

SURFACE, WORK AND THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE:

A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF THREE JIA ZHANGKE

DOCUMENTARIES

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ANALYSIS

“...Suddenly the question are the words I’ve just said,
so awkwardly and blindly... part of a greater play
continuing through me... a worker in the world theatre.”

– *La Chinoise*

Introduction to concepts and theories. In Jia Zhangke’s debut feature film *Xiao Wu* (*Pickpocket*), the titular protagonist returns to his hometown to find both the physical and emotional terrain impenetrably altered. One of the only ways of reconnecting with an old friend, who, once a pickpocket like Xiao Wu, and now reinventing himself as a businessman, is to acknowledge a wall outside of their childhood homes used to mark their aging process. By touching the wall (both in isolation from each other) the characters of the film are literally encountering a surface of their memory. As the town’s crumbling infrastructure hints at impending redevelopment and transformation, the surface of this wall represents the last evidence of a shared space between two friends unable to find connection in modernity. It is a space of memory—proof of the constancy of a changing China and, more gloomily, the further inevitability that it someday will be torn down. Throughout his filmography, Jia represents the physical surfaces of a transforming national project as a way of addressing individual perspectives on reality.

To approach the cinema of Jia Zhangke is to encounter these surfaces that physically provide evidence of the complex transience of modern life. To interpret each shot, frame or gesture within a film is to interpret specific moments in space, time and the emotional identification that conflates them (Qi, 2014). Graced with the emotional power of realism and societal critique, these “creations of space and time” represent a certain significance rarely seen in contemporary cinema. Jia accomplishes this by granting the spectator access (albeit, a distant, minimalist access) to individual characters who transmit perspective on the world.

I argue that the common denominator between each of the characters in Jia’s films can be understood as each person’s relative classification as *workers*. Most of these workers are literal workers in the sense that they are employed by the state or, say, a factory or construction company. Such a strict definition is not always applicable, however. Rather, *worker* here I am referring to someone who operates within spaces of modernity, and is therefore, in a country with a strong nationalist program like China, subject to the machinations of the macro-economic and political system. In this way, all of China can be seen as a production stage, and all of its economic subjects as workers in the national theatre.

The worlds represented in Jia’s films are specific Chinese moments of reality, fragments of space and time with contemporary significance that, like the walls constantly being destroyed and rebuilt, are created with the intention for use. To “use” Jia’s films is to assume new perspectives on China’s shifting collective project and how that in turn effects the perspective of the individual spectator. Transfixed with China’s physical and civic transformation, Jia represents his country as a giant production of economy - a stage constantly getting destroyed and reset for global market interaction, rendering its subjects often displaced from work, community or their entire home-space. By engaging directly with human subjects to provide

perspective for the spectator, Jia's films can be seen as texts that track the dislocation between the individual and the collective in a post-Maoist Chinese culture that is beginning to accept and contribute to the global economy (Yingjin, 2010). Like most of the characters (or subjects) in his films who tell of their personal histories as "constructors" (often literal laborers or sometimes performers or artistic, and therefore, "constructors" of worlds) of some kind, Jia acknowledges his own contribution in constructing Chinese realities. His vision is from one of the many workers in the national production—another surface in the modern development plan.

As a spectator of Jia's films, one *experiences* before knowing what exactly is happening. Such as it is for a director who privileges the provisional frame and mood evocation prior to offering clear contents or coercing narrative clarity (Qi, 2014). In other words, the spectator is shown a series of frames within a film with the intent of presenting various ideas on Chinese realities as opposed to transferring pure knowledge from artist to spectator. This method of distancing the spectator from identification has the tendency to create rather oblique experiences when watching Jia's films. His characters are alienated from their immediate environments and portrayed with a distance, making it difficult for spectators to create identification with them. Time moves like a great beast, slowly, but powerfully; and often, the films depict the erasure of history. Surfaces crumble, new ideologies arise, ready to rebuild.

So vast, complex and unfamiliar are these "creations of space and time" that Jia's films should defy any reductive readings. This research is being limited to a textual analysis, therefore, of three of his documentaries that represent the themes of individual workers and their contributions and perspectives of the production of space within China's post-Maoist global market emergence in significantly distinct ways. The three films are *Dong* (2006), *24 City* (2008) and *I Wish I Knew* (2010). Within these films, the research will be isolating various thematic and

technical elements that pertain to the claim that Jia's films are studies of individuals acting as workers in spaces produced by macro-economic controls. The "surfaces" represent fragments of change: old walls come down, new walls are constructed, etc. All of China is a production set preparing for the event of global capitalism. Even in documentary, Jia recognizes the contrivances of reality. Thus, documentary subjects become actors and actors become documentary subjects. All workers, whether laborer or artist, become stagehands.

Through a variety of complex and subtle self-reflexive techniques, the "surfaces" of these films reflect the changing physicality of the Chinese economic and social landscapes perceived through the people local to the films' settings. In *Dong*, a painter attempts to configure a Yangtze River landscape near the prospective site of the Three Gorges Dam project by painting a tableau of local male workers in its foreground. In *I Wish I Knew*, the histories of Shanghai are explored using the city's famed cinematic past as a way to represent the city as a readymade for the 21st Century global market sphere. And in *24 City*, Jia hones in on a development replacement project converting a state-run factory into luxury condominiums by mixing in elements of fiction into the documentary.

In summary, this research will be examining the following elements in three Jia Zhangke documentaries:

- (1) *workers as individual actors of their socioeconomic condition*
- (2) *the production of space*
- (3) *surfaces within these spaces*

For further clarity, it will offer definitions for the key terms of the analysis.

Worker. Any individual agent contributing to the constructed collective notion of what China looks like from a local perspective. This could be a factory worker in *24 City*, the painter in *Dong* who reappropriates the shifting Chinese landscape into his own vision, or even Jia himself, as a constructor of worlds shown through his films.

Space. The local, physical setting specific to each film, scenario or frame. For example, the space of *24 City* is the entire factory campus, but for each character's interview, a new local space arises with its own conditions and essence. In other words, space can become as local as the frame allows, but is never of its own singular "justitselfness"; rather, all characteristics of "local" space are conditioned by the machinations of the macro. When one says the "production of space," this is precisely the process that is meant.

Surface. This can be understood here in two ways: as a literal surface of, say, a wall or concrete walkway, i.e. something physically constructed for an intended use; and, also, as something constructed but more invisible, something artificial and representative, something that locks into the imagination of the user and changes its perspective on things. For Jia, cinema is a surface.

In order to fully analyze the texts for the elements mentioned above, this research will also draw from three areas of research to frame its analysis: semiotics, montage, and a cultural analysis of China's historical relationship to polylocality and spaces of transformation.

Semiotics is a method for understanding how to see and gauge meaning within texts. It is, in other words, an interpretative strategy for finding symbolic meaning in objects. It is the key towards recognizing Jia as a self-reflexive filmmaker: one who acknowledges his own filmmaking as complicit in the critique he formulates within them. In the meaning-making process of semiotics, there is the interpreter of the object, the object under interpretation, and the concluding interpretation of that spectator-object relationship (Tsang, 2013). Semiotics, above all, is about making meaning. Cinema, then, as it is in the business of images, can be understood as a laboratory for semiotic interpretation. Tsang (2013) develops a cinematic triad of semiotics, consisting of *representamen*, *object*, and *interpretant*, that together become "unifying terms" with which we can interpret a film with (p. 11). In the context of Jia's films, this research refers to these *objects* of semiotic interpretation as "surfaces." As superficial entities endowed with interpretative qualities, *object* and *surface* are interchangeable concepts with only a nominal difference. The wall Xiao Wu and his friend both encounter in *Xiao Wu (Pickpocket)* as a space

of memory is a good example of how a surface becomes representative when interpretation is applied to it. In this case, the wall is not just a piece of civic infrastructure but a symbol of loss and change.

In interviews, Jia has claimed a desire to treat his films as surfaces themselves (Qi, 2014). Rather than dive into the subjectivity of things, and thus, risk enforcing identification, he prefers his films to dwell on the objective surface of things, becoming a surface itself in the process. Therefore, we can further view the screen with which we view his films on as a surface-object (Qi, 2014). It is the domain of the *interpretant*, i.e. a spectator, to recognize this surface and create meaning from it.

Montage is a theory of cinema introduced by pioneering Soviet filmmakers in the 1920's that views cinema as a material means of using art as a political act (Bordwell, 2005). It is admittedly difficult to associate Jia with a strict Eisensteinian classification of montage. Nonetheless, at the heart of Jia's films remain a cinematic design derived from the nature of conflict and contradiction essential to montage theory. While it is true there is an inherent link between montage and Marxist ways of thought, it is simultaneously true that elements of both can be used against each other. If the Soviet Union emphatically valued the collective over the individual, and montage instituted this creed into its own value system of art in general, then Zhangke, it can be said, pits China's institutional collectivism against an emerging individual consciousness. The films as a result are concerned equally with both ideas and people, the collective and the individual. The depth to which Jia explores the individual and collective realms is what defines his conception of montage. In other words, there is a localized approach to montage in each of the films under analysis.

Finally, a brief but crucial cultural analysis of modernized China's relationship to space, scale and its representation in cinema is necessary in order that we gain a perspective on a place with a complex social and historical identity. Jia's films unconsciously but specifically exist within this space and, without a general analysis, many of the cultural references in the films would go undetected and thus, much of the films interpretative possibilities lost. Yingjin (2010) defines the historical Chinese condition by focusing on a single conflict: (1) the production of space and scale by an authoritarian position and (2) the polylocality of China's cultural landscape. This is an important notion towards understanding the complexities of China's post-Maoist spatial and cultural orientations and how they have affected one another through China's global, capitalist and population booms in the late 20th Century. The cinema of Jia Zhangke engages in this very battle by becoming itself a space where this conflict is dramatized. By framing the technical design of three of his documentaries with montage and semiotic interpretation theory, this paper concludes that the critical foci of Jia's films—local individuals acting within macro-produced spaces—is also the very story of modern China itself.

Dong (2006) and the artist as a worker of perspective

Dong (2006), a documentary made as a thematic companion to the feature film *Still Life* (2006), is centered on Fengjie, a small industrial town off the Yangtze River close to the proposed site of the Three Gorges Dam. Much of the town, due to its proximity to the construction site will be flooded, and thus, its inhabitants forcibly removed. What remains of the town is an eerie mix of construction laborers, hangers on and businessmen. Fengjie is a ghost town in the works. Though *Still Life* has become acclaimed in the international critical consciousness, *Dong* remains the relatively obscure shadow to its feature-length, more

“produced” and costlier counterpart. Nonetheless, due to its minimal, lo-fi digital aesthetic, its ambitious humanism and mix of *vérité* and staged elements, *Dong* is a crucial work in understanding the many critical angles Jia’s aesthetics can embody.

The film is concerned with a painter who is constructing a massive tableau of male laborers from Fengjie posing in the foreground of Three Gorges Dam landscape. If all of China is a production, then the town of Fengjie is a set actively being torn down for the construction of a new one. Surfaces reflect everywhere in this production. The whole town is in rubble. Walls have crumbled. The dam, as much a symbol of high hubris and progress as displacement and ruin, is waiting backstage to be pulled out for the next scene. Self-consciously, Jia constructs his own perspective on the situation by making the focus of *Dong* about a painter who is a clear stand in for himself. Amidst this stage in rubble and ruin, this artist arrives in the space with the intent of using the surface of a canvas to project his own interpretation of the scenario. In other words, this local space of Fengjie, utterly altered by a massive state development plan, is reconstituted into the dynamic vision of an artist.

This perspective can be understood in the very first frame of the film. Before any production credits or titles, we see the painter Liu Xuedong (from here on out, the titular “Dong”) from behind and the waist up gazing out onto the huge vista of the Yangtze River valley (Fig. 1.1). Mountains stretch upward on either side of the raging river. The landscape is massive, wild and overwhelming. Yet, the artist, jutting through the lower left-hand side of the frame’s foreground, throws all potential scale out of proportion. He towers over the whole valley, gathering perspective. This is the prospective site of The Three Gorges Dam and Dong is above it all hovering high in space like a god. Here we can identify the main conflict in Jia’s films

illustrated in a single frame: the complicated interplay between the individual's perspective and the macro-collective design. Yet the key distinction in *Dong* is this godliness of the artist. For Jia, the artist represents a unique characteristic of the Chinese worker-subject. Empowered with the ability to construct worlds (and thus, perspective and space), the artist is a worker represented as a worthy foe to the state's macro-production of reality.

Soon, however, the perspective returns to the human scale as the great expanse of nature shifts to the interior of a boat entering Fengjie (Fig. 1.2). The space is crowded with passengers and conversation as an automated authorial voice on the intercom makes announcements. Dong, on his cell phone, gazes once more into the approaching space. In the next shot, we find him on land, wandering through piles of rubble, the camera carefully panning with him horizontally (Fig. 1.3). He inspects the territory, gazes off into space and, crouching down, balances a few pieces of rubble in his hands. This is the artist in preparation. Freed from the temporal and physical constraints of wage labor, the work of the artist is primarily one of exploring a space and developing individual perspective on it. Dong wanders coolly through the scene he eventually aims to appropriate onto the canvas, hands in pockets, engaged in the realms of his mind.

Emerging from these three opening scenarios, we can locate Jia's corresponding ideas of space in contemporary China: natural space (the river valley soon to be replaced by the dam); controlled space of economy (the boat entering Fengjie); and, the discarded spaces built and left behind by human construction (the ruinous piles of rubble). For Jia, the artist has the leisure to traverse all three, wide-eyed and interested in everything.

His work is not purely of intellectual leisure, however. Soon Dong is shown hard at work on his painting, collaborating with both people and tools to construct a physical representation of

space. By observing him paint, the spectator begins to understand space from the perspective of Dong. He engages us in interview, confiding that he needs “to see [his] subjects at a distance” in order to “paint each stroke rationally” (Fig. 1.4). Here again, Dong can be seen as a stand-in for evangelizing Jia’s own conception of cinema, in which he employs a similar discipline of distance and objectivity. In Jia’s films, alienation is omnipresent. By often placing great distance between his subjects, the background, and the camera, it becomes difficult to foster identification between the spectator and the characters in the film (Qi, 2014). Like the figures in the film, a spectator can feel alienated watching a Jia film due to this lack of identifiable entryways. But through a process of waiting, watching and dwelling on the interpretive qualities of the film’s surfaces, it becomes possible to engage with the perspective of the film as a totality (Qi, 2014). The screen is this *object of signification* that allows us to interpret meaning into the work.

For Jia, this is the urgent work of the artist—to use the medium as a physical surface with which the spectator can interact with. Rather than providing clear contents of narration or information which would allow us as spectators to identify with the charters of the political facts of the situation, Jia instead provides us with a frame of perspective, a surface, to interact with. His films then, can be seen on an equal plane as any of the other surfaces depicted within them - the crumbling wall, the piece of stone in a pile of rubble - all evidence of a constantly shifting production of space. As workers in this world, all of us – character, subject, artist, spectator—are left with a sense of alienation from our labor, and must create new perspectives if we are to survive.

Such are the underlying thematic intents to *Dong*. But what of the technical labor of Jia himself? How does he communicate these ideas? What is he physically doing in the editing room to evoke such perplexing ideas? Jia’s tendency to blend documentary and fiction can be traced

back to original ideas in montage theory as a confrontation between reality and narrative (Veg, 2007). This notion further complements (and complicates) Jia's vision of China as a giant production of space as the distinction between what is "real" becomes harder to discern, and ultimately, something negotiable.

Made in companion with his feature film *Still Life*, Jia interestingly incorporates elements of both fiction and reality into *Dong*. For example, we may recognize an actor from *Still Life*, Han Sanming, mixed into the group of male laborers modeling for Dong's painting. By calling into question the borders between fiction and documentary, Jia is forcing us to think twice on the exclusivity of both, not just in films, but in everyday life. Semblances of reality are often incorporated into the realms of fiction. But can fictional elements be incorporated into reality? By using Han Sangmin as the vessel with which to pose this type of question, Jia has appropriated him from fictional subject in *Still Life* to documentary object in the artist's spatial representation of Fengjie in *Dong* (Fig. 1.5). In Jia's China, where the fate of a space like Fengjie is dictated by the machinations of the state, the individual's reality is constructed outside the realm of nature.

Could this play between fiction and reality be a variation of Eisenstein's (1949) ideal cinematic synthesis of "Art and Industry" (p. 46). That by blurring the lines between what is "staged" and what is "real," Jia is ultimately affirming a material analysis of history and advocating for a kind of working class consciousness? I would argue yes, albeit in a slightly deterred manner. In some senses, Jia exemplifies a variation of montage that exists within the frame based on the emotional resonance and tone of the piece, as well as exploring notions of conflict between individual and state, reality and fiction, etc. (Eisenstein, 1949). In other words, there is a kind of thematic montage that is critical of the material organization of modernity

while it simultaneously acknowledges its contribution to it. But the organization of the film, the cutting and movement of the camera, remain based on emotional instinct rather than “mathematical units of measure” (p. 75). Thus, as we watch his films and attempt to discern the various questions that arise – what’s real? what’s fiction? why does this matter? what could it mean?—we are allowed to construct our own synthesized conclusions.



Dong (2006) dir. Jia Zhangke

Fig. 1.1. The opening shot of *Dong*. The artist gathering perspective in natural space.



Dong (2006) dir. Jia Zhangke.

Fig.1.2 The second sequence in *Dong*. The artist in a controlled space of economy.



Dong

(2006) dir. Jia Zhangke.

Fig. 1.3. The third sequence of *Dong*. The artist strolling through mountains of society's discarded space.



Dong (2006) dir. Jia Zhangke.

Fig. 1.4. The artist Dong explaining his philosophy on perspective and representation can be understood as a stand-in for Jia's beliefs of the cinema.



Dong (2006) dir. Jia Zhangke.

Fig. 1.5. Three planes of surface: the camera-surface; the canvas-surface; and the documentary object-surface.

24 City and the space of history. This specific variation of montage which relies on a conflict between fact and fiction, the individual-collective disjunction, and the objective interpretation of the spectator, reaches new heights in Jia's mammoth hybrid documentary *24 City (2008)*. It is a film that asks one question: as the macro-production of space shifts its historical mise en scène from communism to capitalism, how do individual subjects examine their own agency and futility as workers in the world theatre? Jia attempts to answer this not by being a journalist but by being an inventor, architect and constructor of realities. By implicating his film into the lived conflict of deciphering the limits of reality within produced spaces, Jia creates a massively complex film that repurposes the official historical perspective of the state to that of the worker-individual.

With more urgency and objectivity than *Dong*, *24 City* investigates the conflict between the individual and the state collective will by focusing on the workers of a state-run factory that is redeveloping into a luxury condominium complex. Factory 420 was a state-run manufacturing campus of military aircraft vessels that employed and housed hundreds of thousands of workers and their families. As the state's global role as a communist power weakened, so did the manufacturing output of the factory. In the 1970's it was downsized to a producer of cheap goods, and finally, in 2006 as the state definitively ceded to the fate of globalized capitalism, sold to a private company specializing in luxury housing (Shu-chin, 2011).

By weaving together this history through a spread of stories, Jia gives precedence to the toll that China's macro-economic shifts have inflicted on the individual worker. The spectator, however, lacks nearly any reference to distinguish whether these histories are "fact" or "fiction" amid this meandering narrative. Without the enigmatic perspective of the artist-worker of *Dong*, Jia's thesis in *24 City* retreats into the oft-dispirited sense of futility of the worker, a subject

displaced at the whim of state machinations. Thus, this delirium experienced in deciphering between “reality” and “the stage” is given evidence through the individual consciousness of workers. Whether or not these stories are borne from reality or a script is intentionally left unclear. After all, if the whole world is a stage, Jia seems to be asking, what’s the difference?

From the first shot of *24 City*, the audience is confronted with a huge disconnect in scale between space and the human subjects who navigate it. The frame consists of a mass of workers trudging through a factory’s entrance gate so massive it dwarfs the anonymous bodies funneling through it (Fig. 2.1). Watching this action, we are reminded of the Lumière film *La sortie des usines Lumière* (1895) (*Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*) and the beginning of cinema itself. Through this reference, Jia is expressing solidarity with documentary cinema’s singular ability to depict the conditions of humanity. He is also accomplishing something more subliminal. By showing the inverse of the Lumière film – workers not exiting their factory but entering it—he reveals the purpose of his film: to depict the lives of workers not as free agents of public spaces but as subjects to the state labor system. This is not the liberating gestures of workers trotting into the public sphere as the Lumières depicted. It is a representation of humanity as an entity shaped by the system it is coerced to act within. By organizing space as both historic and cinematic, Jia is introducing a film with the intention to subvert and, at times reverse, the expectation of what that word documentary, and its history, is supposed to mean.

From the godly perspective of the factory gates, the film then enters the workspace as the credits roll over sentimental music. As we watch workers weld, scrape and bang fiery metal instruments, the practical components of the film’s production are listed plainly in text. Jia is acknowledging the film as a product of labor. It is a kind of initiation into the space of the film, a

way of announcing both the solidarity and complicity with the contemporary production of spatialized labor.

This economy of labor is not only a matter of documentary reality, however. It is also a production of theatre. In the following sequence, the workers are again corralled into a space, a massive auditorium where the redevelopment program is announced from a stage under a large banner reading “CEREMONY FOR TRANSFER OF LAND.” Here workers can be seen not only as a collective force subjected to the situation of socioeconomic policy, but also, as they are willed into a rehearsed, commemorative song and cheer, participants in it. The film then cuts harshly to an isolated corridor where a lone figure trots up a staircase. The entire dislocation between the individual and the collective, the theatrics of economy and the isolation of reality, is portrayed here in a matter of seconds. In *24 City*, Jia is revealing his purpose within documentary cinema: to first track the working masses into their spaces of employment, and then, to chase the lone figure on the staircase and tell its story. Only by exploring the individual’s subjectivity in relation to the enforced collective will can the production of space be acutely critiqued. That this subjectivity necessarily includes fictional elements is the entire point in portraying the experiences of individual lives that are structured by forces beyond their control. A thesis of *24 City* could be summed up with the following mantra: sometimes only fiction can represent reality.

There are three individual narratives in *24 City* that illustrate the ambiguities of Jia’s cinematic space. They can be understood as dialectical games between reality and fiction and are used to critique the socioeconomic space produced by the state but experienced by workers. We can interpret these themes utilizing methodologies of montage theory and semiotics.

One of these narratives is an interview with Secretary Guan, former head of security of Factory 420 and a secretary in the Communist Party. He is situated in the seats of the auditorium (now, largely empty), his back to the stage where, alarmingly, two men are playing badminton under a large military propaganda poster. As Guan recounts his days of leadership in the party, the scenario grows in absurdity and we begin to recognize that more than just a game of badminton is being waged. Both the physical competition of the players and the empty rhetorical volleys of Guan are the back-and-forth gestures of sport. Politics and the spectacle conflate into a single display of mass-produced ideology.

This dynamic between political theatre performed on and off the stage illustrate the two planes of power examined in Jia's cinema. One is of the obvious and recognizable variety wherein fiction is clearly distinguished from reality through the signifier of the stage. This is the space of paid performance and entertainment where an audience is expected to understand the indestructability of the "fourth wall." The badminton players exemplify this realm. But there is an invisible kind of theatre being waged off-stage as well, performed by the likes of Guan and other high-ranking officials. It is characterized by echoing state-enforced ideology in an attempt to monopolize history. By including Guan's oral history, Jia is both recognizing official government narratives of the past and simultaneously exposing it through the constructed cinematic spatial orientation. As Shu-chin (2011) points out, one of Jia's firm beliefs concerning Chinese history is the urgency to de-monopolize the official historical narrative set in place by the government. By slyly constructing a *mise en scène* that depicts a theatricalism performed on and off the stage, Jia is subliminally addressing this concern and effectively subverting a space to which ordinary people have been denied historical access to.

After literally constructing and deconstructing the historical stage in one scene, *24 City* transfers entirely to the perspectives of the factory workers past and present, giving precedence to their oral histories through interviews. It is difficult (and especially, I would wager for foreign viewers unfamiliar with Chinese film industry) to discern which segments use actors and which use the real workers of Factory 420. As was mentioned earlier, this oblique, ambiguous distinction must be understood as part of the point in addressing the lived spaces of production in China. Jia purposely arranges the interviews so both actor and worker are situated in similar arrangements: shot in medium frame and sitting down at an equal distance from the camera. Therefore, an equal emphasis is placed on fiction and reality. In other words, whether we are watching a professional actor or a documentary subject is a question that precedes the ability of the cinematic image to truthfully communicate reality (Shu-Chin, 2010).

One of these interviews is of a woman named Hou Lijun who, sitting alone in a bus marauding through the streets at night, recounts her tales of misfortune as a repairperson in Factory 420. Forced to leave her family for work, she experiences isolation, and eventually, in an ironic twist, after the diminishing production of Factory 420, loses the job she relocated to get. As tears fall from Hou Lijun's face, Jia occasionally cuts to seconds of a black screen before returning to the bus again. Her final words, "If you have something to do, you age more slowly," are presented in quotes as the frame fades into a black screen, her name boldly attributed in text. Hou Lijun's lonesome journey is reflected through the constructed *mise en scène* of the cinematic space: a bus with no other passengers, visible driver or apparent destination accentuates the isolating experience of the Chinese worker-subject. Jia is attempting to reconstruct a space which gives definition and, though somber in tone, a reclamation of spatial orientation to the ordinary worker. And by displaying Hou Lijun's final words as a kind of

proverbial mantra, Jia elevates the ordinary to the extraordinary, restructuring the intentions of “official” historical narratives.

Though it is dangerous to equate Marxism with its various 20th century ideological experiments, there is nonetheless a clear disdain and ironic perspective in Jia’s films for the Maoist programs implemented under the communist banner. Certainly, he refuses to engage in the idealism of early Soviet films that expressed a harmony between worker and machine through experiments with montage. An entire century of countless wars, famines and shifting global paradigms offers Jia the means to distance his political and cinematic beliefs away from the strict accordance of materialism. Where Vertov’s *Man With a Movie Camera* (1920) views man as one independent fragment connected by machine to the larger organic web of social, economic and political relations, Jia prefers to provide distance between the acceleration of this mindset and the individuals at the behest of it (Shu-chin, 2011). In other words, if Jia is ultimately constructing political critiques in his films, he is consistently examining the system from the perspective of individuals like Hou Lijun, thus relocating the political programs from a collective emphasis to an individual one. Through concerns with power, politics and history, Jia is ultimately expressing his care for the people made anonymous through a coercion of collective participation.

Despite this resilience against pure cinematic materialism, the goals of dialectical montage as a cinematic tool—to express conflict and synthesis between “Art and Industry”—remain coded into the themes of Jia’s films (Eisenstein, 1949). Can there, be, therefore, a form of montage that is in conflict with itself? *A montage of montage and anti-montage*? It may sound verbose, but there is a logic at work here applicable to Jia’s process, most pertinently in his exploration of the “fictive” and “real” spaces of contemporary experience. The development of

this theme is what constitutes Jia as a filmmaker interested in both the material and human elements of society, experimenting thematically in both montage and (neo)realism.

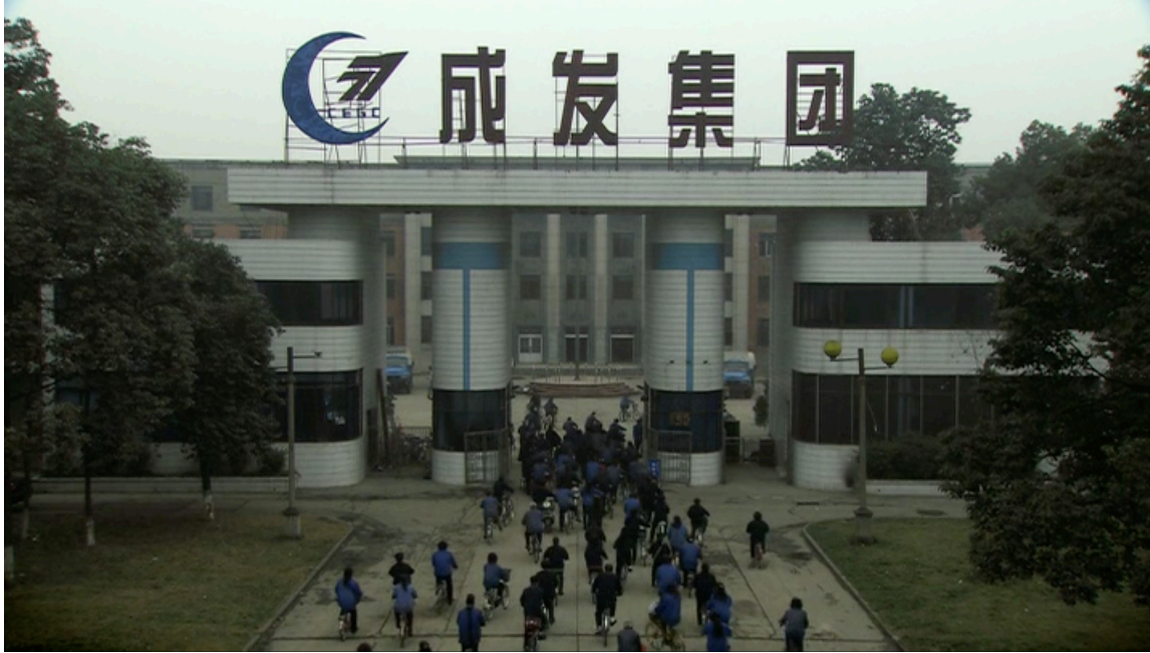
This technique of using montage-within-the-frame can be illustrated with one stunning shot from *24 City*. The camera begins low, showing a long exterior wall decorated with advertisements for a luxury living condominium, promising a green paradise in the middle of the industrial city. The camera then fluidly cranes up and over the wall and into the massive construction pit obscured by the façade, thus providing direct evidence of the government's great lie. Tweedie (2013) correctly points out that in this shot, Jia depicts China's entire historical transition in one camera movement. Part of the effectiveness of this shot is its highly orchestrated but dedicatedly documentary (i.e. real) connotation. By placing the façade and the obscured within one continuous shot, Jia is showing the spectator two narratives of modern Chinese reality. One is the thing of billboards, of false promises; the other is the pit of reality and loss, but also of unknown futures—a set in waiting.

Jia's incorporation of fictional elements in *24 City* reaches its apex of layered allusion and critique during the interview with the woman known in the film known as Little Flower. For domestic Chinese viewers the fictional elements of this segment are distributed in two ways. First, Chinese audiences will doubtlessly recognize the famous actress Joan Chen (Western audiences may too—Chen played the sultry sawmill heiress Josie Packard in *Twin Peaks*) in the role of Little Flower, and that secondly, Chen is playing a character given the nickname Little Flower for her resemblance to the titular character (who was played by the real Chen) in the classic Chinese melodrama of the same name from 1979 (Shu-chin, 2011). It is a sly, multi-layered mechanism for reminding spectators of the fluidity between the real and the representational in spaces constructed through ideology.

Even without being privy to these local in-jokes, the interview with Little Flower (Fig. 2.2) demonstrates with remarkable subtlety Jia's methods of critique. Little Flower's (hi)story is a virtual lost and found, at first prized for her resemblance to a beauty of the screen only to find the magic fade away. Little Flower's virtual connection to a film character of collective admiration, national pride and ideal female beauty has an inverse effect on the Little Flower who went to work in Factory 420 as a twenty-year old young woman. She experiences many admirers and boyfriends but true love is destined to escape her. When Jia records her history, she is middle-aged and single, navigating alone the labyrinth of modern "produced" space.

Within this scene, we find a human subject caught between her authentic self and a virtual representation of it that eventually takes control of her life. The fact that the film *Little Flower* is commonly known as one of many state-produced propaganda films is testament to understanding *24 City* as Jia's attempt to reclaim the representational back to the real. That he chooses to accomplish this by entirely fabricating a narrative using actress Joan Chen to portray a factory woman who resembles herself in a film starring herself, only adds to the complexities Jia is willing to wade through in order to reach the desired level of formal realism. Only through a dialectic between reality and staged reality can the truth be found. Only by experimenting with a "montage of montage and anti-montage" can an authentic cinematic representation of reality be discovered.

In *24 City*, it is in the (hi)stories of the workers, some told from lived memory while other scripted and rehearsed, that Jia forms critical perspective from. By exposing the official government histories as mere sport, he reclaims them for the individual, using both fact and fiction to reflect the ambiguities of modern Chinese spaces of labor and social interaction.



24 City (2008) dir. Jia Zhangke.

Fig. 2.1. The opening shot of *24 City*. Workers entering the factory.



24 City (2008) dir. Jia Zhangke.

Fig. 2.2. Little Flower in ironic detachment from her reflection.

I Wish I Knew and the montage of (hi)story. In his 2010 documentary *I Wish I Knew*, Jia uses this representation of media spectacle found in the Little Flower interview as a point of departure in order to portray Shanghai as a modern city-space actively conditioning its reality through the production of stories. The film explores the histories of the city by examining in equal measure narratives told on and off the motion picture screen, interested in the intersections between the city's famed film history and the citizen's real lived experiences. At times the distinction between the two become indiscernible. In the same way that *24 City* reclaimed official historical labor history into the domain of the individual, so does Jia reterritorialize Shanghai's collective identity of storytelling into his own cinematic space, representing "fact" and "fiction" equally. By mixing archival footage, clips from older Shanghai films, and his own primary recorded material (including a recurrent fictional narrative thread), *I Wish I Knew* formally represents Shanghai as a space of historical production where the dialectical collision between narratives on and off screen reach a critical synthesis. As the distinctions between narrative falls out of focus, this collage of histories eventually blends into a singular representation of Shanghai as a globalized space manifesting its reality through the production of stories.

From the opening credit sequence of the film, *I Wish I Knew* acknowledges its contribution to this production, becoming a self-reflexive space for the spectator to examine the very nature of (hi)story. The first images we see are gargoyle/dragon-like statues on the exterior of a large building. A worker cleans the face of one as credits appear. Finally, we see the business of the building revealed on a sign: The Shanghai Bank of Communications. Before any narrative elements of the film are revealed, Jia is acknowledging that, even in a film with a vision as independent as his own, there are always financial controls in place. Jia's own

directorial credits are revealed from the perspective of the bank, looking out at an anonymous space of Shanghai: construction, traffic, the active sphere of a globalized city. Then the title is revealed on a black screen as if to bemoan the endless, mysterious natures of modern spaces: *I Wish I Knew*.

Only now, with a contradictory admission of utilizing private production for an investigation of public spaces, can the film begin. But as Yingjin (2010) points out, to claim that Zhangke is complicit in the financial sphere of Chinese economy and thus, suspect in promoting it, is too shallow a criticism. Through the use of slow motion and sentimental music, this opening scene come across as anything but celebratory. Instead, it presents a kind of ironic detachment, a set of contradictory elements necessarily put in place to represent the ambiguities (and sadness) of the spaces where globalization is negotiated. In a film that is largely about a local space's relationship to its cinematic representation, Jia is admitting his own film as yet another one of these representative surfaces, produced and admitted by the powers that be.

Throughout *I Wish I Knew*, Jia blends oral histories with fictional texts (films) to construct a space of collective imagination that privileges neither. Many of the interviews consist of stories told from the perspective of elderly people recounting their childhoods. Often, these stories are filled with espionage, organized crime and the violence of the earliest Communist Party days. In other words, the stuff of movies. At times, these stories are about times before the storytellers were even born. One woman named Wang Peimin, for example, speaks of her father, an early Communist executed by Nationalists, and her pregnant mother who flirts with madness as a result. The fact that a story of this nature is dependent on its passage through time moves us just as much as it alarms us for the simple reason that it was told by someone who may or may

not be induced with mental trauma. How much of this story can we honestly believe if the storyteller was not alive at the moment of occurrence? Does this skepticism even matter?

Furthermore, the fact that Wang is introduced without reference to her occupation, current situation or any other expository data, convinces us that her relative anonymity signifies her as more of a passive spectator than a storyteller. And yet, she is undoubtedly a participant in the storytelling process. She receives stories and transmits them for audiences. In effect, she is no different from Jia himself, or even the spectators watching *I Wish I Knew*. All are interpreters of a world of surfaces, built and deconstructed through the development of their political, social and cultural environment.

To clarify this conceptual intent, Jia precedes Wang's story with two crucial sequences, both of which we can recognize as fictional in their own ways. We may recognize Zhao Tao, Jia's frequent collaborator (and wife), who in this first scene walks aimlessly through anonymous industrial spaces, observing construction sites and passing traffic with a sense of curious detachment (Fig. 3.1). The segment's focused, contrived cinematography as well as our recognition of a well-known actress making use of its space, offers us formal evidence to conclude this is cinema pre-meditated and rehearsed. From Zhao's dramatic gaze, the frame fades into a static shot of an empty thoroughfare captioned "Nanjing Road set, Chedun Film Studio (Fig. 3.2), then followed by a composed shot of Wang Peimin gazing off into the street as a squadron of foot soldiers amble by, visible through a storefront reflection (Fig. 3.3).

With these three images, Jia is exposing the contradictions of history to the light. In Jia's space, the accepted roles of workers are reversed: it is the actors who exist in public places (Zhao Tao), and the non-actors (Wang Peimin) who dwell on movie sets recalling traumatic past events. The disorientation of this role reversal is contextualized as bookends to the shot of the

film set. If it were not for the caption denoting the name of the particular set, we would be unable to distinguish between it and any other Shanghai street. We recognize the ambiguities between the sets of Shanghai films and the “sets” of Shanghai’s “real” public experience. By the time we are with Wang, listening to the story of her father and mother, we recognize it as something hardly different than the multitude of stories constructed on film sets. All stories, whether films or memories, belong to the collective imagination. They all become, in their own way, surfaces of fictional interpretation.

As a result, average, “anonymous” individuals like Wang Peimin assume the roles of *historical actors* by participating in the collective, organic dimensions of their city’s historical narrative. The differences between the Chedun Film Studio set and the room Wang Peimin tells her story in become difficult to map. Both the Chedun Film Studio and Wang Peimin’s story are spaces whose cultural identity is negotiated through the emerging global market of Shanghai (which, Jia informs us earlier in the film, officially opened its ports for foreign trade in the mid 19th century under British colonial rule). The world is a stage; its space produced and organized through collective storytelling.

In the latter half of the film, Jia advances this critique of narrative/historical assimilation by directly engaging in the aesthetic dialectics between mediums, forming the film into a critique of how specific cinematic representations infiltrates reality. For example, after Wang’s story, Jia inserts clips from a state propaganda film called *To Liberate Shanghai* from 1959 as a way of addressing how the space’s historical memory is synonymous with its historical representation. Even if a film like *To Liberate Shanghai* intentionally foregoes “fact” for propaganda, the effects of the film have been embedded into the city’s consciousness and therefore, part of reality itself. Jia is depicting the history of a place just as he is critiquing it by engaging directly with the

space's industrial production—in this case, the medium of film and its representation of Shanghai. This is a form of direct montage previously unseen in Jia's films, representing one of the most significant critical perspectives on Chinese identity within his larger filmography.



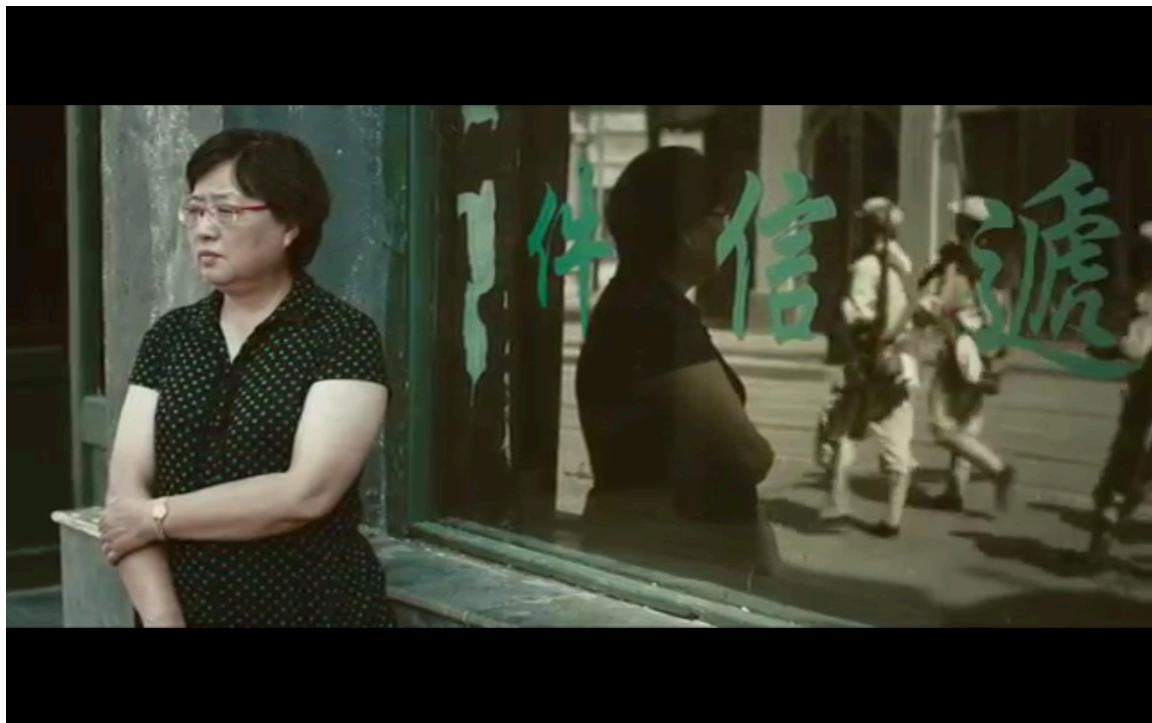
I Wish I Knew (2010) dir. Jia Zhangke

Figure 3.1. The actress Zhao Tao wandering through the public spaces of Shanghai.



I Wish I Knew (2010) dir. Jia Zhangke

Fig. 3.2. Historical film production set in Shanghai.



I Wish I Knew (2010) dir. Jia Zhangke

Fig. 3.3. Non-actress Wang Peimin and the reflection of her history through a film set window.

Concluding remarks on aesthetics. This engagement with aesthetic dialectics is critical to understanding Jia's cinema because so often he is concerned with the paradoxes of contemporary life. As De Luca and Jorge (2016) argue, films like *Dong*, *24 City* and *I Wish I Knew* can be understood as waging a dialectics between slowness and fastness. In other words, because the films are dealing with transformation via the destruction and construction of space, Jia's preference for *slowness* through long takes gives an eerie definition to the *fastness* in which China is transforming for the local people effected by development. There is a sense that as spectators we are watching the collapse of a local space in real time, and therefore, the weight of the past and the impending future are in co-existence with each other. To witness the destruction of a place is to also engage with the loss of memory. In a sense, Jia is combatting the *fastness* of China's transition with the *slowness* of the eternal, experienced present. This is often why Jia is often associated with neorealism. He intends to make the modern condition something deeply felt by the spectator, and accomplishes it by raising the curtain of his country's staged production of reality. That, in order to understand all the elements at play on stage, you must sit still and from a great distance when you watch.

"The trend of globalization will make this world become tedious," Jia writes in *The Age of Amateur Cinema Will Return*, a kind of manifesto where he admits his steadfast belief that the future of cinema will favor earnestness, diversity and unique emotional attachment to the world in navigates (as cited in Mackenzie, 2014). For Jia, filmmakers of the future will "free themselves from conventional customs and restraints to an infinite space for creation; at the same time, they are earnest and responsible because they persist with the conscience and conduct of intellectuals" (p. 623). In order to create cinema that truly reflects the conditions of the world, filmmakers must first not only recognize the surfaces of the world, but become one themselves.

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