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Poor Theory and New Chinese Cinema: Jia Zhangke's 'Still Life'

To speak about what we don't know – Poor Theory – is both daunting and exhilarating; so let me begin by outlining a number of motifs that might serve as tentative orientation points, starting with the notion of theory in 'poor theory.' Marx, we remember, criticized Proudhon for presuming to have arrived at a 'Philosophy of Poverty;' he stood Proudhon on his head and entitled his critique 'The Poverty of Philosophy.' What we might want to claim however is something a little different from Marx: not so much how philosophy or theory always lags behind the facts, hence its poverty; as how this lag, this poverty, can be a positive source and resource in our encounters with problematic texts; for example, with texts like the Chinese city or the Chinese cinema. Poor theory begins, then, I would say, with the salutary uselessness of existent theory: it sees existent theory neither as riches that we can live off, nor as a burden that we have to shrug off. Note that the stress falls equally on the salutary and the useless. In a similar vein, poor theory is neither a clear method nor an absence of method, but a method that we glimpse when we struggle with the anomalous details that don't fit into a reading. Such a method produces typically not the reading of a text, but the text of a reading.

A second related motif, tied to my examples but also relevant for poor theory, concerns what might be called, equally ambiguously, the poverty of images.

Take the example of images of the city: even as they proliferate, images of the city more and more tell us less and less about the city. How much have we learnt about Beijing from watching the Olympics on television? Some kind of radical disconnection between image and city seems to have occurred. Yet in spite of this, it would be premature to give in to postmodern cynicism or to Old Testament style pronouncements like 'simulacra of simulacra, all is simulacra.' Though images cannot capture the city directly, this does not prevent the city from seeping into images when they are not looking. Or to put this another way, the city cannot be observed directly, but it can be deduced from the effects and distortions it produces; effects and distortions that we call cinema, architecture, design, new media, and so on. All these cultural practices can also – should also – be thought of as parapraxes: something like slips of the tongue or other inadvertent mistakes that provide evidence for the existence of what cannot be made evident: a spatial unconscious.

Related to the image is a third motif that I will call duplicitous documentary. The duplicity I have in mind has nothing to do with lying, or with the banal observation that documentaries cannot be objective, because camera angles, cutting, narrative, lighting, etc. etc. are all involved. Rather duplicity has to do with a change in the situation of documentary today. The classic ambition of a documentary style – from Italian neo-realism to the British and Canadian documentary movement – has been to expose what ideology hides, to confront the factitious with the factual. However, in a situation when factoids are taken for facts, when 'reality' as in 'reality television' has become a game show, and when

fact is becoming as rare as ‘an orchid in the land of technology’ (Benjamin), what becomes of documentary? The only sure answer is that it cannot simply retain its old form or employ its old strategies. If documentary, like translation, is always a kind of betrayal, we must start with the fact of betrayal, with the betrayal of fact. Documentary must turn duplicitous, not in the sense of the filmmaker passing off as true what in fact has been staged (a criticism often made about ‘Nanook of the North’), but in the etymological sense of something made up of folds and doublings.

We will have occasion to return to these three motifs, but let me now introduce a fourth – the poor – by turning to Jia Zhangke’s film Still Life. It won the Golden Lion award at the 2006 Venice Film Festival – though we should not hold that against it. What kind of film is it? The usual answer is somewhat misleading.

Jia Zhangke is often thought of as the 6th generation filmmaker whose films show us “the other China”: not the China of the capital or coastal cities, with their new architecture, prosperity, and cosmopolitan culture; but the other 95% of China that most of us do not know, a China in all its poverty and backwardness, with old architecture and whole towns reduced to rubble in the name of progress, or submerged in water to allow projects like the Three Gorges Dam to be built: a China of ordinary but fascinating people. A summary might go like this: Still Life begins with a long traveling shot (like the unrolling of a Chinese scroll) that picks out ordinary people on a boat going to the old town of Fengjie. On May 1, 2006 (ironically, Labor Day), this two thousand year old town, already partly submerged, will be almost completely submerged, becoming a New Atlantis,

when the next phase of the Three Gorges Project begins, and the water level rises to 156.5 meters; as if towns, like commodities, had an expiration date stamped on them; and as if the emergence of the New China were posited on the submergence of the old. One of the people on the boat is Sanming, a coalminer from Shanxi who is traveling to Fengjie to find the wife and child who left him sixteen years ago. Soon after, the second main character, Shen Hong, also arrives by boat, to look for a husband whom she had not heard from for two years. These two characters never meet, and their stories end differently: Sanming chooses reconciliation, Shen Hong chooses divorce. We see, as we follow these two stories, a town being demolished; people uprooted and lives changed; all made worse by corrupt or incompetent officials, and the appearance of hustlers, opportunists and entrepreneurs out to make a fast buck. Even this brief summary may serve to suggest why so many commentators see the film as a kind of fictionalized documentary with an underlying humanist theme: the criticism of ruthless modernization that does not weigh the human costs, the celebration of the persistence, courage, and resourcefulness of poor people; hence, the Chinese title Sanxia Haoren (The Good People of the Three Gorges), with its Brechtian overtones. However, it seems to me that any reading of Still Life as social-documentary with humanist overtones largely misses the point. Who are the 'good people'? Not just the poor, who in the film are just as nasty and rapacious as you and me. Moreover, the main characters are not poor. Sanming makes a good if dangerous living as a coalminer, while Shen Hong belongs to the class of professionals and officials. If we stress the humanist

overtones too much, we miss the film's spatial complexities, and the duplicities of its documentary style.

Consider for example a number of details that summaries like the one given mention only in passing, details that are impossible not to notice as they stick out from and disturb the documentary surface of the film. One detail occurs fairly early when Sanming looking up at the sky sees what appears to be a UFO. As we follow the UFO racing across the screen, the camera reveals the second character Shen Hong, just arrived in Fengjie, also looking at it. Lest we think this is just a clever way of cutting from one story to another (like the opening scene of Stanley Kubrik's 2001: A Space Odyssey), we are given an even more incredible image later on, when we follow Shen Hong trying to locate her husband with the help of his friend the archaeologist Wang Dongming. In the midst of a town under demolition, we see several shots of a strange new building, looking like some structure designed by aliens. And then suddenly, without warning or subsequent commentary, the building takes off like a rocket being launched, as if it really were a structure built by aliens. What to make of these and other strange details, these surreal elements in a film that for the most part adheres to a realist documentary style? What kind of documentary is this? And what kind of space?

Perhaps the quickest way of answering this question is to place Still Life side by side with Holbein's famous sixteenth century painting The Ambassadors, also a kind of still life. In Holbein's work, most of the picture surface renders with meticulous care many objects that are symbols of the arts and sciences of the time – except for one object that seems to float in the foreground, a sixteenth

century UFO perhaps, an object we certainly notice but do not immediately recognize. The harder we try to place it in the realistic/perspectival grid of the picture, the harder it is to construe. We begin to see it only when we realize that the object is painted on a different grid from the perspectival, and that it is in fact the distorted or anamorphic rendering of a skull. The skull as memento mori, as a reminder of death and the vanity of human wishes, is of course a standard motif in Renaissance painting. What is radical in Holbein's picture though is how the skull as memento mori is both right there in front of us, and yet not there because it is placed in an anamorphic, twisted space. We can compare the fantastic scenes and images in Still Life to the anamorphic image in Holbein's painting. They function as reminders and indicators of a twist in social space. What Still Life documents is a social condition that has undergone a spatial twist. Just as in anamorphosis, what has changed are the invisible grids and coordinates by means of which we make sense of the picture; it is these changed coordinates that again and again assert themselves and disturb the documentary surface of the film. This suggests that what we called the spatial unconscious is not something that is hidden; it is nothing other than this twist in space, just as the notion of a 'socialist market economy' is a twist. The poor refers us therefore as much to poor and good people, as to these spatial deceptions that defy perception and conception.

Consider now a spatial peculiarity of the film: the space of Still Life is a space where people disappear; or better still, it is a space that disappears people, space acting almost like a terrorist state. The narrative stretches across a wide

expanse from Shanxi to Sichuan, and in this space people disappear, husbands and wives inexplicably drop out of sight; as if falling off a grid. When these people re-emerge they are almost unrecognizable, anamorphized figures in a convex mirror. Though they can be physically located – Sanming eventually tracks down his wife, Shen Hong her husband – in a sense, they cannot be found. Take Shen Hong's husband Guo Bin for example. His original intention for going to Fengjie was to work for the provincial government on provincial reconstruction; once there, he resigned from his government post to take up a job in demolition. He is now manager of a successful demolition company, whose owner Miss Ding is a woman with whom he is rumored to be having an affair.

More than any psychological factors, more than individual desire, it is this new and unfamiliar grid of disappearance and demolition that distorts social space and determines affective relations and life choices. These changing grids also structure some of the more poignantly incongruous images in the film, like the shot of workers futilely trying to demolish with hand tools the metal silos of an abandoned factory, or the shot of Shen Hong and Guo Bin dancing amidst the rubble. Even Guo Bin's affair with Miss Ding, owner of the demolition company, can be seen to be less a response to her person than to the seduction of space.

Like space, time too is twisted. Wang Dongming, Guo Bin's archaeologist friend, races against time to save the Han dynasty relics that are unearthed as the 2,000-year-old town will be demolished in two years. This sense of time running out, these cities at the end of time, produce their own paranoias even in

someone as solid and stable as Wang Dongming. In Wang's apartment, Shen Hong notices a strange sight: on a long string, Wang has hung, like on a clothesline, a number of different watches and clocks; an eerie image that calls to mind Dali's best-known painting 'The Persistence of Memory,' produced by what Dali called his 'critical-paranoid method,' which shows watches and clocks melting like cheese against a stable, normal-looking landscape: the 'camembert of time.' The physical landscape does not seem to have changed, but the markers of time have. These temporal twists are alluded to nowhere more clearly than in the changing meaning of nostalgia. We usually think of nostalgia as a strong desire to hold onto the past in the face of a confusing present. But in Dali and Jia, nostalgia takes on a different tonality. The question they implicitly ask is what becomes of nostalgia at a moment of disrupted, dissolving temporalities? What happens to nostalgia when the present instant becomes so readily the instant past?

Consider the scene in the first half of the film where the middle-aged Sanming strikes up an unlikely friendship with Mark, a young local hoodlum who later dies in a gang fight. As they exchange phone numbers, we hear the different ring tones on their cell phones. Sanming uses the old song "Bless the Good-Hearted People," reminder of an old Communist era that has long gone. Mark uses the theme song from the popular TV series "The Bund" about an old Shanghai recreated by Hong Kong television, a Shanghai that never was. The line "Present day society doesn't suit us because we are nostalgic" is a line that Mark likes to quote from the TV series. Through this juxtaposition of Sanming and

Mark, nostalgia begins to take on novel characteristics. It is no longer a generational phenomenon: not only are the old nostalgic, so too are the young, as if the young were now old before their time. Secondly, nostalgia belongs not just to the individual; there can be large-scale mass nostalgias, like the curious nostalgias that China in its globalizing phase has been experiencing. One bizarre example is nostalgia for the Cultural Revolution, seen in a brief vogue for Cultural Revolution memorabilia and the appearance of restaurants serving atrocious Cultural Revolution food. When this vogue died down, another took its place: nostalgia for the 80's, the period that marked the end of the Cultural Revolution when universities, conservatories and art academies were re-opened. But the fact that there can be nostalgia both for the Cultural Revolution and for its demise; the fact that nostalgia can be so arbitrary, the fact that both Sanming and Mark can be subject to it, suggest that what we are dealing with is more like a form of hysteria. When time itself is twisted, history is experienced as hysteria, including the history of socialism itself.

Nowhere is history-as-hysteria more evident than in the current characterization of China as a “socialist market economy.” What does the phrase mean? The official explanation is that it is an attempt by the state to harness market forces in order to develop socialism, not depart from it: an attempt by China to change identity without losing identity. On the other hand, some scholars like the Marxist historian Maurice Meisner believe that the phrase is a contradiction in terms, a regrettable betrayal of socialism; while others like the writers for the professional journal Finance Asia assert, with some glee, that China today is already capitalist

in everything but name. These diverse views on the 'socialist market economy' suggest that we are dealing not simply with either the life or death of socialism, but with something else, its afterlife: with a posthumous socialism whose emblem might be Mao's preserved body lying in state in Beijing. Socialism in posthumous form can have a vitality stronger than ever before. A spectre is haunting China today, we might say, and it is the spectre of socialism. Even globalization can be part of such a spectral history: China's turn to globalization can be thought of not as a contradictory about-face, or as a break with the socialist past, but as the form that a posthumous socialism takes.

The duplicities of a socialism repeated under global market conditions can be followed in the films of Jia Zhangke, particularly in his more recent films like The World and Still Life. In these films, everything happens in a present made up of two absences: on the one hand, the no-longer-there, a communist past that has gone forever; on the other hand, the not-yet-there, the as yet unrealized hope that the 21st century will prove to be the Chinese century. Hence an air of irony surrounds even the simplest of everyday events. For example, on the boat to Fengjie, Sanming and other travelers are forced to watch a magic show put together by some enterprising small town thugs. After the performance, the thugs extort payment from the captive audience in the language of globalization. "Haven't you heard of intellectual property rights?" This is ironic not only because of the spectacle of small town thugs talking like globalizers, but also because the simplest event is complicated by a twisted socialist history. In the old socialism, property was theft, and by extension intellectual property too was

theft, hence the indifference to intellectual property rights. In the new socialism, the watchwords are private property, even in Fengjie where few people have it. In this present made up of absences, we see new character types emerging, particularly the figure of the entrepreneur who has displaced the older figure of the revolutionary hero. We see the rise of new media, particularly the cell phone that everyone uses, from the peasant to the parvenu. The entrepreneur and would-be entrepreneur characterize the new Chinese city, just as the flâneur according to Benjamin characterized the modern European city. Equipped with cell phone, the entrepreneur lets her fingers do the walking.

In fact, one of the most interesting aspects of Still Life is the way it relates to new media. The film we know was shot in High Definition digital video, which gives the images great clarity and precision. There are many instances of the camera halting a shot or freezing it, as if trying to turn movement into “still life,” or to see it better. Examples include the shot of a 10 yuan bank note, with a picture on the Three Gorges on the back; shots of Sanming motionless against a landscape; stills of discarded objects, and so on. It is important to note however that Jia Zhangke’s use of new media is inherently paradoxical. It is used to show that the more precise the medium is, the more elusive the object becomes; just as the clarity of the still image of the picture of the Three Gorges on the back of a bank note does not prevent its meaning from changing. The use of digital video allows Jia’s images to be both precise and illegible, or better still, to be precisely illegible; just as in his use of documentary nothing is more illegible than the precise. This goes together with another aspect of new media that the film

explores for its own purposes, namely the way such media enables images to be spliced together seamlessly, so that anything can be connected to anything else and what can be imagined like UFO's and buildings-as-rockets can be made visible; in a word, the brave new world of Photoshop and the fake, the world of the spectral image. There is, however, a crucial difference between Photoshop and Jia Zhangke's use of it. The former is a kind of deception or hoax; the latter gives us what I have called the duplicitous, whose main characteristic is that it is not deceptive, but rather a provocation to thought, opening up the possibility that the real is not the true, that the visible is not the intelligible, and the intelligible is not the visible. The Photoshop-like images in Still Life allow Jia Zhangke's cinema to work in the gap between the visible and the intelligible; as if it were only by means of spectral images that the spectral history of socialism could be evoked.

Perhaps the most nuanced example of Jia's relation to new media is alluded to in the two strange scenes where we hear a street urchin belting out a pop song. The scenes are more comprehensible if we know that the song he is singing is 'Mice Love Rice', a cheaply produced song but the first to successfully bypass the usual channels of music distribution by going directly to the internet. It became the most popular song in China in 2004, with six million downloads a day. Hearing this song in relation to the ring tones of Sanming's and Mark's cell phones is almost like hearing three different layers of spatial histories in the film – through an archaeology of sound.

As for architecture, what can a poor town like Fengjie show us about architecture? With the exception of the building-as-rocket, Still Life does not seem to show us very much of architecture; but from another point of view it does. The sight of buildings in Fengjie about to be submerged or demolished is like the counter-image to the dominant image many of us have of buildings emerging or about to emerge in Chinese cities like Beijing and Shanghai. What emergence and submersion, image and counter-image, have in common is that both are anticipations of a future state of affairs, both speak in the future perfect tense: after a certain date, Fengjie will have been submerged, as after a certain time in the near future, Chinese cities will have emerged as the capitals of the 21st century. The future perfect tense leads to what might be called an architecture of anticipation, whose signs are not only the frenetic building boom in China today, but also the phenomenon of empty residential and commercial buildings in Shanghai and other cities as a result of speculative overbuilding, or the destruction of historical spaces like the hutongs in Beijing, to make way for miles after miles of mall spaces, even before the businesses are there to fill them. Many of the new areas in China's biggest cities look like nothing so much as ghost towns that bear an ironic resemblance to Fengjie; not ghost towns where people have left, but ghost towns where people have not yet arrived. It is also in terms of an architecture of anticipation that one puzzle might be resolved: the puzzle of why an ultra-conservative institution like CCTV should commission an innovative architect like Rem Koolhaas to design its Beijing headquarters. The playful visual form of the CCTV building consisting of two inverted and

interlocking L-shape structures gives no hint about the activities taking place inside—except as an anticipation of things to come.

Perhaps it is the Chinese city itself that poses some of the greatest challenges to urban theory, and offers the greatest opportunities. Transformed at unprecedented speed by new forms of capital, politics, media, and technology, the Chinese city threatens to outpace our understanding of it. We are forced to think of these cities then not just as physical, political and economic entities, but also as a cluster of indecipherable images, a series of contradictory discourses, a problematic experience of space and place, a set of practices that do not add up. The interest of Still Life for urban theory is that it challenges us to see the city not through privileged moments of insight or revelation, i.e. through epiphanies (suddenly, I understand); but rather through working with our uncertainty, puzzlement and confusion, i.e. through negative epiphanies (suddenly I understand that I don't understand). I understand that I have been seeing everything through a frame, and that what is necessary is not to frame what I see, but to deframe it and allow anomalous details to have their say. What is necessary is to turn theory into poor theory.

With Still Life in mind, we can say that poor theory is not theory about the poor; nor is it even theory in defense of the poor and subaltern, necessary as such a defense continues to be. It is certainly not the abandonment of theory, only its reconfiguration. Poor theory is a way of proceeding when clear solutions are not discernible and the means at our disposal are limited. If the city threatens to out

pace our understanding of it, the trick is to use the lag, the shortfalls and exaggerations, to provoke theory and to inform practice.

It is considerations like these, it seems to me, that we find in Still Life, seen for example in the way it ends: on a note of suspension, on a negative epiphany. As Sanming leaves Fengjie, he pauses and looks up. We have a final eerie shot of what looks like a man suspended in mid-air. In fact, the man is walking on a tight-rope stretched between two tall buildings, just as China today is on a tight-rope between two moments: on the one hand, a communist past that has gone forever; on the other, fantasies of the future, encapsulated in slogans that we see everywhere in Beijing like 'One World, One Dream;' and we might add: two nightmares, with China as the dreamer. It is this phantasy space, encompassing the aspirations of individuals, cities, and nations, that Jia Zhangke's film documents. It is also in this space that poor theory will have to do its work.