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# An Analysis of the Aesthetics of Temporal Space in Jia Zhangke's Films in the Perspective of Deleuze's Film-philosophy

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history

Received: 2021.12.22

Accepted: 2022.01.14

Published Online: 2022.01.19

### Keywords:

Jia Zhangke

Deleuze

Time-image

Crystal-image

Time-space

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines Jia Zhangke's aesthetics of time and space based on Deleuze's cinema philosophy as a theoretical foundation. The paper's central thesis is that Jia Zhangke creates an aesthetic of space and time in film through the presentation of temporal images. Through an analysis of Jia Zhangke's *The Good Man of Three Gorges*, *The World*, and *Xiao Wu*, it is argued that Jia not only provides a practical example of Deleuze's philosophical theory of cinema but also portrays a complex and realistic social spectacle in the context and culture of China.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Research Purpose

The subject of this thesis is a theoretical investigation of the representation of time and space through the work of Chinese director, Jia Zhangke, utilizing three case study films: *Xiao Wu* (1997), *The World* (2004) and *Still Life* (2006).

I have elected to focus on examples drawn from Jia's work as they represent a progressive illustration of the latest generation of Chinese filmmakers. Jia is a director who incorporates aspects of film theory he studied before becoming a writer/director. Jia's films reveal not only a wealth of humanitarianism but also profound Chinese culture. Jia has gone beyond the realistic record of real-

life issues and has begun to integrate conceptual aspects into his films, using cinema to communicate philosophical ideas and treating the relationship between narrative and human reflection in a more sophisticated manner<sup>[1]</sup>. Jia's pursuit of truth and the visualization of time has given his films a unique aesthetic.

Film as a visible and imaginable entity can also make philosophy more figurative<sup>[2]</sup>. In Deleuze's two books on cinema, he lists over 600 examples of films, allowing the audience can compare the footage corresponding to the theory to understand<sup>[3]</sup>. The series of films Deleuze explores primarily European and American films. However, in light of developments in film studies, the films that led scholars to their conclusions now seem

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55121/card.v1i1.15>

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dated and quite Eurocentric. In a carefully focused way, this study seeks to address that imbalance with regard to examining a selection of work by one Chinese director. Hopefully, it is possible to find in Jia's films the shades of crystal-images and pure audio-visual contexts mentioned by Deleuze and analyze the representation of temporal space in Jia's films from a philosophical, aesthetic point of view.

## **1.2 Research Approach**

Firstly, The main arguments developed in the thesis are derived from documentaries and publications about Jia and a close study of his films. The film theory I apply is primarily derived from Deleuze's philosophy of cinema. I have also consulted Chinese film journals and e-books, and a range of other scholarly literature and Chinese academic websites.

Secondly, about the case study argument, three of Jia's early stylised works have been chosen as the main cases for analysis in this thesis. In these three works, the process of modernisation in China, the reform and opening up of the Chinese economy, and the construction of the Three Gorges Dam water conservation project, which are substantial social changes, are used as the narrative background. In this context, Jia's films' sense of time and space is further complicated and worthy of deeper exploration.

Thirdly, this thesis also uses an interview survey to make its case. A total of two interviewees, a doctor from the China Academy of Art, Qi Junwei, and a teacher from Jiangxi University of Finance and Economics, Chichi, were recorded and translated by the author. The interviews focus on the philosophical aesthetics in Jia's films set in Chinese history.

## **1.3 Layout of the Report**

Chapter Two briefly outlines how Jia's film style has developed. It is mentioned who influenced Jia's spatial and time consciousness and narrative structure, respectively, whether Author can find shades of connection with Deleuze's film-philosophy; this is followed by an account of the current state of research on Jia's films, which is overviewed both internationally and in local China. The attitude of the critics towards Jia's films was diverse. In addition, a brief overview of the background and goals of Deleuze's film theory mentioned in this work was given, clarifying that the starting point of his theory and Jia's films are both concerned with the continuation of spiritual thought and are compatible with each other. Finally, the current research literature on integrating Deleuze's

film theory with Chinese cinema was reviewed, as the importation of western film theory into China was quite late.

Chapter Three analyses the scenes in Jia's films about Deleuze's concept of Pure audio-visual contexts. Firstly, the background to Deleuze's film theory is briefly reviewed. Secondly, by explaining the concept of the pure audio-visual contexts and how Mei Jia's space-temporal consciousness has been closely linked to the pure audio-visual context and the time-image from its inception. Jia's films focus on the traces of human routine in life, giving examples of how Jia presents the pure audio-visual context and explores its aesthetic value.

Chapter Four analyses how Jia presents the crystal-image in the three case films from the perspective of both space and time. Initially, explaining what is meant by the hyalosigns, I demonstrate how the style Jia displays in his philosophical aesthetics is comparable to the crystal-image. I divide this into two points: the alteration of the crystal-image and the coexistence of the crystal of time and give examples of how Jia presents each of these in his films and traces their aesthetic embodiment. Through the presentation of the matter, Jia ultimately achieves an essential intuition of the existence of life.

Chapter Five concentrates on the views that emerged from the two interviews I conducted. It explores the dialectical view of Jia's presentation of socially sensitive topics; whether there is a connection between the image of characters doing nothing in purely audiovisual situations and Chinese national identity mentioned by Deleuze; and the pros and cons of Jia's presentation of China's complex society in a time-image manner. Through the interviewer's interpretation of Chinese history, this film essay goes a step further exploring the value of Jia's philosophical aesthetics. The audiovisual language under film theory is the way and means by which Jia expresses poignant issues. Still, the Chinese history and culture arouse Jia's desire to direct narratives that are the source.

The Conclusion considers that Jia's films' expression of time and space reflects a universal human destiny. Overwhelming social transformations, periods of rapid development and change, always provoke a powerful awareness of the fate of the individual, a concrete expression of the eternal human spiritual aspiration of ultimate concern. Jia Zhangke's films recreate space and time through what Deleuze calls crystal-images and purely audiovisual situations, thus reflecting on the people's inactivity under the modernization of society. Theoretical practice and artistic practice have invariably been in an interactive and generative relationship. While the theory is becoming a classic, more new cases of practice do

verify the existence of the theory constantly. The original intention of my thesis is that the reader, as a result of my dissertation, will pay more attention to the theoretical and aesthetic values behind the cinema.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Jia's Enlightenment of the Film Style

In 1990, China's new era of reform and opening up made remarkable achievements. The country's gates were opened, with a corresponding influx of various Western ideas and a growing cultural pluralism. Jia graduated from the Literature Department of the Beijing Film Academy and was well-versed in Western film theory. When the new generation of Chinese directors picked up the film camera, they found that they did not have much of a past or history to relate, and the stories of the people around them became the first ones they observed. Hence, the background of growing up in a tiny town in Shanxi allows Jia's films to tell the stories of ordinary men struggling for their fate, which sets the tone for the personalities in Jia's films. On the road to form Jia's unique style, the author finds that the awareness of space and time and the realist style in Jia's film world can be traced back to their roots.

Under the magic of the Soviet montage school of cinema, an action that might take five or six minutes to complete in real life can be turned into one minute or thirty seconds through the processing of time and space, which will accordingly create a sense of power and accumulation of time, and can also strengthen the rhythm of the film. Jia admits that he took many notes when he was at school, but when Jia had the chance to make a film himself who abandoned the things he had worked on and studied the most. After fully appreciating the aesthetics of Soviet cinema, he was drawn to something entirely different<sup>[4]</sup>. Frodon<sup>[5]</sup> believes that Jia is more attracted by the daily state of people, the more natural and realistic feeling of time and space. That indicates the realism that was first emerging in Jia's technique when he first entered the field of cinema.

#### 2.1.1 Enlightenment of Space and Time Consciousness

Jia was deeply immersed in Antonioni's *Red Desert* from the first time he watched it. What profoundly influenced him was the shaping of space in the film, the space of the factory and the sensation of loneliness and alienation. Jia went to the video collection and borrowed all of Antonioni's films. An intuition that led him to discover the secrets about space. As a result, Jia understood that space could hold emotions and precious information. Antonioni states that when one goes into a

space, one has to immerse oneself for ten minutes and listen to the space speak to oneself, and then have a conversation with it. It's pretty miraculous to Jia that a director can communicate with space<sup>[6]</sup>. It is the initiation of spatial awareness in Jia's subsequent films. In Jia's short film *Public Space*, the actors freely play with the space, and he is confident that time will answer. Each space has its logic, which determines the way the people in it behave. For example, if one enters this room, one might stand next to the glass door. Others like to sit on chairs. Although it is mysterious, it shows the individual's tendencies, disposition, and behavioural logic<sup>[7]</sup>.

Robert Bresson's *a Man Escaped* had the most significant impact on Jia in terms of time awareness. This film enabled Jia to discover the concept of time in cinema. The film shows the prisoner grinding a spoon all the time, and the audience invariably assumes that this spoon would be of any use in the escape, but it is not. This depiction of ineffective time does a remarkable job of illustrating the mechanical and dull nature of life in captivity. The characters' daily routine and the use of props in prison are used to obtain special effects and bring the audience into the feeling of the prisoners and their experience of time. It is evident that the director is not interested in efficiency but pours all his emotions into the film, making the film a natural reaction of an individual. From that moment onwards, Jia began to rethink the efficiency of narrative. Having learnt this, Jia began to create his time and space in his films like a fish in water. Creating documentary images of overlapping spaces and the coexistence of eras such as *The World* and *Still Life*, this dissertation focuses on these two works in the context of Deleuze's philosophical theory of cinema in Chapter Three.

#### 2.1.2 Enlightenment of Structural Consciousness

During his studies in the 1990s, Jia began to be interested in new philosophies and sociologies abroad, such as structuralism and postmodernism. These ideas opened up new horizons for him to observe society and human beings and helped him create structural connections between his films. The narrative is important, but what he feels is more significant is the connections made by the structure<sup>[8]</sup>. It is evident here that Jia was not satisfied with the linear logic of human time with the structure of narrative; he began to explore deeper, arguably on his way to discover the mysteries of the Time-Image. A unique feature of Jia's work is the development of Chinese society as a background for his films, which inevitably adds tension. The rapidity of China's development is a unique advantage. Still, Jia himself admits he has been inspired by Yasujiro Ozu when he

uses the profound social changes as a narrative backdrop for his films<sup>[9]</sup>. Ozu's films show the altered human relationships triggered by industrialization, modernisation and social transformation. The shift in human relations caused by the economic and industrial upheaval is, as the film represents, quite close to the life of Chinese people in the 1990s. Deleuze's Time- Image, which philosophically dealt with the temporality inherent in the cinematic image, could be described as a rediscovery of the Japanese film director Ozu, even naming him the inventor of the pure audio-visual context<sup>[10]</sup>.

### 2.1.3 Enlightenment with Virtual and Surreal Elements

In comparison, the 1980s coincided with a significant period of reform of China's economic system. After a long period of theoretical change and practical development, in the mid-1990s, China proposed establishing a relatively complete socialist market economy system, which marked a new stage of development in reform and opening up and socialist modernisation. These are the natural backgrounds of what is happening in Chinese society. Under this natural space, Jia's depiction of the passive survival of the ordinary people by their will is the expression of the objective beating complexity of life. Many people would easily misunderstand Jia as a documentary filmmaker due to his realistic solid style. These are the actual backgrounds of what is happening in Chinese society. Under this natural space, Jia's depiction of the passive survival of the ordinary people by their will is the expression of the objective beating complexity of life. Many people would be tempted to misunderstand Jia as a documentary filmmaker because of his intense, realistic style. Although practical, Jia explicitly believes that the documentary form has inherent shortcomings which compensated for through fictional feature films. Fiction is a highly significant way of revealing the truth. Only films containing concrete reality and inherently abstract reality can genuinely reflect our lives<sup>[11]</sup>. Jia gave a lecture on the many highly rapid changes or earth-shaking changes, and he would jokingly claim that it must be the work of aliens. It means that it is a reality and a reality that people can't believe or accept. It shows that Jia constantly adds new elements to his style, experimenting with combining reality and the virtual<sup>[12]</sup>.

## 2.2 Research Status and Theoretical Review

This thesis is based on an analysis of Jia's films and uses Deleuze's film theory as a theoretical basis. Therefore, it is necessary to make a short review of the

current state of research on the temporal consciousness in Jia's films and some of Deleuze's film theories. Jia's films are primarily written and directed by himself. His films *Xiao-shan Goes Home*, *Xiaowu* and *The Platform*, are based on people's real lives at the grassroots, on experiences related to his own life<sup>[13]</sup>. In addition to his film works, Jia has now published *Jia Thinks I: Jia's Film Handbook 1996-2008*<sup>[14]</sup>, *Interviews with Chinese Workers - Stories about Collective Memory*<sup>[15]</sup>, and *Jia Thinks II: Jia's Film Handbook 2008-2016*<sup>[16]</sup>. These books provide a detailed account of the process of Jia's filmmaking, giving a complete and comprehensive picture of the director's philosophy and the exciting and heartbreaking stories behind his films. In these works, the motivation for the creation of the film, the writing of the script, the problems encountered in the actual shooting of the film, and more, as well as Jia's autobiography, interview transcripts, dissertations and film reviews, are included. It is the primary reference for this article on directors.

## 2.3 International Criticism and Research on Jia Zhangke's Films

At the 63rd Venice Film Festival in 2006, Jia was awarded the Golden Lion, one of the three highest awards of the European film festivals, for *Still Life*. As a member of one of the new generations of Chinese film directors, Jia was one first to achieve international recognition. When *Xiao Wu* has launched, French film critic Charles Desson, editor-in-chief of *Cahiers du Cinema*, published his article *A Season of Love and Smiles*<sup>[17]</sup> in *Cahiers du Cinema*, which was the first response Jia received from the international film critics. Charles Desson has expressed the intensity with which one feels connected with the environment as *Xiaowu* wanders around the county. Charles Desson's commentary focuses on the documentary nature of the film as an aesthetic that Jia has been particularly keen to emphasize.

For this reason, *Xiaowu* was the film in which Martin Scorsese commented that he saw his uncle's shadows and that the film was intimate to him<sup>[18]</sup>. In addition, Jean-Michel Frodon and Walter Salles produced a documentary about Jia, *Jia Zhangke: A Guy from Fenyang*<sup>[19]</sup>, which reveals reflections on the transformation of Chinese society, towns, families, the Cultural Revolution and globalisation (Americanisation). *The World of Jia*<sup>[20]</sup>, written by Jean-Michel Frodon, editor-in-chief of the French film handbook, was published in China in January 2021 as the first book to provide a detailed introduction and interpretation of Jia his work. This work also serves as the primary reference for this dissertation on Jia.

In brief, international critical studies of Jia's "Hometown Trilogy" have focused on three aspects: first, the realism of the films; second, the preference for temporal experiences, especially his upbringing; and third, the beauty of wandering, confusion and uncertainty. Although these reviews make essential observations about Jia's film studies, they are mostly brief and limited, lacking in-depth exploration in the context of Chinese social reality and lacking a systematic approach to sorting them out. On the other hand, Jia's early films have remained underground in China, with few audiences and researchers. Most research articles on Jia's films were published after 2004. After Jia's *Still Life* won an international award, he gradually emerged in the Chinese film market. It is led to the reintroduction of seven films, previously squeezed by the mainstream space, such as *Xiaoshan going home* <sup>[21]</sup>, *In Public* <sup>[22]</sup>, The Hometown Trilogy: *Xiaowu* <sup>[23]</sup>, *The Platform* <sup>[24]</sup>, *Unknown Pleasures* <sup>[25]</sup>, and *The World* <sup>[26]</sup>, as well as *Still Life*, which have become new hot topics of research <sup>[27]</sup>. The research literature on Jia includes papers published in specialist journals, most of which are immediate reviews of individual Jia films <sup>[28]</sup>. There are also some chapters of master's theses or doctoral dissertations.

In the Notes on *the World*, the famous writer Professor Ge Fei <sup>[29]</sup> commented on Jia's film *The World* in terms of the abstract narrative atmosphere, the enclosed space for the characters' activities, the unrealistic and poetic setting of the story, and the realistic narration of the survival of the underclass, as if it were a vast container in which Jia has packed his alert observations and complex thoughts about the current reality.

*The World*, Jia's contrasting phenomena abound, confusingly, such as outsiders and Beijing; regional China and the world picture; real and false; closed and open; documentary and fictional; concrete and abstract. Unlike foreign critics, because of his common background in Chinese socialist life, Ge Fei begins to pay attention to the "spatial" narrative elements in Jia's films, studying the imaginary of the regional spatial relationship between city/rural and Beijing/world constructed in Jia's film narratives. It is a novel perspective in the criticism of Jia's films and has broadened the thinking of later researchers.

Professor Wang Hui <sup>[30]</sup> of Tsinghua University at the symposium on *Still Life* at Fenyang Middle School mentioned that the audience in two traditions could understand the epicness of Jia's films: the epicness of Jia's films can be understood in two traditions. The first is the tradition of Yasuro Ozu and Hou Hsiao-Hsien, which uses the details of the routine, ordinary person and isolated fragments of the historical ocean to show the profound

changes that permeate our daily lives. On the other hand, Jia's differs from Ozu and Hou Xiaoxian in that his perspective is directed towards the lower strata and, from a narrative perspective, is also more parallel to the characters of this world. This narrative approach benefits from the new documentary movement developing over the past decade or more. This narrative approach has benefited from the trend of the new documentary movement that has gradually developed over the past decade and from the spread of digital technology. This view allows us to explore Jia's approach to inheritance.

Professor Zhu Xueqin, a scholar of history, spoke extemporaneously after watching *The World* and was interested in Jia's reference to the topic of modernisation. According to Professor Zhu, this is not the first time China has initiated modernisation. Regardless of the party or ideology, as soon as the modernisation process is launched in China, some of the same social episodes are bound to unfold again, depending on how it is captured and expressed.

Modernisation has been launched for a generation, but artistic images reflecting the millions of ordinary people who are the carriers of modernisation and who have been swept into urban life by industrialisation have been absent. *The World* reaches out positively to the people who pay for this modernisation - the thousands of peasants <sup>[31]</sup>. Jia's film is probably the first current film that positively considers modernisation in China. Hence, the author believes that Jia's film should be seen in the context of modernisation and globalisation.

Among those critical is Wu Xiaodong, a professor of Chinese at Peking University, who believes that the film *The World* is a compromise to the masses. The restraint of *Xiao Wu* is no longer present here in *The World*. In other words, previously, Jia always tried to avoid deliberate camera editing methods and dramatic sensationalism in his films to express a smooth narrative. Details were sufficiently organized to serve the story, whereby storytelling and dramatic considerations replaced the logic of truth in the real-life sense <sup>[32]</sup>. It has also been said that Jia's work is bland, and the plot is often not enough to make the film enjoyable. It reflects an imbalance in the director's handling of reducing reality and the education and entertainment. Jia seems to want to restore the realities of life through no or minimal editing, but this has the added disadvantage of slow pacing. Especially in an age when cinema is becoming an entertainment product, Jia's artistic approach would not be understood by the general audience and would result in low box office revenues. If taken one step further, the director's minimally edited scenes contain all sorts of deep thoughts

and undertones, a film full of cryptic language that the impatient public cannot easily understand.

To sum up, although the research results related to Jia's works have been abundant, there are still gaps, and some studies are limited to the surface level, lacking the analysis and research on the value and connotation in the profound logic and temporal consciousness of Jia's film sequences from the height of film-philosophy theory. Under this current situation, the author finds some profound correlations between Jia's films and the image theory of Deleuze. The artistic charm of Jia's films lies in the grasp of the real-time and space in the films under the documentary style, and this way of thinking about the beauty of time and space is the concrete practice of Deleuze's image theory.

## 2.4 Review of Selected Film Theories on Deleuze

Since only part of Deleuze's film theory is mentioned in the main exposition chapter of this dissertation. Thus, the author will be given a short review here. The French philosopher Deleuze's late philosophy of cinema opened up new ideas for film theory. Concerned with the temporal character of cinema and the importance of space, Deleuze also introduced philosophical concepts such as reality and the virtual, the real and the imaginary, consciousness and perception into film theory. For Deleuze, this approach helped to gain new perspectives, expand the understanding of the world and its place in it, and help humanity discover new possibilities for thought, life, and existence. Deleuze was obsessed with cinema, and his *Cinema 1: Movement-Image* and *Cinema 2: Time-Image* brings together key ideas from his film theory. Deleuze argues for the possibility of the time-image as a flux that reveals itself purely<sup>[33]</sup>. The crystal-image and the Pure audio-visual contexts, which are the primary references in this dissertation, are how time exists in the image. Deleuze argues that the aim of film studies is neither the interpretation of meaning nor the reproduction of images but the creation of a new cinematic world. What is unique about Deleuze is that he suggests that film is the result and product of thought and has an active effect on thought, creating new spaces of thought. The film directly represents the activity of the mental mind, linking the outer world with the inner consciousness. The film is a stage where the spirit and mind operate, a realm of conflicting ideas<sup>[34]</sup>.

Despite its close association with cinema, Deleuze's theory of the image is not particularly concerned with the meaning of cinema. In itself, it went beyond cinema towards a more profound philosophical realm. Deleuze's cinematic thought explores the value and meaning of

cinematic existence from a philosophical perspective, offers a new way of reading cinema, especially art cinema, and has some guidance for the time of cinematic aesthetics<sup>[35]</sup>. And in common with Deleuze, each of Jia's films has transcended the film itself, while the meaning of his work has every time provoked widespread discussion and speculation. The time-image is prominent in Jia's work. He refers to the camera confronting reality but examining the spirit<sup>[36]</sup>, which coincides with Deleuze's focus on the ideas behind the image.

### 2.4.1 Literature on the Integration of Deleuze Film Theory with Chinese Cinema

James A. Steintrager's *The thirdness of King Hu: Wuixia, Deleuze, and the Cinema of Paradox*<sup>[37]</sup>. It is worth mentioning here that Jia's destiny was to make films with martial arts elements inspired by Hu Jinquan. *MATRHE A. Holtmeier's the wanderings of Jia: Pre-Hodological space and aimless youth in Xiao wu and Unkonwn Pleasures* mentions that Jia's concept of filmmaking reflects the purposelessness of his characters. This evokes Gilles Deleuze's concept of "pre-hodological space" derived from Kurt Lewin and Gilbert Simondon. The pre-hodological space permits Jia to juxtapose social and ecological transformations with young Chinese people's lived experiences and break the tendency to order the logic of the state<sup>[38]</sup>.

In Yun-Hua Chen's *Deleuze and Hou Hsiao-hsien's 'mosaic' in Good Men Good Women*<sup>[39]</sup>, Hou Hsiao-hsien's approach to thinking about Taiwan's history and presenting a transnational aesthetic is supported by Deleuze's interrelated concepts of the 'time-image' and the 'any-space-whatever'. The way Jia presents history in his films shares similarities with Hou Hsiao-Hsien, especially in the structural setting of the spanning historical context<sup>[40]</sup>. And in Seung-hoon Jeong's *The Para-Indexicality of the Cinematic Image*, Jia's *Still Life* is used to illustrate Deleuze's Deleuze calls the absent but immanent Real or Virtual.

### 2.4.2 Literature on the Integration of Local Chinese Cinema and Deleuze Film Theory in China

In China, due to the late introduction of the philosophical theories of Western cinema, it is relatively recent that the literature combining Deleuze's film theories with local Chinese cinema has emerged. However, there was the phenomenon of explaining films by theories and applying theories to films, expressing only an understanding of theories themselves rather than

genuinely exploring the inner mechanisms of the works from the films themselves. This dissertation attempts to study Jia's temporal consciousness's spiritual origin, inner mechanism, and artistic expression from his film works themselves and form a systematic view on the aesthetics of temporal consciousness in Jia's works.

### 3. Purely Audio-Visual Contexts in Jia's Film

#### 3.1 The Living Image

Cinema enables people to think in a way that is not dependent on the human eye<sup>[41]</sup>. The pure audio-visual contexts and temporal crystals that are the subject of this paper are 'ways of thinking'. For Deleuze, cinema itself is a living image<sup>[42]</sup>. This is because the cinematic image is created, it is alive as a temporal mass<sup>[43]</sup>. The camera is the perceptive eye. Any shot is created through the camera's viewing, and although the camera's image does not appear in the screen, the camera has an active part to play in the creation of the image<sup>[44]</sup>, and the world it perceives is communicated back to the screen as the image seen by the audience. In the cinema, the audience, in a state of inhibited agency and visual dominance, establishes an imaginary relationship between the viewer and the world they see reflected on the screen<sup>[45]</sup>. The traces of the passage of time oblige the spectator to become bored or to begin to contemplate, and this contemplation becomes the most direct field in which the film becomes associated with the spectator<sup>[46]</sup>. The audience has its own subjective ideas about the objective perception of images. According to Deleuze, in modern cinema, images from the material world, memories and hallucinations on different levels form a complex cycle of relationships. There are images that represent objective things and environments, but also mental images that represent memories, dreams and thoughts. The mental image is in turn shaping another image, hence the objective image that has been reshaped by memory, dream and thought. These subjective and objective images form a complex web of images that are interwoven with each other, like a thousand overlapping complex layers<sup>[47]</sup>, that is to say, cinema is a kind of thought, which is similar to what Jia has proposed the camera looking at the spirit while facing the material. At one moment, Jia said that he saw the past in the camera and that he wanted the camera to stay on, in order to preserve the past that the camera was presenting. What the camera records is not a memorable event, but an interplay of time, indistinguishable from the past and the present<sup>[48]</sup>.

According to Deleuze, 'Cinema does not just present images, it surrounds them with a world'<sup>[49]</sup>. Time-Image's mission is 'to make holes, to introduce voids and white

spaces, to rarify images, by suppressing many things that have been added to make us believe that we were seeing everything'<sup>[50]</sup>. This void is empty, but it is there, and the audience may put their own thoughts, their own life experiences, their own judgements into it. In other words, behind the sublimation, behind the intuitive space and time, it is possible to create a cinematic void which contains more intangible information. This is the same reasoning behind the so-called white space in our traditional paintings, and the same reasoning behind Yasujiro Ozu's saying that a film is won or lost by its aftertaste<sup>[51]</sup>. Therefore, both the East and the West have the same aesthetic principles. This is the proof that Jia has somehow penetrated Deleuze's image as a thought.

#### 3.2 Purely Audio-Visual Contexts

Deleuze stands on the foundations of modern philosophy, particularly in the light of the related work of another French philosopher, Henri Bergson, who argues that the past, present and future are an indivisible whole and that time is a never-ending stream<sup>[52]</sup> as Deleuze<sup>[53]</sup> continues with Fischer Cinema is the only experience that allows time to be presented to me as some kind of perception. The film is the only experience that allows time to be presented to the viewer as some kind of perception. It is only that time here is never clock time, but pure time<sup>[54]</sup>. In other words, the linear time of past, present and future is only a pragmatic, daily view of time, while the non-linear view of time, in which past, present and future are all one, is the original and unending appearance of cosmic time<sup>[55]</sup>.

Deleuze argues that there would be two types of visual expression in the image, one being the movement-image and the other the time-image, according to everyday time and pure time. Deleuze analyses the important changes that occurred in cinema after the Second World War, when the war led to a dramatic change in human perceptual experience and a radically different view of the world. Deleuze argues that modern cinema, like Italian neo-realism, transitioned to a fragmented, improvised image, with a loss of coherence between images and the use of irrational editing such as jumping. The movement-image rupture is marked by the emergence of a Pure audio-visual contexts<sup>[56]</sup>. The characters in modern films have changed considerably: they are more like wandering narratives in which the characters become fantasists, sleepwalkers, placed in a haphazard environment, passively watching, listening and recording, but unable to answer, act, judge or react actively. In other words, in modern cinema the character loses all active role in the environment and fails to influence it<sup>[57]</sup>. For example, when a person passes by

an accident in a car, the cause of the accident is present and the person can experience the scene through sight and sound, but the death does not belong to the person, who is in a Pure audio-visual state at the moment. In a way, as soon as one leaves the scene, one is free of it. The accident does not affect a passer-by in any substantial way, but for at least two or three hours, one is constantly recalling the accident as a bystander. It is as if the Pure audio-visual situation is irrelevant but does exist in the mind. This is the opposite of what happens to the viewer, it is not a perceptually driven emotional involvement, but only the influence of sound and image. What is important here was that as long as the character reacts to the situation, what the audience perceives is a perceptual-motor image, and only if the character is in a situation that completely transcends their ability to move does it somehow become the audience <sup>[58]</sup>. In *Still Life*, one a particular socio-political dimension associated with the Three Gorges site. The other was an almost metaphysical dimension, observing people in circumstances beyond human endurance and representing their absurd and insignificant fates.

In the time-image, cinema is created as an artificial action. Such artificiality was not an arbitrary action, but one that followed and was controlled by the nature of time. In other words, it was the way in which the extension of time presented itself, just as time presents itself by instigating the migration of migrating birds. Here is not only a glimpse of Deleuze's ultimate new concept of cinema, but more importantly, the ultimate basis for cinema and even for artistic creation: to understand and follow the natural movement of the 'time montage' <sup>[59]</sup>. In traditional cinema, time is only a way of measuring movement, but in modern cinema, time presents itself through images.

### 3.3 Jia's Presentation of China in a Purely Audio-Visual Context

In the film *Still Life*, the film was filmed in the ancient county town of Fengjie where the Three Gorges Water Conservancy Project was taking place, a city in great turmoil. Countless families who had lived here for generations were relocated, and the 2,000-year-old county town will be demolished within two years and sunk forever. A structure with two main story lines interspersed was used in *Still Life*. The first story line follows Han Sanming, a coal miner in Shanxi, who sixteen years ago spent money to illegally buy a bride. The woman was rescued by the police and sent back to her hometown in Sichuan just after she became pregnant. Sixteen years later, Han comes alone to Fengjie in order to

find his wife and child again. After a few twists and turns, Han Sanming and his ex-wife decide to reunite. In another story line, Shen Hong, a nurse, comes to Fengjie alone to find her husband, Guo Bin, whom she has not seen for two years. Shen Hong hopes to end her marriage, which exists in name only. When Shen Hong finally finds her husband, she tells him, "I've come to tell you, let's get a divorce." Then she took the boat and left. Deleuze's <sup>[60]</sup> description of the Pure audio-visual contexts is that the character is no longer in a predetermined, purposeful situation of sensory function; any movement, any chasing, is futile because the situation is far beyond all his powers of initiation. Thus, the situation no longer presents a clear, dramatic response to action, this de-dramatic, de-plotted sound and light situation neither induces nor extends action. And the important type of image to which this particular new signifier relates is the vulgar image of everyday life <sup>[61]</sup>. In Jia's films one can find his habit of using non-professional actors and improvisation. When Jia is showing the everydayness of the lives of common people, it is easier for non-professional actors to do imperceptive performances because they do not need acting skills, they just show their everyday lives to the camera and let Jia's camera record them.

There is no shortage of Pure audio-visual situations in *Still Life*, with Han Sanming and Shen Hong coming to the Three Gorges separately to look for someone. Jia uses footage of the people arguing over the demolition of the Three Gorges project as a Pure audio-visual situation for Han and Shen Hong. In the film, Han and Shen Hong are indifferent in the face of their quarrel. This is because the argument did not involve their own interests. Han and Shen Hong are mere spectators, like the audience. The Three Gorges Project is a world-famous feat in history, but behind it were millions of displaced people who sacrificed their stable lives, overshadowed by the benefits the project would bring to the country. This history has been forgotten, but it is repeated in Jia's film, which abandons more information about the Three Gorges Project in favour of a description of what life was like for ordinary people during that period of history, as Han Sanming and Shen Hong, like the audience, watch the trivial routines of the people of the Three Gorges, for beneath the ordinary pictures of life are complex structures of time and space that deserve our consideration.

As the famous Brazilian director Walter Salles <sup>[62]</sup> has said, no country today is undergoing such rapid and violent change as China, and no one has been able to reflect this change as profoundly as Jia. The helplessness and numbness of the people in the face of huge social changes, occasionally rebelling without realising it.

Behind this were defects in the Chinese genes. Director Jia intercepts the pure time in that period of history and reflects on it together with the audience. Apart from showing the characters in their daily lives, there are many shots of Han gazing at the demolished Fengjie County, as well as many shots of Han walking through the ruins of the demolition. The ruins were presented extensively in the film and became an object of compulsory viewing for the director. The viewer is as bored and silent as Han, but between the falling buildings is a pure chronicle of the city's dramatic changes. That is how the Three Gorges changed over the years. In the temporal image, Deleuze finds that the action-image model ultimately leads to a constant repetition of the plot, unlike the use of children in neo-realist films. This is striking to Deleuze because these children, even when they see circumstances or situations that they cannot bear, cannot stop watching and at the same time cannot have an effect; the images of these children embody what is almost a purely audio-visual context<sup>[63]</sup>. In the closing moments of the film, after a short walk in the street, Takeshi is handcuffed to a telephone pole by the police. Surrounded by people, Takeshi crouches down. Passers-by stop to watch the action and stare at the characters, but also at the camera, pushing down the 'fourth wall' of the film. Everything interacts with each other, and the film becomes more vivid and dynamic than ever before. Jia<sup>[64]</sup> says of the end of *Xiao Wu* that he didn't know how to end the story, hence the haphazard ending, in which Xiao Wu is taken away by the police, crosses a lively road and disappears into the crowd, like the end of many neo-realist films. But Jia knew that this dangling ending could not be satisfying and was only temporary. The reaction of the onlookers during the shooting gave Jia an idea. Nowadays, hardly anyone stops to look at what others are doing, but in Fenyang

in 1997, the camera was already surrounded by a crowd of people before it was even held out. Because most of the filming was outdoors, they were mobbed every time. Jia thought: Why not let people watch when the police take the thief away? The camera could have shifted from Kobu's point of view to the point of view of the people around him. Here Jia appropriates an incident from his memory. A friend of his used to be a policeman but was fired for handcuffing a suspect on the street to attend to a personal matter without permission. From this incident, he associated it with handcuffing Xiao Wu to a telephone pole. When filmmaking this last scene, there was no telling what would come out of it. There was only one roll of film left and it was possible to shoot a scene three times without caring what happened, just to see the reaction of the pedestrians. After three takes, the film ran out. The film was really over. People had contributed to the film without knowing it. In terms of how the film is viewed, the audience actually takes the place of the characters and becomes a spectator to the environment.

### 3.4 Stillness in a Purely Audio-Visual Context

Deleuze<sup>[65]</sup> argues that it is Yasujiro Ozu who has silenced time in his films, and he begins with the concept of time by analysing *Still Life* and empty mirrors in Ozu's films. And that the *Still Life* in Ozu's films is what gives the changed object its unchanging form, and that within the unchanging form comes change. *Still Life* is not only time but a pure and direct image of time. Because everything changes in time, the *Still Life* is the most accurate visual storage of the event.

The question of how to interpret the still and empty shots that appear in the long takes of a film has always been a question of how to interpret them in relation to the storyline. The object is stationary, no action could link



Figure 1. These four pictures are from *Still Life* (2006).

it to a causal relationship, thus the *Still Life* becomes a container for time. The film's Chinese title translates as the good person in the three Gorges, but its English title is *Still Life*. In the director's statement, Jia says that *Still Life* represents a reality that we ignore, which, although deeply marked by time, remains silent and keeps the secrets of life <sup>[66]</sup>. This is highly in line with Deleuze's view. The *Still Life* is not only the simple objects pictured, but also the entire city that has been demolished. They bear traces of time since the Western Han, keeping the lives of millions of people a secret. *Still Life* documents their demise. On this basis alone, what it has achieved can be denied by no one.

## 4. Crystals-Image in Jia's Film

### 4.1 Crystals-Image

In Time-Image, time is given its independent expression apart from movement. The crystal in Deleuze's Deleuze's time-image, then, embodies Bergson's view of time in film art, a mixture of past and present, clarity and obscurity. Reality and imagination, perception and recollection, the present and the coincidental, the apparent and the potential exist simultaneously, are simultaneously born and exchanged in cycles, thus forming a point where the two are indistinguishable. They have crystallised into one, which is the birth of the crystal image <sup>[67]</sup>. What is seen in the crystals is pure time. In the image world, in real life, movement is never unstructured, and time, too, is the overlapping of the past and the present, the continuous continuation of the past into the present <sup>[68]</sup>. For example, if you put a sugar cube in a sugar solution, there are two movements of the sugar cube, crystallising and melting simultaneously. Still, it is impossible to distinguish which moment is doing what, and they interact with each other <sup>[69]</sup>. In other words, the time seen in the crystal-image is indistinguishable between past, present and future. The structure of a crystal allows us to see how, with each turn of the crystal, what is opaque and virtual becomes luminous and actual. Our thoughts become matter, while matter becomes an object of our thoughts <sup>[70]</sup>.

Jia explores various social aspects of this temporal complexity:

- Domestic and social violence
- Corruption and revenge
- Pop-influenced youth culture
- The plight of migrant workers

Whatever the subject matter, Jia explores the temporality of the now-dwelling moment, which oscillates at the intersection of present and past narratives but cannot form a linear temporal structure of its own. However,

Jia's focus is not on the passing of the past or on an entirely future-oriented time but on how these moments themselves connect and establish a different temporality outside the dominant narrative structure.

This temporality is essentially the temporality of modernity, a transient existence <sup>[71]</sup>. In other words, Jia is looking for a cross-section of the crystals of time. This cross-section magnifies the social everydayness of China's development and uncertainty as expressed in Jia's films. That means a movement that develops according to pure time -- True.

### 4.2 Variations of Crystals - Images

As mentioned earlier, Jia's films are mostly set against the backdrop of social changes in China, for example, China's reform and opening up of its economic policies and its modernisation, which have undoubtedly brought unprecedented progress to the country's development, but which have also allowed the people of the society under development to get lost in the rapid changes. Jia is interested in filming how this change affects people when one world is replaced by another <sup>[72]</sup>. Jia is keenly aware of China's development has brought to the ordinary person, such as emotional changes and changes in their homes and social environment. Firstly, in the case of Shen Hong in *The Still Life*, her search for her husband, who has not returned home for two years, is a search for her feelings, but in the process, her feelings deteriorate, and she finally gives up. The search is a denial of one's current situation, a constant search, a denial, and finally, a change of outcome. In general, the film presents Jia's proper focus. The narrative of the past and the future still have a starting point, or rather a structure. They have a temporal goal. However, the present is a moment of uncertainty, displacement, searching, an uncertain starting point, and an uncertain destination <sup>[73]</sup>.

The interplay of past, present and future experiences in this is the miraculous work of pure time montage. The Three Gorges water project has caused the migration of millions of people, and Han Sanming arrives at his former home, only to find it flooded with water. Spatially, the potential space and the actual space alternate and interact, from the potential home to the actual reservoir, and it is the chaos of time that changes all this. Han Sanming's former residence represents the life of ordinary people, slowly disappearing with the release of water from the Three Gorges Reservoir. Regarding the shooting of *Still Life*, Jia remembers that in Fengjie, he felt a solid surreal atmosphere within the reality. Workers did the demolition of buildings in Fengjie County in seven- day blocks. The buildings were disappearing five or six floors a day, and

they were desperately trying to make a film, racing against the disappearing city, which was particularly surreal<sup>[74]</sup>. The line between reality and fantasy does not exist. The supernatural happens every day and on every street corner<sup>[75]</sup>. Things evolve so that old meanings have been denied and new ones have not been born, and the changes brought about by overriding policies have left people in confusion and disorder. The old county has drowned, the new one has yet to be built, and the old things that should be taken up must be taken up, and new things that should be discarded must be discarded. Jia's film is about what happens to the people under the inevitable renewal of social development.

#### 4.2.1 The Variables of Non-professional Actors and Improvisation

*Still Life* can be called a masterpiece on a whim because Jia wrote the script in just three days. Jia<sup>[76]</sup> said, "I spent those three days with a book in my hand to jot down my ideas, where I spoke and the assistant director took notes. We were shooting while adjusting the script, and the actors were all invited by me on the phone on a temporary basis." In *Still Life*, the entire film was filmed in real locations.



**Figure 2.** The two pictures are from *Still Life* (2006).

The protagonist and the audience observe the removal of a city from the same unfamiliar perspective. Jia saw a train coming and filming; a wall was torn down and

filming the broken wall, instead of the camera rolling according to the initial script. In this way, the film is flexible, and he has stated that filmmaking is "a way for me to be closer to freedom"<sup>[77]</sup>. There is a performance scene in *Still Life* in which neither the singer nor the audience is Jia's actors. This happened to come across a local song and dance performance during the filming of the movie, hence this happening was recorded by chance in the movie. Improvisation and filming are unscripted, recording what happens according to the narrative logic of pure time and the real action in physical time. In other words, Jia's films are a submission to "truth" with a guide of "freedom". Improvisation and the use of non-professional actors allow his films to be full of plot variations which come from the illogical variations of the complexities of real life. One of the main characters, Han Sanming, is a non-professional actor whose real-life real name is also Han Sanming, and whose occupation both on and off-screen is that of a coal miner. In *The Platform*, Han Sanming has just found a job in a coal mine and has already signed a death disclaimer. In *The World*, he travels from Shanxi to Beijing to deal with the follow-up of the death for the "Little sister", a friend of his who died on the construction site. In *Still Life*, Han Sanming becomes the protagonist who leaves Shanxi again, quitting his job at the coal mine to find his wife and daughter. In *A Touch of Sin*, Han sanming is also called as he is in Shanxi, preparing to bring workers back to the Three Gorges. One can imagine that he will earn a fortune and bring his wife home. In the film, Han Sanming does not exist to move the story forward, but rather independently. Off-screen, he is also a link between an individual life and the world he belongs to. In life too, there is no way to know everything that happens to others<sup>[78]</sup>.

#### 4.2.2 Expressing Change in Surreal Terms

Nowadays, people can live simultaneously in multiple, unconnected relationships or travel across different regions. A new world of experience is formed as people compare and cross-reference different lives, relationships and regions. But in a film narrative, a single linear storyline is hardly satisfying to the director's desire to show the complex reality of the world. To witness, but not to access, this is the personal feeling of being torn apart by the changing age. This feeling brings a sense of anxiety and powerlessness in real life, for example, the surreal. To deal with the surreal is to attempt to remove what is indeed a recognition of complexity<sup>[79]</sup>. Jia's films have touched on the relationship between superficial modernity and inner truth. To judge poverty, present suffering or represent the pressures of existence would be to simplify

the context of our lives. Only a film containing both concrete and inner abstract reality can truly reflect life as it is a complex and variable state of life in the vitality of time.

In *Still Life*, Jia uses two storylines, in which the two main characters each have their own stories unrelated to each other but are presented as cross-narratives in the film: Han Sanming - Shen Hong - Han Sanming. In the scene that shifts from Han Sanming to Shen Hong, Jia uses special effects to present a UFO in the sky. The transition is cleverly made from the scene where Han Sanming sees the UFO to where Shen Hong sees the UFO in the sky. The UFO is the connecting point between them, as they arrive separately for different purposes in a city that will be dismantled and disappeared. In Jia's film, the scenes mainly do not serve the development of the storyline. Jia said that he wrote the script clearly why the main character is the way he is today and why he has changed. But the most significant change in filmmaking was to take away all these antecedents and conclusions which the audience knows. If the film were to talk about these causes and consequences, it would break the story's rhythm. This kind of thought of Jia has broadened the conception of time, both as something that gives people a unique watching experience and as an expression of how time is continuous, as a realistic choice that can be predetermined and arranged, and as a life experience that transcends reality. Deleuze refers to invisible causes because all causes and effects are not isolated facts but

have to be understood in the context of dynamically generated events<sup>[80]</sup>. In other words, there is no such thing as a "cause" or "consequence". There is only exchange and interaction between events and events in space and time.

In his sense of pure time, Jia found that the virtual was a better way to reveal the truth. From Han Sanming to Shen Hong, real life is a journey from one world to another. To put it in another way, the progress of the Three Gorges Water Conservancy Project is magnificent in that it has turned the city into a wretched state, like after a nuclear strike or an alien invasion. Hence the presence of the UFO is a further reminder to the audience that society is moving so rapidly and dramatically, in such a real way.

### 4.3 Coexistence of Crystal Images

#### 4.3.1 Spatial Coexistence of Hyalosigns

As mentioned earlier, in the temporal image, time is no longer used to measure movement, but is shown in the image alone. The space created by the image world is then given the meaning of time, in other words the spatialisation of time. The concepts of reality and potential can also be applied to space. In Jia's films, the same space is often given multiple functions. Jia often says to set designers: "You have to find spaces that have a soul"<sup>[81]</sup>. The space of the past and the space of the present are often superimposed. A bus, for example, has been abandoned and transformed into a restaurant; a waiting room in a bus



Figure 3. The four pictures are from *Still Life* (2006).

station, the front room where tickets are sold can be used for billiards, and behind a curtain it becomes a dance hall, turning it into three places and assuming three functions at the same time, just like the superimposition of the same image in modern art. What is presented is a complex space in which the past, present and future interact with each other, alternating between the real and the potential. After the superimposition of spaces, the audience sees a deep and complex social reality. In Jia's films the characters run out of the frame one moment and into it the next. The camera's perception creates oblivion. What is visible inside the frame and what is not visible outside the frame, thus creating a relationship between the imaginary and the real, giving the audience a lot of room for association.

In *Still Life*, The Three Gorges printed on the RMB note is a symbol of the country's beautiful landscape, yet at this moment a significant part of the Three Gorges in front of Han Sanming's eyes is sinking underwater with the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. The Three Gorges on the RMB note is full of imaginary rights and material space, a potential space. The view in front of Han Sanming, on the other hand, is real and visible; it is real space. The Three Gorges was once spectacular, but now it is in decline. Real space and potential space overlap. What has changed it is time. In the previously mentioned concept of the crystals-image, pure time is a Chaos, impossible to distinguish between past present and future. In the same way, a space given life by pure time would not be able to distinguish between the actual and the virtual.

This complexity of time can take many different and specific forms in a given space. The scenes of the film *The Three Gorges People* are set around the Three Gorges Dam and present several temporal intersections. On the one hand, the dam itself represents progress and modernisation, a temporal trajectory towards the future. In the film, however, the people only get a glimpse of the dam and the progressive builders are portrayed as morally dubious businessmen. The film is set against the

backdrop of a massive demolition process. Ancient towns are being demolished and thousands of years of history submerged. This time trajectory moves into the past, the past that the local people are leaving behind and the past that archaeologists are excavating before the rising waters forever conceal it.

Film as a new means of representation of history lies in its social and documentary nature<sup>[82]</sup>. In the new period of mainland China, cities, especially metropolises, have taken the ideological high ground by being modern, civilised and in tune with the world. Some scholars have likened this urban purism to the encirclement of the countryside by the city. The process of urbanisation, with its attendant problems of urban-rural divide and the hollowing out of the countryside, is a common feature of the development of modern industrial civilisation. Particularly in regions where the process is moving at a very fast pace and where there is a long history of vernacular cultural traditions, when they move from the familiar world of their hometown to a completely unfamiliar space, they experience the most severe impact and test between the different lifestyles and concepts of the city and the countryside, the traditional and the modern. The hesitation, resistance and outright denunciation of urbanisation also become more intense.

#### 4.3.2 Hyalosigns of Virtual

Bazin has suggested that Reality is that of an "asymptote"<sup>[83]</sup>. The so-called reality produced by documentary techniques is likely to obscure the reality hidden in the order of reality. The more liberal the boundaries are, the closer one can get to the aforementioned true. Jia states that all documentary methods are aimed at achieving the reality to which his heart aspires<sup>[84]</sup>. Every nonfiction filmmaker ends up realizing one day the boundaries that cannot be crossed—those beyond which we risk causing harm to the people we film.



Figure 4. The two pictures are from *Still Life* (2006).



**Figure 5.** The two pictures are from *The world* (2004).

Jia's other film, *The World*, can be used as a terrific example to analyze Jia's spatial consciousness. Jia found a way for a traditional Chinese society to understand the world: The World Park, which his parents had taken him to when he was a child. It has models of famous landscapes from around the world for spatial consumption. Here visitors can see miniature views of the world's famous architecture. From "America" to "India" to "Japan" it is only a 60m walk. People's enthusiastic curiosity about the external world is simply satisfied. Zhao Xiaotao and Cheng Taishang are a dancer and a security guard in the World Park respectively. They live, fall in love and die in the virtual imaginary setting of the international, globalised World Park. Jia also sets up other story lines to keep the characters connected to the real world and to maintain a depiction of the complexity of society. *The World* is in fact Jia's attempt to represent people's misunderstanding of the "world" in the face of globalisation. The film *The World* unfolds in at least two other dimensions: the dimension of China's overall social environment and the virtual dimension. Virtual and reality as potential and real spaces make it difficult to distinguish. In the world, in addition to placing the story in the potential space of the World Park, Jia has fictionalised a world of online animation. In a world where everything is controlled, there is an unlikely collision of fiction and animation. Flash animation is used extensively to deliver mobile phone text messages in *The World*. The

text messages bring up all sorts of reveries and become the narration and voice-over of the film, while at the same time very cleverly transforming the spatial scenes. For example, Cheng Taisheng receives a text message from Liao and rides off quickly on a white horse in his security uniform. Such speed is beyond the audience's imagination, creating an interplay with real time and space, and creating a strange difference between the time stated and the time we perceive. The World became the opposite of the theme park it strives to portray - the world of possibilities.

### 4.3.3 Coexistence of Old and New Cultures

The complexity of time can take many different concrete forms in a given space. Either that or coexistence can be seen in the temporal image. The scenes in the film *Still Life* present several temporal intersections at the same time. On the one hand, the dam represents progress and modernity, a trajectory in time towards the future. However, the film is set against the backdrop of a massive demolition process. Ancient towns are being demolished and thousands of years of history are being submerged. This time track goes into the past. On one side are the demolished and collapsed streets and houses, the dilapidated and rusted factories, the dirty and cramped hostels and the cramped and crowded ferries, while on the other side are the rushing and flowing rivers, the brightly lit new bridges, the wide and elegant Fengjie New Town and the towering Three Gorges Dam. Time is turned into the space that is the current social situation and social existence. At the same time, it is framed in the film camera, creating an interplay between the sense of history and reality. The significance of symbols in Jia's films lies in bringing to light the hidden time. The young boy in *Good People of Three Gorges* sings a hot pop song, the young man watches a Hong Kong martial arts film, and the older generation still listens to traditional Chinese Peking Opera, Jia's seemingly inadvertent street radio, pop music, and clothing accessories become the coordinates that give space its temporal character. The philosophical significance of this film comes primarily from its refusal to make decisions on behalf of its audience. It is neither propaganda for modernization nor a simple nostalgia. Jia's exhaustive model of the environment produces an image of time in which the forces of the past and the future are pushed to an ambiguous end, and it is this ambiguity, as well as the uncertainty of the situation, that defines the life depicted in the film.



Figure 6. The two pictures are from *The world* (2004).



Figure 7. The six pictures are from *The world* (2004)

## 5. Interviews

As discussed earlier, Jia offers an image that responds to purely audio-visual contexts and the crystal image. In this world, people can no longer take action due to the modernisation process of society. In this world, the people in Jia's films present an exhausted state of idleness. From this sense of inactivity, the spectator is made to watch Jia's work with greater attention to the repressive socio-political context from which his films emerge and the emotional dimensions of modernization development. At the same time, Jia's films bring specificity to Deleuze's abstract philosophical formula, emphasizing the social and political stakes of the latter's thought. Therefore, Jia does not merely exemplify the ready-made Deleuzian standard of the crystal image and the purely audio-visual context. The backdrop of China's remarkably magical social changes in Jia's films does add to the tension and Chinese cultural underpinnings of the films. To dig deeper into the aesthetic values of Jia's films, the author interviewed two scholars. One is Qi Junwei, a Doctor of Theatre, Film and Literature from the China Academy of Art, and the other is Chichi, a professor at Jiangxi University of Finance and Economics, both of whom were born in around 1980s in China, the era in which Jia's films are narrated. Thus, no one is better placed to trace the history and culture of the 80s and 90s in China than those who have come from that era. Qi said:

*The scenes depicted in Jia's film Mountains May Depart and "The Platform" are some of the most precious memories of my life. It gave me a glimpse of the spirit of the past era, like an "ukiyo-e" of the common people.*

In other words, Jia says that in Chinese society there is not much difference between everyone, because the people are suffering from all the changes<sup>[85]</sup>. In 1999, Jia's *Xiao Wu* was banned by the Chinese Film Bureau on the grounds that its content tarnished China's image and affected cultural exports and diplomatic friendship<sup>[86]</sup>. This began a five-year-long journey of underground filmmaking. Since then, Jia's *The Platform*, *The Divine Destiny* and *Ren Ren Yi* have not been granted a license to be screened in China. In response, Qi feels that:

*Jia's films do contain sensitive subjects, but not in a critical and reactionary light, but rather in a calm and objective depiction of social contradictions. It is out of a desire for truth that Jia openly respects everything in the space in which he shoots on location, making his films more objective and realistic.*

Like the social transformations in Jia's films, Deleuze

describes the self-external, uninterrupted, unstable forces as those of 'encounter', he writes:

*Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter. What is encountered may be Socrates, a temple or a demon. It may be grasped in a range of affective tones: wonder, love hated, suffering.*<sup>[87]</sup>

In other words, the friction and rupture in people's spirits are expressed through external forms: in the course of a radical change in history, something that was considered natural to people changes so that they feel uncomfortable and start to experience pain. Even during the shooting, Jia could not tell whether it was a new beginning or a ruin<sup>[88]</sup>, he was falling into the crystal images presented in his films, or somewhat he was bewildered by the objective images of real life. This movement occurs dominated by pure time.

Time is one of the most critical signs that affect human life as social systems change. Xiaowu lives in a forgotten era that is neither modern nor primitive farming. Within this hopeless void of time, the dull images of Xiaowu looking motionlessly down at the roadside, glancing at passing bicycles and pedestrians, and mischievously stealing apples from a fruit vendor's cart, are the most typical scenes of the wasted, almost frozen time. The film camera gazes longingly at what Xiao Wu does in this almost frozen time, yet the viewer is disappointed to find that nothing significant happens in the end. The figure of nothing is an external representation of the purely audio-visual situation in which Deleuze describes people as presenting a state of non-perception. From a Chinese cultural context:

There are few countries in the world that have undergone as many dynastic changes as China in the history of the world. The strong dominate the weak; that is the law in this world. When dynasties change, the beliefs and surnames of the people have to change with them, in order to survive only. The twenty-four histories of China were 24 times of disgrace. This is how the saying "the numb Chinese" came to be written by Lu Xun. It is because we have become accustomed to injustice, humiliation and control, and it is difficult to stir up any spirit of passion (Chichi).

*Numbness is the norm for Chinese people in the face of life's vicissitudes, and please note that numbness here is not a pejorative term, similar to "The Power of Insensitivity"<sup>[89]</sup>. In response to social change, most Chinese people appear to be in a state of 'waiting', not making any choices and thus seemingly doing nothing (Qi).*

In the time-image, a purely audio-visual context is presented, which lacks logical relationships and dramatic action and consists of disconnected, empty, purely audio-visual symbols. It is only when a series of realistic fragments are linked that the audience can understand the connections between the fragments and the meaning of the facts<sup>[90]</sup>. From the perspective of Chinese cultural transmission:

*In presenting time-images this way is more appropriate for Jia to express sensitive topics in China. For example, in the case of the Still Life, the change in the water conservancy project involves the migration of millions of people. In Jia's film, however, pure time is used as a guide, removing some of the director's subjective cause-and-effect logic and eliminating much of the plot, leaving only the everyday life of the people to be depicted. For example, Still Life are only mapped through some off-screen voices and realistic circumstances of demolition and eviction. As in reality, the people are unable to know all the facts, and many policies and social events that have taken place have so far failed to give an account to the people, and many will choose to forget, but I will not. I believe Jia's film is even less likely to do so (Chichi).*

However, the way Jia uses this description also suffers from being questioned. In Deleuze's view, as degradation and submission to time. Indeed, naturalism fails to produce a "direct image of time" because it "can only grasp the negative effects of time; attrition, degradation, waste, destruction, loss, or mere forgetfulness"<sup>[91]</sup>. Furthermore, the darker side of the story reflects one of the most controversial aspects of neorealist cinema: the systematic focus on the search for tragic, ugly details<sup>[92]</sup>. Jia was also once questioned for having mastered the mystery of winning awards in Europe, creating films with the goal of harvesting trophies. But in China, the boundless darkness within Lu Xun's essay illuminates our darkness. The question of freedom is one of the things that keeps mankind pessimistic for so long, and pessimism is the atmosphere that produces art. Pessimism makes us pragmatic and kind; pessimism fills us with creativity<sup>[93]</sup>. Jia's point of view lies in his refusal to comment on his characters, even when they are caught in extreme situations. For Jia, cinema is not a courtroom. Likewise, his characters refuse to be martyrs. These are ordinary people who occasionally rebel without being aware of it. Instead, it is the conditioned emotions associated with the inherent richness of life that define his humanism, a humanism that rekindles the mind after exhaustion<sup>[94]</sup>. One could say that the reality Jia wants to portray is in fact

extremely life-affirming, although people are decadently bored and time is long. On the generative-imperceptible or life-escaping line, there can only be an impersonal and vigorous force of life<sup>[95]</sup>.

Since the founding of China, the pace of development has soared ever higher. It has only been about 60 years since the people went from surviving on a full stomach to living with technological intelligence. The inability of human thought progress to catch up with the social development process has brought us a huge shock. The people have been suffering all this in silence. In terms of the relationship between the government and the people.

When the government says demolish buildings, workers demolish buildings, when the government says close factories, the people have to embark on a journey to find another way out (Qi).

*The government's policies are overwhelming and reflect the relationship between the people and the government. For example, the millions of people displaced by the Three Gorges project had to be moved within two months (Chichi). Like Chekhov's Cherry Orchard, it's about the process of acceptance rather than resistance.*

## 6. Conclusions

The essence of Auteur theory is the construction of a personalised world of images using stylised expressions, where style and personality are the surface and the director's thought is the depth of the Auteur theory. The clear coherence of the director's ideas permeates his images, and his work is a comprehensive rewriting and restoration of what the director understands to be China's history, reality and future, reflecting the collaboration and resistance between the director's thoughts and ideology.

Jia uses cross-narrative approaches, leaping visual ways of thinking, and complex sound-visual connections to bear the uniqueness of his own style. Thus, each of Jia's works is not isolated. In *The Platform*, the youth who has nowhere else to go in his hometown becomes either Xiaowu, who is still living an unpleasant life, or Xiaoyong, who is a rising star in *Xiao Wu*. Xiaowu, eager to leave his hometown, will have a look at Zhao Xiaotao and Cheng Taisheng in *The World*, who are working in Beijing but can't integrate into local life. Will the love between Zhao Xiaotao and Cheng Taisheng fade into Shen Hong and her husband among *Still Life*? In purely audio-visual contexts, people who have lost the ability to perceive and respond and have nothing to do become the main characters of Jia's films. By depicting the routine and helpless and numb attitude of the ordinary people, Jia

shows the turmoil of Chinese society at that time, which is his unique interpretation of Chinese history personally.

The Chinese cultural context in Jia's films is traced in an interview with scholars Qi Junwei and Chichi. There are few countries in the world that have undergone as many dynastic changes in history as China which is a huge county like unbridled, wild, unorthodox and dynamic. Jia has allowed time in the film to fall silent with a kind of spectatorial calmness attitude. People with nothing to do are confronting time to show their tenacity. Deleuze uses Cinema 1 and Cinema 2 to explore the relationship between images and thought, arguing that thought is represented through time in images. In his perception of time, Deleuze found two possible ways of expressing pure time, the Crystal Image and the Pure Audio-Visual Context. It is verified in this thesis that most of Jia's films experience the perception of the camera in these two ways, providing a fresher and more modern concrete case for Deleuze's philosophy of cinema. Guided by pure time, Jia's film plots are jumpy and causeless. This is similar to the "hyperlinks" of the Internet, where one link can lead to another and to infinity, but none of them starts with a zero and none of them ends with a one, everything is linked in a vast network with no boundaries<sup>[96]</sup>. Objective images of real-life plots that are not accounted for in the film play out in respective worlds, past present and future at the same time. In this way, Jia's films have a deeper expression of the real world of experience. In fact, the truth in cinema does not exist in any specific and partial moment, but only in the structural links, in the authentic reasoning and the impeccable inner grounds of the sequence, in the convincing order of reality even after the dismantling of narrative patterns<sup>[97]</sup>. Jean-Michel<sup>[98]</sup> says that Jia's films are never structured with unreasonable flexibility, but rather with plot jumps and reminders audience that there is always another story, an endless stream of other stories.

Cinema has been described as the art of time and space. In Jia's awareness of time and space, space is brought to life by pure time, making significance of the overlapping of history and modernity. Although Jia adheres to a realistic style, his ideas are endless in the creation of space and time. The addition of surrealist and virtual elements does not destroy the unity of Jia's cinematic aesthetic, but rather accentuates the absurdity and indifference of the rapid development of real society. The camera filming the material but examining the spiritual is Jia's motto. Jia's reflection on China's personality reflection and humanistic concern for the individual who in the context of China's modernisation gives his films not only a Deleuze's modernity but also deep cultural roots.

## Limitations and issues for the research

Deleuze's cinema philosophy is profound, with countless associated philosophical theories, a vast system of the theory that the author admires. Due to the length and focus of this thesis, only some of Deleuze's philosophical theories of cinema have been discussed. Further research would hopefully provide a brief overview of Deleuze's Movement-image and Time-image. There are not enough examples of the integration of Deleuze's film theory with Chinese cinema. Regarding exploring the cultural context, there is minor literature that talks explicitly about Chinese culture. Thus, this thesis makes up for this by interviewing two educators with a Chinese cultural background, but the number of interviewees is limited due to length. Therefore, this thesis compensates for this by interviewing two educators with Chinese cultural backgrounds.

However, due to the length and volume of the paper, the number of interviewees was limited, and this dissertation could not include many of the discrete discussions in the text. Chinese culture is enormous, and it is hoped that future research will provide a cultural basis for Chinese film aesthetics in a varied and objective way.

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## Appendix

### Questions for interviews

1. What is your understanding of the consciousness of time and space in Jia Zhangke's films? Can you briefly summarise it?
2. Are there any similarities between Jia Zhangke's and Yasujiro Ozu's films in terms of the expression of time?
3. As a viewer of Jia Zhangke's films, do you have an active awareness? (Jia Zhangke's films are very inefficient in terms of narrative, with a lot of depth of field shots and long shots, do you actively select your favourite elements from them to get a more unique viewing experience?)
4. How do you feel that the characters in Jia Zhangke's films give an imperceptible performance to the plot of the scenes? (Purely audio-visual situations). What do you think of the fact that, like the audience, he is an actor doing what the audience does?
5. What do you think of the still shots in Jia Zhangke's films, where the director usually uses empty space as a transition or to enhance the atmosphere, but in Jia Zhangke's films there are often 3-5 seconds of still shots in a fixed position, such as rusty iron plates, abandoned factories, etc.
6. symbolic things often appear in Jia Zhangke's films, such as Han Sanming, a real-life character who exists in reality throughout many of Jia Zhangke's films, though usually without a heavy role, his focus is on presence, why do you think Jia Zhangke set out to do this? What do you think is the point of his existence?

7. Jia Zhangke often uses the backdrop of China's times, the huge developments as the subject of his films, such as *The Hills and Rivers*, *The Good People of Three Gorges*, *Xiao Wu*, *Standing Room* which all count, and this really brings tension and context to his films. How do you feel about the contrast between such a large context and the way he observes the reactions of the people, ordinary reactions, rather than violent resistance?
8. In Jia Zhangke's films, there are often off-picture impressions of sound, like the arrangement of the sequence after Mei Mei kisses Xiao Wu in *Xiao Wu*, with off-picture sound from John Woo's *Bloodbath*, in order to create such an effect of dissociation: to allow our perception to move back and forth freely between the two levels of reality and non-reality. Do you feel it as an audience member? Did you, as a viewer, feel drawn out of it?
9. In the context of Jia Zhangke's films, what do you think of Jia Zhangke's statement that "the camera confronts the material but examines the spiritual"?
10. So Jia Zhangke simply set *The World in the World Park*, an imaginary park that exists in real life, which exists in itself, but its meaning is virtual, and put real people in this environment, just like an experiment. The alternation and overlap of real and potential space is like what Deleuze calls a time crystal. What do you think of Jia Zhangke's setting? Is the more false something is, the closer it is to the real thing?
11. How do you see the complexity of Jia Zhangke's films in terms of the many confrontations, or coexistences, of times, of old and new, of spaces?
12. In Jia Zhangke's films, there is always a presence of change, such as social change, home change, emotional change. Do you feel a sense of connection?
13. In Jia Zhangke's films, the choice of space is very unique, and you will find that many spaces have multiple functions. For example, the bathhouse in *Xiao Wu* is originally a public space, but in the plot, it is subconsciously turned into Xiao Wu's private space, where he is allowed to sing. How do you see the overlapping of spaces in Jia Zhangke's films? There are also many spaces that have a temporal character, such as the Three Gorges, or the road that the sea takes against the gun in *Heaven's Doom*, which existed in the Qing Dynasty. Another example is the city walls of Pingyao which also have a great sense of history. What is your sense of such spaces with a sense of history?

### **Audio links to interviews**

- <https://abdn.cloud.panopto.eu/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=4f9226bc-1160-4356-bfbf-ad9100e7a18e>  
<https://abdn.cloud.panopto.eu/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=363d71ba-bd01-465c-b0ca-ad9100e7c9e7>  
<https://abdn.cloud.panopto.eu/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=56a95cd1-f1cf-4e1c-a599-ad9100e7c5c4>