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Independent Chinese Cinema: Filming in the “Space of the People”

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*In Public* in My Own Words

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# In Public in My Own Words

JIA ZHANGKE

Last year I obtained a subsidy from the Jeonju Film Festival's "Digital Short Films by Three Filmmakers" programme. Having received it, I initially did not know what sort of film I wanted to make. And then I suddenly thought of Datong. For me, Datong is a city of legend. Anyone from Shanxi will tell you that Datong is a particularly immoral, terrifying place. So I wanted to go and take a look. Furthermore, there was a legend at that time, which particularly attracted me, according to which Datong was supposed to be moved: as the coal mines there had already been picked empty, the miners were all out of work, and it was just the time of the "great western development" policy, so people said all the coal miners would be moved to Xinjiang to work in oil drilling. The legend went that everyone there was currently living it up while they could, and even in ordinary restaurants you had to reserve a table half an hour in advance. Datong and my hometown are at two ends of a diagonal; on a cultural level, it was closer to Hohhot and Zhangjiakou, while Taiyuan was really too remote.<sup>(1)</sup> And to top it all off, this was a city of former grandeur on the decline, with historic cultural sites attesting to its ancient past.

I went there, my mind filled with fantasies. When I arrived, I became extremely excited, because it was exactly as I had imagined it. The bits and pieces of hearsay were quite similar to what I saw, the only difference being that the rumours were already quite outdated. This is how I became attracted to the city. At first sight, I felt this place was extremely erotic; looking back now, it was maybe because the people populating that space were all extremely excited, full of desires, bursting with life within a sealed-off space.

I did not immediately focus on public space; initially I even wanted to conduct interviews, because I had a friend running a sauna where a lot of people would spend the night, and I thought of interviewing those people who didn't go home. Then I abandoned this idea, because I felt that I didn't need people to tell me things, nor did I need to talk to them; I abandoned all language, observing their attitude was quite sufficient. This is also the reason why the film has no subtitles: you don't need to hear clearly what people are saying, their voices are part of the environment, what they say is not important, what is important is what they look like.

Then, when I slowly began to immerse myself in shooting, I found a kind of atmosphere. There is a sentence by Antonioni that I particularly like, when he says that when you enter a space, you must begin by soaking yourself in it for ten minutes, listening to what the space is telling you; then you can have a dialogue with it. This has probably always been one of the tenets of my



A scene from *In Public*: "a public bus, after it had been discarded, was remade into a restaurant; in the waiting hall of a bus station, you could play billiards in the room in front of the ticket counter; behind a curtain it became a dancing hall; it was divided into three spaces, fulfilling three distinct functions."

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creative work: it is only when I stand in the space of the real situation that I know how to shoot a scene, and this is also how I compose my storyboard, so space is really extremely helpful to me. In a space, you can find something, get a feeling for it that you can rely on.

I filmed many spaces. The train station, the bus station, a waiting room, a dance hall, a karaoke bar, a billiard hall, an ice-skating rink, a teahouse... During the editing, because of the time limitations, I had no choice but to cut out many things. In these spaces, I found a kind of rhythm, a kind of sequence: many of these spaces were related to travel, so I selected the things that were best suited to this thread.

The atmosphere of a space is itself an important direction; another important aspect is the links between spaces. I found it interesting to observe how the spaces of the past and of the present were superimposed. For example, a public bus, after it had been discarded, was remade into a restaurant; in the waiting hall of a bus station, you could play billiards in the room in front of the ticket counter; behind a curtain it became a dancing hall; it was divided into three spaces, fulfilling three distinct functions, just as in the superposition of identical paintings in contemporary art; and after observing the superposition of spaces, I discerned a deep and complex social reality.

This is how this film became more and more abstract, as I took out any elements of plot or drama. At the end, I was left with those situations, those details. What I hope will attract the audi-

1. A play on words: Taiyuan is pronounced like "too far" (*tai yuan*). Jia's hometown of Fenyang is closer to Taiyuan, while Datong is less "remote." (Translator's note)

A woman rushes into view  
at a bus stop: a scene from *In Public*.  
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ence in the end are those faces, those characters.

This was the first time I filmed using DV. In practice, the way DV works was not exactly as I had imagined it. I originally thought it would allow me to film some very lifelike scenes, but in the event I found that its most precious attribute was that it could film even abstract objects. Just as most people walk along a river according to a certain sequence, the advantage of DV is that you can wade in, but you can also keep an objective distance with it, following its rhythm, its pulse, watching it attentively while you progress, which allows you to conduct an ideal observation.

We had a very small team: a cameraman, a sound engineer, the producer, and one car. In the morning we would immediately start driving around, and just shoot whatever we saw, in a very relaxed way, without any preparation, in an exploratory way, as if we were strolling around. I think this is the kind of freedom DV gave us. Cinema is an industry, and making a film is a job with meticulous planning; independent production also stems from the wish to reduce as much as possible the constraints and fetters imposed by the industry. These constraints are not only the pressure imposed by the producer, or the control of film censorship, but the film-making method itself is a sort of norm, and DV gave us the pleasure of freedom from the industry. When we filmed the bus stop, our local guide had just taken us to a coal mine to shoot a workers' club. After we came out, at the place you see in the film, there just happened to be some people waiting for the bus. The sun was beginning to set, and I suddenly had the feeling I had hit my target. I filmed this place, and kept filming, filming, filming all sorts of things. When I filmed the old man, I was already very satisfied. He was very dignified, and I kept filming him patiently. When my lens followed him onto the bus, suddenly a woman rushed in, and my sound engineer later said I had begun to tremble at this point. When I observed her, the backdrop was a very ordinary area of workers' living quarters; I suddenly had an almost religious feeling, and I kept filming. However, then another man suddenly came into the picture – I don't know what sort of connection they had – and the two of them left. During this whole sequence, I felt that every minute was like a gift from God.

This was also made possible by the way we worked. I was able to spend a whole afternoon there just filming. But if I had been using film, it would not really have been possible to catch these things. If you need to think about the ratio of film you are using, you might as well just leave. But now I can film entirely as I want, because the cost of working as I wish is very low.

But DV also has many technical limitations. I was using a Sony PD 150 camera. I am most bothered by its focus problem; it has no graduations, so it runs off focus easily, and you need to pay

attention every second. Also, when you are filming outside scenes, the colours are terrible in strong sunlight, and the depth is also not very good. If you meet any shiny line, especially a metallic horizontal line, because the waveforms are different, it will flash, and the picture won't look very stable. I once wrote an article called "The Age of Amateur Cinema is About to Return." After it was published, everyone discussed this problem, but I think some misunderstanding occurred in the discussion. What I meant was a type of amateur spirit as opposed to a certain type of stale filmmaking, especially within the system. But with regard to the films themselves, our demands should be extremely high. The images we can capture on DV definitely represent a revolutionary, subversive step forward, but gaining easier access to the right to film doesn't mean an author should treat it lightly, or fail to treasure it.

In 1995, I shot a documentary called "One Day, in Beijing," which I never edited. But when I reverted to documentary after making two feature films, I discovered I had developed a method. Because when you pick up the camera and begin shooting, this task itself forces you to experience spaces, people, and events that you have no opportunity to experience otherwise. I believe a director slowly becomes less self-confident, because being less self-confident does not translate into filming badly; on the contrary, when you are depicting someone or something, you experience doubts: is this what the person is thinking? Are this person's values, questions, ways of dealing with problems really like this? If I remain in a certain environment, I can completely put myself in someone else's position to depict Xiao Wu, to depict the song-and-dance troupe, but after leaving them for a while, I can no longer be sure, because I've already become unfamiliar with their lives. Documentary can help a director come out of this state of mind. When I feel that my life is being changed more and more, that my desire for knowledge is becoming weaker and weaker, that the resources of my life are becoming narrower and narrower, shooting a documentary revives my experience of life, as if my blood was beginning to circulate again after my arteries had been blocked for a long time. Because I am once again able, by putting myself in their shoes, to seek a basis for my characters, I have once again returned to the set of ordinary life and drawn the vital energy from it. •

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• Translated by Sebastian Veg