

# Jia Zhangke's *Still Life*: Destruction as Intercession

by Erik Bordeleau

This essay is intended as a kind of meditation on stillness, or, more precisely, the *stopping power* that characterizes *Still Life* (2006), looming as it does on the border of the real and the imaginary, of time and history, of documentary and fiction, and ultimately, politics and “life.” Many commentators on contemporary Chinese cinema have insisted on the realism of Jia Zhangke’s films and their quasi-documentary aesthetic as a means to deduce their political relevance. But if *Still Life* really is a film of great political interest, it is not only by virtue of its striving to bear witness to a China in full mutation. How, then, should we envisage the ethical and political tenor of Jia Zhangke’s filmic interventions in relation to their acclaimed realism?

Jia Zhangke’s cinema stands out not least for its concern for blending with the worlds it frames; it is obviously not seeking to “split skulls,” as Eisenstein would have it. In that sense, the challenge of

this essay consists in getting as close as possible to the point where Jia’s filmic gesture and the gestures actually filmed become indiscernible. For Jia Zhangke is an *intercesseur* (mediator), perhaps the greatest living *intercesseur* of the Chinese art world (along with Ai Weiwei). The concept of intercession was first shaped by Quebec filmmaker Pierre Perrault and then amplified by Gilles Deleuze in his studies on the time-image.<sup>1</sup> Briefly, we can say that intercession involves an act of fabulation, which relates to what Deleuze calls the “power of the false”; for beyond a mere transmission of information (as potentially suggested by the English translation, “mediation”), intercession poses the problem of how one can *believe in the world*. Below I attempt to highlight the qualitative transformations that Jia’s filmic gesture of intercession assumes, fosters, and supports in a radically unbelievable world—contemporary China.

Perhaps better than any other work in the realm of contemporary Chinese cinema, *Still Life* offers a unique opportunity to meditate on this function of intercession in a context of extreme socio-economic mutation and massive destruction of ecosystems and human habitats. In the film, the gesture of intercession ultimately consists of a dive into the eye of 拆 (*chai*, demolition), a passage along the very line of the demolition process, which the *chai* character represents both in its foretelling and figuration. Conversely, I will say of *chai* (and of other elements we’ll encounter during the analysis) that it interpolates duration within the film, making an *imaginal interruption* in which the stopping power of *Still Life* resides.

Intercession and interpolation are the two primary concepts with which I want to envisage Jia’s filmic gesture. The former relates to ideas of becoming, and is an obligatory passage for those whom Gilles Deleuze calls the “people to come”; the latter is only intelligible through a strong conception of imagination as a properly human faculty, which can be identified with an editing operation.<sup>2</sup> The two concepts are complimentary in their orientation and inclination toward the *intersection* or *in-betweeness* of things—they both approach the world “by the middle.” They also both relate to a movement from singular to singular, according to what Giorgio Agamben has called an analogic, or paradigmatic, logic that traces “exemplary constellations,” which can be read as virtual itineraries or passages for the coming community.<sup>3</sup> But for a constellation to be formed, the present needs to be immobilized. It is this constellation of thought that I wish to explore in greater detail below.

Standing as close as it gets to the demolition process caused by the construction of the Three Gorges dam, *Still Life* presents itself as a practice of the non-place, as did *The World* (2004), Jia’s previous film. But unlike *The World*, *Still Life* is not so much about unilateralizing existential malaise as it is a way to frame “progress” in real time, which is to say a way of withstanding this test of destruction in the present tense. In this filmic involvement or *mise en jeu*, there is an echo of Walter Benjamin’s description of the destructive character: “What exists he reduces to rubble—not for the sake of rubble, but for that of the way leading through it.”<sup>4</sup> Of course, Jia is not responsible for the destruction of Fengjie, a soon-to-be-submerged city with more than 2000 years of history. Instead, by taking up the task of putting on film such a critical moment of Chinese history, focusing on the beauty of the gestures and bodies performing the demolition, and witnessing the threshold of stillness that insists at the foremost point of the *chai* character-event, Jia avoids the futile clichés feeding China’s national will to power. In this, he also pays tribute to the anonymous victims of this pharaonic project by providing them with a truthful reflection of their situation and, above all, in the foretold exile, the possibility of an encounter.

**UFOs and Realism**

*Stealthy and untimely, the apparition of the spectre...*  
—Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*

Around the middle of *Still Life*, a strange event, one might even say

a “pure” event, occurs: a UFO unexpectedly crosses the sky, leaving the characters—and the audience—immobile and speechless, in a state of pure seeing (*voyance*). For a few seconds, the world is suspended: a spectral moment, a “moment that no longer belongs to time,” as Derrida would put it, while everything appears in an unreal immobility, halfway between reality and fiction, secretly misadjusted.<sup>5</sup>

The incongruity of this apparition is quite surprising, especially given that Jia’s films are usually described as “realistic,” because of their social content and also because of the minimalist, quasi-documentary aesthetic that characterizes them. The introduction of this purely imaginary element naturally raises questions regarding the meaning of realism in Jia’s films. The passing of the UFO interpolates the narrative, cuts it in two and marks the transition between the two stories around which *Still Life* revolves: those of San Ming, a miner who comes back to his wife after 16 years of separation, and Zhao Tao, who, after being left by her husband without any news for two years, goes to see him at the dam’s construction site where she announces her intention to divorce him. From this perspective, the UFO would be drawing the narrative boundaries of each of these stories from the outside, so to speak, noting their fictitious dimension. This reference to a “transcendental” point from which the story is told problematizes the relationship between reality and fiction. In a manner that remains obscure, the UFO’s passage identifies itself with Jia’s filmic gesture. It seems to signal a hypothetical point of contact (even if a disjunctive one) between fiction (the film) and the filmmaker’s actual reality, something like the cosmic imprint of his filmic intervention in the world. In other words, we could say that where the UFO interpolates, a power of the false is at work, which would also correspond to a movement of intercession—to interpolate is at the same time to interrupt and to imagine, to insert and to falsify, to introduce and to disguise.

**写生/写意: “To Write Life” or the Life of Images**

*It is characteristic that in Chinese we don’t say that a form, a figure or a sign have a “signification,” but an “intention,” 意 (yi): form, figure and sign are, by essence, an acting out.*  
—Jean-François Billeter, *L’art chinois de l’écriture*

Jia Zhangke was first invited to the Three Gorges dam’s construction site by his friend Liu Xiaodong, a famous Chinese painter who was closely involved in the rise of the 6th generation of filmmakers in China, then working on a series of paintings about the lives of workers and peasants forced to leave their homeland.<sup>6</sup> One of the works he produced at the time, “Three Gorges,” was sold for over 22-million Yuan in November 2006 (about US\$ 2.6-million dollars then), which was a record for a work of contemporary Chinese art at that time.

It is in this context that Jia simultaneously shoots two films: *Still Life*, a fiction, and a documentary film about Liu Xiaodong, entitled *Dong*. Both films were presented at the 2006 Venice Film Festival, with *Still Life* winning the *Lion d’or* of the competition.

The proximity between these two works gives us an opportunity to think about the complex relationship between realism, documentary and fiction in Jia’s work. When juxtaposed, these two films may even cause some discomfort to the viewer who experiences the blurred divide between reality and fiction created in the passage between them.

But before addressing this issue, we must first ask a question that can hardly be avoided given the title of the film, namely the question of the relationship between cinematographic realism and “still life” as a pictorial style. Originally, *Still Life* was to be called 静物 (*jìng wu*), the Mandarin equivalent of “still life,” before the Chinese title became 三峡好人 (*San Xia Hao Ren*), “The Brave People of Three Gorges.” In Mandarin, the full expression for translating “still life” is 静物写生 (*jìng wu xie sheng*), where *xie sheng*, which literally means “writing life,” suggests a style of realistic painting that takes the outside world as a model. In English, *xie sheng* can be translated as “painting from life,” which is also the title of a book on the work of Liu Xiaodong.<sup>7</sup> To “paint from life” refers to a type of painting done in the open air, outside the studio. The term *xie sheng* opposes a classical Chinese painting practice called 写意 (*xie yi*), meaning literally “to write from intent or idea” (etymologically, *yi* is “the sound of the heart,” evoking the idea of resonance); *xie sheng* focuses on the subjective relationship between the artist and the object he or she depicts, suggesting that these objects can never can be completely objectified.<sup>8</sup> It is not least in this regard that Jia Zhangke and Liu Xiaodong share a desire to portray contemporary China’s situation closest to its transformations by painting and filming *in situ*, “from life.”

In this context, it is interesting to examine more attentively the artistic approach of Liu Xiaodong as it is presented in *Dong*. His desire to seize reality in the flesh led him to develop a very particular painting technique:

My objective is to confine myself in a narrow space to paint, so to eradicate part of my rationality. [...] After years of painting, control is not a problem. But to attain the kind of control that enables me to give a vital expression, I have to set strict limits on form and physique. That is: I lie on all fours to paint, as if to dive into it, staying no more than one meter from the canvas. You can’t see that far from such a standpoint. And then, you portray your subject with earnestness, as if making a transcription, through physical conditions, to prevent too flawless a transcription. In this situation, I let my body go with the flow, so my physical energy is poured into it.<sup>9</sup>

In his series of paintings made at the Three Gorges, Liu Xiaodong devoted himself to capturing the natural beauty of the workers’ naked bodies, sculpted by their labour. To do so, he brings them together in a reduced space, around a mattress. He spreads his canvas a few steps from them, directly on the ground, and “isolates” himself on the spot. The bodies pose, motionless, while Liu is vigorously busy “pouring himself” onto the canvas, transmitter-transcriber of the concentrated power of the bodies, assembled and composed,





suspended in still life. In the description of his pictorial gesture, Liu Xiaodong pays special attention to the organization of his own physical activity (later in *Dong*, we also see him doing a kind of *gong fu*). “All of him” is in play in the energetic transcription process, in a way that seems to stand midway between *xie sheng* and *xie yi*, giving a unique depth to his pictorial “realism.” It also seems that his sense of form and the way he gives shape should be understood in relation to the Chinese calligraphic tradition, which has always attached a prime importance to the bodily integration of the writing-painting gesture. In that tradition, it is the whole body that captures and internalizes the figure, which then manifests it spontaneously:

When the calligrapher captures a dynamic figure and internalizes it, it becomes a “pregnant figure.” The Chinese character he utilizes, 意象 (*yi xiang*), literally means “figure of intention,” which is to say that the figure carries intention, or is “pregnant with intention.” This expression refers to the dynamic images that we hold within us, which spontaneously tend to expression when reactivated: a gesture, an expressive moment that we have integrated. It is in this sense that the figures collected by the body itself are “pregnant” or “charged with expression.”<sup>10</sup>

This description of the “figures of intention” and their relationship to the calligrapher’s body stays closest to the vital process by which an image is made physically dynamic. Liu Xiaodong’s energetic contraction produces a pictorial space saturated with life, concentrated in figures that run deep, reaching Jia’s films in a fashion that may be taking part in what Benjamin called a *Dialektik im Stillstand*, a stillstand dialectic, where images stand on the threshold of movement and immobility, in a tension-charged pause.<sup>11</sup>

Ultimately, the only way to grasp Jia’s filmic gesture in all its complexity involves going further into what could be defined as the question of imaginal impregnation, halfway between traditional Chinese calligraphy and painting, and Benjamin’s dialectic of the image. Or, again: Jia’s filmic gesture’s ethico-political power must be conceived on a plane that we could call, following Warburg and Agamben, “the life of images.” Bill Viola synthesizes what is at stake here when he underlines how “images live in us [...] we are living databases of images [...] and once images get into us, they never stop growing and transforming themselves.”<sup>12</sup>

Dong, Still Life’s real?

The vital force of the workers’ naked bodies celebrated by Liu Xiaodong constitutes a central motif of *Dong*, but also of *Still Life*. In his excellent interview with Jia, entitled “Jia Zhangke: Painter for Political Camera,” Stéphane Mas underlines that “what Xiaodong Liu says of the bodies of these workers, this beauty, this strength, is featured in *Still Life*,” adding that “time’s work upon the bodies is everywhere present, especially in *Still Life*.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, *Dong* and *Still Life* are intimately linked, and their juxtaposition gives rise to a complex entanglement between reality and fiction. For example, in *Still Life*,

Mark, a young, fanciful man that San Ming befriended dies after he is crushed under a brick wall.<sup>14</sup> In the documentary *Dong*, we witness the return of a worker’s corpse to his family; there again, San Ming is present. In an extremely disturbing way, this scene extends the *Still Life* character’s fictional death. San Ming (which is his real name) appears as a character witnessing the fictitious death of a friend, and as an all-too-real witness to the death of a colleague.

Another less dramatic element subtly blurs the line separating documentary and fiction: seeing San Ming, one of *Still Life*’s main protagonists, pose as a “simple,” anonymous worker for one of Liu Xiaodong’s paintings. The figural and “unreal” immobility of Ming is retroactively interpolated in *Still Life*’s imagery, creating a kind of duplication of perspective, thus revealing another essential aspect of the complexity of Jia’s filmic gesture. Pictorially speaking, something more-than-real, a complex of living pictures on the screen—an imaginal contraction—brings reality and fiction into a zone of indiscernibility.

It is difficult to conceptualize precisely the tenor of the viewer’s malaise created by this blurring of reality and fiction, as if fiction’s effect of plenitude would decompose under the rough contact of documentary.<sup>15</sup> Could this be a bit of pure time, then? The life of the images seems to involve a “chronic time,” a *chronos* seized in essential rupture with chronological time, which seems to make way for the emergence of what Deleuze might call “de-actualized peaks of present.”<sup>16</sup> From this line of imaginal emergence, our meditation gains a new ground: it is about educating both the cinematographic and ethico-political significance of interpolation as the production of de-actualized peaks of present in *Still Life*. The stopping power at work in *Still Life* that manifests itself at the border of the real and the imaginary, of documentary and fiction, must now be sought out at the threshold of time and history.

Still Life’s Temporal Paradox

*Still Life* is a deeply paradoxical work. On the one hand, everything in it is in motion: the construction of the Three Gorges dam gives rise to a huge migratory flux, as thousands of former residents of Fengjie see their city progressively impounded beneath the rising waves. As in his previous works, Jia shows the effects of China’s accelerated economic development on the lower classes, focusing here on the forced deracination of the “brave people of the Three Gorges,” as the Mandarin title of the film goes.

On the cinematographic plane, everything seems only to be movement, but a slow, fluid movement, meandering and meditative, merging with the regular flow of the mighty Yangtze, as suggested by the film’s magnificent opening shot. The film also incorporates a number of elements from classical Chinese painting: river, mountain, and mist (notice that in Mandarin, landscape is written 山水 (*shanshui*), “mountain-water”). Also, in Chinese tradition, the omnipresent fog of the Three Gorges valley, softening the mountain’s outline and beautifying the landscape, is thought to enhance the fertility of exchange and the fluidity of communication. In *I Ching (Book of Changes)*, for example, figure 58, 兌 (*dui*),

“to exchange,” is obtained by the double repetition of the trigram “fog” (again, if we add the radical “speech” to *dui*, we get 說 (*shuo*), which means “to speak”). Jia, who studied fine arts and classical painting before devoting himself to film, describes his use of the many panoramic views in *Still Life* as a “gesture that takes after the rolls of classical painting, that they would unroll like this in space.”<sup>17</sup> Jia adds, “if I chose cinema, it’s because it enables you to show passing time.”<sup>18</sup> Between the juxtaposed human and natural temporalities, *Still Life* shows a life that, despite everything, follows its course irreversibly. In that sense, *Still Life* actually is a “still life,” which consists, according to Deleuze, in a pure and direct form of time.<sup>19</sup>

And yet, in a less obvious but nonetheless palpable way, *Still Life* is also charged with a stopping power; in English and German, respectively, we could say “standstill” and “stillstand,” two expressions that suggest something that resists and holds itself, in a kind of verticalizing but immanent interruption. In *Still Life*, something *con-sists* and *re-sists* itself.<sup>20</sup> The verb “to resist” comes from the Latin *resistere*, where we find *sistere*, “to be stopping.” On a macro-political plane, as in other works by Jia—and more broadly, the best of the 6th generation’s cinema—*Still Life* resists by interpolating itself into the flux of Chinese mass-media, short-circuiting the molarizing and sanitized representations from the national marketing venture that flood and format Chinese public space. However accurate this description may be, this level of analysis falls short by confining itself to a criticism of representations. We must also examine Jia’s micropolitics—his subtle way of entering the imaginal intimacy of the *forms-of-life*—to reveal the planes of consistency he finds there. It is on the molecular, imaginal level that we must ultimately look for *Still Life*’s stopping power, and the singularity of Jia’s filmic gesture.

Belief and Time

*The criticism of contemporary capitalism as hegemony of subsistence and negation of existence must ask the question of consistency, and, as such, of the belief that constitutes it, which is to say, that consists in it.*

—Bernard Stiegler, *Mécréance et discrédit I. la décadence des démocraties industrielles*

*The cinema must film, not the world, but belief in this world, our only link.*

—Gilles Deleuze, *Time-Image*

The construction of the Three Gorges hydroelectric dam is a major symbol of Chinese modernity; one could even say that it somehow summarizes the principal historical episodes of China’s twentieth century. The idea was put forth as early as 1919, by Sun Yat-Sen, founder of the Republic of China, and again in 1949 at the time of the Communist Party’s accession to power. The project aims to control the Yangtze’s deadly spate, improve navigation conditions, and, of course, produce electricity. In the early years, several feasibility



studies had been conducted, but because of the political turbulence that affected China it was not until 1979, just as the Cultural Revolution ended, that the exact site of the dam was confirmed. In 1989, with Jiang Zemin and Li Peng overcoming all obstacles (and with the latter's son a major shareholder in the project), the Three Gorges Project was adopted. The project was voted on at the Chinese National Assembly on April 3, 1992, and the construction began a year later.<sup>21</sup> By using television archives showing Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, *Still Life* emphasizes the historical dimension of the Three Gorges project. And in one sequence, the grandeur of the project is emphasized as somebody talking to a man responsible for the construction of a bridge connecting the banks of the Yangtze exclaims: "The Yangtze is tamed. You have achieved Mao's dream."

*Still Life* reminds us that the Three Gorges dam project is a long-term affair. But beyond the historical aspects, the film essentially questions the very event of the dam, its unbelievable character. Of course the dam is there, present, too present. But paradoxically, the fact that it is undeniably *there* is not sufficient to be certain we are contemporaries of it. This is because co-presence with the event is never simply chronological: if so, we could not say that something (un-believable) *happens* to us.

For Deleuze, this problem opens to the central question of "belief in the world." Belief, for Deleuze, is not belief in something (holding a representation as truth), but rather a belief by which the world holds together, and by which a becoming is effectuated, a belief that insures the imperviousness of a becoming-line, or the assumption of a determined relationship to time. From this immanent conception of belief, Deleuze short-circuits the direct opposition between reality and fiction and affirms a function of fabulation where fiction is presented as power and not as model. Defined as such, the function of fabulation is immediately political:

It is the real character who leaves his private condition, at the same time as the author his abstract condition. [...] It is a word in act, a speech-act through which the character continually crosses the boundary which would separate his private business from politics, and which *itself produces collective utterances*.<sup>22</sup>

Insofar as it constitutes itself as a fabulation power, Deleuze can say of cinema that it "becomes a free, indirect discourse, operating in reality."<sup>23</sup> Belief engaged in fabulation *operates* in reality—it works, realizes, effectuates. If there is a policy in Deleuze, we must look for it at the peak of belief and fabulation, in a complex back and forth between effectuation and counter-effectuation.

The gesture of intercession unfolding in *Still Life* is nothing less than an attempt to rise to the event that is the construction of the Three Gorges dam. It is in this context that we should understand the introduction of fantastic elements in *Still Life's* narrative: a UFO crossing the sky, a building of surreal architecture suddenly taking off like a rocket, characters from an era that has past using cell phones and playing video games; these imaginary elements problematize the relationship to the real and reveal a necessity for it to be made fiction, in the mode of fabulation. To justify the surrealist side of *Still Life*, Jia will simply mention that in China, "unbelievable things happen all the time. [...] We sometimes have a hard time believing what we see."<sup>24</sup> Filming "from life," Jia oversteps strict realism to reach at the fabulatory fusion point of the real, filming not only the world, but our belief in this world. In doing so, he offers a sort of fictional and collective fulcrum for the personal biographies of the victims of the dam's edification who are also at risk of not withstanding the demolition, of being unable to integrate their difference to this larger-than-life event, and of being swept away by the waves of a fatally distended time.

Passage: The Eye of 拆 (Chai)

For the present shape of this world is passing away.  
—Paul, *Letter to Corinthians*

*Still Life* takes us into the ruins of a city that's disappearing, using the workers' demolition labour as a common thread. "The first time I saw the destruction of those buildings," says Jia, "I really felt that it meant the end of something, but also the beginning of a new era."<sup>25</sup> Several sequences in the film show different aspects of tension between past, present, and future. At one point, for example, we can see a group of archaeologists working to salvage vestiges of the past. Relation to the past is also very important in the encounter between San Ming and Mark, the young impersonator of the famous actor Chow Yun-Fat who dies later in the film. San Ming tells Mark he wants to reconnect with the woman he had bought 16 years ago. The object of his quest involves a certain loyalty towards the past—"we do not forget what we are," he says—contrasting with the ways of young Mark, who wants to be as modern he can be, and claims to live in a "world of adventurers." At one point, the two exchange their cell-phone numbers, and San Ming's ringtone plays "Long live the brave people." When he hears it, Mark exclaims: "Fuck! Brave people? None of those in Fengjie these days!" Note that this same expression, found in the Mandarin title of the film, 好人 (*hao ren*), accentuates its historical dimension. The sequence continues with the music of Mark's ringtone, which seems to have been composed expressly to describe the current situation in the valley of the Three Gorges: "Waves flow, waves pound/the river runs for a thousand miles/It surges through our world of woes/and carries all of our sorrows." To the music, the camera then turns to a television screen that will show a sequence of images beginning with a woman in tears, and continuing with a ship sailing on the river. This gentle, beautiful, filmic transition will conclude with the UFO passing overhead.

The situation is harsh, very harsh, for migrant workers appointed to the demolition of Fengjie. "All of these workers are more or less unemployed," says Jia, "are more or less homeless, with this perpetual movement from one place to another, this feeling of permanent exile."<sup>26</sup> These workers occupy a crucial position in Chinese economic development, and it is no coincidence that they are Jia's topic of choice. They are the great sacrificed people of Chinese economic development, at once indispensable and supernumerary. One particularly striking scene of *Still Life* sums up their condition: while bare-chested workers hammer at the remains of a collapsed building, a team in protective suits is going through the ruins, spraying



pesticides in preparation for what will soon become the riverbed. A strange music emphasizes the incongruity of the moment, while on a wall still standing, a poster reads: "Give yourselves, bodies and souls." Time runs out: in some way, the future is about to happen, but obviously, this future will not be the workers', who will have already given everything.

In showing this solidarity with the fate of the workers, the imaginal power of *Still Life* is concentrated in a political present tense, on the cutting edge of the demolition process. Amidst the ruins of Fengjie, Jia taps forces that are irreducible to the hollow fable of economic progress and national power that saturates the Chinese mediascape and deprives the labouring class of an adequate representation of its condition. The ultimate stake of Jia's intercession gesture is to translate into images the power of destruction mobilized in the Three Gorges valley, in a way that educes a becoming and configures it as a passage. But how does he do it?

Anyone who has travelled to China in recent years knows that an essential feature of its current situation may be observed in a ubiquitous figure constituting a real threshold between the old and new, the past and future: 拆, *chai*, which means "demolition," a character that can be found on any building to be destroyed. We could say that Jia's act of intercession is to integrate the latent dynamism of the *chai* figure, and actualize its readability, in the heart of the chaos brought on by the accelerated destruction of Fengjie. This readability is provisional and punctual, as is the passage of this disappearing world's figure. Like other contemporary Chinese artists, Jia invites us to wholly go through the *eye of chai*—only at this price can there be contemporaneity in China.

Discussing classical Chinese poetry, Qin Haiying mentions how "some verses appear as a juxtaposition of images [...] where each word becomes, as Barthes says about Mallarmé, a 'station' that can radiate in all directions."<sup>27</sup> This parataxic power of the Chinese character illuminates the particular status of the *chai* of *Still Life*. *Chai* presents itself as a paradigmatic example of imaginal interpolation, in which resides the stopping power of *Still Life*. For despite the apparently continuous character of the gesture of intercession, the passage is not smooth: it implies an imaginal interruption, the introduction of "an enduring interval in the moment itself"—an interpolation.<sup>28</sup> At the peak of the *chai* figure, *Still Life* di-stills some pure time.

If the figure of *chai* really does configure a possibility of passage, it is insofar as it is established as an imaginal *contretemps*, transfiguring the actuality of the destruction and making it into chronic, non-chronological time—a peak of de-actualized present. There is a passage only because, in one way or another, there is a stop *by* the image, a stop *at* the image. The present in *Still Life* is a present edited in images; and the site of the passages it configures may ultimately be what Foucault, when describing the threshold of the outside and fiction, called the "neutral intermediary" or "interstice of images."<sup>29</sup>

Conclusion: China in the Time After the Mutation

*The moment is the Caudine Yoke beneath which fate must bow to the body. To turn the threatening future into a fulfilled "now," the only desirable telepathic miracle is a work of bodily presence of mind.*  
—Walter Benjamin, *One-way Street*

In an interview conducted by Agnès Gaudu, Jia directly questions his relationship to Contemporary China and the incredible mutation that his country has experienced since the start of the economic reforms:

**Jia Zhangke** As a Chinese, I feel I do not understand very well what happened in China during all those years. The evolution went so fast... The male and female characters don't understand either. We are in the presence of a UFO. The policy of reform and openness taught us that life would improve. But, up to today, the better life is a UFO, it has not materialized... *I think that Deng Xiaoping's reform is over and that what we see today is not China in mutation, but China after the mutation.* It's like the dam. It is finished and we can even visit it. We have reached a certain level of material life, but a question remains to be resolved: how to manage all of this?

**Angès Gaudu** There will be no more change?

**JZ** *We are already at the end of what such reform could bring.*

**AG** On the question of where China is going, you cannot answer either?

**JZ** I make films that simply show what happens. Economy in good or bad health, open or conservative periods, everything is mixed up. It is difficult to synthesize. Before, I thought that China's problem was that the economic development was too quick. Today, I think that quickness is not a problem. Its problem is political and cultural openness, which are too slow, and the difference between these two rhythms, an accelerated economic development and a slow political change.<sup>31</sup>

What is particularly remarkable in this passage is that Jia systematically breaks from the story of economic transition and its promise of infinite progress. He highlights the growing gap between economic-technological progress and the political openness in his country, a discrepancy that is certainly not specific to China, and one that Bernard Stiegler defines as a "process of detemporalization," meaning that "society is disadjusting from the technical system, and this disadjustment is already, in itself, a loss of time."<sup>32</sup> In Jia's words, this would translate in the following statement: "we have not yet finished digesting recent history." But to trigger a "digestion of





history,” we must necessarily find its term, and it would be vain to look for it on a strictly chronological plane.

“If the idea of human progress doesn’t hold,” says Sigfried Kracauer, “it’s primarily because it is inseparable from the idea of chronological time as a matrix of a process that carries meaning.”<sup>33</sup> *Still Life*’s UFO symbolizes, in its own way, the limits of the progressive imagination. It is well known that UFOs appear only in the empty sky of progress, when the past’s constellations have lost all readability. They embody the arrow of homogeneous time, charging to the future: they are the spectral incarnation of the utopia of progress. But paradoxically, their apparition bends the line of chronological time. For an instant, the course of time is suspended. We could say that the UFO appears only at the point where the progressive imagination asymptotically approaches its own limit.

By saying that we are now facing China “after the mutation,” Jia resists the “informed progressive tendency” to think the present through a requirement for politico-cultural completion. *Still Life* posits itself exactly at this gap between the homogeneous, empty time of progress and the vital need to stop the present, or rather, give way to a concept of present “which is not a transition, [but rather one] in which time originates and has come to a standstill.”<sup>34</sup> In his study of messianic temporality, Agamben states: “Our representation of chronological time, as the time in which we are, separates us from ourselves and transforms us into impotent spectators of ourselves—spectators who look at the time that flies without any time left, continually missing themselves.”<sup>35</sup> To rise to the event that is happening to us, we must manage to counter the loss of time; we must literally give ourselves time. To give oneself time is, for San Ming or Zhao Tao, to bring about encounters that will help solve the problems of the past, so that each can conjugate his life in the present.

In my reading of Jia Zhangke’s *The World*, I discussed what Debord calls the “systematic organization of a breakdown in the faculty of encounter.”<sup>36</sup> In *Still Life*, by contrast, there is a celebration of the qualified time of the encounter. Significantly, the film is divided into four parts: tobacco, alcohol, tea, and sweets. At the time of planned economy, these luxuries were distributed amongst the population in an egalitarian way. In *Still Life*’s economy, “they are,” Jia says, “the sign of the persistence of social relations in China.”<sup>37</sup> The interpolation of these intertitles during the film effectively emphasizes its power to establish relations of these symbolic objects, which are signing, through their exchange, the open and undetermined time of the encounter. x

Notes

1. See Pierre Perreault, “Le discours de la parole” (1966) in *De la parole aux actes* (Montreal: L’hexagone, 1985); Gilles Deleuze, “The Powers of the False” and “Cinema Body and Brian Thought,” in *Cinéma 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

2. Etymologically, interpolation means “interruption.” In a complex exegesis of the relationship between potentiality and multitude in the political thought of Dante, Agamben notes that “in Averroist tradition, [interpolation] coincides with imagination.” For more details, see “L’opera dell’uomo” in *La potenza del pensiero* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2005), 375. It is also interesting to note that Adorno, speaking of Benjamin, says that “for him, philosophical imagination is the ability ‘to interpolate in the smallest detail.’” Quoted in Gérard Raulet, *Le caractère destructeur* (Aubier, 1997), 89. Furthermore, in *Cos’è il contemporaneo?* (Rome: Nottetempo, 2008), Agamben suggests that the contemporary divides and interpolates time. It is in this tradition that we position our use of the concept of interpolation.

3. For more details on the “paradigmatic gesture,” see the chapter “What is a paradigm?” in Giorgio Agamben, *Signatura rerum* (Torino: Boringhieri Bollati, 2008).

4. <http://www.theoria.ca/theoria/archives/2007/01/benjamin-the-destructive-character.html>

5. Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Galilée, 1993), 17.

6. For example, Xiaodong was an actor in Wang Xiaoshuai’s *The Days* (1993) and the art director for Zhang Yuan’s *Beijing Bastards* (1993).

7. Weiwei, Ai, Liu Xiaodong, Liu Xiaodong: *Painting from Life*, Timezone 8, Hong Kong, 2008.

8. In both cases, surprisingly, the Chinese prefer to say of the literate painter that he’s “writing.” Why? According to Zheng Wuchang, author of *A Complete History of Chinese Painting Studies* (Zhongguo huaxue quanshi) (Shanghai: Shuhua Chubanshe, 1985), “the scholars despise the term ‘paint,’ which has something of the craft to it, and makes you think of the formal reproduction of things.” Qin Haiying summarizes the comments of Zheng in *Segalen et la Chine: Écriture intertextuelle et transculturelle* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2003), 138. François Jullien also offers some elements of answer: “If we like to say of the literate painter that he writes, it is to signify that what he is representing—bamboo, rock or character—is never apart from a will to say [vouloir dire] and that the shape he traces, even when borrowed from the world, is invested with his subjectivity.” Jullien, *Le nu impossible* (Paris: Seuil, 2005), 91.

9. Dong, Film, directed by Jia Zhangke, Hong Kong, 2006.

10. Jean-François Billeter, *L’art chinois de l’écriture* (Paris: Skira/Le Seuil, 2001), 185.

11. For an enlightening analysis of this dialectical conception of the image tracing back to Aby Warburg’s “dynamogrammes” and “pathos formulas,” see Giorgio Agamben, *Ninfe* (Torino: Boringhieri Bollati, 2007).

12. Quoted by Agamben in *Ninfe*, 10.

13. Stéphane Mas, “Jia Zhangke: peintre pour caméra politique”, accessed October 24, 2008, [http://www.peauneuve.net/article.php3?id\\_article=171](http://www.peauneuve.net/article.php3?id_article=171).

14. The circumstances surrounding his death remain mysterious, but some sequences in the film lead us to believe that Mark, who was not a worker, was the victim of a settling of scores between rival gangs linked to demolition companies.

15. In *Film Fables*, Rancière notes that documentary has the possibility of presenting the “meaningless truth of life” emblematic of aesthetic art, a feature which he opposes to the plausible action characteristic of representational art and its mimetic requirement: “The privilege of the so-called documentary film is that it is not obliged to create the feeling of the real, and this allows it to treat the real as a problem and to experiment more freely with the variable games of action and life, significance and insignificance.” Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2006), 17–18.

16. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Athlone Press, 1989), 130.

17. Mas, “Jia Zhangke,” [http://www.peauneuve.net/article.php3?id\\_article=171](http://www.peauneuve.net/article.php3?id_article=171)

18. Ibid.

19. Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, 273. Deleuze discusses still-lives in relation to Ozu, who greatly influenced Hou Hsiao-Hsien, one of Jia Zhangke’s principal sources of cinematographic inspiration.

20. The expression “to resist oneself” is a cornerstone of Santiago Lopez Petit’s thought. See *Horror Vacui: La travesía de la noche del siglo* (Madrid: Veintiuno Siglo, 1996). The reflexive form of the verb “to resist” allows for internalizing the opposing action. It also allows for it to be reconducted to the body.

21. For more details, see Philippe Savoie, “Impact durable du barrage des Trois Gorges sur le développement durable de la Chine,” *Revue Vertigo* 4, no. 3 (2003).

22. Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, 222–223.

23. Ibid., 155.

24. Mas, “Jia Zhangke,” [http://www.peauneuve.net/article.php3?id\\_article=171](http://www.peauneuve.net/article.php3?id_article=171).

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Qin Haiying, *Segalen et la Chine*, 23.

28. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, 155.

29. See Michel Foucault, *Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside*, trans. Brian Massumi (New York: Zone Books, 1987).

30. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Vol. 1: 1913–1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael William Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 483.

31. Agnès Gaudu, “On n’a pas encore digéré l’histoire récente,” in *Courrier international* 862 (May 10, 2007); my emphasis.

32. Bernard Stiegler, *Mécréance et discrédit, Vol 1: La décadence des démocraties industrielles* (Paris: Galilée, 2004), 71.

33. Quoted in Laurent Olivier, *Le sombre abîme du temps* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2008), 147.

34. Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” accessed May 31, 2012, [http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/Theses\\_on\\_History.html](http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/Theses_on_History.html).

35. Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 68.

36. See Erik Bordeleau, “The World without Future: Stage as Entrapment in Jia Zhangke’s Film,” *China Review* 10, no. 2 (2010); Guy Debord, *The Society of Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), aphorism 217.

37. Agnès Gaudu, “On n’a pas encore digéré l’histoire récente.”

Images

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