

Temporality, *Nature Morte*, and the Filmmaker: A Reconsideration of *Still Life*
Dai Jinhua
Translated by Lennet Daigle

In the world of contemporary Chinese cinema, Jia Zhangke is, in many respects, an exception to the rule: he is a director whose films almost without fail depict the lower classes or, the majority of society; a director who has continually, from the start, been dedicated to making art films; a director who has fulfilled his social responsibilities as an artist while developing an original mode of artistic expression; a director who has made the transition from independent underground films to commercial mainstream films without losing his vitality, and without suffering exclusion from western film festivals; a director famous for his autobiographical narratives who has finally “grown up”, and who has successfully drawn on his experiences to explore broader social issues. As long as China’s fifth generation filmmakers continue to make commercial compromises, and the sixth generation remains stuck – have grown but not matured in terms of style and modes of expression – Jia Zhangke will remain an exception, or even “one of a kind.”

Actually, after the period in which Chen Kaige’s *Yellow Earth* and Zhang Yimou’s films had become synonymous with the moniker “Chinese cinema” and after Zhang Yuan’s nomination of “underground cinema” to refer to what Europeans think of as “Chinese cinema” – both post-Cold War but still Cold War-style designations, the release of *Platform* and the inverted portrait of Mao on the film poster unexpectedly heralded the arrival of the “Jia Zhangke era” of Chinese cinema in the new millennium’s international film world, as represented primarily by European film festivals and American film studies classes.

In some sense, Jia Zhangke, with twenty-first century eyes of the world upon him, has become one of many paradoxical traces littering world film history, or rather, of that branch originating in the European art film. It is similar to the beginning of the twentieth century, when modernism and the avant-garde movements began to turn against, question and shatter the cultural renaissance and its ideological fabric. The invention of the motion picture camera gave rise to the twentieth century’s most important form of art/popular culture (at least in the first half of the century). It nevertheless also revived and reinforced the “renaissance space”: the fantasy world created by the camera’s centralizing perspective and the classical stage spectacle replicated by the silver screen.

In the second half of the twentieth century, during the 1960s, the author, God and humanity were all declared dead; yet the “politique des auteurs” went against the times and came into being, giving both impetus and a name to wave after wave of “new wave” cinema around the world, initiating an era of personalized cinema in which auteurs “wrote” with light. This in turn led to a sort of cultural paradox, since the auteur theory that arose in order to classify and interpret Hollywood filmmakers came to sustain European films made in opposition to Hollywood, and came to be an extension of the critical practice broadly associated with the New Left in the Cold War era. In France and Germany, at least, the auteurs and the affiliated new wave movements became active participants in – or even the driving force behind – the European and American countercultures during the sixties and seventies.

As neo-liberalism rose to utter dominance in the eighties and auteur films or European art films gradually exhausted their originality and critical edge, international film festivals – one of the central sites of post-war film creativity –

implemented or expanded mechanisms for the identification, nurturing and classification of non-western filmmakers and writers. It almost goes without saying that in their role as identifiers of new talent, these European film festivals are in many respects a double-edged sword. They broke the European singular prerogative on "art film", and opened European and American eyes to the world of non-western film. But they also, consciously or unconsciously, successfully dictated and regulated the ways non-western artists understand and conceptualize film, art and aesthetics.

At the same time, for third world or non-western film artists, Europe's film festivals have undoubtedly provided a means of escaping the constraints of crass commercialization as well as severe governmental or cultural realities, and have allowed them to continue pursuing their artistic dreams and social critique. But international film festivals also take films with clear, specific cultural concerns and political criticisms and remove them from their local contexts, giving rise to a particular cultural or psychological type of non-western filmmaker: the combination artist/political dissident, who creates idiosyncratic films nurtured by the strangely – even perversely – insular world of the film festival/art house circuit.

In another sense, postwar/Cold War European art cinema in its very nature perpetuated an unspoken assumption of twentieth century modernism: namely the counter- or anti-commercial nature of art – even if this is undoubtedly an extension of and variation on the anti-utilitarian assumptions of classical art/aesthetics, and even though modernist art itself undoubtedly had difficulty escaping market commodification. Clearly however, since the global market and its cultural/artistic products long ago took over the mainstream, the anti- or non-commercial positioning of art films has taken on an inherently critical cast, in ways that are not necessarily consciously acknowledged. Perhaps it is precisely because of this that the social and cultural reconstruction of post-war art films frequently overlapped with the social and political articulations of the New Left, and that it played an important and even leading role in the "global sixties".

However, even though certain Euro-American art films (including avant-garde, experimental cinema) actualized some form of cultural resistance, or at least a critique of modernity (namely capitalism), the evaluative standards used by international film festivals, whether consciously or unconsciously, embedded mainstream Western values in their classifications for non-Western filmmakers. This situation has led to a somewhat bizarre double standard: the self-referential European insistence on "other" means of expression treats many forms of otherness as either worrisome or praiseworthy signs of "lagging" on the path toward global capitalism. It has inevitably standardized the methods of representing society used by non-Western filmmakers wanting to pass through the narrow doors of international film festivals. They consequently have reproduced what may tentatively be called "Eurocentric" ways of imagining the self and others, and have had no choice but to become a referent for the standard Euro-American "non-western" script. These filmmakers then have had difficulty achieving non-western forms of self expression characterized by full subjective and cultural self awareness. Actually, during the last two decades of the twentieth century, European international film festivals' methods of nominating non-Western films centered on Asia (including a surprising but unsustainable interest in Turkish and Iranian new wave cinema), particularly greater China (Chinese language) films, for which Hong Kong's new wave was the forerunner, followed by Taiwanese and mainland Chinese new cinema (i.e. the successive appearance of the fourth, fifth and sixth generations).

Following *The World, Still Life* marks Jia Zhangke's second film since his

transition from underground to commercial cinema, and from autobiographical to imaginative plot. The film's narrative space - the Three Gorges reservoir, the largest hydroengineering project in Chinese history and largest water conservation project in the world - is heavy with social symbolism. The massive dam interrupts China's longest river, the Yangze, at its most dramatic stretch: the Three Gorges region is home to China's most beautiful natural scenery. One finds here countless vestiges of history from over the past two thousand years, and countless poems, songs, and writings praising its landscape. But the area is also rich in water resources, and damming the river to generate electricity has been the dream of three generations of Chinese leaders and hydroengineers seeking to conquer and remold nature, and harness energy.

Actually the movie includes a seemingly "realist" episode. As Shen Hong calmly takes leave of her husband and steps on the riverboat bound for Shanghai, the camera zooms in on a television monitor aboard the boat, nearly filling the whole frame, where images of Sun Yat-sen, Mao Zedong, and Deng Xiaoping are successively shown, accompanied by the pleasing, proper voice of a female narrator describing their plans to dam the gorges, followed by a scene of Jiang Zemin at the ribbon cutting ceremony. Around the edges of the frame, however, the passengers on deck are obscured or indistinct. Perhaps it is precisely this careless "glimpse" of a shot that casually reveals the film's true intention: to move aside the grand images that lie at the heart of mainstream depictions, and allow us to see with the same kind of casual glance the people behind this canvas - the insignificant little people scurrying to keep up with the giant strides of modernization.

The Three Gorges project was launched in 1994 and completed in 2009, a total of fifteen years. The project was accompanied by a massive migration of people from the reservoir area on a scale rarely seen in human history: the migration of an entire region. Depending on one's point of view, the Three Gorges project is either a marvel of the human control of nature and a milestone in China's century-long modernization, or an environmental and ecological disaster, the moment of inexorable doom toward which history and the present are moving.

Interestingly, within the filmic space we hardly ever see any large scale hydroengineering works, and aside from the male protagonist Han Sanming's jobsites, the film hardly shows us the ubiquitous ruins. On the contrary, the film is filled with scenes of very ordinary bustling streets and densely packed dwellings typical of a small city in southwest China. But it is a way of life that can be absolutely and permanently cut short at any time by the word "demolish" (*chai* 拆) written and circled in whitewash on walls of buildings slated for removal - a sight so ubiquitous that it has come to symbolize Chinese urban life in the nineties.

In one of the film's few lighthearted moments we see Han Sanming and a coworker splashing water on each other after a day's work in the hot sun, when suddenly something outside the frame attracts Han Sanming's attention and he worriedly calls out to the owner of the inn. Not until the camera pans to the inn keeper do we see a group of workers writing *chai* in giant white strokes enclosed in the customary circle, on the side of the inn where it says "Chinese People's Pavilion and Guest House." Even though this means the end is near, that the inn keeper will lose his home and livelihood and that Han Sanming will lose his humble but inexpensive lodgings, the inn keeper can only muster a few feeble curses, to which the workers give the routine response that they are just doing their job. In the next sequence, a wide angle shot shows a small building on a hillside and a mother and daughter looking out the window. But in the lower right we see another huge, white,

encircled *chai*, adding a sense of alarm to this everyday scene. As the camera pans to the right, past the *chai*, a high-angle shot reveals the inn keeper hobbling down the street.

Still Life depicts a time close to the project's completion. The narrative ambience is permeated with a sense that the countdown has begun. Signs indicating how high the water will rise during the project's third phase appear everywhere, as if the filmic space itself tells a story of "flooding". In fact, the filmic space, and the time period and background that unfold through the narrative make *Still Life* into something of a contemporary Chinese parable: rebuild or drown, create or destroy, remember or repress, an era's dream come true or a complete rupture with history. The film is built on an extremely old narrative trope: the search. A man and woman with nothing in common, he from the lower class, she from a higher class, come to the Three Gorges separately looking for their spouses. Thus it is personal stories that motivate and dominate this parabolic/collective/social site. The primary plot takes the form of a free flowing melodrama, full of fortuitous encounters and missed opportunities. But Jia Zhangke refuses to construct fantasies, and instead uses a seemingly unpremeditated, informal, documentary style of exposition.

Still Life exhibits just those characteristics that could allow us to make the broadest or most crude distinctions between art and commercial film: large numbers of long takes, and a slow, drawn out editing rhythm. Perhaps it goes without saying, but the ideas and qualities embedded in the long takes and slow editing characteristics of art film – as opposed to the "short" and "fast" of commercial film – are among the ways that films produce their cultural politics. Long and slow are contrasted or counterposed with short and fast, indicating a non-conformist stance towards the speed and efficiency prized by modern/capitalist logic. The opening sequence is an extremely long, seemingly endless and boundless long take, panning across the passengers on the deck of a Yangze River freighter, like a long painting scroll depicting the lower rungs of Chinese society - the enormous lower class, the majority of society, or one could say the huge base of the pyramid supporting the Chinese miracle - before finally revealing and alighting on the male protagonist Han Sanming. This sequence is followed by more long takes capturing Han Sanming travelling and searching.

It is precisely these shots following Han Sanming through bricks and rubble, through slum-like temporary housing for the poor and past reinforced concrete structures seemingly under construction but actually under demolition, that delineate the contours of this massive and perverse space: an unprecedented and unrepeatably engineering project, whose completion heralds the complete destruction and submersion of the space itself. In light of the impending flood, this discarded space and community has come under the rule of casual violence and organized crime.

Three long takes are worth mentioning: the first shows Han Sanming calling Xiao Ma's mobile phone during a rain shower that has brought work to a halt. The camera pans toward the source of the faint ringtone, ultimately revealing not far away beneath the rubble the dead body of the childlike young man. The second depicts Shen Hong and Guo Bin meeting and deciding to breakup, with a stationary shot filming this long separated couple who may still have feelings for each other, but who have long since ceased to be a couple in anything but name. The third comes at the end of the film as Han Sanming's fellow workers on the demolition site decide nearly on the spur of the moment to leave and accompany him to the Shanxi coal mines to find work. The camera films these migratory, drifting men against the backdrop of China's vast territory, walking out of the depths of the frame, turning towards the right, then shifts

to a medium shot of Han Sanming's back, while in the background is one of *Still Life*'s most important, absurd, and symbolic of images: a figure holding a long bamboo pole walking on a steel cable across the Yangze, a river once considered an insurmountable natural barrier.

The background image of the final shot may work at an allegorical level to comment on the lives of the Three Gorge's, or perhaps all of China's internal migratory lower classes, full of imminent danger, lives hanging by a thread. Or it could be read as a tragic footnote to the choices and aspirations of the people in the film: In 2005, the year *Still Life* was filmed, news reports of accidents in the Shanxi mines repeatedly shocked Chinese society. The frequency of the accidents and dramatic increase in casualties revealed what was only the tip of the iceberg of problems facing China's poor. A protest video about the mining disasters popular on the internet at the time was entitled: "There is an occupation called making it back alive."

There is one particular long take sequence that reveals or explains the social significance of this space: it opens with a panoramic shot of the demolition site and the workers swinging their sledge hammers, using the most primitive of methods to tear down modern reinforced concrete buildings. In the foreground Han Sanming stands for a brief moment before taking off his shirt and swinging his hammer. The camera pans and gradually moves in on a silent and seemingly abandoned heap of rubble, when suddenly a group of workers covered head to toe in white protective clothing and carrying sprayers "rise" from the rubble in a manner reminiscent of science fiction films, creating a powerfully surreal atmosphere. The camera follows the workers as they spray disinfectant over the rubble heap, allowing the audience to see formerly enclosed homes, their walls crumbled, now lying exposed and part of the external environment. The decorations and awards that remain on the walls reveal the dreams, passions and memories of the inhabitants. It's a type of scene normally found in war films, the feel that Picasso's *Guernica* tries to transmit. Yet this film is dealing instead with a "construction" site that is the focus of worldwide attention.

In *Still Life* Jia Zhangke paints a fairly dark picture: during the final phase of the Three Gorges project, migrants are forced to leave their homes for the northeast, or Guangdong – China's northernmost and southernmost areas. The "closest" destination is Shanghai's Chongming Island. These people closely connected to the land are uprooted and moved to places where the terrain and culture are very different, while those who refuse relocation are forced into slums or, like Old Ma and family, to live on boats adrift in the Yangze. All of them represent the most prominent social landscape of globalization: a metaphor of flux.

After the Three Gorges project and the ensuing mass migration had thoroughly destroyed the communities in the dam area, the people who remain are without the most basic social protections or means of self preservation. In *Still Life*, the area has already been reduced to a primitive criminal state in which violence is the only solution. We see unemployed men, forced to migrate to find work and subsequently injured on the job, helplessly, unreasonably and pointlessly asking the bankrupt factory's manager to compensate them for their losses, and forced to rely on the money their wives earn from prostitution; while Old Ma clearly relies on the fists of his deckhands to maintain order in his shipping business. In the background, never appearing except as a photograph in a flier, the "Lady from Xiamen" is apparently in charge of "office building demolition", while her lover (bodyguard? henchman?), Shen Hong's husband Guo Bin, is clearly a powerful criminal figure.

Aside from the demolition crews (with whom Jia Zhangke sympathizes and

identifies to some extent), every scene with crowds of people includes some bandaged heads or bloody faces. Guo Bin's place of work exists in an especially great swirl of noisy activity, in which violence is met with violence. Jia Zhangke has never avoided these themes in the past, but neither has he fixated on or amplified their cruelty as he does here. In a blurred, distracted mode, Jia Zhangke's long takes create a visual caress that touches everything in this soon to be submerged landscape – people, things, scenery – as if seen through the eyes of Han Sanming and Shen Hong, who are drawn to the area by their love. Perhaps this is the origin of the film's English title *Still Life*. Actually, following the example of European art film, it is space - and not people - that plays the leading role in the film. Here it is the Three Gorges, the reservoir, and the area soon to be flooded. What traces, reveals, or speaks for this leading role is the movement of the long take. That is to say, in the dialogue between Jia Zhangke and the Three Gorges, or Jia Zhangke and the reservoir area, everything in the film is a kind of "still life". The translator of the film's title into English bestowed a sense of desolation and longing absent in the Chinese title (which translates literally as "The Good People of the Three Gorges")

Here, however the film exhibits an interesting cultural symptomaticity. One could say that the film basically follows the conventions of art films and makes space a primary character, albeit a palimpsestic space condemned to disappear, or already gone: the majestic scenery of the Three Gorges, the river-bank towns, the future reservoir, or the soon to be depopulated countryside. But it would be more accurate to say that spaces such as the future reservoir area or the Three Gorges District—already gone or inevitably fated to disappear—float suspended in the distance, above or beyond the narrative and the text.

Thus the visual space of *Still Life* has become a "site" in the narrow sense, a temporal appearance of a spatial form. Clearly, within the range of Chinese art cinema, or rather in the tradition of post-Mao film, *Still Life* is the first to accomplish the inversion of cultural and visual themes of fifth generation Chinese cinema (or rather fifth generation-style film). No longer is space given priority over time, and no longer is the time of progress, reform and life swallowed by Chinese historical and geographical space. Rather it is temporality, that is to say development or progress that sweeps away historical and natural spaces like a hurricane and rewrites them, as if once again corroborating a compressed experience of time.: contemporary China experienced four hundred years of European capitalist history, from the Enlightenment to the critique of modernity in the thirty years leading up to the turn of this century.

Yet perhaps we need to consider the prehistory of this late modern period of China's "history of modernization." Without even going back as far as the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1911) we can already find the outstanding recurring themes about modern China's historical narratives and space-time imaginaries: the movements to reassess Chinese culture and history in the 1980s, in which fifth generation filmmakers played such an active role, actually (and also as a form of imaginary) were a repetition in a transformed sense of May Fourth cultural movement themes [need footnote on May 4th]. The prominent spatial aspect of May Fourth pre-occupations became a direct vector in these later movements for the notion of "the extraordinary structural stability of Chinese history", in which the hope for redemption lay in a re-activation of time, or more precisely in allowing the time of "world history (i.e., capitalism)" to replace or substitute for "Chinese time."

Perhaps even more interesting, the legitimation of the Three Gorges project and

its enactment as a heroic feat are in effect the reappearance and fulfillment of the temporal/historical narrative of the late 1950s and the Mao era. Not only is it the realization of Mao's own personal dreams ("to erect cliffs like those along the Xi River, that will shut out the clouds and rains from Wu Mountain, and create a lake rising high in the gorges" – can't find this one, will ask Dai), and noble sentiments ("Ten thousand years are too long, Seize the day, seize the hour!" [fn: "Reply to Comrade Guo Moro" in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*]). It is moreover the enactment of a demonstrative logic of that era that seems fantastical/absurd in light of today's mainstream thinking: "There is no Jade Emperor in heaven, no Dragon King on earth. I am the Jade Emperor, I am the Dragon King. Tell the mountains and hills to open the way, I'm coming; "The earth is a bauble... I will carve it as I please." Perhaps it goes without saying that in these two quotes, "I" must definitely be "capitalized", because even if this "I" cannot be directly identified as the "proletariat" – the once and future subject of history in Marxism or the International Communist Movement – the "it" is undoubtedly a reference to "the people" ("the people, and only the people, are the motive force of history" [need footnote] and not the individual.

In the current moment we probably do not need to offer a meticulous explanation that in the post-Mao era, the capitalist transformation that is referred to in China as "reform and opening" – in the sense of "modernization" and industrialization supposedly taking the nation state as their unit, and in the "logic of catching up and overtaking" by which underdeveloped countries compare themselves to developed EuroAmerican countries – this post-Mao era, far from being a rupture with the Mao era, is deeply, intimately and directly intertwined with it. . . Consequently the communism and socialism of underdeveloped countries in the twentieth century can be seen instead as a form of state capitalism actualized under specific historical conditions, though such a narrative is incapable of revealing, and may even conceal, political and cultural tendencies of the twentieth century's international communist movement, particularly the realities of Cold War socialism. But what makes *Still Life* such a valuable filmic moment is its ability to stop and look back and try to capture in a series of "still lives" spatial images that will be destroyed, submerged in the ceaselessly accelerating flow of time.

Yet another cluster of social and cultural symptoms are reflected in the changes that have occurred between fifth generation films' (particularly the earlier ones) and Jia Zhangke (and perhaps the sixth generation)'s respective means of representing history, the present, and space/time: namely China's "progress", or more accurately the march towards capitalism and China's economic "rise." Rather than making it easier for films to explore cultural themes, these changes have made it dramatically more difficult. In the past, in the Mao era (1950s – 1970s), the people (those classified as workers, peasants or soldiers, those clearly included in the "capital I") briefly eclipsed the "new person" of modern Chinese culture/literature (the delicate, sensitive, pale individual), and firmly occupied the place of the social and historical subject, occasionally using what would by Euro-American standards be considered "non-cinematic" or even "anti-cinematic" methods to change or settle once and for all the "subjectless sentence" that characterizes Chinese cinema.

However, in the new era, the fifth generation's resurrection of the May Fourth movement's Enlightenment critique also reinstates, in a seemingly logical fashion, the "subjectless" film. Not only are people no longer in control of history and narrative, they once again become prisoners of or sacrifices to society or their environments, and almost no people or roles exist who can occupy the visual position

of the camera and become the agent of the narrative. Consequently, the cinematic gaze on its human objects must forego the fiction of the hypothetical character on which it had depended, and must unexpectedly reveal itself for what it is, and it is precisely this internal fracturing or disappearance of the position of subject that renders difficult or impossible the “suturing” demanded by mainstream cinema. Consequently, examination of fifth generation films, particularly the earlier ones, is likely to reveal that, despite recurrent difficulties in filmic expression, as well as that of an agentive subject, each reconstruction is highly unique and rich.

In *Yellow Earth* for example, leaving aside cultural politics and aesthetic concerns, it is still not difficult to read it as a drama about different subject positions and intersubjectivity. The random placement and clashing of the film’s revolutionary songs and folk songs not only reflect “official practice” and “rural practice” respectively, but also link four subject positions that cannot be subsumed under the binary oppositions modern/traditional, revolutionary (reformist)/conservative: First, Gu Qing, an 8th army soldier sent to the countryside to study and record folk culture, an outsider representing both revolution/radical change and enlightenment/modernity. Second, Cuiqiao’s father, the expression of Yellow Earth or “Old China”, which becomes simultaneously the logic of the land and of nature – “This old yellow earth... how can you not respect it?” and the spokesman for traditional, conservative values. This position also occasionally provides glimpses of “the people”: still not remote, and still looked up to in reverence. Third, Cuiqiao: the female position, an oppressed position, also implying the “sons/daughters of May Fourth”: oppressed, repressed and exploited to the point of unreservedly welcoming and embracing the possibility of any kind of change, even if it does not promise a vision of liberation. Finally, Han Han: shared with Cuiqiao, a position culturally signifying the child’s generation, and of course the only position of “youth” in the May Fourth sense, a position of revolt and reform in terms of expectations and intentions.

Interestingly, because of this position, Han Han occupies the role of a modern, revolutionary “new person”/individual. He stands out within the film’s narrative due to his playing a more important role within the father/son order than Cuiqiao and due to his speechless or rather mute condition. Thus in the last scene, he is the one running against the feverish flow of the crowd toward Gu Qing, but ultimately he faces a blank and open horizon. For me, the positing of different types of subjectivity and the filmmaker’s identification with different subjects is not only an expression of the still vibrant socialism of the time or a historical memory of the Mao era. It is also an expression of the ritual cleansing undergone by the sent down youth [will need a footnote here about sent-down youth], and the emergence of a special emotional connection they felt towards the rural land, the village, and the peasants or people. It is a form of moral discipline and honesty shown by those who lived through the twentieth century, especially the socialist era, and who therefore have faced the reality or predicament of China’s past and present.

Perhaps compared to Gu Qing, the father of CuiQiao and CuiQiao herself, the director has invested Han Han with more autonomous imagination or subjective self-consciousness. Thus Han Han’s speechlessness or muteness signifies or reflects “China” and its realities and cultural constraints in the early eighties. As in the scripts of fourth and fifth generation directors in the late seventies/early eighties, a wandering, speechless or mute or delirious madman or fool becomes a necessary ornamental signifier in the filmic space. They serve as a noticeable, if obscure, vehicle for a latent historical consciousness, as well as a semi-conscious self-referentiality about the situation of intellectuals and artists in the new China. But as I have already discussed,

in early fifth generation films, when variously signifying characters are unable to take up the subject position of the director's narrative or viewpoint, or refuse/are refused this task; or when characters serve only as objects of the gaze, an extremely important discursive manifestation of subjectivity and the most powerful means of depicting the subject is actually the "undisguised" film camera. It is precisely this inability to achieve, or refusal of, the camera's suture, as well as the painstakingly unconventional compositions - particularly the abundance of long takes - that reveal the existence of the camera. The camera stands in for the plot and the human psychodrama for time - suppressed and swallowed by space, but trying to burst out of and tear open its closed, suffocating power. Perhaps it goes without saying, but in this instance the autonomous camera undoubtedly becomes or is acknowledged as the very self-same operator of the camera connected with the discursive context and occupying the place of the subject, what French auteur theory described as the auteur/director.

Jia Zhangke not only rejects the possibility of a love story, he also rejects the Three Gorges area's rich dramatic potential. He chooses to focus instead on the reservoir and the everyday life of China's poor. The film's truly moving reality fills this story of lost love with a permeating sense of despair, as if the two leads will never find who they're looking for, and this world, soon to be submerged, will erase their only remaining hopes. Faced with this unavoidable ending/closure/fate, the two characters, at least Han Sanming, has arrived too late. Early on, the address he has carefully preserved on a cigarette box has long since become nothing but a vaguely distinguishable smudge/blotch in the wide expanse of the reservoir, a blotch soon to be lost in the depths. Melancholic, nostalgic - perhaps it is Jia Zhangke himself who wishes to salvage something from this unprecedented "flood", to save some images, to preserve the tenuous connections between individual and society, the past and present, culture and the material world.

Perhaps as a result the movie has novelistic chapters: tobacco, alcohol, tea, candy. These chapter headings represent small luxuries of Chinese life, or traditional gifts that have smoothed the way for social relations and served to bind Chinese society. Yet in every section of *Still Life* these small catalysts nearly always fail to achieve communication, exchange, transmission or emotional bonding. Admittedly in the first section the old man at the inn accepts the cigarettes that Han Sanming gives him as a gift. But soon his inn will be reduced to rubble, and the owner will spend his remaining years alone and lonely at some transfer station or migrant camp holding the placard of his little inn. Xiao Ma, who asks Han Sanming for a cigarette and drinks with him, is a likeable and laughable youth who is thoroughly immersed in the fantasy world of Hong Kong films (like *A Better Tomorrow* or *The Bund* or one of Chow Yun-fat's "stylish gangster movies"). His plea to Han Sanming to "Be my brother, I'll cover you" is of course completely without value or meaning, something that is clear from the start. As the innkeeper says, "This kid has no future." Han Sanming later uses cigarettes as a burnt offering, lighting them one by one before the body of this child who has died a violent death.

The second section "alcohol" starts just after a gift of liquor has been rejected. At the end of the first section Han Sanming takes out two bottles of liquor from his hometown and offers them to Ma Laoda, the older brother of his ex-wife, addressing him as *ge* (brother). Ma's response is "I'm not your brother, and I don't want your liquor." The camera remains fixed on this awkward moment between Han Sanming and Ma Laoda, the former holding up the two bottles, until the scene gradually fades. Without question alcohol binds Sanming with Xiao Ma and with the demolition crew,

helping set the latter on the long journey they are fated to travel. Most profoundly, when Sanming brings up the dangers of coal mining, saying “When you go down in the morning, you never know if you’ll be coming back up at night”, the men can only keep drinking in silence. Is this a male expression of sadness? Camaraderie? Or just a helpless resignation to fate? What tobacco and alcohol together articulate are no longer social bonds, but rather perhaps a new, if vague, expression of class identity. Or at least a pledge between people facing their final destiny that some help will be offered in time of need, even if no pledge to share the burden is implied.

In the third chapter, with its multiple plotlines, tea provides the link to the female lead Shen Hong, who has come to the Three Gorges in search of her husband. Unlike Han Sanming, the sequence with Shen Hong starts with a close-up of an abandoned factory space, highlighting the (class) identity of the female lead and the different types of people they are looking for – one rural, one urban. At the same time we are given a glimpse of a different pace of life. Han Sanming lives in step with a slower rhythm shaped by village life, its traditions, kin ties and beliefs. He has come searching only after a sixteen-year absence. Shen Hong’s is an urban rhythm, fluid, drifting, unmoored. Two years of absence is cause for concern, and two years of waiting is already a very long time. An interesting detail: when an employee of the bankrupt factory is unable to open the rusted lock, Shen Hong picks up a hammer that happens to be lying around and quickly knocks off the lock. Tea, the common Chinese beverage, is the most ordinary thing one can offer guests. But Shen Hong’s tea is some she found in the abandoned locker of her husband Guo Bin. In the next scene Shen Hong, alone and lonely, opens the bag and pours an excessive amount of leaves into a cup just before the scene cuts. We don’t see her pouring her own water, and don’t know if she drinks this cup of bitter tea. But as the plot unfolds we realize that at this point she resolved to leave her husband.

Related to the theme of “tea”, in the plotline devoted to Shen Hong, is her continual and symbolic action of drinking bottled water. We see that every time she has an empty bottle she makes sure to fill it up. This action and this little prop are meant perhaps to intentionally signify “thirst”: emotional, physical, sexual. She is careful to keep a water bottle with her, even though it is not necessarily one worth keeping, but instead a consumer good meant to be used and discarded. This seems to be an allusion to Shen Hong’s marriage or love life, a portrait of the shifting, unstable modern world and present-day China. Everything is being mercilessly cast aside. The things you are trying to preserve may be things that were never meant to last in the first place.

It’s also in this section on tea, in a medium shot of Shen Hong, that a bizarre, even ugly building suddenly comes alight and rises into the air. (Actually, when we first see Shen Hong, she steps off the boat mid-frame in Fengjie; in the background a flying saucer shoots past above the horizon. In a parallel scene, Han Sanming also sees a flying saucer go by.) Everyone else in the scene is silent and indifferent. When everything in the ancient land of the reservoir district has become disposable, no one takes notice of whether a building is still standing or has disappeared. Such things have become commonplace.

An interesting, if “unconscious,” gender discrepancy comes out here. The film’s two major images of fantasy, the flying saucer and the crossing of the Yangze on a single steel cable, correspond to Shen Hong and Han Sanming respectively. But the image of the flying saucer shooting past occurs behind Shen Hong’s back. She remains completely unaware of it, signifying perhaps that she is completely immersed in her marital problems, not realizing, even though she is well educated from the petit

bourgeoisie, that her marriage is only a tiny part of a huge, crumbling canvas. The crossing of the Yangze on the cable, however, occurs in front of Han Sanming, in his field of vision, even though he is in the foreground, indicating perhaps that Han Sanming is fully aware of his social status and social fate. Though he has never joined the criminal underworld like “Xiao Ma”, the life of a manual laborer in today’s China and in the world is both filled with violence and expendable. Yet the tone is not one of sorrow, but rather of generosity. Here the “correct” representation of class and gender is once again shown to be paradoxical.

Then there is the film’s final section, candy: a luxury product during times of scarcity, and a superfluity in times of wealth. “Candy” can also be used in a somewhat old-fashioned way to refer to a sweet, intimate relationship. Yet at the beginning of this section, as Xiao Mage and his “boys” set out to “stamp out” some trouble, probably some kind of gang dispute, he gives Han Sanming a “Big White Rabbit” – a famous old/bygone brand of candy from Shanghai -- and arranges to drink with him when he returns. Xiao Mage also shares the candy with his mates, saying/asserting, in the style of a Hong Kong gangster film, “Brother Guo will make sure we’re taken care of”-- reflected in the “generous” treatment he ultimately receives when his body is discarded on a rubbish heap.

When Han Sanming orders food and liquor and awaits Xiao Mage, long past the time he is supposed to show up, the camera pans to reveal the diners at the next table and thus another absurd image: four actors in full Peking opera dress and makeup, who do not drink, eat or talk, but stay focused on their own handheld video games. Another post-modern intervention, both absurd and realistic: in this space the premodern and postmodern meet, like Xiao Mage’s immersion in the suave images of Wu Yusen’s action films [will need footnote]. But located in the everyday ranks of the proletariat as he is, Xiao Mage’s relationship with Han Sanming is not and could not be characterized by the type of heroic self-sacrifice one finds in the legends of Wu Yusen’s films. Rather they display the kind of modest mutual aid one finds among the bit players, such as the modest offerings and burial that Han Sanming gives to this young man who doesn’t even have a real name.

Ultimately, the original implications of “candy”, the care and intimacy, are expressed in the relationship between Han Sanming and his ex-wife. In a half collapsed building somewhere, Ma Yaomei gives a “Big White Rabbit” to Han Sanming, who unwraps it and takes a bite, and gives the rest to her. A bit of love and warmth, a couple kept apart for sixteen years and wanting to reunite, but still separated by 30,000 RMB. So Han Sanming decides to go down into the mines once again despite the dangers. This slight sweetness is thus mixed with too much bitterness. Jia Zhangke portrays a child on the river steamer who sings popular love songs, appearing individually with Han Sanming and then Shen Hong. Perhaps the feelings these couples had for each other once resembled these love songs but ultimately they bear little relationship to their personal lives. In this overwhelming and cruel reality, love is considered a luxury, even a myth.

After tobacco, alcohol, tea and candy lose their social, catalytic and communicative significance among the lower and marginalized classes, Jia Zhangke continues to use another catalyst, the only one with no connection to human emotions or people at all: money. Here, money is not just a number with financial meaning, it has a kind of material aspect: paper currency. For as far as the Chinese lower classes are concerned, they have “fallen off” the imperialist map of finance capital. Money/currency runs through the entire movie. When Han Sanming lands in Fengqie he is dragged into what was formerly something like a circus tent, where a magician

holding a stack of white paper strips recites a mantra that the “Information Age” is full of: “If you want to float on water, you need U.S. dollars.” He proceeds to turn them into Euros and RMB. Then claiming to own some sort of intellectual property rights to his trick, he requests or better to say extorts “tuition fees”.

Later, the local demolition crew asks Han Sanming if he saw Kuimen, a famous site in the Three Gorges, in the boat on the way over. When they are met with his blank look, they produce a RMB note decorated with the Kuimen scenery. In response Han Sanming produces a different note with a famous scene from his hometown, Hukou Falls on the Yellow River. Later we see Han Sanming holding one of the notes up to compare it with the wide, mist-covered Kuimen in front of him. Profoundly and ironically, as tourists flock to see these places for the last time, places that have been cherished and eulogized for millennia, Han Sanming, who has come drawn by love lost, has taken absolutely no notice of them. This small detail reveals the divergent interests of different classes. It is also in this detail that money comes to convey memory and homesickness. As Han Sanming prepares to take leave of his demolition team coworkers, his parting words are a promise that the image of Kuimen on the RMB will remind him of them. Yet in the end they don't part company, they all go with him to the Shanxi coal mines, motivated by the higher wages for which they may end up giving their lives.

This is the force motivating China's two hundred and forty million migrant laborers to leave their homes: job opportunities, ideally with higher salaries, even if the price to be paid is excessively dear (actually Jia Zhangke already explored the “cost” of life in his previous film *The World*). While the mysterious “woman from Xiamen” who seems to possess supernatural powers in the reservoir area undoubtedly derives her powers from money, or rather from the obscure connections between power and money/or: the camera obscura-like connections between power and money, Jia Zhangke dispassionately explores the interaction of money and emotion. In the face of money, the marriage of Shen Hong and Guo Bin proves to be as flimsy as paper, while Han Sanming's simple desire to be with family must be bought with money he doesn't have. The tragic backstory, whose gender formulation one could interrogate, is that Han Sanming originally bought Ma Yaomei as a wife from a human trafficker. Ma clearly could not abide such a commercial marriage, and so accepted her liberation by the police due to criminal kidnapping and human trafficking. But as a consequence of this liberation and her choice, she may end up being resold by her brother, for her own and perhaps her daughter's survival. Actually, the person he was originally looking for was his daughter who, out of the same motivations as her mother, has long since left for work in Shenzhen. Thus in *Still Life*, this story of an epic journey in search of love is not a momentary eruption full of dramatic tension but a dramatic exhaustion of emotion in the face of reality, particularly financial reality.

Ultimately what makes *Still Life* so appealing is something I keep coming back to, namely Jia Zhangke's postmodern “interpolations”: the sudden ascension of a UFO, the shadow of a man, in Han Sanming's field of vision, crossing the Yangtze on a cable. When the smooth, unhurried documentary style is already characterized by highly realistic absurdities, these radically absurd images become organizing elements that complete the picture of reality. In some sense, the camera “appropriates” the scenes documented from Han Sanming's point of view, often creating an even more absurd feel than typical postmodern embedding techniques: a group of middle-aged sex workers who appear, when called, on a half collapsed balcony offering their seductive poses, almost as if in parody of a brothel demeanor; a red and

white bag made of woven plastic, abandoned on a pile of broken rock, from one end of which protrudes the head of Xiao Mage, who has apparently been beaten and cruelly stuffed into the bag; the flustered and exhausted former union head meeting with angry workers in the decommissioned factory, while the remnants of pictures of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao hang above his head, serving as a historical reminder or as caustic irony; the painted opera troupe in the restaurant, immersed in their video games. Yet if we expand our view to include independent (underground) documentaries about the Three Gorges region (particularly those that have garnered international acclaim, such as *Before the Flood* and *Bing Ai*, (Bing's Love) we can see an interesting, recurring observation: that reality in contemporary China and the third world in general is foremost the reality of the spread of capitalism or primitive capitalism, in which money replaces tobacco, alcohol, tea, and candy as social cement and lubricant. But in the era of globalization, a third world artist can no longer, as Zhan Mingxin asserted many years ago, write like Sherwood Anderson, or write in a realistic, transparent style. Even though China and poorer third-world countries are still experiencing a Sherwood Anderson or Charles Dickens-style reality, this reality cannot be borne by a highly formalized, commercialized, conventionalized realism. That kind of Sherwood Anderson realism has already been declared illegitimate in the European present, and postmodernism the only available option. To loosely appropriate a construction used by Hardt and Negri in *Empire*, one of the fundamental characteristics of globalization is the disappearance or at least withering of the second world, and the ubiquity of both the first and third worlds. Interestingly, or tragically, faced with the globalized present, we are only able to use first or perhaps second world writing techniques and standards.

Another example: the experiences of independent documentary director Feng Yan making a film about the Three Gorges reveal other aspects of these difficulties. In 1988 Feng Yan went to Japan to study environmental economics. At the 1992 Yamagata film festival she happened upon the work of acclaimed documentary filmmaker Shinsuke Ogawa. Feng Yan's transformation into a documentary director has already become something of a legend in Chinese film circles. The majestic series of documentaries created by her mentor and idol Ogawa record, on a vast spatial and temporal scope, the struggles of Sanrizuka farmers against the construction of Narita International Airport. The production team's eleven years of participant documentation became an integral and prominent part of the movement itself. So in 1994 when the Three Gorges project started, Feng Yan took her camera and went to the reservoir site in the hope of recording this historic event (and perhaps, like Ogawa, becoming involved).

What she was unprepared for was that the inhabitants of the area were actually "looking forward to the building of the dam." The news that construction was about to begin sent the whole area into a joyful frenzy. As Feng Yan tells it, the primary reason for this was that the dream of taking advantage of the huge elevation drop – the waters of the Yangtze "falling from the skies" – to create energy has been at the core of China's century-long "modern dream." Therefore over nearly the past one hundred years of projecting and imagining, hardly anything has been built and hardly any investment made in the reservoir region. Thus the local residents were trapped in difficult and remediless natural and material living conditions, on the one hand, and were placing all their hopes in the project, on the other, trusting that once the dam went up they would finally have a share in the huge promise of modernization. I believe this situation to be one of the absurdities faced by countries late to undergo modernization: huge national construction plans can cause certain

pieces of land to be discarded or set aside, to the extent that they become nothing more than temporary resting places in the minds of local residents. When this enormously expensive and shockingly expansive project kept getting delayed for various reasons but never cancelled, the people in this area lived for generations in a state not unlike something out of *Waiting for Godot*. So as far as they were concerned, the Three Gorges project was, if not a gift from heaven, then at least the end of several generations of waiting. It is also a formative part of the reconstruction or self-remaking of modern Chinese culture in the wake of the tragic clash with Western imperialism in the late nineteenth century, representing infinite hopes for modernization, faith in historical progress, and yearnings for reform and change. According to the blueprints for westernization and modernization, villages, farms and rural life and culture are designated for the most part as historical traces destined to disappear (or be destroyed). Not only are they viewed as completely without positive value or meaning, they are given no structural position within the culture.

In Feng Yan's case even though the situation was the opposite of what she expected, she stayed anyway and began following the lives of several local women as a way of charting this "project" and the dramatic changes it caused. One of the women turned out to be an exception of sorts, a female villager named Zhang Bing'ai. Only she obstinately fought back. She refused to move and opposed the dam, out of love for her home and the soil. Feng Yan filmed for longer than Ogawa did, so one can imagine how much material she had to work with. But strangely enough, at the turn of the millennium, when she finally started editing the material, the only film she completed, and the one that ended up winning her international acclaim, was the story of this exception: *Bing Ai*.

What is thought provoking for me is that on the one hand the vast logic of global capitalism destroys everything in its path; yet on the other, oppositional cultures are not only weak and marginalized, they can only react to and position themselves in predictable opposition to their enemies, and are unable to create their own, constructivist, alternative logics. Thus they are unable to create their own structures within which to mobilize, share, and organize. Ogawa's landmark films were made during the exceedingly complex cultural environment of post-war Japan. They reflect the mutual interdependence of revolution and resistance in the global sixties. Yet with the sixties long gone and the post-Cold War period upon us, when those who suffer have been stripped of their moral value and hopes for the future, it would seem that there is no other choice but to rely on the models created by Ogawa and others in the sixties in order to understand the narrative logic and narrative significance of the current plight of society and the rapacious course of modernization.

If we move from *Bing Ai* to the work of director Li Yifan, including his documentary about the Three Gorges, *Before the Flood*, we come upon an even richer exploration of China's social and cultural ills. Li Yifan, who started his career with *Before the Flood*, was also responsible for the documentary *Village Archive*, in which he turned from the displacement caused by the Three Gorges dam to the subtle symbiosis between Christianity and local elections. In August 2008, as part of the joint exhibition *Microscopic Narration: Social Images by Zhang Xiaotao & Li Yifan* at Beijing's 798 Iberia Center for Contemporary Art, Li presented his first piece of installation art, entitled *Law Archive*. A steel-ribbed tunnel leads visitors toward the exhibition hall, which is largely enclosed in a steel mesh, turning it into a giant cage. Around the cage are densely arranged old personal document folders [need footnote on dang'an]: the files that renowned labor lawyer Zhou Litai accumulated working on behalf of injured workers in Shenzhen and Chongqing. Televisions suspended at

different heights inside the cage broadcast interviews with Zhou's clients who have been denied compensation.

On the opening day of the exhibit, several dozen bare-chested workers wearing black shorts and black masks (black fabric bags with three holes cut in them) squatted in rows on one side of the hall. Photographs of this piece exhibited later were pointedly named "The Abusers and the Abused." When they left all that remained were their shoes, perversely and somewhat savagely arranged in rows. Their "fashion sense" clearly marked them as what would be called in China "bandits" or "petty criminals." But spectators, reporters, and art critics all instantly identified them as "terrorists". In one corner of the hall, outside the fence, two people dressed as workers continually fed the contents of the document folders into a paper shredder. The shreds were then once again formed into sheets of paper, which appeared on a desk next to the shredder, where amputees (due to work related injuries) copied with traditional writing brushes the text of Rousseau's *Social Contract*. The finished copies were framed and hung alongside the entrance tunnel. In the words of the exhibition catalog, this is a kind of "micro narrative", Li Yifan's research in social "pathology".

Even setting aside for a moment the interactive relationship between Li Yifan's Law Archive and the other work on display in the main hall, contemporary artist Zhang Xiaotao's *Dense Fog*, Li's installation pieces stand on their own as both shocking and thought provoking. The visual statement created by the densely packed personal documents that refuse to disappear and the hooded workers, along with Li Yifan's photographs of them and the name he has given them, all indicate a clear conceptual framework: exploitation, violence, hardship, and how they inevitably lead to the brewing violence and risks taken by people who feel they have no other choice. Here "The Abusers and the Abused" is obviously not invoking the concept of "repression" as used in psychology and psychoanalysis. Rather it subtly evokes oppression and resistance (or is it resistance and oppression?), The unhesitating identification of "terrorists" unexpectedly drags a Chinese matter into the Americanmade post 9/11 world of anti-terrorist ideology, raising new questions: What precisely are the causes and processes that lead to terrorist attacks or movements? Could it be that behind appalling acts of terrorism lies a history of violence and oppression? Aside from retribution through terrorism, do the oppressed and exploited have any other option? As for the exhibition as a whole: How do the elements outside the fence and to the side – the paper shredder, recycled paper and the workers copying *The Social Contract* – relate to and enter into dialog with the "scenery" inside the cage? Li Yifan explains, "I'm not trying to shock or frighten people, and I'm not trying to simply deconstruct society; I'm trying to create a new awareness of lower class society and new methods for examining contemporary social issues." But is Rousseau's social contract to be considered a symptom or a solution? If it's not a "new method" for "creating awareness" of or "discussing" the lower classes or modern society, then exactly where in these installations/texts are these methods (potentially) to be found?

Returning to Jia Zhangke as the director of the "art film" *Still Life*, I would suggest that the postmodern *Still Life* can be regarded as or read as a "national fable"; while the live performance of "The Abusers and the Abused" and the modeling and naming of terrorists combined with Rousseau's *Social Contract* grant this "micro narrative" a strikingly "macroscopic" or broad significance. So when Jia Zhangke calls his piece *Still Life*, he captures and records a series of images in time. He touches time and freezes time, the most prominent image being the various watches that Wang Dongming/Wang Hongwei has hanging beside his end table – a spatial

image of time. This, despite that in the film, this frozen “scenery,” longingly gazed at, is about to be destroyed in the hurricane of modernity. The implications of the term “*Still Life*” allow Jia Zhangke to avoid having to depict progress, the past and the future.

But perhaps due to the restrictions of the medium in installation art, or perhaps due to Li Yifan’s own personal artistic choice, *Law Archive* opens a window on the future; and the role of the elements “outside” the cage is surely to suggest a solution. But is the solution to destroy and rebuild? Or establish the social contract? If the former, does this point to “revolution”? If the latter, then hopes are pinned to “reform” and “rule of law”. The latter, which is the dominant consensus within the Chinese intellectual community, the basis of its knowledge and discourse, is the logic of the post-Cold War victors: that capitalism is superior to and higher than socialism. In China, a (post) socialist country, comprehensive capitalist development - particularly democratic governance and implementation of the rule of law - is seen as an effective solution, or even the only solution. What this fails to acknowledge is that the problems China faced at the turn of the century, particularly the problems with rural workers, are linked to the historical debts of socialism (the urban/rural dichotomy created by the household registration system); and clearly this is a problem related to the global spread of capitalism. Thus spreading or strengthening capitalism is not only trying to cure the wound using the weapon that made it. It is an old capitalist cure for a new global malady; and moreover, this old cure is one of the causes of the new disease.

Linking these things once again to the Three Gorges project - a strange case of advance and retreat, construction and demolition - and to *Still Life* and *Before the Flood*, what comes out is not just a matter of art or the difficulties of artistic expression, but the difficulties faced by China and by the world in the era of globalization. *Still Life* won Jia Zhangke the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, once again confirming his international status as an “auteur”. But this does not change the marginalized status of critical or oppositional culture in the era of globalization. And it cannot respond to, not to mention solve, the urgent question of whether or not culture can provide an alternate path.