

We are the black hole that makes the sun glow. (1/2)

Lessons from a conversation with Huang Chi-Wen and the work of Chang Li-Ren 張立人

This is the **first of two** parts of an article that arose from my conversation with Chi-Wen Huang about Chang Li-Ren's work. The starting point for this exchange was his solo exhibition titled: "Yesterday's Dream" that Chi-Wen hosted at her eponymous gallery from February 11 to March 18, 2023.

Chi-Wen Gallery is a contemporary art gallery located in a Townhouse in Taipei that showcases contemporary art. The gallery has been operating since 2004 and is known for its particular emphasis on new media and experimental art forms. It has presented works by both established and emerging artists and hosted a variety of exhibitions, performances and events. Since 2018 it is also the base of Chi-Wen Productions, an organisation dedicated to produce and document artist film, video and performance with a special focus on works dealing with political issues and subaltern communities. Most notably, they produced 'A Dream of Wholeness in Parts' in 2021 and 'If I had the words to tell you we wouldn't be here now' in 2019 – both written and directed by Sin Wai Kin formerly known as Victoria Sin. Chi-Wen Gallery also participates in international art fairs such as Art Basel Hong Kong, Loop Barcelona or Frieze New York and has a presence in the global contemporary art scene.

Chang Li-Ren is an artist from Taiwan who graduated from the Graduate Institute of Plastic Arts at Tainan National University of the Arts. His body of work mainly consists of video installations, conceptual art and animations created using a unique form of story-telling using virtual worlds between imagination and reality. He also works in the gaming industry.

Chang's work has already been featured at Chi-Wen before: in "Migratory Birds, Sea Breeze, Phonograph" (fall 2020). He showed a collaborative project with artists Yuan Cheng and Lanxin Rui titled: "FM 100.8". This piece was dealing with their individual relationships to Taiwanese national narratives and the histories that precede them. Earlier that year, Chang Li-Ren showed at the gallery's exhibition "Every Man is an Artist". This show, bearing the subtitle: "Talking About Artists' Social Engagement" was inspired by Joseph Beuys's notion of "Social Sculpture", an idea for a future in which every living person becomes an active agent in shaping their social environment.

Here, Chang showed the first two parts of a trilogy that I will deal with more below as well as an installation titled "Ming Rih Li" (2017) revolving around his life-experiences while developing the trilogy. The installation depicts an old film studio fallen into disrepair over the years. From two hidden holes the viewer can see images of the scenery outside his studio's window, the inside of the studio and finally a model of the model city he used in his video works. Other artists who took part in the exhibition are Chim↑Pom, Tsubasa Kato and Li Ran while River Lin, Su Misu, Yu Cheng-Ta staged live performances.

These examples should illustrate Chang Li-Ren's and Huang Chi-Wen's work and introduce the two vectors that generated "Yesterday's Dream", an exhibition that has the speculative fiction work "Battle City Trilogy" as its centerpiece. This trilogy is composed of two animated video pieces and a graphic novel. Chang spent more than a decade working on this project.

Inspired by the rich tradition of Taiwanese Puppet Opera and Theatre he created and designed all the model cities and the characters appearing in the films by his own. The scripting, voicing, animation as well as all the production and postproduction work was done by him.



All three parts are set in a near (and possible) future. The first two parts of "Battle City" were filmed in a human sized model of a city with an uncanny resemblance to Taipei, while the third part bears this resemblance in the backdrops of the drawings. For the artist, "Battle City" is the future Taipei.

In the first part "The Glory of Taiwan" [台灣之光] (2010-2017) we get to know the setting: a place originally built as military training area now populated by normal citizens. We are then introduced to Zhi-Qiang, a nihilistic incel who – after being rejected by Xiao-Ming, the person he loves – sets out to "destroy the world". This figurative speech is taken quite literally by the authorities who in turn impose martial law. The American army invades in the form of an intervention. In an unexpected turn, disaster strikes at the hands of another downtrodden character: Rung, an old

classmate of Zhi-Qiang, who finds in nuclear martyrdom the ultimate opportunity for “glory” (Chi-Wen Gallery 2022).

The second part “Economic Miracle” [經濟奇蹟] (2018 – 2022) is set in a time after Rung’s nuclear detonation which has left the city at the hands of JJ Enterprises, a company that turned the city into the economic capital of the world. This corporation segregates the surviving population along the wealth gap by the means of brutal police force and impermeable bureaucracy. The enterprise draws its legitimation by harnessing the monopoly over the means of energy production; for which they exploit the vital energy of the impoverished citizens and of “the son of Taiwan” – an undefined character. This part again follows Zhi-Qiang, but this time in his search for redemption. In his mission to sabotage JJ Enterprise’s operation on top of the dystopian version of Taipei’s iconic 101 skyscraper, he discovers that the son of Taiwan is indeed Rung, his old friend and nuclear martyr.



Parallel to this story, we follow Xiao Ming, the person whose rejection drove Zhi-Qiang to rebel against the world in the first part. Xiao Ming infiltrates JJ Enterprises to release the son of Taiwan in order to destroy the hyper-capitalist world following the event at the end of the last chapter. Zhi-Qiang and Xiao Ming meet where the Son of Taiwan is imprisoned and at this point we find out that Rung, Zhi-Qiang and Xiao-Ming were friends a long time ago. After his release, Rung transforms into a gigantic humanoid light-monster, destroys the city and swallows all the missiles and ammunition deployed by JJ Enterprises and the US military against him. In a climatic end, Zhi-Qiang and Xiao-Ming jump to reach Rung at the heart of that monster. After that: blank.

The third part “Formosa” [福爾摩沙再度偉大] (2021 – 2022) takes us further in time and deeper into the dystopian tropes of geopolitical intervention, individual autonomy and resource extraction that make Battle City so characteristic. Society remains segregated along the lines dividing classes: the upper class breeds the lower class to harvest their organs for bodily enhancement and modification. In his extrapolation of the destructive tendencies of our contemporary world, Chang reveals its potentially disastrous future and harnesses far-fetched narrative conventions to present an image of violence at a comic distance. (Chi-Wen Gallery 2022)

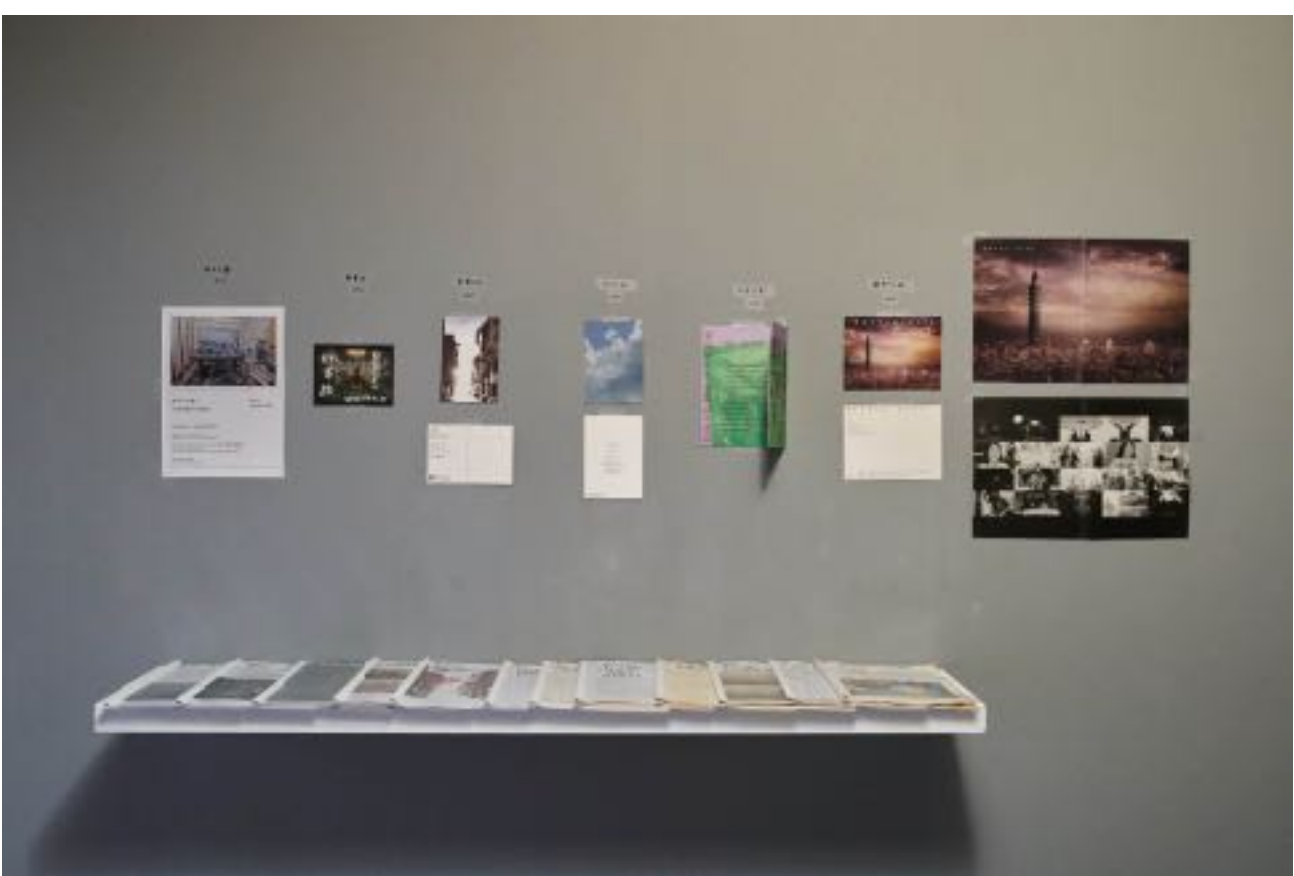
What is the world to you anyhow when the fight is inside of you?



In this trilogy the role of the artist as storyteller and mediator of stories becomes more than apparent. Li-Ren’s work is a critique of the organisation of power but also of the incommensurability of the public (city in this case) and the personal sphere. In all three parts, the city (the stage on which urban life happens) is in itself an important character. This dark, solitary actant has an indoctrinating power over the other characters. For them, there is no exit from the bureaucratic and institutional framework of a dystopic (and probable) post-contemporary society in which they live. There is no imaginable outcome that is not despair. Much of this critique arises from Li-Ren’s own experience in producing the first part of the trilogy. In 2010 he moved into a tiny, expensive studio apartment in Taipei to start working on the model for his film. Soon after the first of many funding rejections he received, he relocated his studio to cheaper Tainan, a city in the south of Taiwan. Chang Li-Ren, quite literally, took the city with him. This relocation deeply influenced the direction the project took in the following years. Much like his main character, he was disillusioned.



Zhi-Qiang, the main character, reacts to his disillusionment by externalising his anger, protecting it from the outer-world in the form of exaggerated threats; the artist, on the other hand, harnessed it and prevailed. In fact, this phase of the project is now an important key in Chang's oeuvre who likes to think of his work as entangled in a process of transformation of resources. In "Yesterday's Dream" for example, one could browse through the countless documents the artist had to submit (mostly without success) for state funding and other bureaucratic tasks that are normally rendered invisible in a gallery exhibition. The clear curatorial and artistic statement of locating this archive in the first room one encounters in the gallery is committed to present art not only as slick and polished *end-products* but also as a messy and often tedious labour practice.



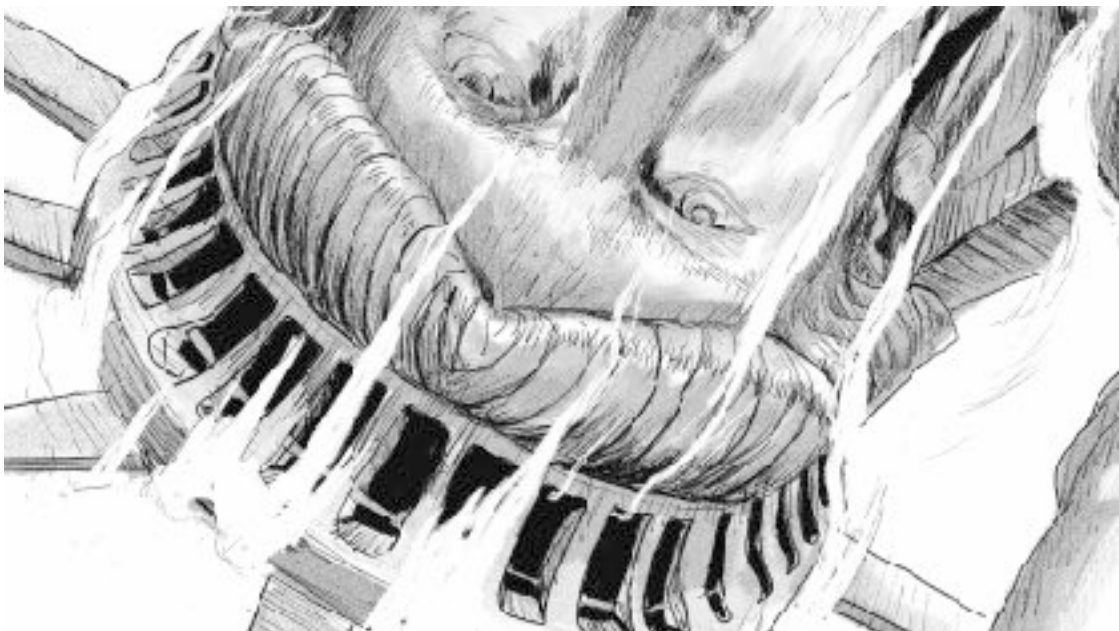
In his own words about the first room Chang Li-Ren said: *“The space here is like a studio after a shoot, where many objects are packed and stacked, like a Yard Sale or a Garage Sale, to sell some of the objects in stock, a return to the reality of life.”* Besides his archive, logbook and original sketches of the battle City Trilogy, we also find a series of souvenirs. This approach does not only mimic and reappropriates the marketing strategies that bigger film productions employ to promote their own products but it also gives space to more humble, low entry and easy forms of engagement with art purchasing.



It is in this room where we encounter also the first video-artwork of the exhibition: a news reel from the “Battle City” universe luring us to be immersed in the speculative world of the artist. According to the artist, this work is a projection of the everyday atmosphere he felt when watching television as a child in the cold-war era in Taiwan, although he was not able to fully grasp the topics and events that were being reported on, he could sense what they tried to convey: an urgency for the incoming end of the world, the creeping shadow of war and a push of relentless acceleration towards a fully industrialised and automated society.

In Li-Rens memory the way Taiwan was portrayed in the Textbooks and journalistic content when he was growing up had a certain “schizophrenic and mythical character”. In his work, the artist tries to re-contextualise and repurpose these legendary tales which the political system nurtured; the miraculous growth of GDP through the development of processing exports and petrochemical and heavy industries, individual stories of success and the veneration of new idols such as the "Son of Taiwan" (the nickname for the first elected national leader who is not from the KMT).

Although Chang Li-Ren’s work does not directly enter the political sphere, as it would be more common in what we commonly denominate as politically engaged art (art which manifests through forms of protest, active resistance or other public forms) he manages to create a hyper-domestic statement that is deeply influenced by Taiwans history and current geopolitical states of affairs. The Martial law imposed to harness Zhi-Qiangs threat to the status quo resonates with the one that loomed over Taiwan from 1949 until 1987. It is the second-longest imposition of martial law by a regime anywhere in the world, following Syria’s 48 years. In the second part, the City only survives the nuclear catastrophe by transforming into the economic capital of the world, which is a clear reflection on the nation’s precarious ambiguous position between a global capitalist hegemony led by the United States which provides at least some degree of national autonomy and the prospect of a forced absorption by its bigger neighbour, a path which would have disastrous consequences to all social freedom as it is lived in the Island nation today. A freedom that has been earned through countless generations of hardship against occupations and oppressive regimes.



Through the whole trilogy, the lingua franca of the characters is a speculated/nonsensical language that uses Chinese characters as its written form. Although we are not able to understand what the characters are telling to each other, we can understand what the artist wants to say to us through the Chinese and English subtitles. This was purposely developed and introduced by Chang to thematise the violence that local minorities and majorities have suffered at the hands of mono-culturalist and linguist policies that banned the local Taiwanese dialects and neglected the plethora of Austronesian languages native to what since the 1950's constitutes the Republic of China. The unintelligibility between local communities and occupational forces is a trope much explored in Taiwanese art forms. An example being Wen-ching, one of the main characters of Hou Hsiao-hsien's *City of Sadness* (1989) who is mute and unable to talk for himself, thus an [ableist] metaphor for being unable to decide his own destiny.

Zhi-Qiang's journey in "Battle City" illustrates the importance of confronting one's own darkness and finding peace. His character is an embodiment of the struggle between the individual and the society, between the self and the other, between life and the non-life. His journey shows that the path to peace and reconciliation is through empathy, compassion, and forgiveness, and that friendship can be a powerful force for transformation and change. Similarly, in the second part of *Battle City*, the Martyr who had been awakened again with the intention of destroying what was left is embraced by those who were dear to him, and this gesture of forgiveness and care transforms his destructive energy into an energy for change.

Friendship becomes the morning star.

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This is the **second of two** parts of an article that arose from my conversation with Chi-Wen Huang about Chang Li-Ren's work. The starting point for this exchange was his solo exhibition titled: "Yesterday's Dream" that Chi-Wen hosted at her eponymous gallery from February 11 to March 18, 2023.



[IMAGE: The Island Formosa and the Pescadores, Johannes Vingboons, 1640, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons]

The world is that what you fight for

As an island, the history of Taiwan is complex and multifaceted, shaped by centuries of migration, colonization, and political upheaval. Taiwan's indigenous peoples, who are thought to have inhabited the island for thousands of years, were gradually displaced by waves of immigrants from China and other parts of Asia. The island was colonized by the Dutch in the 17th century, and later came under the control of the Qing dynasty in the 19th century.

After World War II, Taiwan was returned to Chinese control, but the country soon found itself embroiled in a civil war between the nationalist forces of the Kuomintang (KMT) and the communist forces of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In 1949, the KMT were defeated by the CCP and retreated to Taiwan, which they declared to be the seat of the Republic of China (ROC).

As mentioned above, for several decades, Taiwan was ruled by a one-party dictatorship under the KMT, which imposed martial law and cracked down on dissent. However, in the 1980s, growing pressure from civil society and the international community led to a period of democratization and liberalization, culminating in Taiwan's first democratic presidential election in 1996.

Despite these political changes, Taiwan's status as a sovereign nation remains a matter of dispute and a focal point in geopolitics. The government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) claims Taiwan as part of its territory, and has not ruled out the use of military force to bring Taiwan under its control. This ongoing tension has had significant implications for Taiwan's international standing and its relationship with other countries.

One of the key factors that has contributed to Taiwan's economic success is its dominance in the global semiconductor industry, which is often referred to as the "Silicon Shield." Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Corporation (TSMC), which is based in Taiwan, produces over 60% of the world's semiconductors and over 90% of the most advanced ones. While the "Silicon Shield" has helped to fuel Taiwan's economic growth and strengthen its autonomy, it has also contributed to growing inequalities and social pressures, leaving some people struggling to keep up with the pace of change and to adapt to the demands of a rapidly evolving global economy.

Chang Li-Ren gave a talk in the gallery that was announced under the title: "Your Dreams Don't Deserve to be Remembered". I did not attend it because I knew I would not be able to understand much, but I talked to him about why he chose this title for talking in front of an audience. He wants to correct some parts of the first film of *Battle City*, but he cannot longer afford to spend so much time and personal resources to recreate it. He added: *"With the completion of another great "Taiwan light", TSMC, in Tainan's Sanae factory, the rent in the village has skyrocketed, and I can no longer afford to pay the rent for the studio and have to pay for a rubbish truck to empty the items. It was a dream for thirteen years, and the project was eventually erased before it was fully exhibited, a*



dream that is clearly not worth remembering compared to the economic development and artistic environment of the region.”

The artist's life, his complex storyline, distinctive animation style and intricate cultural and historical references are not only a lesson on how sensitive and explosive social systems are, but create a great story that appeals for a greater sensibility for the social issues of today. In his own words: *“Battle City is not just about war, but about survival in the wider sense. Survival in this context is not survival in the traditional sense of the law of the jungle, but survival in the context of humanly constructed civilisations, legal rules, media networks and economic environments. In other words, survival in a state of economic activity that we know as everyday life.”* He draws inspiration not only from his own experience and the public presence of geopolitics and social issues, but also from the experiences that other have made in these fields. Zhi-Qiang, the main character of the Trilogy was inspired by a squat leader of him when he was a soldier stationed at the Kinmen frontline. In our interview, Chang told me how one night, his squat leader, a cheerful and lively teenager who had just graduated from cadet school and who carried a cartoon-printed wallet with a picture of a young girl inside broke down in tears while they were on sentry duty carrying loaded assault-rifles, he told me how he thought his breakdown had something to do with the girl he carried in his back pocket.

“The military is a relatively exploitative place, and many people, other than those who serve on a





voluntary basis, choose to serve because of their families' finances, sacrificing their lives for their families' livelihoods and living in a different world” he continued.

Much like *Battle City* follows various characters that navigate a bureaucratic dystopia. “Yesterday’s dream” follows the artist through the hardships of bureaucracy and precariousness of art production. A field where people like Chi-Wen play an important role. Who described the artist work as being: *“much like Taiwan; walking an own path, fearless and decided but tragic in its past and future outlooks.”*

When I asked her about her curatorial approach, she replied that she likes artistic practices that critically engage with hegemonies by building own systems and structures that support the stories that build up real alternatives. She understands her gallery and production house as such a structure itself. It is a vessel that helps artist to navigate the Maze that is the cultural sector. Her curatorial practice is a sort of fold of the interpersonal relationships that we commonly associate with the ‘social’. Besides Chang Li-Ren she has also shown other artists known for their political works, most notably Chen Chieh-Jen and Hsu Chia-Wei amongst others.

For Chi-Wen the process of becoming a cultural worker is a process of meta-socialisation where one discovers what society can bring to them and where their limits can extend to. By making these processes visible and focusing on the strategies they produce she wants to disrupt the current merit-oriented art field. In her eyes as in the eyes of many of us, this social paradigm of merit pushes the imaginative mind in a box, a white cube to exclude it from the social sphere. What happens then? The remedy of Chi-Wen is to not cancel this box, but to restructure it from the inside with art-forms that escape its static form.

Her approach arises from her experience growing up in an ambiguous time when liberalisation through open market strategies went hand in hand with political censorship. The programs she prepares for the gallery reflect not only this experience, but gives forum to forms of art that rose from similarly lived experiences.

With Chi-Wen gallery, geopolitical and local issues, such as the segregation of subaltern communities, the exuberant urbanisation under authoritarian regimes or the thug of war for the independent state of Taiwan have a stage in the east and South-East Asian art and gallery scene.

Much in line with the cultural policies of this country, which employs artistic collaborations as a form of diplomatic tool, Chi-Wen employs the exhibition of art and the production of artistic works (via her production house) as soft power, or better said: as a force to soften power. A force of true heart that can promote and distribute sincere versions of autonomy, mutual understanding and a better future.

Her engagement with the production of art came from the motivation of rethinking the role her gallery has taken in the local art scene since it began operating in 2004. Since then her gallery became established and known for their focus on video art, so Chi-Wen Huang took the responsibility of more thoroughly fomenting this medium, vouching for a more cinematic approach and the promotion of subaltern visions behind and in front of the camera that portray hidden histories, sensibilities, threads, localised struggles and the stories that weave the complex pattern of Taiwanese identity. *“Taiwan has so much, a lot. And it is becoming very bright right now. It is living through an interesting moment. And It’s time for us to use the ‘weapon of light’”* she added.



The idea of promoting diverse art production practices aligns with the importance of an embracing and uniting periphery. The role of the periphery is to challenge the status quo, question dominant narratives and power structures, and offer alternative visions of the world. It is an archipelago of para-spaces where voices and visions can be heard and seen, and where diversity and pluralism are upheld as a bulwark against homogenization and standardization. Taiwan's socio-cultural history is a prime example of such a space and as such, it can play a vital role in supporting and creating diverse and urgent art practices needed today.

Through her gallery and her engagement, Chi-Wen Huang is contributing to this process of resource concentration and creating a platform for voices and visions to be heard and seen. While Chang Li-Ren has managed to set an awkward mirror for us to ask ourselves: what will I do if it gets this far?

In this image and space we can learn to understand that art production is a field of collaboration, a field for experimentation and place for the development of characters and strategies needed to overcome the current system driven by meritocracy. Instead of being considered as mere indicators and tokens of achievements, cultural workers should be considered as key agents who create their own discourse and movements, and who possess a powerful inner strength and social resilience.

We are the black hole that makes the sun glow.