

Rok Benčin*

Temporalities of Modernity in Jia Zhangke's *Still Life***

The cinema of Jia Zhangke is well known and celebrated for its portrayal of the social and cultural impact of the Chinese economic reforms of the final decades of the past century and up to the present day. Usually associated with the so-called Sixth Generation of Chinese film directors, characterised by independent production, realist techniques, and focus on the individuals at the margins of society, some critics have claimed that his emphasis on “ordinary” people from the lower classes and provincial towns, corresponding to his own origin, represents a considerable shift even from the depictions of urban bohemia in the earlier Sixth Generation films.¹ Be that as it may (bohemian youth, as we will see, are important for Jia as well, only from a more provincial perspective), Jia himself said that one of the main motivations to start making films while he was still a film theory student at the Beijing Film Academy was that in 1997 he had yet to see a Chinese film that had anything to do with the Chinese reality that he knew.² To capture this reality, he claims, one should refrain from storylines of great “tragic and happy events” and focus rather on the more monotonous temporality of everyday life: “If cinema is going to show concern for ordinary people, one must first have respect for everyday life. One must follow the slow rhythm of life and empathize with the light and heavy things of an ordinary life.”³

And yet, in the grasp of this major societal transformation the slow rhythm of ordinary life is itself caught up in the whirlwind of historical change. Jia's

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¹ Zhang Zhen, “Bearing Witness: Chinese Urban Cinema in the Era of ‘Transformation’”, in: Zhang Z. (ed.), *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, Duke University Press, Durham and London 2007, pp. 15–16.

² Jia Zhangke in Michael Barry, Xiao Wu, *Platform, Unknown Pleasures: Jia Zhangke's ‘Hometown Trilogy’*, Palgrave Macmillan on behalf of the British Film Institute, Basingstoke and New York 2009, p. 128.

³ Jia Zhangke, *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out: The Chinese Director's Texts on Film*, trans. by Claire Huot et al., Kindle ed., Bridge21 Publications, Los Angeles 2015, Ch. 12.

* Institute of Philosophy, Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts

first three feature films were inspired by and eventually filmed in the director's hometown of Fenyang, which changed dramatically in economic and social terms in the years he spent studying in Beijing.⁴ It is precisely the juxtaposition of the slow, meandering rhythm of life and the fast-paced, goal-oriented era of modernisation and reform that creates the temporal knot of Jia's films. As Chris Berry observes, Jia focuses on "those who are not the drivers of China's post-socialist project but instead, at best, its passengers, and more often the onlookers at the roadside."⁵ Focusing on marginal characters left behind but still tossed about by the currents of progress, Jia manages to depict a conflictual coexistence of different temporalities and the social divisions they immanently entail.

In what follows, I explore the temporal construction of Jia's films in relation to the narrative structures implied by the idea of modernity and the processes of modernisation, but also by the aesthetic claim to realism. Presenting reality through its slow rhythms rather than through its great events seems to entail an aesthetisation that strays away from standard interpretations of realism, activating what Jia calls "the aesthetic sense of the real".⁶ I address these problems via Jacques Rancière's recent elaboration of the temporal hierarchies associated with the idea of modernity and his discussion of the redistribution of sensible capacities enabled by the aesthetical and political reversal of these hierarchies.

Modernisation at a Standstill

In no other Jia film is the problem of modernisation so dramatically set than in *Still Life* (2006), shot at the construction site of the Three Gorges Dam, completed in 2012 as the world's biggest power station. The film's attention, however, is not directed at the construction itself – the dam is almost completely absent from the film – but rather at the large-scale demolition process in the back-

⁴ "The rate of Fenyang's modernisation and economic growth, not to mention the impact the forces of commodification had on people there, were all unbelievable. Shanxi is already a backwater province, relatively, in China and Fenyang ... a rather remote place even in Shanxi, so the fact that these changes were reaching even Fenyang and in such a visible way had an incredible impact on me." Jia Zhangke in Michael Barry, *Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown Pleasures*, p. 128.

⁵ Chris Berry, "Xiao Wu: Watching Time Go By", in: C. Berry (ed.), *Chinese Films in Focus II*, Palgrave Macmillan on behalf of the British Film Institute, Basingstoke and New York 2008, p. 251.

⁶ Jia Zhangke, *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out*, Ch. 16.

ground. Due to the dam's reservoir, whole towns and villages were demolished before a large area was flooded, requiring the relocation of more than a million people. Two temporal lines intersect at the Three Gorges area, one pointed at the market-oriented future and its demand for energy, and the other pointed at the past, with the annihilation of towns with millennia of history.

This intersection, however, is itself pushed to the background by the addition of a fictional layer, which constitutes the multiple storylines of the film. Two newcomers come to the soon-to-be-demolished town in Fengjie County: the miner Han Samning, looking for his wife, who left him years ago, and the nurse Shen Hong, looking for her husband, an engineer working on the dam, in the hope of clarifying their estranged relationship. A third temporality is thus introduced, an uncertain present of wandering and searching, through the lens of which we encounter all of Fengjie's current social layers, from the local population on the move and migrant workers, to the leading figures in the dam's construction. The outsider's perspective allows Jia to avoid the simple opposition between progress and tradition, modernisation, and its human toll. Instead, the film produces a universalised portrayal of displacement without abstracting from concrete historical conditions or different social positions. The temporality Jia captures in his films is not the temporality of the grand narrative of historical progress, nor the temporality of nostalgia for an irretrievable past. The narrative of the past and the narrative of the future still have a starting point or a goal that structures their temporality. The present, however, is a time of displacement with unclear origins and destinations.

Showing the apocalyptic scenes at the Three Gorges, as shocking as they may be, is thus not an end in itself. *Still Life* is less a film about the on-going apocalypse, an outright critique of progress and modernity from the perspective of its victims, than a post-apocalyptic film that explores the fragile connectivity between the fleeting moments that fall out of the narrative temporal constructions of demolished pasts and constructed futures. The surreal scene witnessed by Sanming at the very end of the film, a figure of a tightrope walker between two half-demolished buildings, is thus a good indication of Jia's cinematic method: rather than dwelling on the loss and destruction, his films forge impossible

paths through the disintegrated world of his characters. As suggested by Bruno Besana, *Still Life* “creates a narrative of connection of disconnected elements.”⁷

But in what way is it still useful to frame this discussion in terms of the concept of modernity? According to Berry, the Maoist “grand narrative” structure of “socialist modernity” was reinstated in the post-Mao era of “the four modernisations” and “reform and opening-up”, which is also reflected in Chinese cultural production: “Appropriated and adapted for the People’s Republic of China, the continued domination of materialist ideologies of progress on both sides of the post-socialist and socialist historical divide helps to account for the continuation of modern modes of time as progress in mainstream television documentary and feature film work in the People’s Republic.”⁸ According to Berry, however, Jia’s works are among those other types of film that show different experiences of time and ultimately lead to the conclusion that time is never homogenous, but rather differential and disaggregated. It would, on the other hand, be wrong to claim that Jia simply opposes progress *per se* or that he is blind to the benefits that the reforms have brought. His tactic, as Jason McGrath observes, is one of “exposing rather than opposing,” showing the contradictions of modernisation in everyday life rather than promulgating an oppositional ideology.⁹

Rather than presenting the problem in terms of opposition to modernisation, we should explore the conflictual coexistence of temporalities inherent to modernity itself. One can find an indication of this in Wang Jianjiang’s understanding of Chinese modernity as “bie-modern”. *Bie* (别) here stands for alternative, awkward, or non-modernity, and is defined by Wang as a spatialisation of temporality in the sense of a contradictory coexistence of pre-modern, modern, and post-modern elements in contemporary China.¹⁰ Such coexistence, however, may very well be inscribed in the idea of modernity more generally. Fredric Jameson’s sceptical account of the re-emergence of discussions on modernity at

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⁷ Bruno Besana, “Fictioning Disagreement: The Construction of Separation in the Work of Jacques Rancière”, *Maska*, 32 (185–186/2017), p. 80.

⁸ Chris Berry, “Xiao Wu: Watching Time Go By”, pp. 254–255.

⁹ Jason McGrath, “The Independent Cinema of Jia Zhangke: From Postsocialist Realism to a Transnational Aesthetic”, in: Zhang Z. (ed.), *The Urban Generation*, p. 85.

¹⁰ Wang Jianjiang, “‘Quadrilateral’ in Philosophy and Bie-modernism”, *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies*, 13/2017, pp. 129–130.

the turn of the millennium turned our attention away from the ideal of the new and the linear temporality of progress as such and rather focused it on the temporality of catching up with an imposed ideal of modernity. What is thus being sold, according to Jameson, is either “the illusion that the West has something no one else possesses” from the perspective of developing countries or, also within the West itself, the social adaptation demanded by the necessities of the global free market.¹¹

More recently, Jacques Rancière has shown how instead of a simplistic horizontal line interrupted by the breaks that separate the old from the new, modernity should rather be thought of as entailing “a complex intertwining of temporalities, a complex set of relations between the present, the past, and the future; between anticipation and lateness; fragmentation and continuity; movement and immobility.”¹² In our supposedly post-historic age, Rancière claims, the temporal structure of the so-called grand narratives has actually been recycled. Capitalist and State power in Europe and elsewhere continue to rely on the discourse of historical necessity, although its outcome is no longer Revolution but Reform. The triumph of the global free market becomes the new historical *telos*, for which certain sacrifices need to be made.¹³

Rather than simply reviving the Lyotardian grand narrative, Rancière gives his own understanding and genealogy of the concept. For Rancière, narratives of time are fictions, constitutive of how a sense of reality is produced via the distribution of the sensible. Narratives of time shape the common experience by introducing “the causal rationality of temporal linkage between events,” a rationality itself “bound up with a hierarchical distribution of temporalities which is a distribution of forms of life.”¹⁴ His genealogy of this hierarchy starts with Aristotle’s *Poetics*, in which the temporality structured by the causal rationality of events according to necessity and verisimilitude is contrasted to the temporality of the purely empirical succession of events, which lacks a specific inner logic and is therefore contingent. The first temporality, linked to poetic fiction,

¹¹ Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*, Verso, London and New York 2002, pp. 8–9.

¹² Jacques Rancière, *Modern Times: Essays on the Temporality of Art and Politics*, Multimediální institut, Zagreb 2017, p. 61.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 22–23.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

is given preference by Aristotle over the second temporality, which is characteristic of historical chronicle. Such temporal hierarchy, Rancière claims, presupposes a social hierarchy between two classes of human beings that experience time according to one of these forms: on the one hand, free, active, and knowledgeable people, living in a time of rational causality, and, on the other, passive people, who live in a time dictated by production and reproduction, to whom, being ignorant of its ways, history merely happens as a succession of events.¹⁵ In other words, the two forms of temporality imply a distinction between those who have time and those who do not. The modern grand narrative then applies Aristotle's fictional logic to history itself and today reproduces its immanent social division by denouncing "the ignorant people who are unable to fit the time of the globalized free market" and who oppose the supposedly necessary reforms it dictates.¹⁶

For Rancière, the question is how this temporal injustice, the injustice of not having time, can be reversed, which leads to the question of whether there can be a different way of linking events, one based precisely on the temporality of bare succession, which was discarded by Aristotle. The temporality of emancipation thus entails "an inner redivision of time," which is dependent on "the production of gaps" in the logical temporality of causes and effects, based on inducing "the power of the moment that begins another time."¹⁷ In order to describe the temporal structure of such emancipatory moments, Rancière draws on not only his repertoire of emancipatory figures, especially "the plebeian philosopher," carpenter Gauny, and the "ignorant schoolmaster" Jacotot, but also on the recent occupation movements and the problem of precarious work today. What is at stake here is not a preference for the ephemerality of the moment against any kind of duration or progress. The question is rather how these moments can be prolonged and connected so that "a new common time" can be "constructed out of breaches made within the dominant order of time."¹⁸

Finally, the reversal of the Aristotelian temporal hierarchy also takes place in literature, i.e. the narrative art itself. Modern literature from Gustave Flaubert

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 17–18.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 33–4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

to Virginia Woolf challenged the preference for a well-constructed narrative and introduced “a time made of a multiplicity of micro-events [in] democratic coexistence” into which plots and characters dissolve as if into “an incessant shower of innumerable atoms,” to use Woolf’s idiom frequently quoted by Rancière.¹⁹ While there is no direct relation between artistic and political transformations, no direct correlation between the aesthetics of politics and the politics of aesthetics, they both operate with fictions that determine the framing and distribution of the sensible fabric of what is perceived as reality. Fiction, for Rancière, is “not the invention of an imaginary world,” but a framework that determines a sense of reality.²⁰

With this in mind, what kind of a sense of reality can we find in Jia’s films, which are, according to Barry, characterised by a strong “narrative distension” that resists the narrative structures implied by both socialism and so-called post-socialism alike?²¹ What is achieved by the long takes and other means Jia uses, in his own words, to “preserve real time”?²²

The Aesthetic Sense of the Real

As we have seen, Jia’s primary motivation to start making films was to record the everyday reality of post-Mao China in the turmoil of market reforms, the effects of which have been, as he claims, just as drastic as those of the more widely discussed Cultural Revolution.²³ Jia’s films have thus been commonly viewed as an epitome of a new style of urban realism in Chinese cinema.²⁴ Jia himself, while committed to portraying historic reality as he thinks and experiences it, is sceptical of the stylistic ideal of realism. Realist techniques such as using a handheld camera, natural settings, non-professional actors, etc., all of which he has employed, can just as easily be used to produce hallucinogenic effects, completely bypassing any realist ambitions: “It’s quite possible that the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 35–7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²¹ Chris Berry, “Xiao Wu: Watching Time Go By”, p. 251.

²² Jia Zhangke in Stephen Teo, “Cinema with an Accent – Interview with Jia Zhangke, Director of Platform”, *Senses of Cinema*, July 2009, http://sensesofcinema.com/2001/feature-articles/zhangke_interview/ (last accessed 12 July 2018).

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Jason McGrath, “The Independent Cinema of Jia Zhangke”, p. 82.

so-called reality that is produced with realist techniques is actually obstructing and concealing the way reality really works.”²⁵

Rather than in terms of realist adequacy, he defines what he is after as an aesthetic sense of the real: “I pursue a sense of the real in cinema more than I pursue reality itself, because I think that the sense of the real is aesthetic, whereas reality itself is the domain of sociology and sciences.”²⁶ Obviously, this does not imply that the aesthetic real is in any way an imaginary realm detached from reality. Social issues ranging from privatisation and working conditions to ecological concerns in contemporary China, along with their clearly stated “sociological” causes, are essential to Jia’s cinema, but are explored through distortions in the fabric of experience rather than as adequate representations of a concept of social totality.

The first indication of this approach is the peculiar mix of realism and fiction or, more accurately, of hyperrealist settings with added fictional layers or even surreal elements. Jia first went to Fengjie County to film a documentary about the contemporary painter Liu Xiaodong, who used the demolition workers as models for his paintings, many of which then also appeared in *Still Life*. While observing the setting, the workers, and the local people, Jia decided to make a fictional film at the same location, adding the stories of Sanming and Hong looking for their spouses. The fictional film and the documentary, *Still Life* and *Dong*, respectively, which share a number of shots, were released separately in 2006, while in his next film, *24 City* (2008), both approaches coexist. In a similar tale of demolition and construction, Jia documents the oral history of a demolished factory in Chengdu that made way for an upmarket apartment complex. The interviews with actual former factory workers are complemented by fictional interviews, scripted by Jia and filmed with professional actors. Jia sees no contradiction here, since history, as he explains, “is built with [both,] facts and fabrications.”²⁷ The use of well-known actors made the distinction between the documentary and the fictional part of the film clear to Chinese viewers. Rather than deception or stylisation, the added layer of fiction thus conveys

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²⁵ Jia Zhangke, *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out*, Ch. 16.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Ch. 11.

something real about the situation which might be missed in a strict documentary and which corresponds to the aesthetic dimension of the real itself.

The most curious interruptions of the realist cinematic mode in *Still Life* are the surreal scenes, from the already mentioned figure of a tightrope walker to properly sci-fi elements such as UFO-like objects in the sky and an enormous concrete monument that at a certain point in the film lifts off from the ground like a rocket. Jia explains that the introduction of such seemingly misplaced elements corresponds to the surreal nature of the Fengjie reality itself: "Seeing this place, with its 2,000 years of history and dense neighborhoods left in ruins, my first impression was that human beings could not have done this. The changes had occurred so fast and on such a large scale, it was as if a nuclear war or an extraterrestrial had done it."²⁸ Such scenes therefore function as some kind of a prosthetic enhancement of realism itself. As noted by Corey Byrnes, discussions on realism in Chinese art and literature have tended to favour "a disinterested representational mode" over formal and stylistic concerns, while Jia's "stylistic hybridity" manages to put forward and benefit from the "transformative capacity of realism" that explores "the unstable nature of the category of reality," which is never more obvious than in the case of the Three Gorges Dam.²⁹

If, on the one hand, realism is enhanced by additional layers of fiction, on the other it is in a certain way reduced by narrative subtractions. This approach is most glaring in *Platform* (2000), where an original 210-minute cut was reduced to the 150-minute final cut preferred by the director, in which many scenes important for the continuity of the storyline are omitted. As Michael Berry explains:

The primary difference between the final cut and the various extended versions lies in the removal of numerous scenes (or portions of scenes) that further elucidate the motivations behind various characters' actions. ... Certain plot details that are very clearly delineated in the longer versions need to be extracted from subtle hints in existing dialogue, or, in many cases, simply inferred from context. The result is a significantly different viewing experience between different

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²⁸ Jia Zhangke in Andrew Chan, "Interview: Jia Zhang-ke", *Film Comment*, March/April 2009, <https://www.filmcomment.com/article/jia-zhangke-interview/> (last accessed on 12 July 2018).

²⁹ Corey Byrnes, "Specters of Realism and the Painter's Gaze in Jia Zhangke's *Still Life*", *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, 24 (2/2012), pp. 55–56.

cuts, with the original version following much more closely traditional conventions of film narrative.³⁰

Jia completely embraced the shorter version and the plot gaps in the film as a narrative method: “I don’t want to provide reasons or explain why a young girl who was dancing is suddenly wearing a tax-clerk uniform or why she is still single after so many years. This is my narrative philosophy. Isn’t that the way we get to know people and understand the world? In bits and pieces and on a superficial level?”³¹ *Platform* follows a group of cultural workers based in a small town and their evolution throughout the 1980s from an official group performing shows filled with revolutionary songs and propaganda pieces to a private group performing an eclectic mix of newly-embraced pop-culture influences, from punk rock to breakdance. The film aims to show the historical changes of the period through the everyday experiences of provincial youth, who, for all their big hopes influenced by the market reforms and cultural opening-up, experience time in a series of prolonged moments, detached from any idea of progress. McGrath claims that “the film manages to depict epochal historical change largely through the scenes of trivial events and even boredom,” minimising “obvious cause-effect narrative progressions.”³² By allowing us to observe the effects without necessarily showing the causes, McGrath concludes, the filmic ellipses achieve a realism of true-life experience, along the lines of Bazin’s analyses of Italian neorealism.

In *Still Life* such narrative subtractions occur again, only this time Jia credits the actors for rejecting some parts of the original script. The character Han Samning gets his name from the actor Han Samning, who is actually a coal miner and – to add some trivia – the director’s cousin (Sanming, as a miner and the protagonist’s cousin, also appears in *Platform*). It was Sanming who suggested that no reasons for his character’s 16-year long wait to go and look for his wife should be given, contrary to the script: “There are so many things in life that don’t need to be explained clearly. There is no need to spell out every cause and effect.”³³ Jia also reports that the actor Zhao Tao (also a regular in Jia’s films and now the director’s wife), who played the other protagonist, Shen

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³⁰ Michael Barry, *Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown Pleasures*, p. 55.

³¹ Jia Zhangke, *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out*, Ch. 3.

³² Jason McGrath, “The Independent Cinema of Jia Zhangke”, p. 98.

³³ Jia Zhangke, *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out*, Ch. 38.

Hong, suggested the scene in front of the fan, where she lets herself be swayed by the artificial wind that blows away the narrative tension of the troubled relationship with her husband:

We shot the night before she had to make a decision about her estranged husband. The original script described her as being alone, yawning, and clueless. I chose a documentary-style shoot. I shot her sitting around for more than an hour; she really got tired and impatient, until she finally fell asleep. When I was ready to wrap, she asked me to look at the fan on the wall and said, "Breaking up is a big and difficult decision. To express her wavering emotion, can we shoot her using the fan to blast away the Sichuan heat and humidity? To relieve the anxiety inside her?"³⁴

This scene typifies Jia's relation to temporality, caught between the monotony of duration and the affective intensity of the moment. In such scenes, Jia explains, narrative "linearity becomes a surface plane."³⁵ In several interviews and commentaries the director elaborates on another scene from *Platform*, showing two friends sitting on a bed talking. The long take allows Jia to preserve the real time of youthful boredom: "You see two people smoking and talking aimlessly for a long time. Nothing happens plotwise, but at the same time, time itself is kept intact. ... Everybody experiences the monotony of time passing where nothing that is noteworthy occurs."³⁶ The conversation casually moves from public executions to the latest developments in their romantic affairs. The monotony is thus ambiguously charged with joy and melancholy mixed in a specific kind of affected indifference. This is the kind of fleeting moment that the camera can preserve and prolong: "The two women's melancholy passes swiftly, as does their leisure time. This type of scene is exactly how I remember such moments. I get sad about the ceaseless passing of time. I felt a dull pain while shooting it. I was hoping the camera would just keep rolling."³⁷ What appears on one hand as a time of empty duration, which the long take attempts to capture, is, on the other, an affectively charged moment that the camera seeks to prolong.

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³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Jia Zhangke in Stephen Teo, "Cinema with an Accent – Interview with Jia Zhangke, Director of *Platform*".

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Jia Zhangke, *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out*, Ch. 3.

Among the Ruins

But what is there to prolong in Fengjie, a place in which archaeological excavations are being rushed to preserve at least some ancient artefacts from the rising waters, which will efface any trace of the town and its history? On the other hand, the future is very uncertain for the people moving away, for the migrant workers seeking new jobs, and for Samning, who must return home to make enough money to pay off his wife's brother's debt and thereby free her from the usurer whom she is forced to work for. Snippets of community remain, from the opening shot of the passengers on the riverboat carrying Samning to Fengjie, which the long shot embraces as a panorama of humanity, to the migrant workers talking about the natural wonders of their provinces, which, somewhat ironically, they observe as represented on banknotes. As Pheng Cheah observes, among the destruction, "the film depicts the establishment of new ties of solidarity and community and the restoring of sundered ties of affection ... that involve the sharing of mundane objects of consumption," particularly cigarettes, liquor, tea, and candy, which appear as subheadings to quasi-divide the film into distinct parts.³⁸ Yet even these fragile communities are, as Pheng admits, provisional and themselves always on the brink of ruination.³⁹

The film thus goes beyond communities to the core of ruination to portray elementary encounters between vanishing ruins and bodies on the move. Jia explains how the apocalyptic situation at the Three Gorges was not in itself what moved him to make the film. Rather, it was his enthusiasm for the way Liu painted the demolition workers that gave him the idea to make a fictional film at the same location.⁴⁰ In *Dong* we see a group of workers together with Jia's cousin Sanming posing for what is to become a five-panel canvas entitled *Hot Bed No. 1*. Jia claims that regardless of the harsh realism reminiscent of Lucien Freud, the canvas manages to capture the beauty of their bodies.⁴¹ Ultimately, for Jia, Liu's paintings convey a universal capacity to be poetic, to affect and be

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³⁸ Pheng Cheah, "World as Picture and Ruination: On Jia Zhangke's Still Life as World Cinema", C. Rojas, E. Chow (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinemas*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York 2013, p. 199.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁴⁰ Jia Zhangke, *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out*, Ch. 27.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

affected, “a form of poetry that anyone can experience.”⁴² What we see in Liu’s canvases and Jia’s films is not an aesthetisation of the hardships in the sense that beauty would prevail over social misery in the eyes of an artist, who does not share the burden of the workers. There is no escape from the omnipresent misery. Nevertheless, despite the misery, a universal capacity to be poetic is transmitted, thus countering the distribution of capacities dictated by the temporality of modernisation.

As for the ruins, their poetic quality should generally come as no surprise, but the ruins of Fengjie are not ancient monuments to long-lost worlds. They are fresh ruins, produced by the very same poetic bodies that inspired *Still Life*. Not only does this ruination put bodies on the move, those of demolition workers and, more crucially, former inhabitants, but its trace will also soon disappear, immersed in the water, and will therefore be bereft of any capacity to testify to this lost world in the future. Walter Benjamin described how ruins became the finest material of creation in the context of German baroque *Trauerspiel*, available for the melancholic allegorist as fragments to invest meaning in after the sense of the whole has been lost.⁴³ It is doubtful that apart from the dam itself, with all its ambiguity, these ruins could be used for creation or allegory, but a minimum potential for figurative connectivity – and therefore poeticity – remains, as testified to by the figure of the tightrope walker. On the one hand, the ruins cast their shadow on other objects in several still-life compositions in the film, commented on by Jia in his notes on the film:

I entered an empty room one day and saw a bunch of dusty objects on the table. I seemed to have uncovered the secret of still objects. Those furnishings that sat in the same places for years, the dusty utensils on the table, the wine bottles on the windowsill, and the decorations hanging on the wall all carried some sort of poetic sadness. Still objects are one part of reality we neglect. Although they endure, they remain silent and hold secrets.⁴⁴

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. by John Osborne, Verso, London, New York 1998.

⁴⁴ Jia Zhangke, *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out*, Ch. 8.

On the other hand, the ruins break away from the stillness and become the setting of life itself in its endurance. As Jia adds in his notes on shooting in Fengjie: “Among the deafening noise and flying dust, there was still a sense of vibrant colour blooming out of life itself, despite the despair.”⁴⁵

The question that remains to be answered is what this poetisation of ruins and the demolition process entail in terms of the peculiar realism of Jia’s cinema. McGrath suggests that already with *Platform* Jia moved away from the more direct documentary-style “on-the-spot” realism achieved by means of shaky handheld camera and similar techniques that characterised his earlier work, to the long-take aesthetisation characteristic of many contemporary art-house directors on the film festival circuit: “Such films become so exclusively reliant on the long take, so concerned with showing in detail the real-time intervals between narrative actions, that the Bazinian long-take realism is pushed to, and sometimes past, the point that it becomes its ostensible opposite – an intriguing kind of formalism.”⁴⁶

The opposition between realism and formalism can, however, be re-examined through a more detailed look at – to use Jameson’s phrase – the antinomies of realism itself.⁴⁷ The basic antinomy of realism was given its classic formulation by Georg Lukács, the greatest proponent of realism against formalism, who identified a formalist deviation already at work within realism. In his 1936 essay “Narrate or Describe?”, Lukács pits Balzac and Tolstoy, representatives of realism proper, against Flaubert and Zola, who in their novels get too close to real-life perception and thereby lose any focus on the social totality.⁴⁸ According to Lukács, only the narrative can properly represent the forces of history at work in a specific situation. In Flaubert and Zola, however, detailed descriptions of scenes are emancipated from the narrative and become an end in themselves, thereby dissolving realism into formalism.

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Lukács’s essay finds its distant echo and mirror image in Rancière’s writings on modern literature. For Rancière, it was precisely the descriptions, written

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Jason McGrath, “The Independent Cinema of Jia Zhangke”, p. 102.

⁴⁷ Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, Verso, London and New York 2013.

⁴⁸ Georg Lukács, *Writer & Critic and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. by Arthur D. Kahn, The Merlin Press, London 1970, pp. 110–148.

as “chains of perceptions and affects,” rather than narrative constructions of causes and effects, that defined realism and with it, the modern literary revolution.⁴⁹ Even in film, as Rancière elaborates in relation to Béla Tarr (another “post-socialist” director fond of long takes), the “essence of realism ... is the distance taken with regard to stories, to their temporal schemes and their sequences of causes and effects,” the distance that, however, “requires us to go ever deeper into the interior of the situation itself, to expand, ever farther back, the chain of sensations, perceptions, and emotions” that precedes stories and even makes them possible.⁵⁰ The Aristotelian temporal hierarchy is thus reversed, opening the possibility of a new type of temporal linkage based on the succession of moments that breach the narrative structure.

From this perspective, the so-called formalist aesthetisation is no longer necessarily the opposite of realism, but rather a way of exploring and transforming the temporal and spatial aesthetic fabric that constitutes what we experience as reality. *Still Life* redistributes the sensible capacities by delving into what Jia calls the aesthetic sense of the real, following the slow rhythm of life in the intervals and cracks of the narrative of modernisation. This approach transforms the ruins from a site of loss to a scene of fragile connectivity.

⁴⁹ Jacques Rancière, *The Lost Thread: The Democracy of Modern Fiction*, trans. by Steven Corcoran, Bloomsbury, London 2017, p. 16.

⁵⁰ Jacques Rancière, *Béla Tarr: The Time After*, trans. by Eric Beranek, Univocal, Minneapolis 2013, pp. 8–10.