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POETICS OF VANISHING

The Cinema of Jia Zhangke

CHINESE CINEMA'S ENTRY into the global culture market came in the late 1980s, with directors such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige collecting international awards and critical acclaim for films such as *Red Sorghum* and *The King of Children* (both 1987). Part of a cohort of film-makers who graduated from Beijing Film Academy around 1982, known in the PRC as the 'Fifth Generation', Zhang and Chen based their success on a repudiation of the previous socialist-realist studio tradition, in favour of a reconnection with a mythologized past and evocation of sweeping, dehistoricized landscapes. In hindsight, the novelty of their work lay not so much in its cinematic language or any stylistic innovation as in the distance it took from the frames of reference of Mao's China—its aesthetics, value-system, material conditions and everyday life—which were pronounced obsolete. In that sense, the cinematic modernism of the Fifth Generation functioned as a confirmation of universal time, as defined by the global market.

The socialist-realist tradition never mounted any effective or coherent resistance to this, as it dwindled to irrelevance in the political-aesthetic debates of the post-Mao period. Rather, criticism of the Fifth Generation from the outset centred on its insistence on grand overarching narratives, and on its unwillingness to straightforwardly 'tell a story' (*jiang gushi*). The elevated style of these films, reifying what they depicted into something 'timeless', seemed distant from the concrete experience of their own times, and failed to represent or recount the ongoing, epic social

transformation of the country itself in the era of Deng Xiaoping's market reforms. The absence of stories in the Fifth Generation revealed on the level of form a poverty of experience that stood in stark contrast to the riot of bewildering content taking place around them.

Over the course of the 1990s, the Fifth Generation's place in the national cultural scene—and with it the place of cinematic modernism within the arena of social and ideological change—became more precarious. Tiananmen and its aftermath had turned anything vaguely critical or non-conformist into real or potential instances of dissent, which had to be muffled, if not summarily suppressed, by state censorship. By the early 1990s, Fifth Generation films were being received abroad as political allegories of a repressive regime, earning them bans from the domestic market—even though it was the state that had granted access to international film festivals in the first place. But such harsh administrative measures seemed sentimental by comparison with the full-throttle globalization and marketization taking place in China in the second half of the 1990s. Under these pressures, the moment of Chinese high modernism now dissolved into a grab-bag of postmodern variations on local and global genres, from the kung fu movie and TV sitcom to uniquely Chinese visual spectacles such as the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics—superintended and designed by Zhang Yimou himself. His unapologetic embrace of the state's instrumentalization of his cinematic 'sculptural consciousness' represented one pole of the dichotomy into which Fifth Generation film-makers had now fallen; the other was constituted by a nostalgic gaze at its earlier self, as in Chen Kaige's *Mei Lan Fang* (2008), a lesser version of his own 1994 Palme d'Or winner *Farewell My Concubine*.

The arrival of Jia Zhangke and his fellow 'Sixth Generation' film-makers in the mid-1990s was in every sense a response to this situation. In place of a fantastical, ideological symbolic unity, they staged allegorical fragments of a broken, disoriented reality. Where the Fifth Generation sutured together a mythological whole—embodied by vast, empty shots of a pristine, ahistorical landscape, from Shaanxi's loess plateau in Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (1984) and Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* to the icy mountain ranges of Tibet—the Sixth was eager to portray the shabby, formless texture of everyday life in county-level towns, where socialist underdevelopment meets the onslaught of marketization. The result of this collision is a landscape littered with wandering souls and

shattered dreams, filled with suppressed rage, disappointment and despair running so deep that, like a chronic disease, they become part of the quotidian routine.

Youthful rebellion and hopelessness on the margins of Chinese modernization—far away from the glamour of Shanghai, Beijing or Shenzhen—are dominant themes in Jia Zhangke's early films. His first full-length feature, *Xiaowu* (1997), centres on a petty thief in Fenyang, left behind to scrape a living from crime while all his friends have gone straight and moved into commerce. *Platform* (2000), the second film in Jia's 'hometown trilogy', follows the fortunes of a troupe of cultural workers from Fenyang, whose trips to the countryside punctuate a story of the gradual disintegration of socialist culture, as they go from staging Maoist agitprop to desultory roadside go-go dancing. The third part of the trilogy, *Unknown Pleasures* (2002), tells the story of two adolescent sons of laid-off workers who carry out a bank robbery that ends in comical disaster; though the scene has shifted to Datong, the film's action remains far removed from the mainstream of China's marketization.

With *The World* (2004), set in Beijing World Park, a theme park that replicates global tourist attractions in miniature, Jia moved beyond the provincial setting of his earlier films to portray the lives of migrant workers in the capital. *Still Life* (2006) depicts the destruction of the natural and social environment by the Three Gorges Dam project, while the leitmotif of *24 City* (2008) was the dissolution of whole families and the demolition of entire neighbourhoods, as a vast factory complex in Chengdu is dismantled to make way for real-estate development. Indeed, Jia's films seem to display an almost systematic sociological approach to the portrayal of the problems of contemporary Chinese development, whether by tackling its human and social costs, as in the alienated youth of *Xiaowu* and *Unknown Pleasures* or the migrant labourers and displaced populations of *Still Life*, *The World* and *24 City*, or its environmental costs, as in *Still Life*.

Formation

Born in 1970 in the city of Fenyang, Shanxi Province, Jia Zhangke was a chance convert to film-making, and a relatively late one. The son of a high-school Chinese teacher and a grocery-shop saleswoman, he grew

up in a semi-rural, semi-urban environment relatively insulated from the allures of the outside world. When explaining to interviewers why pop music features so prominently in his films, he points to the utter lack of any kind of culture or entertainment throughout his childhood and early adolescence: 'After dinner, the four of us [his parents, sister and himself] just sat in the room, with nothing to do and nothing to say, until it was time to go to bed'. The arrival of Taiwanese, Hong Kong and Japanese pop songs and Hollywood films thus had something of a liberating effect. Jia also became an accomplished breakdancer, the result of having seen *Breakdance: The Movie* (1984) over a dozen times.

But it was in 1990, while training to be a graphic designer in Taiyuan, the provincial capital of Shanxi, that Jia decided to become a film-maker, after happening to see Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth*. He made two failed attempts to get into the Beijing Film Academy, which finally accepted him into its Literature Department in 1993. The decision to study film theory rather than directing was, according to Jia, based on his assumption that it would be easier to get in. He himself has speculated that, had he not become a film-maker, he might have ended up a novelist—he has published essays and stories in Shanxi's literary magazines, and was even invited to join the provincial Writers' Association—or else a painter. As part of his apprenticeship in Taiyuan, he lived with other would-be artists on the city's outskirts, gaining first-hand experience of life on the margins as an 'aimless roamer' (*mangliu*), sharing the streets with migrant labourers, and like them subjected to police searches in the middle of the night. Jia has also suggested he might otherwise have become the owner of a private mine in Shanxi's coal country, fully aware that of all occupations in contemporary China, this one in particular has come to epitomize the lawless and predatory exploitation of man and nature.

For the generation that came after Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, the task was one of gaining a sense of concrete, irreducible reality in order to define and give substance to a new cinematic language. This reality, they felt, had entirely disappeared from Chinese film-making. Of all the Wednesday double-features of newly released Chinese films Jia saw while studying at Beijing Film Academy, he concluded that 'none whatsoever had anything to do with me, or with the real experiences and situations of living Chinese men and women.' This prompted him to 'do it by myself', that is, to 'struggle for a right of discourse' (*zhengduo*

huayuquan) to ‘represent the life concealed by the silver screen.’¹ In the decade that followed, Jia found himself ‘always ready to rush off to the street with a camera’ in search of reality. In this one can see the lasting imprint of Jia’s exposure to Italian Neo-Realism.² Other significant influences on him include Ozu and Hou Hsiao-Hsien; the mark of the latter is apparent in the spontaneous, free-flowing style of the ‘hometown trilogy’, which Jia filmed from his own notes rather than on the basis of a completed script. Indeed, he is known for never having finalized a script before the film itself was finished.

In 1995, while still at Beijing Film Academy, Jia made *Xiaoshan Going Home*, which tells the story of a migrant labourer from Henan working in a Beijing restaurant; fired by his boss before the Chinese New Year, Wang Xiaoshan roams the capital looking for people from his hometown of Anyang who might accompany him back. Though he finds plenty of fellow countrymen among construction workers, college students, waiters and prostitutes, none will make the journey with him. Running at just under an hour, the film set the tone for Jia’s subsequent work, his cinematic language clearly taking shape from early on. This applies not only in visual terms, through the choice of street settings and the roving, hand-held camera, but also to the way in which sound is used: pop songs, fragments of tannoy announcements and general urban noise constantly intrude, while Jia’s non-professional actors—an echo of Italian Neo-Realism—tend to speak in regional dialects; a bold choice given that most Chinese films are dubbed in standard Mandarin.

It is also no accident that Jia’s formation took place in parallel to the rise of China’s New Documentary Movement: both returned to street level, descending from the aesthetic heights of ‘modern world cinema’ and the new national mythology; both required fragmentation in cinematic or narrative articulation in order to stay in touch with a brute reality that exists below the radar of modernist form-making. Indeed, the Sixth Generation’s rejection of their predecessors’ metaphysical image of China was not only produced by, but also reflects, a more uneven and polarized society. This required a paradigmatic transformation of

¹ Interview with *Nanfang Renwu zhoukan* [Southern People Weekly], no. 10, 2009, p. 66.

² Jia cites De Sica’s *Bicycle Thief* among his favourite films. See Lin Xudong et al., eds, *Jia Zhangke dianying* [Films by Jia Zhangke], Beijing 2003, pp. 114–5.

the way the camera confronts reality—a reality whose multiplicity and contradictions must be captured.

Mapping the doldrums

Jia's films are best understood as an attempt at cognitive mapping of this reality. They portray a particular topology within China's fragmented social sphere: that of *xiancheng*, or the county-level city. This is not merely a technical administrative label for the films' settings, but rather a full-fledged concept undergirding their visual-political impact. The term refers to a 'county seat', governing townships but governed in turn by a district-level city; it includes both county-level cities such as Fenyang—setting for both *Xiaowu* and *Platform*—and larger district-level industrial centres such as Datong, the setting for *Unknown Pleasures*. Fenyang, which became a county-level city in the early 90s, had a population of 400,000 in 2005, where Datong had 3.2 million; Shanghai's population, by comparison, was around 18 million. There are wide disparities in per capita income between these cities: \$1,500 in Fenyang and \$2,500 in Datong, compared to \$11,000 in Shanghai; that is, an average Fenyang resident's annual income is 15 per cent of that of her counterpart in Shanghai.

The peculiarity of *xiancheng* as a type of social landscape lies not only in its socioeconomic and geographical omnipresence—there are more than 2,400 counties or county-level cities in the PRC, and Fenyang's population is around the average for these—but also in its under-representation in film and literature. To focus on *xiancheng* is, whether consciously or not, to zoom in on the underbelly of China's socialist modernity and its Reform Era. Nominally part of 'urban China', *xiancheng* stands apart from the fantasy of a pristine and authentic, custom-bound rural world, with a stable, village-based social and ethical structure. (Though this itself was in short order torn asunder by the expanding reach of market forces, which brought a massive loss of arable land and exodus of the rural population to rapidly expanding urban centres.) On the other hand, *xiancheng* is decidedly not a metropolitan area; if anything, it offers the opposite of the urban sophistication, white-collar jobs and access to national cultural and political power, as well as to ideas from overseas, experienced in Beijing, Shanghai and provincial capitals in coastal or major industrial areas: Nanjing, Hangzhou, Xi'an, Guangzhou or Chengdu spring immediately to mind.

In terms of material or symbolic capital, then, *xiancheng* is proletarian China *par excellence*. In terms of urban forms and their visual representation, *xiancheng* is usually found to be shapeless and unattractive. Based on observations of Fenyang as seen through the prism of Jia's films, one critic has listed the 'objective spatial properties of *xiancheng*' as follows:

Ruins and rubble spawned by demolitions, standing next to characterless streets and buildings; deserted coal mines and highways; large unused areas; modern dance shows on a flatbed truck competing with village operas and mad discos; sleepy pool rooms, video parlours and a decayed, empty train station; the sound of people selling lottery tickets all over the place—indifferent, monotonous and yet stirring, even demagogic—a sound typical of an age of absent-mindedness and restlessness; lonely, dejected pedestrians walking in the dust that thickens the air; odours of food, or other nameless smells. This is a hometown without famous ancient architectural sites or modern kitsch.³

In other words, this is the in-between, generic area where the daily reality of contemporary China is laid bare. With no clear-cut boundaries or sharp distinctions between rural and urban, between industrial and agricultural, between high and low cultures, *xiancheng* becomes a meeting place for all kinds of forces and currents, whether contemporary or anachronistic. The scene of Jia's films can be industrially over-developed, as with the huge state-run coal mines in Datong that comprise the semi-visible backdrop to *Unknown Pleasures*, in the form of the run-down workers' dormitory where the protagonist lives with his mother; or it can be under-developed, presenting to viewers the rudimentary service sector that sprang up all over China during the 1990s: small teahouses and restaurants, public baths, hair salons, karaoke clubs, pool rooms and brothels. The different modes of production or consumption that appear before the camera find in *xiancheng* not a showcase for their material accomplishments and ideological appeal, but rather their burial ground.

To anyone forced to look closely at its social fabric, *xiancheng* is an aching reminder of all the failures and compromises of socialist industrialization, of the post-socialist Reforms, and even of the sweep of market forces, whose brutal effects on the countryside or in big cities like Beijing and Shanghai turned out to be half-measures when confronted with this

³ Wang Xiaodong, 'Lun Jia Zhangke dianying zhong de guxiang' ['Hometown in Jia Zhangke's Films'], in *Dianying wenxue* [Film Literature], no. 5, 2009, p. 72.

dull, unruly reality. But Jia's films are neither moral condemnations of the crushing material or cultural poverty of *xiancheng*, nor nostalgic apologies for a personal history that bears its imprint. If there are any traces of sentimentalism, these are an emotional residue from Jia's own memories, lost in time and now regained through a form of film-making whose capacities for Proustian recall lie precisely in its ability to document the present.

When asked whether he thinks his films represent the Chinese reality, Jia answered by saying that his films represent one of the Chinese realities; and that what he has learned from his own decade of film-making experience is that his country is presenting increasingly multiple realities. Rather than trying to capture a totality or 'completeness' (*wanzhengxing*), Jia seeks to 'break its silence' and to show the 'facial expressions' of this 'giant economic entity'—often by making audible and visible what is muffled or blurred, or forgotten altogether.⁴ This does not involve aligning his film-making practice with any new, sociologically defined class or set of agents, such as 'small folks' (*xiaorenwu*), 'those on the margin' (*bianyuan*), the 'underprivileged group' (*ruoshiqunti*) or 'the bottom layer' (*diceng*). Instead, Jia is more engaged in finding a legitimate perspective from which to capture a reality that is simultaneously slipping away from experience and coming back to haunt and overwhelm it at an abstract, mythological level.

The films do not commit themselves to a fixed position, politically or aesthetically; rather, their effect rests on a deliberate mobility and reflexiveness—in terms of physical location and subjects, in relation to prevalent intellectual and critical discourses, and vis-à-vis the state and capital (in the form of investors, distributors and censors). It often seems as if Jia's work is devoted to those rendered immobile by the prevailing social, economic and ideological forces. At the end of *Xiaowu*, for example, the audience sees the eponymous pickpocket handcuffed to a pole like a stray mutt captured by a dog catcher, expressionlessly staring back at the passers-by gathering around him. But this memorable snapshot reveals precisely Xiaowu's mobility, as a migrant labourer picking pockets in *xiancheng* in order to survive; his is a mobility people too conveniently ignore and too readily deny when they deem it necessary.

⁴ [Interview with *Nanfang Renwu zhoukan?*], p. 68.

Xiaowu was widely praised by critics for its ‘discovery’ of *xiancheng*, but in a way the true beginning of Jia’s film-making lies in *Platform*, portraying the life of ‘roaming labour’ in the cultural sector within a *xiancheng* setting. Jia in fact wrote the script for *Platform* in 1995, as an account of his *Bildung*—it is the only one of his films to be set in the 1980s—but had to wait until after *Xiaowu* to begin work on it. Yet having arrived, with the ‘hometown’ trilogy, at centre stage in contemporary Chinese cinema as the film-maker of *xiancheng*, whose experiences and images define his work so thoroughly, Jia subsequently felt compelled to rise above it, with *The World*. But this setting is in fact a *xiancheng* within the nation’s capital, at once a migrant labourer’s village and a *xiancheng* imagining of a globalized world. Indeed the ultimate irony of the film is aimed not at the Disney-style theme park, but at Beijing or even China itself: a giant *xiancheng*, whose concrete, contradictory realities co-exist with a virtual, mirage-like unity.

A documentary impulse

Despite its unassuming, unattractive appearance, *xiancheng* is where the most brutal battles of a historical transformation are being fought in China, silently and out of sight. For Jia, what has rendered small-town experiences visible has been demolition (*chai*), making *xiancheng* not just a film set or background but an ongoing event that defines the visual politics of his film-making. The impulse behind it is a will to document, realized by ‘going back to the scene’ (*huidao xianchang*). The ‘scene’ here refers not only explicitly to the familiar scenes of demolition and construction in urban centres as well as the adjacent areas between city and country (*chengxiang jiehebu*), but also implicitly to the scenes of crime and violence in the 1990s, whose beginning can be traced back to 1989 and Tiananmen Square. In that sense the film-maker returning to the scene is not only trying to recover lost personal and collective memories, but also attempting to prove that the lived moment of trauma, unabsorbed by memory and consciousness, is an ongoing event which, however unbearable, can be confronted once again and captured from a cinematic version of ‘writing degree zero’.

While Jia’s age and small-town upbringing provide biographical clues for his desire to return to the ‘scene’, they could not supply the formal and discursive means by which he approached it. One crucial source for these was a conception of documentary that ran parallel to and was

nourished by the New Documentary Movement (*xin jilupian yundong*). Though this came to prominence in the early part of the 1990s, its roots can be traced to the transient moment of intellectual freedom in China in the mid-to-late 1980s, which allowed the country's 'educated youth', mostly poets and painters, to pursue different life-styles and ideals beyond the state or the newly emerging market institutions. The first independent documentary film-makers were so-called 'aimless roamers', who gathered in college dorms and small inns in remote provinces. Wu Wenguang's *Roaming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* (*Liulang Beijing: Zuihou de mengxiangzhe*, 1990) was one of their first manifestos. But this far-away utopia was quickly annihilated by the extension of commerce and technology to nearly every corner of Chinese society in the 1990s, and the surviving dreamers now turned their attention to the 'bottom layer' (*diceng*) in order to construct visual and experiential *vérité* beyond the empty clichés of bureaucratise or the mindless bombardment of the commercial media. In that sense, the New Documentary Movement was not something pursued professionally as a genre or format, but was fervently guarded as the last ground for truth, thought and critique; as Lü Xinyu rightly observes, this betrays its 1980s' intellectual origins.⁵

The settings of Jia's films differ from the deeply rural or radically urban locales often featured in works of the New Documentary Movement. But he shares with the independent documentarists a fervour for rediscovering reality at its most concrete and profane. He shares, too, their propensity for 'going back to the scene' and many of their formal features: documentary-style camera positions and movement; long takes; simultaneous sound recording; and sustained use of interviews, which came to the fore belatedly in Jia, with *24 City*. Thirdly, the protagonists in all of Jia's films are from virtually the same social groups or subgroups—unemployed youth and urban wanderers, migrant labour, street performers, laid-off state enterprise workers—as feature in independent documentary works. During the early stage of his career, Jia referred to himself as a 'cinematic migrant labourer', a stance echoed in the positioning of his camera: he consciously puts it at the eye-level of his protagonists, including that of the squatting Xiaowu. Following or circling around his characters, the camera moves in and out, stands still

⁵ Lü Xinyu, 'Cong Bi An Kaishi: Xin Jilu Yundong zai Zhongguo' ['Starting from the Other Shore: New Documentary Movement in China'], *Tianya* [Frontiers], no. 3, 2002, p. 68. Besides Wu Wenguang, Li Xiaoshan, Kang Jianning and Duan Jinchuan are often mentioned as the most prominent film-makers from this movement.

in their midst as a component of their daily world, waiting to be ignored or, better still, accepted as a documenter. This establishes a more equal relationship between viewer and viewed, who can together form a pact for the 'right of discourse' in the face of a multiple, fragmented reality, an intellectual elite increasingly given to kitsch, and the ruthless forces of state and market.

Jia's films and China's independent documentaries share a common counter-cultural bent. Yet if this orientation is what enables them to get an intimate view of terrain uncharted by 1980s cinema, there is also a price to be paid in terms of mass appeal. A certain self-imposed isolation follows from Jia's critical, non-conformist perspective, and his growing frustration with and distance from his own environment lends the films a strong touch of visual detachment. The idea that Jia's films are representations of working-class life that only high-cultural audiences can understand, or that they constitute laments about urban demolition funded by the demolishers—*24 City*, for example, was funded by the very developers behind the project featured in the film—are ironies not lost even on Jia's supporters.

Digital worlds

A second key device in the development of Jia's oeuvre has been the new technology of digital video cameras, or DV. Inexpensive and easy to handle, DV is a liberating alternative to the rented professional film camera, and has allowed an unprecedented degree of popularization of visual technology—and with it a multiplication of individual perspectives, positions and expressivity. Wu Wenguang described himself as having been 'salvaged [*zhengqiu*] by DV', adding that 'since 1998 I have been led by DV to a completely free state of mind, or perhaps I should say I have utilized it to such an extent that I can do whatever my mind and heart please'.⁶

Jia's first experience of shooting on DV came in 2001, with the half-hour documentary *Gonggong Changsuo (In Public)*. He describes the experience in terms similar to Wu's: 'I shot whatever I saw, completely relaxed and unprepared. It was like an adventure, a wandering without a script'. Filming in Datong, a coarse industrial town on the edge of the Gobi,

⁶ Quoted in Ruan Yanping, 'DV meijie dui chuanguo xintai yingxiang zhi yanjiu' ['A Study of the Impact of DV Media on Filmmakers' Attitudes'], in *Dianying wenxue*, no. 17, 2008, p. 23.

Jia captured 'all sorts of spaces: the railway station, bus stations, waiting rooms, dance halls, karaoke halls, pool rooms, a skating rink, tea houses'.⁷ The choice of Datong as location stemmed from a rumour circulating at the time, according to which the city's entire population was going to be shifted to Xinjiang to extract oil, since the coal was running out. Jia was attracted by the idea that 'everyone in Datong was trying to seize the day for pleasures' on the eve of a dramatic upheaval.

Though this massive displacement never actually took place, the same atmosphere of thwarted desires and precarious existence on the margins of China's ongoing transformation dominates his next film, *Unknown Pleasures*. This was also filmed in Datong, and shot entirely in DV. Dubbed the 'angriest of all Jia Zhangke films', a barely hidden fury permeates *Unknown Pleasures*, rooted in the structural frustrations of *xiancheng* life and the failed life plans of the protagonists. Yet it would be hard for viewers to see the suffocating aimlessness, repression and humiliation that fill the screen were it not for the sense of freedom afforded by DV. Flat and fragmented, hazy and sometimes bordering on incoherence, the visual narrative of *Unknown Pleasures* feels as if it is woven together by an intruder inside a dreamland who does not have to worry about getting caught.

Digital video turned out not only to be suitable for capturing raw visual encounters with Datong; to Jia's delight, it was also ideally suited to 'shooting things that are abstract'. He explains:

Most people seem to be travelling according to a prescribed order, as if they are moving along a river. The advantage of DV, however, is that it allows you to step in while keeping an objective distance, tracking the rhythm and heartbeat of this trend, staring at it, following it, all the while conducting a rational observation . . . That allows me to add a surrealist layer on top of the super-realist foundation of my previous work. I felt I became an essayist with a digital camera and not a film-maker.⁸

Jia's observations on concreteness and abstraction, sensual immediacy and distance, emotional involvement and 'rational' reflection are important, since the aesthetic and political ambition of his films and those of the New Documentary Movement is precisely to forge a new alliance between objectivity and thought, as they are violently sundered by the radical transformation of Chinese society. It would not be an exaggeration

⁷ Ruan, 'DV meijie', p. 24.

⁸ Ruan, 'DV meijie', p. 24.

to say that DV allows the new generation of film-makers to cut deeply into the body of social life and roam between its internal organs. Walter Benjamin ascribed this capacity to film when comparing it to painting—a comparison that allows us to contemplate the revolutionary implications of this new technology.⁹ As DV allows reality to be scrutinized in minute, concrete detail, the cinematic essayist can hold the camera with one hand and, with the other, still scribble down what he sees and thinks, so to speak, thus retaining a critically important distance and autonomy, unbound by the apparatus of traditional film equipment.

A more prosaic—in the Hegelian sense of the ‘world of prose’—space is thus created between material immediacy and the socially given on the one hand, and their negation in reflexive consciousness on the other. It is in this new terrain that a crude aesthetics, with fragmented and shifting forms, comes into being, along with the historical and human experiences that are both activated and captured by its gaze. This the reason why Jia is so excited by the harsh contours of Datong, with its energy and restlessness, its faceless crowds, and the unnamed fury of its youth. Whereas the film’s Chinese title, *Renxiaoyao*, suggests a Daoist kind of untameable freedom—making a direct allusion to Zhuangzi’s poetry and philosophy—the excitement might just as well stem from the freshly minted DV technology and its incipient promise that a cognitive victory might be snatched from a sleepwalk-like *dérive* through the land of indifference and reification.

Disappearances

While Fifth Generation films, as specimens from the heroic or mythological period of Chinese cinema, centred on emergence and coming-into-being, Jia’s films insistently return to the theme of vanishing. In his own words: ‘Some beautiful things are quickly disappearing from our lives’.¹⁰ In *24 City*, an entire community vanishes along with Factory 420, a huge military equipment producer set up in 1958, in the heyday of the Great Leap Forward, which employed 30,000 people. In *Still Life* it is the ancient city of Fengjie that is slated to disappear, and with it the myth of the Three Gorges as a collective cultural reference point, represented in forms ranging from classical poetry to the PRC’s

⁹ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in *Illuminations*, New York 1968, pp. 226–7.

¹⁰ Jia Zhangke, *Jia Xiang [Jia’s Reflections]*, Beijing 2009, p. 25.

currency. Social species or subgroups too become extinct, such as the socialist culture workers of *Platform*; their fate is epitomized by the head of the troupe, played by the Beijing poet Xi Chuan, who simply drops out of view after the ‘privatization’ of the troupe. Elsewhere it is more intangible things that disappear: idealism, dreams, the sense of security, belonging, a sense of direction, ‘principles or norms’ (*zhunze*). If the 1980s cinema dreamt of norm-building, then Jia can be seen as a cinematic poet of norm-demolition, of the impossibility of keeping anything intact, and of the silent violence borne by a helpless population.

But of all the things that are vanishing before our eyes, none is as frightening as the oblivion of the hometown. Xiaowu still has a home in the village to return to, and even though it was demolition work in Fenyang that prompted Jia’s desire to document his hometown life, the streets that feature in *Platform*—with their bicycles, tractors and shabby one-storey buildings—are still as dense and packed as those of any other town where people go about their daily routines. In *Unknown Pleasures*, however, the socialist workers’ dorms and other public spaces stand in a ghostly anachronistic isolation; large open spaces have been created, often in the form of flattened neighbourhoods, dusty construction sites and broad, glistening highways. In *Platform*, the wider processes in play—the disintegration of the socialist organization of labour, the privatization of collective ownership and sweeping commercialization—were still contained within the personal domain of ‘growth’ and ‘experience’; but they quickly overwhelm the phenomenological framework of a 1980s *Bildungsroman*, demanding a more concrete and historical approach. Nonetheless, it takes the ruthless administrative efficiency with which whole cities are demolished or relocated in *Still Life* and *24 City*—and an entire phantasmagorical ‘world’ erected in *The World*—to make personal and collective consciousness fully register what the disappearance of the hometown really means.

Still lives

The original Chinese title of *Still Life* is *Sanxia haoren*, meaning ‘the good people of the Three Gorges’. Its curious English translation points to Jia’s own literary interpretation of the film:

One day I stumbled into an uninhabited room and saw the belongings of the bygone host lying on the desk, covered with dust. All of a sudden it dawned on me that this is the secret of still life. The setting had not been

changed for years; everything was covered by dust; an empty wine bottle by the window; the decorations on the walls—suddenly, everything acquired a poetic melancholy. Still life represents a reality neglected by us. Even though it preserves the deep traces of time, it remains in silence and thus keeps the secret of life.¹¹

The film opens by following the migrant labourer Han Sanming as he travels to the Three Gorges area—at that time the construction site for the world's largest hydropower station—to look for his wife. The camera enters the scene like a stranger stumbling into an empty room just vacated by its inhabitants. The two-thousand-year-old city of Fengjie appears here in the act of vanishing: dismantled, dynamited and flattened amid deafening noises and flying dust. As over a million people are forced to leave their homes, the camera roams to and fro, as if searching for signs of life at an archaeological site—but one in which it is one's own life-world that is being unearthed. The character *chai*—‘to be demolished’—is omnipresent, painted on the walls in red paint along with lines marking the projected water-level. This serves as a constant, melancholic reminder, a rescue plea transmitted from the scene of a social disaster that is inexorably taking place, and which would seem to require measurement on a natural-historical scale (Chernobyl comes eerily to mind).

The documentary core of Jia's early films finally comes to the foreground in his most recent feature, *24 City*, in which the melancholy that dominates *Still Life* is replaced by earnest talking and listening. Here the subject of the ‘still life’ is Factory 420 in Chengdu, sold to a real-estate developer in 2008, which demolished the plant in order to build high-end condominiums on the site (the factory itself was to be relocated in the outer suburbs of Chengdu). ‘Chinese socialism as an experiment has ended at the economic level’, concludes Jia; he continues: ‘what I am facing is the memory of this experiment and the ways in which the workers’ experiences and lives had been affected under that system.’¹² Based on more than 130 interviews with 420 employees and retirees from the factory, the film turns out to be more ‘fictional’ than most Jia films, in that a collective institutional history is crystallized principally in the personal narratives of three women workers, two of whom are played by famous actresses, Joan Chen and Lü Liping; the third is played by Zhao Tao, who has been in every one of Jia's films since *Platform*.

¹¹ Jia, *Jia Xiang*, p. 167.

¹² Jia, interview with Liu Min in *Dianying shijie [Film World]*, no. 6, 2008, p. 42.

This ‘fictitious concentration’, deemed necessary by the film-maker, has a certain Brechtian quality; but it serves mainly as a discursive ‘voice-over’ that anchors and frames the documentary gaze of the camera, which seeks to weave together two threads of ‘still-life’ images, drawn from two domains of contemporary Chinese society. Firstly, that of state-supported institutions soon to go into oblivion, consisting of meeting halls, buses, factory floors and the public space of the communal apartment compounds; and secondly, the realm of private everyday life, consisting of living rooms, kitchens and personal possessions. What the film presents is not so much a collection of still lives from the repressed past and the vanishing present, but rather various visual, audio or discursive passages connecting the bustling surface of contemporary Chinese cities to the darker, subterranean world of ‘personal stories’.

The fascination with still life in this particular sense also relates to Jia’s impulse to document, in his words, the ‘labourers coming and going in front of the camera’.¹³ It is his homage to those whose existence is as silent as a still life. The forced migration of labour in *Still Life*, and the restless mobility of the protagonists of *The World*, in which everybody is on the move—from small towns to cities, from Ukraine to Beijing or Beijing to Ulan Bator—point back to Jia’s earlier obsession with immobility, with those who are stuck in the provincial cities and towns that defined his formative years. In a text from 2006, he writes about an unplanned, impulsive trip to Datong to meet up with old friends:

Arriving around midnight, I took a taxi and went straight to a small restaurant . . . As I expected, all my buddies were there, as they had nowhere else to go. They gathered at this restaurant every day, killing time over drinking and gambling. They never had to make an appointment to see each other.

Having nowhere else to go, he and his Shanxi friends decided to visit abandoned cinemas in the coal-mine district of the city. Stumbling into the dark, empty theatres, some already turned into warehouses, Jia’s descriptions read like his director’s notes or scripts:

Like a group of vagabonds we went along looking for traces of former film theatres or workers’ clubs and found them still standing in the sand storms of the Gobi desert. Some of them wore glassless windows like open wounds, others just sat there in silence, as if still in disbelief over what

¹³ Jia, [*Jia Xiang?*], p. 167.

had happened. I was struck by the thought that the faces of contemporary Chinese people in the past decade or so had never been truly portrayed on the screen, their happiness and sorrows, their life's drama disappearing into nothingness. Nobody cared about those who still live in the workers' dorms nearby, about their souls and their spiritual needs.¹⁴

Perhaps it is this that drives Jia's film-making in the most personal, private, and yet most socially and politically engaged sense: the desire to document, to represent, to remember and pay homage, as both a contemporary and a late-comer, to the vanishing, the immobile and the silent. This constitutes a rescue mission with a critical edge. As a public intellectual, Jia may refer to his project as an effort at 'understanding the moral state of being of our nation' (*mingbai minzu de jingshen xianzhuang*), but Jia Zhangke the private film poet dedicates his work to 'the brothers who are just about to repeat the same routine of eating and drinking, to endure the same solitude and emptiness.'¹⁵

Still life, as a concept borrowed from painting, provides possibilities for Jia's film-making as at once a poetics of vanishing and a documentary of rescue. It offers, firstly, an ultimate epistemological category and operational framework with which to arrest a process of rapid, ruthless change and rearrange its dispersing fragments into a sequence of enduring visual evidence. What is disappearing before our eyes, within the cinematic frame, becomes the concrete substance of 'what has been', negatively filling out a phenomenology of the void. The reduction and suspension of History in the form of still life is not merely a device that places within reach things too large for human experience or perception, making them easier to handle. For the stillness thus achieved becomes a focal point towards which all images, sounds and stories converge. While listening to the harrowing monotony of the sounds of demolition in *Still Life*, the viewer opens herself up to all kinds of sound and light, music and language—hence, perhaps, Jia's mischievous, seemingly inexplicable insertion of a spaceship speeding away across the sky. This openness could serve as a useful cue or stepping stone for a new chronicle of collective experience.

Jia's poetics of vanishing is achieved through a documenting of China's present, in which an agonized battle is unfolding on the frontiers of global capital. From Fenyang to Beijing and back to the 'scenes' of this silent

¹⁴ Jia, *Jia Xiang*, p. 170.

¹⁵ Jia, *Jia Xiang*, p. 170.

struggle, his films have moved beyond his hometown, while pursuing a notion of hometown that is not only personal, but also of wider political significance. For as *xiancheng* becomes China on a national scale, China becomes *xiancheng* on a world-historical scale. What is at stake is no less than the meaning of one's collective social being, for which the hometown is not the last line of defence, but rather the most immediate locus through which other, more socially and politically concrete longings are expressed.

Still Life ends with the migrant labourers leaving Fengjie for an unspecified destination, in search of work and livelihood. Behind them, between two condemned buildings, a man walks a tightrope against the background of a gloomy sky. To see what is present in Jia Zhangke's films is to ask where their protagonists are going and what kind of a future they can strive for: in the words of the song playing at the end of *24 City*, 'Where Does the Future Lie?' (*Weilai zai nai*). As unclear as the answer might be, one thing is certain: they cannot stand still.