

Ellipses and Amnesias

Poetics and Figures of Time in Contemporary Chinese Cinema

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ABSTRACT: Seen from a Western perspective, contemporary Chinese cinema seems to be characterized by two interrelated dimensions: a positive tendency to formal experimentation and a stimulating — and maybe symptomatic — obsession with issues related to time. The purpose of my paper is to investigate the relationship between these two features utilizing a comparative approach. Time as an aesthetic object pervades Chinese cinema across genres and atmospheres, from drama to comedy, from thriller to documentary. Despite the differences between these kinds of movies, the theme conceals a sort of common key, which can be used to interpret Chinese culture and tastes. I will attempt to provide the semiotic schemes for comprehending how time is quantitatively and qualitatively created in a corpus of movies, also comparing them to their ideal counterparts in Western cinematography in order to pinpoint the reciprocal formal specificities. *Mountains May Depart* (山河故人, Jia Zhangke, 2015) splits itself in a sort of dialectic between past, present and future, and reflects on the trauma of separation; *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (白日焰火, Diao Yinan, 2014) combines the feel of noir movies with the materiality of time; *A Touch of Sin* (天注定, Jia Zhangke, 2013) juxtaposes four different space-times, uniting them with a violence which is highly metaphorical, as happens, for example, in the postmodern splatter of Quentin Tarantino; *Mrs. Fang* (Wang Bing, 2017) follows in a documentary frame the life of a woman affected by Alzheimer's disease, with a slow rhythm which clashes with the frenzy of modern life, configuring two times that interface by reflecting on the importance of memory. At the end of

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my paper the peculiarity of time in contemporary Chinese cinema will emerge, both from a stylistic and a symbolic point of view.

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1. Time and Visual Texts

Chinese cinema is a cinema of great importance, sharing certain features with Western cinema, but characterised by its great attention to form, its themes of strong impact, and its particular management of time, which deserves to be examined. We will therefore proceed through an analysis of certain films in order to demonstrate how, even while they belong to different genres, they are able to delineate a specific aesthetics of time.

We are talking here about two ways of understanding time, which concern all films. Traditionally, in semiotics we can in fact identify a quantitative temporality, which regards the effective duration of an action described in the text, and a qualitative temporality, which has to do with the quality of time. When we speak of quantitative temporality, we think of the fact that films have a certain duration, which we call the time of enunciation, and that they tell stories which unfold in a specific time frame, which we call the time of the story; this time frame is treated by films in certain ways, with cuts or other expedients, which are part of the time of narration. A film classic like Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* from 1941 has an enunciation time of 119 minutes, which is the duration of the film, but has a story time which covers the entire life of the protagonist, and also a particular narration time, based on continuous flashes backwards and forwards, since the film actually begins with the protagonist's death².

The time of narration therefore has to do with the way in which the film is constructed, and marks the passage from purely quanti-

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tative time to qualitative time. It can be dilated or compressed. Furthermore, it can place the emphasis on specific sections of time, and in this case we speak of aspectuality, a category elaborated in linguistics and in semiotics by great names like that of Algirdas Julien Greimas³, which can be inchoative if the accent is placed on the beginning of the action, durative or progressive if the accent is placed on its unfolding, or terminative if the accent is placed on its ending (Greimas, Courtés, 1993).

Paintings can be very useful for helping us to understand this category. Charles-Philippe Larivière's *Bataille de Montgisard près d'Ascalon* (<http://collections.chateauversailles.fr/#69abcab8-ada8-41bf-9650-b1e6152e348c>), for example, depicts a precise historical event, that is, the Battle of Montgisard on 27 November 1117, which saw the reign of Jerusalem win against the Ayyubidi, a Muslim dynasty. The painting semiotically places the accent on the beginning of the action, and crystallises this moment. The warrior faction is placed at the left of the painting, ready for battle, and the archers on the right have already drawn their bows, waiting to shoot their arrows. The painting is therefore formulated, at least in its most salient features, according to an inchoative aspectuality. It stops time at the start of a significant action.

In Hayez's famous painting *Il bacio* (*The Kiss*) (<https://pinacotecabrera.org/collezione-online/opere/il-bacio/>), instead, the moment which is fixed is that of a passionate kiss. The kiss is neither beginning nor ending. It is represented in its happening, an eternal happening, an infinite duration, which art fixes. Here we have the case of a typically durative aspectuality, which manifests itself not only in the narration of the kiss but also in the solidity of the bare background against which the two lovers are seen. If you then look at *La mort de Marat* (<https://www.fine-arts-museum.be/fr/la-collection/jacques-louis-david-marat-assassine>), in this painting everything goes to suggest a time which is about to end. Narratively

3. For a more in-depth semiotic analysis of internal and external time in texts see Volli, 2003.

the protagonist dies, with a letter in his hand, and the painting fixes his eternal dying. Furthermore Marat's body is not outstretched like those of the archers in the first picture or vertical like the protagonists' in *The Kiss*; his muscles are relaxed, depicted with a lighter touch, to signify the snapping of the tension of life. This here is a case of terminative aspectuality.

2. Time and Cinema

It is not by chance that we have used paintings instead of films as examples. Chinese cinema, in fact, is closely connected to the pictorial arts and often tends to treat the image like a real painting.

In addition, we speak of qualitative time also when the passage of time is rendered, as happens a lot in films, through semiotic devices like ellipsis, that is, the "cutting of time" by means of editing and of consequent time jumps, or of dilatations, that is, the "lengthening of time", for instance by means of slow motion, which serves to imbue it with passions and emotions, to emphasise its importance, to give time a specific meaning.

What's more, the cinema works on time through repetition, flashbacks and flashforwards, and many other stylistic devices, as well as through stories which deal directly with problems related to personal and social memory, to time, to remembering. The time of the film's form is directly interwoven with the time of its substance. It involves a constant reflection, whose roots can be found in the works of philosophers like Henri Bergson, who proposed a division between "spatialised time", that is, scientific time measured with scientific instruments, and "lived time", the interior duration we feel in our experiences⁴.

4. The theme of time can be traced in many of Bergson's works, such as *Essai sur le données immédiates de la conscience* (1889), *Matière et mémoire* (1896), *Durée et simultanéité, à propos de la théorie d'Einstein* (1922).

The relationship between time and the cinema has therefore been the object of many studies. These certainly include the Russian formalists (Éjchenbaum, 1927), and also authors like the Hungarian Béla Balázs (1945) or Rudolph Arnheim (1932), who concentrated on the absence of continuity in films, that is, on their capacity to blend different temporalities, a feature which makes them different from real life. Also very interesting are the more recent considerations of the English philosopher Colin McGinn (2017) who compared, probably aptly, the experience of the cinema with that of the dream, precisely because of the film's capacity to manipulate time in a similar fashion to what happens to the narrations that are created in our brains during sleep. Some other important theorists of cinema include: Jean Epstein (1946), André Bazin (1958–62), Albert Laffay (1964).

The semiotics of cinema has also addressed — and addresses — the issue of time. One of the most important semioticians of cinema, Christian Metz, distinguishes between the time of the signified (1968), that is, the time of the narration, and the time of the signifier, that is, the actual duration of the film. And, obviously, a place of honour goes to Gilles Deleuze who devoted much of his work to the problems of time and of movement in the cinema (1985). Time is therefore fundamental for the cinema, it is the key which defines it, since the cinema is “image in movement”, *Art of the Moving Picture* as Vachel Lindsay wrote in 1915 in the first theoretical text in English on the cinema. The cinema is therefore image which is articulated in time.

3. A Grammar for Chinese Cinema?

In contemporary Chinese cinema the issue of time appears extremely important. The problem of time in contemporary cinema begins to emerge at least from the rise of what is called the “Fifth Generation” (Ni, Harootunian, 2002; Cornelius, Haydn Smith, 2002;

Nie, 2003), between the Seventies and Eighties, which became of international importance thanks to authors like Zhang Ymou and Chen Kaige, and which continued in the Nineties with the “Sixth Generation”, set on highly independent registers, with directors like Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai, to Jia Zhangke, Zhao Liang, Wang Bing, Ning Ying and many others, who have often consecrated their fame abroad, through festivals which have permitted them to export many films of outstanding quality. These two generations of filmmakers, who constitute to all effects an important Chinese cultural heritage, were formed prevalently in fertile cultural environments like Shanghai and Beijing, but also thanks to the viewing of Western films, often difficult to find. In their films, time becomes a predominant subject of investigation, because they are collocated between the present breathtaking expansion of China as a major world power, and the past formation of China as the People’s Republic.

In these films the characters always live in some kind of tension, trying to find their place in a complex world where the present attempts to mediate between the well known past and an unknown future. We are dealing here with films that are always extremely experimental, characterised by at times radical stylistic choices, creating a filmic grammar of great interest, which finds some points of contact with “traditional” Chinese cinematographic aesthetics. Bibliographical research, in fact, consents the discovery of certain defining features of a traditional Chinese cinematographic style.

Lin Niantong’s *Chinese Film Aesthetics* (1991) and the anthology edited by Linda Ehrlich and David Desser, *Cinematic Landscapes* (1994) sustain, not wrongly, that in Chinese cinema long takes prevail over editing. Lin Niantong (1991, pp. 7–35) therefore speaks of «montage within the long take». It is also rather common to find indications of a fairly widespread utilization of camera movements. On the contrary, in the contemporary Chinese cinema of the Sixth Generation the movements of the film camera are not necessarily so frequent, even if however present and in some cases fundamental, as in Wang Bing’s utilization of the handheld camera. Lin Ni-

antong (1991, p. 41–9) attributes this tendency to the relationship between Chinese cinema and traditional painting where “multiple perspectives” and “elastic framing” can be noted (Wilkerson, 1994, pp. 39–41). In short, traditional Chinese cinema — the cinema of Cheng Bugao, Wu Yonggang, Sun Yu and many others — conceives the film as constituting part of an organic artistic discourse together with the other traditional arts such as painting and music. Already in this sense great emancipation can be traced, seeing that at the origin of cinema in the West not everyone agreed in defining it an art form.

Another component of the traditional aesthetics of Chinese cinema is the emphasis on flatness over depth, and in general the tendency to avoid chiaroscuro (Hao, 1994, p. 54): *Twin Sisters* (Zheng Zhenggiu, 1933) is often mentioned as the first example of «flatness of composition, horizontal extension, and even lighting» (Ni, 1994, p. 69), so as to «obscure the vanishing point and weaken the sense of depth» (Hao, 1994, p. 47). Lastly, it is a fairly pervasive idea that the shot scale in Chinese cinema is based on a “medium–shot system”, so that the film camera is neither too far from nor too near the object being filmed, always in line with the traditional aesthetics. This is a matter of so–called «distanced framing» and of «the lyrical over the narrative» (Berry, Farquhar, 1994, p. 100; An, 1994, p. 120). It is also said that traditional Chinese cinema is built on the pictorial aesthetic where «boundlessness», «emptiness» and «vast horizontal extension» (Ni, 1994, pp. 67–9) are widespread, so that the figures appear subjected to the environment, «resulting in a large number of “empty shots” that convey the oneness of humanity and nature» (Hao, 1994, p. 50).

The result of these widespread stylistic choices has to do with an idea of cinema that is more poetic and less anthropomorphic, in line with Chinese poetry and art which «stress lyrical evocation over narrative development» (Wilkerson, 1994, p. 42)⁵. While these notions

5. The collection of notions and references in this paragraph has essentially been drawn from the excellent compendium in Udden (2012, pp. 265–6), which maps the issue clearly and thoroughly.

are useful for creating some kind of order in the aesthetics of traditional Chinese cinema, not all are valid for contemporary Chinese cinema, which is based also on the questioning and overturning of certain aesthetic models.

4. Jia Zhangke and the Ellipses

Let us start then from two films by Jia Zhangke, a leading name in the Sixth Generation. The films are *A Touch of Sin* from 2013, which won the *Prix du scénario* at the Cannes Film Festival, and *Mountains May Depart* in 2015, which was presented both in Cannes and at the festival in Toronto. All the films that we will analyze are in fact well-known in the West.

A Touch of Sin is what we would define a film in episodes. Four segments of thirty minutes each alternate with one another as separate blocks, and yet are connected by a *fil rouge*. In all of them the ending is violent and tragic. The treatment of time is fundamental because all four of the stories are presented through the eyes of characters who cannot adjust to the country's rapid change, and who in the end give in to the stress caused by an existence that they cannot control. The explosion of violence is always very fast, as in a *raptus* or outburst. *A Touch of Sin* represents the present which collapses because it is unable to see the future. Thus in the first story the worker Dahai, after having attempted in every way to recover the money the mine boss has unjustly stolen from the workers, even reporting him to the central inspectorate in Beijing, and after having suffered a great deal of injustice, takes justice into his own hands and shoots the man dead. In the second story San Zhou, a young boy from Chongqing, despite having a family that loves him, cannot find anything worth living for, and so becomes a criminal and brutally kills a woman for her handbag. In the third episode a young woman, Xiao Yu, played by Zhao Tao who has a long artistic relationship with Jia Zhangke, works as a receptionist in Hubei, and refuses to

prostitute herself to a client, who begins to humiliate and ill-treat her, until she kills him in a fit of anger. In the last episode Xiao Hui, a boy from Dongguan in the province of Guangdong, earns his living by working very hard, first in a factory, then in a night club, and then again in a factory. His grey life is given some colour by an unexpected love story which, however, ends badly and the boy, alienated by work and by the absence of prospects, commits suicide by throwing himself off a balcony. *A Touch of Sin* is therefore a film of emancipation, where themes like the class struggle, gender violence, and the condition of the young are shown in all their harshness.

All the stories have been inspired by real events, such as the suicides of young workers in the Foxconn plants in Shenzhen, young people who perhaps have migrated to the cities from the countryside and fail to feel integrated in the context of the great metropolis, where time is accelerated and the rhythms of life become at times unsustainable.

There is in the film, first of all, a prevalence of long shots rather than medium ones, and long takes, which are then supplanted instead by the use of more frenetic editing at the moment of the explosion of violence. It is as though the lived time of the characters were reflected by the type of editing. The more frenzied the instants become, the more the editing mirrors them then, when calm re-



Figure 2. JIA ZHANGKE (2013), *A Touch of Sin* (chinese title: 天注定), China, 135 min., Xstream Pictures, Office Kitano, Shanghai Film Group Corporation.

turns, so do the long takes. The long takes and long shots are precisely figures of spatialisation and dilatation of time. The characters, little and dominated by the environment, are thus perceived as in a state of meditation and total absorption with the landscape. Here, furthermore, as in other films that we will see, there is the presence of the snow and of the mines, isotopies, that is, recurring images or themes, which contrast the suavity of nature with the brutality of work. The long shot is a way of showing China as a nation–continent, a paradoxical Sinascape where a logic of “solitude in the multitude” prevails⁶. The snow is nature that is contrasted with the mines, the cultural heritage of hard manual labour which is very deeply felt in China.

As we then see, another indication of the presence of time stretching between past and future, and clashing with the present, is the fact of resorting at the same time to strongly traditional contexts, also through the staging of celebrations and traditional music and the emphasis on the statue of Mao, and contexts of modernity, represented by the metropolis. The present is the meeting point between communism and capitalism, difficult to grasp but tangible.

The aesthetics of slowness is counterposed by that of splatter or of pulp, which occurs right from the first episode with the protagonist Dahai, a bad boy who, after being humiliated, strikes back and takes revenge. His is blind revenge, as if to say that not only is the mine boss guilty of having sold out to an industrialist from Canton and having been corrupted at the workers’ expense, but that everyone, that is, the whole of society, is equally guilty. Madness explodes unexpectedly as a consequence of a feeling of inadequacy.

There are many links here with Western cinema, like that of Quentin Tarantino and the various figures of punishers and anti-heroes who take justice into their own hands. In Tarantino’s films, in fact, there are also characters who are marked by their verbosity, and long scenes where nothing seems to happen except for the characters’ continuously being frustrated, until eventually the pulp vio-

6. The expression “Sinascape” is taken from Xu, 2007.

lence is unleashed, which is a form of revenge, often social in nature, like in the films of Jia Zhangke. This is particularly true in the more recent films directed by Tarantino, for example, *Kill Bill* (2003–4), *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), *Django Unchained* (2012), *The Hateful Eight* (2015).

And so, in *A Touch of Sin*, whose title is a clear evocation of *A Touch of Zen* by King Hu in 1971, once the violence has exploded, there is a return to slowness, in the final frame, with the police on one side, the horse on the other, and finally an empty shot. The connection with *A Touch of Zen*, which is a typical example of a *wuxia* film, that is, a film containing a martial hero, is glaringly obvious. In King Hu's film the young girl seeks redress for the tortures suffered at the hands of her father during the Ming epoch; in *A Touch of Sin*, similarly, the characters are postmodern heroes who are also searching for justice, but alone, in a world which refuses to listen to them.

In the second episode the young protagonist has a Chicago Bulls cap, which symbolises his relationship with American capitalist culture, in contradiction with traditional Chinese values. Here, too, the figures of slowness recur, as in the scene where he peels an apple, while another character crochets, both practices that necessarily require time and reflection. The scenes are perfectly inserted in a dialectic between fast and slow, between meditation and instinct. There is also here a recurrence of fireworks, a theme which we will see in another film. The fireworks, like the presence of the image of a tiger, are anticipations of and metaphors for what is going to happen. The firework drifts slowly across the sky and then explodes; the tiger, locked in a cage, moves more or less slowly, desiring revenge for its imprisonment. These are what in semiotics we would call metaphors but also visual prolepsis, that is, rhetorical figures that function as anticipations of time, which make us intuit in advance what is about to happen.

And there are also recurrences of occasions that have the flavour of a turning point in time, events like New Year's. In addition to the long shots we would also point out here scenes in which there is a

relationship between anonymous madness and a solitude that is instead impregnated with meaning. And, as in the preceding episode, animals unwittingly close the scene and put everything to rights again. First it was a horse, now it is the cows.

For the moment we will stop here, as we cannot go in depth into all four episodes. What we want to say is that, as Chris Berry sustains (2009), time in Jia Zhangke's films is Postmodern time. And it is a different Postmodernism compared to the "asynchronic" time, the eternal present, of the West as identified by Fredric Jameson (1984). It is a New Postmodern Realism which also looks towards Hollywood, but cynically. Jia's characters are all marginal and ordinary, the "Chinese everymen and women" who symbolise a China in rapid change. They are characters in movement, but who are not going anywhere, who are part of a temporality in flow. This New Postmodern Realism can be understood as the official aesthetics of contemporary China. And, as we have already been able to appreciate, Jia Zhangke's films therefore use many techniques to express time, both through the production of visual metaphors (the tiger, the fireworks) and with the use of cinematographic techniques (long takes, editing, etc). They are always films that talk about the country and its history, where the characters are to be understood not as single individuals but as representing all Chinese people. The protagonists of Jia's cinema try to move, but in the end they meet failure and death (Berry, 2009).

Mountains May Depart is another film which, just like the previous one, enjoyed wide appeal abroad. Silvio Danese has written:

Three parts of skillfully disturbing and engaging direction [...]. Unforgettable characters, like in a novel by Balzac or Flaubert, updated to the theme of decline and to a different reluctance towards love in our epoch. It is a film about time, what has been, what is, what will be (...). A propos of cinema emotion is always honoured, which yet is fleeting, less important



Figure 5. JIA ZHANGKE (2015), *Mountains May Depart* (chinese title: 山河故人), China, France, Japan, 131 min., Xstream Pictures, Shanghai Film Group, MK2.

or profound than sentiment. Jia leaves us with a true sentiment, to live and to meditate upon.⁷

If in *A Touch of Sin* there are no ellipses, the four episodes following one after the other as if they were all at the same time, in an eternal incomprehensible present, *Mountains May Depart* instead provides us in two hours with two immense ellipses, which divide the film into three closely connected episodes. The story unfolds, in fact, in three periods of time. The first is in Fenyang in 1999, the year in which China was to re-establish its sovereignty even over Macao, where two childhood friends, Liangzi and Zhang, compete for the beautiful Tao, once again played by Zhao Tao. Tao will finally choose to marry the rich Zhang while Liangzi, a humble miner, will go away. This is where the first ellipsis occurs, a temporal leap of a good fifteen years. It is now 2014 and Tao and Zhang have divorced. What's more, Zhang has gone to live in Australia with his son Dollar, who returns to his mother one last time on the death of his grandfather, and at this point speaks only English and does not seem to recognise his mother much. Liangzi meanwhile has fallen ill with cancer. Here comes the second ellipsis, and we are transported to Australia in 2025. Dollar is now a young man who is trying to

7. S. DANESE, *Nazione-Carlino-Giorno*, May 7th, 2016 (author trans.).

learn Chinese, his father has gone bankrupt, and he wishes to meet the mother he can hardly remember again. In addition, he has a love affair with a much older woman, who is also a kind of mother figure to him. The film does not reveal to us whether Tao and Dollar will find each other again, and ends with her dancing under the soft snow to the same music to which she was dancing at the beginning of the film.

It is moreover significant that the song is not Chinese, but rather a Village People hit, here in the Pet Shop Boys' version, called *Go West*. The song, in fact, encapsulates both in its sonority and in its text an entire ideology of the West, and the Pet Shop Boys videoclip is in fact a mix of Western and Communist stereotypes (for example, a red Statue of Liberty) which form the confused world where Jia Zhangke's characters perhaps feel they live today.

The fact that the first and last scenes are built around the same dance and on the same notes, with the protagonist Tao first very young and happy and then old and nostalgic, inserts the film within a sort of circularity. It is once again the signifier, the structure of the film, that works in close connection with the signified: the story told is not one of many stories, but is everybody's story, and everybody is compelled — to use Friedrich Nietzsche's expression — to an eternal return to the present. The fact that Tao dances at the end, even though she is a woman who has been defeated by life, is a sign of acceptance but also of revolt. She dances and the editing shows her with her back to us, against a backdrop of traditional Chinese buildings, with the snow in the background, to signify her awareness of being part of a historical circuit which has echoes in the present.

In addition there are many of the stylistic devices that we talked about in relation to *A Touch of Sin*: the presence of events that are markedly connected to time, like the Chinese New Year, the fireworks which are thus configured as a transtextual isotopy, the coal mines, the snow. And also aspects of novelty, like a "disco aesthetics", with certain elements of that which in the West is called the *vaporwave*, that is, a sort of nostalgia «for a dream that will always

remain out of reach» (Trainer, 2016, p. 421)⁸, which can be seen in the scenes of the first segment set in a discotheque; in the presence of a dog whose time of life is significant because it is related to the events that befall the characters (it is the puppy that Tao gets at the beginning of the film and that is with her in the final scene, despite everything that has happened); in the tiger in the cage that recalls the tiger in the tapestry in *A Touch of Sin*; in the presence of the trains which also appeared in *A Touch of Sin*, heterotopias as Michel Foucault would say, where Tao can spend more time with her son. She, in fact, says: «The slower the train, the more time I can spend with you». Other figures of time include the presence of *deja-vu* and false memories, especially in the third segment, where Dollar is more adult, and also the presence of an inter-generational relationship which means the relating with each other of two different temporalities. In conclusion, many elements in the film contribute to defining it as a reflection on the nature of time.

On the formal plane we can also see, as we did before, many empty shots or very long shots. These should not be regarded as *pillow shots*, that is, as frames useful only to help the viewer comprehend where the scene that he or she is about to see is set. They are, instead, frames that have the function of showing how everything remains the same in spite of the events which befall the protagonists, and how the environment is able to absorb everything. This is a particular way of treating time and place.

5. *Black Coal, Thin Ice* by Diao Yinan

Another film that needs mentioning is *Black Coal, Thin Ice* by Diao Yinan in 2014. This is a noir film, with many links to the Western tradition in

8. The theme of vaporwave rises in the West during the era of the web, characterised by the so-called remix cultures. Often the vaporwave imaginary unifies music codes and visual codes, put together and transformed into memes, mini-games or similar web contents. For a semiotic approach to this panorama cfr Marino, 2014; Thibault, 2017.

contemporary cinema followed, for example, by the Coen brothers, and which also has a flavour, especially in certain frames, of classic Western movies like those of Sergio Leone. Here, too, the story is constructed around an ellipsis. The first rapid part is set in 1999, when a number of corpses are found in some mines in a little town in northern China. During the investigation, Inspector Zhang Zili finds himself involved in a shootout, in which he is wounded and sees his companions die. A time jump takes us to five years later. The inspector has by now healed but is depressed and given to alcohol abuse, yet he decides to return to the case and meets and falls in love with Wu Zhizhen, a woman who seems to be connected to the deaths in the mine. At the end, he discovers that she is actually the murderess. The film therefore once again revolves around time and the way in which it is absorbed by the characters, and has many points of contact with the works of Jia Zhangke.

The part set in 1999 is constructed to a slow rhythm, with the presence of many long takes and measured transitions. Everything is played out in long shots and with a certain depth of image, both characteristics which are less present in traditional Chinese cinema. All these rhetorical figures aim at emphasising a quality of time, a time which never seems to flow, especially after the discovery of the corpses and the deaths of the inspector's policeman friends, events which the families involved try to work through or forget, an impossible operation. The tension in these moments is also rendered by the dialectic between the hot coal in the mines and the coldness of the ice, elements which motivate the film's English title: *Black Coal, Thin Ice*. When the story shifts to 2004, time does not seem to have moved, and there continue to be narrative situations of "dilated time", as during the stakeouts in the car. Here, like in the films of Jia Zhangke, the slowness of time is contrasted with the instances in which violence explodes suddenly and uncontrollably, and is subsequently re-absorbed in pillow-scenes, silences, lingering moments on bridges which unfold extremely slowly. Here again the characters are ordinary and marginal, and live in solitude. And again here there are many empty shots which, as we said before, are not to be seen as pillow shots.



Figure 3. DIAO YINAN (2014), *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (chinese title: 白日焰火), China, 110 min., Omnijoi Media, Boneyard Entertainment China, China Film Co.

The whole film is therefore built on the relationship between time and suspense, and emphasises certain issues: the past which returns in the present, personal and collective trauma, the incapacity to forget the horrors which have occurred and which return like ghosts.

When towards the end of the film Zhang Zili discovers that Wu herself is the assassin, he goes to a dancehall where he had already been before and abandons himself to a liberating dance.

Here he reminds us in some way of Tao in *Mountains May Depart*, a demonstration that the directors of the Sixth Generation, even while at times operating with different registers, have many points of contact, both formal and thematic. The dance is a moment of re-appropriation of the self and of release, a catharsis where time once again belongs to the protagonist⁹. A time when in fact nothing materially useful is done, but intentionally so. This scene gives way to the final sequence, where the police take Wu to the scene of the crime to reconstruct what happened. She points out the places where she stabbed someone, and where there was once a bed there is now a wardrobe. The director's emphasis in this scene is once again placed on showing how, simultaneously, time modifies some things, while certain traces of the past remain the same forever. The entire scene is permeated by ironic tones, whereas the rest of the

9. The theme of dance as a ritual process of catharsis is studied in Spencer, 1985.

film has been significantly more sombre. When Wu and the police leave the building, a deluge of fireworks meets them in broad daylight and, although the police do everything they can to stop the thugs who are setting them off, their efforts are in vain. The smoke and noise envelop everything, before the appearance of the end credits. The fireworks and their explosions are incessant, and restore order by creating chaos.

Black Coal, Thin Ice is thus a film built on the subtraction of elements, as foreseen by a certain European aesthetics like that of Robert Bresson (cfr. Schrader, 1972), and is connected to all the stereotypes of classic Western noir, but with a somewhat cynical gaze, almost mockingly. In it are contained the disillusioned detective, the femme fatale, and a particular aesthetics of the weather that affects the characters. This is why we can sense the influence in the film of the Coen brothers' work in *Fargo* (in 1996) or in *No Country for Old Men* (in 2007), with its Western charm but with a certain depressed humour. The image of China which emerges is very similar to that of Jia Zhangke, made up of a multitude of people but also of a huge sense of solitude and a lack of faith in others and in the country.

6. *Mrs. Fang*

A different China, far more human, and with a completely different conception of time from the Western one is finally represented in *Mrs. Fang*, the latest film by Wang Bing, one of the most important directors of the Sixth Generation. He is part of a new movement in Chinese documentary cinema which was born in the Nineties from the need to narrate a country in great economic and social change, and to which belong names like Wu Wenguang, whose film *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* in 1990 is considered the movement's initiator, but also Li Hong, Xu Xin, and Zhao Liang who made a positive impression on the West through his five-hour film *Petition*, presented in Cannes in 2009, and *Behemoth*, presented at the

Festival in Venice in 2015, once again revolving around the infernal working conditions of the miners, this time in Inner Mongolia. This film marks another connection of great interest between Chinese art and Western art, since the entire film is conceived explicitly as Dante's *Divine Comedy* reinterpreted from the perspective of contemporary China. The foundry with its flames is Hell, the hospitals full of people whose work has made them ill are Purgatory, the city of Ordos is a phantom Paradise.

In this documentary panorama of deep social sensibility, which forms part of what Chris Berry has termed New Postmodern Realism, Wang Bing proposes from his very beginnings with *Tiexi Qu* in 2003 a cinema which is extreme in its duration, in the themes represented, in its formal choices, and even in the fact that often the shots are clandestine, taken in secret in places where they were not actually permitted. *Tiexi Qu* is a film that lasts over nine hours, divided into three chapters, entirely focused on the district of Tie Xi which in the Eighties had become the most important industrial centre in the country and then gradually closed down towards the end of the millennium. The film thus documents with a clinical eye the changes, the agonizing condition of the workers in the passage from a socialist-type economy to the new laws of the market, that is, the passage to the China of the present. The duration of the film, the themes treated in it, and the philosophy of cinema that lies behind it, associate Wang Bing with one of the most significant European directors and documentary-makers, Claude Lanzmann, who leapt to fame with *Shoah* in 1985, a monumental nine-and-a-half-hour film on the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis during the Second World War, and whose latest film was *Napalm* in 2017, a film partially shot clandestinely, like Wang Bing's, this time in Kim Jong Un's North Korea, with shots of the past interspersed with interviews from the present, in a temporal interweaving.

Wang Bing is therefore collocated fully among the contemporary directors of the most significant documentaries not only in Chinese cinema but worldwide. His films also include works like *Three Sisters*

in 2012, which won awards in Venice, Nantes and Freiburg, centering on the relationship between three little sisters from Yunnan and their father who goes to look for work in the city, or fiction films, that is, not strictly documentary, like *Goodbye Jiabiangou* in 2010, set in China in the 1950s and which shows the inhuman conditions of political prisoners and others in a work camp in the Gobi desert. In short, all Wang Bing's films revolve around the fundamental theme of the Chinese people's relationship with their present and with their historical memory.

From this perspective *Mrs Fang* amounts to a film that is heartbreaking but of extreme sweetness. Wang Bing once again pushes his work stretched between aesthetics and ethics towards the outer limit. This is the story of Mrs Fang, an Alzheimer sufferer who spends her last days of life at home in bed, surrounded by her family. Wang Bing documents in the real sense of the word, stripping the film of any narrative component, and only emphasising the dimension of time passing.

The beginning is a silent long take of Mrs Fang, in 2015. She is well dressed and erect, looking around her; we do not know whether she is aware of her illness already but we presume so, otherwise there would have been no reason to film her. The only sound is that of the river near her house, in the village of Maihui, near Huzhou in the province of Zhejiang. She then moves away from the frame with a troubled expression, but the frame remains fixed on the silent landscape. We are once again dealing with the "aesthetics of the empty shot". We then see her inside the house, at the centre of the frame again, always standing. Everything has a flavour of anticipation, of predestination. And in fact after three minutes and twenty-five seconds the ellipsis occurs, the time jump, and the second part of the film starts, which will occupy the remaining 82 minutes. What was previously a medium shot, fully in line with the traditional Chinese cinematographic aesthetic, becomes a close-up, very close, on Mrs Fang's face in 2016, a few months later. She now seems very thin, lying on her bed, more or less conscious, her mouth constantly open, unable to move. This terribly drastic passage, which occurs thanks to cinematographic editing, that is, through a form of the signifier, signifies the speed with which the illness has

spread, a speed which has made Mrs Fang's life essentially senseless even before her being reduced to this sad state. The lingering on Mrs Fang's face will be constant throughout the film, and will be alternated only by two other types of scenes: scenes where her family, full of life, are around her and talk in her presence about all kinds of things, including her condition and the choices related to her funeral, and scenes of the family fishing. The close-ups of Mrs Fang are infinite, all the same: it is as if time around her becomes increasingly slow. The camera gaze is objective but also subjective: we see her from only one point of view just as she now can see the world only from one point of view. So the film imitates the very condition of the person it is talking about.

The fact that the relatives who surround her continue to live, involving her in their conversation, talking without stopping, represents a particular sensibility, one not so common in the West. It is as if Chinese bio-ethical philosophy were distancing itself from that of the West, where the ill person is put in places like hospitals and, frequently, surrounded by silence. Here the sick person continues to be part of family life. This is a great demonstration of sensitivity.

The fishing scenes are also functional in relation to the concept of how life goes on and the primary necessities, for example, the need for food, do not cease to exist. Just under halfway through the film, a long scene of nighttime fishing causes a crisis in the filmic image, elaborating a discourse on the difference between the visible and the



Figure 6. Wang Bing (2017) *Mrs Fang* (Chinese title: 方绣英), China, 86 min.

non-visible. Little can be seen of what happens in this night scene, just as little can be understood of Mrs Fang's condition, as we do not know what she is or is not aware of, or what she does or does not feel. And, above all, the duration of the scene is useful because on returning to the house, the long close-ups of the patient resume, as she lies there, always immobile. It is as if two different times, that of life and that of death, intersect, until the end, when Mrs Fang dies. Here Wang Bing once again changes perspective.

Mrs Fang's face is no longer filmed in close-up, and there is a return to a medium-shot where the whole family can be seen around the bed. She can no longer be seen. Wang Bing thus reveals himself able also to make use of some of the ideas of European cinematographic theory like those of André Bazin who in 1949 declares it impossible for the cinema to ethically film death. But the film is not over yet, and in fact there is a further ellipsis, which this time brings us to three months later. In a long shot one of the relatives is silently fishing in the stream. Mrs Fang has gone, dying of Alzheimer's, an illness which first of all provokes the loss of memory, yet everything around her goes on. In this extraordinary way does the film end.

Wang Bing's is an invisible incursion into the lives of Fang and of her family, a presence which becomes an absence. In the West too, obviously, the theme of illness is treated, as in *Still Alice* by Glatzer and Westmoreland in 2014, which also deals with the theme of Alzheimer's but is characterised by typically American excessive romanticization; or in the Spanish film *Mar Adentro* by Almodovar in 2004, which is a dramatic film of strong impact but is strictly narrative in flavour. Wang Bing's elegance is something completely different: his action of subtraction, his delicacy, his rigour which recalls a little also that of Japanese filmmaker Yasujirō Ozu, his continuous operating on a double register through which form becomes substance, signifier becomes signified, his adhering in a modern way to standards which may also be ancient, like respect for the unity of time, place and action elaborated by Aristotle, all these reveal a

way of making cinema that is outstandingly rare. In addition Wang Bing, perhaps more than any other contemporary Chinese director, formalizes a definitive breaking away from the Fifth Generation, even if there is a continuity of intent. The Fifth Generation, in fact, seems to revolve around what Dai Jinhua has called the “Zhang Yimou model”, which «involves mega amounts of investment, international crews, transnational locales, landscape spectacles, exaggerated icons of China plus myth–martial arts, maximally streamlined plots, expensive computer technologies and an unwavering Hollywood strategy» (Dai Jinhua, 2009, p. 40). Wang Bing’s, instead, is a new frontier in independent cinema, made up of small means, concentrating on personal stories which become universal, without any breathtaking views and above all without any references to Hollywood. This is surely true for Wang Bing, but in the end also for the other directors of the Sixth Generation, like Diao Yinan and, obviously, Jia Zhangke. This last, who makes films that are radically different from those of Wang Bing and who often is more markedly connected with Western cinema is, however, the creator of a new aesthetics of great importance, which demonstrates finally that it is impossible to define an aesthetics of Chinese cinema that comprises all its films, both in the case of traditional cinema and in that of contemporary cinema. As James Udden underlines, in fact:

Unfortunately, writers such as Lin Niantong have taken a narrow, singular path, seemingly searching for *one* definitive Chinese style with *one* viable source. This seems misguided. Chinese–language cinema over the decades has produced no monolithic, quintessential Chinese film style, but instead an impressive diversity of cinematic styles and techniques. Moreover, these are not the mere result of a singular cultural front or aping foreign models; rather, they also display inventiveness and experimentation due to greatly varying historical contexts. (Udden, 2012, p. 263)

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