

The Surreal Realist Cinema of Jia Zhangke

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Abstract

Surreal Realism in the Cinema of Jia Zhangke

Through a close investigation of three recent films by Chinese filmmaker Jia Zhangke (1970-), namely *The World* (2004), *Still Life* (2006) and *A Touch of Sin* (2013), the thesis argues that a new form of cinema that can be described as ‘surreal realism’ has emerged in the director’s attempt to capture the ultra-rapid transformations (*zhuaxing*) taking place in post-socialist China, specifically in the 21st century. Jia’s films historicise the present by visualising the varying modes of circulation in contemporary China, including the movement of bodies, the abstract circulation of value and the movements of desire. I suggest that Jia’s historicisation of the present not only captures historical transformation but also uses such transformation as an impetus for cinematic invention.

I further argue that the success of his work, including its international reception, is due to this commitment to the formal evolution of the medium of cinema. That in turn is premised on an engagement with a wide variety of other aesthetic forms that impacts upon the way Jia’s films are conceived, shot and structured, most significantly architecture, painting and the internet. This process of incorporation involves working against these other mediums while simultaneously drawing on them to generate a new cinematic method. The result is what I call a surreal realism that is able to reveal the present as a complex interaction of historically laden political and aesthetic forces.

The first chapter is a case study of *The World* which focuses on its relationship to architecture, showing how the film engages with the tourist architecture of the theme park and the metropolis and how this architecture is navigated by those working inside of it. The second chapter, a case study of *Still Life*, draws out the film’s engagement with painting, arguing that the film investigates the legacy of Socialist Realist painting as an earlier means of historicising the present, tapping into those paintings’ utopian promise of an unrealised future. The third and final case study explores *A Touch of Sin* in relation to the internet and the social network news feed, showing how the film interrogates the circulation of narratives of violence online, linking this violence to economic circulation more generally to create a revised conception of the violence of history.

Jia’s work has often been understood through a narrowly sociological paradigm, in which his films are used as a means of making statements about social transformation in China. These approaches rarely engage in a sustained investigation of the formal characteristics of Jia’s work, focusing chiefly on their subject matter. While not denying the sociological implications of Jia’s work, I seek to develop an alternative approach to the relationship between aesthetics and politics and to deepen the understanding of Jia’s films as works of art. I contextualise Jia’s work in relation to world cinema and position him within a wider network of directors and cinematic methods, arguing for his significance at the forefront of the evolution of cinema today.

Thesis Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree. I give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University's digital research repository, the Library Search and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time.

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Introduction

Prologue

This thesis argues that the work of Chinese director Jia Zhangke (1970 -) is crucial to the evolution of the cinematic medium in the 21st century. I will argue that Jia's cinema evolves the medium through three interrelated aesthetic strategies. Firstly, Jia incorporates diverse aesthetic forms into his films, with a particular focus on architecture, painting and the internet. Secondly, Jia visualises the networks of circulation operating in the world system of late capitalism. Thirdly, Jia develops a stylistic strategy I have termed surreal realism, which draws inspiration from the hyper-rapid transformations that have taken place in post-socialist China.

I will demonstrate Jia's contribution to the aesthetic evolution of cinema through three case studies. Each chapter will focus on one of Jia's films following the chronological order of their release. The films are *The World* (2004), *Still Life* (2006) and *A Touch of Sin* (2013). Each chapter will demonstrate the relationship between the film and another aesthetic form. *World* will be discussed in relation to architecture, *Still Life* in relation to painting and *Sin* in relation to the internet. These engagements with other aesthetic forms lead to fundamental transformations in Jia's cinematic form

My approach to Jia's work differs from the existing scholarship on his work in a number of ways. Firstly, it eschews the narrowly sociological framework which has dominated academic engagement with Jia's films. These studies approach the films as reflections of social changes taking place in China. Therefore the formal character of Jia's work is lost, with a narrow focus on the subject matter or narrative. Instead, my study focuses on the aesthetic and formal elements in Jia's work. Secondly, this study seeks to understand Jia in an international context. Many of the aforementioned sociological approaches focus on Jia's films as explicitly Chinese. Instead I will emphasise the international character of Jia's work and of cinema in general. Cinema is part of the international network of capital and thus reflects the international networks of circulation. Jia's work therefore must be understood in relation to both the history of cinema which has preceded him and the work of his contemporaries around the world. Only through this approach can we truly understand Jia's work and appreciate the manner in which it contributes to the evolution of cinematic form.

For Jia, cinema is the only means of rendering the increasingly strange reality of life in China in the 21st century, a means which continues to mutate and transform and whose malleability is entwined with the violent processes which it draws on for its aesthetic power.

I Biography and Production

Jia was born in the rural town of Fenyang in Shanxi province, China in 1970. These two biographical details, his place of birth and date of birth, are central to the interpretation of his films. They have generated a minor mythos around his character which has become difficult to separate from his work. This is explored in the documentary entitled *A Man From Fenyang* (2014) in which Jia is filmed returning to his hometown, itself a reference to his second film, *Pickpocket* (1997), in which a character returns home to Shanxi from Beijing. His year of birth has marked him as a member of the Sixth Generation of Chinese filmmakers, who grew up during the period of Deng Xiaoping's economic liberalisation and whose work has been understood to track the transformations of post-socialist China. His place of birth has further singled out his work within this generation of filmmakers because, unlike many of his contemporaries, his early films focused on the provinces, the places left behind by the economic boom which followed the liberalisation.¹ Shanxi is located in North China and

1 The urban character of the Sixth Generation's films is explored by Zhang Zhen in her introduction to the edited collection *The Urban Generation* (2007) which engages with the work of the Sixth Generation. She writes 'The historicity of this particular "new" or contemporary urban cinema is precisely anchored in the unprecedented large-scale urbanisation and globalisation of China on the threshold of a new century.'(Zhang Zhen 2)

has a lower GDP than the more wealthy Eastern provinces. The province contains a third of China's coal deposits and its economy is driven by coal mining. The notoriously dangerous profession of coal mining emerges as a backdrop in Jia's early films. These early films have been described as the *Hometown Trilogy* because of their setting in Jia's home province of Shanxi. The films in this trilogy are *Pickpocket* (1997), *Platform* (2000) and *Unknown Pleasures* (2004). The films which I am focusing on in this thesis are those that immediately follow the *Hometown Trilogy* and represent a move outward from the provinces in line with the internal migrations which have taken place in China as labourers have moved from the provinces to the city.

The *Hometown Trilogy* was made after Jia completed his studies at the Beijing Film Academy. Jia notes that he was drawn to make films after seeing Chinese director Chen Kaige's film *Yellow Earth* (1984). (Teo 2001 np)² He was accepted into the Beijing Film Academy in 1993 where he majored in film theory. It was here that he was introduced to the work of French film theorist André Bazin, whose theoretical elaboration of the politics and aesthetics of realism were to have an enormous influence on Jia's approach to filmmaking.³ Jia also had access to the school's enormous film library, in which he engaged with the films which Bazin championed, in particular the Italian neo-realism of Roberto Rossellini (1906-1977) and Vittorio De Sica (1901-1974) and the modernist cinema of Michelangelo Antonioni (1912-2007) and the French director Robert Bresson (1901-1999). He also cites the work of the great Chinese director Fei Mu (1906-1951), Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu (1903-1963) and Taiwanese New Wave director Hou Hsiao-hsien (1947-). Jia writes about the influence of these directors in his writing collected in *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out* (2015). He notes the surreptitious influence of these directors, stating 'I did not know I was influenced by films of De Sica and Bresson until one day an audience asked me whose films I liked, then I realised there might be some potential connections between my creative process and their styles.' (Zou np)

Jia made three short films during his time at film school, *One Day in Beijing* (1994) which shot groups of tourists in Tiananmen Square over the course of a day, *Xiao Shan Going Home* (1995) and *Du Du* (1996). (McGrath 86) *Xiao Shan* was the most important of these early works, which contained the seeds of what would become central to Jia's early filmmaking. (McGrath 89) That is, a combination of spontaneous shooting on the street, the use of non-professional actors, minimal use of narrative and a thematic concern with the aimless and nihilistic youth of provincial China. The film follows the exploits of Xiao Shan played by Wang Hongwei, a friend of Jia's from the Beijing Film Academy, who is attempting to return home for the holidays. Instead, he spends the day getting drunk, trying to seduce a young woman and eventually falling asleep. *Xiao Shan* was screened at the Hong Kong Short Film and Video Awards in 1995 which introduced Jia to the group who would become his long-standing creative collaborators. The Hong Kong cinematographer Yu Lik-wai, the producer Li Kit Ming and his producer and editor Chow Keung have worked with Jia to this day. Jia's wife, the actress Zhao Tao, has starred in all of Jia's films since *Platform*. Along with this Wang Hongwei has appeared in almost all of Jia's subsequent films, and in the first two films of the *Hometown Trilogy* served as a stand-in for the director.

This notion of trying to 'go home' is indeed what Jia himself will do in the *Hometown Trilogy*, returning from Beijing to make films in the streets, highways and buildings of his youth, although this cinematic homecoming will never be simple. Jia notes that 'When I went home I found everything had changed so dramatically. It looked like everybody was having some kind of trouble, the relations among people left me cold, money and interest made the relations distant....Then I went to the streets.... the old grocery stores turned into

2 Interviews with Jia have predominantly been drawn from online sources and thus do not have page numbers. The interviewer is understood to have also been the translator of his response and will be cited accordingly.

3 Bazin's influence on the Sixth Generation of Chinese filmmakers can be traced back to an influential essay written by Zhang Nuanxin and Li Tuo 'On the Modernisation of Cinematic Language' (1979) which engages with Bazinian film theory.

karaoke bars, there are big “tear down” signs on residential buildings everywhere. One could sense how profoundly the social transformation had changed ordinary people’s lives.’ (Zou np) As I will discuss, the local in Jia is always a difficult topology which is constantly delineated by the city, the nation and the world.

II *The Hometown Trilogy* and Realism

The *Hometown Trilogy* should be understood as the first exploration of what I have termed the cinema of circulation. While my thesis is concerned with the three films which Jia makes after the *Hometown Trilogy*, I suggest that these later films represent a continuity with the aesthetic strategies which Jia develops in these early works. That is not to say either that Jia’s filmmaking has not developed and changed. On the contrary this is supremely evident when we compare his first film *Xiao Wu* with *A Touch of Sin*, the final film which I am discussing. Instead I am arguing that these films represent an aesthetic trajectory which develops out of a continued interest in the aesthetics of realism and cinema’s unique ability to historicise the present. The identification of Jia with realism has been central to much of the scholarship around his work, but the further linkage which I establish, which implies that realism is related to a concern with movement or circulation has not been attempted.⁴ Nor has the scholarship around realism ever really engaged seriously with Jia’s post-*Hometown* films. A notable exception is the work of Dudley Andrew whose book *What Cinema Is!* (2010), engages with a Bazinian analysis of contemporary world cinema and includes a discussion of Jia’s later work. (Andrew 57) He describes Jia’s work as a part of a ‘cinema of discovery’ which, through its street shoots, allows room for the accidental to intervene in the production of the work. (Andrew 58) This definition of Jia’s cinema is essentially an expansion of Bazin’s description of the films of Italian neo-realism in which shooting in the rubble of Italian post-war cities led Rossellini to construct narratives around minor incidents, to follow characters as they walked through the city. Jia’s films *Xiao Wu* and *Unknown Pleasures* in particular draw from this tradition and, unsurprisingly, the influence of Italian neo-realism comes up often in the scholarship around his early work.

The other crucial stylistic factor, as noted by Jason McGrath, is Jia’s preference for long-shots in the *Hometown Trilogy*. (140) This is another important formal quality of the realism which Bazin valorises and which is central to the cinema of Jia’s influences, in particular Antonioni, Ozu and Hou Hsiao-hsien.⁵ Bazin contrasts the long unbroken shot with montage, which he critiques for its ‘authoritarian tendencies’. He argues that the long-shot is democratic as the viewer is able to freely navigate the screen and is not ordered by zooms, cuts and close-ups.⁶ Jia explicitly expresses his own affiliation with this politics of the spectator stating, ‘In my long shots and long takes, my goal is to respect the viewer’s agency, and even to give my films a sense of democracy. I want audiences to be able to freely choose how they want to interact with what’s on screen.’ (Chan np) This concern with viewing and the politics of spectatorship extends into the films themselves, with characters frequently shown looking at landscapes, watching plays, films and television or most powerfully just staring into spaces. These character-viewers remain throughout Jia’s filmic development and I will discuss them further in the following chapters.

Realism in the expanded Bazinian sense developed by Jia is a question, then, of

4 For an interrogation of the notion of Jia's realism in relation to both Bazin and world cinema in the 1990s and early 2000s see Jason McGrath's chapter "'Independent' Cinema: From Postsocialist Realism to a Transnational Aesthetic" in *Postsocialist Modernity* (2008), 129-64.

5 Another important proponent of the long take is Fei Mu which David Der-wei Wang discusses in *The Lyrical in Epic Time* (2015). Fei Mu himself writes about the long take stating, 'In order to transmit the gloomy mood of Old China, I have undertaken the presumptuous and daring experimentation with my work, relying on the "long take" and "slow motion"' (253).

6 What Bazin fails to note is that the eye, or senses more generally, are not unmediated. The individual and their sense apparatus are already guided by particular ideological and libidinal interests which will determine what is picked up by the eye. For a critique of Bazin's politics see Jean-Louis Comolli's article 'Technique and Ideology: Camera, Perspective Depth of Field.' (1972) in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* (1986).

temporality linked to a particular spatial location within a particular historical moment.⁷ The particular historical moment is the transformation or *zhuaxing* which has taken place in China since the economic liberalisation, evoked in Deng Xiaoping's speech during the 'Southern Tour' of 1992 in which he declared that 'Socialism can also practice market economy.' (Zhang Zhen 5) Thus his *Hometown Trilogy* can be understood as what Bazin describes as a 'cinema of duration', characterised by slowness, deliberate long-takes, minimal cuts and an often stationary camera. (Bazin 76) The slowness also has a political dimension: not only does it allow viewers to navigate the image, but as Chris Berry points out this 'distended narrative time' is the temporality of the 'losers' of the economic liberalisation. (Berry 99) That is, the time of those in the provinces or *da xibu* (vast west) which have not benefited from the economic boom taking place on the eastern seaboard. These are spaces which have been depleted or exhausted by the mass migrations to the cities by migrant workers or *mingong* (peasant workers).

The city, even in Jia's *Hometown Trilogy*, is always present and is conceptualised as space with a different relationship to time. Movement to the city is a way of accessing time itself. In *Xiao Wu*, the protagonist has just returned from the city. In *Platform*, a character pretends that he has been to the city to appear more worldly and, in *Unknown Pleasures*, a girl hopes to go to university in Beijing and a young man plans to join the army to escape the drudgery of small town life. Even more specifically related to my argument on realism and movement, a much discussed scene in *Platform* involves the protagonists running to watch a train pass for the first time, showing that their isolated space is now being linked with the rest of China.⁸ But this rather hopeful image of the potential within the new means of circulation must be contrasted with the image of the unfinished highway in *Unknown Pleasures* which appears to lead nowhere. It would thus be a mistake to interpret Jia's localism as a simplistic attempt to resist globalisation by focusing on the power of the local. If anything, the local is a site of boredom, ruins and nihilistic cynicism.⁹ That is not to say that Jia's later films present the city or other spaces of China as somehow more egalitarian, but rather that they open up different temporalities and thus demand a different kind of cinema.

The *Hometown Trilogy* has been periodised as part of the Sixth Generation of Chinese filmmakers.¹⁰ The name Sixth Generation refers to their place in the lineage of Chinese cinema, a lineage which was disrupted after the War of Liberation and the entire Mao period.¹¹ The Fifth Generation of Chinese filmmakers were the first filmmakers to emerge from the reopened film schools during the 1980s and their earlier work historicises the

7 Here too the link between Jia's realism and Italian neorealism is suggestive, in that Italian neorealism also emerged at a very particular historical juncture (after the devastation of World War Two) and combined a local spatial context with an international or cosmopolitan vision. Realism in this expanded sense goes beyond the conditions of street shooting and non-professional actors but connotes a particular cinematic thinking in which these formal conditions are a vehicle for a utopian exploration of everyday life. For an interpretation of Italian neorealism in cosmopolitan terms see Anthony Gardner, Mark Nicholls and Anthony White 'Cold War Cultures and Globalisation' (2012) *Third Text* 205-215.

8 This scene also references the famous scene in Indian director Satyajit Ray's film *Pather Panchali* (1955) in which village children are shown seeing a train for the first time, the train being not only a symbol of modernity but of the world outside their isolated rural community. For a discussion of this scene see Michael Berry *Jia Zhangke's Hometown Trilogy* (2009), 57-8 and Carlos Rojas *Homesickness* (2015), 278.

9 As Yuk Hui notes on China and globalisation it is 'impossible to go back to this state of isolation - for what was external (eg. trade) is now internal to the country (eg. through financial and other networks)...Locality is not the reassuring alternative to globalisation, but its "universal product".' (Yuk 307)

10 For a discussion of the *Hometown Trilogy* in relation to the Sixth Generation see Michael Berry *Jia Zhangke's Hometown Trilogy* (2009). For a contextualisation of the trilogy in relation to wider currents in Chinese art see Xiaoping Lin's *Children of Marx and Coca-Cola* (2010) in particular the chapter 'Jia Zhangke's Cinematic Trilogy', 147-164.

11 For a discussion of the Sixth generation see the edited collections *From Underground to Independent* (2006) ed. Paul Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang and *The Urban Generation* (2007) ed. Zhang Zhen.

socialist period.¹² It is grouped around the work of Chen Kaige (*Yellow Earth* (1984) and *Farewell my Concubine* (1993)), Zhang Yimou (*To Live* (1994) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991)) and Tian Zhuangzhuang (*The Horse Thief* (1986) and *The Blue Kite* (1993)). The dominant interpretation, offered by scholars such as Zhang Zhen, is that these directors, particularly Chen and Zhang began making politically and aesthetically challenging films but were eventually integrated into the official film market (Zhang Zhen 10). The later work of the Fifth Generation, in particular that of Zhang Yimou, has been dominated by commercially successful big budget films. Of particular importance are the elaborate *wuxia* (martial arts) period films such as *Hero* (2002) or *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), which Zhang Yimou directed and which were hugely popular not only in China but in the West.¹³ These films were released during the same period as Jia's *Hometown Trilogy* and thus serve as stark counterpoint.

Jia has noted that his work is a direct reaction against the cinema of the Fifth Generation and of Chinese official cinema more generally. He states, 'If we were to find out years later how people lived in this period we would find only falsehood and lies. In this regard I realise that cinema is a means of memory.' (Zhang Zhen 42) Jia's work and that of the other directors in the Sixth Generation can be understood as a commitment to historicising the present, against the fetishisation of the historical past which appears in the costume dramas of Zhang Yimou. As Zhang Zhen writes in relation to the Sixth Generation, 'This cinema 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 Zhen 3) The films of the Sixth Generation have been characterised as 'postsocialist critical realism'. (McGrath 83) Along with Jia the Sixth Generation is linked to the work of Zhuang Yuan (*Beijing Bastards* (1993) and *East Palace, West Palace* (1996)), Wang Xiaoshuai (*So Close to Paradise* (1998) and *Beijing Bicycle* (2001)) and Lou Ye (*Suzhou River* (2000) and *Summer Palace* (2006)).

While my thesis is not explicitly concerned with contesting this periodisation I believe that the *Hometown Trilogy* already represents a disjunction with the work of the aforementioned directors. Much of the work of the Sixth Generation directors displays an overwhelmingly narrative-based and character-driven cinematic form as opposed to Jia's more experimental and durational work.¹⁴ The crossover comes in their choice of subject matter, the lives of the poor or marginalised and their use of the *jishizhuyi* or 'on-the-spot-realist' style.¹⁵ (Berry 122) While Jia's work differs aesthetically from these directors, the institutional or anti-institutional approach to the production of films is what links their practice. The Sixth Generation all produced films outside of China's official filmmaking bodies, such as that of the state owned China Film Group Corporation. Such material relations classify them as 'independent films'. All of Jia's *Hometown Trilogy*, along with many

12 For studies of the Fifth Generation see Rey Chow *Primitive Passions* (1995), Zhang Xudong *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms* (1997) and Paul Clark *Reinventing China* (2005), *New Chinese Cinemas* (1994) ed. Nick Browne, et al and Paul Pickowicz 'Velvet Prisons' in *China on Film* (2012) ed. Paul Pickowicz.

13 Zhang Yimou himself has been critical of the Sixth Generation of filmmakers, see 'From Fifth to the Sixth Generation: An Interview with Zhang Yimou.' (1999) conducted by Tang Ye which appears in *Film Quarterly* 53.2 (1999): 2.

14 Jia's cinema is closer to that of some of the later works of the Sixth Generation who I would argue have been influenced by his own style. Of particular note is the work of Li Yang (*Blind Mountain* (2007), *Blind Shaft* (2003)) and Diao Yinan (*Night Train* (2007), *Black Coal Thin Ice* (2014)). Jia has also formed a production company and some of the work which has emerged from this shows the indelible influence of his blend of durational experimentation and minimal narrative. In particular the incredible *Life After Life* (2016) by Zhang Hanyi blends the surreal realism of Jia's post-*Hometown* period films with the minor events of small town life central to the *Hometown Trilogy* while displaying its own distinct cinematic engagement with Buddhist cosmology.

15 This *jishizhuyi* style also links the Sixth Generation to the New Documentary Film Movement which emerged in China the early 90s. For an analysis of Jia's work in relation to the New Documentary Movement of the 1990s in China see Chris Berry 'Getting Real: Chinese Documentary, Chinese Postsocialism' in *Urban Generation* (2001). For an analysis of Chinese documentary cinema see Dan Edwards' book *Independent Chinese Documentary: Alternative Visions, Alternative Publics* (2015).

of those by the other Sixth Generation directors, were banned in China, a moniker which as Valerie Jaffee has argued, was crucial to their success in the West (Jaffee np). The films which I am focusing on in my study were all made with the approval of the Chinese Film Bureau. But they have all been subject to official criticism and have only been screened for short periods in mainland China. Jia has successfully worked with the China Film Bureau in order to change the laws around film approval, meaning that since 2003 directors only have to send an outline rather than full script and completed film for state approval. It is important to note that since the 1990s and early 2000s, when much of the work of the Sixth Generation was made, the Chinese film industry has undergone an enormous overhaul in line with the massive privatisations which have transformed much of the organisation of Chinese capital. It has also grown considerably and is now the second largest film industry in the world and is expected to overtake Hollywood by 2020. (Deloitte 2) Since the 2000s a number of large production companies have emerged which produce blockbuster Chinese films as well as investing heavily in Hollywood productions.¹⁶ The films I am focusing on emerged in an interesting period for Chinese cinema, during the expansion and overhaul of the Chinese film industry as well as transformations in the production of cinema more generally.

III Surreal Realism and the Compression of Time

The post-*Hometown Trilogy* work maintains Jia's realist project but his decision to shoot the new sites of China has led to an evolution in his cinematic form. If the *Hometown Trilogy* represented a difficult return to the provinces, his later work I will argue represents a perpetual journey to take in the diverse spaces and time frames of contemporary China. This movement reflects the movement to the city by the migrant workers and Jia has been described as the 'migrant-worker director' (*mingong daoyan*) (Zhang Zhen 16). I describe the realism of the post-*Hometown Trilogy* as a surreal realism. This term is drawn from Jia's description of his first post-*Hometown* film, *The World*. In an interview he stated, 'I think surrealism is a crucial part of China's reality. In the past 10 or so years, China has experienced the kinds of changes that might happen across a span of 50 or even 100 years in any normal country, and the speed of these changes has had an unsettling, surreal effect.' (Chan np) He reiterates this in relation to *Still Life* stating that he initially planned to shoot a more straightforward film but he 'couldn't ignore the surreal aspects of the Three Gorges landscape. I had to use fantastical elements, because without them I wouldn't have been able to adequately express the utter strangeness of our contemporary reality. I wanted to depict the compression of time, the sense of no longer living a natural existence.' (Chan np) Jia consistently links the surreal to a temporal register, China's accelerated development has unleashed forces which have deeply disrupted reality and demand new cinematic developments. In other words to make a realist film about contemporary China cinema must attempt to catch up.

Realism here then must be understood no longer as a generic term, with a series of representational tropes (such as the long-shot or the use of street shooting and non-professional actors). Rather, it aligns with Fredric Jameson's use of the term to designate artworks involved in the 'cognitive mapping' of late capitalist social life.¹⁷ (Jameson 54) But given the exceptional historical situation of Chinese development, there is something

16 For example film production company Dalian Wanda paid USD \$3.5 billion for a controlling stake in Legendary Entertainment. Recently Chinese investment in Hollywood has been curbed by a state crackdown on capital outflows. See Matthew Garahan 'China's Hollywood Romance Turns Sour' (2017) *Financial Times*. For an examination of the growth of the Chinese blockbuster film industry see Ainhoa Aranburu 'The Film Industry in China' (2017) *Journal of Evolutionary Studies in Business* 1-28. For an analysis of Chinese investment in Hollywood see Aynne Kokas *Hollywood Made in China* (2017).

17 For a critical engagement with the usefulness of theorisations of postmodernity in relation to Chinese post-socialist aesthetics see the edited collection *Postmodernism and China* (2000) ed. Xudong Zhang, and Arif Dirlik in particular Xudong Zhang's 'Epilogue: Postmodernism and Postsocialist Society - Historicising the Present', 399-442.

more intriguing in how Jia characterises this situation as ‘the compression of time’. This compression implies a warping, a disjunctive juxtaposition of overlapping time frames which are now superimposed over the top of each other. This is a uniquely cinematic way of coming to terms with the ultra-rapid yet uneven development of contemporary China in which multiple forms of production, from the most archaic to the most advanced, or indeed futuristic, co-exist within not only the same country but the same cities.

These surreal elements are more or less subtle but they pervade the entire corpus of Jia’s post-*Hometown* films. From the extended animated sequences in *The World* to a building taking off like a rocket-ship in *Still Life*, these elements have been difficult for critics and scholars to comprehend. In fact most scholars have chosen to ignore these elements of the later films or have attempted to relate them to existing aesthetic paradigms. For example, Eddie Bertozzi describes these as magical realist, theorising them in relation to literary examples such as Gabriel García Márquez. (Bertozzi 155) While magical realism is certainly at work in Chinese contemporary aesthetics, literary examples such as Mo Yan’s *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out* (2006) are far closer to the generic notion of magical realism in which the supernatural, here part of a folk Buddhist pantheon, is integrated into the entire narrative.¹⁸ Jia’s use of surreal elements is certainly not ‘magical’ or supernatural in the sense theorised by the concept of magical realism.

Instead the surreal elements in Jia’s films are representations of Chinese modernity and an effect of accelerated historical development. In this way I will argue that Jia’s surreal realism emerges out of the ruins of the Communist project and intermingles with the post-socialist fantasies of the Chinese present.¹⁹ McGrath’s notion of ‘postsocialist critical realism’ noted above must be expanded because the post-socialist aesthetic regime is often wrestling with the iconography and representational coordinates of the socialist realist heritage. But also because work such as Jia’s is contending with contemporary visions of progress which are no less fantastical than those of the socialist past. From the blockbuster cinema of China’s mainstream film industry to the advertising imagery which penetrates every aspect of the contemporary metropolis to the online spaces of the Chinese internet, surreal realism articulates a profoundly disorienting historical time-complex. Consequently, the surreal does not only emerge from overt insertions, such as the animated sequences in *World* or the CGI space-ship in *Still Life*, but from the very places which Jia has filmed. In *World* the film is set in The World Park, a theme park composed of replica monuments from around the world, and *Still Life* is shot at the site of the Three Gorges Dam project which flooded an entire region. Surreal realism therefore explores the reality of fantasies, desires and dreams which circulate throughout the architecture, artworks and networks of contemporary China.

Surreal realism explores the speed of the present in three broad senses. Firstly, the compressed historical time which I have noted above, which has created a coexistence of different time periods (historical time). Secondly, the rapid speed of development which has led to an exponential speed up of the experience of time (durational time). Thirdly, the relationship between this speed and aesthetic production (production time).

An extremely important element in Jia’s relationship to historical time is his use of digital video (DV). Jia has been a champion of DV technology, penning a ‘DV Manifesto’ in which he lauds the expressive potential of the medium. In this essay, entitled ‘The Age of Amateur Cinema is About to Return’, Jia states that the new digital cinema will ‘exceed the existing professional evaluation method because they are more open to more promising

18 In literary terms the notion of *chaohuan* or the ultra-unreal discussed by Ning Ken is closer to Jia’s cinema. In an essay on the topic Ning writes ‘much of Chinese reality has seemed like a hallucination’ and notes, like Jia, that ‘the sense of time is different...it’s as if China has escaped gravity...in just thirty years China has gone through changes which took several hundred years in the West.’ (92) His novel *Three Trios* (2015) draws from outrageous stories that circulated during the Chinese Government’s anti-corruption campaign launched in 2012.

19 The term post-socialist has come into common usage to periodise the transformations that have taken place since Deng Xiaoping’s reforms beginning in 1979. For a theorisation of the term see Xudong Zhang ‘Postmodernism and Post-Socialist Society: Cultural Politics in China After the “New Era”’ (1999) *New Left Review* 77-105.

film forms.’ (Jia 163) It allows filmmakers to work outside the studio system and produce work which is not limited by the funding requirements of the state or large-scale producers. Jia and his cinematographer Yu Lik-wai used DV for the first time on *Unknown Pleasures* and have continued to use it to this day. Jia has stated, ‘I often joke that, if it weren’t for DV, I wouldn’t be able to capture all the changes that are happening in China, because they’re so fast.’ (Jia 2015 164) When characterised in this way, DV is thus a means of tapping into the speed of production more generally, to capture the transformations of China through a literal acceleration of the mode of cinematic production. DV is of course not limited to the independent film industry in China, it has now become the standard form of cinematic production at the highest levels.²⁰ As I will discuss further, particularly in the first chapter on *The World*, the transformation of cinema into a digital medium has an enormous impact on how we define what cinema is today. Jia has characterised his own approach as a ‘poetic digital style’ and it is essential to link his use of DV to the notion of surreal realism.

There is a tension in Jia’s surreal realism between a defamiliarising tendency and a desire to incorporate the strangeness of contemporary social life into the work. A desire to make the real strange and a desire to compete with or exceed the strange temporality of contemporary China. This tension is particularly acute for a foreign viewer, who is already watching for a China that is exotic, strange or unfamiliar. This thesis will not attempt to reconstruct a Chinese experience of viewing Jia’s work; it is the work of an outsider to China, who is watching the films and studying them within the international context of the evolution of film form. Jia’s films have quite literally become faster over the course of his career. They are still remarkably elegiac by comparison to the Chinese high-capital blockbuster (such as *Wolf Warriors 2* (2017) the highest grossing film of the year) but they have nevertheless begun to incorporate a wider variety of technical means into their cinematic form. The use of animation and CGI is accompanied by a more fluid and mobile use of the camera largely abandoning the static camera of the *Hometown Trilogy*. And to return to the notion of spaces, Jia’s post-*Hometown* films have moved to Beijing (*World*), Fengjie (*Still Life*) and a combination of all of the above and more in *Sin*. Speed both historical and durational is explicitly linked to movement, linked not only to movement through time, but movement across the map of China. This diversity of spatial locations is part of the more general effect of the expanded circuits of movement which join cities and towns, including highways, train networks and virtually, the internet. (I explore this in depth in Chapter three). Surreal realism then is a cinema of circulation, which draws from the forces of post-socialist China while simultaneously seeking to visualise them.

IV Film Form as Methodology and the Heterogeneity of Cinema

My theorisation of Jia’s work as a surreal realism will historicise Jia’s cinema in relation to the evolution of cinema and the evolution of the other mediums which cinema draws upon. This thesis therefore does not attempt to read Jia’s cinema as symptomatic of the transformations of post-socialist China. These transformations are central to understanding his formal evolution but they are not the guiding principles which structure this study. As noted above, the sociological approach is the most prominent paradigm in which Jia has been interpreted.²¹ While such studies engage with the political and social forces which give rise to Jia’s films, they rarely move beyond an evaluation of the film’s content or narrative. The films then serve as examples in a wider argument about ‘China’s transformation to

20 For a thorough engagement with the relationship between cinema and the digital in relation to late capitalist social organisation see Jonathan Beller’s *The Cinematic Mode of Production* (2006), a relationship I explore further in chapter three. See also D.N. Rodowick *The Virtual Life of Film* (2007). For a study of the relationship between the cinema and other forms of virtualisation see Anne Friedberg’s *The Virtual Window* (2006). For a discussion of the role of digital video in relation to the production and circulation of independent cinema and amateur filmmaking see *DV-Made China* (2015) ed. Zhang Zhen and Angela Zitto, in particular Dan Gao ‘Chinese Independent Cinema in the Age of Digital Distribution’, 163-84.

21 For an example of this approach see Keith Wagner ‘Jia Zhangke’s Neoliberal China’ (2013) *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 361-377, Arianne Gaetano ‘Rural Women and Modernity in Globalising China’ (2009), 25-39 and Xudong Zhang ‘Poetics of Vanishing’ (2010) *New Left Review*, 71-88.

a global economy' (Zhang 2010) or 'young rural women working in Beijing' (Gaetano 2009). While Jia's films engage with China's ultra-rapid modernisation, the transformation is also registered at the level of form. Not one of the aforementioned studies discusses Jia's use of digital video, his interest in visual texture or the shooting style favoured by his cinematographer, Yu Lik Wai. Jia himself has noted this, stating: 'In films, I pursue a feeling of the real more than reality itself, since I think the feeling of the real concerns aesthetics, whereas the real is only a matter of sociology.' (Jia in Bertozzi 163) This thesis is not a sociological report on China through the prism of cinema. Instead the political and social analyses which appear in this study are mobilised in order to understand Jia's films more fully.

This thesis approaches Jia and his films as forms of thinking. The aim is not to apply philosophy to cinema, but rather to draw out the ways in which these films create a way of thinking which is particular to the cinema. While I will draw on existing theoretical paradigms, these will always be informed by a close formal analysis of Jia's films, as the films themselves allow us to approach existing aesthetic problems in new ways. Cinematic thinking works by making visible desires, affects and sensations by way of the image. The filmmakers and writers Jean-Marie Straub (1933-) and Danièle Huillet (1936-2006) describe the work of French painter Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) as materialising sensation, and we can understand cinematic thinking as another such process. (Deleuze 1989 316) Jia's films materialise sensations within contemporary China. These sensations always operate on a number of levels, from the allegorical and symbolic to the minor and the personal. Therefore another problem with the aforementioned sociological reading of Jia's work is that it merely interprets the subject matter of his films as a reflection of existing aspects of post-socialist China. If we simply interpret Jia's films as a series of historical documents we fail to see how Jia himself is already engaged in this process of historicising through cinema, in a way which is far more complex and nuanced than that of the sociologist or the historian. Jia explicitly links his filmmaking project to the excavation of historical memory, stating: 'At this point, I'm most interested in emphasizing cinema's function as memory, the way it records memory, and how it becomes a part of our historical experience.' (Chan np) Jia's aesthetic project excavates traces of historical memory through cinema, using the visual, sonic and discursive systems of the pre-communist, communist and post-socialist era to create a cinema of the present which does not reconcile the past but, rather, sees it as structuring the dreams and desires of the present.

Jia does this by exploiting the heterogeneity of cinema. I characterise this heterogeneity as cinema's ability to incorporate or draw from other aesthetic forms. As discussed above this thesis will be composed of three case studies. The first will focus on the film *The World* and the manner in which it works with and against the architecture of the tourist space of the theme park. The second chapter will explore the film *Still Life* and its relationship to painting, in particular that of Socialist Realism. The third and final case study will discuss *A Touch of Sin* and its relationship to the internet, particularly Chinese social media. While each case study will focus on a particular relationship between cinema and other mediums, all of the films draw from a variety of mediums. Jia's work draws on Chinese and western literature, Peking Opera, Cultural Revolution theatre, pop music, fashion, photography, television and of course other films. Jia demonstrates what Alain Badiou has described as cinema's constitutive impurity, its intimate entanglement with other mediums. (Badiou 4) This has always been central to the understanding and development of cinema, for both filmmakers and the writers of the cinema.²² Architecture and painting have been frequently interpreted in relation to the cinema. As I will elaborate in the first chapter, Walter Benjamin compared cinematic spectatorship to the experience of inhabiting architecture,

22 For example Eisenstein begins his famous essay 'From Theatre to Cinema' by comparing cinema to an unbuilt city in which the early filmmakers 'pitched our tents and dragged into camp our experiences in varied fields. Private activities, accidental past professions, unguessed crafts, unsuspected eruditions - all were pooled and went into the building of something that had, as yet, no written traditions, no exact stylistic requirements, nor even formulated demands'. (3) *Film Form* (1949). On the impurity of cinema see *Impure Cinema* (2014) Ed. Anne Jerslev and Lúcia Nagib and Ágnes Pethő *Cinema and Intermediality* (2011).

and Sergei Eisenstein's engagement with the relation between cinema and painting will be explored in Chapter Two. My final case study on *Sin* will explore how the internet, in particular the structure of the feed and the social network, intersects with and transforms cinematic form. Cinema's formal heterogeneity is foregrounded in Jia's work and is central to his evolution of cinematic form.

V Cinema of Circulation - Cinema in Wider Networks

Jia's realism thus must be understood as both a continuation of older realist models and a transformation or intensification of them. Surreal realism is a cinema of the network. This network is not solely reducible to the internet, but includes the relationships between desires, objects and modes of circulation which organise and disorganise post-socialist China. At a concrete level this means the social relations of the world system of international capitalism, premised on the circulation of commodities, bodies and value. Much has been made of the shift to a 'networked capitalism', but in reality circulation has always been essential to the development and expansion of the capitalist economy, from shipping routes to train lines and roads. In fact, as Marx notes in Chapter Three of *Capital Vol. 1*, money is already a mode of circulation (as exemplified in his formula Money-Commodity-Money (M-C-M)). (Marx 200) Virtual networks of circulation such as the internet are thus an extension of the prior modes of circulation, facilitating the intensification of financial speculation and commodity consumption. These networks initiate what Marx describes as the intensification of 'the velocity of circulation', in other words the speed with which transactions are made. Bazin's notion of the realism of characters unbound from the constraint of plot, space and vision, meets another aspect of the historical definition of realism in Jia's work, that of the attempt to register the abstract movements of the economy within the artwork.²³ These two realist imperatives are actually directly linked, to be unbound from space-time is in part to be unbound by the wage form, alienated from the objects one produces and the work which one does. Temporality in capitalism is radically uncertain, subject to the 'circular movement' of being shuttled from the past to the future and back again. This is not to dismiss the quality of being metaphysically ungrounded, instead it is to deepen the uncertainty; one is always lost within a network in which one moves, whether one likes it or not. Cinema is the mode which is born from this radical spatio-temporal disjunction. It comes into being in the ascendant phase of capitalism and its form is premised on the constant reconfiguration of space-time. But cinema is also a commodity which circulates, which accrues value and which is produced by the same world system.

Jia's cinema moves in multiple directions. It is both an object circulating within this series of relations and a means of abstractly visualising the movement of circulation. The point of departure between the *Hometown Trilogy* and the films which I will be drawing upon is that Jia's exploration of the mode of circulation expands. Nonetheless even in the *Hometown Trilogy* wider circuits and spaces are implied, with the urban centre pressing on the peripheral spaces of Shanxi province. *Pickpocket* takes place during the transfer of Hong Kong to China. In *Platform*, the wider cultural transformations of the Deng reform period are reflected by the transforming aesthetic of the theatre troupe who move from performing revolutionary songs to break dance and punk music. And in *Unknown Pleasures* the protagonists' futures all lie in leaving the provinces for the city. In addition to this, the films of the *Hometown Trilogy* all engage with the phenomenon of rural depopulation, the accelerated process of the movement from the country to the city which has left cities like Jia's hometown of Fenyang relatively underdeveloped. The three films I am focusing on all engage more directly with circulation at a national and international level. The formal heterogeneity discussed above contributes to this process. Architecture, painting and the internet all function to initiate circulation. In *The World* the theme park and the city of Beijing are architectural complexes which organise bodies, both drawing in bodies

23 For a definitive reinterpretation of the literary realism theorised by Georg Lukacs see Jameson's afterword to *Aesthetics and Politics* (1977) 196-213.

from around the country and articulating movement through them. The circulation enabled by the Yangzi River in *Still Life* is framed against the paintings which mediate the representations of the river, which has always been crucial to the circulation of goods in the Chinese economy. The internet in *A Touch of Sin* is a means of circulating news and information, as well as being central to the financialisation of China's economy in the transformation period.

The international circulation of films makes studying Jia within the confines of 'national cinema' inherently limited. Cinema is always an international aesthetic form. Even prior to the period of economic liberalisation, Chinese films made during the Cultural Revolution such as the revolutionary ballet *Hongse Niangzijun* (The Red Detachment of Women (1970)) and the opera *Zhiqu Weibushan* (Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy (1970)) were shown in the West (albeit in an extremely limited and disorganised manner). Jia's earliest film, *Pickpocket*, was distributed internationally by Japanese director Takeshi Kitano's production house Office Kitano and his second film, *Platform*, was funded by the Busan International Film Festival, an annual festival in South Korea. All his films have been shown at major film festivals worldwide with *Still Life* winning the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 2006 and *A Touch of Sin* being nominated for the Palme D'or at Cannes in 2013. His films also circulate online, and are streamed and torrented by cinephiles all over the world. It is thus necessary to place his work in an international context. Jia's work can be linked to that of other art filmmakers from the region such as Thailand's Apichpatpong Weerasethakul (1970-) and Japan's Naomi Kawase (1969-). Along with this the work of other contemporary filmmakers such as Portugal's Pedro Costa (1958-) and Iran's Abbas Kiarostami (1940-2016) is relevant. Jia's work will thus be mapped in relation to wider cinematic trends in order to further understand how his cinema functions at a deeper level in the international history of film.

This also reflects the context in which I am engaging with Jia's work, as an international cinephile who is seeking to understand the evolution of cinema in the 21st century. My own relationship to cinema has been indelibly shaped by the internet, as both a repository of information about the history of cinema and the primary means of obtaining and watching films. This thesis is the extension of the practise of internet cinephilia and should be understood as a means of translating the experience of hours spent watching films online. While I have travelled to film festivals to see newly released films, the principal mode of research has taken place in the new site of cinema, on a tiny laptop screen in a bedroom. Even if one wanted to watch films legally the methods in place to maintain copyright law would prevent the watching of the majority of newly released films. DVDs are marked by nationalised access through the regional coding devices. And while legal streaming services such as Mubi are committed to world cinema, films are only available on such sites for a limited time. Part of the new logic of downloadable files is that films can be infinitely rewatched. We can see a film or part of a film as many times as we like, isolating particular elements and taking screenshots. The logic of montage is no longer limited to the interior organisation of a film but determines viewing and circulation.

VI Chapter Overview

The first chapter on *The World* demonstrates the relationship between cinema and architecture. The film follows the lives of migrant workers who live and work in the The World Park, a theme park in Beijing composed of replicas of famous monuments. Jia's cinema is transformed by this surreal architectural complex. The film is both influenced by the architecture of the park while simultaneously seeking to undermine the relations which are otherwise concealed. The film explores the effects of living inside an architectural complex which is primarily designed to be looked at. It does this through an exploration of the back-stage spaces where the characters live. The movement of the camera is determined by the corridors which connect this backstage space and is used to convey the stress and strain of the lives of the service workers. But the film also reveals the new desires that circulate inside this architectural complex. These desires are both informed by the space

and labour of the protagonists while simultaneously seeking to overcome the constraints of labour in the service economy. The film is punctuated by a series of brightly coloured animations which show the protagonists in flight. The tourist-complex produces a desire for unfettered movement. This movement is part of a utopian reading of the architecture of the park as well as part of the film's engagement with telecommunications devices as means of overcoming constraint. These affective relations are reflections of the labour of the protagonists but simultaneously offer a means of evading the constraints. But the film's conclusion, the murder-suicide of the protagonists, suggests that the only escape for those inside this architectural complex is death

The second chapter will reveal the relationship between painting and cinema in the film *Still Life*. The film is set in Fengjie, a city in the Hubei Province, in an area that is on the verge of being flooded by the Three Gorges Dam project. It follows two protagonists who have travelled to the region searching for their spouses whom they have not seen for many years. Rather than focusing on classical Chinese brush and ink painting, I will explore the relationship between the film and the artworks of Socialist Realism. *Still Life* engages in a complex relationship to memory, both personal and historical, through excavating desires which are contained in paintings, objects and landscapes. This chapter will demonstrate how the film engages with the allegorical use of water as an image of aesthetic harmony in classical painting and historicises this in relation to the role of water in Chinese politics and history, particular that of the recent socialist past and the post-socialist present. *Still Life* also explores this memory structure through a series of poetic objects, liquor, cigarettes, tea and candy. These become means of initiating relations, both between characters within the film and across the formal scope of the film. The other memory-structure is that of the socialist past. *Still Life* is not nostalgic for this era but for the utopian desires which were represented within Socialist Realist artworks. Socialist Realism has a strange temporality, one which sought to generate the future through an idealised representation of the present. We will see that Jia's cinema taps into this temporal structure, historicising the present through the desires which surged through the past.

The final chapter will establish the relationship between cinema and the internet in Jia's film *A Touch of Sin*. *Sin* is composed of four narratives which are inspired by stories which circulated online on the Weibo feed, a Chinese social media site. Each story follows a protagonist who is drawn to an act or acts of violence. The film draws on the structure of the social media newsfeed while simultaneously seeking to undermine its organisational logic. The film creates an unsettling feeling of simultaneity or connection between the narratives, in part through their shared focus on the spaces of circulation and the recurrent symbols which circulate through the film. The violence of the film draws from the genre cinema of the historical martial arts or *wuxia* film and the gangster film. But this violence of cinema consistently collapses into the violence of everyday life, locating a violence at the heart of capital accumulation and the movement of the economy. The ostensibly immaterial labour of global techno-capitalism is shown to enact a violence of its own, in particular in the construction of hardware in the factories of Southern China. But the digital as a structure is also reflected in the texture of the image, shown to have a very physical relationship to spaces. The film uses the textural aesthetic of the advertising image to frame everyday spaces, linking them to the overall movement of the economic structure. Violence in *Sin* is both a reflection of the mode of production but also a means of striking back against it, of enacting a revenge against the physical and abstract structure of Chinese techno-capitalism by those who suffer within it.

Chapter One

The World (2004)

Introduction

Jia's film *The World* (2004) engages with the architectural spaces of post-socialist China and transforms cinema in the process. The film is set in The World Park in Beijing, a theme park which contains replicas of internationally famous monuments from around the world. Jia described the theme park space as a 'fantasy', stating that, 'the first time I visited, I was disoriented by all those replica monuments from all over the world concentrated into such a small space. It was as if I had entered a fairyland.' (Chan np) The film exemplifies the notion of surreal realism that I have outlined above. I will argue that it draws on the disorienting qualities which Jia mentions, heightening the already surreal atmosphere of the park. The film is inspired by the park but simultaneously works against it, drawing out relationships which are otherwise concealed by its architecture. The film shows the labour which sustains the architectural spectacle and the libidinal relationships which emerge inside the tourist complex and are shaped by life within the park.

The World is part of a wider engagement with the theme park in Chinese contemporary art, in films such as Stephen Chow's successful blockbuster *Mermaid* (2016), Yan Lianke's novel *Lenin's Kisses* (2004) and Cao Fei's online artwork *RMB City* (2008). *The World* is also part of a series of films depicting Beijing, from blockbuster films such as *Saving Mr Wu* (2015) to the independent films of the Sixth Generation which Jenny Kwok-Wah Lau has dubbed the Beijing Trilogy (*Good Morning Beijing* (1990) by Zhang Nuanxin, *Beijing Bastards* (1992) by Zhang Yuan and *City Paradise* (1999) by Tang Dalian), but which can be extended to include Wang Xiaoshuai's *Beijing Bicycle* (2001) and Li Yu's *Lost in Beijing* (2007).¹ I will argue that in *The World* there is a collapse between the theme park and the city. Both are understood to spatialise economic and social relationships and both are designed following a logic of spectacular visual display.

The film follows the lives of two workers in the park, Tao (Zhao Tao) and her boyfriend Taisheng (Chen Taisheng) who are migrant workers who have travelled to Beijing from the provinces. China has the largest internal labour migration in the world with millions of workers travelling across the country every year. They are known as the *liudong renkou* or floating labour population.² As Li Zhang notes, these labourers arrive in cities with almost nothing and, as shown in the film, are often employed in low skilled jobs such as construction or in the growing service industry. Their lives are defined by the notion of *chuqu*, which Leslie T. Chang defines as the desire to 'go out'. (Chang 11) Jia has been described as a 'cinematic migrant worker' (*dianying mingong*) because of his focus on the lives of the floating labourers of China. Indeed, this film is his first work made outside of his home province of Shanxi: he, too, is irresistibly drawn to the mega-city of Beijing. The film links the circulation of bodies for labour to another prominent mode of circulation in post-socialist China, that of the tourist industry. Interestingly, Jia's first student film, *A Day in Beijing*, also depicted tourists looking and milling about Tiananmen Square over the course of a day.

1 For a discussion of the place of Beijing in Sixth Generation cinema see Jenny Kwok-Wah Lau 'Chinese Cinema Revisits the City' in *Chinese Connections* (2009) ed. Tan See Kam, 220-233, *The Urban Generation* ed. Zhang Zhen particularly Zhang Zhen 'Bearing Witness' 1-48, Berenice Reynaud 'Zhang Yuan's Imaginary Cities' 264-294 and Shuqin Cui 'Ning Ying's Beijing Trilogy' 241-263.

2 For a sociological theorisation of the phenomena of migrant labour in post-socialist China, see Li Zhang's *Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power and Social Networks within China's Floating Population* (2001). For an engagement with the role of female workers in this process see Leslie T. Chang's *Factory Girls: Voices from the Heart of Modern China* (2008). Sheng Keyi's novel *Northern Girls* (2004) also focuses on the experience of female migrant labourers who have travelled from the north and are living in Shenzhen in southern China. See also Fan Lixin's documentary *Last Train Home* (2009).

Unsurprisingly China has the largest internal tourism industry in the world.³ Tourism was one of the industries which Deng Xiaoping singled out in his 1979 Huang Shan speech as a significant area for expansion in the process of economic liberalisation. (Honggen Xiao 805) A famous image shows Deng standing on Huang Shan (Yellow Mountain), smiling with his trousers rolled up. (See Fig.1) Here the leader becomes a tourist, encouraging the people to do the same.⁴ As Luk Tak-chuen notes, tourism had to be industrialised (*chanyehua*), as a means of stimulating economic development and improving local infrastructure. (165) While tourism began around sites of national historical significance (such as the Imperial City), or sites of famed natural beauty (like Huang Shan), theme parks soon became a popular way to capitalise on China's growing middle class.⁵ These parks combine visual attractions, like the replica buildings in the World Park, with entertainment spectacles, such as the extended dance sequences or parades shown in the film. These spaces rely on the cheap labour made available by China's floating population and are part of the rapid growth of the Chinese service industry.

Theme parks have also been part of the ultra-rapid urbanisation which has swept through China since Deng's economic liberalisation. In *The World*, the theme park allegorises the growth of Chinese cities in general. But it is also an element in the growth of these cities. As Shien Hong notes, 'the practise of developing theme parks that bind tourism and real estate in urban settings is preferred by property developers [and] local government ... adding substantial value to the land and boosting rapid urbanisation'. (102) In *The World* the boundary between the theme park and the city is indiscernible. The surreal architecture of the park is merely one element in the surreal architecture of the post-socialist city. The copy-cat approach to architecture, exemplified in the World Park, has been the template for the building of entire zones which mimic famous European cities. There is a Chinese Venice (Dalian), an Austrian village called Hallstatt (Luoyong), the British themed Thames Town (Sonjiang) and most famously a deserted Paris (Tianchudeng).⁶ (See Fig.2) But rather than reading these architectural forms as copies, we should understand them to visualise a particularly Chinese form of globalism. As Bianca Bosker argues these cities do not merely copy the originals but improve upon them, by creating a new model or map of the world in which the entire earth is contained inside the larger structure of China. (Bosker 68)

Academic engagements with *The World* have narrowly interpreted the film as a critique of globalisation, focusing on the film's title and the park's caricatural approach to nation and ethnicity.⁷ I will argue instead that the film provides a critique of the labour relations of China's new service industry through an extended cinematic engagement with the architectural complex of the Park. I argue that the theme of the park and the film is therefore not the global so much as it is travel. But not travel as a touristic sojourn or as the struggle of the floating worker, but travel understood as pure movement, outside of the

3 Recently Chinese external tourism abroad has been the subject of a series of incredibly successful comedies by Xu Zheng which satirise the middle class, see *Lost in Thailand* (2012) and *Lost in Hong Kong* (2015) .

4 For a discussion of Deng's Huang Shan speech and its impact see Shien Zhong 'Variations on a Theme Park in China' (2014) *Asia Pacific World* 101-122 and Xiao Honggen. 'Deng Xiaoping and Tourism Development in China' (2006) *Tourism Management* 803-814.

5 For a discussion of the Chinese theme park including a discussion of the World Park see Geremie Barmé 'Archaeotainment' (1995) *Third Text* 29-38. See also Barmé *Shades of Mao* (1996) for a discussion of the Mao themed park in Shaoshan. See also Thomas Campanella 'Theme Parks and the Landscape of Consumption' *The Concrete Dragon* (2008) and Tim Oakes 'The Village as Theme Park' *Translocal China* (2006) 166-192.

6 For an discussion of the phenomena of Chinese copy-cat architecture see Bianca Bosker *Original Copies* (2013), Jeoren de Kloet 'Europe as Facade' *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 58-74 and Calvin Hui 'Decaffeinated England' (2016) *Verge* 76-83. For a more general discussion of the role of the copy in contemporary China see Yu Hua 'Copycat' *China in Ten Words* (2012) 181-202.

7 For an example of this approach see Arianne Gaetano's 'Rural Women and Modernity: Seeing Jia Zhangke's *The World*' (2009) *Visual Anthropology Review* 25-39 or Keith Wagner's 'Jia Zhangke's Neoliberal China: the commodification and the dissipation of the proletariat in *The World*' (2013) *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 361-377.

constraints of architecture and labour. This desire is initiated by the architecture in which the protagonists work. Jia notes that the surreal quality of the park extends to the lives of the workers within it stating, 'people's lives within that space are also quite surreal. When I spoke to the women who perform at the park, they said they had danced the same dance there every day for the past three years. While they felt a kind of freedom in being able to randomly enter into different parts of the world, they also felt trapped in this insular environment' (Chan np) This sentiment encapsulates the film's approach to architecture, as both a constraint initiating habit and repetition and as an opening outward into new desires which cannot be fulfilled by their lives in the service industry. The film is also punctuated by short animated sequences which follow characters communicating on their mobile phones. The phone creates an alternate architecture, which allows the protagonists to navigate the theme park-city but also to imagine a life completely free of the constraints of labour. The film asks: what happens when architecture designed to be looked at is inhabited? *The World* shows the manner in which this architecture is both a site of entrapment and an initiator of utopian desiring as well as a stimulus for cinematic invention.

I will first briefly outline the relationship between architecture and cinema drawing on Walter Benjamin's notion of the affinity between the distracted manner in which buildings and cinema are perceived. I will argue that the film explores what happens when architecture designed to be looked at is inhabited and the manner in which this displaces the distinction between the tourist and the worker, leading to a new mode of navigating the city. Secondly, I will demonstrate the manner in which the film is inspired by the park while simultaneously working to expose what is concealed, through its focus on the backstage spaces of the park. Finally, I will argue that the use of animation within the film serves to visualise the invisible relations at work within the city, both the labour relations and the utopian desire for travel initiated by amorous communication through the mobile phone. Jia's cinematic practice evolves through its interaction with the architectural complex of the park, transformed by the utopian energies which move through the space but simultaneously transforming the park itself by its ability to visualise the hidden relations which sustain it.

I Cinema and Architecture - The City as Theme Park and the Worker as Tourist

Cinema and architecture are two modes of shaping perception. In *The World* this connection is explicit as the film navigates the architectural spaces of the park and Beijing. The film brings out the relationships which the park and the city silently organise, both creating spaces and dispersing them, tapping into the desires generated by architecture while producing new relationships which architecture conceals or forecloses. In the following section I will use Benjamin's notion of optical and haptic perception to note the manner in which *The World* frames the view of the theme park city and demonstrate how cinema is an instrument to disrupt the purely optical navigation of buildings. Finally, I will argue that in *The World* the theme park and the city collapse into one another, with the workers' vision of the city creating a new relationship to the seemingly banal spaces of post-socialist Beijing.

The relationship between cinema and architecture was famously articulated by Walter Benjamin who compared the modes of spectatorship initiated by the two forms. In the final section of his canonical essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1939), he argues that cinema and architecture both generate the same form of spectatorship.⁸ He writes, 'Architecture provides the prototype for a work of art that is received in a state of distraction and by the collective'. (Benjamin 2015 239) These two qualities, distraction and collectivity, are dialectically opposed to the qualities of immersion and individuality, which characterise the perceptual relation to older art forms such as painting or sculpture. If the older art form was perceived directly, the film is engaged with indirectly, or in a 'state of distraction'. If the older work immerses the individual viewer into it, the collective audience of a film 'absorbs the work into itself'. (Benjamin 2015 239)

⁸ For an extended engagement of the relationship between architecture and cinema see Giuliana Bruno *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture and Film* (2002) and Sergei Eisenstein 'Montage and Architecture' (1940) *Assemblage* 110-131.

Benjamin continues by characterising architecture as being received in two modes: that of how a space is used, which he characterises as the tactile mode of perception and how a space is viewed, which is the optical mode. (240) The optical mode in architecture is distinguished from the visual perception of other aesthetic forms. Unlike a painting which generates visual attentiveness, architecture, experienced in a state of distraction, is less likely to create a relationship of aesthetic contemplation. Instead it creates habits, habitual ways of seeing (in the visual mode) and habitual ways of moving (in the tactile). Cinema could become, or already was, another mode of transforming habits which, for Benjamin, gave it a utopian potential.

Benjamin contrasts the distracted-haptic mode of perceiving buildings with the gaze of the tourist. He writes, ‘no idea of such reception is conveyed by imagining it as taking place collectedly as among tourists ogling famous buildings’. (Benjamin 2015 240) According to Benjamin the tourist sees the city as a collection of visual attractions to look at and be photographed in front of. The tourist gaze is central to *The World*, in fact the entire World Park has been built upon this premise. We can extend this notion of the tourist gaze to the new skyline of Beijing, with buildings designed by internationally acclaimed architects, such as Rem Koolhaas’ CCTV building or the Zaha Hadid firm’s Galaxy Soho complex.⁹ (See Fig.3) As Hal Foster notes, such buildings are created to become ‘instant icons’ and designed with visibility and the image in mind. (Foster 24) For Benjamin tourists are too attentive to architecture. They never experience the tactile perception ‘which does not occur through the medium of attentiveness’ but rather through habit. (Benjamin 2015 240) This habitual use also determines optical reception which ‘occurs very much less in a state of close attention than in one of casual observation’. (Benjamin 2015 240) But part of the design of the architecture of contemporary Beijing is to encourage this touristic vision. *The World* undertakes a complex navigation of these spaces and of the modes of perception which they inaugurate. The protagonists who live and work in the park occupy a strange position, they engage in a tactile relationship to a space that has been built purposefully to accommodate only the touristic engagement with architecture. By using the park as a place for everyday interactions the protagonists inevitably forge a new relationship to the city as a whole.

The juxtaposition of the perceptual modes of the tourist and the worker is exemplified in the scene in which friends from Taisheng’s hometown in Shanxi come to visit him in the park. They have been drawn to Beijing by the search for work and the expectation of assistance from an old friend. The scene begins with a shot showing the park’s replica of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. (See Fig.4) We see the structure surrounded by tourists standing in an archetypal pose, with two hands raised as if they are holding up the tower. The angle of the camera framing the shot is not in the same position as that of the camera taking the photo. A gap is opened up which highlights not only the presence of the camera shooting the film, but registers the presence of other cameras and their lines of sight within the shot. The visual illusion, in which the hands appear to be holding up the tower, breaks down and instead we see people who seem to be leaning against nothing. In this sequence the cinematic camera works against architecture, disrupting its function as a photographic backdrop. Cinema opposes the photograph not only by introducing the flow of time into the image, but through a particular kind of angle with which to view time. Taisheng’s friends are shown walking through the scene in the background of the photograph. They pass by the Tower of Pisa, Saint Peter’s Basilica and Manhattan. These new workers occupy a position between the tourist and the worker. They move through the park as they would the city of Beijing itself, marvelling at its novelty but in the same way they would any part of the new city.

The theme park and the city continue to blur throughout the film. The most prominent mode in which this occurs is through the framing of the park with the city in

9 For a discussion of the role of architecture and political authority in relation to Imperial China see Geremie Barmé’s book on the Forbidden City which describes the cosmological character of the palace’s location as the centre of the universe. See Barmé *The Forbidden City* (2008).

the background. When Tao travels through the park on the monorail, the buildings of Beijing are shown behind the Arc De Triomphe and the Great Pyramid of Giza. (See Fig.5) In the title sequence of the film, the Eiffel Tower is shown as part of the skyline while in the foreground a man collects rubbish wearing a bamboo hat. Later the film returns to the Eiffel Tower from the top and its view is predominantly that of the buildings of the city which surround the park. As I will discuss in more depth, the park itself is an element of the city, with workers living inside the complex. Their spare time, lunch breaks and leisure time are spent inside the park structure. Not only does this allow the film to explore how the park's architectural complex is maintained through the process of labour, but it changes the way the characters manoeuvre through the greater area of Beijing.

The city of Beijing as navigated by the worker is revealed as a space of production and a source of visual pleasure. This approach to the city is evidenced in a scene where Tao visits Taisheng's friends from the provinces, Sanlai and his brother who's nicknamed Little Sister, at the building site where they work. The camera frames Tao walking through the building site following her as she looks at the construction in process. (Fig.6) Here we see Beijing as a space of perpetual construction, a city in a state of permanent expansion. This is also signalled through shots of cranes which are a permanent aspect of the city's skyline. As Zhang Zhen notes, 'the trademark of Urban cinema is...the bulldozer [and] the building crane.' (3) Tao moves through the building site like the tourist moving through the park, marvelling at the masses of workers and the piles of materials. She remains sharply in focus, while the background of workers and buildings blur behind her. The camera follows her onto the buildings' foundation, where cement pylons and steel beams emerge from the base. In a move that will recur throughout Jia's late work, we see the building not only in the process of construction (or destruction) but as a cross-section. The foundations and joining elements are exposed. The scaffolding which surrounds the building maps its exterior while the exposed skeleton of the structure provides an access point beyond the facade. But at the same time as construction is defamiliarised and the process of 'urban development' shown to be a process of production, it is simultaneously aestheticised. Firstly, internally by Tao, who when asked by Little Sister what she thinks of the site, replies 'It's beautiful'. Secondly, by the camera, which frames the site in the warm light of the setting sun. This scene features one of the most exquisite uses of natural light in the film, in sharp contrast to the dim backstage interiors of the park, the harsh fluorescent light of the entertainment spectacle, and the grey and discoloured atmosphere of smoggy Beijing. The tourist gaze begins to evolve within the film, from the tourist gaze as Benjamin describes it (as non-cinematic and ogling in relation to the tourists in the park) to one which derives a new attentiveness and defamiliarised approach to architecture in general.

The scene at the construction site will be replicated later in the film but with different effects. Little Sister dies on the building site and his parents come from the provinces to collect compensation for his death. They are shown sitting silently at the construction site, undertaking a vigil for his death. (See Fig.7) They bear witness to the underside of China's perpetual production, recalling the many who have died in industrial accidents in the rush to build the new China and its urban sprawl. Their appearance also brings the provinces back into the frame which have been depopulated by the mass migration to the cities. Little Sister's father wears a blue Mao suit, appearing like an ageing character from a Socialist Realist poster. Sitting silently on the construction site his parents are almost like time travellers from another epoch. They do not appear to marvel at the new Beijing and instead look on sadly.¹⁰ In these sequences the utopian is never far from the dystopic, every vision appears compromised, and yet every compromised vision simultaneously slips back into the utopian register of potential beauty.

¹⁰ This section of the film is preceded by a title card which reads 'Tokyo Story', a reference to the film of the same title by Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu (1903-1963), who Jia has acknowledged as an important influence on his work. In *Tokyo Story* two parents come from the countryside to visit their adult children in the city and receive a cold reception. The generational gap in Ozu's film, signifying in part the transformations of post-war Japan, serves as a template in *The World* which is intensified by the transformations of post-socialist China which Little Sister's parents have witnessed.

There is a perpetual slippage between the tourist and the worker. The worker who travels to find labour is of course travelling for a very different reason to the tourist who travels for pleasure. But at the same time the worker who encounters the new city is fascinated by its novelty. And for the worker who lives inside the park, it somehow remains a source of fascination, a space to inhabit and a means of orienting oneself to the rest of the city, finding in Beijing a source of visual delight. This delight is never pure, or unadulterated; it is tied irremediably to death, the living death of labour and the prospect of organic death which lurks within the production process. *The World* constantly juxtaposes these visions, these ways of looking, which emerge from ways of inhabiting space. It is a materialist cinema, in which labour organises vision, but a materialism open to the flights of desire which emerge from these processes.

II Mapping Junkspace - Corridors and Backstage Labour

In *The World*, cinema is both a means of mapping architectural structures as well as a way of undermining them. Jia's cinema adopts strategies from the architecture of the Park while simultaneously visualising relations and desire which are otherwise concealed. One manner in which the film does this is through the extended engagement with the backstage area of the park, particularly the corridors which connect its varying structures. In mapping the backstage areas of the park, the film shows the labour which sustains the architectural and entertainment complex of the park. The film also shows the forms of intimacy which develop in the park and which are undeniably influenced by the spaces in which the workers live. In the relationships, of both friendship and romance, we see the way in which the park complex is both a site for affection but simultaneously a space of exploitation and manipulation.

The backstage areas of the park correspond to what Rem Koolhaas has described as junkspace. Koolhaas argues that the modernist paradigm of rational architecture and planned urban development has been abandoned in the 21st century city. Instead, architecture and urbanism proceed haphazardly. Junkspace is largely composed of generic repeatable forms, which are frequently impermanent, constantly upgraded and later demolished to make way for new spatial organisations. Koolhaas's earlier work valorised the joyous 'delirium' of architectural multiplicity and perpetual transformation. He has since come to argue that disorganisation has itself become the sign of a new order.¹¹ In *The World*, Jia never ceases to frame and reframe junkspace. (Fig.8) These anonymous spaces, the corridors, dressing rooms, dormitories and hotel rooms, are as crucial to the architectural logic of the film as the stages and monuments of the park. The corridors contain prominent piping, which for Koolhaas is another fundamental element of junkspace, as air-conditioning and heating systems become the primary organisational principle.¹² (Koolhaas 176) The control of temperature is what makes these spaces both bearable and liveable, given the poor insulation and cheap materials used to fabricate these buildings. In a scene which explicitly gestures to this climatological condition we see Tao dressed in a raincoat huddled in her bed.

The frequent tracking shots down corridors represent one way in which Jia's cinema utilises the structure of junkspace as a formal mode. The corridor becomes an internal framing device, a kind of stage or border of its own. This play between the stage and the border (between urban and provincial and national and international) occurs in a particularly important sequence which links the corridor to travel, labour and the control

11 For Koolhaas's earlier position advocating architectural pluralism see *Delirious New York* (1978), for a valorisation of the anonymous architecture of the new metropolis see 'The Generic City' (1995) *S, M, L, XL* and for his more recent critical turn see 'Junkspace' (2002) *October* 175-190.

12 Interestingly piping, in particular air-conditioning piping, features prominently in Thai director Apichatpong Weerastheakul's film *Syndromes and a Century* (2006). The film concludes with a haunting image of an air-conditioning pipe, with the camera slowly moving into the pipe. The pipe here works to both gesture towards the unspoken historical horrors which are concealed beneath the facade of Thailand's repressive regime and as a more mysterious symbol of architectural horror, as the pipe is contained in the basement of a hospital.

of bodies. The scene begins with a shot of the empty corridor outside of a dressing room. (Fig.9) A group of Russian women who have just arrived to work in the park are ushered into the corridor by the man who presumably organised their trip to Beijing. He instructs them to give him their passports for 'safe-keeping', obviously as a means of controlling their movements. We see here an example of how the official mechanisms which control circulation, such as the passport, are co-opted and manipulated by unofficial agents. One woman, Anna, refuses and the camera uneasily shifts, panning slightly but hemmed in by the tight uncomfortable space. The contemporary city here is not a prison, but a series of doorways, leading off a corridor. We can or cannot enter certain rooms, we require identification, a keycard or a passport and the corridor decides what door we may walk through. The same camera movement is replicated in another corridor sequence when Tao is propositioned by a wealthy Hong Kong businessman in the kitsch brightly lit corridor of a karaoke bar. As Tiantian Zheng argues, sex work intersects with the service work of the entertainment complex (Zheng 6). These interstitial spaces are given a certain menace, through the camera's slow ominous pan.¹³ The corridor becomes a silent witness and a means of enforcing order, made all the more sinister by its banality.

The relationship between the entertainment spectacle and the corridors of the backstage area emerges explicitly in the opening sequence of the film. The camera follows Tao as she runs through the backstage area looking for a bandaid. (Fig.10) The camera's sharp, jolting movements are determined by the winding passageways of the backstage area. The camera serves to bring out the affective qualities which emerge inside these corridors, namely stress and anxiety. The camera's motion evokes the quality of the temporality of Tao's labour. While Jia's *Hometown Trilogy* evoked the slow time of repetitive labour and boredom, *The World* shows how stress is the engine of the service economy through the use of increasingly mobile cinematography. The only other explicit acknowledgement of this stress is Tao's retort to a co-worker who says 'Not so loud you'll wake the dead', to which she replies 'I'll kill them then.' The corridors appear once again to take on a haunting quality, and indeed the remark resonates with the film's morbid conclusion. The badly designed backstage area only increases the anxiety. Stress is registered at the level of the body and is rarely confronted directly or at the level of language. The camera, unlike language, is capable of capturing stress, it gives back to experience the stress which is otherwise concealed or contained by architecture. The film then cuts to Tao performing an elaborate Bollywood dance routine onstage, smiling broadly and flanked by two enormous screens which replicate the dancing on the stage. This spectacle is shown to be the product of huge organisations of labour, of energies which the architecture otherwise conceals (in a later sequence we see performers practising dance routines in the crowded corridors). After the performance the film cuts once more to the backstage area, and the camera slowly tracks down the empty corridor. The music from the stage continues to play over the ominous tracking shot back through the corridor.

The film also shows the manner in which labour and leisure collapse in the backstage space. The film can thus be understood to be a variant on the back-stage musical genre, in which the performances are interspersed with the drama of the performers' personal lives.¹⁴ This is another aspect of the collapse between the city and the theme-park discussed above, as the service economy is driven by affective relations which are inseparable from social relations in general. This is evidenced in the park's spatial organisation, with the camera

13 Jia's exploration of the intersection between service work, domestic labour and sex work owes much to Chantal Akerman's masterpiece *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). Both directors bring out the ominous quality of everyday spaces but, unlike Jia, Akerman uses an incredibly still camera and the extreme long shots, techniques closer to those Jia uses in his *Hometown Trilogy*.

14 The backstage musical *42nd Street* (1933) by Lloyd Bacon and Busby Berkeley shows the manner in which the musical spectacle is produced by backstage labour (both rehearsals and personal relationships) and like *The World* shows how this spectacle creates and sustains utopian desires. Another important influence on *The World* is the work of Taiwanese New Wave director Tsai Ming-liang (1957-), who frequently engages with the musical as a form in such works as *The Hole* (1998) and *The Wayward Cloud* (2005). Like *The World* these films show the breakdown between performance and personal life in the new forms of affective labour which are so central to the late capitalist economy.

framing workers' lives within the backstage area of the park, sleeping in group dormitories and eating together in cafeterias. This heightened proximity is framed as fostering forms of intense intimacy. Tao forms a friendship with Anna, one of the Russian migrant workers who comes to the park. Anna says, 'We don't speak the same language but you are my friend'. This kind of communal intimacy and camaraderie between the migrant workers is also evident in the celebration when two of the workers, Wei and Niu, get married. The women toast to 'History's great beauties! Yang Guifei, Pan Jinlian, Marilyn Monroe, Madonna! World peace, women's rights and faces without freckles!'¹⁵ The toast to the *femme fatales* of China and Western pop culture is an essential element of Jia's cinema, which shows the new forms of expression in post-socialist China in which traditional culture is incorporated into a wider pop vernacular.¹⁶ But the toast is also an element of the bonding between female workers whom the film shows to be constantly subject to exploitation in the collapse between labour and leisure.

The backstage space is the site of many of these gendered conflicts. Earlier in the film we see Wei and Niu arguing in the backstage area, while other co-workers look on and offer advice. There is a logic of performance at work in these relationships, replicating their labour as actors and entertainers. Niu is incredibly jealous, he is shown angrily confronting Wei and eventually setting his jacket on fire in a performance of hysterical self-destruction. At the wedding celebration he calls her his 'Statue of Liberty', referencing the monuments of the park. The park is thus shown to govern libidinal relationships. We see Tao and Taisheng's relationship play out in these same spaces. (Fig.11) Tao sits on Taisheng's lap in the dormitory while other workers stand around watching or talking. When they want privacy they must hire a hotel room, where Taisheng complains that Tao is 'too old to be playing the virgin'. She is chastised at the level of performance, she should perform better as a woman and as a lover. Later we see her cleaning Taisheng's uniform in the washing area of the living space. The libidinal relationships are therefore shown to intersect with labour relations, replicating their logic of performance and gender relations.

At times these libidinal relations are incredibly overt, such as when Tao's co-worker, Youyou, embarks on a relationship with their boss and is swiftly promoted. But more often the film shows how the affective labour of performance intersects with personal relationships and other forms of labour, in particular sex work. In one sequence Tao is invited by one of her co-workers to a 'party' where they will 'try to have a good time'. They have been employed to entertain wealthy businessmen in a karaoke bar. As Tiantian Zheng notes, the karaoke bar is a locus of much of the sex trade in post-socialist China (56). Again labour and leisure collapse, as she must smile if she is going to be a successful hostess.¹⁷ As noted above, she is confronted by one of the men who tries to proposition her in a corridor. In the toilet of the bar Tao sees Anna, who is now a prostitute. Tao begins to cry uncontrollably, unable to articulate her despair. The injunction to smile breaks down and the camera frames her crying in the cramped bathroom, while Anna tries to speak to her in Russian. It is important to note that this theme of the role of gendered labour in the service economy runs throughout the films of the Sixth Generation and will recur in Jia's later

15 Yang Guifei was one of the 'Four Beauties of Ancient China', an imperial consort whose story was adapted into the poem 'Song of Everlasting Sorrow' by the Tang Dynasty poet Bai Juyi. It has also been adapted for film by Japanese director Kenji Mizoguchi in *Princess Yang Kwei-Fei* (1955) and Hong-Kong Director Li Han-hsiang in *The Magnificent Concubine* (1962). Pan Jinlian is a character from Chinese literature, famous for poisoning her husband, and the patron goddess of brothels and prostitutes. She is also extensively referenced in Chinese director Feng Xiaogang's recent film *I Am Not Madame Bovary* (2017), which also features scenes set in the World Park.

16 On the intersection between traditional and modern representations of women in Chinese art and popular culture see the work of Dai Jinhua collected in *Cinema and Desire: Feminist Marxism and Cultural Politics in the Work of Dai Jinhua* (2002) ed. Jing Wang and Tani Barlow.

17 Yan Hairong cites the notion of *suzhi* which denotes 'civility and self-discipline' as an essential value in the new Chinese service economy. (2) The notion of 'quality' also denotes a sense of cultivation, which implies both a modern sophistication and good breeding in the eugenic sense. In *The World* this 'quality' required of service labourers is often indicated by a forced smile on the face of actress Zhao Tao, whose incredible performance conveys the difficult necessity of maintaining this perpetual air of civility.

films, in particular *A Touch of Sin* (see Chapter Three).¹⁸ The relationships formed between workers is shown to be powerful, but they do not provide an escape from the demands of labour. The libidinal investment in love and friendship is inseparable from the investment in service work, which is intensified by the organisation of the theme-park city.

III Animated Communication and Travel in Itself

Animation in *The World* creates an alternate architecture, initiating a virtual space which corresponds to the mobile phone and its promise of unfettered communication. It emerges as a paradoxical space imbued with the promise of flight from the constraints of the theme park-city and its logic of labour, yet is simultaneously conditioned by its demands. I will argue that this contradiction is also central to animation as a whole and Jia's use of it here shows the increasing complexity of his cinematic practice. The animated sequences are triggered by Tao or Taisheng receiving a message on their phones. (Fig.12) The text message is central to their relationship, as it is for all lovers in the 21st century. The animations thus visualise their communication, with each other and with others, including Taisheng's with another woman, Qun, whom he is seeing in secret. This animated-communication reflects the contradictory position of love within the film as discussed above. Just as service labour creates new forms of intimacy so does the constant communication channel of the mobile phone. In *The World*, animation visualises the invisible processes of networked communication which sustain 21st century techno-capitalism. It is thus both the theme-park by other means, with its ominous corridors and vulgar icons, and a dream city which exceeds the park, created by the desire to escape the constraints of the city and atomised individuality, an impossible flight which reaches its apotheosis in death. The initial fantasy of escape promised by the movement from the countryside to the city is intensified and expressed through the animated form.

In order to understand this dual function of animation within the film we must briefly look into the theorisation of animation. Russian filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein (1898 - 1948) was a strident champion of animation, particularly the works of Walt Disney, a position which seems remarkable given Disney's historical role in the dissemination of American ideological dominance. Eisenstein's interest in animation was an expression of what he found most powerful about cinema in general. That is, the ability to show transformation on screen and then the ability for this transformation to be actualised in the viewing audience. Animation took this understanding of cinema to its most extreme point, showing bodies completely unbound from the constraints of reality. Eisenstein theorised that animation expressed a 'rejection of the constraint of form, fixed once and for all, [a] freedom from ossification, an ability to take on any form dynamically.' (9) For Eisenstein animation contained an irrepressible utopian impulse, outside of any ideological content, and Disney films formally expressed the desire for a non-alienated relationship to the body and space, revealing the capacity for bodily and spatial transformation. In *The World* we see this when animation takes over the screen, transforming the dull and discoloured architecture into bright colours. It is also evident when we see Tao flying over Beijing, no longer constrained by the reality of her life within the park. (Fig.13) Capitalism in Eisenstein's analysis was understood to be stagnant and stultifying, presenting mechanised and standardised forms of subjectivity. But as Keith Broadfoot and Rex Butler note, animation and its ability to show perpetual transformation ('the ability to dynamically assume any

18 Sixth Generation films which focus on gendered labour in the service economy include female director Li Yu's *Lost in Beijing* (2007) which follows a young woman who works in a massage parlour and is sexually assaulted by her boss. Cui Xiuwen's video artwork *Ladies' Room* (2000) also depicts the circulation of female bodies and focuses on the bathroom as a kind of backstage space, echoing the scene in the bathroom in *The World* discussed above. They also mark a sharp distinction to the triumphalist cinema of the Fifth Generation in which the historical mistreatment of women, depicted in films such as *Raise the Red Lantern*, was relegated to the feudal past, and implied that traditional patriarchal forms of subjugation had been relegated to the dustbin of history. These newer films can be linked to growing political activism around the treatment of women in Chinese society, for example that the 'Feminist Five' of Li Tingting, Wei Tingting, Zheng Churan, Wu Rongrong and Wang Men who were arrested in 2015. See Zheng Wang 'Detention of the Feminist Five' (2015) *Feminist Studies* 476-482.

form?) can be understood to be the perfect cipher for the process of capitalism and its logic of equivalence in which any object or practice can be integrated into its dynamic process of accumulation. (Broadfoot, Butler 272)

The history of Chinese animation reflects this dialectic, evoking both utopian aesthetic impulses as well as forming a central pillar of the contemporary culture industry. This contradiction can be expressed through a comparison of the art animation of the Wan brothers and the current Computer Generated Imagery (CGI) industry in China today. Wan Laiming and Wan Guchan were pioneers of animation in China, creating the first feature-length animated film, *Princess Iron Fan*, in 1941 and the first colour animation, *Piggy Eats Watermelon*, in 1958.¹⁹ The approach of the Wan brothers drew on Disney's animation, particularly *Snow White* (1937), while also utilising Chinese folk tales for its subject matter (rather than Disney's use of European fairytales).²⁰ (Fig.14) The animation industry, like cinema in general, was disrupted by the War of Liberation and the subsequent reorganisation and nationalisation of the film industry. The work of the Wan Brothers is evoked explicitly in Jia's film, *Unknown Pleasures*. A teenage couple are watching the film *Havoc in Heaven* (1964). Bin Bin (Zhao Weiwei) exclaims to his date 'Wouldn't it be great to be the Monkey King? He doesn't have to worry about his parents.' The utopianism of animation is thus already evoked by Jia in *Pleasures* and provides an insight into understanding its deployment in *The World*.

The evocation of escape through animation is more straightforward in the earlier film. In *Pleasures*, the lithe balletic figure of the Monkey King travelling on a cloud is free from the constraints of life in a small industrial town. The space of animation is separated visually from the space of the film more generally, what crosses over is the desire for freedom expressed by the Monkey King. In *The World* we are within a world that is saturated with animation, where the boundaries between live action and virtual animated space have completely broken down. This is evident in the ubiquitous appearance of screens within the film. (Fig.15) We see advertisements for the park playing on television sets on public transport, while huge animated advertisements are shown on screens in the train station. The park itself is also full of screens, which accompany the performances in which Tao and her co-workers take part. Animation in the film is a way of emphasising the already surreal effect of life within the theme-park city. It is also a way of visualising mobile communication, as noted above.

Animation in *The World*, while appearing segmented from the live-action sections of the film, is in fact implicit in every scene. Rosalind Krauss argues, in her canonical essay on what she describes as 'the post-medium condition', that film cannot be understood apart from animation any longer due to the use of CGI in contemporary cinema (Krauss 33). But we can expand this to include the digital filmic image in general, of which the *The World* is one example. The animated film and the live-action film are indistinguishable, as every cinematic image can be broken down into its component digital parts and manipulated frame by frame at a micro-level. Therefore the 'digital texture' of the film is present regardless of the appearance of explicit animation. While CGI is explicitly evoked in Jia's next film, *Still Life*, one cannot properly situate the use of animation in *The World* without taking into account the place of CGI within contemporary mainstream cinema. Not only is CGI central to the aesthetic form of the Chinese blockbuster, but CGI is also a central

19 For a discussion of the work of the Wan Brothers see Marie-Claire Quiquemelle 'The Wan Brothers and Sixty Years of Chinese Animation' in *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema* (1991), 175-186 and for an extended history of Chinese animation see Sean Macdonald *Animation in China* (2016).

20 Interestingly one of the most important artists involved in Disney films in its early period was a Chinese émigré Tyrus Wong (1910-2016) whose work was influenced by Song Dynasty landscape paintings. This is particularly evident in *Bambi* (1942), whose backgrounds are composed of minimal brushstrokes and colour washes.

aspect of China's contribution to the international film industry.²¹ A parallel can be drawn between tourism and the CGI industry (which is broadly part of the technology-oriented economy), both being aspects of the entertainment complex which have grown exponentially in China in the late 20th and 21st centuries. Similarly, both industries are understood as part of the virtual economy in the jargon of neo-liberal economists and yet both rely on an enormous amount of material labour.²² In fact China is a site of much of the material labour which produces the so-called digital economy of global techno-capitalism, from the production of hardware in the Pearl River Delta Basin to the running of enormous server systems to support internet finance (I will discuss the production of hardware in more depth in Chapter Three on *A Touch of Sin*). While the animation used in *The World* is not the kind of smoothly rendered CGI central to the formal grammar of the contemporary blockbuster, it nonetheless reflects the broader digital imaginary of contemporary China, from the political speeches filled with jargon around digital innovation to the working lives of those who produce the parts essential to the technological spectacle, to the digital environments which people navigate through their mobile phones.

Animation therefore has a dual function within the film, to reflect the melancholy of life in the theme-park city and to gesture towards a utopian space which goes beyond it. This dialectic reflects the film's approach to romance facilitated by communications. It is an alternate means of navigating the architectural space of the theme-park city and yet it also reflects the difficult position of the characters who live inside it. The mobile phone is part of the more general mode of circulation which has led to the growth of the Chinese economy in the late 20th and early 21st century. The phone is a way for migrant workers to communicate with those at home, as well as with others in the city.²³ This understanding of the phone as a medium for linking long distances recurs throughout Jia's films, from the novelty of the installation of a phone in the village in *Platform* to the ubiquitous smart phone in *A Touch of Sin*. In an interview Jia suggested that networked communication has robbed the Chinese people of 'the sense of yearning between lovers, which was the most romantic aspect of Chinese poetry.' (Lee np) But *The World* seems to undermine Jia's own sentiment, or render the situation far more complicated. Networked communication has not destroyed the sense of yearning, it has instead transformed it, creating a situation in which the beloved is perpetually within reach but nonetheless constantly at a distance. The spatio-temporal coordinates of love have expanded. If perhaps the poetic potential of longing has been lost, it now falls to the cinema to engage with the new spatio-temporality of yearning in the 21st century.

The film uses animation to show the collapsed spatio-temporality of networked communication. The promise of networked communication is that the distance of space and time can be conquered by the mobile phone. The architecture of the Park, with its slogan 'See the Entire World in a Single Day', promises the same thing. The animations frequently relate to movement. We see Taisheng galloping through the city on a horse or Tao flying over the city. Movement is of course at the heart of the film. All the characters are migrant

21 The briefest scan through the highest grossing Chinese films of the past five years reinforces this, from *Monster Hunt* (2015) to *Mermaid* (2016). Along with this, explicitly animated films, such as a recent *Monkey King* film series have been incredibly successful. China's animation BaseFx is one such studio which works on CGI and visual effects for American cinema and television, winning an Emmy award for their work on the series *Boardwalk Empire* and receiving an Oscar nomination for *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015). See Mathew Scott 'Base FX at Ten' (2016) *Variety* np.

22 For a more thoroughly materialist conceptualisation of the Post-Fordist economy, see Maurizio Lazzarato's essay 'Immaterial Labour' in *Radical Thought in Italy* Ed. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt 133-48. He notes a number of key aspects of immaterial labour, in particular a breakdown of the old distinction between physical and intellectual labour, the growing importance of the service economy, the decentralisation of production, the increasing importance of tertiary activity, the importance of human resources as a management model and the place of communication as both a form of technological production and as a form of management.

23 For a discussion of mobile phones and China's migrant worker population see Jack Linchuan Qiu *Working Class Network Society* (2009) and for a focus on the phone and migrant women workers see Cara Wallis *Technomobility in China* (2013).

workers, who have left their homes to work in Beijing. This movement can be part of a desire to continue moving. For example, Anna is at the park trying to save enough money to eventually go to Ulan Bator to see her sister. Taisheng's lover, Qun, is dreaming of one day reuniting with her husband in Paris.

The most straightforward expression of animation as a form of utopian movement is when Taisheng receives a message from Qun. We see an animated sequence of Taisheng galloping across the city of Beijing, delivering a message to his beloved, surrounded by dancing flower petals. (Fig.16) He appears like a heroic lover from a classical poem. The screen shows a dilapidated wall of a building, and the flower petal leads us through a pipe. The animated fantasy architecture transitions into a back-street garment industry and then into a filmed image. The fantasy collapses into the everyday, but it is still a place of fantasy for Taisheng as it is where his lover works. The film thus does not undermine the desire for romantic connection but shows how it exists within the same spaces as immiseration through labour. When Taisheng enters the garment shop it is as if it really is the site of destined love. But more often in the film, movement is far more ineffable, a desire to be somewhere else. Frequently, we see Tao staring out at monuments in the park, looking out of the monorail carriage, or staring at the Arc de Triomphe. For Tao it is not a desire to leave China and see the real monument, but rather a melancholic longing to escape the world of labour itself.

Love is a means of realising this utopian desire for movement, providing a partial escape from anomie and loneliness. But this love reflects the park too. It is born inside its architecture and is tied up in the desires which the architecture fosters. We see Tao and Taisheng in the park on dates, meeting to eat lunch at particular monuments. This reflects the tactile experience of spectacular architecture which I discussed earlier, in which the use of the space by the workers generates new uses for the space. In one sequence the camera frames Tao and Taisheng walking through the boulevards of Paris. The boulevard seems to be the antithesis of the ominous corridors of the backstage area. But at the same time they are arguing. In order to calm the situation Taisheng suggests they try one of the attractions. They sit on a carpet and are filmed waving at a camera. (Fig.17) This is shown on a television screen overlaid over an image of the Eiffel Tower. They appear to be flying up and down the monument. It is a primitive animation, the kind which emerged in silent films, appearing for the first time in Raoul Walsh's *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924), a film which, like the park, was full of exoticist spectacles. Even before digital cinema, film and animation were intersecting. In this primitive animation of the flying carpet and Eiffel Tower, love emerges as the product of life in the park and it is only a momentary escape from its exhausting repetition. But at the same time the park itself is given a utopian quality, it visualises a possible life, of movement and freedom, which is unrealisable within its walls.

The film shows the limitations of the desire for escape. There is an intensity to Tao's love which is in part the result of its utopian quality. It is a way of escaping the space of the theme-park city. Intense connections between the workers are a means of surmounting the difficulty of lives outside of families and home. She says to Taisheng, 'If you cheat on me I will kill you'. Later this will be realised. In another sequence, Tao tells Taisheng as they kiss inside the cockpit of a plane, 'Being stuck here all day will turn me into a ghost'. This sequence encapsulates many of the concerns of the film. The plane in the park is a monument to the possibility of flight and travel. But of course it is not an actual way to travel from one destination to another. It has become the symbol of flight. Tao works inside the plane dressed as a flight attendant. She is a service worker playing out the role of a different kind of service worker. Flight for Tao, then, is not escaping the park as this would merely mean finding a new job equivalent to the one she has now. In the next sequence we see an animation which shows Tao flying over the city of Beijing, wearing the same flight attendant's uniform. She flies over the Eiffel Tower of the park and then over Beijing with images of Deng Xiaoping and Xi Jinping on billboards below. She then appears to fly over the horizon of Beijing, leaving the entire world behind completely. This sequence initially appears to have a joyful quality. It is the utopianism of flight and freedom. But it is also ominous given the film's conclusion, in which Tao kills herself and Taisheng. In this way we

can understand the entire film as a ghost's journey through the theme-park city of Beijing. The animation is thus both a symbol of freedom from the constraints of space as well as the register of its impossibility, a freedom that is perhaps only realisable in death.

In this way the animations do not present a flight into unreality or delirium as Tonglin Lu has suggested. (Lu 177) Nor do they represent the alienation produced by technological devices. Rather they show the utopian and dystopian qualities which the mobile phone and the theme-park city produce. The phone is a means of attempting to broach the isolation of labour. It is a means of sustaining romantic relationships. But love and telecommunications are born inside the same theme-park city which produces the protagonists' despair. Animation and cinema more generally are modes which attempt to show a life outside of the limits of subjectivity and anomie. But they too are doomed to replicate the logic of equivalence which sustains capital, and thus in *The World* escape is never possible, at least not through the modes made available to its protagonists.

Conclusion - On Love and Suicide

The ending of the film presents us with a conclusion that is both profoundly pessimistic but also strangely utopian. As noted above, love in *The World* is invested with an incredible intensity. Georges Bataille suggests that all love involves an intimacy with anguish. 'Love raises the feeling of one being for another to such a pitch that the threatened loss of the beloved or the loss of their love is felt no less keenly than the threat of death.' (241) Tao discovers that Taisheng is cheating on her when she sees a message on his mobile phone. The screen cuts to another animated sequence. The room fades around her and instead of flight, there is an animated drowning. It is as if Tao has sunk to the bottom of the filthy waters of the Yangzi. She invites Taisheng to the house she is housesitting and leaves the gas on. They are found the next morning and their corpses are pulled out into the snow.

There are two endings to the film. The first is the ending which inspires pathos. *The World* presents the tragic death of two young people corrupted by the city, a familiar cinematic motif in which idealistic migrant workers are crushed by the horrors of the metropolis.²⁴ In this ending Tao and Taisheng die trapped inside the image, inside the architecture of the fantasy of success which animates techno-capitalist China. In this interpretation love is an escapist fantasy, an impossibility and ultimately another ruthless site of captivity. It is at one with Emile Durkheim's analysis of suicide in the city, the result of anomie and the destruction of values after the rapid transformation of society. (Durkheim 247) But we can glimpse another ending. The black screen, which ends the film, is a spatial complex and an animation too. (See Fig.18) It is a block of digital colour, or anti-colour, which swallows the filmic image. It swallows the city and the theme park too. Inside that void is not the silence of the tomb but voices. Taisheng asks, 'Are we dead?' Tao replies, 'No. This is just the beginning.' Suicide in *The World* is not the pessimist's choice at all. The Hungarian philosopher Emil Cioran famously said that suicide meant one still believed too much in life, expected something better. (Cioran 87) In this sense Tao loves and hates too much, too intensely.

In *The World*, the choice between living and losing love is answered with a cut to blackness. Death is not 'The End' of the film, but the beginning. Love is dying not slowly inside a theme park, but falling asleep for the last time, and waking up inside a new dreamscape. It is the final flight to another city, not the glittering Necropolis of Beijing, but the unrepresentable, unphotographable interiority which leads through annihilation to the terrifying outside. It is the desire for perpetual flight which already flows through the theme-park city but cannot be contained by it. In this reading suicide is utopian, death

24 This is a recurrent cinematic motif, with the city framed as the site of both dreams and corruption from the silent classics, such as F.W. Murnau's *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1926), Chaplin's *City Lights* (1926) and Chinese director Wu Yonggang's *The Goddess* (1934), to more recent works such as Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Dust in the Wind* (1986). Closer to Jia's neorealist influence is Luchino Visconti's *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960) which depicts the breakdown of a family after their migration from southern to northern Italy.

is just the beginning. Cinema as a medium also submits to this murder-suicide. Film, the chosen medium for Jia's early work, is murdered by the emergence of digital technology. But in embracing this murder and actively submitting to it Jia allows cinema to be born again. In allying oneself with death, one is always at risk. The digital image can of course spread banality. But it can also create new and perverse spaces, architecture which undermines the foundation of the monument and its maze-like accretions of junkspace. Jia allies with the digital to both map the theme-park city and to draw out the forces which already grow inside of it, forces which only cinema can realise and desires which cannot be ignored.

Chapter Two

Still Life (2006)

Introduction

This chapter will explore the relationship between cinema and painting in Jia Zhangke's film *Still Life*. The film is Jia's most acclaimed work internationally and won the Golden Lion Award for Best Film at the Venice Film Festival in 2006. Like *The World*, it is a film which takes the surreal reality of contemporary China as its subject matter. The film is set in Fengjie in Hubei province, a region affected by the Three Gorges Dam project, an enormous hydroelectric dam across the Yangzi River. The National People's Congress approved the Dam in 1992 and construction began in 1994 and was completed in 2012. The building of the Dam and resultant reservoir flooded the region where it is located, displacing 1.24 million residents living in cities and towns in the area around the Three Gorges.¹ The film follows two protagonists, Sanming (Han Sanming) and Shen Hong (Zhao Tao), who have travelled to Fengjie to find their spouses whom they have not seen for many years. Like *World*, it draws from another art form, namely painting, to engage with the surreal character of this historical transformation. Painting, like architecture, is shown to be a mode which cinema draws on to represent the circulation of bodies and goods through the medium of the river. But painting is also a mode which allows Jia to engage with the asynchronic temporality of the desires of the past. If *World* expresses the utopian desires which emerge in the post-socialist architectural spaces of the present, *Still Life* expresses the longing for a future that never occurred through an excavation of the desires of the past.

The film has been characterised as part of a more general aesthetic response to the Three Gorges project. Wu Hung, scholar of Chinese contemporary art, notes this and argues that, 'A constant theme in these works is displacement - the movement of millions of people away from and into the region, the drastic demolition of old towns and the rapid appearance of new cities, the astonishing changes in landscape and topography.' (Wu *Displacement* 2008 13) More specifically Jason McGrath has grouped *Still Life* with other films set in the midst of the Dam project, namely Zhang Ming's *Rainclouds over Wushan* (1996), Dai Sijie's *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* (2002), Yan Yu and Li Yifan's *Before the Flood* (2004) and Jia's own film, *Dong* (2006). McGrath notes that while Jia's films differ from both the noir of *Rainclouds* and the narrative melodrama of *Seamstress*, they are also distinct from the more straightforward documentary approach of *Before the Flood* (McGrath 44). The urge to preserve spaces is central to the documentary impulse and given the unique situation of the Three Gorges, cinema seems charged with the duty of committing these disappearing landscapes to memory. The displacement which these artworks engage with is not only that of people but of buildings which will disappear beneath the floodwaters and the landscape itself which will be utterly transformed.

The comparison between the film and the medium of painting has emerged for a number of reasons.² First and foremost because of the English title of the film, which suggests the European tradition of still life painting. The Chinese title of the film is *San Xia Hao Ren*, which translates to 'The Good Person of the Three Gorges'. This can be read as a reference to the Bertolt Brecht play, *The Good Person of Szechwan* (1941), a parable about

1 For a detailed history of the Dam project and a critique of its ecological and social repercussions see Dai Qing's *The River Dragon Has Come!: The Three Gorges Dam and the Fate of China's Yangtze River and its People* (1998).

2 For a discussion of the relationship between cinema and older Chinese art forms see Jerome Silbergeld *China Into Film* (1999). For an engagement with the relationship between the cinema and Chinese and Japanese painting see the edited collection *Cinematic Landscapes* (1994) ed. Linda Erlich and David Desser. For a more general approach to the relation between the ontologies of cinema and painting see Anne Friedberg's *The Virtual Window* (2006), Andre Bazin's 'Painting and Cinema' (1967) and Angela Dalle Vacche's *Cinema and Painting* (1996).

the limits of morality in an immoral society set in the upstream province of Sichuan.³ The English translation of the Chinese title of the film as *Still Life* is intriguing, because the tradition of the still life is itself a translation of a Western style. There was no tradition of still life painting in Chinese art prior to the widespread introduction of oil painting in the late nineteenth century. If we re-translate this title into Chinese it is *jing wu* meaning 'quiet objects' (66). But it can also translate to *xiesheng*, meaning to sketch or paint from life in such a way so as to capture *shenqi* or the 'divine vitality' of life itself (Ortiz 110). The notion of *xiesheng* first appears in the work of Song dynasty scholar Shen Kuo (1031-1095), who praised the landscapes of Dong Yuan (934-62) and Xu Xi (-c. 975) of the *Jiangnan* or 'south of the river' style of ink-wash painting.⁴ (Ortiz 110) (See Fig.1) Valerie Ortiz notes how these artists 'painted with no outlines, with blurred ink washes...which were particularly suited to the misty scenes cherished by the Jiangnan artists'. (110) It was later used as a way of introducing a scientific realism into art.

The film is involved in a complex critical relationship with both the notion of *xiesheng* and *jing wu*. The notion of *xiesheng* here is linked to a concern with temporality, a desire, as Jia has noted, to capture the transformations taking place in the present. In this way the film draws, like prior artists, from the vitality of the river, being propelled by its current, with a formal corollary in camera pans. But Jia is always a materialist and the river is a complex economic system, propelling the circulation of goods and now, quite literally, a source of power. He also implicates the historical representations of the river as a site of visual harmony in the film. Everything he films is imbued with temporality, both historical and durational. The film links the lives of its protagonists, who are driven by a persistent memory of their loved ones, to a historical memory of the river, which has in part emerged through its prior aestheticisation. The notion of *jing wu* also becomes a means of conveying this persistence of memory, through the framing of specific arrangements of objects. The most prominent of these are shown on four title cards; liquor, cigarettes, tea and candy. These objects create internal still lifes within the film, small fragments which allow the film to navigate larger historical questions through the frame of minor arrangements.

The academic discussions of the film which have made comparisons to painting have hitherto focused primarily on two aspects. Firstly they have discussed the documentary companion piece to the film entitled *Dong* (2006) about the painter Liu Xiaodong and secondly made comparisons between the films' use of slow pans and the Chinese tradition of scroll painting.⁵ Liu himself has made comparisons between the landscape of the ruined banks of the Gorges and traditional painting stating 'It was powerful, deep, and empty, like the kind of scenes you find in a Song [dynasty] landscape painting.' (Wu *Displacement* 2008 133) In particular he notes Li Gonglin's *Picture of Water Converging* which he saw while in New York and which prompted him to paint at the Gorges. Jia's point of comparison is quite different. He states 'Seeing this place, with its 2,000 years of history and dense neighbourhoods left in ruins, my first impression was that human beings could not have

3 This reference to Brecht's play is another example of the international frame of reference of Jia's work. Brecht found in Peking Opera a model for his own theorisation of 'Epic Theatre' as a non-mimetic form of drama. For a discussion of the influence of Chinese theatre on Brecht's thought and work see Fredric Jameson's *Brecht and Method* (1998).

4 For early theorisations of Chinese painting see the collection *Early Chinese Texts on Painting* edited by Susan Bush and Hsio-yen Shih. For an engagement with the medium of the screen in Chinese painting see Wu Hung, *The Double Screen* (1996).

5 Some examples of this tendency include Lucia Ramos Monteiro 'Remaking a European Post-catastrophic Atmosphere' (2015) *Cinémas* 97-117 and Luo Ting 'Neither Here nor there' (2015) *Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies* 149-171. For the most sophisticated extrapolation of the relationship between Chinese cinema and painting see the writing of early Chinese filmmaker and theorist Fei Mu (1906-1951) and his film *Spring in a Small Town* (1948). David Der-wei Wang extrapolates on this in his chapter on the work of Fei in his *The Lyrical in Epic Time* (2015) where he discusses the relation between horizontal pans and scroll painting, drawing on the scholarship of Chinese film scholar Liu Niantong. For a discussion of Song Dynasty painting and the work of Fifth Generation director Chen Kaige see Peter Rist, 'Renewal of Song Dynasty Landscape Painting Aesthetics Combined with a Contemplative Modernism in the Early Work of Chen Kaige' (2016) *Poetics of Chinese Cinema* (2016), 51-77.

done this. The changes had occurred so fast and on such a large scale, it was as if a nuclear war or an extraterrestrial had done it.' (Chan np) I suggest that the inhuman nature of this apocalyptic vision is precisely what *Still Life* manages to capture, the inhuman registered by both the human figure (the painting hand) and the inhuman apparatus (the digital video camera). These changes then register internally in the film through the intersection of the individual lives (Sanming and Shen looking out at the landscape) and the forces of history (the UFO, the building taking off). What is difficult to grapple with, but what *Still Life* manages to communicate, is that these changes that have occurred so fast have been made by humans.

Another important aspect of the film's historically oriented critique emerges in the paratextual element of its release date. The film was released on the same day as Zhang Yimou's *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006), an elaborate *wuxia* costume drama set in the 10th century AD. Jia stated that 'he wanted to give Chinese audiences an alternate choice'. (Zhang Rui np) The problem is not necessarily the *wuxia* drama itself. In fact, as I will discuss in the next chapter, Jia will go on to adopt many strategies of the genre in his next film, *A Touch of Sin* (2013). Rather, it is the way in which such films avoid engaging with the problems of the present, instead revelling in sumptuous costumes and balletic martial arts sequences. Jia goes further, though, in his critique of the Chinese period drama, arguing that such films dramatise power and thus normalise hierarchical power.⁶ Films such as *Curse* serve a new national narrative. Like the Dam, these films draw a teleology which links the grandeur of feudal Imperial China to that of the contemporary post-socialist state. Jia, in *Still Life*, takes the more difficult path of historicising the present, more difficult not only because the present is elusive but because it is already disappearing beneath the media narratives which surround it.

I will argue that if *Still Life* has a painterly corollary it is not landscape painting but the art of Socialist Realism. Wu Hung notes that the central aesthetic problem for Socialist Realism was the attempt to combine the image of the people with the abstract historical forces of socialism and the economy. (Wu *Displacement* 2008 69) Socialist Realism here can be understood in an expanded sense, not merely as a series of formal representational tropes but as an overarching political aesthetic project.⁷ This aesthetic project sought to historicise the transformations of Maoist China while simultaneously promoting further transformations in the right direction. *Still Life* takes up the first element of this project as part of Jia's interest in capturing the surreal reality of contemporary China. Jia writes 'I couldn't ignore the surreal aspects of the Three Gorges landscape. I had to use fantastical elements, because without them I wouldn't have been able to adequately express the utter strangeness of our contemporary reality.' (Chan np) The second part of the Socialist Realist project, to create artworks which would initiate further transformations, is also taken up by Jia's film. This is not in an activist sense, but rather to historicise the very notion of a utopian future, which underpins the temporality of Socialist Realist artworks. The Socialist Realist painting conflates the project of the present with the full Communist utopia to come. The Three Gorges project was one such dream that has now been realised but without the egalitarianism that such projects once promised. *Still Life* interrogates the after-life of dreams, not nostalgic for the socialist past, but interested in the dreams and desires which this past fostered and which remain unrealised.

This chapter will begin with a short background on the role of water in Chinese painting, specifically linking it to the notion of political practice and good governance. This

6 The *wuxia* period drama thus can be critiqued from two opposite positions. Firstly that it avoids the present, by creating a detailed but ultimately fantastical image of the past. Or secondly, that while the *wuxia* purports to engage with the past, it instead reflects the state of China today, and in fact through its depiction of ritual and aristocratic power, serves to celebrate the state.

7 Mao's speech at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art in 1942 became the model for Socialist Realist aesthetics. See *Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art* (1967). But as Liu Ding and Carol Yinghua Lu note, realism as a broader element of leftist aesthetics was already prevalent in China in the 1930s but was more prevalent in literature (3). See their article, 'From the Issue of Art to the Issue of Position: The Echoes of Socialist Realism, Part 1.' (2014).

will provide an insight into Jia's engagement with water in the film, particularly its role in visualising circulation and the time of capital in painting and cinema. I will then compare this notion of flow to the use of poetic objects or still lifes to create internal temporal connections within the film's structure. Finally I will draw out the relationships between these aesthetic strategies and the film's relationship to Socialist Realism which will then serve to allow us to reinterpret the film's complex historical time structure, in which the desires of the past return through the ruinous landscape of the present.

I Water and the Voyage-Form: Visualising Circulation

Water is a central formal and thematic element within the film, reflecting its central place in the metaphysical and mythopoetic structure of Chinese thought. The Yangzi River is central to this as both a subject of representation and as an aesthetic model. The word for 'landscape' as used for the genre of landscape painting is *shanshui*, literally 'mountain water'. The character for China is *Hua* which refers to the Huashan Mountain in the West of China, which means flourishing or magnificent. (Lindqvist 59) It would be impossible here to give an exhaustive treatment of the place of water and mountains in Chinese painting.⁸ Instead, I will show the manner in which *Still Life* brings out the economic and political forces which circulate within these representations. Jia's cinema mirrors the industrial process of the Dam, harnessing the river for power, using it as a means of generating a new approach to cinema.

The film taps into the dual role of the Yangzi in Chinese art work, as both a symbol of fertility and prosperity and a symbol of political authority. The Yangzi, and the Three Gorges region in particular, are recurrent images of nature in all its beauty and power. The river has been the source of the economic and political authority of feudal Emperors and continues to this day to be an essential element in the Chinese economy. As scholar of Chinese art Wu Hung writes, 'Good governance in China has a long association with hydraulics'. (Wu *Displacement* 2008 24) Realising the Dam project was the completion of the dream of the mythic Ancient Emperor Yu the Great, the founder of the first Chinese dynasty the Xia, around 2100 BCE. Yu oversaw the building of an elaborate series of dams which allowed agricultural production to be stabilised along the banks of the River. It was this achievement which made him the first Emperor of China. (Lindqvist 52) This theme has been represented in countless paintings, most famously in the Qing Dynasty handscroll by an unknown artist, *King Yu Moving a Mountain to Control the Floods* (date unknown).

The notion of moving mountains would recur in Mao's speeches about the people's ability to achieve superhuman goals, to defeat imperialism and then build communism.⁹ More specifically, Mao addressed the necessity to build a dam near the Three Gorges, which had been first proposed by Chiang Kai-Shek in 1919 and had been planned until 1947, when the Civil War reached a critical point and the American engineers assisting in the project left. (Wu *Displacement* 2008 23) Continuing the political-aesthetic nature of the Three Gorges, Mao wrote a poem, *Swimming* (1956), about his vision of a Three Gorges reservoir:

Walls of Stone stand upstream to the west
To hold back Mt. Wu's clouds and rain
Till a smooth lake rises in the narrow gorges

8 For a discussion of the characters for water and mountain which relates these to Chinese painting, see Cecilia Lindqvist *China: Empire of the Written Symbol* (1989) in particular the chapter 'Water and Mountains'.

9 'The foolish old man who moved the mountains' as a metaphor for China defeating imperialist powers appears in the speech of the same name delivered at the conclusion of the Seventh National Congress of the Communist Party of China in June 1945, the same congress in which Mao was appointed Chairman of the CPC Central Committee. It was one of the most frequently read stories in the Little Red Book. Joris Ivens (1898-1989) used the story as inspiration for his documentary *How Yukung Moved the Mountains* (1976) about the Cultural Revolution which shows many of the industrialisation projects of the period. At 763 minutes it is one of the longest films ever made.

The mountain goddess if she is still there

Will marvel at a world so transformed.¹⁰

Swimming and the metaphor of moving the mountains is a powerful image for what the communist project wanted to achieve. The overcoming of natural obstacles to production, such as the Yangzi River, transposes into the overcoming of seemingly impossible tasks, such as building communism. This is evident in the socialist realist poster, *Forging Ahead in Wind and Waves* (*Zai dafeng dalang zhibong qianjin*) (1974) by Tang Xiaohu showing Mao after his historic swim across the river looking out at the river surrounded by children, who would be the first generation to live in a new socialist society. (Fig.2) The Maoist goal of harnessing the power of the river is directly referenced in *Still Life* when a VIP, presumably a party official, says to another man who oversees the Dam, 'You made Chairman Mao's dream a reality...you tamed the Yangzi'.

The ideology surrounding the realisation of the Three Gorges project frames the Dam within a lineage of political-engineering achievements. *Still Life* explicitly engages with this narrative when it films a television aboard a ship travelling down the river. The video provides a potted history of the Three Gorges Project, cutting between photographs and footage of Chiang Kai-Shek, Chairman Mao and Deng Xiaoping. The television set appears in front of a window which looks out onto the water. The modes of view are foregrounded, with the window of the boat, the view onto the television and the view of the landscape all contained within the single shot. A voiceover states: 'The Three Gorges Dam has been a dream of our leaders for several generations. The people of this region have made great sacrifices for it. On May 1, 2006, the water level here will rise to 156.30 metres. The houses on the riverbanks will all be submerged.' The mythos surrounding the Three Gorges Dam project is summed up in this formulation: the dream of the leaders juxtaposed with the sacrifice of the people to produce the national monument.

The framing of the Gorges as a national monument is evident in the sequence directly preceding the shot of the television. The camera frames the prow of the boat which is filled with tourists who are taking photos of the Gorges. (Fig.3) We have a similar structure to sequences in *World* which interrogate the tourist gaze. A voiceover, which will later be revealed to be the voice of the television, recites the work of Tang Dynasty poet Li Bai (701-762): 'From the colourful dawn over the city of the White Emperor to the dusk over Jiangling, I journeyed for 300 Miles. The cry of monkeys from both banks behind me carries over ten thousand peaks to my tiny boat.' The poem juxtaposes the natural beauty of the Gorges with the architectural beauty of the city of the Emperor. The sequence thus historicises the natural beauty of the Gorges. The Gorges were a site of pilgrimage for artists and poets, a site producing a canon of representations and meditations. The paintings of the Gorges thus include within them the journey taken to paint them and signal an early instance of the visualisation of circulation, in this instance visualising the artist's journey to reach them. The intersection between the older image of the Gorges as a symbol of unchanging natural beauty and the socialist desire to transform nature occurs in the incredible paintings of Li Keran (1907-1989). Li painted landscapes and rivers in layered ink and intense red pigment to represent socialism.¹¹ (See Fig.4) In the film the characters are not travelling to Fengjie to draw the Gorges. They go there to find their loved ones, who in turn have been drawn by the Dam project. The area continues to inspire the movement of bodies but for a different purpose. No longer is the Emperor's palace the rival of the

10 See *The Poems of Mao Zedong* (2008) Trans. Willis Barnstone. Mao also famously swam across the Yangzi by the Wuhan Bridge on July 16 1966 in a famous gesture that marked his return to public prominence after his retreat to Hangzhou in late 1965. Significantly the swim also marked the intensification of the Cultural Revolution which had been announced in May of 1966. It also generated a famous series of propaganda images of Mao floating in the river as well as an image of him on the bank in a white bath robe.

11 For another important figure in the intersection between traditional landscape painting and socialism see the work of Huang Zongrui whose paintings *Sites Commemorating the Revolution* (1974) substitute the traditional spaces which featured in Chinese painting with revolutionary sites such as Zunyi and Yanan.

Gorges' beauty, but the nation's Dam, which not only rivals their aesthetic power but is capable of transforming it.

Through this short sequence we see Jia historicising the Dam project in relation to the history of the Yangzi. (See Fig.5) But he does this through the same channels, namely the news broadcast, which are in the process of reifying it. He mimics the cannibalising process of the propaganda mechanism, in which historical achievements are inserted haphazardly to produce a coherent teleology in which the present appears as the inevitable result of the past. Jia's use of these archival images and footage makes this one of his most direct allusions to the history of China as it appears in the contemporary propaganda image.¹² It is intriguing that this occurs in a film which Jia made with state approval. This direct commentary is in part a result of the scale of the Dam project. Jia states, 'Its impact is phenomenal. It's not something the government can cover up.' (Lim np) This sentiment is echoed when Han first sees the submerged areas of what was once old Fengjie. His guide seems shocked that Han did not know about the flooding. He says, 'Never heard on TV about the Three Gorges Dam?' The project, while controversial, is also a source of national pride.¹³ This is referenced by the voiceover in the aforementioned video, which notes that 'Today the world's eyes look toward this region again, thanks to the Three Gorges project.'

We can see a continuity in how Jia characterises Chinese nationalism here and in *The World*. The Dam, like the buildings and monuments of contemporary China, is a sign of China's international resurgence or *fuqiang*, meaning wealth and power.¹⁴ The Dam project is understood not only as an example of engineering prowess but as a kind of aesthetic marvel, evidenced by the number of flyover shots of the Dam which circulated in news footage after its completion. It is important to note that Jia conspicuously avoids these kinds of camera angles. These overhead shots emphasise the project's magnitude which is now comparable to the beauty of the river or the Gorges themselves. We must also note that Jia's film is not a form of documentary exposé, such as Yan Yu and Li Lifan's *Before the Flood* (2004), which shows the difficulties facing residents seeking compensation after their displacement. Rather, it is an attempt to historicise the Dam differently, to move away from the spectacular media image, which links it to the dream of power, but to show instead other kinds of dreams which the Dam taps into.

The film juxtaposes different forms of viewing which in turn create different forms of dreaming or imagining. The characters are frequently framed by the camera staring out across the river with the Gorges in the background. The frequent comparisons made between Jia's work and Italian neorealism are evident in this quality, which I have noted in the introduction. We can understand the film to be an example of what Gilles Deleuze describes as the 'voyage form'. (Deleuze 1986 216) In Italian neorealist cinema, the impact of the Second World War has left characters ungrounded in space. They thus float through cities, searching and looking, not necessarily with any real object. Or rather the object may be merely a pretext to continue searching. Characters in these films are always shown as viewers. (Deleuze 1989 3) This is not only a mise-en-abyme for the cinematic experience but signals a transformation in vision brought on by these new spaces. The Dam has created a

12 The other most direct engagement with television in Jia's work occurs in *Unknown Pleasures* (2003) in which a television showed China's successful Olympics bid and was looked at with disinterest by the film's young nihilistic protagonists. For a discussion of the use of television in Chinese contemporary art see Wu Hung 'Television in Contemporary Chinese Art' (2008) in particular his discussion of Zhang Peili's *Water: Standard Pronunciation* (1992) which stages a mock news broadcast in which the newscaster reads definitions listed under the character 'water' from the Chinese dictionary *Ocean of Words*. (Wu 'Television' 2008 78-80)

13 The aforementioned *The River Dragon Has Come!* (1998) by Dai Qing outlines the oppositional stance to the Dam's ecological destruction as well as the destruction of historical buildings which would occur in the flooding.

14 The notion of *fuqiang* as a project became linked to a restoration of international dignity after China's military defeats by Western powers in the 19th century. For a study of *fuqiang* in relation to prominent figures in Chinese politics over the last century, see Orville Schell and John Delury's *Wealth and Power* (2013).

similar quality of radical spatial uncertainty. Emerging into this space are Shen and Han. While they move through the same spaces they never meet. The two narrative threads in the film never overlap. But the characters are nonetheless connected by their quality of being viewers and of being viewers of a space which demands a change in perception.

Jia's cinema transforms in the wake of the challenge to perception initiated by the Dam. The 'voyage form' becomes radicalised as the camera becomes implicated in the water's currents. There is an internal tension in the film between panning across the river and framing boats moving across the still camera. The traditional opposition between the shot and the cut is replaced by an opposition between movement and static camera. The camera does not necessarily have to create movement as the river itself is a force which generates its own internal movement through its currents, and pushes objects across the screen. Nonetheless, the cinematography of Yu Lik-wai has a discernibly fluid style, mimicking the movement of the river. It can be understood as a cinematic notion of *xiesheng*, the painterly characteristic in which the painter draws from life in order to imbue the work with a sense of the river's real power.

The first sequence of the film exemplifies the tension between the pan and the long-shot. The film begins by slowly panning across the bodies of passengers on a ferry travelling down the river. In a juxtaposition that perhaps epitomises Jia's approach to contemporary China, we see passengers looking at their mobile phones while others have their palms read. The relationship between the slow pan and painting, while often reductive in discussion of the film, here seems relevant. This is because in its survey of men without shirts it directly references the paintings of Liu Xiaodong.¹⁵ As in the work of Liu, bodies here take on the character of landscapes and the same slow pan will later be used to move across the river bank and waters of the Yangzi.¹⁶ The next sequence employs a static camera, to show a ferry, presumably the same one the passengers were on, moving toward the screen. (See Fig.6) The next shot, which contains the film's title, is another static shot which shows the same ferry move across the screen from right to left, with the city of Fengjie in the background. The camera appears to be on the other bank and we see the city from across the river. This sequence inverts the grammar of the traditional construction of coherent cinematic space. The so-called establishing shot follows from a space, the ferry, which is moving. Our understanding of space within the film is often frustrated. Or rather because the space is temporary or haphazard our navigation of it is too. This spatial uncertainty emerges not through frequent cutting or disorientating camera movement but rather through unexpected views or small details which jump out of the background.

As the boat moves across the screen we recall Andrei Tarkovsky's often quoted notion of the 'pressure of time within the shot' (117). Tarkovsky explicates this principle in his book *Sculpting in Time* (1986) in which he writes, 'The distinctive time running through the shots makes the rhythm of the picture; and rhythm is determined not by the length of the edited pieces, but by the pressure of the time that runs through them.' (117) This pressure was central to Jia's use of the long-shot in the *Hometown Trilogy*. In these films the pressure of time emerged as the slow durational time of boredom, of repetition and stagnation. But the long-shot in *Still Life* works quite differently. Pressure is created not by the duration of the shot but through the framing of water. Time appears through the movement of water, which in 'real-time' moves the boats through space and through the shot. This manner of filming water is in part drawn from Fei Mu's film *Spring in a Small Town* (1947), a film which Jia

15 See Wu Hung's interview with Liu Xiaodong in the catalogue for an exhibition of works relating to the Three Gorges Dam Project at the Smart Museum of Art in Chicago, Wu Hung *Internalising Displacement* (2008) 112-137.

16 The work of Chinese artist Huang Yan (1966-) exemplifies this relationship between the landscape and the human body in another way. In collaboration with his wife, Zhang Tiemei who paints the landscapes, Huang photographs bodies which have been painted with images of the Chinese landscape. An important passage in Taiwanese author Qiu Miaojin's *Last Words From Montmartre* (1996) frames the connection between the body of the beloved and the landscape in a way that is reminiscent of *Still Life*. She writes 'the only way I can deal with you is by making you fully comprehend the kind of "landscape" you have carved into my heart during this time. Yes: It's an enormous landscape painting.' (42)

frequently references. In a famous sequence in *Spring* the camera pans across a boat and then cuts to a shot of water which moves across the screen. David Der-wei Wang describes *Spring* as dramatising the intersection between different forms of time, in particular that of the lyrical and the historical (297). He writes that Fei Mu “spatialises time”, calling attention to the multiple layers of reality in a given zone.’ (296) In Jia there is a similar intersection between time structures in which the lyrical is always implicated in the epic time of history and vice versa. This is evident in the daily lives and intimate details of the protagonists’ interactions with the river, in the demolition crews making way for the Dam or the residents moving up the bank. The pressure is that of water which is threatening to flood the entire film. It is in this sense a film shot under-water or on the cusp of a flood. This does not, however, translate cinematically to an urgency or a sense of impending disaster. It is calmly registered by the camera and the protagonists as something that is happening to them and is completely out of their control.

In Jia’s work, time is never shown apart from movement. In *Still Life* the flow of the river enters into another flow, that of the circulation of bodies and capital. The opening shot exemplifies this, panning across the ‘floating population’ of China. As in *The World* there is an intersection of the movement of tourists and the movement of workers. The river is both a means of circulation (as a passage for ferries and transport boats such as barges) and a site for generating it (the economies which emerge from and around the river). The entire project of the Dam is of course one which will utilise the flow of the river to create power, another infrastructural project which is essential for the circulation of capital. As noted above, the river as a site of natural beauty also must be understood as a space which has been entirely reified and monetised.

The intersection of capital and the view of landscape is wonderfully illustrated in a scene where Han is framed with the view of the Gorges behind him, looking down at the 10 yuan note. (Fig.7) The camera then cuts to a close up of the note. A boat which looks like a transport barge moves across the screen, gradually moving behind the note. The scene illustrates how natural beauty is as much a monument to the nation as statues, buildings or engineering marvels such as the Dam. The film is thus torn between trying to avoid a simple aestheticisation of the river while simultaneously being drawn to filming its movement. The view of the river is always mediated by the historical representations which have preceded it (such as the poetry of Li Bai or the landscape paintings), and by the money through which all life in late capitalism moves.¹⁷ The circulation implied by the note intersects directly here with the circulation of goods made possible by the Yangzi. In filming its flow of traffic, its barges taking work equipment and produce, its ferries taking workers and travellers, the film has found a means of filming capital. Of capturing it in all its abstraction and concreteness. Visualising capital, the notoriously difficult task of realist and materialist artists, is here successfully achieved by Jia.¹⁸ What prevents such a scene from falling into an activist or ethical cliché is, paradoxically, its beauty. The vision of the landscape is not pristine or untouched nor is it presented as tainted by the appearance of economic and historical forces within the cinematic frame. When Han is looking at the Gorges he is seeing a sight that he has already seen thousands of times before on bank notes. Now seeing it in all its actuality he looks back to the note to compare the two scenes. The relative clarity of the line drawing on the note is nothing like the Gorges, which are bathed in fog. This scene is one example of *Still Life*’s powerful ability to show the historical as it is implicated in landscape, and the manner in which the personal, in this case Han, is inextricably linked to the national. In *Still Life* ‘lyrical time’ is inseparable from the flow of historical time and the cinematic voyage-form is a mode of traversing these intersecting flows.

¹⁷ Compare with Song Dynasty writer Su Shi (1037-1101) on landscape painting: ‘One fails to see what Lushan mountain is really like because one oneself is in the mountain’, in this sense one has not only already seen the mountain but oneself’ trans. James Hargett (Hargett 16-7).

¹⁸ There is a direct correlation between the way Jia visualises capital through water in *Still Life* to the manner in which he visualises it through animated sequences in *The World*. But, as I will discuss later in this chapter, animation serves a somewhat different purpose in *Still Life*.

II Poetic Objects

In *Still Life* cinema takes from painting another mode of visualisation, that of the still life of the film's title. As I have noted above, the still life is itself a relatively recent genre in China, following the adoption of oil painting in the late nineteenth century. But the notion of still life can be translated as *jing wu* or 'quiet object'. The film utilises four title cards which refer to the four objects that become important vessels for creating and sustaining relationships within the film: cigarettes, liquor, tea and candy. These are all objects which are given as gifts at times of festivals and celebrations, or as compensation for death or a means of courting favour. Gift-giving has an important place within Chinese tradition. As Xu Ping notes, the pictogram for gift *li* is the same as that of the Confucian notion of propriety, which relates to rites and ceremonies as well as to the notion of protocol, a form of ideal governance or order. (40) He quotes the proverb *liji biaoji*: 'Without polite welcoming words, there can be no connection, without *li* [gifts] there can be no audience'. Xu Ping notes that these interconnected notions of *li* 'come to form a type of model social order and an effective control system for interpersonal relations.' (41) The gift economy, theorised by Marcel Mauss in *The Gift* (1925), was understood to have preceded the development of market economies. But in post-socialist China gift-giving retains a significant social form and has in fact been intensified by the growth of the market economy.¹⁹

In *Still Life*, though, these objects do not create ideal models so much as cultivate new desires. Shelley Kraicer interprets the objects as replacements of the four traditional objects, fuel, rice, cooking oil and salt, with objects of consumption. (Kraicer 2007 np) Kraicer goes further and suggests that this is also a meta-commentary on cinema and consumption, as the film resists the production of consumable narratives. I will argue, instead, that the objects are profoundly ambiguous. While they are certainly commodities they are also modes of desiring. They are means of producing new time frames in which new relationships form around these objects. Jia's early cinema consistently avoided visual metaphor. But in this later period he engages in more direct discourse with symbols that operate in daily life. This interest in the poetic resonance of everyday objects is discussed by Jia in relation to the work of Robert Bresson. He states that Bresson creates 'a very real material world, but pulsating in the background of such a world you can sense something entirely formal - it's a positioning arising from attention to the small things of ordinary life'. (Jia 81) *Still Life* engages with the poetic resonance of the everyday through the use of the title cards. This is not a simple metaphoric game of translation, with cigarettes meaning x or y. One could suggest that this is a means of evoking traditional modes of artistic communication or evading censorship, making the work essentially untranslatable. But it is also a way of tapping into the creative approach to how objects work in contemporary China, in which new connections are formed around objects and new desires emerge to fill the void left by the erosion of communist values in the post-socialist era.

Every item that is filmed in *Still Life* is imbued with temporality. Jia writes about this temporal characteristic of the still life stating that it 'represents a kind of reality that has been overlooked by us; although it retains in its depths the traces of time, it remains ever silent, protecting life's secrets'. (Jia 167) This notion of the 'traces of time' in the quiet object is linked to another of Jia's important influences, the Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu, whose 'pillow shots' cut to objects which imply the passing of time.²⁰ The temporal property of objects in *Still Life* is intensified by the formal deployment of the title cards. These cards introduce a momentary stoppage into the movement of the film, providing an anchor in the flow of cinematic movement. There is thus an opposition between the title card, as a form

19 For an analysis of the role of the gift in Chinese social life see Mayfair Mei-Hu Yang's *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets* (1994), which theorises the system of *guanxi* or dynamics of interpersonal social relationships in relation to Mauss, Georges Bataille and other anthropologists.

20 The most famous example of such an object is the cut to a vase in Ozu's masterpiece *Late Spring* (1949) which Deleuze interprets as an example of time 'in its pure state'. (16) Ozu's 'pillow shots' also show landscapes or rooms without people, in contrast to *Still Life* in which a landscape is rarely shown without also framing a character looking at it.

of writing or naming, and the film's unfolding of images. The names of the objects appear in the bottom right corner of the screen, apart from the final character for candy which appears in the screen's centre. (Fig.8) The connection to Chinese painterly convention is apparent. Landscape paintings are frequently accompanied by calligraphy, often a poem, and an artist's seal, located on the side of the composition. But unlike the calligraphy which often refers to the landscape, or an identifying seal, the text here refers to everyday objects which appear throughout the film. Once the objects emerge in the narrative we pay more careful attention to their use. Initially it appears to be a heroisation of the everyday, which is in line with a more general consideration of the film's focus on ordinary people and a politics of realism. Understood in relation to Chinese aesthetics more generally, they can be interpreted as a concern with the 'blandness' which French philosopher Francois Jullien understands as an essential element in Chinese art. (Jullien 25) But I want to emphasise instead how these objects develop linkages between disparate sections of the film. Therefore while the narrative is ostensibly two stories of people searching for their spouses, the text serves to orient the film around characters' interactions with and through these objects.

The Chinese character for 'liquor' (*jiu*) and tea (*cha*) both appear on a screen which has faded to black. The fade to black creates an internal gap or stoppage within the film. The black screen usually accompanies the end of a film, the credit sequence, or even the blank screen prior to the film's beginning. Black screens within a film disrupt the flow of a film, creating a disjunction in movement. The black screen also refers to the structure of the screen itself, operating as a means of highlighting the cinematic medium. The minimum requirement for cinema is a black screen dividing what is seen from what appears outside of it. The black screen at the end of the film is the means of ensuring a gap is initiated between the desires operating during the film and the desires that govern life after the film is over. But if the black screen is a form of protection or immunisation against possible cinematic infection when deployed after the film, its inclusion within the film is a different matter altogether. The black screen in *Still Life* is consistent with its function in *World*, as a void, which is both an emptiness and a form. The void in this instance also has a direct painterly connotation. It offers a means of approaching painting and cultivating a conceptual attitude towards the subject matter.²¹ In *Still Life* cinema itself is a kind of void, in which these objects come to reveal deeper significance as well as become imbued with new connotations through their juxtaposition.

If we understand the film to connect disparate layers of memory, from the historical, to the personal, to the geological, then the black screen also seems to gesture explicitly toward a gap in this memory. But if instead we understand these moments of blackness to constitute a cinematic void, then we can understand the objects as caught up in the process of sustaining relationships across long distances and after long absences. The notion of the film made underwater, or under threat of disappearance noted above, is juxtaposed against the sustained memory which persists inside the flooded landscape. At the immediate level Han and Shen are searching for spouses whom they have not seen for many years. The problem is not that they are forgetting but that they are burdened with the painful inability to ever forget and are thus driven to find them.

Tea is one of the objects involved in the complex interplay of memory and relationships. Shen goes to the factory in which her husband once worked and asks to see his locker. When it fails to open she takes a hammer and prises open the lock. The camera frames the open shelf of the locker and her hand appears on the screen and reaches in and takes out an official document, a passport or an identity card. The character for 'tea' appears on the

21 The Taoist notion of *xuwu* or nothingness is an important concept in classical Chinese aesthetics. As an attitude it is a mode of self-negation or a mode of emptying the psyche itself. Fu Zai writes of this in his *Guan Zhang Yuanwei Huasongtu* or 'Observing Landlord Zhang Painting a Picture of a Pine', a classical text on painterly aesthetics. He writes '...It is not a painting but the genuine Dao...he has left behind his cleverness, his thoughts are deep like the Origin's transformative power, and the myriad things reside in the source of his spirit and not in his senses.' *Wu* also refers to the empty space of the painting, and is thus an essential compositional element of Chinese landscape painting. See Fan Minghua 'The significance of *Xuwu* (Nothingness) in Chinese Aesthetics.' (2010) *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 560-574.

bottom corner of the screen which fades to black from this tableau. It is an internal still life, a small portrait of a worker's locker. It is unclear if this is tea which Shen Hong has sent to her husband, tea which they perhaps once enjoyed together. It must be noted that more than any other of Jia's films, *Still Life* refuses to reveal the significance of objects. But the fade at once separates this scene, creates a pause, which magnifies the significance of the tea for Shen. The object creates the profoundly melancholic connection, rather than overt dialogue or description. After the black screen we see Shen on board a boat, where she pours the tea into a glass. The tea appears ambiguously as both a restorative sign, which can be continually replenished with hot water, and as painful repetition-compulsion to search for a connection which has long disappeared. She will soon find out her husband has begun a new relationship in Fengjie.

The liquor generates another ambiguous series of relations. Han Sanming brings an offering of alcohol to his brother-in-law which is refused. The alcohol is rice wine from his hometown and is a means of enlisting his brother-in-law's assistance in his search for his wife. The brother's refusal to accept the gift is a means of refusing to acknowledge the past relationship and to acknowledge Han's continued desire to find her. This refusal to accept the gift is later reversed when Han drinks with his co-workers in the demolition group. Here the gift is not a means of bargaining for favour, but a way of celebrating the end of their work together. It is a means of instituting an ending, inscribing a solidarity between the workers. It is also an invitation to a kind of reverie. The quiet object in *Still Life* is not necessarily meditative or spiritual but rather a means of creating an internal distance between the time of labour and that of leisure or celebration. It is also the pleasing slackening of time of drunkenness. This moment is not overwhelmingly joyous. The alcohol from Han Sanming's hometown reminds him of his job as a miner, a job which pays much better than the demolition work he and the other drinkers have been doing. But when they suggest that they will come and work with him, he is quick to dissuade them. He says, 'the work is very dangerous, you go down into the mine and you're not sure if you'll ever come up again.' Nonetheless, liquor is a minor invitation to journey, through conversation in which the workers discuss their homes and their labour, and into the future, in which they toast to meeting again. It is a means of refashioning time for a moment, to create a solidarity of shared time through the mediation of alcohol.

Cigarettes create a similar invitation for reverie. Like alcohol they are offered as a gift, but they are also a courtesy. Indeed the above sequence of Han and his friends drinking pans across to a man leaning back and smoking. Cigarettes mark time. Watching a character smoke a cigarette in real time presents us with an image of time visualised. We can physically see seconds and minutes turning into smoke and ash. Cigarettes are also an invitation to dream, a means of luxuriating in time.²² Georges Bataille writes that smoking epitomises the pleasure in squandering time (and perhaps health too). He describes smoking as 'a purely glorious expenditure, having for its goal to procure for the smoker an atmosphere detached from the general mechanics of things.' (Bataille 6) When the character for 'cigarettes' appears on the screen in *Still Life*, it is overlaid with a painting of a boat, further enriching the connection between the voyage and the alternate time of smoking. The out of focus boat transitions to a room in a boarding house, where a television is playing a scene from John Woo's classic gangster film *A Better Tomorrow* (1986). (Fig.9) In this iconic scene Chow Yun Fat's character lights his cigarette on a burning counterfeit bank note. Cinema, particularly the high budget Hong Kong new wave cinema of the 1980s, revels in such sequences of glorious expenditure. When Han offers a cigarette to Brother Mark he lights his cigarette on Buddhist paper money. The reverie initiated by cigarettes is thus shown to be profoundly cinematic. Cinema in the world of Jia's films is shown to be implicated in daily life, part of a vernacular language, and form of creative self-

22 For a study of cigarettes and femininity in contemporary Asian cinema see Peter Pugsley and Ben McCann 'Female protagonists and the role of smoking in Chinese and French cinema' (2016) *Asian Cinema* 59-83.

transformation.²³

The cigarette in *Still Life* therefore does not only provide a momentary stillness within the movement of time, but actually initiates a creative self-transformation. It is part of a rich production of alternate values which fill the void left by the erasure of communist values in post-socialist China. It is this situation which Jia's characters occupy, finding in pop forms a source of creative transformation.²⁴ Brother Mark can become Chow Yun Fat. Paradoxically Mark states, 'We can't forget who we are', which itself is a quote from Chow Yun Fat. Perhaps it is because who the characters 'are' is never reducible to their labour or their situation. Jia's films resist the pathos of presenting poverty as either a source of misery to be pitied or as some kind of release into a life of naiveté and innocence. Perhaps this would make his films more palatable to Western audiences seeking to demonise China or further orientalise it through an expression of liberal charity (think of the enormous success of a film like *Lion* (2016) which does exactly that in relation to India). Instead who the characters 'are' is a complex of dreaming and desiring, that is, they are always in the process of moving about and searching. It may be out of necessity due to the precarity of labour, but this necessity is transformed into a source of journeying and searching which is given a quest-like allure. *Still Life* does not affirm the present labour relations in China, but rather shows how these relations are navigated and mythologised by those who must participate in them.

The cigarette also creates a new relationship, initiating a friendship between Han and Brother Mark. Jia prefers the mythology produced by Woo's gangster films to the mythology of power at play in contemporary mainstream Chinese cinema, because while Woo's films are in one sense more cynical, they are also more honest. They present a series of codes of conduct, in this instance friendship which is a powerful value in the atomised world of post-socialist China. They also explicitly link cigarettes to cinema as modes of utopian production, opening up the world to pockets of alternate temporality. At the same time, there is a melancholic undertone to these evocations, because Mark will die. In an attempt perhaps to recreate the kind of gangsterism celebrated in *A Better Tomorrow* he and a local gang go to terrorise a neighbourhood for the petty local kingpin, Guo Bin, who is Shen's husband. Mark is found dead beneath rubble and Han lights three cigarettes next to a photo of him as an offering. But it is not pop culture or cigarettes which have killed him. It is the chaotic and anarchic violence at the heart of capital accumulation in which the characters are enmeshed and which they must attempt to navigate in order to survive.

The final character for candy, like the character for cigarettes, is accompanied by a dissolve transition. Unlike the black screen described above, which introduces a charged void into the heart of the film, the overlay places two distinct spaces and times into the same frame. The character appears over the face of Shen Hong who is seated on a boat, and stays there as the screen fades to an image of mountains covered in fog. The transitional images are haunting, Shen's face intersects with the mountain as it appears to swallow her. It appears to resemble a brush and ink drawing, in the flooding effect of pigments which alludes to the flooding to come. The title card in black adds to this ominous tone and foreshadows the death of Brother Mark who hands out White Rabbit candy before heading to the job in which he will be killed. He unwittingly appears to be aware of his death,

23 Jia's interest in the overflow of the cinematic into the everyday is also shared by the Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami, whose sensibility is in many senses very close to Jia's. This is particularly evident in Kiarostami's film *Close Up* (1990), a work of docu-fiction which follows the court case of a man who impersonates a famous director.

24 Another instance of the use of the pop forms is Brother Mark's ring tone which he plays to Han. It is the theme tune of a 1980 television show called *The Bund* or *Shanghai Tan* which featured Chow Yun Fat as a gangster in 1920s Hong Kong. The song, sung by Frances Yip, became a Cantopop hit with the following lyrics, 'The river's waters run toward infinity / It surges through our lives / It carries away our woes', which plays while the film cuts to Shen walking toward the river. Jia has himself noted the importance of musical references and in particular Cantopop, stating, 'Before the mid-eighties all the songs we heard in China were propaganda, revolutionary songs. All of a sudden in the eighties, rock'n'roll was being written in China.... Both the Chinese people and the government had certain expectations in the eighties.' (Kraicer 2003 31) Therefore another utopian register is invoked, the expectations and excitement of the economic liberalisation of the 1980s.

handing out the candy as a final gift. The juxtaposition of the character for candy, with its implications of sweetness, across Shen's face has a further irony, as she looks out the window melancholically on the boat which will take her away from Fengjie to Shanghai. In one sense she is leaving this landscape for the last time, if she ever returns here this space will be completely different. But the bittersweet element is that it seems that the memory of her beloved will remain, in a way perhaps that is more eternal than the mountains and river which are overlaid over her face in this sequence.

Through the use of title cards, objects become involved in a complex dialogue across the course of the film. This creates a non-linear formal organisation attuned to visual and symbolic resonance between ostensibly disconnected sequences. The black screen which accompanies the title cards creates a void within the flow of images, while the fade which accompanies other title cards overlays two images over one another. This signals the dual function of the film's attentiveness to objects. The quiet object is a means of stopping the flow of cinematic movement and making us pause on a particular image, such as the arrangement of tea in the worker's locker. It is a clarification. But the object also takes part in the blurring of multiple time frames, the blurring of historical and personal, epic and lyrical. These formal functions of the object are replicated within the narrative, as the objects become means of refashioning characters' relationships to time. Just as the river is an aesthetic and economic form, the quiet object is simultaneously a commodity and an invitation to dream. Alcohol becomes a means of qualitatively differentiating the time of labour from the time of leisure, initiating a shared time between Han and his fellow workers. Cigarettes also become a mode of luxuriating in the passage of time, of showing the pleasure of squandering moments. These objects become entangled in forms of personal mythologisation, as for example, tea is a way of remembering the beloved and cigarettes are a way of becoming Chow Yun Fat for a second. They are a means of forming and sustaining relationships, as gifts or shared experiences and contribute to a new complex of post-socialist values which Jia's cinema carefully reveals.

III From Socialist Realism to Surreal Realism

Still Life engages another impulse found in painting, an unanticipated impulse called Socialist Realism. As noted above, this is Socialist Realism understood not merely as a set of representational rules or guidelines but as a desire. It is a desire to transform reality, to use the artwork to seed the present with the image of the utopian future to come. There is a strange temporality at work in socialist realist paintings and poster art in which the future of full communism is imposed on the poverty of the present. In *Still Life* we see that the future promised by these art works remains unrealised and moves through the film. The melancholy which is registered is not nostalgia for the socialist past, but for a dream which the past cultivated so intensely. One of the tasks of Socialist Realist art was to aestheticise the development of the productive forces. *Still Life* shows the end of this particular mode of production with factories in ruins and the extended work of destruction required to make way for the new Dam.

The legacy of Socialist Realism has been an undeniable influence and theme in the work of post-socialist Chinese artists. It has served as both a foil to react against and as a series of iconographic tropes to be repurposed for other uses. Political pop artists, such as Wang Guangyi, utilised Socialist Realism to point to the mass re-branding of Chinese communism in the post-socialist period, showing it subsumed by the iconography of brands.²⁵ (See Fig.10) The gap between the reality of life in the Maoist period and the Socialist Realist artwork now came to signify the gap between economic liberalisation and the socialist discourse in which it was couched. This is registered in the work of what have been described as the 'Cynical Realists' such as Yue Minjun, whose work, in particular the painting *Execution*,

25 See Huang Zhuan *Politics and Theology in Contemporary Chinese Art: Reflections on the Work of Wang Guangyi* (2013).

attests to the representational blockage enacted by Socialist Realism.²⁶ (See Fig.11) The collapse of Maoist iconography is also registered as a loss which opens up an ethical and representational void. While Jia's work engages with this loss his use of communist iconography in *Still Life* is quite different. As noted above, popular forms such as cinema are one means of carving out an alternate perspective from which to view the present as well as historicise the past. And through the quiet object, new forms of temporality are opened up within the film. A further temporal mode is opened up by Jia's engagement with the Socialist Realist artwork, which is often melancholic but simultaneously capable of opening an alternate view of the present through the utopian desires of the past.

Jia's engagement with Socialist Realism is closer to that of Liu Xiaodong and what has been described as the work of the New Realists. While these artists utilised the detailed oil painting techniques taught in art academies, their work avoided heroic representations and focused instead on scenes of daily life (Wu 'A Case' 2008 27). As noted above Liu painted scenes around the Gorges and there are multiple *scenes* in *Still Life* which directly reference Liu's paintings. Of particular note are the shots of Han Sanming shirtless, which echo Liu's painting *Hotbed* (2005) for which Han actually posed. We see Han posing for the painting in Jia's documentary *Dong* (2006) (See Fig.12) Han is not the muscular or glowing figure who is the subject of a Socialist Realist painting or poster.²⁷ Nor is the labour shown in the film heroic or exciting. Instead, as in Liu's paintings, the film shows the work of demolition as teams are employed in the task of knocking down the buildings on the banks of the river before the area is flooded.

What both Jia and Liu adopt from Socialist Realism is a subtle strangeness which permeates their representations of lives amidst the rubble. This is evident in Liu's work *Great Migration at the Three Gorges* (2003). (See Fig.13) *Still Life* is full of small instances of similarly strange juxtapositions. Brother Mark is shown trapped in a bag with his head poking out, crying out for help. Han is offered prostitutes who are standing on a cement platform jutting out from a half-demolished house. This is emphasised in the film through the particular mode of navigation adopted by cinematographer Yu Lik-wai. Just as the junkspace architecture of the World Park influenced the cinematography of *World*, the rubble of Fengjie creates new opportunities for cinematographic invention.²⁸ The camera moves through the ruins in an exploratory manner, rarely if ever following a particular character's perspective. Instead scenes unfold in an enigmatic way, as the camera moves in and out of the ruins of buildings.²⁹ The half-demolished buildings reveal their outlines as if they were architectural cross-sections or the cut-open house of a film set. (See Fig.14) This rubble is overwhelmingly composed of the Soviet-inspired functionalist concrete brutalism of the Maoist period housing compounds. Such buildings were frequently the subject of Socialist Realist paintings, symbols of the growth of cities like Fengjie. For example, the poster by Zhang Yuqing (1909-1993) called *The New Centre of the Commune* from 1961 shows precisely these types of new concrete structures bathed in glowing light. (See Fig.15) In sharp contrast to this visual celebration is a photograph we see hanging in the bathroom of a hotel, showing a building captured in the moment its roof collapses. (See Fig.16) The legacy of

26 Wu Hung discusses the movement in his essay 'A Case of Being "Contemporary": Conditions, Spheres and Narratives of Contemporary Chinese Art' in *Antinomies of Art and Culture* (2008) 290-306.

27 Sheldon Lu discusses Jia's portrayal of Chinese masculinity in *Still Life* in the chapter 'The Postsocialist Working Class: Male Heroes in Jia Zhangke's Films' in *Changing Chinese Masculinities* (2016) 173-85.

28 For a discussion of ruins in contemporary Chinese artwork see Wu Hung, *A Story of Ruins: Presence and Absence in Chinese Art* (2012). In particular the performance artists Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen have both made works using fragments of demolished buildings from Beijing suburbs.

29 These sequences are reminiscent of the work of Portuguese director Pedro Costa (1959-), whose *Fontainhas Trilogy*, in particular the film *Colossal Youth* (2006), depicts the demolition of a working class neighbourhood to make way for new urban developments. *Still Life's* digital cinematography is much closer to Costa than Rossellini's neo-realist ruins, although he certainly adopts the Italian director's eye for framing objects within the rubble. Another important connection in terms of the filming of demolition and construction is Kiarostami's shots of the building sites of Tehran in *A Taste of Cherry* (1998).

Socialist Realism, as an architectural form and as a desire, appears to have collapsed along with it.

Socialist Realist painting sought not only to heroise the development of the productive forces, but to link this labour to a greater historical project. This is evident in a poster by Tian Yuwen (1928-), distributed in 1958 during the Great Leap Forward, which bears the slogan 'Blast furnaces rise in level ground releasing red rays everywhere.' The poster explicitly links the image of the two workers at the furnace with the historical project of developing the 'red rays' of socialism. (See Fig.17) In *Still Life*, along with the demolished buildings, we see part of this industrial mode of production abandoned. Shen visits a factory which is being shut down. It is the last known place her husband worked. The camera frames a rusty machine part dripping brown water into a puddle beneath it. (See Fig.18) It is reminiscent of sequences in Michelangelo Antonioni's post-apocalyptic work *Red Desert* (1964). As in the sequences showing the Yangzi discussed above, water is capable of both generating movement as well as visualising circulation. Here the dripping rust provides us with a compact image of the end of a particular form of production, whether from mismanagement or the ostensibly irresistible impulse of modernisation. The colour red, so prominent in Socialist Realist artworks, is now a dull and faded rust. The next scene directly links the decaying factory to the communist legacy, as a group of former workers demand compensation from the factory boss beneath portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao. The Socialist Realist portrait hanging in the factory was a means of connecting the process of work in the factory to the project of building communism (Wu 'Television' 2008 69). But here the portraits hang as an ironic reminder of a deep disconnection between the workers and their managers and between the communist past and the post-socialist present.

The ruins of the socialist project are also attested to by the film's Chinese title which references Brecht's play *The Good Person of Szechwan*. In Brecht's play a young woman called Shen Te is a prostitute who follows the teachings of the gods, but whose generous nature is taken advantage of by the people of her town. A group of Chinese gods, looking to restore their lost faith in humans, take pity on Shen Te and grant her a gift of a tobacco shop. But the only way Shen Te is able to succeed is to abandon the morality of the gods and take on an alternate identity, that of the ruthless and exploitative Shui Ta, which allows her to develop the tobacco shop into a tobacco factory. While the film is not an explicit adaptation, it draws on Brecht's concern with the impossibility of morality in an immoral world (This theme will return in Jia's next film *A Touch of Sin*). We see the way in which the project of building the Dam is an opportunity for corruption through the character of Shen's husband who commandeers local gangs to forcibly remove residents from their homes. The Brecht reference returns again when we see a group of actors in Peking Opera costumes dressed as gods eating dinner in a small restaurant. (See Fig.19) It is an example of Jia's surreal realism, the moment is not noticed by any of the characters and could be understood to fit into a supposedly realist schema. But it also shows that the gods have been reduced to just another set of workers eating food in a restaurant with all the others involved in the demolition project on the riverbanks. Mao's reference to the parable of the 'Old Man Who Moved the Mountain' whose hard work is rewarded by the gods is now an ironic example of the powerlessness and futility of the lives of ordinary people. The gods are just a group of hungry workers. Any notion of a greater moral project involved in the labour of the demolition workers has since been reduced to rubble.

There is, however, another way of understanding how Socialist Realism as a desire persists in the film. The exploratory camera can be seen to be part of a wider project of excavation which is taking place in the film, brought on by the destructive process of building the Dam. This is most obviously allegorised when Shen visits Wang Dongming (Wang Hongwei), a friend of her husband who is presiding over a Han Dynasty architectural dig. He must finish the dig before the flood arrives. While there was much controversy about the destruction of ancient sites, the film seems far more concerned with the more recent past, that of the personal histories of its protagonists and the legacy of socialism. The excavation appears again when a group of men in Hazmat suits are shown emerging out of the rubble. (See Fig.20) The disconcerting effect of the exploratory camera movements

described above are heightened by the film's soundtrack, in which a low synthesiser begins to hum, creating the atmosphere of a sci-fi film. They walk through the rubble holding yellow rods which pass over abandoned items, in particular a child's green gumboot. As noted above, Jia described the area around the Gorges as looking as if a nuclear bomb had gone off, or an alien invasion had taken place. The nuclear reference points to both the Chinese nuclear energy programs and the various industrial disasters which have taken place in China. But these apocalyptic references can also be understood differently. These men are explorers from the future, like Wang they are searching for the remains of a long dead civilisation from the artefacts that have been left behind.

There are two other distinctly sci-fi moments in the film which have been the source of much speculation. In one sequence a building in the shape of the character for China (*hua*) takes off and in another sequence a flying saucer is shown flying over the Gorges. (See Fig.21) Both these sequences are clearly animated and develop the surreal realism of the animated sequences in *The World*. Just as the animated sequences in *World* move between commodified desires and unfathomable utopian ones, so too do the digital animations here generate a similar slippage. The notion of flight also emerges again in relation to animation, as the voyage-form described above transforms from a journey up and down the Yangzi to a journey into outer space. Jia has suggested that surreal techniques such as animation are required to capture the speed of China's rapid transformations. And the fact that characters appear unfazed by these strange sights attests to their absolute immunity to shock. What is so strange about a building taking off or a spaceship flying across the sky when an entire region is going to be underwater in a few years?

But in *Still Life* the animations also evoke a distinctly historical image. The China-structure in particular contains within its concrete frame the hopes and desires that are contained in the design and construction of such a structure, much like the buildings of Fengjie, now being demolished. When framed in an earlier sequence the China structure appears to be keeping watch over the area, and much like the portraits hanging in the factory, connecting the city to the greater project of building Chinese communism. (Fig.22) Thus its take off could suggest that this connection has been severed. Once the building is covered by water, the desires it contains will be forgotten. Similarly, the UFO could be taking the men in white suits away from earth forever, abandoning it in the hope of discovering a more hospitable planet.

There is a further utopian reading contained in Jia's harnessing of the power of Socialist Realist aesthetics. We can understand Socialist Realism as a kind of science fiction that attempted to create a world in its own image. While these images may have been illusory they nonetheless had symbolic potential and were invested with desire. Socialist Realism is thus a figure for hope in the transformative potential of the communist project, while it is also, as seen in the post-socialist painting to follow, imbued with the capacity to articulate opposition. In *Still Life* Jia harnesses both these aspects of Socialist Realism to invest his work with complex time images. The alternate time-line is one in which the socialist desire, the desire which combined egalitarianism and technological transformation, still operates. Or at least is no longer merely a parody of itself. The future which was fantasised about has not yet been realised. It is not likely to be realised at any time in the near future. In this sense Jia's film is completely free from nostalgia. If there is a nostalgia it is not for the past, nor for the image of the past, but for the desires which remain unrealised in this past. These desires are contained in structures which only cinema can realise, or even, release.

In her work on the former Soviet Union, Svetlana Boym discusses what she describes as 'post-socialist nostalgia'. Boym articulates two distinctive forms of nostalgia, totalising and fragmentary. The first seeks to reconstruct a complete image of the past. This type of nostalgia is exhibited in films which heroise the communist past, which in the Chinese context is exemplified in the national foundational narrative of the film *The Founding of a*

Republic (2009).³⁰ The second form is incomplete and partial. Boym writes that this latter form of nostalgia 'acknowledges the displacement of the mythical place without trying to rebuild it.' (Boym 285) While Boym characterises the first as utopian and the second as ironic, in Jia's work there is a collapse between these conceptual or affective structures. The fragmentary is a means of releasing the utopian. There is no desire to return to the past itself, only a longing for the utopianism which the past, in the form of Socialist Realism, fostered.

In *Still Life* Jia manages to do something which Socialist Realism constantly attempted. That is, to join the personal to the national, to depict historical transformation and to imbue images with the power to capture desires. In regard to this relationship between the personal and the national, it is significant that we only see the Dam itself once, in a scene where Shen finally finds her husband and presents him with a document for a divorce. Significantly, he is now an official who has risen through his involvement in the Dam project. This scene at the Dam can be interpreted allegorically as further evidence of the divorce between the state and its projects and the ordinary person cast adrift in the ensuing events. In the Dam we see the dream of countless rulers realised. And so it is viewed as the ultimate monument to power, in the same vein as a painting of Mao or a heroic representation of the workers. It is a means of blocking and containing time which threatens always to spill out and flood the present. But simultaneously, through cinema, we come to approach the Dam threefold - as a monument to the present, as an excavation of the past, and as a potential launch into the future. This future is of course uncertain. The film ends with Han travelling back to Fengjie to work in the mines in order to earn enough money to buy his wife back from her employer. On his way back to the boat we see a final animated image, a tightrope walker balanced between two ruined buildings. (Fig.23) In this image we see the balance which Jia is constantly trying to strike. A balance between a realist impulse to capture the present while ensuring that this present is still amenable to the desires of the past. Jia's cinema therefore is capable of articulating new desires which perhaps, like the spaceships, have returned from the future. If, as noted earlier in the section on water, the official history of the Three Gorges Dam project seeks to create a coherent telos linking the achievements of the past to those of the present, *Still Life* disrupts this telos by suggesting that history could have happened otherwise and indeed still might flow on an unpredicted course. Surreal realism takes from Socialist Realism the power to play with time, but does so not to inspire loyalty, but to create a cinema which is open to desire differently.

Conclusion - History Submerged

What does it mean to make a film underwater? What happens when one creates a film within a landscape on the verge of a flood? For Jia there is a necessity to make a film in such an environment, but he must reinvent his approach to the cinematic medium in order to do so. Creating a film in such a space could easily dissolve into empty spectacle or an act of documentary preservation. Neither of these approaches befit Jia's project of historicising the present. Jia is not concerned with documentary preservation as such, but rather what fascinates him about this landscape is that it provides a particularly acute example of the process of memory itself. *Still Life*, as a film underwater, is a film in which multiple structures and modes of memory join the same flow. Jia's film is not concerned with forgetting as much as it is concerned with the persistence of memory. It is the painful memory of the beloved which draws Shen and Han to Fengjie and what follows them as they move through the ruins on the riverbank and look out across the Gorges. It is also the dim memory of a utopianism which is barely perceptible but continues to flow through the spaces and structures of post-socialist China. Jia's cinema is concerned with tracing the passage of these desires as they move through bodies, in and out of ruined buildings and across the flowing waters of the Yangzi River.

30 For a discussion of the role of nostalgia in Chinese Sixth generation cinema see Yomi Braester 'Tracing the City Scars' 161-80, and Augusta Palmer 'Scaling the Skyscraper' 181-204, both in *The Urban Generation* (2007) ed. Zhang Zhen.

Jia's method in *Still Life* involves adapting strategies from painting, in particular Socialist Realism, in order to historicise the changing landscape of the present. The river itself serves as an expression of both historical constancy and a site of transformation. This constancy is not an eternal quality of nature as such but rather its place as a constant source of economic power, something which is still drawn upon to this day. At the same time the river comes to serve as a visualisation of the endlessly transforming power of capital as the very structure of the landscape has been irremediably altered by the Dam. The river thus becomes a means of framing the volatility of the Chinese present as well as framing it as an important vector for the circulation of goods and commodities. *Still Life* is also attentive to the manner in which these historical transformations, of an impossible or incomprehensible magnitude, are revealed through the minor detail of the everyday object. Jia's work has always been attuned to the capacity of objects to reveal histories and desires. In *Still Life* this quality becomes intensified through the use of title cards which reorient the viewer away from linearity and toward a navigation oriented around an interaction with and through objects. In *Still Life* we see Jia's ability to find a cinematic quality in almost every aspect of everyday life, from the curling smoke of a cigarette to a packet of tea in a locker, all of which come to serve as markers of time itself.

Still Life then is ultimately concerned with placing different temporal registers into contact. There are a line of clocks hanging on the wall of the archaeologist's house. Are they counting down to the moment when the flood will wash away his dig, the day when it becomes impossible to access the historical past? Or do they stand for a kind of futility, of the impossibility of clock time to take account of the subjective durational time of memory which Henri Bergson distinguished. (Bergson 226) In *Still Life* the clock is not only incapable of taking into account the durational experiences of reverie or melancholy, but also the long durational time of history. Cinema then becomes a way of conceptualising a relationship to history by restructuring the relationship to the unfathomable. This unfathomable time is the deep geological time of the river, the distant past of feudal China, and the recent history of socialism. These vast time schemas institute a blockage on conceptualisation, made even more impossible by the relentless assault of reifications which lock us into the bad infinity of a perpetual present. One of the great achievements of *Still Life* is to propose a durational relationship to history, to use cinema to completely flatten the relationship between the personal time of longing for the beloved and the historical time of the transformation of the river. Crucially this is not the idea that history is merely an interpretation or a subjective relationship to time. Nor is it simply an affirmation of the historical character of the everyday. Rather it is that history is comprehended through the affective, through the everyday occurrences of our lives, and it is precisely through the most intimate and personal desires that we reach the most universal and impersonal ones.

This durational experience of history radicalises allegory. Socialist Realism sought to create coherent visual systems to historicise the communist project. A man holding a gun is not merely fighting other soldiers but defending socialism from the threat of imperialism. A woman working in a factory is not merely making machine parts but constructing the body of the socialist state. In Socialist Realism the individual's life and labour were a representation or stand in for the collective project. *Still Life* adopts certain allegorical strategies from Socialist Realism but it refuses to resolve the personal and the historical in this straightforward way. Nor are historical events merely a backdrop for the staging of personal dramas. When Shen eventually divorces her husband who is an official involved in the Dam project, we are tempted, as discussed above, to read this as an allegory for the divorce between ordinary people and the state. And this is not completely incorrect, but what is crucial is that it is only through that subjective experience of leaving her lover that we can comprehend something of this divorce or distance between Shen and the world around her. It is similarly the case in Sanming's search for his wife. He must travel a great distance and see the area transformed, comprehending through the disappearance of the landscape the disappearance of his wife. The film does not stage these moments as revelations or transformation for the characters. This is something completely absent from Jia's cinema. Instead by overlaying different kinds of memory the film creates images in

which it becomes impossible to distinguish the historical and the personal. Or rather we see how indissolubly linked the personal and the historical are. When characters are framed looking at the river it is simultaneously a vector of the economy, a symbol of yearning and a visualisation of the pure passage of time flowing past.

The quality of melancholy is itself transformed by the film. A melancholic relation to history is the fear of forgetting the past. A fear that unless we pay careful attention to the past we are doomed to return and eternally re-tread the same ground, eternally repeating the same mistakes. Perhaps what the film suggests is something a little different. The film's melancholic quality is that we cannot forget the past no matter how hard we may want to. In Maurice Blanchot's terms we have 'forgotten the capacity to forget'. (Blanchot 195) There is a sense throughout the film that the painful presence of the past will never be forgotten. And a knowledge of the past, of its disasters or tragedies, will not prevent these same disasters happening again and again. But there is another painful quality in this past which the film returns to. That is the utopian desire for a transformed world, one in which all manner of unfathomable things, far stranger than UFOs and rocket ships disguised as buildings, will become possible. For Jia these utopian desires are painful, in part, because they cannot be separated from the tragedies and chaos which accompany them. But they are also painful because they mean that by paying attention to these utopian desires we are out of step with the present. To follow such a desire, as *Still Life* does, means to be caught up in the asynchronic time of the future which the socialist past dreamt of but never realised. Therefore the demolition of the buildings and the take off of the China-structure could mean something else entirely. Not to forget the past as such but to begin dreaming a different future, one which is attuned to the long duration of history, attuned to the utopianism bred in the past, but also a utopianism all of our own.

Chapter Three

A Touch of Sin (2013)

Introduction

In this chapter I will argue that Jia's 2013 film *A Touch of Sin* (2013) transforms the cinematic form by incorporating the social media news feed into the structure of the film. *Sin* is comprised of four narratives, all adapted from stories which circulated online on Sina Weibo, a Chinese microblogging website whose interface is reminiscent of Twitter.¹ There is a tension within the film between replicating the experience of stories received on the online news feed and a desire to create new relationships between these stories. I will argue that Jia's cinema is transformed by the feed while at the same time suggesting that cinema is capable of creating a time in which these stories transcend their status as a series of strange disasters by their insertion into a totality, in which the protagonists' struggle between fate and freedom is politicised, albeit through the aesthetic paradigm of the cinema. Like both of the preceding films, *Sin* does not ignore contradictions in favour of a false unity or harmony but instead suggests subtle connections between events and visions in the confusing landscape of 21st century China.

Sina Weibo reached the height of its popularity and influence between 2010-14 when it had an estimated 536 million active accounts. (Svensson 227) The first plot in which Dahai (Jiang Wu) kills a corrupt village chief was based on the story of Hu Wenhai who, in 2001, killed a village cadre and 13 others whom he saw as his personal enemies. (Lin 2017 281) The second plot follows Zhou San (Wang Baoqiang), a travelling bandit who comes home for New Year and commits a bank robbery. This story was based on Zhou Kehua, a Chinese gunman and bank robber active between 2004-2012, who is believed to have killed at least nine people and was eventually shot by the police. (Lin 2017 281) The third plot of Xiao Yu (Zhao Tao) was based on the Deng Yujiao incident in 2009, in which a woman was charged with murder after stabbing a man to death who had attempted to sexually assault her in the sauna where she worked. This subsequently became the focus of an online campaign around corruption and sexual harassment, eventually leading to her charges being reduced. (Lin 2017 281) The final story of a young man named Xiaohui (Lanshan Luo) struggling to repay a debt is based on the Foxconn factory suicides, which reached their peak in 2010 when an estimated 18 Foxconn employees attempted suicide, predominantly by throwing themselves from buildings. (Lin 2017 281)

These stories were all controversial events not only because of the online reaction they provoked from Weibo users, but because of the attempts to censor their circulation through state intervention. As Yang Guobin notes, internet censorship in China is not straightforward and involves a constant negotiation between the state, the online platforms and the public (Yang 5). For example, in 2010 Weibo launched a mission to stop the 'spreading of rumours' online (Yang 3). He has also noted that part of the most recent attempts at internet control were a reaction to the growing influence of Weibo and were first implemented on the site. The white paper on 'The Internet in China' in 2010 was the first comprehensive approach to a 'Chinese model of Internet administration' which Yang interprets as an extension of one of Xi Jinping's 'four comprehensives' around law and order and which aimed to implement tighter state governance over Chinese cyberspace (Yang 4). This policy has not only involved overt censorship, but also an increased online presence of state news organs such as the *People's Daily* whose Weibo presence provided a counter to the information uploaded by other users of the site. Significantly, Jia's film, which deals with these 'sensitive' issues, was pulled from circulation after only a week, but nonetheless was

1 *Sin* must be distinguished from the recent rise in the popularity of Chinese films based on online novels, such as *Mojin: The Lost Legend* (2015). Such films are produced with a built-in market which is exportable to other mediums, frequently remade simultaneously as films, video games and online television series. While they are another important example of the relationship between cinema and other virtual aesthetic forms, *Sin's* approach to the online feed does not merely adapt stories to film but partakes of a formal engagement with the structure of the feed in which news stories are consumed.

watched and streamed online.² (Lin 2017 282)

While the internet is driven by algorithmic calculation and abstract numerical processes it is experienced by most users as a kind of narrative machine, a space for reading and sharing stories.³ *Sin* harnesses this machine for cinema by utilising stories from the social media newsfeed to create a series of obliquely interconnected narratives. Therefore the internet, like the architecture of the park of *World* and the waters of the Yangzi in *Still Life*, leads to a formal evolution in Jia's cinema. The most immediate formal transformation is the intensification of narrative. Jia notes that this is directly the result of the social media feed, stating, 'I chose to tell four stories instead of one because this is the way I received the information on Weibo as it was happening. They were all intertwined with one another, not happening one at a time. It hit me that I could present this intertwined feeling in my film, just like the way I experienced it on Weibo.' (Brzeski np) This feeling of simultaneity is the most important and difficult aspect of the film. While the stories never overtly intersect, they are linked by a subtle recurrence of symbols and a heightened unreality which builds on the surreal realism I have discussed in the preceding chapters.

This chapter will argue that while *Sin* is indebted to the sense of simultaneity or interconnection produced by the feed, it also presents us with a counter to the confusion which such an overwhelming degree of information can generate. The film plays constantly with the notion of the connection of spaces and the dislocation or disconnection of its protagonists. The film takes place in multiple locations, but it also dramatises movement itself by engaging with the spaces of the circulation of bodies and labour, frequently shooting highways, airports and trains. The internet is understood as another vector of circulation, one that is central to the infrastructure of finance and the spread of information. Like the phone discussed in Chapter One, the internet connects the enormous geographical distances of China. Another element in this circulation involves the movement of symbols, which in this film is most prominently envisaged in the recurrence of animal symbolism. This can be understood in terms of advertising images as much as the traditional associations of the zodiac animals in Chinese cosmology. These images are undecidable and the characters are left trying to work out their place within this overwhelming network of circulating stories, connections and strange symbolic unions.

I will argue that another effect of the interaction with the feed form is that *Sin* has the most overt narrative arcs of any of Jia's films, with each story culminating in a violent climax. It is these violent climaxes which made the source stories into news items in the first place. But *Sin* does not purport to tell the real story behind the news story. In fact it could be interpreted as quite the opposite, as the film, more than any of Jia's previous work, is indebted to genre cinema, namely the *wuxia* and the gangster film. The film involves a form of mythologisation in which violence is understood to be a complex reaction to the overwhelming obstacles in the protagonists' lives. The Chinese title of the film *Tian Zhubing* can be translated as 'Heavenly Fate' or 'Fated Doom'. Violence is thus both a means of wresting control back from fate and simultaneously the doomed reaction to the violence of forces which are far beyond the control of individual lives. In *Sin* the fated connection may include a fatal alliance with death.

The final section of the chapter will argue that the feed form intensifies the textural quality of the digital image. This visual style intensifies the surreal realism of *The World* and *Still Life*. Jia described *The World* as having a 'digital texture' but these films are warm and lush by comparison to the cold artificiality of *Sin*. The film uses fluorescent lighting and an evenly manipulated colour grade to bring out the harsh quality of interiors. The even

2 For an in-depth discussion of the film's release history and its distribution through online streaming services see Lin Feng's article 'Online Video Sharing: An Alternative Channel for Film Distribution?' (2017) in *Chinese Journal of Communication* 279-274. For a discussion of the role of internet piracy and streaming services in the production and distribution of Chinese cinema see Dan Gao's essay 'From Pirate Eye to Kino Eye' in *China's iGeneration* (2014), 126-46.

3 For a theorisation of the ontological structure of the digital, especially understood in terms of data and metadata see Chinese philosopher Yuk Hui's book *On the Existence of Digital Objects* (2016).

lighting heightens the artificiality of the film where even scenes outdoors are incredibly low contrast. The coldness of the film should be linked to the advertising aesthetic which comes to the fore in this film. The film, like digital advertising more generally, appears less to be using colour than texture, particularly in spaces such as the sauna in which Xiao Yu works or the factories where Xiaohui works. The centrality of texture is key to the digital design of these spaces and to the heavy post-production work of post-internet cinema more generally.⁴ But while Chinese blockbuster films such as *Wolf Warrior* (2015) which employ digital textures allegorise an ascendant China, *Sin* presents us with the interiors which organise the world's so-called digital economy, showing the sites of production and the hopelessness which this engenders.

I Visualising Circulation: Caricatures of Power and Symbolic Animals

In *Sin*, Jia's concern with the changing landscape of China involves an exploration of the space of circulation and dramatises the increasing disorientation of those caught within these movements. The film presents the four narratives as part of an interplay between connection and disconnection as characters attempt to make sense of their rapidly transforming world through the symbols which proliferate around them. *The World and Still Life* both presented migrant labourers but *Sin* actually shows the spaces and processes of movement. The film reflects the interconnected nature of contemporary China through its focus on a wider variety of spatial locations and an increased temporal speed. It is by far Jia's fastest film to date. Speed is a corollary of the infrastructure of circulation, of both the high-speed networks of movement and the online spaces which connect vast distances. The film also allegorises this notion of connection and disconnection through the characters' reading of signs and symbols, most prominently through the films' focus on animals.

Sin explicitly foregrounds the interconnectedness of contemporary China by framing the spaces of circulation. Jia explicitly notes this stating, 'My films are interested in the relationship between people and the spaces around them. In *A Touch of Sin* I explore new parts of the Chinese landscape, places like the airport and high-speed trains.' (Hughes np) The very first scene of the film begins on a highway where Zhou San kills two men who demand a toll for passing across the road. This establishes the setting of the film, the spaces which join the cities and villages of China, which are increasingly monetised. We will see shots of highways, railway stations and the interior of train carriages, ferries moving down rivers and buses dropping off passengers at depots. DHL vans pass by in the back of shots. Scooters travel between towns and airports are shown in the process of being constructed. (Fig.1) Most of the transitions between narratives involve travelling through such spaces. This is most overt through the manner in which Zhou San's narrative connects to Xiao Yu's. (Fig.2) The sequence begins with Zhou San travelling down a highway where he has just killed two people in a bank robbery, before getting onto a bus in which Xiao Yu's lover is sleeping. Zhou gets off the bus but the camera continues to film the interior of the bus as it pulls up at a depot where Xiao is waiting. They go to a train station where Xiao watches him get onto a train which leaves. We then watch her walk back to her workplace down a road.

Along with these physical sites of circulation, the film visualises the abstract processes of the circulation of information. While characters from the various storylines never actually meet, they are joined by the way news of what has happened recurs in other storylines. Zhou San's murders are recalled in Dahai's story when the migrant workers are rounded up to see if any of them fit the description of the criminal. Dahai's murderous spree recurs in Xiaohui's story when he reads about the story on an iPad. Xiao Yu's attack is recalled in the final sequence of the film when her new employer, the wife of the village chief whom Dahai kills, recognises her from the news. The internet is explicitly shown to connect all the stories. The film frequently frames characters checking their phones or watching news

4 Film theorist Steven Shaviro theorises this in his book *Post-Cinematic Affect* (2010) which uses Deleuzian film theory to analyse CGI in contemporary blockbusters which, he argues, transcend old cinematic categories such as the creation of the illusion of uniform locations and internally coherent perspectives. (Shaviro 26)

reports on iPads and laptops. (Fig.3) But this interconnection is not necessarily shown to give characters a greater freedom or autonomy. In one of the most overt visualisations of internet use in the film we see Xiaohui and his soon to be lover, Lian Rong, scrolling through the feed in a room in the high class brothel in which they work. (Fig.4) Here, as noted above, they read about Dahai's attack, as well as snow falling in northern China, a corrupt official hoarding Chanel handbags and, significantly for the film's focus on the mode of circulation, a high-speed train crash. Lian Rong asks, 'What should I write?' Xiaohui answers, 'WTF', which she proceeds to type in reaction to all of the news stories. While the feed encourages commenting, discussion and the spread of information, the film seems to be ambivalent about the political potential of the online space. The events on the feed are experienced by these characters as a series of disconnected disasters, so absurd and so frequent that they no longer have the power to shock. Within this ostensibly interconnected network events still appear as disjointed. There is also the question of the degree to which information appearing online can be trusted and why a certain type of information is being allowed out by the state.

This notion of disconnection within an interconnected world is frequently commented upon in the film. There are constant references in dialogue to characters being lost, unable to find direction or disconnected from the space-time of the present. This occurs at the micro-level when Xiaohui is trying to use the GPS function on a workmate's phone, which results in a brutal injury to the workmate's hand. But more often this concern with direction is given an explicitly historical quality. A workmate comments to Dahai as he rages about the corruption in the village, 'It's a pity you weren't born in the revolutionary era, you would have made a great general.' When the village chief returns from Beijing on a private jet the party secretary of the village shakes his hand saying, 'Mr Jiao you've reached a new level' to which the chief replies, 'Let's Progress Together.' The film thus contains a caricatural quality in which the state's discourse around progress is subjected to a merciless assault through verbal and visual satire. In the airport scene the chief is shown as a member of the new class of wealthy officials who have sold off formerly state-owned property and profited immensely. (Fig.5)

The film's use of visual caricature satirises the notion of progress that animated both socialist and contemporary post-socialist discourse. These portrayals borrow from Mao-era cartoons, which showed capitalists in suits and top-hats, but here the top-hat is replaced by a Louis Vuitton scarf and designer sneakers.⁵ Jia himself appears in the film in this very role, as a cigar-smoking patron of a high class brothel. The cameo serves as an ironic reference to his own success as a filmmaker and producer who has had great financial success through his supposedly critical and independent cinema. The sequence at the brothel also contains a further caricature of the contemporary party and business elite and its use of socialist rhetoric (the brothel is called 'The Golden Age'). In a scene reminiscent of *The World*, a troupe of women in sexualised versions of the Red Guard uniform march around a room while clients look on approvingly, one even staring at them through a pair of binoculars. (Fig.6) Later Lian Rong, dressed in blue official uniform, is involved in a role play inside a train carriage in the brothel where a man dressed in a Mao jacket tells her to address him as 'Chief Leader'. The man asks her, 'Where are we going?'. When she replies, 'Wherever you want', he chastises her. 'Young people nowadays have no sense of direction', he says, before asking her if there have been 'any recent innovations' and pulling her head downward to lick his nipples. While the socialist heritage in *Still Life* was a possible source of utopian

5 Another important legacy which Jia taps into is the political cartoons which circulated in China during the 1980s beginning with the founding of 'Satire and Humour', a supplement to the *People's Daily* started by cartoonist Ying Tao in 1979. By the mid 1980s multiple cartoon newspapers existed and almost every local-level party newspaper had a cartoon column. The more general decline in freedom of the press after the Tiananmen Square massacre led to a decline in the production of cartoons. Recently, political cartoons have risen in popularity on social media, for example the controversial work of Wang Liming, known as Pervert Red Pepper. For a discussion of the history of Chinese political cartoons see John Lent and Xu Ying 'Chinese Cartoons and Humour' (2013) *Humour in Chinese Life and Culture* 81-102. For an analysis of contemporary online cartoons see Luwei Rose Luqiu 'The Cost of Humour' (2017) *Global Media and Communication* 123-138.

dreaming, in *Sin* it is a cartoon used as a kinky way to eroticise power. That this scene occurs on a train set links it to the film's concern with circulation as well as historicising the train network as one of the first networks to connect up socialist China. The train was a source of incredible excitement in Jia's second film *Platform* (2000), set in the 1980s, but here it has lost its utopian quality. The scene also parodies the notion of 'directionless youth' in the discourse of the state. Lian Rong, like all the characters in the film, is working far from home, trying to survive inside the networks which have displaced everything. The film is in this sense quite pointed: China is not 'progressing together', the forward march of progress leaves disaster, dislocation and degradation in its wake.

The feed is shown to present further disorientation and the film attempts to show both the effect of this disorientation while simultaneously locating the events and characters within a greater context. This involves an intensification of symbols which characters are dimly aware of but cannot ever quite interpret.⁶ The caricatures of the socialist past and state discourse relating to progress are one such element, but this symbolic play emerges throughout the film. One example is the recurrent animal symbolism. (Fig.7) We see a horse being whipped at the beginning of the film, whose cruel owner is shot by Dahai during his rampage. He ties a tiger rug to his rifle before going to shoot the village chief. Lian Rong releases a goldfish into a river to try and atone for the bad karma she has attained for being a prostitute. A little girl is shown crying while her father cuts their duck's throat for a New Year meal. A young fortune teller sits in a box full of snakes. Later an animated CGI snake slithers across Xiao Yu's path. Later still an old man with a cow and a monkey on his shoulder watch her after she has stabbed the men in the brothel. These symbols can all be linked to the allegorical use of animals in Chinese folk tales or in classical Chinese literature such as *Journey to the West*.⁷ They can also be linked to Buddhist cosmology, the signs of the zodiac and the notion of reincarnation which is referenced by the character Lian Rong.

But we can also link these animal images to pop culture. For example, Hong Kong director Tsui Hark's film *Green Snake* (1993) plays on a television in the sauna where Xiao Yu works as workers relax. (Fig.8) It provides another layer to the recurrent snake symbols which appear in Xiao Yu's narrative. As in *Still Life's* reference to the John Woo film *A Better Tomorrow*, pop culture is understood in *Sin* as an important vernacular form, one which is used to make sense of the rapidly transforming reality of post-socialist China. In *Sin*, the pop form is shown to intersect with the already rich visual culture of China, playing with familiar references and retelling traditional stories. *Green Snake* is based on a novel by Lillian Lee which itself is based on the Chinese folk tale *Madame White Snake*.⁸ The film relates the story of two snake spirits, played by Maggie Cheung and Joey Wong, who try to tempt a Taoist monk. The link between the snake and female sexuality becomes further evident when Xiao Yu is attacked by the jealous wife of her lover and hides in a van where a young female fortune teller is surrounded by snakes. Jia's use of the pop form becomes a means of linking the film itself to a wider network of aesthetic production.⁹ The reference to *Snake*

6 Another way of understanding this almost preconscious sensation of interconnection and fate is the manner in which it signals the presence of predictive data gathering algorithms which are operating constantly while we are online, determining the kind of content which appears on the feed. Mark Hansen describes these processes as operations which never reach a level of conscious awareness but impact experience all the same, not as mediations of perception as much as 'self-sensing environments'. (Hansen 30) See Mark Hansen *Feed Forward* (2015).

7 *Journey to the West* attributed to Wu Chengen is one of the 'Four Great Classical Novels' of Chinese literature. It was published in the 16th century during the Ming Dynasty and tells the story of a Tang dynasty monk's pilgrimage to the west (central Asia and India) to obtain Buddhist sacred texts. See William Jenner 'Translator's Afterword' *Journey to the West* (1984).

8 See Lillian Lee *Green Snake* (1993). For a discussion of the various adaptations of the story see Liang Luo 'Writing Green Snake' (2017) *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China* 7-37.

9 Japanese director Shunji Iwai's film *All About Lily Chou-Chou* (2001) also explores the intersection between the pop form and the network, exploring the effects of a fictional pop star on the lives of the film's young protagonists. The film is also formally informed by the aesthetics of online spaces, with a non-linear structure and the use of smooth digital cinematography. Shunji also developed the film in tandem with the internet novelisation and through posting on an online forum about the fictional star.

links *Sin* to an already established cinematic classic, producing an external cinematic lineage and is further evidence of Jia's interest in the way cinema exists in a network. As Carlos Rojas notes, in his discussion of the film in his book *Homesickness* (2015), part of what is so fascinating about the film is that it too will enter into the circulation of the 'contemporary transnational mediascape'. (Rojas 281) Internally this reference also links the service labour of the workers at the sauna with the soft-core eroticism of Tsui Hark's film. It is not an overt connection but the link between the snake and female sexuality becomes increasingly apparent. Xiao Yu does not read the snakes overtly but she is aware that her status as a woman working in the sauna exposes her to the threat of violence. The snake also serves as a model for revenge as she strikes back against the men who confront her. An exhaustive reading of this symbolism is tempting, but ultimately futile. The images are intensively overcoded. A semiotics of cinema, proposed by film theorists such as Christian Metz, is impossible in such an instance.¹⁰ *Sin* adopts the heightened referentiality of the feed in which the image is inherently undecidable, prone to taking on all manner of contradictory associations, which in turn reflects the image economy of post-socialist China and international capitalism more generally.

I do not want to unpack each reference, therefore, but rather note that in each instance the characters use the animal symbols as a means of orienting themselves in relation to the events unfolding around them. In *Sin*, the internet is characterised as a means of circulating not only information but symbols, whether this be memes, photographs or advertising images. Characters are constantly shown reading these symbols as a way to orient themselves within their individual lives. The avatar or online alter-ego of Lian Rong's character is 'Fish Seeks Water' and Xiaohui's is 'Little Bird'. These are names chosen as the means of navigating the current of the social media feed. The animal references also take on allegorical qualities. Dahai shoots the man whipping a horse. The subjugation of the defenceless is likened to the beating of a horse which cannot defend itself. The horse is then seen trotting riderless down the road, a symbol of an emancipated but simultaneously directionless people. The resonance of the symbols within the film is difficult for the characters to register. They seem dimly aware of their significance but cannot insert them into a coherent structure. These character-viewers who attempt to comprehend their fate through images are reminiscent of Benjamin's fragment on 'Fate and Character'. He writes, 'Fate can be apprehended only through signs, not in itself, for - even if this or that link of fate, is directly in view, it is nevertheless a relationship that is meant by these concepts, never accessible except through signs because it is above the immediately visible level.' (Benjamin 2007 304) Thus, on one level, cinema allows for an abstraction in which these narratives, with their interconnection and subtle resonance, can be understood. While the internal character-viewers only see their own narrative, the external filmic viewer can draw connections across all the stories. Eisenstein's notion of intellectual montage operates here not through the direct linkage of linear shots, but through the juxtaposition of the three narratives.¹¹ Like the poetic objects in *Still Life*, the structure of the flood of symbolism in *Sin* allows for a conceptual navigation which moves backward and forward across the scope of the film. But at the same time, as with all of Jia's work, even the most straightforward caricatures cannot ever capture the whole. While the film manages to visualise circulation in a way in which very few other Chinese 21st century artworks have been capable of, part of its success is due to the way it presents the confusion of being inside a network in which one is perpetually attempting to draw together threads of understanding and yet is constantly being frustrated. The character-viewers in *Sin* appear doomed to wander across physical and virtual highways of the present, trapped in an ever expanding maze of contradictory information.

10 Or perhaps in all instances, as cinema is not easily reducible to the structure of a language. For a discussion of the limits of semiotics in relation to an analysis of the cinema see the chapter 'Recapitulation of Images and Signs' in Gilles Deleuze *Cinema 2* (1985) 24-41. See also Christian Metz's book, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (1974).

11 See Sergei Eisenstein 'A Dialectic Approach to Film Form' 45-63 and 'Methods of Montage' (72-83) *Film Form* (1949) trans. Jay Leyda.

II Violence and Fate: *Wuxia* Destiny and Violent Labour

In *Sin*, violence is a means through which characters tear themselves from the situations into which they have been thrown. Jia states, 'Resorting to violence is the quickest and most direct way the weak can try to restore their lost dignity.' (Hughes np) As noted above, the Chinese title of the film translates as 'Heavenly Fate' or 'Fated Doom'. The violent climaxes in each narrative are both a means of seizing autonomy and simultaneously an expression of the characters' violent fate. There are constant references to fate or destiny in the film, as a way of blessing fated encounters and being cursed to live the life one has been dealt. In a sequence which encapsulates these notions of fate, Xiaohui and Lian Rong meet in the brothel where they both work after having previously seen each other on a train. 'We were meant to meet here', Xiaohui says. Lian Rong replies, 'Everyone is meant to meet here.' Her response is both an ironic reference to the brothel's mythos as a site of fateful encounters but also exemplifies the film's concern with interconnected virtual spaces. Fate in *Sin* evokes the Chinese traditional forms of predictive numerology such as the *I Ching*, the Buddhist notion of karmic retribution and, most significantly, the interconnected logic of the internet.¹² The internet, and in particular the smart phone, realises the belief in a totally interconnected universe. All the characters will eventually meet, or at least stories about them will intersect, in the feed.

The film's violent sequences borrow explicitly from genre cinema.¹³ This is evident from the film's English title which references King Hu's famous *wuxia* film *A Touch of Zen* (1971).¹⁴ *Wuxia* is a compound of *wu*, meaning military or martial, and *xia*, meaning honourable. The film plays with the *wuxia* trope of an honourable hero who is also an outlaw. The *wuxia* influence is apparent through the film's visual style. For example, Xiao Yu's sequence references *wuxia* costume tropes, with Jia noting that her high pony tail is a reference to the character Yang Hui-ching in *Zen*, a female warrior played by iconic actress Feng Hsu, who appears in many of King Hu's films. (Fig.9) As noted in Chapter Two, Jia was an outspoken critic of the contemporary *wuxia* film, releasing *Still Life* on the same day as Zhang Yimou's *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006). But if the contemporary *wuxia* serves to dramatise state power, creating an unbroken line of Chinese exceptionalism from the feudal era to the present, Jia's engagement with the genre is far more complex.

By inserting the *wuxia* film into the present Jia continues his exploration of popular culture as a utopian investment. As noted in both of the preceding chapters, popular culture is understood within Jia's work as an alternate mode of navigating the present after the decline of socialism as a value system. In *Still Life* we saw how Brother Mark's engagement with Chow Yun Fat's character in *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) went beyond the screen. But in *Sin*, popular cinematic forms are integrated into the form of the film itself. During Xiao

12 Hansen writes that data gathering algorithms have shifted media from 'a past-directed recording platform to a data-driven anticipation of the future'. (4) If past media could be theorised in terms of inscription or archiving, algorithmic calculation gathers large amounts of data which are immediately put into action without the mediation of an agent or subject. In this way the in-built futurity of predictive digital technologies can be aligned with the notion of fate, in the sense in which it orients and predetermines experience without any recourse to freedom or subjective decision making. For a discussion of the intersection between Buddhist understandings of fate and digital media see Gregory Grieve's discussion of the relationship between the Silicon Valley ideology of the interconnected network and Buddhist cosmology in *Buddhism, the Internet and Digital Media* (2015) 93-116.

13 For a discussion of the film's violence and the *wuxia* genre see Yanjie Wang 'Violence, *Wuxia*, Migrants' (2015), *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, 159-172 and Jiwei Xiao 'China Unravelling' (2014), *Film Quarterly*, 24-35.

14 *A Touch of Zen* is an important reference point, being the first *wuxia* film to become successful in the West, winning the Technical Grand Prize at Cannes in 1975. The film has been frequently referenced since, with Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and Zhang Yimou's *House of Flying Daggers* (2004) both including direct homages to *Zen*. It is also important to note that the *wuxia* is perhaps the most commercially successful Chinese film genre in the West and is thus a mode which directly relates to China's international historical-cinematic reputation. For a comprehensive history of the *wuxia* genre see Stephen Teo *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema* (2009). See also Ho-Chak Law 'King Hu's Cinema Opera' (2014) *Music and the Moving Image* 24-40.

Yu's fight sequence the tropes of *wuxia* cinema are integrated into the cinematography and editing, moving from the everyday to a space of cinematic fantasy. The cutting is much faster than anything we have ever seen before in Jia's films, as the screen moves from the perspective of Xiao Yu's attackers to her hand which pulls out a knife, to a close up of her face cutting across the screen. Blood sprays artfully across her clothing. She then stalks through the sauna with her knife raised above her head, in the same pose as Feng Tsu in *Zen* or Jen Yu (Zhang Ziyi) in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). (Fig.10) The soundtrack adds to this fantastical quality, adopting the clicking percussion and whistling *xiao* (bamboo flute) of the *wuxia* soundtracks of composer Ta Chiang-Wu who worked with King Hu.

The other fantasy space which the film invokes is that of the gangster film, specifically the work of Hong Kong's Johnnie To (1955-).¹⁵ *Sin* contains a direct reference to To's film *Exiled* (2006) which plays on a television in a bus which Zhou San travels on. For many years Jia has been rumoured to be making a film with To's production company, Milkyway Films, although this has never eventuated. Nonetheless, in *Sin* his interest in the speed and brutality of To's cinema is evident. Dahai's revenge sequence contains the most explicit references to this, vengeance being a staple trope in the narrative logic of gangster cinema. The gangster reference is also contained in the casting of Jiang Wen to play Dahai, an actor recognisable for his role as a bandit in his brother Jiang Wu's film *Let the Bullets Fly* (2010).¹⁶ (Fig.11) In *Sin* the gangster trope of outrageous violence is apparent. (Fig.12) Every time Dahai shoots an enemy they fly backward from the force of impact. The camera then pans across to show blood pooling around them. In a sequence which evokes the style of political caricature noted above, Dahai shoots the village chief as he is seated in his new Audi, with blood covering the car's brown leather interior. The camera cuts to Dahai's smiling face, sprayed with blood. In Dahai's sequence this violent revenge is linked to the socialist past. Earlier we see him staring wistfully at a monumental Socialist Realist sculpture of a worker and farmer. (Fig.13) He is dressed in a green army greatcoat and, as noted above, he ties a tiger rug to his gun, referencing the Maoist model opera *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (Zhi Qu Wei Hushan).¹⁷ A tiger's roar is heard on the soundtrack. In this sequence the utopianism of popular culture and that of the socialist art of the past become intertwined in his desire to take direct action against corruption in his town.

In both Dahai and Xiao Yu's sequences the fantastical character of the violence has a retributive quality. Both are preceded by violence done to the protagonists. Dahai is repeatedly beaten across the head with a shovel for disrupting the village chief's return. Xiao Yu is attacked twice, firstly by men employed by the wife of her lover and later when she is beaten across the face with a wad of cash for refusing to sleep with two men in the

15 To's films, like Jia's, also take part in a historicisation of the present. Of particular note is To's *Election 2* (2006) in which the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997 is reflected through the restructuring of the hierarchy of gang leadership and expresses the strained relation between Hong Kong and the mainland. For a discussion of To's work in relation to mainland Chinese cinema see Yiu-Wai Chu 'Johnnie To's "Northern Expedition"' (2015) *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 192-205. For a discussion of speed in To's work see Charles Kronengold 'Multitemporality and the Speed(s) of Thought' (2013) *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 277-295.

16 The reference to *Let the Bullets Fly* (2010) also nods to a further resonance between the two films. *Bullets* was the source of much online debate as, while it was set in the 1920s, many viewers interpreted it to be commenting on contemporary events circulating in the news as well as a critical reflection on the legacy of socialism, given its historical setting. See Xiao Liu's article 'From the Glaring Sun to Flying Bullets' in *China's iGeneration* (2014), 321-36. The character of Dahai is thus an extension of his character in *Bullets*, playing a rebellious yet jaded figure who comments on the failures of the present to live up to the ideals of the past.

17 *Taking Tiger Mountain* is based on the novel *Lin bai xue yuan* by Qu Bo which was in turn based on events which took place during the Chinese Civil War in which a communist soldier disguises himself as a bandit in order to overcome a bandit gang. Dahai's notion of transforming himself into a gangster in order to defeat the village chief is in part a reference to *Tiger Mountain*. The opera was adapted to film by Xie Tieli in 1970 and by Tsui Hark as *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* (2014), with elaborate digital tigers and snowstorms. For a discussion of the model opera see Barbara Mittler 'China Revolution Model Works' (2003) *The World of Music* 53-81. For a discussion of filmic adaptations of the opera see Jason McGrath 'Cultural Revolution Model Opera Films' (2010) *The Opera Quarterly* 343-376 and Ban Wang 'Third World Internationalism', *Listening to China's Cultural Revolution* (2016) ed. Pang Laikwan and Paul Clark 85-106.

sauna. These sequences are also exaggerated, particularly through the heightened sound of impact with fists or blunt objects. But unlike the aforementioned violence, which attains a level of cathartic satisfaction, these sequences are brutally senseless. The violence of everyday life is of a different quality in *Sim* to the violence of vengeful fantasy. The everyday violence is fated, it is part of the protagonists' lives. Dahai is repeatedly told to stop being a 'troublemaker', and when he confronts other townspeople about the corruption they try to avoid him. Xiao Yu hears a radio program that says that animals can commit suicide. She tells a co-worker about this who replies, 'Haven't they ever heard that it's better to live miserable than die happy?' This black humour foretells the fate of Xiaohui who plunges to his death in the next sequence. The violence of everyday life is therefore confronted when the characters enter into the violence of a fantasy which allows them to wrest control, if only for a brief moment, of their miserable fate.

But this distinction between fantasy and everyday violence collapses throughout the film. When Zhao San murders two people during a robbery it is framed with the tense shooting style of a To film and yet, unlike the retributive violence discussed above, there is no apparent motive. Zhao San lights cigarettes as an offering to those he has killed. He says, 'The gods were to blame. If you have any grievances tell Heaven about them.' Unlike Dahai and Xiao Yu then, fate is not opposed by violence. Violence is the inevitable result of the life he is fated to live. He is able to take advantage of the violence of everyday life, stealing for the exhilaration of becoming subsumed into its violent movements. When his wife asks him to stay in their village he replies, 'It's too boring'. She asks, 'What isn't boring?' to which he replies, 'Shooting guns isn't boring'. In choosing a life of perpetual movement on the highways of China, Zhao San resembles the *wuxia* archetype of the lone swordsman. But unlike the swordsman who is eventually redeemed and serves the community, Zhao San is ruthlessly antisocial. At one level he expresses the post-socialist logic of individualism and appropriation in its purest form. But at the same time we recall Brecht's famed maxim, 'What is robbing a bank as opposed to founding one'. (Brecht 92) In the bank robbery the bank's blurred logo exists as a beacon for Zhao and a rival, something which can accumulate value faster than bullets or even cameras can capture. (Fig.14) The speed, which Jia adopts from gangster cinema, is a means of conveying the speed of financial capital, accelerating in the impossible task of matching the ultra-high frequency trading of stocks on the Shanghai, Shenzhen and Hong Kong stock exchanges.

The collapse between fantasy and everyday violence is most brutally apparent in Xiaohui's story, except in the reverse of Zhao San's situation, he is ultimately the victim of the violence of the everyday. We see the violence of labour in the accident he inadvertently causes. The camera frames a close up shot of his workmate's hand sliced between the thumb and forefinger. (Fig.15) We hear him arguing with his mother on the phone for not having sent enough money home. Later he is threatened by a group of thugs for not having paid his workmate's medical bills. (Fig.16) And finally we see him throw himself from the top of the factory dormitories, ironically titled 'The Oasis of Prosperity'. While on the phone to his mother, he references Zhao San's narrative saying, 'I'm not a bank robber'. Unlike Zhao San he has no exit from the problems of everyday life, of debt and familial obligation. Significantly, unlike all the other characters, who were based on individuals, Zhao San is based on the suicide epidemic at the Foxconn factories. There is no corrupt individual that he can isolate as having attacked him, no retributive justice to exact, no violent fantasy to enact. We see him approaching the dormitories brandishing a metal pole as if to strike down the entire edifice of the factory-dormitory complex. But the entire social system is too large and too intricately woven into the fabric of daily life to dismantle with a metal pole.

Violence is therefore shown to be simultaneously a way to oppose fate and the fated response to a violent historical moment. Dahai says, 'I can be more evil than the village chief'. Thus his massacre is a mimetic replication of the larger forces of social violence. In this way the film inserts these individual acts into a wider circuit. They are no longer strange outbursts, expressions of psychopathic tendencies of aberrant individuals. By creating a subtle resonance between the narratives, the film opposes the manner in which such events appear in the news or the social media feed. Jia notes, 'We don't experience

life by encountering just one person or one event. Rather, we encounter lots of information and many people at the same time.' (Wong np) *Sin* manages to maintain this sense of simultaneity while creating a series of juxtapositions and relations which draw out an underlying logic of violence which meshes the Chinese social fabric together. This is in part what distinguishes *Sin* from other ostensibly critical Chinese films, such as Feng Xiaogang's box office success *I Am Not Madame Bovary* (2016). In *Bovary* social problems are isolated as a problem of corrupt or lazy individuals, which perfectly corresponds to the Communist Party's anti-corruption campaign launched at the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party in 2012. The officials who fail the protagonist of *Bovary* are the 'tigers and flies' which President Xi Jinping described as parasites on the Party and the state. On the other hand, in *Sin*, violence is shown to be constitutive of the entire circuit of production, from the officials who have made money from privatising state-owned enterprises, to men who sexually assault women in bath houses, to the violence of labour processes in factories and the reactions of those who seek to resist them. It is the violence of both the law and the lawless, a violence which is reified as fate which the individual is powerless to oppose.¹⁸ Cinema in *Sin* is a form which can elaborate violent fantasies, show the violence of the everyday and create a new series of connections between the two. It is a form which never seeks to resolve the complexity of modern China but instead deepens the understanding of the problem through heightened juxtaposition.

III Digital Textures - Visualising the Production of the Digital

Sin uses a heightened digital texture to create the landscapes of circulation within contemporary China. The digital texture is used to show the material relations which underscore the so-called immaterial labour of contemporary techno-capitalism. *Sin* builds on Jia's attention to the textural properties of the digital image which underscored the use of animation in *The World* and CGI in *Still Life*. While *Sin* does not employ as much overt animation (there is a single instance of a CGI snake slithering into bushes), the digital texture of the entire film is far more apparent. In its stylistic uniformity the film differs quite radically from other attempts to visualise the internet in contemporary cinema, which still depicts it as a fantasy space separate from reality, or through stylistic heterogeneity and schizoid pacing.¹⁹ In *Sin*, the virtual is completely integrated and inseparable from the everyday experience and navigation of space.²⁰ As noted in Chapter One, all cinema is animated in the digital era in the sense that it is open to manipulation at the smallest level. *Sin* shows evidence of this digital style of post-production, with its incredibly crisp high definition images with an evenly colour-graded image. This style is in part the result of the ever improving quality of digital video technology which improved exponentially in the seven years between the shooting of *Still Life* and *Sin*. (Fig.17) But it is also part of a marked decision by Jia to embrace the particular visual aesthetic of the clean and crisp digital

18 In *Sin*, violence is not isolated as a particular Chinese problem but rather as a crucial element of international capitalism, which relies on the vast army of reserve labour which China can amass for production of goods. Therefore foreign reviews which interpreted the film as a comment on 'lawlessness' in China completely ignore the film's indictment of the legally sanctioned forms of violence which sustain their nations' own economic prosperity. Arif Dirlik critiques the unspoken 'complicity' of these foreign approaches to China in his book *Complicities* (2017). For Western reviews see Robbie Collin 'A Touch of Sin, review' (2013) *The Daily Telegraph* and Manohla Dargis 'Living and Killing in a Materialist China' (2013) *The New York Times*.

19 For an example of the fantasy approach see Zhao Tanyu's *Love O2O* (2016), a popular blockbuster depicting a love affair between two gamers. For an example of this second schizoid approach see the video work of Chinese post-internet artist Miao Ying, in particular her series *LAN Love Poem.gif* which adopts the heterogeneous social media forms of gifs, internet poetry, stock images, video clips and screenshots.

20 Benjamin Bratton theorises that digital technologies operate on daily life at a number of intersecting layers which he describes as 'the stack'. Of particular interest to this study is his discussion of digital design in relation to architecture in the section 'City Layer' of his book *The Stack* (2016) 147-191.

image.²¹ This style has been prominent amongst other Asian art filmmakers, such as Korea's Hong Sang-soo and Japan's Naomi Kawase. (Fig.18) I argue that Jia's use of this style is a form of visual politics, which uses the stylistic tropes of the advertising image against itself, while simultaneously revelling in the expressive properties of the medium. This style is particularly capable of capturing the surreal character of other digitally designed spaces, from their interior decor to their harsh flat lighting. Through this approach Jia is able to show the digital as it is materialised in the production processes and everyday spaces of labour in contemporary China.

In the digital image, texture is a fundamental element in the construction and elaboration of spaces.²² For Jia the film is first thought in terms of textural properties rather than composition or framing. He notes, 'When we [cinematographer Yu Lik-wai] work together, we start by thinking about the texture of the image and work our way up to the composition and frame.' (Ma np) High definition digital images are capable of capturing textural qualities which film cameras were unable to bring out. Antonioni, in his famous essay on colour from 1940, suggested that expression through colour would be the central question facing the cinema of the future. (Antonioni 111) In 21st century cinema the formal regime has shifted towards an exploration of texture and its expressive properties. Digital textures are central to almost all contemporary cinema but are immediately discernible in the use of CGI in mainstream Chinese films. The sheen of the skin of bizarre creatures in films such as *Monster Hunt* (2015) or the multi-layered explosions in films like *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017) are obvious examples of an aesthetic that is dominant in the industrial cinema of the present. (Fig.19) *Sin* utilises the textural qualities of digital cinema to very different effect bringing out the digital textures present within the design of everyday spaces. The backdrop of palm leaves in the film's title screen is one such example. This backdrop will return again later, revealed to be the wallpaper in the sauna where Xiao Yu works. (Fig.20). The sauna is full of this mass application of decor motifs, appearing on wallpaper, furniture and curtains. This concern with decor is an overwhelming element within the film. Digital design combines a diverse iconographic palette with the post-painterly application of pattern to space of whatever dimensions. Thus the sense of ubiquity which the internet induces is not only the effect of digital communication but is an effect of the way in which the digital has been completely integrated into the spaces of daily life.

Not only is the decor digitally designed but so are the spaces in which much of *Sin* is set. The film presents an evolution in the visualisation of junkspace discussed in Chapter One. While the junkspace in the backstage area of the world was haphazard and unfinished, the digitally designed spaces in *Sin* attain a certain coldness and austerity which is only heightened by the decor discussed above. The interior of the sauna, the rooms inside the brothel and the buildings housing workers in the factory are all examples of digital design which combines repeatable units with a clean banal functionality. (Fig.21) Another element in this design is the manner in which the film signals the way the digital space flows through architecture. Not only are decor and architecture digitally designed, but the network as a structure is signalled. Lian Rong comments, 'This room has great wifi', as she and Xiaohui sit in one of the rooms in the luxury brothel.

The digitally designed decor and architecture is heightened by the use of cold fluorescent lighting throughout the film. This fluorescent lighting, while having expressive properties, is not particularly fantastical. Rather, it is part of what I have described as the surreal realism of late capitalist spaces. Jia's interest in fluorescence in *Sin* is an evolution of its use in *The World* where the lighting was used to great effect to convey the anomie of the

21 During the making of the *Hometown Trilogy* film *Unknown Pleasures*, cinematographer Yu Lik-wai actually manipulated the resolution of the digital video camera in order to make the image less 'clear and artificial'. (Ma np) The post-*Hometown* films, in particular *Sin*, embrace the clarity and artificiality of the digital image. Nonetheless this concern with manipulating the quality of the image has always been a part of Jia's work and a strategy for historicising the technology of cinema itself.

22 For discussion of digital video and the properties of the digital image see Carol Vernallis *Unruly Media* (2013), André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion *The End of Cinema?* (2015) trans. Timothy Barnard and David Rodowick *The Virtual Life of Film* (2007).

World Park. Its use is even more ubiquitous in *Sin*, extending from signs on the outside of buildings to the interiors of rooms lit with coloured lighting in varying hues of pink, blue and green.²³ (Fig.22) The colour-filtered lighting of a Tsui Hark film from the 1980s, such as *Green Snake*, is now an element of everyday spaces. Another effect of fluorescence in *Sin* is the manner in which it makes every surface reflective. Faces are lit up by the glowing screens of phones, tablets or laptops. Light is thus one way of materialising the otherwise invisible relationships within such spaces, from wi-fi networks to the relations of production. Yu Lik-wai's cinematography heightens the reflective quality through the use of an extremely shallow focus, which blurs part of the image while bringing out the other parts of the image in detail.²⁴ (Fig.23) The digital texture of light in *Sin* therefore combines the crispness of a high definition camera with a kaleidoscopic background of different coloured light. This has the effect of giving the film the lighting composition reminiscent of an advertisement. Indeed Jia has made advertisements for companies such as Johnny Walker. (Hitchcock 222) *Sin*'s lighting creates a certain coldness which marks an evolution in Jia's surreal realist aesthetic.

The surreal realist lighting effect is used to develop a visual critique of the techno-capitalist production process. This is evident in the sequences in the factory complex where Xiaohui works. As noted above, the factory is based on the Foxconn factory complex in Shenzhen, where the hardware for companies such as Apple and Sony is produced. The Taiwanese company is the world's largest electronics manufacturer and the largest private employer in China with a revenue of USD \$131.5 billion in 2016.²⁵ Shenzhen was one of the first Special Economic Zones (SEZs) established in China and was developed to encourage foreign investment and accelerate industrialisation in the region. These zones encouraged foreign investment by lifting economic restrictions and promising cheap, compliant labour power. (Aufheben 7) The SEZ in Shenzhen has expanded into the Pearl River Delta Economic Zone which has become known as the world's workshop. Architectural theorist Keller Easterling describes these sites as 'a dynamic crossroads of trade, finance, management and communication'. (Easterling 2012 np) Easterling notes the manner in which these zones develop into financial and spatial enclaves which are free from the legal authority of the state in which they are contained.²⁶ These complexes combine labour and leisure and the film frames workers eating, sleeping and relaxing in the same space where they work, echoing the collapse of the division between labour and leisure explored in the *World*. Throughout *Sin*, workers are shown on phones, tablets or computers in their spare time in the spaces where they work. But in Xiaohui's sequence we see the space where these devices are constructed. The film shoots the interior of the factory with the lighting style described above, creating a clean and sterile atmosphere of white fluorescence with reflective surfaces and a blurring of whatever is out of focus. (Fig.24) This is simultaneously a realist

23 There is a connection with Harmony Korine's film *Spring Breakers* (2012), in terms of an interest in the textural properties of lighting, which was incidentally released in the same year as *Sin*. Korine stated that he 'wanted it look like it was lit with candy. Like Skittles or Starburst. I wanted the tone to be pushed into a hyper-candy-textural, hyper-stylised reality.' (Godfrey np) While Korine's film is far more explicit in its use of the pop form of the video clip and the advertising image, both films use the textural properties of digital cinema to intensify the already surreal qualities of everyday spaces, such as hotels and bars. Chinese director Diao Yinan 's film *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (2013), also released in the same year, utilises fluorescence in a very similar manner to Jia with the neon coloured lighting of everyday spaces used to expressionistic effect.

24 Christopher Doyle's cinematography for Wong Kar-wai, in particular in *Chungking Express* (1994) and *Fallen Angels* (1995), is an obvious precursor of this stylistic phenomenon although his camerawork is far more overtly expressionistic, employing extreme differences in focus to create light trails. Nonetheless both Yu Lik-wai and Doyle share a penchant for the blur and the heightening of the surreal lighting effects of everyday spaces. See Angelo Restivo 'Wong Kar-wai: The Optics of the Virtual' *A Companion to Wong Kar-wai* (2016) ed. Martha Nochimson 135-152.

25 See 'Hon Hai Precision Industry Annual Report' (2016).

26 Easterling's book *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (2014) discusses the new forms of sovereignty emerging in the 'tech parks' and production enclaves in special economic zones. Spaces like the Pearl River Delta exemplify Easterling's notion of 'extrastatecraft' in which non-state forces have attained the administrative authority to build new forms of infrastructure.

rendering of the space and a means of visualising the economic relations within it, the flow of labour and commodity production moving through the structure.

By shooting these factory sequences in the same style as an advertisement, *Sin* creates a complex expression of the contradictions of digital cinema. Such sequences offset the more overt critical sentiments and prevent the film from veering into parody. This visualisation is what makes such sequences so chilling, they are rendered in the same light as the advertisements which will be used to promote the products they are making. The breakdown of production and consumption in late capitalist economies is here visualised as a breakdown in the mode of visualising production in the form of consumption, or at least an advertisement designed to further generate consumption.²⁷ Jia's ability to create this visual regime is in part the result of his experience of producing advertisements which allow him to continue to fund his films. In this way the film indicts cinema itself, as part of the same mechanisms which produce the commercial. Cinema is an industrial art, whether this film is an enormous blockbuster or a supposedly critical art film. While Jia's work does not trumpet the Chinese state, it is made with the same international capital investment and under the same relations of production which sustain and expand post-socialist Chinese capitalism. Digital cinema is also made with the same hardware produced in the factories of the Pearl River Delta and thus the exploration of the factory spaces is a form of self-reflexive exploration of the material relations underscoring the production of something as seemingly immaterial as the digital image. In *Sin* the digital emerges as something completely integrated into physical space and created by hands and bodies in the labour camps of global techno-capitalism.

Conclusion - 'Su San, do you understand your sin?'

In *Sin* there is no escape from the violence of fate. Violence is understood as circular, not because it begets more violence, but because the individual can never match the violence of the social form of techno-capitalism. The film ends with Xiao Yu arriving in Fenyang, the same town where the film began. Dahai's murderous spree has certainly not altered the balance of power. The sequence begins with a factory bottling the Chinese liquor *baijiu*, shot in that same quasi-advertising style as the Shenzhen factory shot earlier. The film cuts to Xiao Yu, with her *wuxia* top-knot now cut off, looking through the window into the factory. It then cuts to a photo of the dead chief and his wife at the airport taken the day that Dahai was first beaten. We see that Xiao Yu is here for a job interview with the dead chief's wife. While he may be dead, the union of private production and state backing remains intact. The chief's wife recognises her from the news and asks 'Is that problem behind you?', to which Xiao Yu replies, 'Yes, it is'. She is then reinserted into the flow of production. In the next scene we see her walking through the wind to a Peking Opera taking place outside the old city walls. It is *Yu Tang Chun* or *The Faithful Harlot*, which was also filmed by King Hu as *The Story of Su San* in 1964. Peking Opera, like the *wuxia*, has been a way of historicising Chinese social transformations, most famously in Chen Kaige's film *Farewell My Concubine* (1993).²⁸

But here *Su San's* fate seems to suggest a continuity between the feudal era and the post-socialist present. The opera tells the story of a love affair between a prostitute, Su San, and a

27 For a discussion of the breakdown between production and consumption see Lazzarato's essay 'Immaterial Labour' (1996) in *Radical Thought in Italy* Ed. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt. Lazzarato describes the intensification of production in postwar European economies, developing theories from Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), in particular the notion of the production of consumption (18). For an application of theories of this breakdown to the Chinese context see the work of the collective Aufheben, in particular their essay 'Class conflicts in the transformation of China' (2008) in *Aufheben* 16.

28 As David Der-wei Wang notes, Peking Opera was also an important reference point in the work of Fei Mu, who found in Peking Opera a way to synthesise the modernist impulse of cinema and a national symbolic economy. (278) Fei also filmed various Peking Operas, such as *Gold Plated City* (1937) and *Murder in the Oratory* (1937), as well as writing an essay on the subject, 'Issues in making cinema of traditional Chinese Theatre' (1941). See Wang's *The Lyrical in Epic Time* (2015) in particular the chapter 'Fei Mu, Mei Linfang and the Poetics of Screening China', 271-310.

wealthy young man, Wang Jinlong. Over the course of the story Su San is shunned and sold to another man as a concubine. The jealousy of the man's wife leads her to attempt to poison Su San. She avoids eating the poison but when her master dies she is accused of murder. The story loosely intersects with Xiao Yu's narrative. She has been the target of the wrath of a jealous wife and is attacked as a prostitute by the men who assault her in the sauna. The story is not an adaptation as such, but is part of the fabric of references which creates the film's sense of simultaneity. This sense of simultaneity is a result of the collapse of the present into the interconnected news events of the feed which make up the film's narrative. But this simultaneity is also a collapse of linear historical time as reference points from the past return with a new intensity within the feed. Perhaps the collapse of spatio-temporality inaugurated by the feed acts as an intensification of the tendency already existing in Chinese aesthetics to adapt and re-adapt classical texts. In *Sin* this symbolic economy is shown to be so rich that it constantly threatens to overflow. But this final scene is a wonderful example of Jia's ability to use cinema to connect diverse spatio-temporal coordinates and references, without succumbing to a harmonious resolution of contradictions.

Su San's story ends in a lengthy court case where she pleads for mercy before the Imperial Court. In the final sequence in *Sin*, the camera frames the judge who asks Su San, 'Do you understand your sin?' The film cuts from the stage to Xiao Yu watching. It then cuts outward framing the entire crowd watching the performance. As noted earlier, the framing of audiences recurs throughout Jia's work. We see audiences watching films, theatrical performances, concerts, and just watching events unfold in the street. In this final frame which ends the film the crowd looks on silently. This direct juxtaposition of stage and performer creates a particularly acute moment of direct address to the filmic audience more broadly. The film ends with this question: What is Xiao Yu's crime? What is the crime of the audience of the opera, living in Shanxi, who have never seen the wealth of post-socialist China's economic miracle? The contemporary *wuxia* is criticised by Jia for celebrating Chinese Imperial power and creating a continuity between Imperial and contemporary China. What *Sin* shows is another form of continuity, the continuity of historical domination, not as heroic and balletic spectacle but as a vicious inescapable circuit. The fate of Su San and Xiao Yu remains the same. Their crime is to have been born a woman in a history which condemns them to violence.²⁹

In *Sin*, the fate of those who attempt to escape the fated violence of history is to be thrown into the circuit of annihilation. The fantasy of escape offered by cinematic violence is understood to reflect the mode of production in general. Capital accumulation in Chinese history has always been violent, from the development of the industrial economy in the socialist period to the reorganisation of production in the Special Economic Zones of the present. It is a series of cataclysmic shifts, a chaotic process in which huge displacements of population accompany radical transformations of landscapes, cities and ways of life. *Sin* is certainly not nostalgic for another period, even if certain characters, such as Dahai, look back romantically. As noted in Chapter Two, if nostalgia exists in Jia's work it is not for the past but for a future that was dreamed of in the past and never fulfilled. These people who are framed, the peasants and workers of rural China, were once seen as the revolutionary subject who would overthrow international imperialism. The film's ending shows the disjunction between this utopian quality and the pessimistic reality of 21st century Chinese capitalism.

Instead the utopia of *Sin* is the most cinematic and perhaps most ambitious to have thus far emerged in Jia's work. It consists of the utopian gesture of waging a war of revenge against history itself, against that of the socialist past with its famines and repressions and the post-socialist present, with its corruption and its ever increasing class inequality. It is a way of striking a blow against fate itself. Of course Jia would never allow this fantasy to be

29 For a discussion of women in 20th century China see Gail Hershatter *Women in China's Long Twentieth Century* (2007). For a discussion of women during the socialist period see *Some of Us* (2001) ed. Xueping Zhong and Wang Zheng. For an analysis of women in post-socialist China see Wang Zheng 'Gender, Employment and Women's Resistance' *Chinese Society* Ed. Elizabeth Perry 162-186.

complete. As noted above, the heroic violence of Dahai and Xiao Yu is shown to have had no effect on the mechanism of capital. Xiaohui's suicide is the effect of the annihilation of the imperative of labour and debt. And Zhou San's lone gangsterism could be read as the perfect figure for the individualistic appropriation of property and wealth. Importantly though, history and fantasy in *Sim* are not oppositional but intertwined. If violent fantasies reflect the violence of capital they also reflect the desire to overcome this violence, by adopting its strategies against itself, if only for a brief moment. This is also a larger reflection of Jia's formal method, adopting the tropes of genre cinema to map the processes of circulation and its effect on individuals. It is less a critique of the *wuxia* or the gangster film, but a way of tapping into the utopian quality which already exists within them.

The Weibo feed is another form which is investigated for its utopian potential in *Sim*. In part for the straightforward reason that it has the potential to generate narratives, to spread information across the country. As noted above this is not an uncritical affirmation of social networks or the news feed. The limits of the politics of the internet are foregrounded when Xiaohui and Lian Rong scroll through Weibo together and can only write WTF on every news story. These stories only produce a moment of outrage which is swiftly redirected to the next story which appears on the feed. But as noted in both of the preceding chapters, Jia's approach to daily life is not that of the de-mystifier. Just like the theme park architecture of *World* and the Socialist Realism of *Still Life*, the feed is incorporated into the cinematic form. It informs the manner in which the film approaches narratives, by adopting a structure in which the stories escalate to the point where they become news and thus enter the feed. It also informs the overall structure of four narratives, none of which are overtly connected in terms of plot. Rather the overlap occurs in terms of the spaces which the characters occupy and the symbolic connections which recur throughout the film. These spaces are the sites of circulation both digital and physical, which are increasingly shown to have become completely integrated into daily life. Jia's digital aesthetic is capable of articulating these processes, visualising that which would otherwise be indiscernible, as the textures of the everyday become a means of mapping production. By integrating the feed into the cinematic form Jia is not only able to map circulation in China, in itself a remarkable feat, but is able to create a cinema for the 21st century, an international cinema that uses its own complicity with the processes of global techno-capitalism to enact a kind of cinematic vengeance against it.

Conclusion

Jia's surreal realist cinema is born out of a desire to historicise the present. In Jia's work the speed of historical transformation becomes a stimulus for formal invention. Surreal realism is part archaeology and part time travel. Given that the present is so swiftly swallowed up by the future, cinema must adopt increasingly surreal methods to take hold of it. Given that this present is also the result of a historical past, Jia's cinema must also work with fragments of the past to create connections and relations across time. The present appears to be buried too, at once blindingly apparent and at the same time difficult to discern. Jia's films create connections within this present, between spaces, objects and symbols. This is what gives Jia's films a speculative quality, at once illuminating and elliptical. It is a form of cinematic thinking that is attuned to subtle connections and fragile resonances between places and images. But it is also a cinematic thinking that is unflinchingly materialist, continually returning to production of all kinds. Production that is at once performative (the service workers of *World*), destructive (the demolition teams of *Still Life*) and technical (the hardware assembly in *Sin*). Every moment of reverie is punctuated by a moment of brutality, or rather, every moment of reverie is caught up in the same process of production as the moment of violence. Jia's films themselves are caught up in this process of production and track the modes of circulation while simultaneously being an element within this process of circulation. This difficult position is precisely what makes Jia's work so powerful.

Jia's work visualises the processes and currents running through the spaces of post-socialist China. These are abstract forces which surge through social life. They range from the large-scale movement of populations to the persistence of debts and from the history of demolished buildings to the torments of love. But these abstract forces are not 'personalised' as such. It is never a straightforward process in which characters come to represent a particular type or a social group. Instead the films show the manner in which the protagonists navigate and make sense of the present. This navigation reflects the role of the films themselves, which seek to explore the contradictions and difficulties which underscore social life. Jia's films do not resolve these contradictions into harmonious unities. There are no satisfying conclusions or happy endings. Instead of resolution there is only further complication, problems are shown to be deeper or more intractable than they first appeared. Individuals are caught up in impersonal processes which exceed them and against which they have no control. The role of Jia's films is to show life lived within the impersonal, within the radical uncertainty wrought by the processes of production and circulation which shape the present. Jia's cinema is one in which uncertainty is registered at every level, which brings out the strange quality of the everyday.

Jia's realism is one in which desires and dreams constitute part of the reality of the present. The characters in Jia's films are constantly attempting to make sense of their world. They do so through fragments of pop songs and films, history and memory, commodities and labour. These combinations produce new and unrealisable desires which are born from the present but are never irreducible to it. This accounts for the utopian dimension of Jia's cinema. In his films utopianism intersects with and deviates from the production process. Utopian desires are born in these processes and yet cannot be contained by them. These desires are never as simple as escape or wish fulfilment. In fact they are difficult to bear and are at times so painful they pursue one even unto death. Jia's surreal realist cinema is ravaged by desires which are impossible and unrealisable, such as the desire to be released from the constraints of architecture, or the desire for a socialist future which has never been achieved, or the desire to take revenge against history itself. In Socialist Realism utopia was the inevitable result of historical forces and the labour of the people. In the aesthetics of post-socialist China utopia may have faded but the future is still visualised as a space of progress and prosperity. Jia reconfigures utopia to show it as a painful desire, which interrupts the present. It may come from the past as old desires persist or it may come from the future as new technologies give birth to new dreams. These desires take hold of his characters and push them towards the limit of what it is possible to conceive in the present. While *Sin* is the most overt expression of this, the animated sequences of *The*

World and the CGI visions in *Still Life* are part of the same irruption of utopianism. There is of course a powerful pessimism in his work, a sense that the violence and exploitation which has marked the history of China (and the world) will continue. But Jia's utopianism is a desire for something unfathomable which in the present can only be felt as a painful and fierce longing. Surreal realism then is a means of registering and visualising utopia as an unbearable longing, a longing that is central to the forms which the characters use to understand the world and which Jia himself uses to create cinema.

A crucial part of Jia's cinema is its ability to incorporate other mediums into itself. This is a means of both expanding the formal properties of cinema and simultaneously using cinema to work against or complicate these other mediums. This is integral to how he understands history through aesthetic form. The process of historicising the present through cinema must include a critical engagement with other aesthetic mediums which have preceded it and which exist alongside it. I have noted particularly how architecture in *The World*, painting in *Still Life* and the internet in *Sin* are crucial points of reference for understanding the evolution of Jia's aesthetic. But while these mediums offer points of entry to his work, they are part of a wider structure of aesthetic forms which Jia's films engage with, and which include television, dance, pop music, sculpture, advertising, decor, fashion and Peking Opera.

In *World* the architectural complex of the theme-park city informs the cinematographic style while simultaneously serving as a space for the camera to work against and expose. The corridors of the backstage junk-space inform the use of an exploratory camera, whose movements are delineated by the tight quarters and winding corridors in which much of the film is set. At the same time the film brings out the relations which the architecture of the park conceals, the lives of those who live inside the tourist spectacle of the theme-park city. But a final crucial element of the film is the manner in which it then explores the desires of these characters, desires which are in part utopian investments in that very same tourist architecture. As I have discussed in Chapter One, Tao's longing for unfettered travel-in-itself is a mode of dreaming that is generated by the World Park in which she works. The animations in which Tao and Taisheng fly across the city are both the result of their labour and a means of exceeding it. *World* does not puncture this form of dreaming or desiring by showing it to be irreconcilably tainted by the social system but rather shows how alternate modes of navigating the present co-exist. The murder-suicide that concludes the film pessimistically suggests that this mode of dreaming cannot survive reality. But the film's conclusion is simultaneously an exit from the reality of labour. In death the two lovers are now freed from the constraints of architecture and the service economy

Painting operates as a similar force in *Still Life*. It is incorporated into the cinematic form as another mode of historicising the present. While most critical reflections on the film have drawn a parallel between the film and Chinese scroll painting of the Song Dynasty, the film is actually closer to a far more recent painterly trajectory, that of Socialist Realism. I understand Socialist Realism not as a series of representational rules but as a desire to use painting to historicise the production process and generate a particular future. The film's approach to these desires is not nostalgic in a straightforward way. Instead it draws on the utopianism of an egalitarian future which such works fostered. This curious nostalgia for the future creates a complex historical time-structure, composed of a melancholic longing. The excavation and demolition of the Three Gorges Project takes on increasingly complex allegorical qualities; the coming flood appears to be both washing away the past and yet simultaneously pulling up elements from the national unconscious. The characters in the film are also part of this historical floodgate, seeking out their past loved ones in Fengjie around the Gorges. Their intimate longing is connected with various poetic objects, and the film creates internal still lives composed of these objects, simultaneously memorialising the dead and summoning the beloved. Socialist Realism is one of the underlying organisations of memory which links these disparate objects, serving to create a means of navigating the present through the afterlife of the desires of the past.

In *Sin* the internet feed is a mode which generates a further evolution in Jia's cinematic

form. The film works against the logic of the feed while simultaneously adopting aesthetic strategies from it. In adapting stories of violence which circulated online, the film seeks to mimic the sense of disorienting simultaneity which accompanies engagement with narratives online. But the film also undercuts this disorientation by developing a series of interconnections between the narratives, from its focus on the spaces of circulation such as highways and airports, to its recurring symbols such as animals. The violence of each narrative creates the most discernible connection which runs throughout the film, with fantastical cinematic violence collapsing into the violence of everyday life. This violence is linked back to the mode of production, with a particular focus on the production of digital hardware in the Special Economic Zones of southern China. The seemingly immaterial labour of techno-capitalism is shown to have a very physical structure. This digital structure is expressed in the very texture of the image in *Sin* with its heightened artificiality adapting the visual regimes of advertising to illustrate the spaces of production and circulation. The film's violence is thus shown to be an expression of the violence of capital replicating its logic of destructive accumulation. At the same time, these narratives of violence are also given a certain utopian quality. Revenge is given a utopian dimension, it is a means of striking back against the violent passage of history. By adapting the feed form for cinema, *Sin* seeks to undermine the logic of the fated violence of history.

Future Directions - The next phase of Jia's work

The question which emerges at the end of this thesis is a speculative one. What will be the next phase of Jia Zhangke's career? Will he continue to expand the medium of cinema? Or will his work stagnate as he begins to repeat the gestures of his earlier work? One problem which his work faces is its political status. Throughout the thesis I have sought to avoid a categorisation of his films as politically radical or transgressive in relation to the ideology of the state and the censorship of 'sensitive' material. There are two principal reasons for this. Firstly, censorship in China involves a constant negotiation and re-negotiation of the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable content. (Yang 5) Secondly, I do not think that cinema's content, transgressive or otherwise, is primarily what denotes its aesthetic quality. To do so is to misunderstand the relationship between aesthetics and politics. Instead an attention to Jia's formal approach has been paramount to understanding why his films are at the forefront of cinematic practice in the 21st century.

Nonetheless the co-option of ostensibly critical artists by the Chinese state is clearly one of the challenges which confronts Jia as his increasing success both internationally and domestically leads to a rise in his status. There is a fear amongst fans of his work, that he may be travelling along the same path as that of the Fifth Generation directors of which he was once a vocal critic. Perhaps he is set to follow Zhang Yimou, a filmmaker whose work has been completely subsumed by the Shanghai Film Corporation. Zhang's *The Great Wall* (2016) featuring Hollywood star Matt Damon was an artistically lamentable yet otherwise straightforward production which combined the exportable exoticism of a period representation of Imperial China with the capital-heavy fantasy blockbuster typical of mainstream Chinese cinema.¹ While Jia's work has not reached this level of aesthetic stagnation, official support or investment capital, there are fears that he may be on this path. The rumoured interest in Jia's work by President Xi Jinping, his most recent film *Mountains May Depart* (2015) being shown with state approval and his role as the curator of the Pingyao Film Festival in 2017 have all led to speculation about Jia's future in the Chinese art market. As I noted in my introduction, the 'criticality' of Chinese art films has long been a source of their popularity in the West and the recent success of Chinese films, such as Jia's, in China itself has made it a necessity to examine the place of critique in the branding of world

¹ See Tony Rayns 'The Great Wall (Review)' (2017) *Sight and Sound*. For an assessment of Zhang Yimou's late trajectory see Xuelin Zhou *Globalisation and Contemporary Chinese Cinema: Zhang Yimou's Genre Films* (2017).

cinema more generally.² As I noted above, Jia walks a particularly difficult tightrope, one in which his desire to reach a larger audience is tempered by the desire to continue to create formally innovative work.

The fear of Jia losing his artistic integrity is perhaps misplaced. For as I have repeated throughout this thesis, Jia's work, like all cinema, whether independent or studio-funded, relies on the industrial system of Chinese and international capitalism. This is not a point to critique, but rather an empirical fact with regard to the relations of cinematic production. The success of Jia's work has always been his ability to manipulate these particular relationships both to market his films to Western audience thus securing international funding and distribution, and to continue to make films which in his mind, and the mind of his supporters, attest to the reality of life in post-socialist China. It is precisely by being so aware of their place within the world system of capitalism that Jia's films are so successful in portraying it. This is central to Jia's surreal realism, exploring the spaces and visual regimes of post-socialist China by tapping into the stylistic qualities which emerge from it. Advocates of the post-critical turn in art and theory suggest that critique always tacitly elevates the object which it chooses to criticise.³ Such an approach would suggest that Jia's films require the oppressive system of Chinese capitalism for their success. But this is to misunderstand the status of the art work and for that matter the structure of capital. The work is never autonomous but always involved in a series of material relations with the economic and social system which produces it. Jia's work, like the great materialist filmmakers, is aesthetically successful precisely because it is so acutely aware of its status as a commodity within the production process.

So, rather than understanding Jia's work as under perpetual threat of co-optation by the forces of capital, or in this case, the combined force of capital and the Chinese state apparatus, it would be better to ask whether his work can continue its formal evolution alongside the evolution of China. It is not a question of whether Jia's work will become a mouthpiece for the state, or more insidiously a mouthpiece for the ever intensifying market forces. Rather we should ask whether Jia's surreal realism will be able to continue to evolve along with the transformations that are continually taking place in China. All the films which I have discussed draw from events taking place at the time of their production. From the copy-cat architecture of the theme park-city to the flooded areas created by the Three Gorges Dam Project, Jia's work has always been drawn to these visually startling and historically unprecedented events. In part perhaps this is a question of temporality, Jia is drawn to capturing spaces in the moment they are emerging or in the moment in which they are disappearing. These changes are taking place so quickly that history seems to disappear in their wake. Is this impulse, in part a documentarian's desire, to capture everything on film before it has been lost to time? This goal would correspond to Jia's Bazinian understanding of cinema, as the culmination of the aesthetic desire to defeat time, or more dramatically to defeat death. (Bazin 10) But it is also a desire to use cinema as a means of reorganising time, of creating new historical trajectories and creating connections between seemingly unrelated phenomena. At this point we can suggest that Jia is truly creating what Eisenstein described as an 'intellectual cinema' (Eisenstein 82). So the question is whether his work will continue this experiment in producing new organisations of time within the accelerating temporality of the present.

Jia's most recent film, *Mountains May Depart* (2015), continues this historicisation of the present. It is set in three different time periods, at the beginning of the new millennium, then in the present and, finally, in a future Australia of 2025. The film is set in Shanxi and follows a woman Shen Tao (Zhao Tao) who must choose between two men, Zhang

2 The work of Arif Dirlik is particularly relevant here which utilises the notion of 'complicity' in his critique of Western responses to China, in which the reliance on Chinese production and its role in Western profit-making, is conveniently left out of criticisms of China's state apparatus. See *Complicities* (2017)

3 See Bruno Latour 'Why has critique run out of steam?: From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern.' (2004) in *Critical Inquiry* 225-248.

Jiansheng (Zhang Yi), a wealthy mine owner, and Liangzi (Liang Jindong), a poor miner. She and Zhang marry and soon she gives birth to a son. The child's name is Zhang Daole, which means 'it has arrived', a reference to success, prosperity and a male heir, while also punning on the word 'dollar'. In the second section, Shen and Zhang have separated and Daole lives with his father in Shanghai. When Daole comes back to Shanxi for his grandfather's funeral the distance between him and his mother is evident. The final section takes place in Australia where Daole now lives with his father. He cannot speak Mandarin and therefore cannot communicate with his father and has no memory of his mother. The film ends with Daole deciding to visit his homeland after a relationship with his Chinese language teacher Mia (Sylvia Chang) compels him to seek out his past.

Each section of the film is shot using a different quality of digital camera and aspect ratio, foregrounding the manner in which cinematic visualisation processes have developed over the course of this period. In this way the relation between light and the cinematic apparatus is shown to have a history. That each section looks noticeably different is a testament to the speed of the evolution of digital cinema. *Mountains* also historicises Jia's own oeuvre, with the first section visually reminiscent of the *Hometown Trilogy* and the second section reflective of the post-*Hometown* films which I have discussed in this thesis. The final section is shot with bright hazy lighting. If we understand the film as part of Jia's ongoing historicisation of the present, then we must understand this future as the kind of future that is imagined today. Part of historicising the present means understanding the present's speculation about what its future will be. The sequences in Australia appear to be composed of footage sampled from a tourism advertisement. Perhaps this is the future which Jia sees, one in which the advertising image has completely overtaken any other form of visualisation. Australia is emptied of history and instead serves as a kind of empty referent akin to the buildings in the theme park in *The World*. In fact, in a sequence which references the tourist imaginary of *The World*, Shen and Zhang stand in front of a backdrop of the Sydney Opera House as part of their wedding photo shoot.

Mountains continues the engagement with genre cinema which Jia began in *Sin* but instead of the *wuxia* and gangster film it draws on the form of the family melodrama. Melodrama has often played a role in historicising social transformations in Chinese cinema, from the 1920s films of the Mingxing company to the Fifth Generation's Cultural Revolution films (such as Zhang Yimou's *To Live* (1994)).⁴ The separation and reunion of mother and child has also been a central element of narrative closure in what is known as the *datuanyuan* or reunion narrative. In *Mountains* this resolution is ambiguous, it could appear as the fantasy of the mother or as an impossible resolution of an unbridgeable distance. In the film the reunion with the mother allegorises a reunion with the mother country and the mother language. Jia is thus continuing the outward expansion of his films into new settings, following the movement of the Chinese diaspora throughout the world. Circulation continues to be a central element in Jia's cinema with *Mountains* containing a model of his entire career, moving from Shanxi, to a wider sweep of China and now out into the wider world. But while the film is indeed complex and melancholic, it is also the most accessible of Jia's works, with the most straightforward narrative arc. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but perhaps signals a new direction in his work, moving away from formal experimentation to focus instead on a 21st century re-engagement with narrative cinema.

Perhaps slightly more difficult to dissect is Jia's role in the Pingyao International Film Festival in 2017. Pingyao is an ancient city in Shanxi, a World Cultural Heritage site and tourist attraction famed for its preserved Ming and Qing Dynasty architecture. It is also known for its yearly photography festival. Jia was appointed as creative director of the new international film festival alongside Marco Mueller who has previously curated the Venice and Locarno film festivals. The festival was divided into two sections named after Ang Lee's

4 For a discussion on the Chinese melodrama as genre see Chris Berry 'Wedding Banquet: A Family (Melodrama) Affair' *Chinese Films in Focus* (2003), 183-90. For a discussion of the melodrama in early Shanghai cinema see Li Suyuan and Hu Jubin *Chinese Silent Film History* (1997). For a discussion of the role of melodrama in historicising the Cultural Revolution see Nick Browne 'Society and Subjectivity: On the Political Economy of Chinese Melodrama' *New Chinese Cinemas* (1994), 40-56.

wuxia film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, with the 'Crouching Tiger' section highlighting established directors and the 'Hidden Dragon' section devoted to lesser known works. Like all international artistic festivals, it is difficult to approach it without a degree of suspicion. While some reporters praised it as 'an important platform to nurture creativity', others noted that 'the Jia Zhangke of today has created a film festival that likely wouldn't have served the Jia Zhangke of yesteryear'. (Liu 2017 np) At one level we can interpret the festival as a means of promoting independent films and art cinema that fall outside the blockbusters which dominate mainstream Chinese cinema.⁵ But if this was indeed the premise, the festival's most popular film remained *Sky Hunter* (2017), a jingoistic blockbuster described as a Chinese *Top Gun* (1986). The festival's opening ceremony was complete with a large security presence from police and military, a red carpet appearance by 'Festival Ambassador' actress and celebrity Fang Bingbing and performances by pop artists Zhou Bichang and He Jie in a converted factory theatre complex called 'Platform' after Jia's early film. (Liu 2017 np) The event seems to reflect exactly the kind of performances of post-socialist prosperity that Jia himself dissects so brutally in *The World*. Intriguingly Feng Xiaogang's film *Youth* (2017), which follows a theatre troupe during the Sino-Vietnamese war of 1979, opened the festival but has since been withdrawn from official circulation which suggests that cinema still has a certain disruptive power in China. (Tartaglione np) Nonetheless the festival reflects the contemporary aesthetic spectacle in which the combined power of capital and the state is celebrated through the promotion of art and culture.

Epilogue - On Cinema After Jia

The question of the future direction of Jia's work is irremediably tied to the future of cinema. That is not to say that if Jia stops making innovative films that the medium of cinema itself will stagnate. While he has been one of the great innovators of the 21st century, his own practice has itself influenced the work of other contemporary directors, who will continue to develop the formal potential of the medium in new directions. Rather, it is to say that the questions he has grappled with in his practice are the questions and difficulties which are at the heart of the question of what cinema is today. That is, what cinema is and what it can still become. This question is often raised in relation to technological innovation: how can cinema stay 'relevant' in the wake of developments in digital technology?⁶ Such speculation betrays the idealist understanding of technological innovation which frames it independently of the social totality and economic relations which produce and distribute it. As I have insisted, the film industry develops in relation to developments in the wider economy, and to that degree transformation, in the sense of the perpetual expansion and diversification of the market, is inevitable. But the question instead will be how cinema can negotiate these imperatives and this perpetually accelerating market to both undermine and simultaneously draw inspiration from the multiplying modes of visuality.

As I have argued, Jia's formal innovations involve a complex negotiation and assessment of these social forces. These innovations are also the result of a canny understanding of the international history of cinema. This knowledge extends to an understanding of cinema's ability to incorporate other formal modes. It is Jia's ability to draw from an enormous array of references, from pop music to Peking Opera, often in the same scene which allows him to create these complex reflections on history. In this study I have noted that this historical perspective has emerged in part through engaging with past formal modes, such as architecture and painting. But at the same time historicising the present means assessing aesthetic transformations through the medium of cinema, in other words, what is cinema after the advent of the internet, the smart phone and the social network news feed. It is why Jia's films reflect on the technologies of the present more successfully than so called 'new

5 For a discussion of independent and smaller scale film festivals in China see Ma Ran's 'Regarding the Grassroots Independent Film Festivals' in *China's iGeneration* (2014), 235-54.

6 See Holly Willis *Fast Forward: The Future of the Cinematic Arts* (2016), Bruce Isaacs *The Orientation of Future Cinema* (2013) and *The State of Post-Cinema* (2016) Ed. Malte Hagener.

media' art. Because instead of using technological innovation as novelty or spectacle they reflect on the effects and implications these have for cinema and therein for everyday life. Cinema's impurity allows it to place these different modes, with their different modulations of temporality, into contact and in doing so create new structures of time.

Time then is the great utopian project of Jia's cinema. It is a practice of placing different relationships to time into contact and therein forming new ways of navigating the present. From the time spent engaging in the repetitive labour of dancing in a theme park to the time it takes to send and receive a text message. From the vast geological time scales of mountains and rivers to the minutes it takes to smoke a single cigarette. And from the time it takes to travel from Beijing to Shanghai on a high speed train to the time it takes to revenge against an assailant. Jia's cinema overcomes the opposition between subjective personal time and objective historical time. It creates a durational approach to history in which the personal and the historical are intertwined within the same image. Jia's cinema is attentive to the existence of multiple temporalities within the present. Indeed his historicisation of the present involves a historicisation of the various kinds of time in which we are moving. This reflects what Jia describes as the 'compression of time' caused by China's accelerated and uneven development in which multiple forms of production, both archaic and futuristic, co-exist in the same historical moment. While this may be particularly acute in contemporary China it reflects the international situation of a planet temporally out of joint. Jia's cinema does not seek to repair or reconcile these different time scales but rather to use them to find a new way of exploring the surreal quality of the 21st century.

Sometimes this cinematic reorganisation of time means that impersonal forces, like the circulation of commodities, may be easier to visualise than how a character is feeling when they look up at a building or stare out across a landscape. But at other times we are able to understand both situations at once, a rare achievement in the history of cinema, in which the personal and the historical have been so frequently in opposition. History in Jia's work is not a backdrop for the staging of a personal drama. Nor is the personal used as a vehicle to teach a lesson about our common humanity. Instead, in Jia's cinema, personal subjective time is inseparable from the universal time of history. History emerges through the filming of ordinary objects, everyday spaces and intimate encounters. This is not only to suggest that Jia's cinema historicises everyday life or that his characters are the products of their labour or social class. But rather that these glimpses of the historical are also glimpses of utopia. Jia's cinema is attentive to new desires which appear at odds with the entire economic structure of global techno-capitalism but are nonetheless produced inside of it. These same time schemes, of labour and value, also produce a time of frightening and unimaginable possibility.

This is the singularity of Jia's cinema, to have achieved something which both overtly politicised forms of cinema and overtly emotive forms have failed to do, to show that falling out of love, or killing one self for love, or never forgetting the beloved, are all modes of accessing the utopian project of a new relationship to time. That the death of a friend in the rubble of a building site is also the death of a possible history that could have been but never was. That the painful experiences of the heart are also the painful experiences of history. And it is for this reason that cinema has forever been changed by Jia's work. It is why his work is so difficult and so essential. It is why it must be watched and re-watched. It is proof that an avant-garde cinema exists, perpetually out of time and forever bathed in tears.

Chapter 1 Appendix



Fig. 1. Deng Xiaoping at Huang Shan (Yellow Mountain) in 1979, in Xiao Honggen 'The Discourse of Power' (2006), 805.



Fig. 2. Replica Venice (Dalian), Thames Town (Sonjiang) and deserted Paris (Tianchudeng).



Fig. 3. Zaha Hadid *Galaxy Sobo* and Rem Koolhaas *CCTV Tower*.

Fig. 4. Cinema as disruption of the photo opportunity. *The World* (2004)

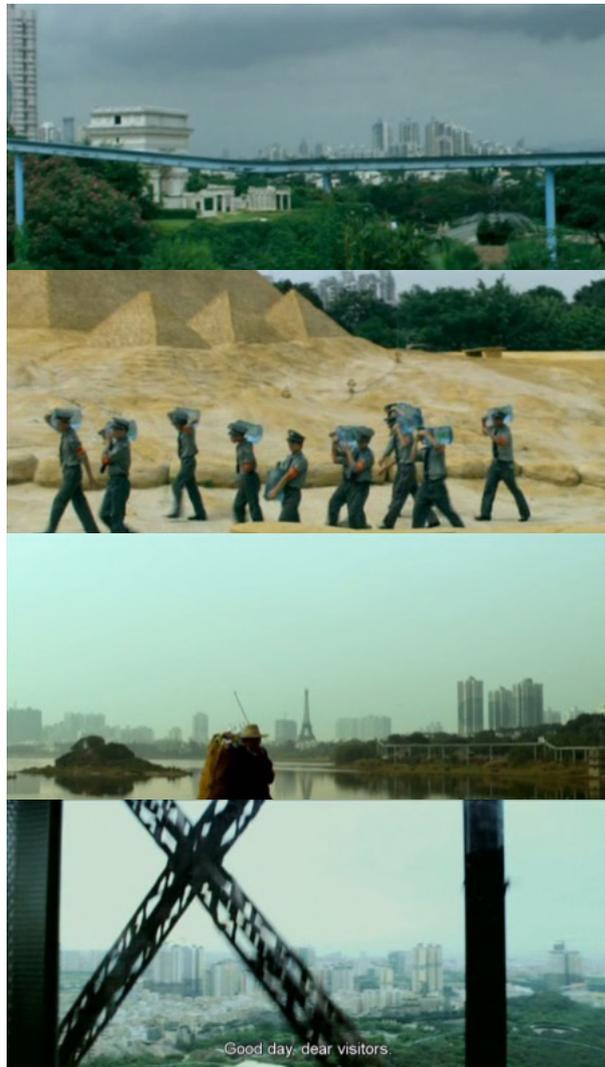


Fig. 5. The blurring of the theme park and the city. *The World* (2004)



Fig. 6. The worker as tourist. *The World* (2004).



Fig. 7. Little Sister's parents visit Beijing. *The World* (2004).



Fig. 8.
Junkspace Corridors. *The World* (2004).



Fig. 9.
The corridor and control.
The World (2004).



Fig. 10.
The corridor and the entertainment
spectacle. *The World* (2004).



Fig. 11.
Backstage Intimacy. *The World* (2004).



Fig. 12.
Animation and Telecommunication. *The World* (2004).

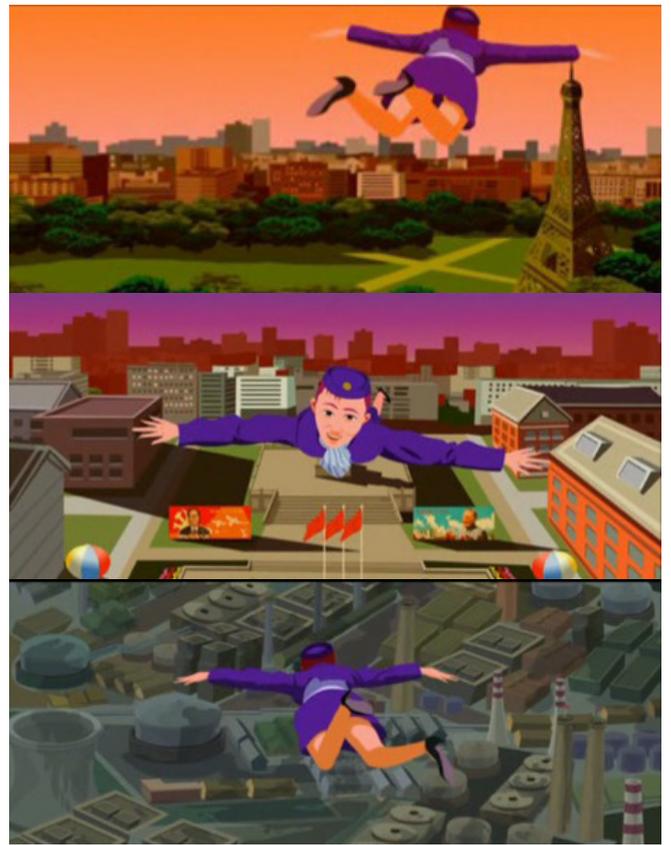


Fig. 13.
Tao's flight over Beijing. *The World* (2004).



Fig. 14.
The history of Chinese animation. *Princess Iron Fan* (1941), Wan Laiming and Wan Guichan and *Piggy Eats A Watermelon* (1958), Wan Laiming and Wan Guichan.



Fig. 15.
Beijing city of screens. *The World* (2004).



Fig. 17.
Animation and flight (the magic carpet effect).
The World (2004) and *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924).

Fig. 16.
Animation as utopian visualisation. *The World* (2004).



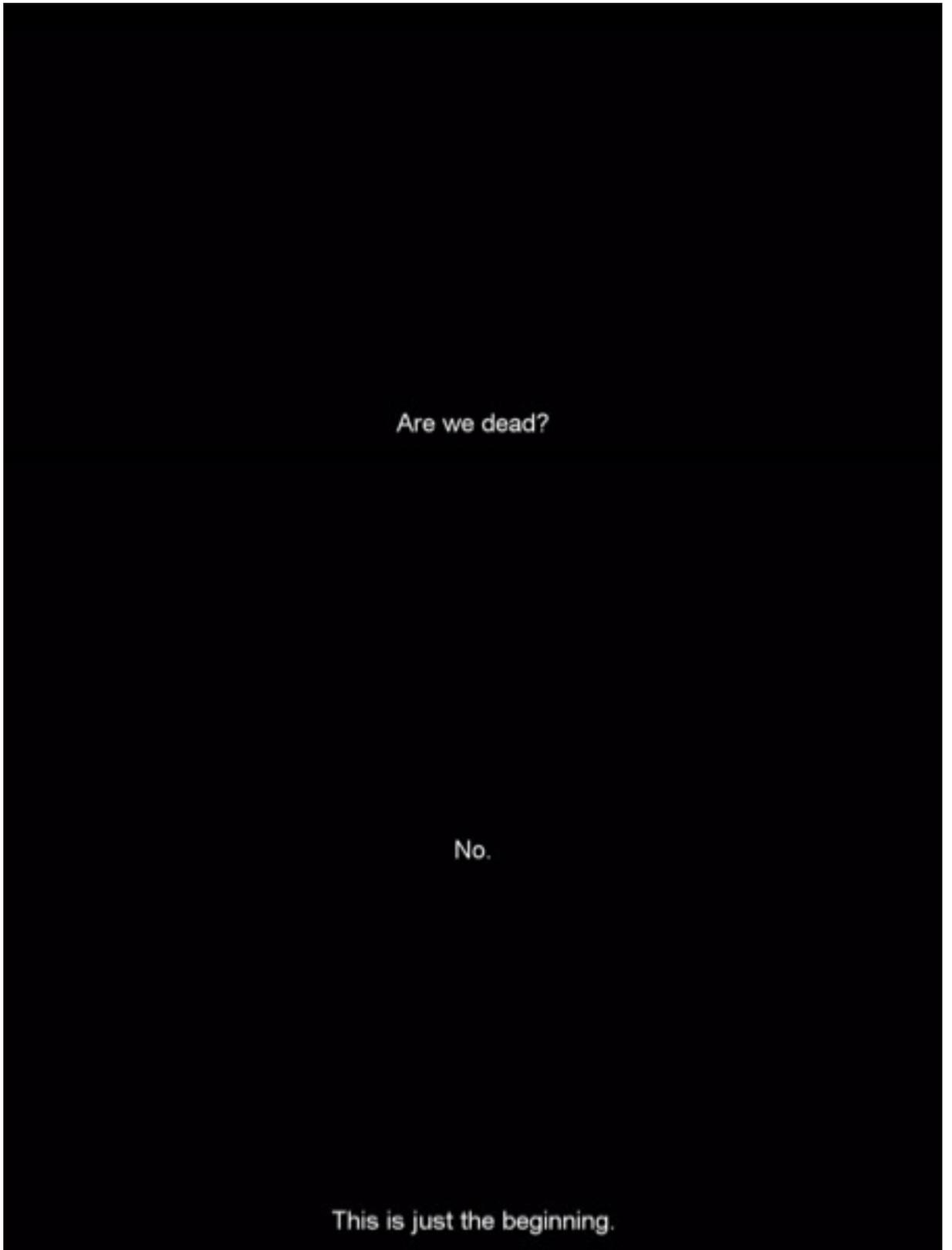


Fig. 18.
Animated digital black. *The World* (2004).

Chapter 2 Appendix



Fig. 1.
Dong Yuan. Xiao and Xiang Rivers. 10th c. Ink and Colour on Silk, 49.80 cm by 141.30 cm . Palace Museum:
Beijing.

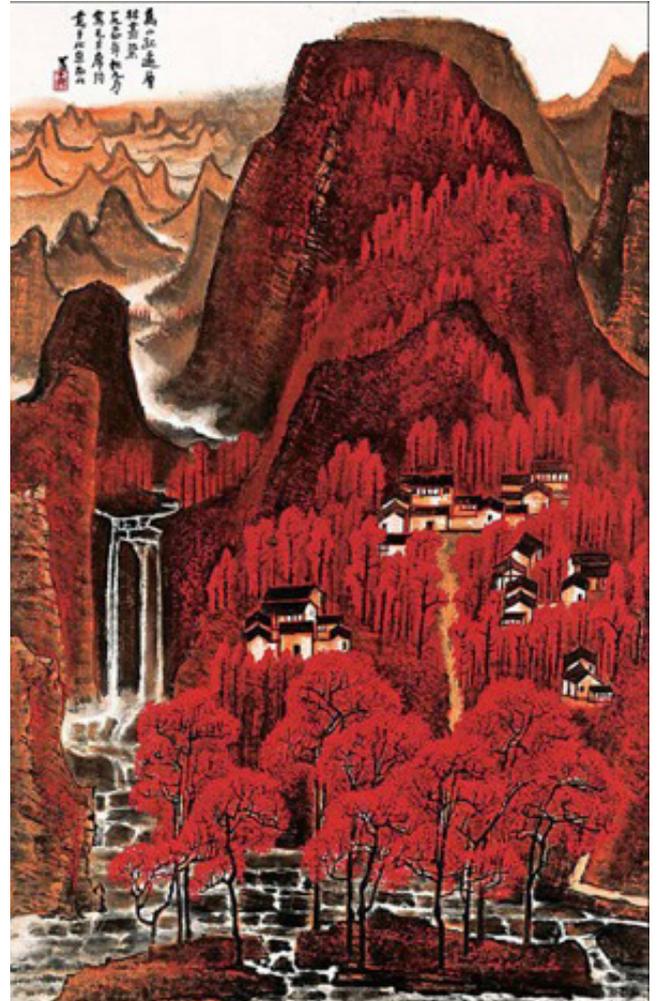


Fig. 2.
Tang Xiaohe. *Forging Ahead in Wind and Waves*. 1971. Oil on Canvas. 172cm x 294 cm. Private Collection.



Fig. 3.
The tourist gaze and the historical aesthetic site. *Still Life* (2006), Jia Zhangke.

Fig. 4.
The socialist landscape. Li Keran. *Thousands of Hills in a Crimsoned View*. 1964. Ink and Colour on Paper. National Art Museum of China, Beijing.



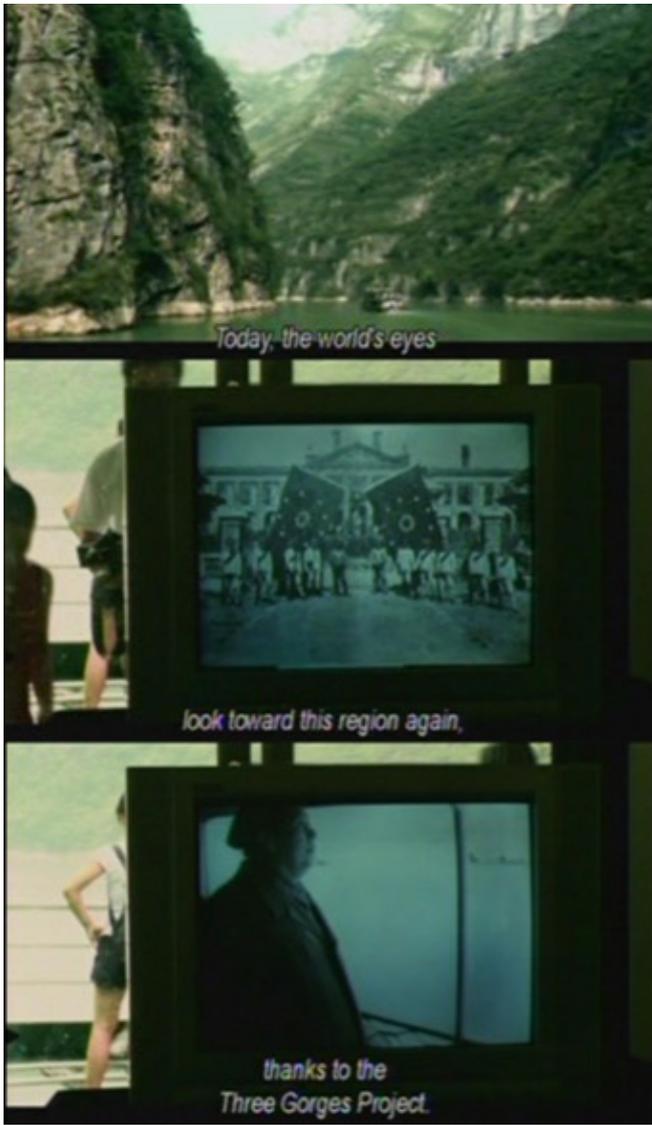


Fig. 5.
Historicising the Three Gorges Project. *Still Life* (2006)

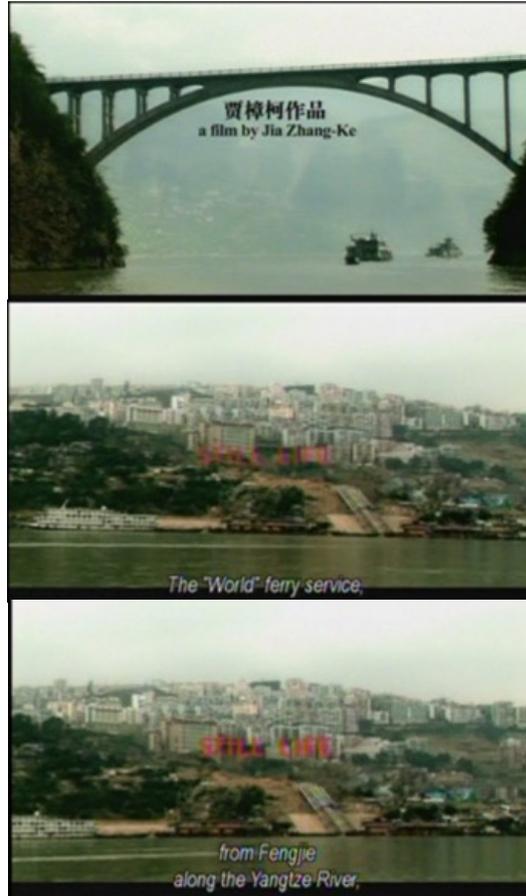


Fig. 6.
The pan and the flow of the river. *Still Life* (2006)



Fig. 7.
Visualising Circulation. *Still Life* (2006)



Fig. 8.
The title card and the poetic object.
Still Life (2006).

Fig. 9.
Brother Mark watches Chow Yun Fat. *Still Life* (2006)





Fig. 10.
Wang Guangyi. *Great Criticism Series: Marlboro*. 2006. Oil on Canvas Today Art Museum, Beijing.

Fig. 11.
Yue Minjun. *Execution*. 1995. Oil on Canvas. 150cm x 300cm. Private Collection.



Fig. 12.
Han Sanming. *Dong* (2006), Jia Zhangke and detail from Liu Xiaodong. *Hotbed*. 2005. Oil on Canvas. 260 cm x 1000 cm.





Fig. 13.
Liu Xiaodong. *Great Migration at the Three Gorges*. 2003. Oil on Canvas.



Fig. 14.
Ruins as architectural cross sections.
Still Life (2006)

Fig. 15.
Zhang Yuqing. *The New Centre of the Commune*. 1961. 53cm x 77cm. IISH/
Landsberger Collection: Amsterdam.





Fig. 16.
Photographing the demolition of socialist architecture. *Still Life* (2006)

Fig. 17.
Tian Yuwen. *Blast furnaces rise in level ground releasing red rays everywhere*. 1958. 54cm x 77cm. IISH/Landsberger Collection; Amsterdam.



Fig. 18.
From red factories to rust. *Still Life* (2006).



Fig. 19.
The gods as hungry workers. *Still Life* (2006)



Fig. 20.
The men in white suits.
Still Life (2006).



Fig. 21.
A UFO across the Three
Gorges and the China
structure taking off. *Still Life*
(2006)



Fig. 22.
The structure watching over the area. *Still Life*
(2006)



Fig. 23.
Han Sanming and the tightrope walker. *Still Life*
(2006)

Chapter 3 Appendix



Fig. 1.
Spaces of Circulation, *A Touch of Sin* (2013).



Fig. 2.
Narrative transition through the mode of
circulation. *A Touch of Sin* (2013).



Fig. 3.
Framing online communication. *A Touch of Sin*
(2013).





Fig. 4.
Reacting to the feed.
A Touch of Sin (2013).

Fig. 5.
Postsocialist
caricature.
A Touch of Sin
(2013).



Fig. 6.
Satirising history and
progress. *A Touch of Sin*
(2013).



Fig. 7.
Animal Symbolism. *A Touch of Sin* (2013).



Fig. 8.
The snake
symbol and the
Green Snake.
A Touch of Sin
(2013) and *The
Green Snake*
(1993), Tsui
Hark.



Fig. 9.
The *wuxia* heroine. Yang Hui-ching in *A Touch of Zen* (1971).





Fig. 10.
Xiao Yu's cinematic precursor, Jen Yu
(Zhang Ziyi) in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden
Dragon* (2000) and *A Touch of Sin* (2013).



Fig. 11.
Intertextual gangsterism. A
television plays Johnnie To's
Exiled (2010) in *A Touch of Sin*
(2013), the cast of *Exiled* and
Jiang Wen in Jiang Wu's *Let
the Bullets Fly* (2010).



Fig. 12.
Exaggerated violence in *A Touch of Sin* (2013).

Fig. 13.
Dahai and
socialist
iconography.
A Touch of Sin
(2013).





Fig. 14.
The bank and the bankrobber as means of visualising the speed of capital. *A Touch of Sin* (2013).

Fig. 15.
The violence of labour. *A Touch of Sin* (2013).



Fig. 16.
The collapse of the separation between cinematic violence and the violence of everyday life. *A Touch of Sin* (2013).



Fig. 17.
The accelerating quality
of the digital image. A
comparison of a still
from *Still Life* (2006)
and *A Touch of Sin*
(2013).



Fig. 18.
Shooting in digital. Stills
from Apichatpong
Weerasethakul's *Cemetery
of Splendour* (2015), Hong
Sang-Soo's *On the Beach at
Night Alone* and Naomi
Kawase's *The Mourning
Forest* (2007).



Fig. 19.
The use of CGI in
contemporary
Chinese blockbusters.
Stills from *Monster
Hunt* (2015) and *Wolf
Warrior 2* (2017).

Fig. 20.
The textural in
digital decor.
A Touch of Sin
(2013).





Fig. 21.
The digital design of everyday spaces.
A Touch of Sin (2013).

Fig. 22.
Fluorescent
lighting.
A Touch of Sin
(2013).





Fig. 23.
Shallow focus and the blur. *A Touch of Sin* (2013).

Fig. 24.
Visualising
production
sites and
relations
through
fluorescence.
A Touch of Sin
(2013).



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