of social technology that can address societal problems and the issues caused by material technologies—rather than relying on yet another material technology to solve social problems, reducing social issues to merely technical ones.

Acceleration leads to overproduction and indigestion. Accelerated, excessive production results in excessive consumption. It does not enrich us; rather, it hollows us out, making everything cheap and impoverished, devoid of substance, lacking in real connection to life. It undermines essence through the proliferation of quantity, rendering it ineffective, pushing us into a polarized state of excess and scarcity: the more excess, the more impoverishment. This inner sense of emptiness further accelerates production, leading to even greater excess and even deeper lack. It does not genuinely add anything from within—only hastens the swallowing of junk food by a famished world. Indigestion may appear as food congestion in the stomach, but it also manifests as the condition of a gutless state—a stomach ever expanding and insatiable, yet lacking the intestinal system to absorb nourishment. What it pursues is a colonial desire for expansion and conquest, without regard for what substantive content might fill the space thus forced open—merely an empty void. This polarized state of excess and poverty, like other black-and-white or left-right polarizations, results in the destruction of the middle ground, deepening division rather than fostering unity.

Promise, Obsolescence, and Struggle

Within the cyclical orbit of the accelerator that entraps everyone, there exists only one linear trajectory: ‘forward’. The blindness of this ‘forward’ momentum lies in how our imagination of the future has been completely technologized and abstracted. This seemingly depoliticized vision of the future—grounded solely in technological advancement—is, paradoxically, the most political of all: it encodes a technocratic monopoly intimately aligned with the structures of power. Technological innovation does not occur in a vacuum; it is governed by the existing order of social domination, just as society is increasingly controlled by technological oligarchs. These tech oligarchs—such as Elon Musk—often function as counter-forces to true social progress. While new technologies theoretically offer democratic possibilities, they simultaneously make people increasingly susceptible to technological control.

The beautiful promises made by new technologies, once refracted through the lens of existing power structures, often become distorted and manifest as bleak realities. They fail to solve the very problems they generate—because these problems are not purely technical in nature. Instead, they attempt to bypass and ignore old issues through relentless updates, moving forward destructively while leaving a trail of wreckage behind—yet still waving the flag of progress. What is absent here is an organic interaction between technology and society. Technology is often made to serve the requirements of the ruling order—such as facial recognition technologies and surveillance systems.

New technologies often promise that ‘anyone can use them’, that they are immediately accessible. But democracy is not so easily attained. Technological innovation prioritizes outcome and efficiency, outsourcing

and streamlining the complex and often arduous processes between origin and result—thereby rendering them invisible. This is one of the dangers of technology: it invites faith in the illusion that what you see is what you get, that mediation is transparent. Technology becomes increasingly abstract, detaching from material mediums. As it intermediates and substitutes for us, we become passive, indolent, and surrender our subjectivity—an abdication for which we will one day pay the price. New technology has a tendency to homogenize that which it mediates, erasing distinctive qualities. This in turn allows it to become ever more industrialized and standardized, facilitating centralized control.

In the realm of moving image technology, current trends lean toward simulation, mimicry, automation, and spectacle. Images are rendered increasingly smooth, just as high-speed rail flattens the space between locations into a linear, rapid journey, stripped of twists and discomforts. New technology continually seeks to eliminate roughness, friction, and discontinuity, pushing us to forget the medium itself (as in the disembodiment caused by digitization)—a tendency that often runs counter to the demands, textures, and tactility of both art and reality. Technology does too much on our behalf. While it has expelled inconvenience, slowness, and clumsiness, in a parallel world these qualities may hold greater value. Older technologies, with their challenges, often elicited greater initiative and subjectivity from their users. In contrast, new technology nurtures laziness in facing reality, habituating us to smooth spectacles and effects. It has bred legions of enthusiasts wielding Leica cameras and large telephoto lenses, producing nothing more than mundane landscape shots. Their reverence for technology and eagle-eyed discernment of technical specifications has not prevented the further dulling of their sensitivity to reality. Equipped with everything, they have nonetheless lost both their goals and the ability to reach them. This is the alienation of the human by technology.

Has pure technological progress brought more happiness? If it had, society should be increasingly content, and spiritual depression increasingly rare. Today should surely be more joyful than a decade ago—yet the reality may be quite the opposite. In an irrational social structure ruled by overwhelming societal problems, technology becomes the bannerman of progressivism, but this flag of progressivism's real function is to obscure the essential issues at stake, seizing the stage from them. These spectacular technologies function more like decorative embellishments and do not in fact enhance human well-being or social welfare. Even if they possess such potential, their realization is subject to how equitably the conditions of technological implementation are distributed in society. Humanity, while accelerating the production of new technologies, also accelerates the production of new problems—problems that entangle with longstanding, unaddressed problems, engulfing the world.

Given the fundamentally double-edged nature of technology, it demands contestation rather than submission. As a moving image practitioner, I have benefited more from the smartphone than from advances in imaging technology per se. The smartphone has brought considerable convenience to my work, allowing me to film, record audio, and capture fleeting ideas at any time. Yet it also devours the user's time, forcibly embeds itself in everyday life, and increasingly assumes the role of life's central actor—displacing the human subject. When the phone is not at hand, or is lost, one feels transformed—anxious, disconnected from the world, cut off from many relationships. The convenience provided by technology fosters deep dependence, and this dependence continues to intensify. In the process, we become more fragile, ever more tethered to our devices. Face-to-face communication—something that neither social media nor video calls can truly replace—is increasingly rare, both in opportunity and in desire. In this accelerated, unstable, and uncertain world, people

subconsciously seek something to cling to, a placebo. New technologies undoubtedly offer such comfort—and this too becomes a kind of addiction. New technologies inherently possess addictive tendencies: by providing comfort and satisfaction, they engender strong dependence, ultimately exerting control. Their power is not acquired through coercion, but through offering ever more comfort, satisfaction, and means to ‘kill time’—thus achieving submission. In the end, it is not we who use technology, but technology that uses or governs us.

With the emergence of instant messaging platforms like WeChat, people have indeed found it easier to connect and communicate. Yet at the same time, more and more people stare at their phones alone at gatherings. The phone has ceased to be a point of connection and has instead become a tool of isolation. It is harder to escape a pleasurable form of slavery than a tormenting one. The intermediary has not merely assisted us in accomplishing our tasks—it has become the task itself. We are drawn into the phone, bound to the nodes of the digital network—‘offline’ life feels less real. But this network is not built on collective will, communicative desire, or ordinary solidarity—it is still a technological network. We must employ social technologies to transform this network into a genuinely social one.

By raising the threshold of satisfaction and treating this threshold as an irrevocable standard of life, most people have become unwilling to look back, unable to accept the lower standards of the past. During the era of VCDs and VHS tapes, no one complained about image clarity; people were not distracted by technical specifications and instead focused on content. But once we enter a more advanced technological phase, we seem unable to tolerate the relative roughness of the past. This subconscious shift further entrenches our submission to the so-called benefits of new technology. Yet in retrospect—at least in terms of cinema—how many films today can truly surpass *Battleship Potemkin*, *Man with a Movie Camera*, or *Metropolis*, all made over a century ago? These films connect far more closely with today’s reality than most contemporary productions. They have already prophesied today’s prototypical reality. Artistic standards do not follow the simplistic logic of linear progress.

Technological upgrades have implicitly raised the threshold for image-making as personal practice, such that only work meeting certain technical standards is deemed fit to enter the film industry’s circulation system. I still clearly remember my return to Gulang, Gansu, in 2005 to shoot a documentary, and what happened afterward in Beijing. At that time, I knew nothing about equipment or technology. Someone who worked in film gear and tech told me: ‘The built-in mic on a Sony PD150 camera can’t be used to shoot a documentary.’ Time has already proven that assertion entirely false.

What drives technological obsolescence? Is it rooted in actual necessity, or is it propelled by the demands of capital acceleration? Technological turnover can very well be a manufactured need—because innovation is the fuel that keeps capital in motion. The logic of capitalism is to accelerate the satisfaction of the present while deferring problems to the future, to distant, out-of-sight horizons—until one day, both future and distance arrive at the doorstep. Most media forms and technologies that are ‘eliminated’ have not reached the point of decrepitude; some are in their prime, yet are retired early or abruptly rendered obsolete. Nevertheless, the non-inevitability of obsolescence and supersession is always presented as inevitability, as superiority, urgency, and as an unstoppable trend—justifying itself through this performance of necessity.

Against Obsolescence: Techno-Scavenging (—as a Form of Social Technology)

When technology becomes excessively elevated, some will inevitably move against the tide—because the new technology may not be what they need, may bear no essential relevance to their lives, and may even degrade their way of life. To return to simpler, even more rudimentary technologies, to cherish their characteristics and employ them in service of more tactile expressions of reality—this is a form of ‘close-contact technology’. Most work does not require the most cutting-edge media, equipment, or software versions; rather, it requires technological appropriateness. Earlier technologies still carry the momentum of previous use—their productivity does not cease abruptly. Obsolescence produces vast surpluses. In fact, these devices and technologies—now sidelined in the capitalist economy but still in their prime—fall into the hands of us, the techno-image scavengers, as a kind of gift. They offer substantial possibilities for reappropriation at low cost. This is, truly, a golden age.

Cut-out tapes, outlet shoes, bulk-packaged clothing, secondhand iPhones costing just a few hundred yuan... these are all recycled items deemed obsolete by the industry, yet retaining full use value. Digital music has never fully replaced embodied forms of music—vinyl, cassette, CD—nor are these formats interchangeable among themselves. The coexistence of mediums is more conducive to a diverse technological ecology than mutual negation. Similarly, digital photography cannot replace analogue film. Sometimes, it is precisely the materiality of a medium that sustains its vitality—its ability to undergo transformation over time, thus affecting the very images it carries and bringing about changes in them. Such phenomena do not occur in digital media. One defining trait of digital media is its refusal of error and deviation—its drive to maintain a constant state. In the realm of video, standard definition (SD)—which was long since superseded by high definition (HD)—cannot be replaced in every respect; this is something I have experienced directly. In my short film *On the Passage of a Few Persons Through a Rather Brief Unity of Time* 关于在短时间内的某几个人的经过 (2020), the footage largely comes from material I shot over a decade ago on a Sony PD-50 DVCAM SD camera. It captures, in real time, the full process of the moon and drifting clouds entering and leaving the camera’s frame during one summer evening. I compared it with footage of the moon shot using an HD camera. There is no question that the SD material, shot under low-light conditions, had a mysterious, film-like graininess—far superior to the plastic sheen presented by HD video. Sometimes, the shortcomings of older technologies—relative to newer ones—can dialectically turn into advantages. Much like many early photographs, the mysterious quality of the world at the moment of its first filmic representation—strongly material, deeply evocative—has all but disappeared in today’s overabundance of technologized images.

In my film *Stratum 2: The Asthenosphere* 地层 2: 软流层 (2021), I used a large quantity of internet-sourced video as the base layer for my visual composition. These videos are mostly low in resolution, rough, and fierce—although amateurish by professional standards, this does not diminish their intrinsic power; on the contrary, it may enhance it. In some cases, I deliberately lowered the resolution of certain downloaded clips—clear, but not too clear. This aligns with the film’s broader handling of materials: for instance, removing all diegetic sound from online footage to maintain distance from the specific context of the scenes—not to feign presence, not to induce a sense of immediacy, but to highlight the viewer’s separation from each scene and reality. The aim is to resist immersion in the logic of certain isolated incidents, and instead guide the viewer toward the film’s overarching expression. The visual limitations and obstructions posed by low-resolution footage undoubtedly help establish this necessary sense of distance.

Since the summer before last, during my filming in Gulang, Gansu, I began experimenting with MiniDisc (MD), an old audio format once eliminated by CD technology, as a supplementary tool for field recording. MDs deliver excellent sound quality, yet were ultimately replaced by CDs due to considerations of cost and convenience. My intention was to reuse a once-expensive medium I could not previously afford. MD is portable, offers high sound quality, and is easy to store and use. As a tangible medium, it also allows for straightforward archiving and retrieval—well-suited to the demands of fieldwork. Once a recording is complete, a visible, touchable original record remains. In contrast, digital audio files are more abstract, more likely to be lost in the vast sea of data. Because MD was phased out early while stock remained abundant, the players and discs are now extremely affordable. I had also experimented with cassette recorders as supplementary field equipment, but compared to MD, they are less convenient and harder to operate.

When I first began working in film, DV tapes were the primary medium for recording video. Later, this shifted to digital hard drive camcorders. After footage was captured, it was copied to external hard drives, and the camera's hard drive was cleared to shoot new material. Two of my external drives failed, and I lost important footage during the transfer and backup process. In contrast, all my DV tape material has remained intact. The tapes themselves serve as original backups, and are easy to locate. I have begun to consider returning to DV tape under suitable circumstances—just as I reconsidered audio formats. Purely digital data is far more prone to disappearance than data stored on material mediums. 'Outdated', 'backward', and 'obsolete' media have not lost their specific technological capacities. Precisely because they have been abandoned by the market and are no longer subject to forced upgrades, they may possess a freedom available only at the margins.

In my more than twenty years of moving image documentation of Gulang, I have used various media formats across different periods: DV tape, digital hard drive cameras, and—more recently—my preferred medium of mobile phone video. I have also taken still photographs since 2000: black-and-white and color film, and then digital images. These diverse materials—especially the stark differences in image ratio and texture between DV's SD and HD video—must be used together without hesitation. Their individual characteristics become visual markers of the historical stages in which they were once popular. The materials I shot in the 'standard definition period' (2005–2011) capture the roughness and simplicity of local agrarian life before the era of acceleration. The local acceleration began around 2013, when the county town began to radiate the optimism of a newly urbanizing small city and new residential complexes sprang up en masse. It was around this time that I began using compact HD camcorders as a matter of habit. In the following years, the area underwent radical transformation: the mountainous regions disappeared; mountain residents relocated to new settlement zones; last year, even a high-speed rail line reached Gulang... This is already version 2.0 of life in the accelerated local development. Amid such rapid change, I grew increasingly fond of the iPhone as an intimate tool: portable, immediate, ideally suited for my often guerrilla-style filmmaking. Moreover, mobile phone footage can be backed up online—this is a potential brought by new technology. What matters is not the age of the technology, but the need for a de-institutionalized, non-conformist form of technology.

The Earth—Gaia—is itself an ancient and vast apparatus of recycling and regeneration. Human waste, excrement, and other 'garbage' have never been completely excluded from Earth's life processes. On the contrary, through complex and delicate natural mechanisms, their constituent elements are broken down and reintroduced into the cycle of life—becoming new organic matter, new building blocks, and actors in the network of agency. In the same way, technology-medium must also participate in cycles of regeneration and decom-

position within human society, rather than being simply discarded or replaced. It is precisely this process—of decomposition, reclamation, and absorption—that is ignored and omitted by the logic of accelerationism.

Deceleration: Snapshots and Slow Shots (—as a Form of Social Technology)

When acceleration becomes an end in itself, perhaps slowing down—fully utilizing and recycling the possibilities of existing technologies—is the more practical choice.

In recent days, I've found myself tinkering again with my old mechanical cameras. One of them is a Japanese Semi Leotax, a Leica-style 120 (medium format) bellows camera with a rangefinder. It does not have a focusing mechanism nor a light meter, and the film advance system is somewhat faulty. As a result, I've had to slow down in order to test and use it: I meter the light using a phone app, estimate the distance using the split image focus, and I fashioned a crude replacement part from a piece of iron wire to fix the slipping film advance spool. Compared to the immediacy and predictability of digital photography, this archaic, primitive, and sluggish method of image-making requires far more time and engagement at each stage—thus decreasing the rate at which images are captured and produced. (In addition, the cost of film naturally makes one more cautious before pressing the shutter.) In this way, photography becomes a practice not of the 'snapshot' but of the 'slow shot'. On the other hand, this primitive process inherently contains greater uncertainty—every stage of its output is imbued with unpredictability. And this very uncertainty seems to align more closely with the qualities of living things.

I have also gradually come to understand why I find myself increasingly disenchanted with contemporary photojournalism, especially prizewinning entries from various competitions, which are filled with images taken using wide-angle lenses—in other words, images that attempt to cram as much as possible of a scene or subject into a single flat frame, compressing it as though compacting trash in a landfill. The artificial, plastic-like quality of much photojournalism stems from this compression. These images are mostly about the event; the people within them are merely ancillary, like coat racks propped up in the background. Photojournalism follows the logic of the snapshot. It invites comparison with the slow photography of the analogue film era: heavy, primitive equipment used to create an image; the use of shallow focal lengths to accentuate an individual from their background; the time spent with that person in order to make the photo—either to adjust their pose, or because the film's ISO (light sensitivity) required the subject to hold still for a moment. This is slow photography.

This approach does not signify a stylistic gesture of 'retro' or 'nostalgia', but rather a rethinking of the relationship between humans, machines, technology, and time. In slowness, one must invest more initiative—and one becomes more alert to the accelerated, ever smoother and more refined new media and processes. Whether still or moving images, obtaining them today is an easy task—and this easiness devalues time, a devaluation that cannot be compensated for by the sheer accumulation of quantity.

Through deceleration, we counter acceleration—and return to our own proper tempo.

Countering the Philosophy of the Disposable and Recycling History (—as a Form of Social Technology)

The belief in relentless obsolescence stems from a 'philosophy of disposability'. This philosophy holds that

certain things are produced only to be rapidly discarded—like single-use lunch boxes. People show little concern for where these containers ultimately end up; once they disappear from sight, the matter is considered resolved. This ‘disposability’ philosophy extends into the domain of history: time that has just passed—along with the events and realities it contained—is swiftly eliminated, as if it were a single-use lunch box just thrown away. The philosophy of disposability believes history itself is disposable, and thus it is fundamentally anti-history, thoroughly atheistic. For such a philosophy, both history and the past are burdens. Old news is overwritten, and today’s news becomes old news almost immediately—as if, by this rotation, historical problems are somehow resolved. Disposability implies a frivolous techno-optimism and a utopian progressivism—believing the future is endless and ‘the future must be better than the present’, and that acceleration is necessary to escape or overcome the imperfections of today.

The philosophy of disposability cheers for the passage of time. Time becomes an inexhaustible resource, continuously consumed—allowing many traces of what has happened to be erased, thereby escaping the entanglements of history, which is undoubtedly an obstacle to this kind of brute acceleration. ‘Eliminating the old to introduce the new’ becomes a goal in itself, depriving people of the time to digest both ongoing life and the life that has just passed. Life itself becomes a shaky, unstable colloid—unable to solidify. As a promise and a lure, the ‘new’ arrives overwhelmingly, like a sweeping hurricane that fragments everything, rendering everything indistinct. Through endless scrolling on their phones, people continuously deliver the ‘new’ into their immediate surroundings—most of it illusory and ephemeral, vanishing in an instant. This ‘new’ lives for a mere moment before immediately perishing.

Just like how a new apartment is promised to an individual to justify the demolition of their old dwelling space—technology sees houses merely as houses, and space and time as inorganic containers that can be substituted at will without any loss. It ignores the fact that a house is a spatial form that concretizes time, filled with triggers that activate the rich memories of its residents and users. Therefore, space existing in a given historical moment cannot be equated with any other; each space is unique. What the homogenizing tendency of technology erases is precisely this incommensurable personal dimension.

As time passes, history does not become the past. On the contrary, our present time coexists and intermingles with history—it is built upon it. History is constantly seeking answers from us. Severing ties with the past inevitably renders the present lifeless and impoverishes the historical soil. We must find an organic way to decompose historical materials, rather than treating the past as inorganic waste and cutting off its inner connection with the present. Otherwise, the present will suffer and lose its vitality. History is not the permanent burial of former realities, nor is it a specimen in a museum; it remains active, continuously placing itself in dialogue with the present. History possesses multiple lives, and the space of the future must be opened by digesting the past. The ghosts of history are always present—what disappears is merely the body they once borrowed. Like a virus, they can awaken once again through the living—like the specter of Dr Mabuse. The realities embedded in the news do not recede simply because the news has ‘expired’—reality itself remains unmoved, while news is merely the shifting appearance it casts and disperses.

In the face of fragmented reality, we must restore our capacity to understand it. Splicing, assembling, and reorganizing history and reality is an indispensable effort in repairing today’s world. Re-chemicalizing history, time, reality, and the world is not about inert reassembly, but about exploring the internal relationships

between fragments—allowing history to re-crystallize. The restoration of history can only be crystalized: a chemical process akin to history developing for the first time in a darkroom.

We cannot allow the present to slip simply and unexamined into the past—to become secret, to become void. Hence the need for Archae (now) logy—an archaeology of the present (see my earlier article ‘The Task of Impoverished Cinema’ 贫乏电影的任务 for further elaboration)—to resist the accelerated destruction of contemporary history. This is an urgent salvage operation at the very moment of history’s presence. It means reusing the ‘reclaimed water’ of time—treating time and history not as disposable consumables, but as reusable resources. Those who salvage and recycle history seek to reconnect the severed banks of the river—past and future—with history as the indispensable bridge between them. The problem is far more complex than ‘breaking the old world to build a new one’. The old world must be meticulously recycled and decomposed to construct the new. The new must be essential, not merely superficial. One cannot overcome history by discarding or ignoring it; that only leads to endless cycles within the same old world.

In all my works to date, *Stratum 1: The Visitors* 地层 1: 来客 (2012) is the first to explicitly attempt the salvage and ‘recycling’ of history and ruins—the old world. The film is composed of two parts. In part A, a vast urban ruin, a residential area on the verge of complete demolition, becomes the nighttime stage and theater for reenacting the ‘pre-history’ of the ruin. I asked two friends to wander through this ‘stage’, recalling events and feelings from their childhoods and hometowns—reconstructing a sense of ‘home’ through memory and language. At the same time, the stage they occupy is, in reality, being dramatically destroyed and disassembled—these two opposing temporal trajectories create a powerful tension. Part B is no longer about staging and reenactment, but about presenting the real process of the ruin’s demolition. One sequence shows a group of professional scavengers at work on the site, filmed from within an abandoned building. They used highly specialized equipment—including metal detectors—to excavate materials such as steel bars buried in the rubble of demolished buildings. While filming them, I too was a scavenger—an image scavenger. This act of scavenging took place not only on a literal ruin, but also upon the ruins of history.

Stratum 2: The Asthenosphere carried out an extensive scavenging, salvage, and recycling operation across the field of media. The film was composed and constructed from thousands of online videos. These served as its visual canvas. But much time and effort was required to create meaningful interrelations between these found materials and with other texts—from historical footage, to classical cinema, to various kinds of writings from disparate sources—so that they might form an intentional, robust, and emotionally charged discourse. The subsequent work *What is Cinema: A Commentary on Stratum 2* 电影是什么: 地层 2 评论 (2019) reused the real-time audio recordings of a group of friends discussing the film after an internal screening. From that material, I developed a new work—one sparked by *Stratum 2*, diverging from its style and content, but possessing a unique character of its own.

This practice of recycling—and self-recycling—actually began earlier, during the making of *Room with Mao’s Images* 有毛的房间 (2015), the fourth film in my Gulang, Gansu series. The material for this film consisted of off-cuts and leftover fragments from the production of the previous three works—mostly unrelated to their respective themes (though some footage had appeared before, it was now approached with different intentions). These were materials that had no predetermined purpose. After finishing the three previous films, I still felt unsatisfied—aware that so much of the richness and complexity of this reality had not yet been

expressed. Many things, people, and places from that time had already vanished or changed significantly, becoming almost unrecognizable. So even though these old fragments were scattered and disconnected, I still attempted to organize them into a new film by tracing a single shared visual motif running through them all.

The Media Field and Archaeology of the Present (Archae-now-logy) (—as a Form of Social Technology)

Once a new technology is born, it becomes a ready-made object—impossible to ignore. To reject it in advance may be irrational; to submit to it is equally irrational. Engaging in a contest with technology is the best way to transform it into a weapon. Alexander Sokurov's *Fairytale* (2022) exceeded all my previous conceptions about the possible relationship between AI and cinema, yet the film also confirmed that AI is a tool—not the subject of creative action. The only entity capable of elevating technology into art is the human being. For artists, expressers, and creators, just as new technologies does not consider or adapt to the internal needs of every single individual, so too are artists under no obligation to engage with every new technology. Between artist and technology, there can only ever be the relationship of an encounter. Whether technology brings us closer to reality, or instead overwhelms us with illusion and causes us to lose our sense of the real, depends on our own will, capacities, and judgment. Technology is a newly born monster: in its infancy, the consequences it may bring are difficult to foresee. It requires careful calibration in order to be subdued. Technology can be used by us—but we can also be alienated by it. The key lies in extracting social technology from material technology, so that it may serve the intrinsic needs of society.

Although the development of photographic technology itself has not brought me much emotional or creative stimulation, other forms of technology have had significant impacts on my work. For example, today we are immersed in and enveloped by social media and the digital sphere. Real-life fragments are being continuously produced online—these are the historical archives of today, the moving images of contemporary history: non-decaying, non-fading. In a sense, history has become a permanent present—always in attendance. The development and widespread use of internet and social media technologies have created new relationships with moving images, and made possible the emergence of the 'media field'—we no longer live solely in physical space or the field of anthropology; we now spend increasing amounts of time in a mediated space-time. This virtual anthropological field, formed by new moving image materials and media technologies, is what I refer to as the media field (for further elaboration on this concept, see my earlier essay 'Sympathetic Geology: A Comparative Observation of Spatial Transformations in Gulang and Beijing' 交感地质学: 古浪—北京两地空间变动的比较观察).

Within the media field, anyone can become a subject on equal footing; anyone can become a contributor and user of materials, a presenter of reality, a revealer of its structures, a leading investigator, and one who holds undeniable discursive authority over specific segments of reality. This also makes possible a 'symmetrical anthropology' (to use Bruno Latour's term)—an anthropology grounded in symmetrical and equitable interpretive power. Those who were previously 'reflected' and 'recorded' passively can now become active participants of expression. Everyone can potentially become an anthropologist—reversing their imposed status as the Other, and generating their own history from an internal perspective. These two modes of inquiry—internal and external—are not mutually exclusive; they complement and verify each other.

The media field is open, populated by image hunters and gatherers, image scavengers. It is a land of abun-

dance—indeed, of overabundance—but only through active awareness and a keen sensibility can one unearth treasures from this endless production of media. The media field contains layers of varying depth that await excavation and study. In the face of the random and ceaseless proliferation of near-infinite image materials—before these productions are degraded and reabsorbed by the ‘soil’ of the media field—the unstable, precarious contemporary history must be urgently salvaged. The pace of its burial has vastly accelerated, far surpassing that of previous centuries. Before we even understand, let alone reflect on, our lives and our histories, they are already accelerating toward extinction. This condition renders the archaeology of the present a deep-seated necessity—its purpose is to respond to the accelerated destruction of history.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, more than any technological innovation, has exerted the most significant impact on my work. More than ever, it underscored the critical value of the media field. The pervasive anxiety throughout society, the surge of micro-historical materials that might disappear the next moment, the extreme restrictions on individual mobility—all of these further compelled me to rely heavily on found online video materials. At that moment, the media field offered more accessible resources than the real-world field. The pandemic led me to decide that, alongside my longer-term and more expansive film projects, I would also begin pursuing more flexible, short-term projects—creating short films akin to Dziga Vertov’s *Kino-Pravda*, offering rapid responses and reflections on unfolding realities and events. This archae-now-logical effort differs markedly in character and approach from my earlier, years-long production cycles.

Between 2020 and 2023, I produced several short films, including *On the Passage of a Few Persons Through a Rather Brief Unity of Time* 关于在短时间内的某几个人的经过 (a title that diverges from Guy Debord’s work of the same name), *The Bright Volcanos* 千高原：明亮的火山 (2022), *Nothing to Fear* 没什么可怕的 (2022), *The Listeners* 倾听者 (2022), *Hwarenheit 911: A Chinese Style 911* 华式 911 (2023), *Archaeology of the Future: A Fragment* 未来考古学：一个片段 (2019), and others. These works were uploaded and circulated through my still-active WeChat public platform, returning them to the media field from which their materials were sourced—with the hope of offering my own perspective for understanding contemporary reality.

The formation of the media field has also enabled a new mode of inquiry, which I call the social compound eye. The internet made participatory co-perception possible: materials contributed by individuals can be compared, supplemented, and verified against one another, in order to correct, complete, and deepen our understanding of collective facts. This gives rise to a kind of composite, compound-eye-style social imaging (for more on the concept of the social compound eye, see my earlier essay ‘On the Social Compound Eye’ 论社会复眼).

The Social Compound Eye and Social Imaging (—as a Form of Social Technology)

The social compound eye is a preliminary tool for social memory. It must intervene in our ‘social memory’ behaviors, undertaking the acquisition, verification, and discrimination of materials—organizing and producing ‘social vision’ organically, rather than surrendering our gaze to artificial social eyes. The compound eye is no longer a solitary or individual gaze; it is a gaze organized and unified through the aggregation of multiple unitary, independent viewpoints. The micro-materials provided by each unit of the social compound eye (not limited to moving or still images, including text and sound) correct and enrich our present understanding and memory of history. Only materials that have been collected and authenticated through the social compound eye can become trustworthy sources for

memory. Otherwise, our memory would be constructed from deformed and inauthentic fragments.

The social compound eye is a relay of vision—a collective gaze that magnifies individual acts of observation and documentation into a societal-scale perspective. It produces a ‘candid view’ of social reality and history: a perspective that integrates fact and truth, capable of revealing. Without the relay and convergence of vision—without collective cooperation between uploaders and viewers—the compound eye cannot take shape. It depends on, and ultimately helps constitute, the neural center of society.

The formation of the social compound eye follows a Gaian logic: it is composed of countless equal visual contributions, ultimately creating a cybernetic system of autonomous regulation and focusing. Compared to the inorganic artificial eyes of society, the social compound eye is a living visual organ—one capable of examining itself and prompting society to become aware of its own presence.

Every public incident, every disaster today affirms the importance of the ‘social compound eye’ formed jointly by anonymous ‘camera-bearing witnesses’ and the rest of us who are watching. Anyone can become a unit of the social compound eye.

— From ‘On the Social Compound Eye’

The ceaseless, convenient, and nearly universal production and circulation of moving images is itself a vivid symptom of technological acceleration and capital circulation. All acceleration, excess, and scarcity ultimately manifest as symptoms within the image. The chaotic impressions that flash quickly across society’s retina are washed farther and farther away by new waves of content, until they disappear completely. Yet the realities embedded in them—most of which we have only discussed superficially—need to be rapidly summoned back into presence (*archae-now-logy*), to be interconnected, examined, and understood. The social compound eye—a revived and evolved kino-eye—carries forward the kino-eye’s legacy of constructing the world and social reality. At the same time, the social compound eye disassembles and transforms the singular, heroic, modernist, and centralized perspective of Vertov’s kino-eye into a mosaic of multiple perspectives. It gathers and synthesizes not one but many kinds of vision.

The world has already been filmed. Using materials and perspectives contributed by countless people, the social compound eye can weave a larger (and neural) network and salvage more reality. These fragmentary materials, like the skin flakes that peel from history’s body, may not contain all—but contain most—of history’s genetic code, and can be studied to understand its traits. By integrating and juxtaposing views from diverse individuals and social corners, we can reconstruct the real in a revelatory way, yielding broader, more panoramic knowledge. The relay and synthesis of vision may enable the gathering and consolidation of those ephemeral, mayfly-like fragments—uniting disparate perspectives and merging individual observations of interconnected realities into crystalline images. This return of vision to the public sphere is entirely possible—though as public space continues to collapse and slip from our grasp, it becomes ever more difficult.

Let us expand the meaning of ‘imaging’. Beyond its technical sense, it can also mean the unveiling and disclosure of social reality—an *imaging of the social*. This dynamic process unfolds constantly in the social

field. Yet the images it produces are continually obscured and distorted by the unending struggles between different social forces.

Though many of my recent works have been built upon found online materials, I have not abandoned the practice of filming myself. These two approaches are not mutually exclusive. In fact, using found footage created by others sometimes feels like a form of liberation—from so-called cinematography, from the tedious binary of ‘professional’ versus ‘amateur’ technical standards. There’s no need to worry about framing, composition, or visual finesse—because it’s not your footage. By quoting it, you place it within invisible quotation marks, both drawing upon its power and maintaining critical distance. The technical imperfections in these materials—shaky hands, jittery movements, vertical framing, ambient noise—become visceral, tangible, and embodied annotations of reality. Like intercepted frontline telegrams, they transmit the urgency and suffocation of the present. Just like working with low-tech equipment, such imperfection can sometimes bring us closer to reality—offering a more tactile and authentic sensation.

Another key point is this: when faced with an immense reality, an individual’s capacity is extremely limited. So, in addition to traditional filming habits, why not mobilize more public resources, more potential ‘camera-bearers’, more readily-available found footage, to serve the same purpose? Why not resurrect Vertov’s kino-eye in the plural form—as compound eyes, social compound eyes? Today, everyone is a potential ‘person with a movie camera’—and what extraordinary work these camera-bearer do, offering micro-perspectives so different from grand, polished narratives!

The social compound eye marks a shift—from cinema’s original emphasis on new technical possibilities of seeing, toward a more concentrated mode of social seeing. In this way, material technology must ultimately transform into social technology. Media itself does not die—only its modes of usage die, and that depends on the attitudes and intentions of those who use it.

My most recent feature-length film, *Another Part of the World: Ghosts and Their Shadows* 世界的另一部分: 幽灵及其重影 (completed in 2024), also represents an effort to construct a ‘montage of the world’ through the collection, scavenging, and salvage of numerous materials from the media field. The final shot of the film returns to the iconic pupil close-up in Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), bringing the social compound eye and the kino-eye into resonance across a century.



Screenshot from *Another Part of the World: Ghosts and Their Shadows*