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MOVIE REVIEW

Still Life (2006)

NYT Critics' Pick



New Yorker Films

A wasteland amid the grandeur of the Yangtze: Zhao Tao as Shen Hong in "Still Life."

Those Days of Doom on the Yangtze

By MANOHLA DARGIS Published: January 18, 2008

A modern master of postmodern discontent, Jia Zhang-ke is among the most strikingly gifted filmmakers working today whom you have probably never heard of. During the past decade he has made some half-dozen documentary-inflected fictions and several documentaries that weigh the human cost of China's often brutal, dehumanizing shift from state-controlled communism to state-sanctioned capitalism, a price paid in the blood and sweat of people who have, paradoxically, inspired him to create works of sublime, soulful art.

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In "Still Life," which won the grand prize at the 2006 Venice Film Festival, the blood and the sweat run directly into the Yangtze River, where they mingle with more than a few tears. The movie takes place amid the clatter and misery of the Three Gorges Dam, which cuts across the Yangtze

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Cast, Credits & Awards

Readers' Reviews (9)

in central China. The largest dam in the world, Three Gorges is a site of great cultural and political strife because of both environmental and humanitarian concerns. More than one million people have been displaced because of the dam (more are expected to follow), evicted from their homes by a ravenous hunger for power, electric and otherwise, that is washing them and history away.

This may sound like a prescription for social cinema, but Mr. Jia's interest lies in visual ideas and human behavior, not agendas. Elegantly photographed by Yu Jianmin in high-definition digital video, the movie opens with a series of nearly seamless, seemingly contiguous lateral pans across men, women and children congregated in a boat on the Yangtze near the dam. The camera sweeps across the passengers slowly enough so that you can see each person alternately laughing, chattering and in repose. After exploring the formal possibilities of the long shot in his breakthrough film, "[Platform](#)" (2000), Mr. Jia has again started to edge near his characters. In "Still Life" he uses human bodies as moving space, to borrow [Michelangelo Antonioni](#)'s peerless phrase, but with enormous tenderness.

Antonioni's influence on Mr. Jia is pronounced, evident in the younger filmmaker's manipulation of real time and the ways he expresses his ideas with images rather than through dialogue and narrative. The drifting, rootless men and women in many of his movies, and the wide-open, nominally empty landscapes through which they on occasion wander, further underscore the resemblances between the filmmakers. Even so, when Mr. Jia's characters roam through the crumbling town in "Still Life" — which is being demolished in anticipation of an engineered inundation — it's impossible not to think even further back in cinema history to Rossellini's postwar films, like "[Paisan](#)" and "Germany Year Zero," works in which the director's moral position is etched into every human face and fallen building.

Like Rossellini, Mr. Jia has found a great subject in his rapidly changing country and its people, who seem to be casualties of a different, more elusive war. The two principal characters in "Still Life," Sanming (Han Sanming) and Shen Hong (Zhao Tao), land in Fengjie separately and never actually meet, bound only by a shared desire to find their errant spouses. Sanming, a fireplug whose muscular arms and back owe something to his time toiling in one of the country's coal mines, arrives in Fengjie hoping to find his runaway wife and the 16-year-old daughter he has never met. For her part, the willowy, more overtly middle-class Shen Hong, a nurse, is searching for the husband who stopped coming home two years earlier.

Written by Mr. Jia and two collaborators, Sun Jianmin and Guan Na, "Still Life" unfolds as a series of minor events and incidental bits and pieces with little obvious connective tissue. Things happen, though not necessarily as a consequence of what took place in the previous scene. Almost as soon as he enters the doomed town, Sanming walks into a scam (he answers the con with

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a flick of a switchblade), visits his truculent brother-in-law (who barely looks up from his rice bowl) and joins the ranks of the local work force by picking up a sledgehammer. After about 40 minutes, Mr. Jia suddenly shifts his attention to Shen Hong, who also comes to Fengjie in time to see the 2,000-year-old town die.

Sanming and Shen Hong inhabit separate spaces and personal stories but remain connected by context, culture, language and landscape. The same astonishingly beautiful mountains soar above both their heads. The two are routinely dwarfed by their environments, by the ruined buildings and surrounding gorges alike. The connections between the natural landscape and the man-made one, between the easy beauty of immutable nature and the eerie beauty of devastated culture (Mr. Jia is a poet of decay), are powerful and unsettling. The dam may not outlast either the gorges or the Yangtze, but if it does, you can always see the image of one of the gorges printed on a Chinese currency bill, yet another reminder of a disposable, commodified past.

Despite the heaviness of this strange, alien place — where government graffiti mark the water levels that will swallow the town — “Still Life” has been painted with a lightness of touch, and with none of the hollow lugubriousness familiar from some of the recent Chinese imported pageants and epics. Mr. Jia’s characters are always of their historical moment, but not necessarily its martyrs. Neither is he a slave to history. His work exists on a continuum with the modernist masters, among other influences, but he is very much an artist of his own specific time and place. His canvas is China, where, as the indelible image of a tightrope walker in “Still Life” suggests, people navigate the fine line between heaven and earth.

STILL LIFE

Opens on Friday in Manhattan.

Written (in Mandarin, with English subtitles) and directed by [Jia Zhang-ke](#); director of photography, Yu Likwai; edited by Khung Jinlei; music by Lim Giong; art directors, Liang Jindong and Liu Qiang; produced by Xu Pengle, Wang Tianyun and Zhu Jiong; released by New Yorker Films. At the ImaginAsian Theater, 239 East 59th Street, Manhattan. Running time: 1 hour 48 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Han Sanming (Sanming), Zhao Tao (Shen Hong), Li Zhu Bing (Guo Bing), Wang Hongwei (Wang Dong Ming), Ma Lizhen (Missy Ma) and Lan Zhou (Huang Mao).

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Readers' Reviews (9)

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9. January
18th,
2008

Art certified

At first, I also found it slow and at the border of boreness, but contrary to the movies with a dense and exacting plot, it penetrated my mind deeply and since that day I have been unable to forget it.

Rating:



- narcissis91

8. January
18th,
2008

I watched it in China

Well, one assumes that it will be banned in China giving the way the review was written. By the way, even when movies are banned in China, you can buy or rent DVD's to watch for most cases.

Rating:



About building the Dam there, I remember reading a report on NY Times; the reporter changed his view from critical to somewhat undecided and sympathetic after spent sometime there and saw the masses and the life people live there.

- ljtao

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