

# Title: Emancipating the Image: The Beijing Olympics, Regeneration, and the Power of Performance

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## Abstract:

“In China, what makes an image true is that it is good for people to see it.” - Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 1971

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau gazes down upon New York City from the 110<sup>th</sup> floor of the World Trade Centre and sees the island of Manhattan as an image. In particular, he witnesses the famous Manhattan skyline as a powerful ‘image-text’ containing a multiplicity of meanings, interpretations, and symbols. Considering the possibilities of the city as visual simulacrum he asks: “[i]s the immense texturology spread out before one’s eyes anything more than a representation; an optical artefact?” Twenty or so years after De Certeau wandered the streets of New York and pondered its pictorial power, such a perspective can be applied to Olympic and Post Olympic Beijing.

The Olympic Games gave the world an opportunity to read Beijing’s powerful image-text following thirty years of rapid transformation. David Harvey argues that this transformation has turned Beijing from “a closed backwater, to an open centre of capitalist dynamism.” However, in the creation of this image-text, another subtler and altogether very different image-text has been deliberately erased from the public gaze. This more concealed image-text offers a significant counter narrative on the city’s public image and criticises the simulacrum constructed for the 2008 Olympics, both implicitly and explicitly. It is the ‘everyday’ image-text of a disappearing city still in the process of being bulldozed to make way for the neoliberal world’s next megalopolis. It exists most prominently as a filmic image text; in film documentaries about a ‘real’ hidden Beijing just below the surface of the government sponsored ‘optical artefact.’ Film has thus become a key medium through which to understand and preserve a physical city on the verge of erasure.