Negotiating Global/Local Identities: Jia Zhang-ke's *The World*

By: Clifford Hilo

> Cultural eccentricities are to be avoided, if not banned altogether. National history and culture are not to intrude or not to be asserted oppositionally or even dialectically. They are merely variants of one "universal"—as in a giant theme park or shopping mall. Culture will be kept to museums, and the museums, exhibitions, and theatrical performances will be swiftly appropriated by tourism and other forms of commercialism.
>
> *-Masao Miyoshi* (Miyoshi 747)

> I think those sorts of environments, those artificial landscapes, are very significant. The landscape in the World Park includes famous sights from all over the world. They're not real, but still they can satisfy people's longing for the world. They reflect the very strong curiosity of people in this country, and the interest they have in becoming a part of international culture…. Of course all of these landscapes are fake. But the problems our society faces are very much Chinese issues, and I think all this is not unrelated to that. We're living in a globalised age, in a world saturated by mass media, in an international city, as it were. But despite all that, the problems we're facing are our own problems.
>
> *-Jia Zhang-ke* (Jaffee)

There is something quite topsy-turvy in the reception of filmmaker Jia Zhang-ke's oeuvre. Over the past decade Jia has been constructing spacious and operatic dirge-like films based on his own experience in his home of Shanxi. While he had operated under the complete ire and disregard of the National Chinese Film Bureau (NCFB), his reception in the western film festival circuit was nothing less than incandescent praise, complete with the requisite overreaching comparisons to "Godard" and "Ozu," and unwittingly he ascended as the de facto representative of the up-and-coming sixth generation of Chinese filmmakers. It seemed the more and more the NCFB stymied the production and reproductive seeding of Jia's films throughout China, the more aesthetically en vogue and culturally important they became.

Indeed, the fears and censure of the NCFB were not without foundation, as Jia's films represented so clearly a portrait of a thinned and ruined post-Cultural Revolutionary China still feverish from the past decades. The common thread to all his films is a frozen socio-economic class that lacks the momentum to move forward, accompanied with the existential dread of being cordoned within this cultural stagnance (quite the appropriate definition for Jia's own relationship with the NCFB). But not to be excluded from the chorus of praise, the NCFB, with its surprising relaxation of its stringent pre-production codes, had green-lit the production of Jia's 2004 film, *The World*, a film about a globally oriented theme park in Beijing and the anxieties of the people who work there.

Displaced from the rusticated, familiar, small town spaces of his previous three efforts, *The World* is Jia's meditation on urban life in Beijing. In his first films, Jia encountered the specter of globalism indirectly with its intimations and undercurrents slyly cutting through his films' stylishly austere backdrops and mise-en-scene; *The World,* however, faces the powers of globalization at its full capacity in the city of Beijing, a recent hub of transnational corporate investment and foreign capital. Saskia Sassen regards this collision of the global/local within the metropolis of Beijing: "What happens to the relationship between state and city under conditions of a strong articulation between city and the world economy … How does the historical, political, economic, and social specificity of a particular city resist, facilitate, remain untouched by incorporation into the world economy?" (Sassen 14-5; Zhang 255).

It is then within the context of this cosmopolitan urban space of Beijing, the commercial, liminal nexus jointing globalism and localism, that I hope to tease out Sassen's colliding anxieties in Jia's *The World*. More specifically it is through Jia's dialectical visual formalism that splits into the stylistically different modes of realism (grounded in the aesthetics of neo-realism) and simulation that finds closer relations to Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson's notions of postmodern aesthetics. What this visual binary of real/simulation constructs is a Brechtian approach to revealing what Robert Stam calls "artistic syncretism" as a "painful negotiation … both of 'resistance' and 'surrender'" (277) and how Homi K. Bhabha regards the postcolonial condition:

> You cannot just solder together different cultural traditions to produce some brave new cultural totality. The current phase of economic and social history makes you aware of cultural difference not at the celebratory level of diversity but always at the point of conflict or crisis. (Huddart 124)

More succinctly, the textual, visual struggle within Jia's *The World* becomes more than a struggle of the real/simulation; it transcends the boundaries of the visual frame and allegorically embodies the struggles of competing global and local cultural identities.

Global/Local Dialogues

It is necessary to first contextualize the idea of the global and local before approaching the text itself, because the heart of this paper is not necessarily the idea of the separateness of the global and the local, but rather the contention and discourse of hybridity between the two. Zhang Yingjin favors this methodology of urbanity as an hybridization, citing Rob Wilson's "glocal city"—a globalization matched with "the reconstruction, in a sense the production, of 'home,' 'community,' and 'locality' in the same process;" and Arjun Appadurai's "framework for remapping the global cultural economy," which includes: "'ethnoscapes' (the flow of people, especially immigrants and tourists), 'mediascapes' (the flow of images, narratives, and information), and 'ideoscapes' (the flow of ideas and ideologies)" (Zhang 254-55). Noting his preference for the ideas of "flow," "fluid boundaries," and the multiplicities of spatial-temporality, one finds Zhang's approach a loosely adaptable, skeletal framework of reference suitable for a plurality of cultural identities.

As a counterpoint to Zhang's redemptive allowance for multiple formations of identity, there is Masao Miyoshi's highly reductive, and yet highly revealing, notion of globalization that envisions the disappearance of the boundaries of the nation-state at the hands of transnational corporations (even Zhang concedes to this disappearance). Extending the economic specificity of his argument to include a cultural globalization at the local level, Miyoshi continues,

> The return to 'authenticity'…is a closed route. There is nothing of the sort extant any longer in much of the world. How then to balance the transnationalization of economy and politics with the survival of local culture and history—without mummifying them with tourism and museums—is the crucial question, for which, however, no answer has yet been found. (Miyoshi 747)

Here, Miyoshi echoes Saskia Sassen's own postulation of the global/local relation, but finally defers to the idea of the politics of disappearance, where local histories are ultimately over-written by globalization.

Similar to Miyoshi's politics of disappearance, Ackbar Abbas argues his notion of cultural disappearance in regards to Hong Kong: "Disappearance here does not imply nonappearance, absence, or lack of presence. It is not even nonrecognition—it is more a question of misrecognition, of recognizing a thing as something else" (Abbas 7). Abbas figures that the very space of Hong Kong, lost in an imbroglio of shifting colonial, political, and economic history, has become misrecognized by those inside and outside of Hong Kong (Zhang 257). In a way, Miyoshi and Abbas share the same reductive quality of privileging, or rather, emboldening the surface levels of globalization, while Zhang suggests a resistance to this cultural disappearance within the realm of contemporary Chinese urban cinema: "In addition to documenting the processes of the 'disappearance' of the local in the age of post-colonialism, postmodernism, and postsocialism, the 'glocal city' promises possibilities of retrieving images, information, and memory of the past and of reimagining, reconstructing, and reinscribing new identities, subjectivities, and ethnicities" (253-54). In this way, Zhang privileges the local, marginal representations, refuting the complete disappearance of the local: "I would contend that, even if a postnational, 'borderless world' may be theoretically imaginable, the local will inevitably finds ways to reinscribe itself—by asserting its difference in the face of its predicted disappearance, if not already its pronounced death—in the transnational, transregional spaces within the hegemonic discourse of the global" (312).

It is from this dialogue of the global and the local, which is readily applicable to Beijing's position within the landscape of the global economy, that Jia's film *The World* finds itself situated more closely to Zhang's idea of "local reinscription," a form of visual protest that negotiates cultural frictions at the global and, most importantly, at the local, indigenous level. In the methodology of Teshome Gabriel's series of phases of Third World Cinema, Jia's film occupies the valorized position of the combative Phase III that documents the "lives and struggles of Third World peoples" (marginalized local) and insists upon the film's own "ideological ramifications" (Pines and Willemen 32).

Realism

As mentioned before, critics have hailed and complimentarily compared Jia's stylization to those of such veteran auteurs as Miklos Jansco, Robert Altman, Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Yasujiro Ozu, Jean-Luc Godard, and Raul Ruiz. In fact, Jia lists among his influences: Hou, Ozu, Robert Bresson, Federico Fellini, Vittorio De Sica, and specifically the film *Yellow Earth* by his mainland fifth generation predecessor, Chen Kaige (Lee). Through the prism of this corpus of texts, one can certainly see similarities to Hou's propensity for static frames grounding an interest in spatio-temporality, Bresson's mannequin, unacted physiognomies, and De Sica's interest in pinpointing smallish characters against the backdrop of inflated, capacious architecture. Then what centripetally binds all these stylizations to one another is Jia's interest in realism, an attempt at the preservation of material actuality, a fidelity to the real world. Bill Nichols explains, "Realism builds upon a presentation of things as they appear to the eye and the ear in everyday life…Realism presents life, life as lived and observed" (165-66).

Quite studied and familiar with the poetics of realism, Jia has been crafting and toning his own realist aesthetic starting with his previous efforts, *Xiao Wu*, *Platform*, and *Unknown Pleasures.* In all of these films, contextualized and spatialized within his home province of Shanxi, Jia has always been particular to the specific formalist qualities of distance, temporality, artifacts of ruin, and subdued physical tonalities in order to convey the "realness" of his realism. Tightly arranging and constructing his mise-en-scene, mise-en-shot, durative takes, and macroscopic distancing, Jia forges a highly unique and personal style that foregrounds his own metaphorical, poetic realism.

One of the obvious touch points for Jia would be the post-war cinema movement of Italian Neorealism, which Nichols describes in comparison to documentary: "the strong causal connections of the well-made Hollywood film that motivated every line of dialogue, every off-screen glance, every camera movement and cut fell away, leaving serendipity, contingency, and chance. The time and space of lived experience gained an imaginative representation. …Such films melded the observational eye of documentary with the intersubjective, identificatory strategies of fiction" (Nichols 167). What should be emphasized from Nichols is this cinematic preservation of time and space, the need to create a cinematographic index that binds reality to the image in a spatio-temporal relation. As Andre Bazin asserted, "The image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified as it were" (Bazin and Gray 15). Bazin championed the poetics of neorealism, particularly in that they shrugged off the expressionist tendencies of montage and discontinuity: "Neorealism contrasts with previous forms of film realism in its stripping away of all expressionism and in particular in the total absence of the effects of montage…they are no less determined to do away with montage and to transfer to the screen the *continuum* of reality" (Bazin and Gray 37).

Spatiality is vitally important to the "continuum of realism" in Jia's realist aesthetics in *The World*. Jia aims to preserve the indexical physicality of local spaces in his fidelity to

images through formalist devices such as the distance of longs shots, the mise-en-shot, how the camera movement itself interacts with the space, and the mise-en-scene itself.

Jia's largeness and fixedness of framed space is one of the realist modes of his style. He mostly pares away the heightened tensions of close-ups and facial profiles; instead he favors constructing his mise-en-scene in long and medium-long shots, thereby reducing a situational proximity to the characters within the frame. He also builds his space without much movement of the camera, creating a painterly tableau, much in the style of Ozu's fixed frame style. For example, Jia observes two characters centered in the foreground of an extreme long shot of the site of the World Park, the skyscrapers of New York City dominating the horizon line behind them. The characters conveniently chat about day to day matters, about one of the characters finding a job for the other's friend, and as the scene progresses, one notices two small figures in extreme long shot wandering about and chatting in a meandering way. Finally, the characters up front call to the characters in extreme long shot, who then proceed to move towards the foreground and also occupy the center of the frame. What occurs in this scene is the jointing of visual and aural information in the foreground and background, a visual and aural polyphony of spatiality that commands two sources of information, two sources of attention simultaneously. What this technique lends to the film is the spontaneity of realism, the allowance of the eye and ear to select attentions, just as in real life.

Another rubric of Jia's realist mode is his style of mise-en-shot. When not absolutely and rigorously stapled down in a fixed frame style, Jia's camera is elegant and dreamlike in its fluid track, pan, and crane shots. Quite similar to the way his long-shot links together the totality of action within the frame is the connectivity and chaining together of sources of action. What dominates most of the film is Jia's faithfulness to his one-shot, one-take style. If the action of the film constitutes a different approach to framing, Jia smoothly glides his camera over the canvas of reality, much as Kenji Mizoguchi or Robert Altman painted action across space, as though with a *camera stylo*, or the camera as paint brush. For Jia though, more than total aesthetics, the importance of mise-en-shot is the preservation of continuity, the necessity of total space. There is a haunting scene where Taisheng informs his friend about the other brother's death, and the camera follows intimately the construction and dramatic effect of the tragedy. The sequence occurs as follows: it starts with Taisheng's emergence from the operating room, followed by his slow divulgence of a mysterious note to the friend, who begins to cry and returns the note to Taisheng, after which the camera pans down to the note and the grieving friend, and finally the camera pans across the lime green wall to reveal an intertitle of the contents of the mysterious note—a will of dollar amounts to be distributed among the deceased's family. Without spoken dialogue, the unabating continuity of the scene conveys the tragedy of the moment in floating, balletic camerawork that exercises and emphasizes the plasticity of the frame and the continuation of spatiality, performance, and visual tension. Each mise-en-shot, the connective, flexing zeugma of visual material between the stationary subjects of interest serves the indexical nature of realism in that it maintains Bazin's continuum of reality. Contrarily, if the scene were composed of separated, shot-reverse shots, the scene would not convey the same dramatic and visual friction; rather, it would bear the marks of editing, the visual scars of spatial rupture.

The final mode of Jia's spatial realism is the realist mise-en-scene of the film: the textural quality of the frame and the objects contained within the mise-en-scene that are geared towards a mode of realism. Here, what realism refers to are images that are closely related to the proletariat class—objects and places that lack the sense of completeness in that they are unglossed, decaying, or in the process of fabrication. They are literally the backrooms of production and privacy that are hidden behind the stage of performance, the workaday places of building and daily living. They are places such as kitchens, bedrooms, bathrooms, sweat shops, the utility tunnels underneath the World Park, and construction sites. Flat, bleach white, natural lighting, mild orange lighting, jaundiced and spotted stucco walls that are decorated by hanging laundry, butcher knives, graffiti, large shadows, cloistered jealous lovers arguing in cramped bedrooms, rust, corrosion, and unfinished skeletons of steel scaffolding are just a few of the color textures and objects that contribute to this milieu of the grey dinge of the lower class, of realist mise-en-scene.

Finally, at they very heart of Jia's spatial realism is the notion of temporal realism. Temporality is key to Jia's films, as it is the foundation of spatial realism, the *continuity* of Bazin's "continuum of realism." Temporal realism takes the form of the long take in Jia's films; it is the durative shot that lasts for several minutes. This allows Jia's space to unfold and progress in real time. When people talk to each other in *The World,* the viewers witness every single moment of banal conversation and uninteresting banter that they volley back and forth. The audience watches the slow movements of people eating meals, washing their laundry, kissing each other, etc. The point of this temporal realism is to create a time that encapsulates the reality of real life, to create a mode of observation that captures the very "momentness" of moments. Temporal realism allows the film to literally becomes a mimetic window that allows the viewer to observe and occupy the same time lived in time as it unfolds in an unbroken manner on the screen.

Simulation

Fredric Jameson argues that post-modernism is typified by depthless, flattened surfaces and a pastiche of commodified cultures: a "culture of simulacrum" (Roberts 127). Jean Baudrillard advances this argument and proposes that what is real in this world (signified) is being overwhelmed and drowned out by the simulation (signifier).

These statements duly apply to the conditions of globalization—as the transnational commerce and post-modern economy shifts into global cities like Los Angeles, Tokyo, and Beijing, it is given that post-modern culture should dovetail. As opposed to the realist mode of Jia's *The World*, the aesthetics of simulation, where the visual material attempts to escape its realist groundings, demonstrate this post-modern culture and attraction to stretching beyond the local in its celebration of glossy animation, miniature, epic architecture, lavish Las Vegas productions, and the post-modern desire for velocity and movement.

One of the most outstanding features of this aesthetic mode of simulation is Jia's use of animated sequences throughout the film. Though not as graphically polished as Disney cartoons, these colorful segments perform as frissons when compared to the sluggish rhythms of Jia's realist mode of aesthetics. Spread throughout the film, there is the leitmotiv of the use of cell phones, whether for calling or text messaging someone; and this repetition of electronic connection is usually in the context of romantic desire and expressing physical attraction across time and distance. In the case of the lovers Tao and Taisheng, who seem to struggle with the absence of passion and libido in their relationship, they constantly call and message each other, leading to Jia's leaps into simulations of animation. Each animation sequence begins with a close-up of the cell phone screen embellished with colorful pastels designed with computer graphics. And from this digital entryway, the animation sequences leap into fantastical realms of startlingly bright colors, smooth, dreamlike movements through space, and subconscious fantasies of escapism and romanticism that are made visible in the expressivity of drawn line and color: an animated Tao flies across the city amongst clouds and a golden sunset using her outstretched arms as wings, and a surreal Taisheng rides a horse and breathes heart-shaped flower petals from his mouth amid a flux of pulsating flowers that surround him. These animations stray from realism into the realm of simulation, where the digital connection of cellular phones attaches to simulations of libidinal energies and fantasies of liberation and unfettered movement.

The ideas of epic miniaturization and pastiche of cultural forms are other facets of Jia's aesthetic mode of simulation. The World Park in itself is quite similar to the simulations found in Las Vegas or Disneyland, in that it appropriates architectures from widely different spatio-temporal locations. Throughout the film, we see such weirdly engaging sites as: the Egyptian pyramids, ancient Scandinavian castles, the Eiffel Tower, the gothic arches and buttresses of Notre Dame, and even the New York City skyline, complete with a dated set of immaculate and sturdy twin towers. This is perhaps the most literal statement about the effects of globalization: it has physically overtaken the local space of Beijing itself. If these large-scale models of globalized landmarks are not enough, The World Park performs daily musical numbers that are quite similar to Las Vegas revues with a smorgasbord of cultural mish-mash, where the costumes are emblematic of Indian, Korean, English, and Latin American cultures, to name a few. Here, in these performances, scored to dramatic, synthesized music, all of the culturally disparate figures on the stage perform in unison with the same gestural quality of a beauty pageant. This is a simulation of the highest order, when globalization is figured as a highly musical, harmonic, and aesthetic fantasy that unites in visual and aural synchronicity. In place of the local meaning attributed to each of the displaced cultural forms represented, there is instead a visceral, sexualized rush of ideality and pastiche that empties the depth of local and individual identities. In Jia's film, both in terms of architectural and cultural simulation, Beijing seems overrun by simulations of globalization that seem ready to subsume any remaining local identities, just as Miyoshi predicted a world where all national borders are erased and local culture is severely at risk of disappearance.

Lastly, the sign of velocity, the privilege of speed is another symptom of post-modern simulations. Here, the flux and blur of fast movement destabilizes the realism of the

subject that is foregrounded and centered in the middle of the visual frame. Constantly, as a type of interstitial shot transition between scenes, there are shots of a figure centered in the frame, while fast moving visual material streams past the central figure. Whether Tao is riding on the tram with the elements in the window rushing past her profile, or Taisheng is driving his van with the paved road quickly disappearing underneath him, hastened mobility and movement are simulations that underscore the flux of the very environment itself.

Everything in Between

The World constantly switches back and forth between these modes of realism and simulation. When the film settles momentarily upon one style, the film soon uproots the viewer by entering into the oppositional style. At times, the film will watch a sedentary, realist style shot suddenly evaporate into a fantastical simulation of animation. The transition in between these two realms is sudden and unexpected. This closely resembles Bertolt Brecht's own notion of *Verfremdung*, which "communicated in a dialectical, non-illusionist and non-linear manner, declaring its own artifice as it hoped also to reveal the workings of ideology… 'Alienating an event or character,' wrote Brecht, 'means first of all stripping the event of its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality and creating a sense of astonishment and curiosity about them'" (Thomson and Sacks 191).

What this effect performs is to create a higher level of consciousness not only concerning the text, but about the very social context within which the estrangement occurs. *The World's* own *Verfremdung* effect then casts a distinctive light upon the tensions and disparate quality between global and local identities. Within the film there occurs the harsh juxtaposition of global simulations and the local realisms—lavish Las Vegas routines are posited next to images of backstage, claustrophobic, cluttered bedrooms.

More important than this dialectical switching between the two different modes is their overlap, where they demonstrate that they are really two sides to the same coin. Simulation and realism, the global and the local, prove to be contemporaneous and extant within each other's space. For instance, as the title credits introduce the film, one sees the perfect replica of the Eiffel Tower largely visible in the backdrop of the film juxtaposed with a bedraggled, impoverished man walking across the foreground of the shot. This alarming and surprising combination of simulated and realist elements occurs frequently throughout the film: backstage performers wearing multinational dress, rustic laborers erecting larger than life skyscrapers, a sweatshop producing designer purses and clothes, Chinese soldiers walking past the Egyptian pyramids, and more. One of the most telling scenes that describes this joint-and-socket connection of the global and local occurs right before another performance: Tao wears a silk-white wedding dress against a doorway that frames the replica of the Arc de Triomphe. Here, the camera flattens the depth of the shot that now becomes two dimensional; the viewer loses cues of depth, and the local and global images literally become one.

This layering of realism and simulation becomes the site of contestation between the global and the local. Is there any safe haven, where the local remains untouched by the

global economy? With the constant overlapping of simulation over realism, it seems unlikely that there is nothing in Beijing that does not bear some signature of global, transnational economy.

Conclusion

When Zhang writes that the local is capable of re-inscribing itself upon the global city, as opposed to Miyoshi's doomed, prophetic imprisonment of the local, Jia's *The World* performs exactly this. Yes, Jia points to the inevitable and overwhelming tide of transnational economic forces in the way images of simulation have infiltrated the landscape of Beijing; but he also privileges the marginalized local culture by exposing the realist underbelly of all these economically muscular exaggerations of global simulations. In a way, *The World* speaks for all global cities that are simultaneously global and local with an heterogeneity of culture in between. It shows that it is possible to counteract—or at least question—the very construction of the seemingly spotless, utopian, architectural facades that embody transnational, corporate culture.

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