

In search of lost blue: Landscapes in Jia Zhangke's documentaries

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Swimming Out Till the Sea Turns Blue, Jia Zhangke, 2020 © MK2 Films

"On this side of the bridge, people's hair is black; on the other side, their hair has turned white": this simple journey takes us into an experience in which time and space move inseparably on a bridge across the river of history, where everything flows between collective memory and the intimacy of individual memories before the eyes of any passer-by who may be gazing upon this landscape. This kind of image also illustrates the importance given to the relationship between the expression of space and temporality by the Chinese director **Jia Zhangke**. **Jia** uses this quote from the Chinese writer Shen Congwen as a starting point for the documentary *Swimming Out Till the Sea Turns Blue* (2020) revealing his ambition to evoke the history of the People's Republic of China from experienced space and represented by certain writers. This is a space that is reconstructed by memory.

The massive social, economic and environmental transformations China has undergone in recent decades represent a recurrent theme in **Jia Zhangke's** cinema. He already has a vast filmography in which his aim seems to be to paint a fresco of contemporary China based on the lives of ordinary people in this great territory of change. This focus appears even more clearly in his documentaries. *Dong* (2006), his first feature-length documentary, was partly filmed on the banks of the Yangtze River. It focuses on Liu Xiaodong's paintings of workers dismantling a thousand-

year-old city to make way for the Three Gorges Dam, the world's largest engineering work. In *Useless* (2007) he visits different present-day landscapes in China like those of Guangzhou's textile industry. The film's scenes range from luxurious Louis Vuitton shops to oily mines in the poor countryside area of Shanxi passing through the glamour of Paris Fashion Week to the "useless" clothes of the designer Ma Ke. In *24 City* (2008), a hybrid film somewhere between documentary and fiction, he takes a look at the imminent demolition of the old industrial city of Chengdu to make way for luxury towers. Finally, in *I Wish I Knew* (2010), he crosses Shanghai's streets to meet various narratives at the water's edge and thus create a historical portrait of the city based on these representations. In all these cases of varying explicitness, the filmic construction of space is used to support and strengthen the dialectic of a history imbued with multiple images and narratives.

Jia Zhangke is very conscious of space in his work which enables him to develop a profound approach to Chinese (and worldwide) current affairs based on an ingenious use of cinematic means. In all his films, he confirms that representations (illustrations, paintings, photographs, novels or films) are directly attached to the concepts of time, space and how human identity is formed as Stuart Hall (2003) put it. Thus, in *Swimming Out*, the filmmaker takes us on a journey through fields, cities, river and sea shores, portraying the time taken to form collectivism and the rise of radical individualism. He presents the era when the idea of the family made rural people stay in the countryside or the journeys of workers who today migrate to another province to keep the chain of progress of this great country going.

Indeed, space contributes a historical, cultural, temporal and aesthetic potential to his films highlighting memory in its essential role in forming identity. On several occasions, **Jia Zhangke** reaffirms the idea that art needs to combat the greatly truncated official narrative of history. He considers this symptomatic of what is happening in his country today - "the official desire to erase the slightest trace of history". [1] Imposing an official historical narrative means that erasing memory becomes such a normal idea that everyone should accept it. Hannah Arendt also speaks of this danger involving "such oblivion - apart from the riches might cause us to lose - [which] would also mean in human terms that we would deprive ourselves of a dimension, that of the depth of human existence". [2]

The Three Gorges Dam is the example which best illustrates this phenomenon as Danielle Eliesseff points out: "The project destroys the traditional living environment of millions of people who have been displaced in an authoritarian manner and not always compensated or properly resettled. It also destroys one of China's most archaeologically rich regions - Jianling in Hubei, the ancient capital of the Chu country which played a major role in ancient China's cultural development and will now be lost forever. [3] This landscape is also famous for having been depicted by many Tang dynasty painters and poets of the magnitude of Du Fu and Li Bai.

Making documentaries is an important tool used by **Zhangke** to resist this process of loss. He considers making films to be a way of conserving memory: "Documentary film helps us keep track of what has been experienced. It is one of

the ways to resist forgetting". [4] Nevertheless, the documentary form's objective expressive capacity was not the main factor in the artist's choice of this process for some of his film projects. In fact, it was exactly the opposite. He finds it easier to film the truth of relationships in fiction whereas "in documentaries I like to concentrate on the condition of people, their way of walking and sounds that echo in a desolate landscape. Discovering and representing this abstract part of existence is what documentaries are all about." [5]

In this way, the Chinese filmmaker finds in landscape the formal means for an immanent approach through which the world is an independent and subjective ecological reality, in the formation of an image from an interpretation resulting from a process created through psychological, cultural, historical and ideological mechanisms. Through the landscape he goes beyond the confrontation between culturalism and naturalism, between perceived and lived space. As Georges Bertrand puts it, the landscape is a phenomenon that is simultaneously social and natural, subjective and objective, spatial and temporal, material and cultural production, real and symbolic: "The complexity of landscape is simultaneously morphological (form), constitutional (structure) and functional and we should not try to reduce it by dividing it. Landscape is a system that encompasses both the natural and the social dimensions. It appears less and less to be an ecological and social structure and increasingly as a process of transformation and thus a phenomenon that is integrated into history." [6]

Jia Zhangke's documentaries represent the landscape as a spatio-temporal process, creating a gentle form resistance against the powerful machinery producing oblivion in contemporary China. This is most evident in *Dong* (and its sister film, the fictional *Still Life*, both released in 2006) in which he systematically uses the principles of shanshui painting of mountains and waterways to reinforce the historical, cultural and therefore human dimensions of the devastation of the Three Gorges region. *Dong* and *Still Life* were filmed at the same time and even share certain shots. Yu Likwai, the cinematographer on the two films, has confirmed this: "He [Jia Zhangke] told me a lot about scroll painting and the multiple perspectives in Chinese painting. This also corresponds to a narrative construction based on several different viewpoints." [7]

At the beginning of *Dong*, the painter Liu Xiaodong is seen with his back to the camera, gazing at a typical shanshui landscape over the Three Gorges featuring majestic mountains between the Yangtze River and the clouds. He turns to look to the side and we finally see his face. In the next shot, the camera tilts up towards the whiteness of the clouds. Here we find other elements inspired by the tradition of traditional Chinese painting like liubai (留白) which involves leaving a blank over a large part of the image to enable vital breaths to vibrate in the void and unblock the necessary transformations of the world. As the fourth-century thinker Zhuangzi says, everything is impermanent: "That which produces forms has no form." [8]

The painter turning and looking to the side serves to add another perspective to the scene namely off-screen as viewed by Liu. The landscape is observed from different points of view - the camera, the painter, the viewer, the lens, the symbolic

dimension and the social dimension. This movement is similar to the floating perspective dear to painters like Guo Xi from the end of the XIth century. This is a technique called angle of totality in which the viewer's previously static eye becomes dynamic. Therefore this is not a simple change of vanishing point created by the cut-out. Instead, it is a subtle use of space achieved through an architecture of the viewpoint which is equally intimate and physical. Next, a vertical movement towards the clouds creates a reading of the image which is similar to the reading used by the old masters of scroll painting who unroll a viewpoint (on paper or silk), enabling observers to let their gaze wander freely (you) over the painting. Observers can thus complete an image with their own imagination, memories or daydreams. The fact that the name of the director and then the title of the film appear in a cursive font on this shot is no way insignificant as it is a reference to the calligraphy of poems which is very common in this kind of painting.

By referring to this aesthetic tradition, the filmmaker sets the representation of the Three Gorges region in a historical framework. Calligraphy is also present in *Swimming Out* and not just in how the chapters are written. It prepares the viewer to adopt a certain view of the landscape. In an interview with the writer Jia Pingwa, **Jia Zhangke** fleshes out one of the writings of this school of thought - "Take a new look at the world". This fresh outlook enables the eye to enter the temporalities of the space represented which conceal a factual and living history that is in constant transformation. Cinema captures this history through its ability to envisage the present and bring various layers of time up to date. The forms captured by **Jia's** camera give meaning to the images but also express the life therein. It creates a form of anthropo-morphological complexity in the energetic history of forms: "As with Burckhardt, art was not just a simple question of taste for Warburg, it was a vital question. Nor was history a mere question of chronology for him - it was a stirring, a debate about 'life' in the long duration of cultures." [9]

What Warburg called "life" in his *Mnemosyne about Art* finds an echo in the notion of qi (气) from the tradition of Chinese aesthetic thought. This vital impulse was noted by Warburg's biographer E. H. Gombrich who saw it as a very useful parameter for artistic judgment. The qi is a moving reference to space and the duration of the image which is above all linked to the vibration that makes an image felt as the continual transformation of reality. This is a value from the Chinese aesthetic tradition that goes further than resemblance and seems to have an interesting application in **Jia Zhangke's** films. François Jullien cites the painter Tang Zhiqi's treatise *Huishi Weiyuan* (around 1620) to illustrate this subtle characteristic. He explains why the likeness is superficial without the breath of energy that runs through it: "Even if you want to paint clouds, whether they are chained or concentrated, heaped or scattered, you must obtain a movement of fluidity and non-obstruction within them so that in their light and unobstructed appearance they are a phenomenal image (xiang) whose tension-intentionality (yi) is to want to fly." [10]

The clouds which **Jia Zhangke's** camera moves through at the start of *Dong* thus prepare viewers to look beyond the surface-level representation of an official discourse about this space and its history. The subjects are generally never very

fixed in **Jia Zhangke's** documentaries. His narrative readily drifts into different layers of a phenomenon. *Dong* is not just a simple portrait of an artist - it almost becomes a treatise about representation. Another interesting example is when he literally abandons the main character of his second feature documentary *Useless* to concentrate on miners' work and textile crafts in Shanxi, his native region. Just before this, Ma Ke says at the wheel of her car that she likes to spend time far from cities as this makes her feel like an amnesiac recovering the memory of her past. This movement of return to the countryside, to the village and to the lost times of memories is constantly present in **Jia Zhangke's** documentaries. It is a searching movement like in calligraphy and in landscapes and represents a fresh look at the world. It is even the very basis of the film *Swimming Out Till the Sea Turns Blue*.



Swimming Out Till the Sea Turns Blue, Jia Zhangke, 2020 © MK2 Films

Huixiang 回乡: The return to the village

Jia Zhangke's new documentary starts with a return to his roots which is not a new element in his work. His first three feature films (*Xia Wu*, *Artisan Pickpocket*, 1998, *Platform*, 2000, *Unknown Pleasures*, 2002) make up what was to be called the Hometown Trilogy and were all filmed in Shanxi, his home province. *Swimming Out Till the Sea Turns Blue* also begins in Shanxi at a literature festival in a place called Jia Family Village. This village has no connection with the director's family but the space is reminiscent of his filmography. It starts with an opening shot from *Platform*, a period film that portrays the early moments of the period when China opened up economically in a village far from the major cities. The subtitle fades in and out and reads: "Jia Family Village, 1979". The scene shows a group of country people chatting and smoking in the hall of the village theatre in front of a huge map

of the village painted on a green wall. It is a panorama filmed in a downshot to show the planned organisation of space within the framework of a communist economy.

In the following shot, **Jia Zhangke** shows us a very similar scene but here the people filmed are no longer dressed in rustic country clothes and the new village plan features modern towers in place of the old country houses. These modern buildings are represented as being well integrated into the iconography of the landscape which is used officially to present national art. This is a composition scene filled with rivers, mountains, bridges and picturesque boats in an image dominated by a large People's Republic of China flag. The country dwellers who were gathered in a relaxed fashion around a lamp become visitors taking selfies in front of this new painting in the second scene. The sound of people chatting has been replaced by the beeping of mobile phones. As the fresco of the theatre had disappeared, **Jia Zhangke** found this new representation of the city in the village history museum. It configures a clear device involving an artificially reinvented historical narrative that presents the continuous line joining traditional and modern China in space and time. Nevertheless, the film's editing makes it clear that these spaces have undergone a brutal break between the rural and the urban environments in recent decades. This has often been followed by the destruction of historical sites to make way for highways, major avenues and large buildings. The new representation hardly expresses the violence of this transformation but **Jia Zhangke** suggests it in the way he confronts these two paintings in the same way as it seems to fade from this rural place in the fresco in the Jia Family Village History Museum. However, the succession of the two scenes also illustrates the way cultural, ethical and identity relations have been shaken up, especially in small towns and villages. The careful observation of this phenomenon runs through his entire filmography.

These two moments in time (1979 and 2019) are brought together by the film's editing in the intersection of Chapter 4, Going Home (回乡), and Chapter 5, The New and the Old (新与旧). This documentary is divided into chapters like a book. **Jia Zhangke** creates a series of distinct temporalities to show the inexorable changes that occur over time and also to cross impure times in the representations. These form the basis for a historical dialectic that is not very receptive to a unidirectional vision of history. The image he presents as showing the Jia Family Village of 1979 is actually a reconstructed scene shot (in 35mm) from his film Platform (1999). This is a historical falsification given that he uses the image from his own fictional film as a real representation of the past rather than as a false historical document. The skilful way he plays on the representation of space and time creates a *mise en abîme* of a deterministic linearity of history between the new and the old, highlighting the complexity of constructing a historical narrative which pervades a space. In this way, the film creates a tension that is not conducive to this kind of unique linear official discourse whose imposed truths very often use the process of forgetting factual and emotional histories.

Jia Zhangke reveals the signs of a historical space in this confrontation between temporalities and temporal superposition of that space reveals a vast and complex historicity. In this case, the grain of the reel of film contrasts with the smoothness

of digital images from the more recent film shoot which reinforces a sensory context for the expression of time in a remembered image. As we have glimpses of multiple layers of time, we are never shown a pure reading of history. Jia Zhangke then reveals a dialectical space to us that Didi-Huberman considers to only demonstrate the impurity and anachronism of time, in "a tensive rather than resolving process which is obsidional and sedimentary rather than linear and directed." [11]

The village shot becomes an attempt to create a landscape for the painting in the next scene and any reading of this shot shows it lost all its picturesque character in the film's editing. It further reinforces the areas of doubt, tension and contestation of a much more oriented, balanced and continuous reading that the shot of the wall seems to indicate. This dialectical space reveals a crisis in the image caused by the contamination of forms and temporalities penetrated by the image in the complexity of cultures and its temporalities. In Jia Zhangke's films, "the colours of traditional opera find the bulldozers of progress, the millennial rigidity of the pagoda finds the hubbub of cars, ancient landscape painting finds the debris of houses and flying saucers. All of these are constantly being redefined, giving space to the possibility of a physical transformation and to an openness to a political recontextualisation of meanings, positions (of sensitive and ideological points of view) and potentialities." [12]

After having shown scenes of 1979 (shot in 1999) and of the front of the Jia Family Village plan in 2019, Jia Zhangke shows us images of Fenyang (his hometown) shot in 1997 in 16mm for his first feature film, *Xiawu* and shows everyday scenes of the same town from 2019. Curiously these scenes take on a clear documentary value despite the fact that *Xiawu* and *Platform* are fictional works. They also reflect a dialectic of time to such an extent that it seems Jia Zhangke wants to preserve them from the relentless progress of the new times. The camera becomes an active agent of the process of historical expression that Jia clearly feels to be inexorably intimate. Returning to his hometown also seems important in this historical approach as it does for the balance of his own identity: "This city simultaneously represents two realities, one of which involves change while the other has an unmoveable side to it. This is a strong contradiction in today's Chinese society. There is cruelty at the level of the administrative districts and also very archaic aspects but this all makes it possible to preserve a relational and positive fabric. At the same time, we can see the old fabric being torn apart to be replaced by the accumulation of wealth and by modernity. Fenyang is the town that constructed me and thanks to Fenyang I don't lose myself and understand who I am." [13]



Swimming Out Till the Sea Turns Blue, Jia Zhangke, 2020 © MK2 Films

Jia Zhangke's *Fenyang* echoes the Shangluo of the writer Jia Pingwa who says in the film that he sees China and the whole world from the city where he lives. In *Swimming Out*, going back to one's roots is the starting point for the rediscovery of the People's Republic of China's history through the affective dimension of literature. Jia Zhangke takes this passage through different real, chronological, represented and anachronistic temporalities as the starting point to look at the lives of four writers whose work is marked by returning to their native villages. The film does not just relate the history of the village - instead it gives the history of the country seen from the village through the accounts of simple people who observe changes in China and the world from their slow and banal daily lives. This view from the village was not necessarily in opposition to the country's rapid development but in some way aimed to balance the changing times with the psychological and cultural importance of spaces and values abandoned by unfettered developmentalism. The ancestral village helps us understand contemporary China from a historical, cultural and emotional standpoint.

The careful observation of internal migration within China and the rapid urbanisation which results from this is clearly one of the most striking features of Jia Zhangke's films. The internal migration of a large mass of young people - floating workers - who leave their villages to find work elsewhere in the country is a phenomenon of prime importance in his work. In his films, it is important to portray this invisible majority which is sacrificed in the official version which features a happy story taking place in a space of harmony like in the current illustration of Jia Family Village. This is a very different picture to that of the decadent or disappearing spaces revealed in his films. His aim is to observe how these economic changes lead to brutal ecological and social stress allied to a great cultural and psychological impact particularly on the most disadvantaged population groups. The director takes the fact that certain writers have made the

migratory journey in reverse - from the metropolis to the village - and their lives and work as the basis to recount the recent history of China through the prism of their intimate memories and stories.

In this process, **Jia Zhangke** seems to be coming closer to a traditional Chinese vision of time and history. History in China has always been related in a linear narrative of successive events - from the ancient Chinese annals which were oracular to an extent and featured series of events that were not necessarily linked or explained to the turning point represented by the Spring and Autumn Annals in which Confucius invented a more rigorously descriptive and explanatory process. Historiography (which records events) was sprinkled over everyday events while historiology (which explains events) did not limit itself to a single channel of important facts. As Léon Vandermeerch observed, this is a form of History based on conjunctural segments: "Noteworthy links are brought together in a bundle of parallel series rather than being remodelled as a single, continuous flow of things. Speculation has therefore continued not to view history as a series of mutations of overall configurations whose particular relations simply give us an enhanced view of the details." [14]

Thus, as Vandermeerch says, this is a conceptualisation of time based on the moment rather than a time with a metronomic duration. He considers that a time that lasts is a static time whereas a moment is dynamic. In the moment, we are no longer in the dynamics of cause and effect with a static time's pure and simple duration: "In the Chinese perspective of temporality, historical causality merges with the dynamism of time itself which is none other than the cosmic dynamism of the Dao." [15] In **Jia Zhangke**'s last documentary, major historical events like the Communist Party's seizure of power, the Cultural Revolution, the imprisonment of the Gang of Four and opening up the economy are relegated to the status of background elements. The story of these great events is told through moments of ordinary people's lives. These only appear in the film in relation to the affective dimension of collective and individual memory.

As well as following official facts, **Jia Zhangke** affords us a glimpse of day-by-day changes to people's lifestyles in terms of work, food, family relationships and even romance. The 18 chapters succeed each other, punctuating the banal details of life - Eating, Love, Noise, Disease and so forth. Subjects are dealt with fluidly, "like flowing clouds" as **Jia Zhangke** puts it [16], in a manner that is neither linear nor didactic. These chosen writers' memories and themes take us on a fluid historical journey which is also sometimes hard and difficult: "The people of this country live like rivers flowing to the sea, carrying heavy loads as they travel [...]. Their journeys are very similar but every single trace deserves to be recalled." [17]

Jia Zhangke thus chooses authors from different eras and regions to represent the vast temporal journey that is the 70-year history of the People's Republic of China. The first is the late writer Ma Feng, the first secretary of the Communist League in the 1950s. He was born in Xiaoyi in the Shanxi province (the same province as **Jia Zhangke**) and is known for his work during the "socialist construction period" when collectivism and revolutionary art were in the ascendancy. Next comes Jia Pingwa (from Songluo, Shaanxi) who was sent to work

in the countryside during the "Cultural Revolution", a time of much trauma when many felt powerless. Yu Hua (from Hangzhou in the Zhejiang province) is known for his post-New Age, postmodern or metafictional literature and began writing in the 1980s, an era of "reform and opening up" when the development of the market and the return to individualism began. Finally, the film moves on to Liang Hong whose story takes place in the present. She was born in Dengzhou in the Henan province and her non-fiction books *China in Liang Village* and *Leaving Liang Village* feature acute observations of village life and Chinese society in general. These are based on her extensive research into Liang Village's current residents and those who left to find work elsewhere. Liang richly documents the impact caused by China's transformations in the villages. Using the village as a starting point, she attempts to understand China's present and future through reference to vivid memories and lost reference points.

It is of course true that Yu Hua's narrative is already set in a suburban context where urban and rural features intersect: "The municipalities themselves are structured by their relationships with the countryside, the country people and old traditions much more than towns are. It is not that one is more important than the other but rather that urban and rural characteristics coexist in the same space." [18] In any case, all these writers return home to rediscover the means of telling the story of their era through the small events of ordinary life.

The importance of the return to provincial life in these authors' work is manifest in this documentary. It is also clear that this return movement means the film can provide a less linear and oriented and therefore more intimate view of history. We are taken on a cinematic journey across China by train, bus or car to the very frontiers of memory. **Jia Zhangke** composes space in the same way as he represents history, expressing what Granet calls a particularly Chinese conception by which "Time and Space are always imagined as a tangible and diverse set of groupings of sites and occasions". [19] It is indeed telling that, in these four authors' work, time seems to be diffused more in the banality of everyday life and the dusty paths of ordinary lives than in the factual linearity of a well-defined official History.



Swimming Out Till the Sea Turns Blue, Jia Zhangke, 2020 © MK2 Films

The calligraphic landscape

But what is the motif of the landscape doing in a film about writers? It can actually already be found in the writings cited by **Jia Zhangke** as in this passage written by Liang Hong: "In the country, the three elm trees fall into silence like the father, mother and son." In these passages, we find a cosmology somewhere between the most intimate elements of human life and the exteriority of the universe which are linked by the feeling of a time and space which are inseparable and impermanent. This feeling seems to draw on memory which is also just as inseparable from how we experience the world around us. This memory in the world seems to be portrayed in this film as being the product of both a physical and a psychological journey. **Jia Zhangke** introduces us to this geography of time and space which is simultaneously abstract and physical.

It is no matter of chance that a train often takes us on this cinematic journey which is rich and fluid but impure like time itself. For example, in Chapter 7, Transit, **Jia Zhangke** pinpoints the contrast between young people on a train immersed in their mobile phones with the beeping sounds intermingling with the steel of the train carriage and the modern melodramatic opera Time to Say Goodbye (by Lucio Quarantotto and Francesco Sartory, sung by the singer Sitar Tan). The young people's eyes are glued to their mobile phones to the point that they do not seem to be present. A young couple share headphones but they are both isolated in front of their screens. A shot shows us a city speeding by through the window. For a brief moment, the image reveals the mountain before it quickly disappears behind the buildings. The young people do not allow themselves the time to see this fleeting landscape between the shapes of the city. However, **Jia Zhangke** does not seem to indicate an easy contrast between contemplation and digital images because he shows the film's audience an ephemeral and subtle

landscape which is difficult to grasp. Through small cinematic gestures which may sometimes go unnoticed by inattentive spectators used to predictable journeys who only perceive a film about a few writers, Indeed, **Jia Zhangke** reveals a work with different layers of meaning which is capable of unfolding a myriad of interpretative paths.

In doing so the director seems to be telling us that this is the main role of landscape as a formal opening beyond form. Again, this brings together literature and visual expression in a historical context which **Jia** seems very aware of. For example, literature and painting have never gone through a complete break as we have seen in the West. Since the appearance of the brush, ink and paper in 2nd century China, calligraphy has been a major art form with aesthetic criteria that were to impose themselves on other arts, particularly painting: "The graphic arts are closely linked to the scholarly culture of the literary world and took off to such an extent in China that they have dethroned all other forms of artistic expression and dominate an essentially literary culture." [20]

This kind of aesthetic criteria link philosophical and spiritual principles to technique by expressing the impermanent nature of the universe through the free creativity of the artist. According to Yolaine Escande, the resonance of breathing or the vibration of unfettered changes in the universe causes life and movement in painting and indeed this is by far the most essential theoretical question in all Chinese art: "In the pictorial context, this deals with the vitality of the subject represented (the breath, qi), the harmonious aspect of how the execution (resonance, yun) and the liveliness of the drawing (the movement of life [shengdong], or visual result)." [21] In landscape painting this vitality was expressed through the vibration made by a 'blow' of the brushstroke which transmits the painter's gesture in a form of confluence with the way the world vibrates. This vibration is also found in the alternating contrast between the foreground and background and in the blank area left on the surface so that those looking at the painting can let their gaze wander over the landscape and fill in this blank with their own imagination and memories.

This artistic way of thinking requires an open work which is constantly changing in the same way as the universe. **Jia Zhangke's** films often reveal the director's eye for these transpositions between the interior of the observer and the exteriority of the work of art which were previously proposed by this aesthetic tradition. He confirmed this was the case in a discussion with the film director Tsai Ming-liang: "Viewers can then transpose their personal experience onto this external aspect to understand and feel it. This transposition process is particularly interesting. The images we show can thus find a place in other people's memories". [22]

This process has been updated in contemporary Chinese cinema and has also revealed its political potential. This transposition offers the freedom to modify the landscape of that which can be perceived and thought of while making possible what Rancière calls a process of political subjectivation "in the action of uncounted capacities that split the unity of what is given and the evidence of what is visible to draw up a brand new topography of what is possible." [23] As François Jullien

noted, the power that goes beyond the pure resemblance of objects is an idea that is discussed a great deal in treatises on Shanshui landscape painting. He quotes the famous treatise by Shitao (1642-1707): "Painting penetrates the unfathomable by decanting itself from the reifying opacity of presence [jing meaning (...) quintessence, the spirit of wine, etc.] and accessing the subtlety-invisibility [of the great process of transformation: wei]." [24]

Curiously this kind of aesthetic power (to see beyond the opacity of appearances) can lead us to a more contemporary vision of landscape which is considered to be both an ecological reality and a social product and thus as object and subject. Georges Bertrand stresses the idea that the simplest landscape is both social and natural, subjective and objective, spatial and temporal, a material and cultural production, real and symbolic. Its complexity is morphological (form), constitutional (structure) and functional. It combines both the natural and social dimensions: "The landscape appears to be less and less an ecological and social structure and increasingly a process of transformation and thus as a phenomenon which is part of history." [25]

Indeed, subtle politics of how we look at things derives from this perception of history from space which brings a contemporary filmmaker closer to the landscape painters of ancient times. For example; the rebellious attitude of literate painters (文人 wenren) has echoes in **Jia Zhangke's** aesthetic and political convictions. To establish a free style, these intellectual painters with their backgrounds in calligraphy opposed the portraitists and decorators of the court who followed a realistic aesthetic (subordinated to foreign rulers' tastes). The literate painters strove towards a free, lively art, especially in their work on landscapes as a reaction against the court professionals' strict style (gongbi工笔). They willingly claimed to have the status of amateurs as opposed to the court professionals: "They were so keen not to be mixed up with the professional painters that they sometimes affected a certain awkwardness to distinguish themselves". [26]

Jia Zhangke is seen as a spokesperson for a generation of independent filmmakers and has also claimed amateur status in a quest for freedom of expression and production in opposition to the mythological stories told by China's beautiful films which are more classical in genre. In 1999, the influential Nanfang Zhoumo newspaper published **Jia Zhangke's** article *The Age of Amateur Cinema Will Return* (*Yeyu dianying shidai jijiang zaici daolai*) in which he defended the use of video and watching pirate VCD films as being an integral part of a democratic and independent cinema. He believes that a light production style and amateur's formal freedom mean the profession's principles can no longer be considered to be absolute rules as professional filmmakers do. **Jia Zhangke** considers these professionals to have long since lost their ability to think: "So what is left? Stereotyped concepts, the prevalence of preconceptions and rigid prejudices. These professionals are hardly sensitive to anything new at all [...]". [27]

For **Jia Zhangke**, being an amateur is undoubtedly actually rather noble in itself similarly to the meaning of literate painters. Sebastien Veg commented on this text by recalling that "**Jia Zhangke** has repeatedly stressed that his use of the term amateur refers the state of mind inherent to his approach to his subjects rather

than to the technical quality (or lack thereof) of films labelled in this way." [28] Like **Jia Zhangke**, these professional artist-decorators did not succeed in portraying contemporary life, lacking the spiritual and philosophical dimension in their thought to represent life in a world with no forms. In both cases, this opposition in terms of form reveals an equally political insubordination against a power that imposes forms, themes and sensibilities.

The way in which cinema, painting and literature are brought together in this way also provides keys to understand the form of *Swimming Out* better. Literate landscape painters returned to the mountains like in the Buddhist and Taoist tradition to regain the momentum between the self and the world and thus use a de-obstructed form of expression. Returning to a home village also represents a journey to the intimate landscapes of a collective memory. An affective and unstructured way of recounting individual narratives is sought that also translates a historical vision of China. This is thus a form of amateurism that rebels against a univocal vision advocating development at all costs by revisiting everyday life in the countryside. In this way, as in all his work, **Jia Zhangke** takes a subtle look at the construction of a space that is historical, dialectical, ultimately, immaterial and made up of memory, imagination and feelings. In this immaterial space, he reverses the modern hierarchy between man and the world. The world is thus no longer the object of the human being and human beings can also see themselves from the standpoint of a world reconstructed in each instant by several temporalities and by divergent points of view.



Swimming Out Till the Sea Turns Blue, Jia Zhangke, 2020 © MK2 Films

The immaterial landscape

In *Swimming Out Till the Sea Turns Blue*, Jia Zhangke seems to pay little attention to the landscape in comparison with certain of his other films. However, the subtlety of his work means we need to take a closer look to reveal the delicate layers of language and meaning he uses in these films. We do not see much of the mountain and water motif which is often present in the Fenyang director's work, but this documentary scatters references to the landscape. This starts with its title, then with the journey back to rural roots and more direct references to the river, the sea or fields mentioned in the documentary. Nevertheless, the landscape emerges at every moment of the film, above all in the encounter between space, time, memory and feeling. Landscape enters the film as a return to the time and space of a threatened identity but the intention is for it to provide a solid reference point to understand the present as Yu Hua puts it in the film: "Remembering the past and missing the homeland are really ways to calm down when you feel disoriented in life."

This dual movement towards the past and the homeland in Jia Zhangke's films is an attempt to map reality in cognitive and affective terms. Zhang Xudong reminds us that this mapping specifically occurs in China's fragmented social sphere through the xiancheng - municipalities which are part of a county's administrative division. These are places like Fenyang (where Jia Zhangke filmed, *Xiaowu*, *Platform* and *Mountains May Depart*) for example or Datong (crossed by the characters in *Unknown Pleasures*) and Fengjie (whose destruction is depicted in *Dong* and *Still Life*). There are great disparities in these places' per capita income as compared to the major cities (\$1500 for Fenyang and \$2500 for Datong compared to \$11,000 for Shanghai). Zhang observes that this is not a techno-administrative label used to designate the film's script. Instead, it is a fully purified notion that sustains the film's visual-political impact in a space without borders or clear distinctions between rural and urban, industrial and agrarian, high and low culture. According to Zhang, the xiancheng has become an anachronistic and paradoxical place. The fact that Jia chooses these places reflects the majority of China while also creating a historical tension: "Xiancheng's specific feature as a type of social landscape lies in its socio-economic and geographical ubiquity - there are over 2400 counties or county-level cities in the PRC and Fenyang has an average population - and also in how little it has been represented in film and literature. To focus on xiancheng is to draw attention, whether consciously or not, to the reverse side of Chinese socialist modernity and its Reform Era." [29]

Even though Jia Zhangke often expresses a certain melancholy in his films, his aim is never to idealise the past. Instead, he follows the dual path as expressed similarly in Yu Hua's phrase, a path between the conflict of life in the present moment tormented by its accelerated rhythm and receiving memories psychologically. Zhang reminds us that Jia's films are neither moral condemnations of xiancheng's dark material and spiritual poverty nor nostalgic justifications for a personal history bearing its marks: "Any trace of sentimentality in them is an affective vestige of Jia's own memories which are lost in time and have now been

recovered through a cinematic form whose aptitude for Proustian memory lies precisely in its ability to record the present." [30]. These memories provide the depth that Hannah Arendt spoke of when discussing the danger of forgetting as a consequence of the ideology of progress. Indeed, in *Swimming Out*, he situates these images in the tension between two time-frames – that of memory and that of contemporary life. These two-time frames intersect before being lost again in multiple reflections of the town superimposed over images of the writers who take turns to recount History and tell smaller scale stories from their personal memories.

Therefore, **Jia Zhangke** did not forget the aesthetics of landscape in this film and instead sprinkled it over the details in the banality of ordinary lives rather than portraying it in sublime panoramic shots. Liu Mia Yinxing agrees with Martin Lefebvre's view that there is sometimes a landscape gaze in cinema, a contemplative gaze which is not necessarily linked to an image of nature and the dilation of durations. Liu considers that this contemplation operates above all in the redefinition of the relationship between the world and the observer rather than in the form of a reading as in the plastic arts: "In other words, a landscape does not necessarily create an internal 'down-time' and instead provides doorways to different spatio-temporal dimensions where it acts as the framework for the possibility of different narratives." [31]

Eisenstein stated that there was a principle of an image without limits on the landscape. He called this principle *obraz-sreda*, an image of the milieu as if "the boundaries between the outside and the inside, between distance and closeness, had become completely porous or as if such spatialities had become sensorially interchangeable." [32] This image-milieu opens the world to the expression of a subjective viewpoint making a synaesthesia of distinct meanings and feelings a possible space constructed by different narratives and feelings.

At the end of the film this endless, boundless image in a non-indifferent nature seems to be taken up and put into a loop. In a quick narration of Yu Hua's youthful memories, he crosses from waves to the sea, passes through the surge of aesthetic perceptions, achieves a feeling of freedom and is finally defined in the desire to swim until an image is formed: "The sea was yellow but the book said it was blue. [...] One day I'm going to swim until the sea turns blue." The verb to swim, you (游) in Chinese, corresponds to the Taoist parameter of *shanshui* painting which means wandering in total freedom or simply to look at things in freedom.

Jia Zhangke seems to make a similar appeal to viewers of his cinema. The rigorous portrayal of China in his films reveals the flexibility of a free, liberated kind of gaze (as Rancière put it) through the implementation of a landscape gaze capable of crossing the boundaries into an image-milieu to become part of it. The landscape calls for this unhindered gaze and thus becomes a rich, formidable representation of the world and its history which is open to a multitude of interpretations. Thus, in **Jia Zhangke's** films the landscape becomes an invitation to dive into the sea to see the lost blue of the world with one's own eyes.

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NOTES

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