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## A Study on the Narrative Style of Environmental Space in the Films Directed by Jia Zhangke From the Perspective of *Still Life*

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### Abstract

The film is a kind of art characterized by combination of time and space. In the film, environment refers to the space with certain functions and it contains certain prescription and specific timeliness. Environments in the film include the natural environment and social environment and have various kinds of functions, in which narrativity is one of the important functions. Environment in the film not only is the background of the film story, but also can promote the development of the plot and deepen the theme in some films indeed. As the representative figure of the sixth-generation directors in China, Jia Zhangke's unique visual language expression and film space narrative application have become the unique style and achievement in the film directing field of the world. *Mountains May Depart*, released in 2015, caused widespread concern in the world and gained high praise continuously after releasing. Meanwhile, creation of visual effect and application of space environment in *Mountains May Depart* completely adopted those in his another representative film *Still Life*. Environments in *Still Life* are of great significance due to their particularity and fully reflect the narrative function of the film environment.

In *Still Life*, narrative functions of the film environments are mainly reflected in these three aspects, namely, the environment is regarded as the structure principle of the film narrative; the environment is the basis for shaping personal character and emotion; and in some plot and shot of the film, the environment is used for foiling the key person so as to emphasize the narrative function of the environmental scenery. In the film, the

environment plays a role in the narrative of the film by means of above three aspects, and thereby achieving to promote the development of the plot and deepen the theme of the film eventually. The film is not only an art combining space and time, but also an art combining sound and pictures. When we study the narrative functions of the environments in the film from the perspective of audio-visual language of the film, we will find the skills of environment narrative functions in the film. Example by *Still Life*, both unique application of the long take and the scenery shot and adding to various ambient sounds enhance the narrative function of the environment in the *Still Life*. In this paper, the author will study the unique space environment narrative style of Jia Zhangke through above aspects related to *Still Life*.

**Key words:** Environmental space; Jia Zhangke; Narrative style

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## 1. ENVIRONMENTS IN THE FILM

### 1.1 Concept of Environment

Environment itself is a relative concept.

Environment is always defined depending on a certain central object. It varies depending on the central object, and varies with the central object. What we speak of the environment is generally referred to the human environment, which can be divided into the natural environment and social environment. Natural environment is also referred to as geographical environment, which refers to the natural world surrounding humans and includes atmosphere, water, soil, biology and various kinds of mineral resources and so on. Social environment refers to artificial environment which is created and established by humans gradually through a long-term planned

and purposeful development on the basis of natural environment in order to constantly improve the level of material and spiritual life, such as city, village and industrial and mining area and so on.<sup>1</sup>

The film is a kind of art combining the time and space. In the film, the environment refers to the space with certain functions and it contains certain prescription and specific timeliness. Space and environment are the “natural” factors to constitute the film images. Space is the generalization of the environment individual. So, the environment has certain functions in the film.

## 1.2 Environment on the Screen

### 1.2.1 Concept of Environment on the Film Screen

Environment elements in the film can be divided from several significances as per different focuses and they have the slightly same significances in the division in the aspects of screenplay, photography and art and so on. Consistent with the division of the environment itself, we divide the environments into the natural environment and social environment as per features of the environments in the film in this paper.

Natural environment in the film stresses the natural properties of the environment and it refers to the sceneries and spaces surrounding the major objects on the film screen, and it is also the important factor to constitute the frames. On the other side, we may further divide the natural environment as per human accepting ways for environments in the film, namely we may divide the natural environment depending on the visual environment accepted by human visual system and audio environment accepted by human auditory system, i.e. the film frames and sounds spoken of by us frequently.

Social environment in the film is the social background and specific living places where the figures are in the film. In the film, social background is often reflected through the relationship between specific figures in a particular time.

The two components of the film environments can be defined separately. But, the two components are indivisible when analyzing the living examples of the film, i.e., the social environment may also be reflected in the natural environment and while the social environment is based on the natural environment. People will make different environment selection and transformation under different social environments, and social environments built by people are also different under the different natural environments. Dialectical understanding of the two components of the environment must insist on the research based on the film story. If the researches on the functions of the film environment break away from the story theme and the figure’s emotion, they will become bland generalities easily.

<sup>1</sup> <http://baike.baidu.com/view/13655.htm#2> Environment

### 1.2.2 The Narrative Function of Environment in the Film Structure

In the film, functions of the natural environment are as follows: stating the region where the story occurs and time when the story occurs; indicating the season, time and place of the figure’s activities; reflecting the theme of the story, indicating the personal character and showing an atmosphere. Selection and disposal of the natural environment should be terse instead of trivial. The space structure of the feature film should consider not only the living environment of the figure, cultural custom, time, religion background and natural environment etc., but also the theme of the film, expression of the figure’s characters, creation of the visual style and rhythm control of the whole film etc. as per the ideas of the director, namely, in the film making, environment and space have these functions such as rendering the atmosphere, implying the theme, and promoting the development of the film plots besides indicating the story scene and sometimes design of the space on the screen also can form a unique aesthetic style.

In the film, social environment is arranged as per the premise of the story. It is closely related with the key figure and impels the figures’ actions. An excellent film should shape the key figures well and it should also better create the environment that is surrounding the key figure and impels actions of the key figure, the reason of which is that social background plays a decisive role in the shaping of the personal character. Meanwhile, the specific relationship between the figures and the environments constitutes a side of the social life, from which the audience can realize the social features depicted in the film.

Figures and the space environments where they live are not inseparable whether in life or on the screen. In the film narrative, figures and environments are interdependent. Environment is reflected through description of the figure’s heart or figure’ heart is reflected through description of the environment, all of which are important ways for narrative of the director. Different focuses, perspectives and entry points selected by director will result in different styles, which are the reason why the directors often need to analyze the space narrative when doing the directing researches. The narrative function of the film environment requires that the environment should have these effects on the film narrative such as promoting the development of the plot and deepening the theme of the film in the film, which is also the writing purpose of this paper.

### 1.2.3 Environment Selection in the Film *Still Life*

*Still Life* is the fifth long feature film of Jia Zhangke, who is a famous director in China (former four long feature films are *Xiao Wu*, *Platform*, *Unknown Pleasures* and *The World*) and it was completed in 2006 and won the Golden Lion Prize for the Best Film of 2016 Venice International Film Festival. An important feature of the films directed

by Jia Zhangke is that the specific environment is relied on and expressed actively and the environment is continued as the important component for narrative. In his earlier film *One Day, In Beijing*, Jia Zhangke selected the Tian'anmen Square as the shoot object; then in *Xiao Shan Returns Home*, the environment feature became the important content element for the long take; story of *Xiao Wu* was constructed because Jia Zhangke took a keen interest in changes of the main streets in his hometown Fenyang County; In *Platform*, symbolic significance of the environment was especially obvious. For young men in the cities and towns, the remote metropolis are the "distant places" representing hope and happiness; *The World*, which is different from the "Hometown Trilogy", is the space imaging experiment. In *The World*, the director put the story in a virtual environmental device to express the modern people's pressure caused by miniature landscape type buildings; in *Still Life*, Jia Zhangke focused on his most familiar space environment (small towns in the inland of China) again, and told two stories concerning "looking for" occurred in the Three Gorges Reservoir Region. *Still Life* continues the cold and grey tone originated from *Xiao Wu*. Jia Zhangke uses concise imaging languages to depict the natural landscape and humanity scene of the Three Gorges being migrated, such as foggy Three Gorges, grey and green mountains and river water, shabby existing buildings in the mountain city and the building ruins. When talking about reason for making *Still Life*, the director Jia Zhangke said that it was September when we went to Fengjie for the first time. After the documentary (refers to *The East*, which was made by Jia Zhangke in Three Gorges at the same time) has been made for over ten days, I suddenly wanted to make a feature film. When we got to Three Gorges, the Three Gorges was completed basically and the Three Gorges Dam had been completed except that only one third of building was not pulled down. In addition, migration of one million people had also completed. So, I saw the scene after the great change, which made me very touched and I felt these people's vitality under this environment. When I saw workers working on the construction site, I felt that no matter where their lives are, their lives will be extremely beautiful and impressive so long as their lives can be seen, so I suddenly wanted to make a feature film (Yang, 2007). Through these words from Jia Zhangke, we can know that the natural environment and social background full of characteristics in Three Gorges makes Jia Zhangke "touched" and thereby making *Still Life*. Thus, the focus of the story in *Still Life* is not the plot in fact. While, the focus is that as the spectators, the two leading figures witness the small town Fengjie's various scenes before disappearing due to construction of the Three Gorges Reservoir Region in the process of looking for his wife and her husband. Thus, the unique natural environment and social environment in the *Still Life* become important elements of the film narrative.

The remarkable the Three Gorges Project is the largest project in the history of the water conservancy construction in the world. The inundated areas of the Three Gorges Reservoir cover 20 districts, cities and counties in Hubei Province and Chongqing Municipality in total and total 1.13 million people removed eventually after the Three Gorges Project was completed. Unprecedented scale of people involved in migration resulted in huge costs and extremely high difficulty, so the migration is regarded as the world-level problem. The key point leading to failure or success of Three Gorges Project is migration. The huge scale of migration not only breaks previous division of resources, properties, benefits, and administrative areas, and it even can break the traditional families that take family love as linkage thereupon and the destination areas for migration also face the same huge problem. So, how to treat with the complex social problem is a severe challenge.

As the hometown of millions of people to be submersed into river water and the place where many important ancient cultural relics are located, the natural environment here can be referred to as marvellous spectacle. Here is full of green mountains and clear rivers and surrounded by mist; here is full of dilapidated walls and everywhere is in ruins. The charming scenery of the nature formed through thousands of years and self-destruction caused by humans easy for only a few years coexist. This is the natural environment of the Three Gorges Water Conservancy Project.

In the film *Still Life*, Han Sanming is a coal miner from Shanxi Province. He is slow of speech and goes to Fengjie to look for his wife who returned her hometown stealthily before 16 years. Shen Hong is a nurse from Shanxi Province. She is depressed and goes to Fengjie to look for his husband whom she loses touch with for two years. Finally, Han Sanming decides to go to his hometown with his wife, but Shen Hong decides to divorce. The profound theme and artistic value reflected in *Still Life* is that it reveals people's changes due to changes of living conditions and implication with humanistic care for people's active creation of future life under the condition of huge change through taking the huge change concerning migration of the people in Three Gorges area as the background. Like other previous films directed by Jia Zhangke, marginal figures are still the main objects described in *Still Life*. But the difference is that destiny of unimportant people is firstly put in the great project (Three Gorges Project) of the human history in *Still Life*. In *Still Life*, great social reform and destiny of the unimportant figures create strong contrast of the film. However, description of unimportant figures under this kind of great background makes the audience able to think about problems through combining the social background during the present transformation period instead of only researching the film plots in the process of film interpretation. In addition, a large amount of shots

of the city demolition and shots of people migration make destiny of figures put in an unpredictable situation. Display of environmental spaces (such as ruined street, remaining damaged buildings, abandoned wharf) in the film has strong metaphor effect and also renders the particular atmosphere of the film.

## 2. NARRATIVE FUNCTIONS OF THE ENVIRONMENTS IN THE FILM *STILL LIFE*

### 2.1 The Environment Is Regarded as the Structure Principle of the Film Narrative

“In terms of the significance of the overall structure of the film, the narrative structure is equivalent to the film montage structure in the aspect of meaning and it indicates the overall frame mode of a film.” It includes “disintegration, configuration, correspondence and integration of time distortion, space presentation and narrative mode and other elements and aspects in a uniform integral structure.” (Li, 2000, p.324)

Space environment participation is one of the basic elements for building the narrative structure of the film. In terms of narrativity of the environment in the film, the specific environment becomes the structure and the clue of the film narrative, meanwhile, main narrative contents of the film are designed as per the space environment.

The two stories relating to “looking for” under the same large social background of the Migration Project in Three Gorges area told in *Still Life* are connected but different in fact in terms of specific environments. Firstly, for *Story of Han Sanming*, we can conclude that Han Sanming appears in these scene environments including outdoor passenger boat, demolition office, the small and rough inn, the site for building demolition, the boat of the Mr. Ma, the small and rough tavern, underground site for singing and dance. Then, for *Story of Shen Hong*,

we can conclude that Shen Hong appears in these scene environments including shipyard, site for historical relics excavation, headquarters for guiding migration and removal, fellowship club for entrepreneurs, house of Dong Ming, outdoor site for dancing party, the side of the dam to be completed. In the film, Han Sanming and Shen Hong do not appear in the same scene environment, but all of these scene environments belong to the same large natural environment and social environment of disordered migration and removal in the Three Gorges area. We can easily realize that the activity spaces distinguish the different social stratum of them naturally at the same time. Han Sanming is the coal miner and demolition worker living in the bottom stratum, while Shen Hong is a public figure with a good professional. The director tells life concerning two different social stratum and hence the space environment in the Three Gorges Reservoir Region is showed richly and spatially.

In the process of film creation, audio-visual language is the carrier of the story narrative. Words are changed into audio-visual language from the screenplay to the screen. From this point, the environmental space is closed related with description of the figure’s heart and emotion, atmosphere rendering, the overall visual style. From the perspective of story narrative, *Still Style* is not the dramatic film with acutely conflicting stories, but it adopts the non-plot treatment for the story, narrates stories based on the main line of the stories and adds many displayed information to express the complexity and polysemy concerning the special social environment of the Three Gorges Project and the special natural environment of the Three Gorges Reservoir Region. From this point, selection of the scene environments has the more special significance. In accordance with the story development of the film, exemplified by *Story of Han Sanming*, the author simply summarizes the main scenes in the *Still Life* and the story information and displayed information contained in the main scenes, which are shown as follows:

**Table 1**  
**Space Environment Information**

Environment scene	Story information	Displayed information
Boat driving on the river	Figure appearance: Han Sanming appears by boat	Various life on the boat and natural features of the Three Gorges Reservoir Region
The cabin in shore	Situation of Han Sanming: without a cash in his pocket; Character of Han Sanming: firm and unyielding Appearance of Figure: appearance of “Xiao Ma Brother”	The living ways of people in Three Gorges Reservoir Region
Shore	Han Sanming looks for his wife by motorcycle taxi as per the address left by his wife	Status of various kinds of passengers on the shore
The original location of No.5, Qingshi Street	Han Sanming fails to find his wife in the original location	The attitude of the driver of the motorcycle taxi on the demolition and changes (from lands to water beaches)
Demolition office	Han Sanming goes to the demolition office to continue to query address of his wife	Demolition results in popular discontent of many people
On the way from the demolition office to the inn	Han Sanming looks for the place to live in	Disordered and noise demolition site; The water level during phase 3 of the Three Gorges Project: 156.50M

To be continued



Continued

Environment scene	Story information	Displayed information
Tangrenge Inn	Han Sanming finds an inn and he lives in the inn temporarily. Han Sanming comes across "Xiao Ma Brother" again. Han Sanming knows where his wife is through taking with the boss of the inn.	The driver of the motorcycle taxi gets commissions: The way of survival of the local people. The boy who smokes: The living state of the local people. "Xiao Ma Brother" imitates Zhou Runfa: Spiritual life of local young
On the way from the inn to the boat of Mr. Ma	Han Sanming passes through the building ruins to be pulled down.	The demolition situation of the Three Gorges Reservoir Region
On the boat of Mr. Ma	Han Sanming knows where his wife is through taking with Mr. Ma; and he pries into the address of his child, but he fails to get answer.	The living status of fishermen in Three Gorges area
Tangrenge Inn	Han Sanming talks with the demolition worker who also lives in the Tangrenge Inn.	Simple and honest character and living status of the demolition workers
Site for building demolition	Han Sanming takes part in the team of demolition workers and he waits his wife to come back while working.	Demolition by workers: Working and living status of the demolition workers; Disinfecting personnel: Clearance of the demolition site in Three Gorges area; The child who is singing: Spiritual life of local young; Local "Miss (hostess)": The way of survival of the local people.
House of the woman who sells her body	Han Sanming sees the middle school graduation photo of his daughter; he pries into information of his wife and daughter, but he fails to get answer.	The living status of the woman who sells her body
.....	.....	.....

According to the above table, we can know that the director aims at narrating stories better on one hand, and he aims at showing more information fully, so all scene environments where stories occur are selected elaborately. Environments in *Still Life* have already not been only regarded as the background of the story any more and they have become the structure principle of the film narrative.

## 2.2 Environment is the Basis for Shaping Personal Character and Emotion

In the film narrative, figure identity, environment and regional culture attribute are considered certainly. These important roles in *Still life* are demolition workers who appear on the scene without clothes. They are located in the bottom of the stratum in China, but they are the direct creators of the Three Gorges Project. Their bare

bodies show the initial vitality of humans when they are in the ruins of the Three Gorges area. Jia Zhangke conceives the stories told in *Still Life* just because he is affected by vitality of these people. At the beginning of the film, the dignified picture that workers with bare upper bodies are busy working shows, which seem to set the tone of this film. This kind of completely realistic shoot runs through the whole film, which not only shows the background of the great social transformation and but also describes the change of the individual destiny due to the transformation in depth and in detail and also reflects sincere and plain humanistic care. This kind of shot with realistic description is sufficient to arouse various kinds of emotions of the audience, and thus this film is full of a kind of dark and sorrowful temperament, which runs through the whole film.



**Figure 1**  
**A Crowd of Workers in a Narrow Space**



**Figure 2**  
**Workers Chat in the Hot Environment to Rest**

Han Sanming Finally finds his wife Mayao Meier whom he loses touch with for 16 years, and then he starts to negotiate with her current husband: He wants to leave here with Mayao Meier. Environment setting in this scene and figures arrangement in the space are very meaningful (see Figure 3). Mayao Meier stands outside the room, and he listens to the discussion on her future destiny made by her past husband and her current husband near the window. The destiny of a woman is decided by the two men, while the woman concerned only can listen in another space. This daily living environment contains an



**Figure 3**  
Actor in the Humble House to Discuss the Future of His Wife

excellent satire in fact, which makes people sad inevitable. Like one million migrants in Three Gorges area, Mayao Meier is only a woman who needs to comply with others' arrangement in terms of her own destiny.

Then, let us see another scene concerning that Shen Hong leaves her husband. In this scene, the director makes the story occur near the Three Gorges Dam being constructed (see Figure 4). One is related to affection to be lost in terms of the story and the other is the century project to be completed in terms of the scene environment. So, contrast between the two shots makes audience sigh.



**Figure 4**  
Actress and Her Husband Were on the Shore of the Yangtze River

### 2.3 Environment Is Used for Foiling the Key Person

Bazin said,

Drama performance cannot leave people. But, dramaticism is also can be achieved without actors. All of violent knocking sound, fallen leaves whirling about in the wind and spindrift on the seaside can produce strong dramatic effect. In some film masterpieces, the figure is regarded as a foiling or a supporting role or contrasts with the nature, and the nature is the key role in fact. (Bazin, 2008, p.147)

Bazin's words stress the narrative function of the environment scenery in the film. In fact, relationship between environments and figures involved in many sections and shots of the film *Still Life* complies with what Bazin said.

In *Still Life*, the shots (see Figure 5) that Han Sanming keeps walking in order to look for his wife appear frequently. In these sequence shots, it is obvious

that Han Sanming's walking is only a small part of information concerning the story of "looking for wife", but the director chooses to use many shots to display "Han Sanming's walking". Actually, the director wants to raise and show the large environment, i.e. ruins of the Three Gorges Reservoir Region by means of Han Sanming's walking and thereby completing to narrate the large time background. In the same way, the nurse Shen Hong comes to the shipyard that has gone bankrupt to look for her husband and she happens to see the dispute between workers and factory manager (see Figure 6). The dispute has no plot effect on the story concerning that Shen Hong looks for her husband, but the reason why the director narrates this dispute for long time is that the director wants to show the destiny of the factory and the workers under the background of the migration of people in the Three Gorges area by means of the dispute and thereby expressing his own attitude.



**Figure 5**  
Male Leading Role Through the Ruins



**Figure 6**  
The Actress in the Production of Shipyard

There are many sections in which the environment is used for foiling the key figure in *Still Life*. It is no wonder that the scholar Cui Weiping gives following remarks on the film *Still Life*:

I think that the story plots are not most prominent in this film, because backgrounds of this film are the city being removed, the reinforced concrete exposed, and continuous beats in the ruins. I even think that “ruins” is the leading role of this film. (Li et al., 2007)

## 2.4 Skills of Environment Narrative Functions Shown in *Still Life*

The modern film is a kind of complex art combining many art elements. Compared with the silent and black-and-white film in the early days, the modern film integrates sounds, colors and other art elements. And what is more, how to use directing skills and techniques to show stories in audio-visual language is also a big business. Thus, when showing the environmental space in the film, not only the kind of environment to be shown should be considered, but also the method used for showing the environmental space by means of visual expression and sound performance should be considered. In which, utilization of the particular long take and the scenery shot and adding of abundant ambient sounds increase the narrative function of the environments in *Still Life* greatly.

### 2.4.1 Continuous Time and Space Expression Under the Long Take

The long take is an important feature of the realistic aesthetics. In the 1940s, Andre Bazin, a French film theorist, proposed the concept of “long take aesthetics” from the perspective of audience based on analysis and research on others’ film and television works. The core and essence of the Bazin’s film theory aesthetics system are stressing that the film peculiarity is its photographing feature, which is also referred to as realism and record. Bazin thinks that

utilization of long take and the shot with depth of field can avoid strict limit on the audience’s perception process, pay attention to revealing the motion by means of normality and complete movement of the matters, keep sense of reality, transparency and polysemy of events, comply with the time process and space integrity of the events, focus on the connection between the overall appearance of the matter and matter itself, lay emphasis on motion of the camera during continuous shoot and scene control during performance of actors, and reflect modern films’ narrative principles of abandoning strict cause and effect logic and drama omitting technique, and its pursuit of natural connection and metaphor effect. (Xu, Fu, & Cui, 2005).

In the film narrative, environments exist everywhere. Both occurrences of events and personal action need to rely on certain scene environments, which need to be shown on the film screen in the considerable form of visualization. Thus, visual processing of environments in the film is an important problem needing to be considered by the director. In *Still Life*, the director uses

a large amount of long takes to narrate the stories and reveal relationship between humans and environment. On one hand, the long takes keep the uniformity of time and space of the film narrative. Jia Zhangke uses many long takes to record the natural features of the Three Gorges Reservoir Region and the real life of the people of the bottom stratum of China under the background of great change and reveal the deep meaning hidden behind the real world in this film. And utilization of the long take appearing at the beginning of *Still Life* is often taken about by people in delight. At the beginning of the film, Jia Zhangke quotes the concept of “Focus Shift Perspective Science” of Chinese painting field, makes the camera move through imitating the hand scroll of the traditional Chinese painting and thus forming a long and transverse shot lasting for 160 seconds and the long and transverse shot is unfolded like the Riverside Scenes at the Qingming Festival, so the activities and mental state of the workers from all corners of the country on the boat are expressed meticulously and richly and group figures of the workers in Fengjie are formed. The shot shifts slowly, and the audience can see the beautiful girl about 20 years old, and old man with graying temples and bare bronze arms and shoulders; In the long and transverse shot, some people brings a jute bag of luggage from their hometowns, some people work with a fan; Meanwhile, in the shot, some people smoke, some people drink, some people play poker, some people read palms, some people play mobile phones when waiting for a coastal ship (see Figure 1 and 2). This detailed showing mode seems to place a huge rock of real life on the people’s hearts, which makes people repressed so that they have no way to escape and they are not able to escape. This scene better restores the romantic charm reflected in *Hotbed* which is an oil painting made by Liu Xiaodong, shows the living status of people located in the bottom stratum completely and in detail, and makes audience involved in the depressed and touching atmosphere created by the film successfully. Jia Zhangke uses the steady long takes to record the history and continue the particular artistic style of his films. We can say that long take has become a symbol of Jia Zhangke’s films. In this impetuous society, Jia Zhangke uses the calm, clean and long takes to restore the nature of life, which makes people slow down, and go down to observe the society and really pay attention to the simplest poetry shown by the normal life and inward world of the ordinary people. This kind of poetry sometimes is romantic and warm and sometimes is cruel and depressive.

On the other hand, the director shows the relationship between the figures and environment in the shot through crafty dispatching of long takes. For example, in the scene concerning that Dong Ming leads Shen Hong to go to the headquarters for guiding migration and removal to look for Guo Bing, the director only uses a shot to show this plot (see Figures 7 to 10). In this long take, the director



demonstrates the space environment of the headquarters for guiding migration and removal comprehensively and better demonstrates that Shen Hong is a superfluous figure by means of position dispatching of the actors. And what is more, the information of social environment shown in

this long take is more prominent. From the long take, we can realize intensive conflict between the migrants in the Three Gorges Reservoir Region and the demolition office representing the government and we also can find some larger social problems hidden.



**Figure 7**  
**People Who Play Cards Outside the Office**



**Figure 8**  
**The Actor Before the Demolition Site**



**Figure 9**  
**The Actress Get Water**



**Figure 10**  
**To Bind Up a Wound Before the Construction Site**

#### 2.4.2 Rhythm Style Created by the Scenery Shot

The scenery shot can foil and show corresponding mood and atmosphere by means of different movement speeds. It is generally used for stating the environment, background, time and space and it has these functions such as explanation, implication, symbolization, metaphor and so on. Meanwhile, it is an important way for the director to express ideological contents, create poetic imagery beauty and adjust the rhythm of the plot. The scenery shot is a kind of empty writing for creating the poetic imagery. In many films, the film will change from real to virtual and scenery shot is used when the mood of the figure reaches the climax or one scene end, which not only changes the original rhythm,

but also is full of new meaning. In general, the short, unsteady scenery shot can make the audience produce a kind of sense of nervousness and urgency, while slow and steady scenery shot can make the rhythm gentle suddenly.

The large historical background of the film *Still Life* is migrants in the Three Gorges area. “The demolition of a city with more than 2000-year history is completed within 2 years”, so how large stirring business it is. However, we cannot see rushed crowds, large-scale demolition, the farewell scene with the eagerness and zest and insincere slogan and passion in the film. Instead, what we can see in the film only is calmness and slowness and authentic life of the common people. One key element for forming



**Figure 11**  
**Water Level Mark of the Three Gorges**



**Figure 12**  
**Abandoned Factor**



of this artistic effect is utilization of scenery shot by Jia Zhangke (see Figures 11 and 12).

Sometimes, the scenery shot also can make the natural and cultural images become the independent aesthetic and expressing objects and participate in the film narrative so as to express emotion and deepen the theme. At this time, the scenery shot often contains a kind of carefree, leisurely and deep “meaning”, which has the strong impetus effect on foiling personal emotion, shaping personal character, externalizing personal mentality and deepening the theme.

In *Still Life*, this kind of scenery shots is many. In the film, in order to look for Mayao Meier, Han Sanming chooses to pull down buildings on the construction site. When the workers are spraying the disinfection liquid

medicine in the ruins slowly, we can find that wall of the house that is not pulled down completely hangs the words “make efforts”, pictorial of Zhou Jielun and the diploma awarded for the house owner (see Figures 13 and 14) and the house arrangement is narrow and messy. All these objects in the house are like inanimate objects in a piece of sketch, which coincides well with the English name *Still Life* (inanimate objects, in Chinese, Jing Wu) inanimate objects) of the film. This shot has the wider and deeper implication besides meaning of the shot itself: the house owner once understood self encouragement, adored youth famous stars and acquired brilliant achievements. But witness of the history will be submerged. In fact, matters submerged are group images, but they are not shown in the shot.



**Figure 13**  
Calligraphy and Painting “Efforts” in the Ruins of the Demolition

Through making a general survey of Jia Zhangke’s film languages, we can find that utilization of the long take and the scenery shot is more prominent, which is connected with aesthetics orientation of his film. Jia Zhangke cannot agree the long take theory of Bazin more. The long take theory stresses respect for objectivity, respect for common people and lays an emphasis on trying best to observe the existence of people in a complete space. At the same time, Jia Zhangke’s film languages also express the director’s philosophic considerations for the current time with rapid changes. These considerations are a kind of scholar’s philosophic considerations. And charm and poetry of these spaces are shown by Jia Zhangke by means of his familiar long takes and scenery shots. Advantage of this kind of audio-visual language is as follows: it cannot change the time and space concept of the film; the camera is regarded as the recorder and it becomes an observer that observes the affairs of human life silently; the parts which the director participates in are reduced; and the audience is involved in the time and space of the film to experience the personal emotion in the film instead of the director, which are the reason why Jia Zhangke likes using long takes and scenery shots.

**2.4.3 Strong Realistic Aesthetics of the Ambient Sound**  
Sound is a particular element in the film art. With the improvement of the theoretical level of the film sound



**Figure 14**  
The Awards on the Wall in the House

and development of the film sound recording technology, the film markers add more sound elements to the films in order to enhance people’s peculiar audio-visual effect and make the film more attractive. In fact, in *Still Life*, the noisy background “ambient sound” included in the whole film is the essentially important role all the time. The particular ambient sound in the Three Gorges area not only reflects the regional customs and time background, but also participates in the film narrative, extends space outside the shot and influences inner rhythm of the film and plots interaction.

Jia Zhangke has a great ambition that is constructing his own world in the film narrative. But, the world constructed by him in the film is split: One is full of pictures, shots and visual effect, which is his hometown; the other is that noisy sound world elaborately created by the director, which is a reality imposed on his hometown and this one means modernity, disappearing of his hometown and new life whether it is good or not. Maybe Jia Zhangke’s sound processing has formed a kind of sound aesthetics for film. Meanwhile, Jia Zhangke powerfully stresses tension existing in the world constructed by him by means of this kind of aesthetics. In addition, this tension runs through each scene or each detail of his film and becomes a distinguishing feature of jia Zhangke’s realism. (Li, 2007)

In *Still Life*, besides recording demonstration of the visual spaces, Jia Zhangke adopts the wholly natural sound in terms of the auditory space.

We add some new elements in the aspect of sound processing. Zhang Yang hopes to collect the natural sound effect and he records for a week together with his assistant. Sound effects collected are conducted the subjective sound arrangement. And we divide these sound effects into several groups such as “passing through the construction site 1” and “passing through the construction site 2”. And then these sound effects are used as per group, arranged again like music, and the group names include sound of steam whistle, sound caused by hammer and so on. (Yang, 2007)

These rearranged spot sound effects make *Still Life*



**Figure 15**  
**The Actress Stands in the Open River**

In the interview, Jia Zhangke answers the question relating to design proposed by the audience:

That building is the migrant memorial tower of Fengjie. At first, it planned to build a larger tower, but finally the tower was not completed well due to the construction company’s funds shortage. I felt that it should fly away instead of standing there when I firstly saw it, so that shot is formed. For UFO, I think that nature in the Three Gorges area is relatively mysterious and many legends may be related to the climate there. I am easy to think confusedly while standing there. One day, I found that the water level rose and the weather was raining, but I cannot swim, so I was a little afraid. Suddenly, the idea occurred to me—how small the human is in the face of nature and maybe a UFO can fly to my front in some day. This scene may contain a little metaphor effect, but thoughts related to it are emotional and direct during shoot. (Ibid.)

However, from the perspective of the film effect, there is no doubt that occurrence of the two surreal environments can make the audience think more beyond the actual environment and stories in the Three Gorges area.

## CONCLUSION

In *Still Life*, the two persons from small towns of other places come to another small town which is about to disappear in order to look for his wife and her husband. Following the process of looking for his wife and her husband, audience realizes the magnificent scenery and dilapidated walls in the Three Gorges area and they also

give the audience a real scene feeling in the auditory space all the time.

### 2.4.5 Section 5 Expression of the Surreal Environment

In the stark realistic environment of the film *Still Life*, two surreal objects that are UFO and the migrant memorial tower that leaves by means of jetting (see Figures 15 and 16) appear abruptly, which makes the space environment where the two objects appear become mysterious and surreal.



**Figure 16**  
**The Monument of Surrealism Flying Away**

realize the various kinds of living status of one million common people here. Stories of Han Sanming and Shen Hong are two small stories in the film, and stories about Three Gorges Reservoir Region and Chinese society revealed by stories of Han Sanming and Shen Hong are “big stories” in the film in fact. Both natural environments and social environments in *Still Life* are the most important roles whether in the small stories or in the big stories. In this film, the environment is involved in the story narrative all the time, and environment showing and story narrative are combined perfectly. Success of *Still Life* is not only success of “good person”, but also success of “Three Gorges”. As a film making environment as the important factor and reflecting the large narrative function of the environment, *Still Life* can be regarded as the classic.

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