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Film review: A New Era (2019)

Hugo Montero

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FILM AND VIDEO REVIEWS

A New Era. Directed by **Boris Svartzman**. 2019. 71 minutes. Colour.

A New Era follows the struggle of Guanzhou's villagers — between 2008 and 2015 — against the eviction of their lands in order to build an 'ecological island' composed by a large number of buildings and urban infrastructures. Boris Svartzman filmed a located experience of these peasants' everyday life with expropriation threat, their resistance to urban planning, and how Chinese's authorities justify their urbanization.

This documentary is particularly relevant about showing people and environment on a change, by pressure. Urban developers are here supported by Chinese State. They are transforming an area mainly dedicated to family farming and wild-developing vegetation to a leisure and urban island committed to the recent and growing Chinese middle class. Both sides are observing these changes, and each other, men are coming everyday early in the morning close to the habitations in order to mark their presence and to put under pressure the last farmers of the land.

The remaining families are watching and hearing the sounds of works in progress, cranes, pneumatic drills, cement mixer trucks and notice every day the rise of improbable black and white high buildings on the horizon.

Authorities had started to destroy some of the houses of the village, justifying that they don't have building permit. The film shows how these destructions are part of a campaign of intimidation. Demolitions are surrounded by police officers and military units; protesters are regularly arrested.

Authorities are targeting the heart of the village in order to erase a sense of community and changing a village's life into a living among the ruins. Urban planners are making lousy deals with the less tenacious farmers and then unweave the community's unity, risen up against one another. This desolation is followed by another one: the knocking down of the meanings of words in order to achieve the authorities' aims.

A New Era shows silently the lack of meaning that is surrounding the idea of an ecological island for the authorities and urban developers. By putting side to side shoots taken from the new neighborhood and the ones from the point of view of remaining families, it highlights how the Guanzhou's project has no connection with the specificities — human or non-human — of such island. The long walks between destroyed houses in the village in which the filmmaker is taking us are like a wandering through museum, presenting a outlook of old Chinese world.

The Guanzhou's urban project seems to be one of these mega-city projects that is beyond all current justifications, besides real estate speculations. It embraces an on-trend concept, the ecology, without any ideological basis to it.

As one of the peasants says, the ideal of Chinese Communist Party is to put in people's minds that they are entering a new era, and the Guanzhou International Ecological Island is one of his paragons, a hollow shell idea as the late-capitalism produces it so well.

Hugo Montero
Université de Lyon
hugo.montero@entpe.fr