

Documenting Postsocialist Reality: The Films of Jia Zhangke

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August, 2010

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment of the requirements
of the degree of Master of Arts

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Abstract

In this paper, I will examine how the films of Jia Zhangke operate as social analyses of the contemporary condition in China through both subject matter and the documentation of a society in transition, as well as, through the creation of an innovative film language. Jia employs cinematic techniques that problematize the borders between fiction and documentary, subjectivity and objectivity, and realism and surrealism thus challenging the underlying assumptions that shape film as a medium itself. It is this essential filmic gesture which blurs the boundaries between traditional cinematic categories that makes Jia's films unique in their ability to reveal the inherent contradictions that structure the postsocialist condition in contemporary China.

Dans cet article, j'examinerai comment les films de Jia Zhangke fonctionner comme des analyses de la condition sociale contemporaine en Chine à la fois par l'objet et la documentation d'une société en transition, ainsi que, grâce à la création d'un langage cinématographique novateur. Jia utilise des techniques cinématographiques qui problématiser les frontières entre fiction et documentaire, la subjectivité et l'objectivité et le réalisme et le surréalisme mettant ainsi en cause les hypothèses sous-jacentes film forme que comme un médium lui-même. C'est ce geste filmique, essentielle, qui brouille les frontières entre les catégories traditionnelles du cinéma qui fait des films uniques Jia dans leur capacité à révéler les contradictions inhérentes à la structure de la condition post-socialiste dans la Chine contemporaine.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Peter Button for his guidance and patience in the early stages of my research. I would also like to express my gratitude to my advisors Hajime Nakatani and Yuriko Furuhashi to whom I am indebted for challenging me and providing me with invaluable direction. Special thanks to David Guimond who offered essential editorial input and whose persistent encouragement and motivation I deeply depended on. My graduate experience has been shaped by Adam Michiels who, from the beginning, has provided me with love and support, and whose insight I value so profoundly; without him none of this would be possible. Finally, I would like to thank my parents, Ruth and John Germann, who have been an unwavering source of support throughout my university career.

Introduction

The past four decades have brought about monumental changes in the Chinese social and economic landscape. After Mao's death, China embarked on a massive economic campaign that moved away from a communist ideology based on collectivization and continual revolution and towards integration within the global capitalist economy. The mass public campaigns that defined the revolutionary period, such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, were judged in the Deng Xiaoping years as deeply flawed. Deng enacted economic reforms that encouraged decollectivization of agriculture and the gradual decentralization of industry. Private entrepreneurship was no longer seen as an affront to the collective ideals of communism but was promoted as a means of stimulating China's lagging economy. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the ideological basis on which the Chinese economy was structured underwent a massive overhaul as Maoist isolation was replaced with global integration.

Reform in China was not limited to the economy, however, but also brought about massive change within the social and cultural realm. As China became increasingly outward looking, the global had an increasingly large impact on the national. Upon opening its doors, China presented itself as an untapped market and was promptly exploited as such by the international capitalist system. The result has been a dramatic transformation of both the physical and cultural landscapes in China. By allowing for greater foreign investment, China saw a sharp influx of transnational corporations and with this a corresponding spread of

global capitalist imagery. Internationally recognizable corporate logos pepper the landscapes of both major cities and more remote rural areas in China. Furthermore, capitalist consumer culture has had a profound impact on the nature of social relations in China. The experiences of the generation of youth coming of age in the 1980s and 1990s have been shaped more by a globalized popular culture than a nationalistic revolutionary culture.

The forces of marketization arising from Deng's reform period have thus resulted in a new cultural logic in China. A greater individuality and autonomy has arisen through this shift from an ideologically unified culture under a planned economy to a pluralized culture under a market economy. The totalizing political ideology of the communist regime has been partially filled by a commodity culture which brings with it an individual desire that would have formerly been subsumed under that totalitarian ideology (McGrath 2008). Furthermore, this individual desire is mediated by a distinctly consumerist logic. As capitalist reforms become further entrenched in Chinese society, so does capitalist ideology come to shape the social psyche. Chinese citizens continue to flock to urban centers where the effects of globalization are most prevalent and social values shift as collectivization is replaced by commodification.

These recent changes in China have been met with corresponding shifts within cultural production which reflect this new cultural logic. Filmmakers emerging after 1989, what have been termed the Sixth Generation, have developed a new cinematic form in order to represent the new social reality of contemporary China. They embrace a documentary-style realist aesthetic meant to

capture the rawness and intensity of the urbanization process in postsocialist China. It is the debris of urban demolition and the machinery of construction that form the urban landscape and are the trademark of Sixth Generation cinema (Zhang 2007). The city is the site at which the contradictions of the grittiness of industrialism and slickness of computer-age commercialism intersect.

Furthermore, the film industry itself has undergone dramatic change as a result of economic reforms. Unlike their Fifth Generation predecessors, Sixth Generation filmmakers often work outside the official studio system. Digital video technologies have opened up opportunities to a wide range of filmmakers who would otherwise be unable to produce films. The achievements of Chinese filmmakers at international film festivals have also provided a framework through which new filmmakers can strive for international and financial success. The entrepreneurship of these filmmakers and the transnationality of the production and distribution process is yet another indicator of the Sixth Generation's deep entanglement in global capitalism. "Situated in this brand-new political-economy regime, the Sixth Generation is itself a cultural phenomenon made possible by the postsocialist market economy, which developed rapidly in the 1990's in full complicity with transnational capitalism and which values the ideology of entrepreneurship" (Zhang 2006, 54). These filmmakers not only provide commentary and analysis of the shifting economic system in China but are also themselves deeply entangled in this system.

Jia Zhangke is one of the most prominent and internationally acclaimed of these newly emerging filmmakers. His films present an image of contemporary

China alternative to the image presented in official discourses and state sponsored cultural production. After graduating from the Beijing Film Academy and already receiving recognition as a filmmaker for the success of *Xiao Shan Going Home* (小山回家, 1995), Jia returned to his hometown of Fenyang and was struck by the monumental changes it had undergone. The widespread demolition and construction taking place there made Jia's hometown almost unrecognizable to him. Jia found himself driven by the need to document these profound changes (Berry 2009, 23). Fenyang thus provided the backdrop for Jia's next two films, *Xiao Wu* (小武, 1997) and *Platform* (站台, 2000). The films that follow further elaborate on this alternative vision and need for documentation; from *The World* (世界, 2004) which presents the lives of migrant workers at a theme park filled with international iconography, to *Still Life* (三峡好人, 2006) which documents the gradual disappearance of the landscape surrounding the Yangze river due to the construction of the Three Gorges Dam.

Jia's films center on those who have been displaced or marginalized by the transformations that have uprooted past social and economic arrangements. The protagonists in his films are mostly unemployed youth trying to find a space for themselves in an economy in transition. These are the subjects that have been left behind in official representations of China's economic achievements and rise to international prominence. By giving voice to the marginalized, Jia positions his films in opposition to official discourses and provides critical insight into the

ways in which capitalist ideology penetrates the daily life of the contemporary Chinese subject.

Beginning with *Xiao Wu* and continuing through to Jia's more recent work like *Still Life*, Jia forms an increasingly more nuanced and complex film language that operates as an interrogation of the contemporary social landscape in China. Jia uses a combination of Bazinian photographic realism with a postmodern hyperrealism to explore the meaning of a multifaceted social experience in an era of rapid transition (Zhang 2007). In Jia's cinematic worlds, the real and surreal are juxtaposed creating ruptures in his representational form. Moreover, Jia blurs the boundaries between documentary and fiction thereby challenging the spectator's perception of the relation of each to reality. By emphasizing the permeability of the borders between these traditional cinematic categories, Jia's films bring into question the representational claims made by film and the ways in which both content and form can be used to provide social critique.

In this paper, I will explore the ways in which Jia's films engage in social discourse and present a particularly complex illustration of the postsocialist condition in China. In chapter one, I will explore the economic and cultural transformations that have been occurring in China in the post-Mao era. I will briefly discuss some of the major intellectual debates that have attempted to analyze and contextualize these changes and how they have evolved from the early 1980s through to the turn of the century. Lastly, I will examine how cultural

production operates as a social analytic tool, looking particularly at how Jia Zhangke's films both shape and are shaped by these larger social discourses.

In the second chapter, I will look at how social transformations in China have been communicated through different cinematic realisms based on differing claims to representing reality. From socialist realist film, which claims to reveal the ideological truth underlying reality, to Fifth Generation films which attempt to construct a new modern subject through historical re-evaluation and, finally, to post-1989 film, which creates a vision of reality through individual subjectivity and documentary-style aesthetics. I will demonstrate how each of these film movements is structured by different cinematic codes, or regimes of realism, which negotiate the relationship between representation and reality based on different ideological claims.

Finally, in chapter three I will examine how Jia creates his own innovative film language that blurs the boundaries between traditional cinematic categories, thus more acutely revealing the inherent contradictions that structure the postsocialist condition in contemporary China. Jia employs certain cinematic techniques that problematize the borders between fiction and documentary, subjectivity and historicity, and realism and surrealism. It is this essential filmic gesture that makes Jia's films unique in their ability to communicate the contradictory nature of contemporary China.

Chapter 1: The Question of Postsocialism in the Era of Reform

The intellectual debates occurring during the reform era provide insight into the cultural climate of this period in China's history. While sprouting from within the walls of China's educational institutions, these debates quickly spread through a variety of public forums and were not simply an exercise among a cloistered group of elites, but rather had a great impact on the wider cultural psyche. One arena in which these debates had an undisputed impact is that of cultural production, where artists were both inspired by and active players in this intellectual discourse. In this chapter, I will explore some of the major intellectual debates occurring in China during this period of radical reform and the ways in which they jointly informed and were informed by the cultural production of the time.

In the post-Mao era, intellectual discourse generally centered upon shifting economic structures which, in this period, played the greatest role in shaping the social climate. Deng's reforms ushered China into a new era of rapid transformation in all realms of society; from private to public, rural to urban, wealthy to impoverished, massive change was inescapable. A vibrant social dialogue inevitably arose alongside this massive social disruption. These debates both criticized the economic reforms and helped to shape them; both scrutinized the social consequences and contributed to their foundation. In many ways, these intellectual discourses provided a framework for interpretation of everyday lived experience within larger structures of shifting values and social configurations.

Much like the economic reforms themselves, intellectual debates in the reform era were marked not by stagnancy but rather by perspectives that were ever-changing. As reforms continued to be implemented, their impact on the social sphere was as varied as the places and time periods in which they took place. The experiences of the Chinese people in the early reform period of the 1980s were vastly different from that of the period after 1989 and again of the early 21st century and the cultural landscape of these various periods was a reflection of these differences. In the years following the end of the Mao-era, economic change was largely embraced as a welcome alternative to the desolation that had been wrought by the Cultural Revolution and revolutionary ideology. Consequently, many intellectuals approached movements towards capitalist restructuring with excitement and confidence. However, as the social disruption that accompanied these reforms became more apparent, particularly after the events at Tiananmen Square, this idealism was gradually eroded and replaced by a more pronounced scepticism. As real-life implications clashed with hopeful speculations, the dynamics of the debates were progressively and irreversibly changed.

Economic Reforms

After Mao's death in 1976, the CCP embarked on a massive campaign to overhaul not only its social and economic policies, but also the ideological platform on which these policies were built. The events of the Cultural Revolution were repudiated and Mao's policies of reform based on class struggle and mass

public campaigns were seen as incompatible with the type of globally integrated development China was to now pursue. With Deng Xiaoping taking over leadership of the Party, China adopted a program of reform aimed at making the transition from a planned to a market economy, or what Deng coined “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” The first wave of reforms began in the early 1980s with the decollectivization of agriculture through the Household Responsibility System, the privatization of certain sectors of the urban industrial economy and the opening of China to foreign investment with the creation of special economic zones. State control was increasingly decentralized and private enterprise based on village and township initiatives began to gain market share over state-owned enterprises in many sectors of the economy.

The protests at Tiananmen Square in Beijing that culminated in the violent state response on June 4th 1989 provided the first major challenge to the reformist government. What had begun as a collective mourning for Hu Yaobang soon turned into an increasingly large gathering of students, intellectuals and labourers in cities throughout the country calling for the reformation of China’s political system to accompany economic reforms. After seven weeks of demonstration, the CCP eventually used military force to diffuse the protestors in Beijing. The violence that ensued and the deaths that resulted from the state response caused widespread disillusionment amongst the Chinese people. What was perceived as China’s movement towards a new post-Mao social liberation was revealed to be simply the continuation of a philosophy privileging state authority above all else.

However, the political turmoil did not disrupt the government's determined efforts toward economic reform which were reaffirmed with Deng's "Southern Tour" in 1992. Deng visited the major industrial centers in the south gathering support for the reformist agenda and reasserting the party's dedication to global economic integration. Reforms in the 1990s gained a new momentum and privatization accelerated in anticipation of China's eventual accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001. While many formerly enthusiastic supporters of China's economic restructuring retracted their support after 1989, this period also saw the rise of a new generation who openly embraced an expanding consumerist culture. By the late 1990s there existed an enormous population of youth who were only familiar with the urbanized, privatized, globally incorporated China of the 21st century.

Intellectual Utopianism in the 1980s

The intellectual environment of the 1980s in China was marked by a distinct optimism and turn towards the future. This period has been dubbed "Culture Fever" as there was an explosion of enthusiastic discussion on the possibilities of a Chinese society entering a brave new world (Wang 1996). Mao-era intellectual repression was replaced by a vibrant cultural discourse which, while influenced by China's revolutionary past, saw the opening of a myriad of new possibilities in a social and economic realm that embraced reform. This new intellectual space provided an arena for an open debate on the meaning of modernity and modernization in postsocialist China. A wide diversity of

responses to the problem of modernity was put forth and there emerged of an array of different trends of thought.

Of course, this was not the first time that the problem of modernity was raised within China's historical cultural discourse. The May Fourth movement launched in 1911 initiated a thorough investigation into potential avenues in which China could enter into a new period of modernity. However, as Wang Jing argues, the cultural discussion of the 1980s differed from the May Fourth Movement in its polymorphous approach to modernity. These new intellectuals were not simply replicating a Western model of modernization but were conscious of the complexity and multiplicity of the possible approaches to modernity. The experiences of the last century created a rupture in the way the path to modernization could be envisioned, whereas "May Fourth intellectuals could only conceive of and emulate the single model of Eurocentric modernity, postcolonial global geopolitics [had] turned the notion of pluralism into a reality" (Wang 1996, 48).

Nonetheless, one characteristic the debates of the 1980s shared with their May Fourth predecessors was a turn towards the future as the focus of exploration. The present conditions of China's social realities were pushed to the periphery as suppositions of future possibilities took centre stage. It was this persistent privileging of the future over the past and present that marked the debates of the 1980s as profoundly utopian (Wang 1996, 40). In this sense, a new utopianism came to replace the Maoist utopianism of permanent revolution. "Modernization now replaced revolutionary action as the end result, and methodological retooling

replaced ideological remoulding as the means to determine the course of history” (Wang 1996, 42). While the means to achieving the goal of Chinese modernity were diverse, the historical ends were the same. The cultural debates of the 1980s aimed to fill the ideological void left by the disintegration of Maoism. Deng’s China demanded a substitute utopian vision and a theoretical modernization came to fill this newly emptied space.

This utopian vision of the future was held not only by the intellectual class but by the CCP as well. The reform era revived the cohesiveness between intellectuals and officials that had been broken down during the revolutionary era. As during the May Fourth period, the cultural elite were convinced of their duty to lead the modernization project. This conviction provided the basis for an attempt to reinstate intellectuals as the leaders of the masses and the spokespeople for society in the post-Mao era. Intellectuals thus did not restrict themselves to the academy but were fully engaged in a comprehensive program of modernization, working alongside their newly established allies in the political sphere. Accordingly, the utopian perspective of the intellectuals permeated the official agenda and came to shape the economic reforms being enacted.

Using a utopian vision of the future as the basis for practical change on the ground inevitably lead to problems with the application of reforms. The disconnection between imagined goals and lived experience predictably began to manifest itself. As Wang points out, the intellectual discourse was grounded in a top-down perspective which privileged the discursive over the experiential and theory over practice. The official reform agenda, which was so deeply impacted

by these discussions, thus also came to privilege the central over the local and grassroots developmental experiments where overlooked if they could not be easily placed within the theoretical paradigms laid out in the intellectual discourse (Wang 1996, 41). By privileging a look towards the future over the real social actions of the present, theoretical idealization characterized approaches to the modernization process on both sides. Furthermore, Wang argues that it was this utopian approach to modernization itself that may have lead to the official crackdown in 1989 and to the eventual downfall of the intellectual class. The utopian approach of intellectuals and their faith in the ability of an idealistic movement from above to enact real change may have promoted an unrealistic revolutionary vision of the potential for national reform overnight. This could ultimately have invited intervention from above and dissolved the radical space that the intellectuals themselves had created (Wang 1996, 56).

Culture Fever was therefore clearly not separated from political concerns but deeply intertwined in them. This is also made evident in the tone of discussion regarding the historical re-evaluation of Chinese culture. The discussion became concentrated on criticising an aging traditional culture rather than directly addressing problems associated with socialism and Deng's reforms themselves. As with the approach to the content of the reforms, the insistence of the discussion to remain focused on the grand narrative of modernization prevented intellectuals from gaining a clear view of historical and present cultural realities. Genuine cultural retrospection thus ultimately remained elusive (Wang 1996, 55). As Wang Hui points out, the critique of politics in this period took the form of an

allegorical critique of Chinese socialism as feudal tradition. This strategic positioning based on a tradition/ modernity dichotomy allowed for the complete reaffirmation of modernity without a substantive critique of the contemporary situation (Wang 2003, 173). This either/or binary served the official political agenda of the time as it prevented a meaningful analysis of postsocialist ideology.

However, the relationship between intellectuals and the state was to change irreversibly after the events at Tiananmen Square in 1989. The state sanctioned violence that was the end result of the escalation of student protests in Beijing left the intellectual elite in a state of bitterness and confusion. The government crackdown demonstrated that the social and economic changes that were part of the modernization process would not be accompanied by the political reforms that had been envisioned as the requisite counterpart. The intellectual class began to retreat from their association with an official structure that had made clear they did not share any vision of reform that may compromise state power. The utopian vision that ultimately had come to shape the potential road to modernization in China had thus abruptly been dissolved.

Despite this rupture in alliances, economic reform in China maintained its staggering pace. Deng's 1992 "Southern Tour" confirmed that the political turmoil stirred up at Tiananmen would not interfere with the government's course toward free market reform. Furthermore, it was in the early 1990s that the social impact of Deng's economic reforms became a widespread lived reality. While the lives of many Chinese citizens had undergone change prior to this period, particularly those in urban and suburban areas, it was in the 1990s that we see

capitalist consumer culture truly beginning to gain a firm grasp on the social consciousness. Along with the growing institutionalization of free markets came a rupture in the cultural logic of Chinese society as a consumerist ideology became an ever stronger force in structuring the social realm. Wang Jing even goes so far as to argue that after 1989, it was not communist authoritarianism that caused the demise of high culture fever and the influence of the intellectual class but capitalist consumer culture. For Wang, “the 1990s dawned in China with the ironic truth: commercialism could turn yesterday’s cutting edge into tomorrow’s museum piece.” (Wang 1996, 116). The rise of consumerism was, for many intellectuals, the rise of ever-increasing and powerful threat to the values which they were trying to promote.

Humanist Spirit Debates of the 1990s

The shattering of an idealized vision of modernization along with the explosive growth of capitalist reforms and consumerist culture created a shift in the central set of concerns in the intellectual discourse of the 1990s. This shift was partially reflected in the “humanist spirit” debates which sought to redefine the relationship between humanist intellectuals and the official reform policy. The debate centered around the growing sense among intellectuals of a state of “crisis” in Chinese culture due to a decline in humanist values. Within the history of Chinese intellectual approaches to modernity, the problem of a decline in traditional values in the face of modernization is a reoccurring theme. However, the humanist spirit debates reframed the long debated problem of changing values

as a specific characteristic of the 1990's, the problem being not the decline of the traditional Chinese value system but rather the loss of the enlightenment consensus of the 1980's due to the vulgarization and commodification of culture in the market economy (McGrath 2008, 32).

Humanist intellectuals criticized the cultural production of the 1990s for its lack of a transcendental viewpoint. Rampant consumerist ideology was thought to have degraded artistic production and created a popular culture that promoted a view of the world based a hollow materialism. In addition, postmodernism, with its deconstruction of liberal humanist ideals, was denounced as being profoundly cynical (McGrath 2008, 31).¹ Artists and writers such as Wang Shuo responded to these critics by trumpeting the increased cultural freedom and diversity brought about by market reforms and consumerism. Wang accused humanist critics of trying to limit people's choices and return to a condition in which their authority was at the center of cultural life (McGrath 2008, 34). For Wang, the debate over the decline of humanist values was an attempt by the intellectual class to preserve discursive power similar to the intellectuals of the May Fourth movement and the 1980s who viewed themselves as having a social mission to provide the nation with moral and ideological guidance.

The humanist critics were further criticized for lacking a clear definition of the nature of the transcendental vision which they claimed was absent in cultural production. The intellectuals who made proclamations to the universality of the "humanist spirit" were accused of failing to lay out a comprehensive framework

¹ The discussion of postmodernism as it pertains to reform era China will be elaborated later in this chapter.

of these values which, consequently, remained shrouded in ambiguity. However, according to Jason McGrath, what the debates did do was confront the ideological void left first by the decline of Maoism and second by the evaporation of the utopian modernism of the 1980s. McGrath reads the humanist debates as a negative utopian vision characteristic of postmodernism which replaced the modernist utopias based on idealistic anticipation for the arrival of a transcendent modernity. The “humanist spirit” was “not so much a substantive utopian imaginary as a tentative effort to hold open a space where such an imaginary [could] still arise” (McGrath 2008, 41). The humanist spirit, like the utopianism of the 1980s, played the role of discursively filling the void left by the dissolution of old ideologies.

At the center of the humanist spirit debates is a distinctive reaction to the rise of consumerist culture and the disintegration of a totalizing ideological field. However, many critics, particularly members of the “New Left,” a school of Marxist theorists rising to prominence on the academic stage in the early 1990s, were critical of the humanists’ capacity for critical analysis of the capitalist structures they claimed to reject. Wang Hui, a seminal member of the New Left, criticized the humanist spirit critics as lacking the conceptual framework with which to form a comprehensive critique of capital after the delegitimization of Marxism in China (Wang, 2003). For Wang, post-1989 China has completely conformed to the dictates of the market. In conformity with a Marxist theoretical positioning, Wang sees the creation of markets and the adoption of capitalist reform as not simply an economic phenomenon but a “social process [that]

ultimately seeks to use market rules to regulate all social life” (Wang 2003, 142). The erosion of a meaningful critical positioning is itself a by-product of increased marketization as it leads to the institutionalization of knowledge and the incorporation of the production of knowledge into the globalization process creating a different cultural and intellectual space than that which existed in the 1980s. Ultimately for Wang, the humanist spirit debates did not address the complex contemporary situation in which social life and state power are tightly linked to capital and market functions as China has been fully integrated into the world capitalist system. Rather, the humanist intellectuals have “confined their gaze to the level of morality” (Wang 2003, 147). By placing the terms of the discussion at the level of abstract morality, they are unable to adequately address and criticise the interconnectedness of capital, state and society.

Wang is critical of the humanist intellectuals’ tendency to conflate socialism with premodern traditionalism. Rather, Wang sees Chinese Marxism as itself an ideology of modernization opposed to capitalist modernization (Wang 2003, 148). Socialist movement is interpreted as the main characteristic of Chinese modernity which provides its own teleological historical perspective and worldview. The Chinese concept of modernization is thus inherently different from the West as it privileges values based on a content of socialist ideology, the only ideology that has provided a sufficient alternative to capitalist hegemony. Wang sees in the Chinese context the potential for an “antimodern theory of modernization” based on avoiding problems associated with Western capitalist

modernity and approaching modernity from a position of doubt and critique (Wang 2003, 150).

However, with the unfolding of the reform era came the embracing of a contemporary modernization stripped of Maoist idealism and antimodern characteristics. It was instead based on the ultimate goal of the convergence of the Chinese economy, society and culture with the contemporary global capitalist system. For New Left thinkers, the paucity of existing ideological frameworks in the face of global capitalism became increasingly evident. As Wang states, “Traditional socialism has not been able to resolve the internal crisis of modernity, and both Marxism and New Enlightenment thinking, as ideologies of modernization, are virtually devoid of force and unable to formulate appropriate approaches to contemporary world developments” (Wang 2003, 183). Rather than using past modernization experiments to position itself in opposition to Western modernization and create the opportunity for meaningful critical analysis, China had chosen to replicate Western models. For Wang, the unwillingness of many intellectuals to recognize the potential for critical positioning within the context of China’s own historical path toward modernization only supports ideological integration into a global consumerist culture.

Postmodernism in China

Another way in which the cultural field of reform era China was reconceptualised was in the debate over Chinese postmodernism. China’s shifting economic status after its emergence into the global capitalist sphere brought into

question its related positioning with regards to modernity and postmodernity. Following Fredric Jameson's lead, postmodernity is a term that has been used to refer to the cultural realities of late capitalism (Jameson 1984). The rise of a postmodern cultural consciousness has been associated with shifts in stages of capitalist production. However, the linear historical progression which characterized the experience of the West has not been shared by China, in which the experience of modernization is defined by multiplicity and overlapping modernities. As Sheldon Lu argues,

Contemporary China consists of multiple temporalities superimposed on one another; the premodern, the modern, and the postmodern coexist in the same space and at the same moment...Spatial coextension, rather than temporal succession, defines non-Western postmodernity. Hybridity, unevenness, nonsynchronicity, and pastiche are the main features of Chinese postmodernity (Lu 2001, 13).

Multinational capitalism arrived in the West as a result of capitalist evolution and the growth of a post-industrial economy. However, in China many aspects and characteristics of this third stage of capitalism exist without the same historical evolution. The modernization program introduced by Deng Xiaoping launched China onto the economic world stage and into a system with pre-existing structures and regulations. This allowed for economic transition at a rate that was impossible for the West who had to build up transnational networks along with their own national growth. Thus, in the case of China, a late capitalist economy

and democratized public sphere are no longer precursors to the emergence of a postmodern consciousness. Residual socialist economic structures exist alongside newly adopted capitalist structures. Transnational communication networks, commercial popular cultural production and globalized capital networks have changed the way Chinese people understand the world and their place in it. It is multiplicity that characterizes the contemporary cultural consciousness in China and postmodernism is included among these multiple world views.

Many scholars have used the term postsocialism as an alternative to postmodernism, one that is more appropriate to China's specific historical experience. However, often this term emphasizes the role of socialist ideology in contemporary Chinese society to the neglect of a full appreciation of China's integration into the global capitalist economy. Paul Pickowicz advocates that the term "postsocialism" be used to refer to not only an economic structure or an official ideology but a contemporary cultural reality (Pickowicz 1994). However, Pickowicz's postsocialist identity essentially revolves around a lack, that of "not socialist". Rather than analyzing the ideological diversity of the contemporary condition, Pickowicz situates his analysis in the past; it is memory and an understanding of what has been lost that is at the root of the collective conscious. This analysis is problematic as it seeks answers to a contemporary situation within a communist history that it is simultaneously recasting.

Conversely, for Zhang Xudong, "Chinese postmodernism" expresses the reconfiguration of collective experience according not only to recent socialist history, but to shifts in all areas of society in postsocialist China.

To this extent the “post-” in “Chinese postmodernism” refers not so much to a sense that something is over, but that something is finally ready to begin along with the breaking of all kinds of rigid epistemological paradigms, aesthetic canons, historical periodizations, geographical hierarchies, and institutional reifications. Chinese postmodernism as a social discourse can therefore be considered to be a revolt against the modernist and modernization ideology of the New Era (Zhang 2008, 136-137).

Zhang argues that the events at Tiananmen in 1989 were a turning point in which a distinctive cultural shift occurred within Chinese society. The Chinese postmodern is characterized not by the dissolution of modernist ideologies but by their intensification (Zhang 2008, 2). The developmentalist ideology of the 1980s which was ushered in by Deng’s reforms was only further radicalized after 1989 through the expansion of globalization, private ownership, free trade and integration into the world economy. For Zhang, postsocialism refers to the existence of socialist modes of production, social systems and symbolic orders within the context of a capitalist world market and ideological domination (Zhang 2008, 10). This creates a society of contradiction with mixed modes of production and value systems. These contradictions exist on many levels, both embracing and resisting capitalist economic structures and desiring to both hold on to and forget the socialist historical experience. Socialist and capitalist identities and

experiences are therefore deeply intertwined in the Chinese context and cannot be examined as two historically separate spheres.

Postsocialism in Jia Zhangke's Cinema

Cultural production plays an integral role in shaping social discourse, and film, with its capacity for both documentation and narrativization, is particularly effective at engaging in social analysis. Jia Zhangke's films and those of his contemporaries operate as shrewd commentaries on the nature of the social and economic transformation overtaking China at the turn of the century. In this way, these films are both influenced by and contribute to the wider intellectual and cultural debates of this period. Often set in locations that straddle the rural/urban divide, Jia's films offer an alternative view of the ways in which globalization is transforming both the physical and cultural landscape of China. By capturing these transitory spaces, these films act as historical documents to the immense changes effecting China while simultaneously scrutinizing the social upheaval that is the result of these changes.

In Jia's films, the local encounters the global in a collision that displays globalization as an unprecedented force that has penetrated even the most isolated areas of the world. Jia demonstrates the ways that transnational capitalism has negotiated new local/global relations as global capitalism both integrates with and contradicts postsocialist localities (Cui 2006, 107). Set in locations like Fenyang, the particularities of the local shine through, but the influence of the global is also made manifest. For example, *Xiao Wu* opens with a close-up shot of a matchbox

with the characters 山西 (Shanxi) written on it, held in the hand of the main character. This shot not only names the setting but foregrounds local space as a central feature of the film. This setting is a peripheral space, existing between urban and rural, a postsocialist geography where commercial culture exists alongside local traditional culture (Cui 2006, 109).

In *The World*, the local and global encounter in a much different setting, a theme park in Beijing exhibiting replicas of international landmarks. Here the global is put on display as a miniaturized landscape for the consumption of local tourists. However, the allure of these international attractions is contrasted with the personalized experiences of the migrant workers from rural areas of China and abroad that work as the tour guides and entertainers at the park. The manipulation and exploitation of these migrant workers along with the exaggerated commercialized vision of the international landscape provides a bleak picture of the deep divide between those who benefit from the spread of globalization and those who have been left behind. For Jia, displacement and dislocation are defining factors in the articulation of the local-global relationship (Cui 2006, 113).

Another means through which Jia explores the collision between the local and the global is through the media. Globalization has ushered in a new visual and mediated culture in China. Jia's films are saturated with commercial imagery, corporate logos and global popular culture references. These images operate as indexes of a global capitalist culture which has spread throughout China in the post-revolutionary period. Jia most acutely demonstrates the ways in which the social identities of the youth in China are deeply tied to global images and the

media. In *Unknown Pleasures* (人逍遥 , 2002), the main protagonists who have been marginalized by the economic changes in China often use media images as way to negotiate a new social space for themselves. Early in the film, Xiao Ji makes reference to the opening scene in *Pulp Fiction* in which two characters rob a restaurant. After falling short in their attempts to find employment elsewhere, Xiao Ji and Bin Bin decide to rob a bank, but their attempt to bring to life what they have seen in the films ends miserably as Bin Bin ends up arrested and Xiao Ji stranded on the side of the road after a failed escape attempt.

In *Xiao Wu*, Jia demonstrates the ways in which the media also operates as a tool for defining new social relations. Xiao Wu, another economically marginalized character who turns to crime for income, feels socially alienated due to his inability to integrate into society. After a falling out with his best friend, a successful businessman, Xiao Wu seeks out social engagement by renting a KTV room. It is in this space, with a female companion who he has also paid for, that Xiao Wu negotiates both social and sexual relations. Xiao Wu's inability to sing along with his partner to the Chinese pop songs on screen ultimately challenges his sense of masculinity and causes him to storm out and disengage. Furthermore, Xiao Wu's relationship is mediated not only by media but also by a commercial transaction, demonstrating how consumer culture redefines sexual relations (Cui 2006, 112).

By demonstrating the ways in which popular culture shapes the social and culture consciousness of the characters in his films, Jia also provides commentary

on the ways in which global commercial culture has been thoroughly integrated into the structure of local cultures. Jia's films are concerned with the global circulation of images in the formation of cultural and social identities and how the local is constructed in terms of a global imagination. However, Jia's analysis is not limited to the fear of the loss of tradition in the face of globalization. Rather, Jia also argues for popular culture as a means of promoting individual identity. Unlike the generation before that was raised on communist ideology and revolutionary propaganda, Jia's generation came of age at a time when commercial popular culture was thoroughly entrenched in the cultural psyche. In an interview with Michael Berry, Jia discusses the importance of popular music in shaping the cultural consciousness of his generation. Jia describes how popular music in the 1980's, such as the songs of Teresa Tang, began to emphasize individual emotion and experience over that of the collective.

So people of my generation were suddenly infected with this very personal, individual world. Before that, everything was collective: we lived in a collective dormitory, our parents worked as part of a collective, and our schools were structured in the same manner. In our educational system the individual belonged to the nation and was part of the collective. But in the eighties everything changed, and it all started with popular music (Berry, 2005, 190).

For Jia, popular culture is deeply tied to individual experience and identity in the post-Mao era. The role of popular culture in social-historical transformations is made most clear in *Platform*, where pop music is used as a marker of historical

change. The film follows a group of young performers who transition from revolutionary dramas to become a dance music troupe. Throughout the film music operates as an index of social change as Jia charts the trajectory of popular culture itself. What Jia makes manifest in *Platform* is the inextricable link between historical change, social identities and popular culture.

Jia's explorations of media and popular culture in his films can also be seen as one way in which his films participate in postmodern discourses. One fundamental feature of all realms of postmodernism is "the effacement in them of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture, and the emergence of new kinds of texts infused with the forms, categories, and contents of that very Culture Industry so passionately denounced by all the ideologues of the modern" (Jameson, 1984, 54). In the postmodern cultural consciousness the high and low are deeply intertwined and this shines through in Jia's films. Jia's persistent use of pop cultural references and his insistence on the importance of globalization in shaping the contemporary social situation demonstrate a rejection of the idea, like that put forth by the humanist spirit intellectuals, that commercial culture operates solely as a corrupting force. Conversely, Jia's films explore the multifaceted ways in which the forces of a globalized commercial culture both limit and expand possibilities in the twenty-first century.

Chapter 2: Cinematic Regimes of Realism

In the realm of artistic production, there exists not a single aesthetic realism but multiple realisms, each with a particular truth-claim that structures its relation to reality. Recent cinematic history in China has seen the transition between various forms of realism. The revolutionary period was dominated by a socialist realist aesthetic that formed its representations of reality on the basis of revealing its underlying ideological truth. In the post-Mao era, Fifth Generation filmmakers engaged in a historical recasting that looked to an idealized rural tradition as a way of reconceptualising the modern Chinese subject. The aesthetic realism in this period was based in a modernist tradition and operated as a critical tool of the modernization process. Finally, post-1989 filmmakers emerged as part of a new generation of artists in China that did not share the memory of the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath. Consequently, these new filmmakers engaged in neither the idealist speculation nor the historical re-evaluation of their predecessors. An emphatic product of the reform era, these films stepped away from representations of collective consciousness and moved towards a new individuality focusing on the everyday life of the new urban subject. In this chapter, I will examine the ways in which these different periods in China's cinematic history are guided by different regimes of realism, each with their own aesthetic and ideological principles.

Realism in Film

With the birth of film came a new art form that was thought to have an unprecedented capacity for the representation of reality. Film combined photographic realism with cinematic movement and, furthermore, was guided by visual codes which were designed to align with perceptions of reality. The resulting cinematic images were perceived by the spectator as more “life-like” than any previous artistic medium. The cinema was thus, from a very early stage, associated with realism (Willemen 1972). Realism as a defining term is shrouded in ambiguity and has been used to refer to a variety of factors such as the artist’s intentions, the spectator’s reception and to wider artistic movements. However, the common thread amongst these differing definitions of realist aesthetics is a basis in the relation between the referent and its representation. According to Paul Willemen,

The term realism applies to a mode of description/depiction, and therefore indicates a relation between two objects; what is being depicted and the result of the depiction. In other words, realism indicates a relation between a primary object (the referent in the real world) – and a secondary object in the fictional world (imitation, copy representation) (Willemen 1972, 38).

When defined as a set of relations, the term realism can be applied to a variety of different works. The notion of verisimilitude is often used in correlation with

realism, in which the representation is meant to accurately reproduce reality by conforming to accepted readings of reality. However, the very notion of “accepted readings” is deeply tied with subjectivity. As film as a medium developed historically, different techniques and styles were developed, each making claims to more accurately representing reality. Over time, filmmakers began to question the notion of an untouched profilmic event as a truer representation of the real and new techniques were formulated in editing, lighting and camera movement to manipulate the profilmic in the name of greater realism (Willemsen 1972, 39). The production process gained greater importance as filmmakers continued to expand the ways in which the profilmic could be modified thus mediating the link between reality and its representation.

One of the foremost scholars on realist cinema, Andre Bazin saw a movement towards greater realism in film as a movement away from techniques that would cause greater interference in the potential for reality to “lay itself bare” in front of the camera (Bazin 1967, 27). Montage is seen as one technique that mediates reality by imposing its own meaning. The meaning it creates is not contained objectively in the images themselves but rather is created through the ordering of these images, or as Bazin states, “the meaning is not in the image, it is in the shadow of the image projected by montage onto the field of consciousness of the spectator” (Bazin 1967, 26). The introduction of depth of field, or the long-take, meant that the objects and events appearing in front of the camera were able to unfold without the imposed meaning of image sequencing. The image is “evaluated not according to what it adds to reality but what it reveals of it” (Bazin

1967, 28). By preserving the “unity of image in space and time,” the camera reveals a reality more real than that presented by a meaning-laden montage sequence.

Bazin was concerned with minimizing the cinematic process through the least possible amount of intervention on the pro-filmic as this would allow the filmmaker to reveal an elemental reality. For Bazin, aesthetic devices are useful only in their ability to further this goal. However, this position fails to acknowledge the ways in which our perceptions of reality are mediated by the very discourses Bazin seeks to overcome. For Colin MacCabe, film can rather be seen as a set of discourses that constitute a certain reality and these contradictory discourses are mediated by specific film practices that create a certain ‘view’ or multiple ‘views’ of reality (MacCabe 1976, 11). MacCabe argues, “It is the contradictory positions available discursively to the subject, together with the positions made available by non-linguistic practices, that constitute the reality of the social situation” (MacCabe 1976, 12). For MacCabe, therefore, the role of the filmmaker is not to seek out an elemental real but rather to participate in the construction and modification of existing discourses.

Seen in this light, the long-take is not a unique practice with unparalleled access to an underlying reality but yet another filmic technique following its own ideological parameters. Bazin supports the immobile camera because it maintains a full visual field without the intervention of multiple viewing positions. This totalizing viewing position thus creates the impression of reality as it creates a perfect ‘point of vision’ for the spectator (MacCabe 1976, 13). All competing

viewing positions which have the potential to destroy the full visual field are effaced creating a single point of view. Bazin himself approvingly describes “the impassive lens” as “stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it” (Bazin 1867, 15). However, this single point of view, rather than being a neutral avenue through which reality is opened up, is itself ideologically charged as it is aligned with a certain discourse and perspective.

The relation between forms of expression and forms of content are critical in movements of realism. Rather than being ideologically neutral, artistic expression is deeply entwined with ideological and thus political discourses. When ideological needs change, so do the modes through which ideological content is expressed and new filmic languages emerge to represent these ideological shifts. Different realist movements have long been defined by a rejection of previous realist traditions and a claim that its practitioners concentrate on the inessential (Willemsen 1972, 37). However, when these value-judgements are set aside, we see that there is a common thread amongst all forms of realism based on the negotiation of the relationship between representation and referent within the context of existing contradictory discourses. As with film as a whole, the cinematic codes which structure different modes of realism have shifted throughout cinematic history in China.

Socialist Realism

With the rise of socialist realism in China came a new aesthetic form deeply enmeshed in social and political life. Art moved away from the individual

and personalized expression of the artist and became part of the building of a new reality based on the principles of socialist ideology. Revolutionary idealism sought to integrate art into the praxis of life and the artist was to work alongside the proletariat class in its effort to transform social and political institutions (Papazian 2009, 4). Socialist realism sought to influence social and cultural behaviour and by presenting the contemporary situation in China as one stage on the historically inevitable path towards a socialist utopia, it provided the means with which Chinese citizens could interpret the world around them.

Film played a particularly important role in this revolutionary vision as visual culture began to take precedence over literary culture in Communist China. Communist propaganda capitalized on the technology of visibility and the “fascistic power of the technologized spectacle” (Chow 1995, 35). Mass demonstrations, public speeches and political slogans and posters all contributed to a new visibility deeply entwined in political subjectivities. The act of beholding a spectacle in collectivity became itself an expression of national self-consciousness. This mediated culture promoted communalism and collective identities and repressed the subjective vision propagated by the May Fourth Movement. The image in Communist China was used as a tool to evoke the submission of the masses and recreate them as spectators who surrender their subjective vision and internalize the other-as-spectacle (Chow 1995, 32). The structural features of socialist realism were automatized and the constant barrage of images began to structure the cultural unconscious (Papazian 2009, 9).

The realist claims of the socialist aesthetic thus diverged greatly from the modernist realist claims that shaped both the May Fourth movement and Fifth Generation film. Socialist realism professed to depict not only the visible surface of reality but also its underlying ideological truth, based on class struggle and the historical progression towards a communist utopia. Films such as *The White Haired Girl* (百毛女, 1950) were meant not only to reflect the contemporary realities of communist China but also to lay bare the ideological ground on which these realities existed. These films thus provided both social analysis and social instruction and the truth-claims that they promoted were deeply entwined with the truth-claims of socialist ideology itself.

The Fifth Generation

As the reform era took hold in China, ideological state control of the culture industry gradually began to loosen and socialist realism, accordingly, began to fall out of favour. The artistic repression of the revolutionary years was lifted and artists in all realms of cultural production began producing innovative and exploratory work. In film, the graduates of the Beijing Film Academy in 1982, including Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige and Tian Zhuangzhuang, marked the emergence of a new generation of filmmakers whose style and subject matter differed greatly from their predecessors. The aesthetic of these films both draw on modernist traditions and are reminiscent of traditional Chinese painting. Utilizing the new freedoms granted them, Fifth Generation filmmakers use their films as

both a method of historical recasting and as commentary on the contemporary state of China.

Among the first faction of artists to emerge in the post-Mao era, the Fifth Generation were faced with the moral imperative of re-examining the indoctrination of the Mao-era. During this period, the tenets of Maoism were opened up for re-examination, along with the disastrous policies that arose from Maoist ideology such as the Cultural Revolution. The totalizing ideology that formerly structured the social field came under intense scrutiny leaving China in an ideological void. Bringing into question the ideological basis upon which Chinese communist society was structured meant also bringing into question the place of the Chinese subject in a nation under radical transformation. The central problems addressed in Fifth Generation films are those concerned with authenticity and cultural subjectivity and are characterized by a collective return to the past and re-evaluation of formative years during the Cultural Revolution.

The Fifth Generation thus embarked on a root-searching movement which turned towards the vast rural landscapes of Western China and the traditions of China's ethnic minorities as a way of re-establishing a post-Mao authentic Chinese identity (Chow 1995). Films such as *Yellow Earth* (黄土地, 1984) display images of a rural peasant life that form an ethnographic recasting of the meanings of China and what it means to be Chinese. For both Western and non-Western audiences, these images provide a picture of a timeless collective life alternative to that of the Communist narrative (Chow 1995, 39). The Chinese

revolutionary subject engaged in class struggle is thus replaced by the traditional rural peasant who is recast as a more authentic premodern Chinese subject.

However, Rey Chow argues this reconceptualization of Chinese cultural history, rather than revealing an essential Chineseness, in effect works to “other” China through the display of unfamiliar landscapes, cultural practices and livelihoods (Chow 1995, 43). Much as Western modernist literature is based on the primitivization of the non-West, in this case, the “third world” themselves seize upon the socially oppressed, women or subalterns, as symbols of the primitive in their narrative of modernization. As Chow states, “This ‘primitivism’ then becomes a way to point the moral of the humanity that is consciously ethnicized and nationalized, the humanity that is ‘Chinese’” (Chow 1995, 21). For many Chinese spectators, the images of rural peasant life in these films are as unfamiliar as to the non-Chinese viewer. Therefore, rather than indicating authenticity through recognition, these images alternatively provide a space upon which an imagined authentic identity can be projected. The primitive subject is exoticized while being simultaneously familiarized as a symbol of a common origin that defines the Chinese national identity, an imagined origin that is always created after the fact (Chow 1995, 23). In this way, Fifth Generation films participate in the trend within discourses on modernity that use cultural production to create modern national identities. Moreover, the Fifth Generation’s attempt to reaffirm humanity as Chineseness can be further understood within the context of the humanist spirit debates which were prevalent in China at the time.

Both turned towards transcendental values and an idealized Chinese subject as a means to re-evaluate the contemporary condition.

The stylistic techniques employed in these films are also informed by larger discourses on modernity. The realism of the Fifth Generation was based on a modernist aesthetic and was grounded in a movement in China during the 1980s towards the “modernization of cinematic language” (McGrath 2008, 84). These films are characterized by highly aestheticized scenes of vast rural panoramas and richly coloured landscapes. This new cinematic language differed greatly from the socialist realist aesthetic which was constructed on the basis of revolutionary ideological concerns. The silence and interpretive openness of the landscapes provide a stark contrast to the scenes of socialist realist films which are saturated with blatant political allusions. As Chow observes, “Nature in these films signifies a deliberate *emptying* that, when placed in the context of contemporary events, wrests apparatuses of representation from the kind of rhetorical coercion that typifies communist state discourse” (Chow 1995, 40). The Fifth Generation used sparse landscapes as a means of emptying the cinematic space of blatant political rhetoric thus subverting the ideologically determined socialist realism which came before. Like the films of the Sixth Generation, the cinematic landscapes of the Fifth Generation are more than backdrops for the films’ narrative but form an important part of the filmmakers’ analysis.

Fifth Generation films garnered much international recognition and acclaim and marked the beginning of the emergence of Chinese cinema onto the international art house scene. Fifth Generation filmmakers became persistent

contributors to international film festivals, the major directors taking prestigious awards such as the Golden Bear for Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* (红高粱 , 1987) in 1988 and the Palm d'Or for Chen Kaige's *Farewell my Concubine* (霸王别姬 , 1993) in 1993. These films appealed to the international film community as they both fit within the favoured modernist cinematic language, as well as, satisfied the desire for the emergence of a new "voice" in post-Mao China. In this way, Chinese film in the 1980s became integrated into wider commodity production, thus falling in line with the general movement towards global capitalist incorporation in China. According to Dai Jinhua, generational naming itself is a reflection of the Western film audience's desire for the new (Dai 2002). This desire both encourages filmmakers to push the boundaries in search of new forms of expression, while simultaneously forcing them to either fit into a generational label or fight against one. Contemporary Chinese film is thus inextricably linked with processes of commodification as labelling systems are not simply used to index a pre-existing cultural scene but are deeply entwined in cultural production itself. As Dai points out, "the discourse on "generations" is not configuring contemporary China's cultural map; it is in and of itself an important cultural scene" (Dai 2002, 73).

While engaging in a modernist visuality, these films, furthermore, engage in a politicization that is characteristic of modernity. The aesthetic modernity of cultural production in the 1980s operated not simply as a new stylistic choice, but also as a critical tool of modernization, its utopian vision grounded not in the

future but in the past (Wang 1996, 42). Through a recasting of China's history and turn towards an idealized rural tradition as the basis for Chinese subjectivity, these filmmakers provide an analysis of the contemporary condition of modernization. According to Wang Jing, modernism is not an aesthetic complement to social modernity but rather a means to intervene in the "progress" syndrome of modernization (Wang 1996, 42). In this way, though differing in form, Fifth Generation films share in the critical endeavours of the post-1989 realist film movement which followed.

Post-1989 Filmmakers

As the pace of capitalist reforms has increased in the post-1989 era, new avenues of production and distribution have been opened to filmmakers, which has caused a reconfiguration in the nature of the film industry. While Fifth Generation films were almost exclusively made within the state studio system, independent filmmaking gained a new prevalence in the 1990s as new technologies were made available and allowed for a dramatic reduction in film production costs. The use of digital video, nonprofessional actors and the rise of a documentary-style realism allowed many new filmmakers to produce films outside of the state studio system. As a result, they are able to deal with subject matter and employ certain stylistic devices which would otherwise be censored by the state studio system. This also meant, however, that many of the films of the Sixth Generation were banned in China and many filmmakers were targeted specifically by the state and banned from making films in China entirely.

The Sixth Generation thus embody a new kind of filmmaker based on an “underground” image. These filmmakers no longer identified as “high” class artists like the Fifth Generation graduates of the Beijing Film Academy. Rather, their identities were more closely associated with the subjects around which their films were based. Often referred to as “marginalized” for their independent status, the image these filmmakers exemplify is often indistinguishable from the characters in their films. Jia, for instance, comes from a lower-middle class family in a small town in Shanxi province and has first-hand experience as an urban migrant worker. Even dubbed the “migrant worker director” (Zhang 2007, 16), his own life parallels the story of his characters, caught up in chaos of rapid urbanization and a society in transition. His films are thus seen as communicative tools for marginalized subjects. Despite also graduating from the Beijing Film Academy, Jia is distinguished from his Fifth Generation predecessors who worked within the state studio system. These filmmakers thus established for themselves a different social identity and relation to their subject matter. The representational claims of these films gained a greater authenticity based on the perceived commonalities between artist and subject. Furthermore, the relation between the filmmaker and the profilmic became more personal as it was no longer mediated by an official film production system tied up with ideas of repression, censorship and the promotion of state ideology.

Post-1989 film embodies a new democratic form of film practice based on the dissemination of new digital technologies and the influence of the New Documentary Movement in China. New technologies have allowed for the rise of

an “amateur cinema” in which anyone can pick up a camera and document their experience. Everyday life thus becomes increasingly visible as the documentary method proliferates. Sixth Generation filmmakers, in this way, work towards a subjective reclaiming of reality in a period of massive social transformation. “Deployed with an experimental lens, the documentary method is instrumental in laying bare the oscillation between representation and actuality and in foregrounding the subject-object relation between the filmmaker and his or her subject matter so as to create a more intersubjective and democratic cinema” (Zhang 2007, 18).

The perception of authenticity of representation is further increased by the documentary-style realism employed by these filmmakers. This realist aesthetic differs substantially from that of socialist realism or the modernist realism of the Fifth Generation. The realism of these films is grounded in a spatio-temporal specificity and documentary aesthetic that positions the camera as witness to the unfolding of a relatively unaltered reality. These filmmakers move away from the more didactic position of Fifth Generation or socialist realist film to take a position as onlooker to the social change unfolding in front of the camera (Zhang 2007, 7). The creation of an impression of reality is based on an even greater sense of indexicality in the relation between filmmaker and pro-filmic and between the spectator and film images. There is a sense of the camera’s presence at the scene, a scene that is recognizable to the viewer and representative of the world in which the spectator lives. The documentary method thus creates “an aesthetic

grounded in social space and experience – contingent, immanent, improvisational and open-ended” (Zhang 2007, 19).

The films of the Sixth Generation are grounded in specificity rather than overarching grand narratives. These filmmakers aim to document individual experience and their stories are centered on the personal not the universal. The documentary method itself is tied to specificity as it links the profilmic to the particular and recognizable spaces of the contemporary Chinese landscape. Spatio-temporal specificity thus gains unprecedented representational access. As opposed to the sweeping modernist landscapes of the Fifth Generation, aesthetically stunning but removed from the life experience of most Chinese spectators, these films take place in concrete locations that bear distinct geographical identities and that are branded with social and historical traces.

Furthermore, the people appearing in these films are often members of marginalized groups that traditionally have been underrepresented. Sixth Generation filmmakers often use non-professional actors that frequently have similar life experience to the characters they depict or come from the same artistic communities as the filmmakers themselves. Han Sanming, the principle character in *Still Life*, appears in many of Jia’s films, using his real name and playing a coal miner which was his work before becoming an actor. The overlap between the lived experience of the actors and the characters they play creates an impression of a “lack of acting” and a greater authenticity of representation. The characters thus extend beyond the boundaries of the fictional narrative in which they were

created and attain a relation to reality that is beyond the grasp of traditionally trained professional actors.

The use of local dialects also undermines the traditional approach to representing a universal Chinese subject. State-sponsored film studios have long upheld the government language policy which displaces local dialects in favour of the standard Mandarin dialect. However, the use of different dialects in Sixth Generation films allows for the capturing of a more localized and genuine speech that further contributes to the expression of regional specificities. In Jia's films, all the actors retain their own dialects and are often reflective of the small towns in which the films take place. In this way, these films construct a cinematic form that "constitutes a particular social and epistemic space in which orality, performativity, and an irreducible specificity of personal and social experience are acknowledged, recorded and given aesthetic expression" (Zhang 2007, 20).

Another characteristic of Sixth Generation realism is the long-take, in which the immobile camera is left to capture a raw reality with the least possible amount of subjective or technological intervention. The profilmic events thus unfold according to "real" movement and time, unaltered by the will of the filmmaker. The long take contributes to a hyperrealist aesthetic and is a technique which foregrounds "the rawness and emotional charge of social experience while also revealing its often absurd or unjust causes or consequences" (Zhang 2007, 7). For Jason McGrath, postsocialist realism is therefore two-fold. On the one hand, it is reflected in the documentary-style techniques that make claims to capturing the postsocialist condition. On the other, these films participate in the tradition of

international art cinema, or what McGrath calls an “aestheticized long-take realism” (McGrath 2008, 82). These films thus contribute to both a specifically Chinese cultural discourse while simultaneously communicating through an international cinematic language.

This postsocialist realism differs greatly in its perceived ideological positioning. While socialist realism claims to reveal the ideological truth that configures the visible surface of reality, postsocialist realism rejects the notion of an ideologically structured reality. Rather, the realist claims of Sixth Generation filmmakers are based on the notion of revealing a crude, underlying reality by unmasking the ideological representations that distort it (McGrath 2008, 84). Postsocialist realism takes up a critical positioning without expounding an opposing ideology, it “rests on the belief that social contradictions are apparent in everyday life but elided in representation” (McGrath 2008, 85). By simply capturing unvarnished images of real people and spaces these films serve to unmask ideology. Through the documentation of the actual movements of everyday life, ideological rhetoric is stripped away and the reality of contemporary China is revealed. The realist aesthetic espoused by the Sixth Generation is based on an assertion of a more authentic connection to reality, one that is lacking in pre-existing modes of realism.

However, the Sixth Generation’s claim to ideological neutrality can itself be read as the underlying ideological principle upon which their representations of reality are based. The idea of presenting an image of reality that is “stripped down” or “laid bare” is based on the truth-claims of this specific representational form.

Documentary-style realism is based on the position of the camera as “witness” to a pre-existing, unaltered reality. This form of witness, however, is “mediated through the visual technologies used for making the films or embedded in the films as metacommentaries, which are deployed as resources for social critique, collective recovery, memory production, and reflections on the nature of cinematic representation itself” (Zhang 2007, 8). These films are not detached from the reality that appears before the lens, but rather are engaged in a mutually affective relationship with this reality. Postsocialist realism, like the realisms that came before, is thus also structured by explicit ideological principles that provide the basis upon which its social analysis is formed.

Chapter 3: Blurring the Boundaries of Cinematic Representation

Drawing a line between fiction and truth in artistic representation has always been a challenging and contentious task. The representational claims made by different art forms, as well as the material base of different mediums, contribute to their perceived connection to reality. The blurring of boundaries between traditional cinematic categories in Jia Zhangke's films demonstrates an embracing of ambiguity in his representations of reality. The subjectivity of the filmmaker plays an imperative role in both documentary and fiction films. In the case of Jia's work, it is not some impossible goal of absolute objectivity which is sought in his films; the question is not whether his films reveal some elemental "real" but rather how his films construct a powerful impression of reality through narrative and style. Jia's fiction films often correspond with the making of a documentary film, as was the case with both *In Public* (公共场所, 2001) and *Unknown Pleasures*, as well as *Still Life* and *Dong* (东, 2006). These films share settings, characters and stylistic techniques. The overlap between these films causes shifts between different levels of spectatorial consciousness and thus brings into question the basis upon which they are labelled "fiction" and "documentary." Furthermore, with the use of digital technologies, Jia incorporates surrealist images which intervene in his documentary-style realist aesthetic and challenge the claims made by this form of realism. In this chapter, I will explore how Jia transgresses conventional boundaries that delineate filmic categories, thus

creating an innovative film language that challenges the relation between representation and reality thus confronting the limits of cinematic representation itself.

Film and Indexicality

Film's claim to representing reality has widely been grounded in its status as an indexical medium. Theorists have often drawn on the relation of film to photography in making assertions about the indexical status of film. As discussed in the previous chapter, Bazin saw an essential bond between the photographic image and the object. For Bazin, the process of photography operated as a "transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction" (Bazin 1967, 14). It is the same reality that makes both the object and the photograph possible and "the photograph as such and the object in itself share a common being, after the fashion of a fingerprint" (Bazin 1967, 15). Here, Bazin makes reference to an existential bond between photograph and object that is the defining factor of the indexical sign. It is the trace or stain imprinted on film through reflected light that stands as proof of the existence of the object being captured and instils upon photography and film its privileged relation to reality. Unlike other art forms, such as painting, profilmic reality is a necessary condition for the creation of photographic images. As Roland Barthes argues, it is this required contact that separates photography's referent from other systems of representation.

I call "photographic referent" not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or sign refers but the

necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph...in Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there* (Barthes 1981, 76).

It is through the contact between the object and the film by way of light that photography operates as an index according to Peirce's system of signification. The index is characterized by its singularity and its mode of representation is based not on resemblance but on proximity.

However, the existential bond between sign and object is not the limit at which the photograph can be read as an indexical medium. Mary Ann Doane demonstrates that the photograph can be read according to Peirce's more complex definition of indexicality which includes the index of Diexis (Doane 2007). The index of Diexis is designated by Peirce to the demonstrative pronouns of language, including "I", "here" and most importantly for the photograph, "this". While both indices are defined by their singularity, there is a temporal immediacy in the index of Diexis that is absent from the index as trace. As an imprint created by a singular object at a moment in time, the trace remains past the moment of contact and thus carries with it the pastness of this event. The index of Diexis, however, "does exhaust itself in the moment of its implementation and is ineluctably linked to presence" (Doane 2007, 136). It is the pointing finger that signifies "this" in the present moment, its value as a sign existing only in the present, as its contact with its referent is only figurative.

The “this” of Diexis is present in film to the extent that it necessarily “presents” the spectator with an image. Furthermore, the image presented is offered by way of the camera lens which guides the spectator’s gaze, acting much like a pointing finger. In his films, Jia uses many stylistic techniques which emphasize the gesture of the pointing finger. Jia’s use of the long-take is one example of the viewing position of the camera dictating the gaze of the spectator. In the long-shot, characters are frequently moving in and out of frame. The sense of the camera’s subjectivity is further augmented when these shots linger past the moment of narrative action. For example, long after the characters have exited and the narrative action has ceased in *Still Life*, the camera often remains fixed on the hillsides of the Yangtze River; the gaze of the spectator, thus fixated on the landscape. The landscape itself we know is being submerged under water due to the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, and in this extended moment, the spectator is pulled from the smooth progression of the narrative and directed to look at “this”, a testimony to the disappearance of the Yangtze hillsides.

The spectator is not only directed by the index, but also plays a contributing role in establishing its validity as a sign. The index relies upon spectatorial knowledge of the process of creation in order to function as an indicator of its referent. According to Philip Rosen, Bazin, one of the most enthusiastic theorists of the photographic image’s indexical potential for capturing reality, ultimately interpreted objectivity as a subjective investment in the image. It is the relation between the objective and the subjective which Bazin examined, for “the ‘objective’ is always inflected by the ‘subjective,’ never available except

through the processes of the latter” (Rosen 1987, 9). The impression of an objective reality through film is therefore the result of a subjective projection. The special credibility of indexicality requires the prior knowledge of an informed spectator who is aware of how the image was produced – through a camera which had to be in the direct presence of the object – in order for the indexical sign to hold a meaningful relation to the object (Rosen 1987, 13). Jia’s films are shot on location and rely to a large degree on spectatorial recognition to create a greater impression of reality. The spectator is thus able to relate to the spaces in Jia’s films not only as places within the fictional narrative but as places which exist in the real world and which hold meaning within the spectator’s own life experience.

Cinematic Motion and Time

Although many theorists have focused on indexicality to differentiate film from other media, this notion has recently been brought into question. Film is granted its indexical status according to its relation to photography. It is the individual frame, a photographic image, which operates as an index to the profilmic referent. Yet film and photography are not synonymous mediums. The most significant difference between the two mediums is the addition of movement. In seeking an alternative to the indexical approach to cinema, Tom Gunning looks at cinematic motion as the primary marker of medium specificity (Gunning 2007). Gunning explores the phenomenological experience of watching movement through different kinds of spectatorial emotional and intellectual involvement.

The impression of reality created by film is derived from a sense of presence resulting from this increased involvement of the spectator.

Drawing on Christian Metz's analysis of cinematic motion, Gunning argues that movement is never a reproduction but "truly exists" on screen. In exploring the distinction between photography and film, Metz turns to Barthes concept of a "deliberation of time" in the photograph which, because it functions as an indexical trace, always carries with it a sense of pastness. Movement, however, is always perceived by the spectator as being present.

Because movement is never material but is *always* visual, to reproduce its appearance is to duplicate its reality. In truth, one cannot even "reproduce" a movement; one can only re-produce it in a second production belonging to the same order of reality, for the spectator, as the first (Metz 1991, 9).

It is this sense of presence that demands a different kind of spectatorial participation which bestows upon film the ability to create a unique impression of reality. When watching a moving image on screen, the spectator does not see a representation of movement but movement itself. At the level of perception, no difference exists between watching an object move on screen and watching the same object move in reality. The same kind of spectatorial investment is required when perceiving motion, on or off screen (Gunning 2007, 43). With cinematic motion as the basis for medium specificity, the impression of reality depends less on spectatorial knowledge than the participatory experience of spectatorship. Film

is, therefore, associated less with the referential pastness of the index than with the manifest presence evoked by the perception of movement.

Though filmic representation produces the spectatorial experience of presence, this does not negate film's role as historical document. The sense of presence evoked by motion exists simultaneously with the sense of pastness of the indexical trace. The spectator is aware that the movement on screen can be repeated again through later viewing and this experience of presence can thus be repeated. Furthermore, though movement creates a greater sense of reality, the moving objects are not thought to be actually present. Doane writes,

There is also a certain instability of the present tense in the cinema, as a result of its archivability and the consequent intrusion of historicity...It would be more accurate to say that photography and the cinema produce the sense of a present moment laden with historicity at the same time that they encourage a belief in our access to pure presence, instantaneity (Doane 2002, 104).

Thought of in this way, the experience of viewing film is thus an experience of multiple temporalities. The spectator experiences both a sense of presence through movement and a sense of the past through knowledge of the production process and repeatability of the film image. By animating the photographic image, a new sense of realism is brought to film, but the photographic processes used in the

production of film images keeps these images linked to pastness and historical documentation.

The layering of temporalities intrinsic to film as a medium is further augmented through Jia's approach to filmmaking. Jia's documentary style and use of video to shoot on location gives the viewer the sense of being a witness to what Zhang Zhen terms a "history of the present" (Zhang 2007, 18). The urban imagery in Jia's films of the debris of construction carries with it a social indexicality, recognizable to the Chinese viewer as icons of the contemporary state of the national landscape. "This cinema thus constructs a specific temporality that is constantly unfolding in the present, as both a symbiotic partner and a form of critique of the social to which it tries to give shape and meaning" (Zhang 2007, 3). The recording of spaces which exist in the here and now create a filmic language in the present tense. However, these are also spaces in a state of rapid transition. While existing in our present reality, these spaces are being demolished and rebuilt at a pace which film cannot match. Jia thus captures the presentness of social transformation through images of reality that almost immediately become part of the past. By recording a present in rapid transition Jia creates a representation of China in which the present and past exist simultaneously.

Documentary as Historiography

Documentary as a mode of filmmaking has long been linked to historiography, its representational claims separating it from its fictional counterpart and placing it within the realm of historical documentation. Bill

Nichols argues that despite the webs of signification on which both documentary and fictional narrative rely, there is a distinct difference between the two (Nichols 1991). Documentary's representational construct differs from fiction in that it is a claim to a representation of the "real" world and not a fictitious world. The essential difference lies in the repercussions of the events being filmed in the material world; documentary "touches" the outside world in a way that fiction does not. In a word, documentary's relation to the world is indexical: it makes direct reference to this world and these references have "real" repercussions.

Documentary offers access to a shared, historical construct. Instead of *a* world, we are offered access to *the* world. The world is where, at the extreme, issues of life and death are always at hand. History kills. Though our entry to the world is through webs of signification like language cultural practices, social rituals, political and economic systems, our relation to this world can also be direct and immediate...Material practices occur that are not entirely or totally discursive, even if their meanings and social value are (Nichols 1991, 109).

Documentaries differ, therefore, not in their constructedness as texts but in the nature of the representations they make. Documentary is linked to history; it asks its viewers to consider it not an imitation of the world but a representation of an historical reality.

Nichols categorizes documentary film as a “discourse of sobriety” and argues that documentary should be grouped with other nonfiction systems such as economics, politics, foreign policy and education which can effect action and alter the world itself (Nichols 1991, 3). These discourses of sobriety serve as vehicles of power and their relation to the real is direct through their ability to have an immediate impact on the outside world. Nichols attempts to separate documentary from other image-based media, like fiction film, whose representations are illusionistic and therefore lack a direct relation to reality.²

However, documentary can also be seen as not a strictly sober discourse but involving also the pleasure and fascination of film as spectacle. Elizabeth Cowie problematizes Nichols’ distinction between fiction film as erotics and documentary as ethics (Cowie 1999). The spectator of documentary desires both reality as knowledge and reality as spectacle. The documentary film presents the world as knowable and combines the pleasure of scopophilia, the desire to see, and epistophilia, the desire to know. The spectator is posited as a subject of knowledge and feels pleasure in the discovery and the unveiling of a narrative based on cause and effect. However, like Gunning’s detective cameras, the spectator also derives pleasure from seeing what is normally hidden or forbidden, a voyeuristic pleasure which has typically been associated with narrative film (Cowie 1999, 29). Furthermore, for Michael Renov, “the documentary gaze is

² In exploring the emergence of early hand-held cameras, Tom Gunning also reveals how the photographic apparatus has from the beginning been used as a vehicle of power. Early “detective cameras” created new relations between private and public as they allowed for the secret capturing of public images. Social discipline was enforced as the camera became “a panopticon of “publicity” acting out this fantasy of full-length plate-glass windows through photographic exposure and visibility” (Gunning 1999, 54). These early ventures in photography demonstrate the ways in which fantasies of knowledge and power are embodied within the apparatus itself.

constitutively multiform, embroiled with conscious motives and unconscious desires, driven by curiosity no more than by terror and fascination” (Renov 2004, 96). Though documentary images are tied to an argument and hold an indexical tie to reality which the images of fiction film do not, they still have the power to evoke a pleasure which goes beyond that of knowledge discovery. They appeal to a pleasure-seeking unconscious which has been thought to be outside the bounds of the sober discourses.

The interplay between objectivity and subjectivity further complicates documentary’s positioning in relation to reality and fiction. While documentaries cannot be seen as completely objective texts, the subjectivity they assert is inherently different from fiction film because of its representational claims. According to Nichols, subjectivity is asserted through argument rather than fictional creation. Nichols argues that “at the heart of documentary is less a *story* and its imaginary world than an *argument* about the historical world” (Nichols 1991, 111). Documentary always directs us back to an historical reality, even as it interprets this reality. Our view of the external world is still filtered through an expository agent and this external authority directs our view thereby imposing its own subjectivity and forcing the spectator into a passive viewing position. However, claims associated with this view differ from the mediated view of fictional narrative. The filmmaker, while asserting her argument, still claims to be in direct contact with the real world and it is this connection which is the basis for documentary’s truth-claim. In this sense, narrative maintains a metaphorical relation to the real whereas documentary makes truth-claims about it.

Jia's persistent tendency to allow the camera lens to seemingly roam freely is one technique employed which evokes a sense of the filmmaker's subjectivity. Jia himself never appears on screen and by remaining unidentified Jia consequently does not present himself as a personality to which the viewer can attach a subjective position. However, Jia's roaming camera does reveal a subjective gaze. In *Dong* there are several scenes in which the camera remains fixated on a certain individual or object while the narrative action continues to occur out of frame. At one point, the voice of Liu Xiaodong, the painter who is the subject of the documentary, can be heard off screen describing his painting technique to an unseen person. The camera, however, is focused on the young girl Liu just finished painting who is making a call on her cell phone. The scene of the girl seems to hold less relevance than the action which is occurring out of frame. The viewer thus becomes acutely aware that the filmmaker behind the camera has made the choice to remain focused on the girl and not on Liu, whose ideas and opinions are thought to be the focal point of the documentary.

Subjectivity and Contemporary Chinese Film

Jia belongs to a new generation of filmmakers who have embraced the subjective voice as a means of examining the "real" world. Yingjin Zhang has argued that in claiming to embrace objectivity, Chinese filmmakers have rather asserted a desire to reclaim subjectivity (Zhang 2006). What these filmmakers are trying to capture is a truth that pertains not to some outside reality but to subjective perception; it is an unofficial history that these filmmakers seek to

create from personal experience and memory. Through the assertion of subjectivity, these filmmakers subvert official History and in so doing come closer to a representation of a reality which they perceive as true. In their competition with official and commercial filmmakers in the representation of the real, it is individual subjectivity which these filmmakers affirm. In reference to a statement in support of the objectivity of film made by Lou Ye, Zhang writes:

I suggest that we take “My camera doesn’t lie” as a statement not so much about certain inherent truth content in Chinese independent film and video as about the new strategic positions independent directors have claimed for themselves with regard to truth, subjectivity, and audience (Zhang 2006, 40).

This new generation of independent filmmakers in China reject the grand historical narratives that structured the films of their Fifth Generation predecessors. As an alternative, these filmmakers use personal experience and storytelling to explore the meaning of China and being Chinese in the twenty-first century.

Accessibility to new technologies has led to a rise in amateur filmmaking which has changed the way life in contemporary China is being documented. Jia has been one of the largest supporters of this growing movement and has even been called “the Godfather of the Chinese DV documentary” (Wang 2005, 19). Amateur video provides the opportunity for new voices to be heard and alternative and marginalized histories to be documented. Yiman Wang argues that

amateur cinema possesses a certain “truth-value” as a result of its ability to unveil “certain aspects of reality unavailable elsewhere” (Wang 2005, 16). Amateur video emerges as an alternative to official cinema, which supports state ideology, and also to commercial cinema, which operates according to a capitalist logic. Both cinemas seek to hide the social problems and injustices that have resulted from rapid, one-sided economic reforms in China. Jia and other Sixth Generation filmmakers see in amateur video the means for the potential creation of a new unofficial, private and subversive discourse. Another prominent independent filmmaker and contemporary of Jia, Zhang Yang, has described DV documentary as “a democratizing ‘weapon’ that decentralizes the state-controlled film industry by allowing an ordinary person to express his/her outlook on the screen” (Wang 2005, 19).

Subjectivity has long played an important role in historiography in China, as demonstrated by Chris Berry’s examination of ‘scar films.’ (Berry 1995). ‘Scar films,’ which arose along with ‘scar literature’ as part of a movement of national self-examination in the late-1970’s, precede Fifth Generation films as the first significant departure from socialist realist cinema. Berry classifies these films as part of a “postsocialist historiography” which joins in the postmodern challenge to empiricist assumptions of an opposition between truth and fiction (Berry 1995, 88). The characters of these films assert a subjectivity which rejects the moral and political certainty of the characters of socialist realist films. These filmmakers use certain subjective devices such as voice-overs, flashbacks and fantasy sequences to offer the viewer a glimpse into the characters’ inner world (Berry 1995, 93). It

is through this ambiguous and private perspective of the individual that history is told. While employing a distinctly different cinematic style and approach, it is also through the stories and perspectives of individual characters that the experience of contemporary China is explored and recorded in Sixth Generation film.

For Berry, this form of personal story-telling has traditionally been embraced in Chinese historiography. While Anglo-Saxon empiricist ideology marks a clear line between fact and fiction, this line has been far more permeable in China. This is particularly true in politics where written historical discourse is often closely intertwined with present politics. The CCP has long supported the role of literature in the recording and interpretation of history and “there is no assumption that fiction does not represent truth; exactly the opposite is the case” (Berry 1995, 96). Fiction is seen as one of the most important transmitters of truth. This position is in keeping with recent postmodernist discourses which reject the idea of an objective history and acknowledge the role that the exercise of power plays in history as knowledge production. In their rejection of historical grand narratives, the Sixth Generation are also participating in this postsocialist re-examination of empiricist approaches to historiography.

Jia’s characteristic use of the long-take is one cinematic technique which questions the structures of grand narratives. In the long-take, cinematic time moves along with real time and is organized in accordance with life movement rather than dramatic need. According to Bazin, it is the long-take which allows for “unity in space and time” and returns to cinema a sense of the “ambiguity of

reality” (Bazin 1967, 37). In Jia’s films, the sweeping historical change of the grand narrative of reform-era China is replaced with actual inertia as lived experience (McGrath 2008, 153). Jia’s films concentrate on the people who exist on the margins of society, whose story is not often heard in the portrayal of reform-era China. For these characters, history is not represented as the smooth progression forward of the grand narrative but rather is marked by the ambivalence of personal memory.

Spectatorial Consciousness

Another strategy Jia uses to explore the relationship between documentary and fiction is to blur the boundary between different modes of spectatorial consciousness. In documentary, the indexical relationship extends beyond simply the relation between the camera and the object of the camera image; there is also an indexical relation between the profilmic and the existential world. This indexical relation is also structured by the subjective consciousness of the spectator. For Vivian Sobchack, documentary is not simply a cinematic object but a “particular subjective relation to an objective cinematic or televisual text” (Sobchack 1999, 241). Documentary is not only separated from other film by the nature of the text itself but also through the relation of the spectator to the text. The spectator assumes a specific mode of consciousness when viewing documentary which structures the viewing experience and determines the meaning of the cinematic images. Cinematic representation is, therefore, always modified by the spectator’s personal and cultural knowledge of the image and

how it relates to the spectator's world. The same image can appear in a fiction film as appears in a documentary but can be interpreted and understood in different ways.

We use our knowledge of the world to interpret the images on screen but documentary also requires a certain lack of knowledge, a gap which is its purpose to fill. Sobchack distinguishes between three types of films, the *film-souvenir* (or home video), documentary and fiction film (Sobchack 1999, 243). The spectator of the documentary interprets filmic images based on a partial knowledge which is in between the complete familiarity of the *film-souvenir* spectator and the spectator of the fiction film who relies entirely on the fictitious world to determine meaning. Moving from *film-souvenir* to fiction, the spectator becomes increasingly reliant on the screen to determine meaning and screen objects gain an increasingly intensified presence as the spectator's consciousness shifts from "a primarily constitutive engagement with the film image to a primarily nonconstitutive and 'submissive' engagement" (Sobchack 1999, 245). For example, an image of a woman on screen can be read either as my friend who evokes personal memories, as a woman that I understand as existing in the real world or as the character whom I know only through her relation within the particular fictional narrative.

However, it is possible for shifts of consciousness to occur within a single film. This can occur in a fiction film when the spectator's consciousness is diverted from the fictional narrative by the film's reference to the existential world. The spectator then enters into a documentary consciousness, both

dependent upon the screen for knowledge but also aware of an excess of existence not contained by it (Sobchack 1999, 246). When a filmmaker shoots on location, the appearance of real places within the space of the fictional narrative can cause such a shift in spectatorial consciousness. Jia's films are shot on location in the real spaces of China. The images on screen thus become not only scenes within the imaginary world of the fictitious narrative but also places which the spectator has obtained knowledge about outside the boundaries of that fiction. It is just that shift in consciousness based on outside knowledge that Jia actively seeks to elicit in order to achieve a greater impression of reality.

One way in which Jia obscures spectatorial consciousness is by replicating scenes in his fiction and documentary films. In one example from *Still Life*, Han Sanming stands from a crouching position and walks over to the water's edge where he stares off into the distance; the camera, following his gaze, lingers on the houses on the hillside of the Yangtze. Within the context of the fictional narrative, this scene can be understood as representing Han's search for his missing wife and the many places she could be hidden. It is also a picture of the areas which are soon to be demolished in preparation for the dam project, a disappearance which the film had been highlighting to this point. In *Dong*, however, this exact scene appears again and Han Sanming is no longer the fictional character in search of his wife, but is a real individual who has been posing for a portrait and stands from his crouching position to take a break and look out over the water. Though the scene is the same, both Han and his actions are understood in different ways according to the context of the film in which they

appear. Furthermore, a viewer of *Still Life* who had already seen *Dong* would recognize this scene and be pulled from her mode of consciousness within the fictional narrative. The viewer would be aware that this moment was captured as a “documentary moment” and therefore the actions were not scripted as part of a fiction but were the result of Han Sanming acting freely. In the documentary, Han is presumed to be acting on behalf of himself and not a fictional character and these actions are occurring in the real world and not a fictitious one. It is the knowledge of the spectator which draws the distinctions between the two scenes. Therefore, while labelling his films as “documentary” and “fiction” with the awareness that this will provoke a certain consciousness among viewers, Jia then toys with this distinction and with viewer consciousness by duplicating scenes in both films, intentionally blurring the boundaries between what can be perceived as reality and fiction and forcing the viewer to reconsider on what basis these distinctions are determined.

Ethics and Spectatorship

The spectator’s position in fiction and documentary can also be viewed differently from an ethical standpoint. The documentary viewer’s subjectivity in relation to the cinematic image is based on that image’s indexical relation to the world and consequently the viewer’s gaze is ethically charged. Nichols uses the term “axiographics” to refer to the way in which an ethics of representation is experienced in relation to space (Nichols 1991, 77). In documentary, it is generally assumed that the profilmic space would have existed and acted in

relatively the same way regardless of the presence of the camera. Of course, there are issues of documentary performance, but the profilmic is not contingent upon the camera as it is in fiction film. Therefore, intervention by the filmmaker into this existent world becomes an issue. The documentary attests not only to the filmmaker's perspective on the world, "but also to the ethical quality of that perspective and the argument behind it" (Nichols 1991, 80). By identifying with the gaze of the filmmaker's camera, the viewer is therefore also implicated in the ethics of this gaze.

Sobchack uses differences in filmic representations of death in documentary and fiction to demonstrate the associated ethical differences. The threat of death in fiction is contained by the iconic and symbolic signs which structure its representation. Documentary, however, is structured by the indexical sign and therefore carries with it the ethical problems and social taboos surrounding "real" death (Sobchack 1984, 286). Documentary therefore generally avoids the direct representation of death. For Sobchack, death exceeds visibility and this excess is made most obvious with the indexical image. The fiction film makes death visible, usually through the use of extreme violence or exaggerated movement and stillness (as the moment of death can only be visibly represented by the contrast between the animate and the inanimate body). The documentary viewer is aware of the existential bond between the images on screen and the world she inhabits. It is this awareness of the viewer which attaches ethical consequences to the images on screen. The conjunction of the two worlds "is finally dependent not merely upon codes of textual representation, but also upon

extra-textual knowledge and judgement, the viewer bears particular subjective responsibility for the action marked by – and in – his or her vision” (Sobchack 1984, 294). It is the spectator as subject that recognizes the indexical force of the documentary image and places upon that image ethical meaning.

Both *Still Life* and *Dong* approach the representation of death in different ways. In *Still Life*, the young boy who Han Sanming befriends at the boarding house, Mark, is killed under a pile of rubble at one of the demolition sites. The moment of his death is not shown but Han becomes aware of his death when the ring of his cell phone is traced back to the pile of rocks. He and the other workers then struggle desperately to move the rocks to uncover the body. This scene is followed by a scene in which Han mourns the death of his friend whose body lays covered by a sheet with a small vigil of incense. Though the body is never fully displayed for the camera, the moment of discovery of the death and the subsequent scenes of intimate mourning are extremely emotionally charged.

In *Dong*, Liu Xiaodong mourns the loss of a co-worker. Liu visits the family of his co-worker and brings with him a picture and gifts. There is a scene in which Liu and family members sit around the home and many, including Liu, are brought to tears. Unlike *Still Life*, the moment of death is not shown nor is a body shown on camera. While at several points there are close-up shots of the faces of family members crying, these emotional scenes occur in a group setting and are followed by laughing and joking as the gifts are opened. In *Still Life*, death is represented as immediate and the scene of Han mourning is of an extremely private nature. However, the immediacy of death, the display of the

covered body and the private moments of mourning are all understood within a fictional narrative framework. In a documentary, these scenes would be ethically charged and, accordingly, Jia approaches the representation of death in more discrete and ethically conscious way in *Dong*. Jia's differing approaches to the representation of death demonstrate an awareness of the different subjective relationships the spectator holds to the images of documentary and fiction film.

Indexicality and Digital Images

New digital technologies have brought into question indexicality as the primary indicator of cinematic specificity. The digital film image is no longer a permanent imprint of light on film, but exists rather as a numerical series of digitized information. It is this shift in the material base of the medium that Lev Manovich argues creates a crisis of film's identity (Manovich 1996). According to Manovich, when shot with digital video, live action footage is no different than any other computer generated image. It therefore becomes only one element among many in digital cinema, all of which are filtered through the same computer programs. Within these programs every frame of digitized footage can be manipulated manually. Through this manipulation, Manovich concludes, film, in a general sense, becomes a series of paintings, or in other words, animation (Manovich 1996, 6). When any frame of live footage can be manipulated, then every frame becomes questionable as a representation of the real; no trace of the material world is left so film loses its indexical status.

It is through this lack of materiality, according to Doane, that the digital brings into question the very notion of medium itself (Doane 2007). Drawing on Gombrich, Doane argues that a medium can not only be understood as a material means of aesthetic expression, but that the potential of a medium to give an impression of the real lies in materiality itself. It is the limitations of a medium, derived from its material production processes, which create a gap in the production of a complete illusion. This gap then provides the site at which the spectator is able to project her own perceptions thereby actively participating in the construction of an impression of the real (Doane 2007, 130).

The digital, on the other hand, is defined according to its unique immateriality. In the digital image, all material objects become encoded information, a series of 1s and 0s. It is this very immateriality that is part of the appeal of the digital as it protects it from the degradation and loss that plague other mediums. These renouncing of its material base places the digital image in opposition to the photographic image in its relation to its referent, for “the digital exudes a fantasy of immateriality, in contrast to the fantasy of referentiality of the indexical” (Doane 2007, 143). By maintaining an abstract relation to its material conditions of production, the digital also redefines its relation to its referent which, no longer based on a direct line of material contact, also becomes more abstract. Furthermore, as there is no longer a perceived material limitation, the gap for spectatorial projection is closed thereby preventing the spectator from participating in the construction of the impression of reality.

However, the notion of a radical break in representation brought about by digital technologies has not been universally accepted. Philip Rosen argues that indexicality is not synonymous with analog technologies and that the introduction of digital media is based more on overlaps with earlier modes of representation than on a radical break (Rosen 2001). This conceptual digital revolution in the regime of representation, termed by Rosen the “digital utopia,” is largely based on the digital image’s claim to limitless compositional malleability and the lack of necessity of origin in a profilmic reality. However, neither claim indicates a radical break. Though digital images allow for easier image manipulation at a much faster rate, various methods of manipulation have long been used in the creation of photographic images. Furthermore, though contact with the profilmic is not materially demonstrated as in the stain of light on film, digital imagery still often requires referential origins which take the form of light intensities encoded as numbers. Consequently, for Rosen digital film, while introducing important innovations in the medium, essentially remains under the ideological umbrella that structured the photographic technologies that preceded it.

Surrealist Interventions

Beginning with *The World*, Jia has used digital film in the production of all of his most recent films. Like other Sixth Generation filmmakers, digital technologies have allowed Jia to shoot high quality images on location. However, Jia also uses digital technologies to manipulate these images and incorporate digital graphics and animation sequences in his films. For example, there are two

scenes in *Still Life* in which digital imagery impedes upon Jia's typically realist aesthetic. The first is the transition shot when the narrative shifts from Sanming's story and we are introduced to Shen Hong. The scene begins with Sanming standing at the edge of a pier overlooking the river. As he begins to walk, the camera follows him then moves ahead lingering on the lush riverside hills. A light appears in the sky and takes the shape of a flying object which then shoots across the sky and into the next shot where the camera follows it, along with Shen Hong. This UFO-type object is visible within the diegesis but is, to the spectator, clearly a digital image created outside of the filmed image. In the second instance, Shen walks out onto the apartment balcony to hang a piece of clothing on the line. In the background stands a strangely sculptured building which spontaneously takes off like a rocket into the sky. Unlike the first scene, Shen walks off before this event occurs so we are unsure as to whether the "rocket" is visible within the narrative.

The incongruity of these digital images raises questions regarding the meaning of the realism Jia employs in his films. These digital images seem to interrupt the documentary-style realism which is characteristic of Jia's films. As discussed above, this type of realism is based on an indexical relationship between film images and an outside reality and the impression that this reality has been recorded with the least possible intervention. These digital intrusions, however, seem to undermine the type of realist aesthetic Jia is trying to create and thus undermine the claims to a connection with reality that the film as a whole makes. The UFO-type object that appears in *Still Life* can be read as a stylistic

tool meant to separate one story from another within the larger narrative. By making visual reference to the fictional narrative, Jia problematizes the relationship between reality and fiction. While the spectator is conscious that the film is structured according to a fictional narrative, the documentary style images and recognizable spaces that appear on screen are thought to contain a “reality” that exists outside of this narrative. The digital UFO-image acts as a filmic intervention into this perceived “reality” and therefore brings into question the relationship of these images to an outside reality. By making the power for manipulation manifest in one image, Jia forces the spectator to reconsider all previous images.

In *The World*, Jia uses animation sequences to interject in the narrative of the film. The first animation sequence appears after a scene in which Tao and Taisheng sit in an airplane which is no longer operational but used as a model attraction at the theme park. Over the speakers, an automated voice announces that the plane was formerly used for international flights from China. Tao again rebuffs Taisheng’s sexual advances and he accuses her of not loving him. He announces that he is leaving and she asks to come along because, as she says, “being here all day will turn me into a ghost.” At this point the film cuts to an animated Tao, in the same flight attendant uniform, flying freely beyond the borders of the theme park, above the industrial greys below and up into the blue sky until she is out of sight. This animated intervention implies that computer technology can challenge the confinement of real life and bring the illusion of freedom (Cui 2006, 115). Here, Jia uses surrealist visuals that break with the

realist aesthetic as a means of demonstrating the impossibility of escape for these migrant workers.

Like the UFO in *Still Life*, Jia exceeds the visual codes which have structured the film until this point thus bringing into questions the limitations of these codes. Jia fully embraces the digital utopian ideal of endless visual possibilities as a means to move beyond the fiction/truth dichotomy. In *The World*, “desires, frustrations, and sexual relations entrapped in cinematic space find freedom in the world of animation” (Cui 2006, 116). Jia exceeds the boundaries of his representational form and, in so doing, makes a gesture to the ways in which reality can also exceed representation. These surrealist interventions are particularly spectacular when contrasted with Jia’s long-take realism. As discussed above, the long-take is a cinematic tool thought to respect the “unity of the event” and to conform cinematic time to real time. By incorporating surrealist imagery, Jia creates a rupture in this unity (Zhang 2007, 18). Rather than smoothing over potential cracks in his particular realist aesthetic, Jia chooses to augment these breaks, thereby challenging the idea of an absolute representational form.

Conclusion

Jia's films address the current situation in China through subject matter and the documentation of a society in transition. However, the specific filmic language the Jia employs reveals a more multifaceted meditation on the nature of the contemporary condition and the inherent contradictions that define the cultural logic in twenty-first century China. By challenging the underlying assumptions that shape film as a medium itself, Jia also challenges the nature of the reality that film claims to represent. The rapid pace of marketization in China has caused confusion over what can be considered authentic and what is an illusory fabrication of the market. As McGrath observes, "In some very basic sense the 'reality' of postsocialist modernity lies not in a 'real' life condition that simply belies the illusions of global capitalism, nor in the utopian consumer imaginary of the contemporary mainstream media discourse in China – but rather precisely in the gulf between the two" (McGrath 2008, 223). The blurring of boundaries in Jia's films mimic the blurring of boundaries on many fronts in the process of dramatic reform which has gripped China in the past four decades: between capitalism and socialism, tradition and modernity, the nation and the individual.

China's drive towards modernization is marked by an unevenness of development in which contradictory elements exist alongside one another. Jia explores the contradictions of capitalist modernization through the subject matter of his films. Jia's films are located in marginal spaces that exist on the urban/rural divide. Cities like Fenyang and Datong have undergone rapid change due to the

developmentalist policies of the reform era. The physical landscapes of these spaces are characterized by the rubble of demolition and construction as entire cities undergo complete conversions to keep pace with rapid modernization. Not yet glimmering urban centers like Shanghai, nor agricultural rural villages, Jia's landscapes exist in a transitory state. Furthermore, it is in these places where the global and the local most visibly intersect. Traditional shops are littered with corporate logos causing a jarring juxtaposition and demonstrating the speed at which global capitalist imagery spreads.

The characters who inhabit Jia's films also reveal the social contradictions which are part of the capitalist modernization process. These marginalized youth demonstrate the gap between the promises of the reform era and the lived realities of the Chinese people. Unemployed and disillusioned, these youth strive to find a space for themselves in a society in transition. Furthermore, while they have not benefited economically from the modernization process, these characters' world view is increasingly mediated by a consumerist logic. These characters are thus at a double disadvantage; they are unable to carve out a space for themselves in the new economy while material possession and consumer power become increasingly important in navigating their social interactions. Jia demonstrates how capitalist desire has been thoroughly integrated into the national psyche while the promises of capitalist abundance have for many remained elusive.

However, it is not only through the content of Jia's films that traditional binaries are challenged, but also through the specific cinematic codes that Jia employs. Jia problematizes traditional cinematic categories thus bringing into

question the nature of the relationship between filmic representation and reality. Jia employs a documentary-style realism similar to many of his contemporaries in the post-1989 era. This form of realism makes a representational claim based on an indexical relationship between the film image and its referent. The documentary aesthetic, created through shooting on location and the use of handheld cameras and nonprofessional actors, creates an impression of a more direct relation between the filmmaker and the subject matter. Furthermore, the spectator perceives a profilmic space that is relatively unaltered and thus the impression of a “reality” that exists outside the frame.

However, Jia also uses certain filmic techniques that seem to contradict this realist aesthetic. Jia’s camera lens displays a subjective gaze which can confuse the seemingly objective claims made by his documentary aesthetic. Jia’s camera often remains immobile while narrative action proceeds out of frame giving the spectator a sense of the dictatorial nature of the camera lens. Moreover, Jia duplicates exact shots and uses the same characters in both his documentary and fiction films. This overlap causes a shift in spectatorial consciousness as the viewer is forced to reconsider how the same images can be perceived differently depending on the representational claims made by the filmmaker. Finally, Jia uses digital technologies to intervene in his realist aesthetic with surrealist imagery. These images exceed the boundaries of Jia’s representational form thus bringing into question the nature of these boundaries. Jia consistently points back to the fictive element of his films, refusing to smooth over the cracks which may impede upon the creation of a complete illusion of reality. Rather, it is through

emphasizing these cracks that Jia seeks to demonstrate the complexity of interpretation.

Jia's interrogation of the relationship between representation and reality is more than an aesthetic exercise. It is through this very interrogation that Jia also examines the experience of postsocialism in China. Much like the experiences of many Chinese citizens in the reform era, Jia's picture of reality is marked by contradiction. Jia does not present a picture of China that is fully realised and absolute in its representational positioning. Conversely, Jia formulates a filmic image that encourages interpretation and the engagement of the spectator. Unlike socialist realist film, in which ideological overdetermination closes images to interpretive meaning, Jia constantly intervenes in spectators' assumptions and opens the door to re-evaluation. Through the use of this original film language which brings into question traditional cinematic categories and delineations, Jia is able to problematize larger social contradictions and present to the viewer a particularly multifaceted vision of reality in twenty-first century China.

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2000. *Platform* (站台)
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2004. *The World* (世界)
2006. *Still Life* (三峡好人)
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