



Fictional Truth and Digital Reality

Jean-Michel Frodon



Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/2203>

DOI : 10.4000/chinaperspectives.2203

ISSN : 1996-4617

Éditeur

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 15 septembre 2007

ISSN : 2070-3449

Référence électronique

Jean-Michel Frodon, « Fictional Truth and Digital Reality », *China Perspectives* [En ligne], 2007/3 | 2007, mis en ligne le 09 avril 2008, consulté le 28 octobre 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/2203> ; DOI : 10.4000/chinaperspectives.2203

© All rights reserved

Fictional Truth and Digital Reality

JEAN-MICHEL FRODON

I believe that the discussion of fiction and documentary in recent Chinese films is particularly timely, as we are dealing with new experiences, which both reformulate old questions and bring up new ones. Some of these questions are internal to cinema, some others relate to our lives today in a more general approach. I belong to a critical tradition which originated in the *Cahiers du cinéma*, and is recalled in Jean-Luc Godard's assertion that all documentary cinema has a fictional approach and all fiction cinema has a documentary part. This is actually easy to understand, though often denied. Cinema is based on recording of actual physical "objects", including bodies, faces, light, etc. Therefore it documents these objects, whatever fictional use is made of them. And on the other hand, no documentary is "pure" recording of reality, it always depends on choices, which are ways to "tell the story". Even video surveillance in a shopping mall needs to choose angles, lenses, frames, etc. The art of filmmaking is always the art of specific combinations of these two horizons. Never a pure fiction, never a pure reproduction of reality.

In modern Chinese cinema, the first renewal did not expect much from recording everyday reality. The so called Fifth Generation, while it aimed to address what had been happening and was happening in its times, the 1980's, emphasised a much more stylised approach, referring mostly to Chinese traditional plastic art. But at the same time, filmmakers in Taiwan, and specially Hou Hsiao-hsien, experimenting with a much more complex combination of Chinese culture, Taiwanese specific cultural backgrounds and time and space cinematic recording, beginning with *Boys from Fengkuei* in 1983. It was only at the very beginning of the 1990's (which also means after the Tiananmen Square events), that fiction and documentary clearly merged in contemporary Chinese cinema to acknowledge the reality of everyday life in China. In 1990, the fiction *Mama* by Zhang Yuan and the documentary *Bumming in Beijing* by Wu Wen-guang could be seen as milestones in this process. Then started a new era in Chinese cinema aesthetics, which combines a strong storytelling ambition and

"deep" approach of the real daily life of the Chinese people. I am speaking here mostly of what is regarded as "fiction films", among which Jia Zhang-ke's works, since *Xiao Wu* (1998), have become the major reference. They massively use "documentary-like" images, which means: apparently not well designed, with minimum additional light, shooting in the streets and real interiors, and also documentary-like sounds, which incorporates everyday noises and popular music and uses dialogues which, though they may be carefully written, as well as the image may be carefully controlled, attempt to be as close as possible to reality.

Clearly opposed to the aesthetics of the previous generation, this cinema is also mostly situated in large cities, while the Fifth generation preferred the country. This new aesthetics clearly contains a flavour of protest, in the sense that it records mostly what makes life difficult and social relations unfair for most inhabitants of the country. This phenomenon is not Chinese in itself. As soon as there is a realistic approach of contemporary life, with the specific inner strength of the recording of physical facts, the way in which the world as it is is viewed becomes more critical. This happens everywhere, whether in Europe, in the United States or elsewhere, provided there is no such thing as what I would call an *ideological script* preceding the making of the film. There may be, and there is actually, a script. But what I call "ideological script" here is the existence, even prior to the writing of a specific script, of "another story," a larger story to be told, and which determines the actual script. This ideological script is efficient for fiction as well as for documentary, for which one can find "real" persons and situations as illustrations, and shoot truly heroic workers, soldiers or sportsmen. The men and women can play their own parts, they are not for real, they are illustrations of what came before the film: the discourse. This is not the art of cinema but its enslavement.

Does that mean that cinema has to describe horrible situations to be true to itself? To a certain extent, the an-

A woman misses the bus in
In Public by Jia Zhangke

swer might be yes, in the sense that, insofar as this world is doomed with poverty, injustice and violence, cinema becomes itself only insofar as it acknowledges it. But we all know this is not what is constantly experienced, and films that would only describe the ugliness of this world would be as false, and as predetermined by what I have called an “ideological script” as the myth-building fiction or documentary delivered by all official powers, including Hollywood of course. The aesthetics of the new everyday-life Chinese cinema is, on the contrary, daringly willing to welcome any beauty in the real world: a landscape, a baby face, a girl’s smile, a sunray, an instant of grace, a real emotion shared by two human beings. These beauties, which are most of the time short moments, are actually so much more beautiful as they appear in such a context.

Given the economic and political situation in China, this movement has naturally found its most appropriate tools in Digital video, its cheapness, flexibility and lightness. But in reality it predates Digital video. The 1990’s so called “6th Generation” movies were shot in 16 mm, sometimes 35mm, or analogical video. It is a general truth that technical innovations do not come before aesthetic change, but respond to it, or interact with it in more complex ways. In the same way as it has been wrongly said that lighter cameras, more sensitive stocks and direct sound created the French New Wave: all the first French New Wave films (Truffaut’s *400 Blows*, Resnais’ *Hiroshima my Love*, Godard’s *Breathless*, Chabrol’s *Le Beau Serge*, etc.) were shot with traditional material (and some kitchen-sink creativity). But they were shot in a way that anticipated these new tools, which were actually on their way. It seems to me the same could be said about this contemporary Chinese cinema which crosses borders between fiction and documentary.

These directors anticipated what the Digital image would provide. Nonetheless, when it appeared, it gave them something which was already expected, but which became much easier to access. What then did Digital Video specifically give to these directors? My main answer would be: *time*. And I would now like to emphasize two different uses of this time in two major films from this context, *In Public* by Jia Zhang-ke and *West of Tracks (Tiexi Qu)* by Wang Bing, since I’d say they do not use the time offered by Digital Video in the same way. But both these ways—and there are potentially many others—relate to fiction, though both films are usu-



ally regarded as documentaries, although Jia is mostly known as a fiction director, and Wang Bing, even if internationally recognized thanks to his documentary work, is willing to direct fiction films as well. I must add that I will not, today, make a difference between HD video and small DV cameras, though this difference does have its own meaning, since they have in common this time-related new standard.

Video offers Jia Zhang-ke the possibility to *wait*. With these techniques, he can stay somewhere a long time, waiting for a train or a bus to arrive, exactly as the people he is filming do. And through this identical situation, shared by the director and those in front of his camera, these people become characters, in the sense of fictional characters. Of course the fictions they would belong to won’t be told, which is even better. It opens space for an infinity of potential fictions. Each of us have a few among them in our own mind, and they are different each time. These “potentially fictional figures” are not separated from what they “really” are, woman going to work, family waiting for a relative at the station, soldier on leave, etc. This is what is so beautiful and moving in Jia’s films: these men and women are related with potential storytelling, beautiful or horrible stories, adventures, melodrama, etc. as part of real life, of our daily existence.

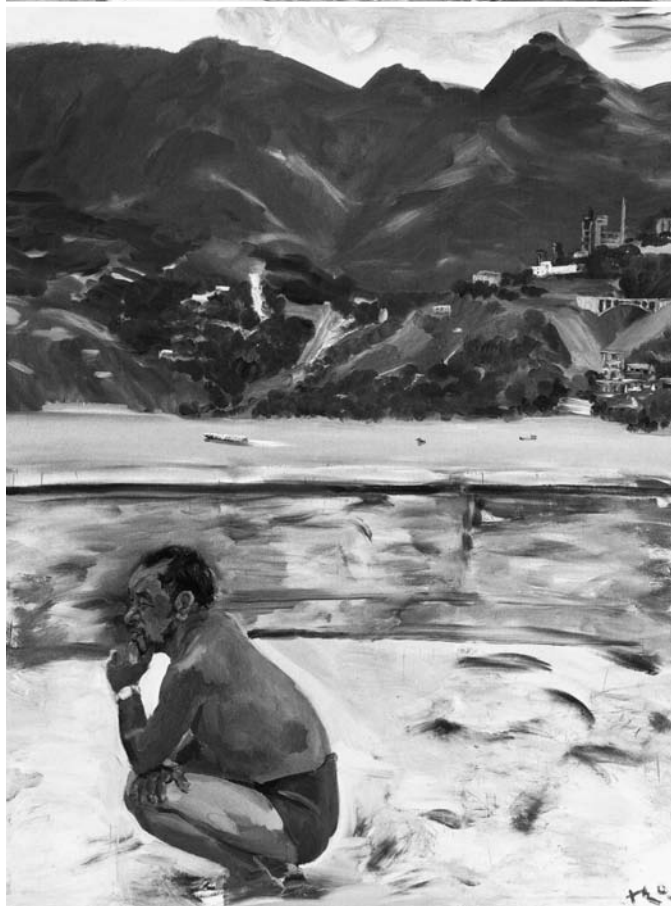
The painter Liu Xiaodong painting migrant workers at the construction site of the Three Gorges Dam

And the fact that this “real life document”, *In Public*, is related to a fictional work, in this case *Unknown Pleasures*, is certainly not a limitation, but an opening. I would even say a double opening. It opens the meaning of fiction, as it underlines how deeply it is rooted in reality (much further than the actual events that happen to 2 or 3 teenagers in the fiction storytelling), and it opens the meaning of documentary, as it shows how much everyday life has, or might have, an aesthetic quality, or at least potential, if we knew better how to look at it, but mostly if we knew better how to live our lives.

In this sense, “crossing boundaries” between fiction and documentary is not confusing them, and I must say I prefer the English title of this symposium to the French one [“Frontières brouillées”]. Because the “boundaries” between documentary and fiction are not erased or mixed, they are redefined as province borderlines inside one unique country, which is cinema.

This is also what is obvious in Jia’s double bill *Still Life-Dong*. *Dong* is a documentary: about what? The reality of the building of the Three Gorges Dam (and later prostitution in Thailand)? Or about the work of a painter facing these realities? Both aspects are there. But the film is mostly about the interrelation between these two levels of reality, the “factual level” and the “artistic level”, to elaborate how deeply the artistic is factual and the factual contains aesthetics. Absolutely autonomous, in the sense that it can be seen alone, or before, or after *Still Life*, it echoes the feature film’s own circulation between real situations, fictional characters, and even pure phantasmagoria, as an option which is not alternative to documentary or fiction-related-to-reality, but a part of this very world, as a flying saucer kindly reminds us.

This is, I believe, the ultimate aspect of the “waiting attitude” which I try to describe in Jia’s work. If you would film long enough, the building would ultimately turn into a spaceship and take off. We are now beyond the “real” effects of waiting with a camera, inside the mind, and then in the special effect computer, but I believe this magical event does come from there, and at least I am sure it makes sense so well, so evidently, because it is part of this process. This is why this time-related attitude made possible by video goes beyond regular realism, and in a different way from its far-western relative, Italian Neo-Realism. It uses the one way it follows to open up to other dimensions, which are real, though usually invisible. Works of art do that, to a certain extent works of



Warm Bed (detail)
by Liu Xiaodong (2006)

art are that (“to open to other dimensions, which are real, though usually invisible”), but the use of video and the “waiting attitude” connect reality and the artist’s vision of what is beyond what is visible, in a completely different way.

Migrant worker characters in
Still Life by Jia Zhangke



If I would call Jia Zhangke “the man waiting with a camera”, I would call Wang Bing “the man walking with a camera”—making clear that neither of these formulations intends to sum up their whole work and style, only how their use of video camera interferes with it. *West of Tracks*, though it certainly meant a lot of waiting (Wang Bing stayed several years to make the film), is not a waiting film, it’s a walking-forward film. Which is strange and moving, since it is walking forward inside a world which is stopped, frozen by the closing of the factories. It is, by the way, interesting to note that both *West of Tracks* and *Still Life* deal with ruins, but they observe them differently. I’d say Jia looks at them like at a vegetal life, discovering what is growing and possibly blossoming in this landscape, and Wang films as if it was animal life, capturing what is running, hiding, giving birth or death, searching food or warmth. Wang Bing’s camera is constantly on the move, in the factories, in the streets, on the train, even in the restaurant, in the workers’ showers or the old man’s small house, it is always looking forward, elsewhere. And it is this movement which, in this case, generates a whole bunch of fictions. Because if *West of Tracks* is without contest a documentary, it is filled with fictional elements, fictional atmospheres, fictional possibilities. It contains political drama, science fiction, cop stories, family melodrama, action stories all around—not many love stories, but buddy stories, certainly. And this intense feeling of potential fiction storytelling all over the film is generated by the movement, the freedom of movement Wang Bing gives himself through his use of the DV camera. And, much more than so many documentaries describing the evolution of the Chinese economy from heavy industry to manufacturing industry, leaving behind so many people and so many things, landscapes, etc., *West of Tracks* tells this story. Because it is, it always was a story. Even: a legend (legend does not mean “lie”, it means story with a strong imaginary potential). The active legend of the building of modern industry in the former decades could have been filmed from the same places, with the same moves. In many ways, Wang Bing places his own steps in its traces, he re-does the storytelling when everything has collapsed. This is why his film is so beautiful and so moving: it is haunted by the ghosts of what was a real epic, but neither the reason, nor the protagonists of this epic are still there. And the cinematic tool cannot be the same neither. This cemetery of lives, dreams and legend has to be walked

through again, but this time with the lightest material, and the lightest feet.

Jia the waiting man and Wang the walking man both use cinema in a way which deeply changes one specific aspect of cinema making. It is editing. The western world, based on lessons by Griffith, Eisenstein and Vertov—as different from each other as each of them may be—did make editing the main way to shape reality-recording into storytelling. Western modern cinema did react against this classical approach by the use of long shots which intended to emphasize mostly a metaphysical experience: a surge of what is beyond reality, a deeper truth, related to “ideas” (God, Beauty, a World of Justice, a reflection of the human mind). Its defiance against cutting revealed a quite puritan defiance against fiction. What we are dealing with here is, I believe, completely different. As a non-conclusive conclusion, I would like to suggest that the contemporary use of video tools exemplified by Jia Zhang-ke’s and Wang Bing’s works belong to another way of connecting real elements into aesthetic shapes. Though there is, obviously, editing—and very good editing work—in their films, the building of the relation between reality and fiction does not rely mainly on the editing process. And it does not aim to reach an ideal world beyond the physical world. I am convinced that, just as the use of long shots by modern western directors was related with the European spiritual heritage, especially with Christian religion and philosophy, this way of structuring real and imaginary elements has a strong relation with traditional Chinese culture and philosophy. •