

*Between Fiction and Documentary: The “Documentary-ness” of Still Life  
(Jia Zhangke, 2006)*

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**Abstract**

Concerning Jia Zhangke’s pursuit of an ingenuous cinematic language, Jia’s particular documentary-inflected realism, most evident in his use of nonprofessional actors as an instrument for the interweaving of documentary and staged footage, ambitiously joins the discourse of documentary film with his parallel projects—the documentary film, *Dong* (2006), and the fiction film, *Still Life* (2006). Triggered by the controversial Three Gorges Dam project, the performance and roles of Han and Zhou become ambivalent as they provide a channel for Jia’s cinematic manipulation of actuality, and consequently open up various approaches of crossing the boundary between historical beings and fictional characters. Han’s role, oscillating between the two oppositions, becomes the vehicle for applying the sense of “documentary-ness” to the staged footage of *Still Life*, and re-establishing the “documentary-ness” of *Dong*’s documentary footage reinterpreted in *Still Life*. Zhou’s portrayal of Xiaomage in *Still Life*, extensively combined with *Dong*’s documentary footage, eventually transforms Xiaomage into a historical being. Considering how their performance disturb the boundary separating documentary film from fiction film, this paper will engage with Dai Vaughan’s examination of the ambiguity of documentary, Chris Berry’s notion of “in the now (and then)” temporality, and Jaimie Baron’s concept of the “archive effect.” Through their contemplation upon the filmmaker-text-viewer relationship, this paper, therefore, attempts to re-think how the performance of nonprofessional actors within both the documentary and staged footage disturbs and manipulates the conventional filmmaker-text-viewer relationship in documentary, and how that relationship might function to constitute *Still Life* as an expanded documentary work.

Keywords: Jia Zhangke, expanded documentary, nonprofessional actors, actuality, temporality, archive

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## Introduction

Jia Zhangke, one of the most celebrated Chinese Sixth Generation filmmakers, has been known for his talent for simultaneously making both fiction film and documentary film with overlapping footages. In his conversation with Taiwanese filmmaker, Tsai Ming-Liang, Jia acknowledges that he does not find a clear boundary between fiction and documentary films as he conceives of his works and his filmmaking practice as ways and medium to express his memory and perception of the transforming reality (Tan & Zou, 2008, p. 17).

In regards to his pursuit of an ingenuous cinematic language that returns to the original life condition of the ordinary Chinese citizens in the tide of socioeconomic transformation, Jia's particular documentary-inflected realism, specifically his collaboration with nonprofessional actors and his interweaving of documentary and staged footages in the parallel projects, *Still Life* (Jia, 2006) and *Dong* (Jia, 2006), joins the discourse of documentary films. This examination concerning how the interconnection of these two films blurs the boundary between fiction and documentary film will engage Jia's documentary-inflected realism with Dai Vaughan's examination of the ambiguity of documentary, Chris Berry's interpretation of the temporality unfolded in Jia's films as the temporality of "in-the-now (and then)," Jaimie Baron's theory on the "archive effect," and Michaela Schäuble's notion of the "more real truth."

In regards to the filmmaker-text-viewer relationship in documentary, a close examination of *Still Life* and *Dong* will demonstrate how Jia's documentary-inflected realism constantly disturbs and manipulates the said relationship by unsettling the viewers' perception of the truth, and consequently crafts and intensifies the "documentary-ness" of *Still Life* to the extent that the viewers can no longer perceive it as merely a fiction film, but as an expanded documentary work, in which the "documentary-ness" emerges from the veil of its narrative.

"My camera never lies" (Jia, 2002, p. 177) is Jia Zhangke's most remembered statement of his own filmmaking practice that seeks to "return to the original condition of real life in its primary form" (McGrath, 2007, p. 84), and examines the "ethics and aesthetics of its documentation and memory" (p. 82). In Jia's pursuit of an ingenuous cinematic language that documents and scrutinizes today's Chinese social reality, "to act" and "to be there" (Wu, 2008, p. 31), therefore, become the central motives behind his filmmaking.

These motives bring into view Jia's documentary-inflected realism that embraces "the conscious exploration of a combination of humanist and modernist concerns and in an aesthetic both documentary and hyperreal" (Zhang, 2007, p. 6). It incorporates *jishizhuyi*, translated as "record-ism" or "document-ism," and *xianchang*, literally meaning "on-the-spot" realism (Berry, 2006, p. 114). This mode of filmmaking, as Chris Berry (2006) defines as the "in-the-now" mode, dominating both the documentary and fiction films in China since 1990, emphasizes "spontaneity" and intends to give the viewers "a feeling of being there as things happen" (p. 114). Therefore, in regards to Jia's filmmaking practice that seeks to share the same "substance" of being caught up "in the tides of urbanization and socioeconomic transformation" (Zhang, 2007, p. 16), among his filmmaking techniques, Jia's

collaboration with nonprofessional actors realizes extensively his *zishizhuyi* and *xianchang* by providing a point of convergence for Jia (filmmaker), Jia's cinema (text), and us (viewers) to "share the same contemporary social space" (p. 3). This is most exemplified in the parallel projects—*Still Life* and *Dong*. Through these films' contemplation upon the demolition and (re)construction of the controversial Three Gorges Dam project in Sanxia, China, and the project's impact on the ordinary Chinese citizens, these films open up a space in which "the boundary separating fiction and documentary, subjectivity and objectivity, artistic creativity and harsh reality is challenged and transgressed" (McGrath, 2009, p. 44).

Corresponding to Jason McGrath's (2009) observation that there is an evident turn to documentary filmmaking in films made in "closer spatial and temporal proximity" (p. 34) to the most traumatic stages of demolition and construction in the Three Gorges area, in an interview published on film comment (2009) Jia explains that while he believes that he needs the help of professional actors to bring history to life when making historical films, nonprofessional actors are crucial for film, like *Still Life*, that confront the present problems of the modern Chinese society. This turn to documentary filmmaking practice that employs nonprofessional actors reveals the concerns about "the ethics and aesthetics of artistic representation" (McGrath, 2009, p. 34) by connecting the viewers with the "physical and emotional upheavals experienced by residents affected by the project" (p. 34).

While Jia recognizes the documentary form as inspiring for discovering the "shape and meaning of a multifaceted social experience in the era of transformation" (Zhang, 2007, p. 18), he is also very aware of "the impossibility of true objectivity for even the most realist style" (Teo, 2014). Therefore, in an interview with Sun Jianmin Jia describes that his documentary-inflected realism, *jishizhuyi* and *xianchang*, is utilized to "pursue the felling of the real" (Sun, 2002, p. 31) instead of reality itself as he believes that "the feeling of the real is on the level of aesthetics whereas reality just stays in the realm of sociology" (p. 31). The quasi-documentary and hyper-realist aesthetics emerging through Jia's collaboration with nonprofessional actors in *Still Life* correspond with Zhang Zhen's (2007) observation that "cinematic representation is hardly a transparent window onto reality but rather a form of interrogation of the 'truth' value of both its referent and its image and their indexical rapport" (p. 18). Accordingly, the discussion evoked by Jia's documentary-inflected realism should gesture towards how such realism, complicating the boundary between fiction and documentary, constructs a compelling confrontation with actuality (what happened) and reality (what we perceive as what happened).

In this sense, the nonprofessional actors in *Still Life*, who are concurrently the social actors in *Dong*, reveal the ambiguity of artistic representations and further resonate with Dai Vaughan's (1999) examination of the ambiguity of documentary in his essay, "The Aesthetics of the Ambiguity." Through the parallel projects' confrontation with the reality and actuality of the transforming Chinese society, the nonprofessional actors' blending together their own real-life experience with the characters' fictional stories, and Jia's interweaving of documentary and staged footages narrow "the gap between the languages of documentary and fiction" (Vaughan, 1999, p. 64). In his interrogation of the relationship between documentary cinema and reality, Vaughan (1999) argues, "the term 'documentary' ... is a mode of response to film material" (p. 58). Therefore, even though documentary film shares a

strong connection with the reality, “a mismatch between record and signification” (p. 88) always exists and consequently requires the viewers to “forge that connection individually in the space created by the film” (Raijmakers, 2007, p. 35). In this sense, Vaughan’s (1999) observation, “in electing to perceive a film as documentary the viewer do not reject a fictive option for a known nonfiction, but rather select a mode of apprehension in full knowledge of their own ignorance” (p. 79), paves the way for Jia’s nonprofessional actors’ complicating of the discussion of documentary film. By “construct[ing] a powerful impression of a confrontation with reality through the rhetoric of the films’ narratives and their cinematic style” (Teo, 2014), these nonprofessional actors, oscillating between fiction and reality, establish a sense of “documentary-ness” in *Still Life* by manipulating the “constitutive-ness” (Vaughan, 1999, p. 82) of documentary’s images for the viewer’s meanings, and potentially shape the viewer’s “documentary response” (p. 58).

For the purpose of examining this fissure of actuality and reality unsettling the filmmaker-text-viewer relationship in documentary, it is necessary to examine *Still Life* side by side with *Dong*. *Dong* is Jia’s documentary film on artist Liu Xiaodong’s site-specific project of large-scale oil paintings portraying the vanishing landscape of the Three Gorges Dam project and those migrant workers involved in the project. *Still Life*, as a parallel project of the documentary film *Dong*, carries exceptional documentary qualities not only for Jia’s utilization of the nonprofessional actors, but also because a large part of the shots of *Still Life* is actually from the documentary footages of *Dong*. In this pair of films made in the Three Gorges Dam construction zone, Jia takes the nonprofessional actors as the site for his interweaving of social documentary and individual fiction that unsettles the boundary between fiction and documentary films.

*Still Life*’s cinematic portrayal of the nonprofessional actors, Han Sanming, the migrant worker of the Three Gorges Dam project, and Xiaomage, the teenage punk who names himself after the leading actor played by Chow Yun Fat in *A Better Tomorrow* (John Wu, 1986), and Jia’s arrangement of the storyline of each character oscillating across *Still Life* and *Dong* collectively foreground Jia’s manipulation of both reality and actuality. Both Han Sanming and Xiaomage in *Still Life* are fictional characters played by nonprofessional actors, whose life experience overlaps with the stories of the fictional characters. Moreover, they become the messengers who deliver historical facts through Jia’s interweaving of documentary and staged footages, which turns the characters into historical beings rather than merely fictional characters. Through Jia’s manipulation of reality and actuality, Han Sanming and Xiaomage’s roles open up different approaches of disturbing the boundary between historical beings and fictional characters, hence the boundary between documentary and fiction films.

Han Sanming first appears as a social actor in the documentary footages of *Dong*, in which Han Sanming is one of the twelve migrant workers posing for Liu’s oil painting project. In *Dong*, Han Sanming, among other migrant workers, is presented by both Liu and Jia as an evidence of the drastically changing Chinese society, and moreover, a vehicle for them to comment on this radical transformation through their artistic representations of it. In one of the sequences in *Dong*, we see Han Sanming posing in front of the vanishing landscape of the Three Gorges Dam for Liu in a squatting position. In this sequence, the film cuts between shots of Han Sanming posing and of

Liu painting, and finally returns to Han Sanming when he stands up, turns towards the wall, and looks far into the distance. The camera then pans away from Han Sanming to the distance scenery, at which Han Sanming is looking at. As a historical being, a real migrant worker, Han Sanming's reappearance through that exact same footage in *Still Life*, consequently makes his role ambivalent when he is introduced as a fictional character this time—a fictional character created to be a migrant worker and whose story constantly overlaps with Han Sanming's real-life experience in the contemporary Chinese society, which is documented in *Dong*.

The aforementioned sequence, without the shots of Liu painting, is introduced in *Still Life* by the newsreel of the relocation of the Sanxia residents on the television set Han Sanming is watching. The newsreel later fills up the entire film screen as the camera zooms onto the television screen. This transition from the television screen to the film screen, merging together the documentary and fictional spaces, establishes the "documentary-ness" of what follows, and consequently paves the way for the viewers' "documentary response" (Vaughan, 1999, p. 58) to the footage of Han Sanming that follows, regardless how this footage is now presented as part of the fictional space created by *Still Life*. The ambivalence of Han Sanming's role and the stories unfolded through him in *Still Life*, both partly real and partly fictional, provide a channel for Jia's cinematic manipulation of the reality and actuality. This manipulation is achieved through Jia's editing techniques that seam together staged and documentary footages his collaboration with the nonprofessional actor, Han Sanming. On the one hand, Jia's seamless editing technique that merges together the fictional and documentary worlds establishes a sense of "documentary-ness" for those staged footages. On the other hand, the layering of Han Sanming's real-life experience documented in *Dong* and his reenactment of it in *Still Life* retrieves the "documentary-ness" of those documentary footages included in the staged sequence.

While Han Sanming's role, oscillating across two filmmaking practices and the spaces created by them, triggers the "documentary response" (Vaughan, 1999, p. 58) by underlining the "documentary-ness" of *Still Life*, Xiaomage's role is arranged to complicate the boundary separating documentary and fiction films. Different from Han Sanming, whose role oscillates across two filmmaking practices due to his physical appearance in both *Still Life* and *Dong*, Xiaomage's role is set only as a fictional character played by nonprofessional actor as he only appears in *Still Life*. Also achieved through Jia's interweaving of staged and documentary footages, the story unfolded through Xiaomage's character serves as a channel for the intervention of those real-life experiences and emotions documented in *Dong*.

In *Still Life*, Xiaomage, after setting off with his gangster friends, was last found dead and buried under the debris of the demolished buildings. The camera later follows Han Sanming and other migrant workers arranging for Xiaomage's funeral, including shots of them carrying Xiaomage's corpse with a stretcher to the Yangtze River for burial and the family honoring the deceased afterwards. While this sequence does not seem to arise any evident sense of "documentary-ness" in the narrative of *Still Life*, all the shots regarding Xiaomage's funeral are actually documentary footages included in *Dong*, which record the funeral of one of the migrant workers in Liu's project after being killed on duty. Having this in mind, a process of transfiguration and reconfiguration that would accomplish the "documentary-ness" of this sequence therefore unfolds. The "documentary-ness" of the original documentary footages is at

first transfigured as fictional footages while they are edited into the narrative of *Still Life*. Later, through Jia's interweaving of the documentary footages of the death of the migrant worker in *Dong* and the staged footages of the death of Xiaomage in *Still Life*, the real-life experience and emotion of the contemporary Chinese citizens are accordingly brought forward. Consequently, the documentary footages are reconfigured to reclaim their "documentary-ness," through which that shared "substance" within the filmmaker-text-viewer relationship encourages the viewers' "documentary response" (Vaughan, 1999, p. 58). On the one hand, the fictional storylines of Han Sanming and Xiaomage in *Still Life*, both expanding from the historical events documented in *Dong*, underline those historical events, and therefore intensify the "documentary-ness" of the original documentary footages of *Dong* by interweaving them with the fictional part of the film.

On the other hand, by blurring the seam between the documentary and fictional worlds through the ambiguous roles of Han Sanming and Xiaomage, and through Jia's interweaving of the footages, a sense of "documentary-ness" of *Still Life* can therefore be established to encourage the "documentary response" (Vaughan, 1999, p. 58). Therefore, the ambiguous existence of the roles played by nonprofessional actors as both fictional characters and historical beings oscillating across *Still Life* and *Dong* challenges the boundary of documentary and fiction films in the sense that such "documentary-ness" is facilitated by and blended together with the fictional elements portrayed in *Still Life*.

The collaboration with nonprofessional actors, in relation to the contemplation upon the demolition and construction of the Three Gorges Dam project, its resultant demolition of the surrounding Fengjie village, and the displacement of the residents and the migrant workers, also reveals a discussion of temporality crucial to documentary. While Jia's documentary-inflected realism of the on-the-spot aesthetics (*xianchang*) often reveals the coexistence of two temporalities—the temporalities of the actors' performance and of the reality, Jia's interweaving of documentary and staged footages through the nonprofessional actors in *Still Life* actually constructs a temporality that is "constantly unfolding in the present, as both a symbolic partner and a form of critique of the social to which it tries to give shape and meaning" (Zhang, 2007, p. 3). In this regard, Chris Berry (2009) also recognizes the "present-ness" of the space constructed by the on-the-spot aesthetics in Jia's cinema.

In "Jia Zhangke and the Temporality of Postsocialist Chinese Cinema: In the Now (and then)," Berry (2009) seeks to foreground the documentary concreteness of Jia's *xianchang* by adding a historical and national extension onto the temporality of the present-ness of the on-the-spot and in-the-now realism. He accordingly terms this temporality as "the temporality of in-the-now (and then)" (p. 114-5), which "brings history back into on-the-spot realism without returning to the linear progress narratives" (p. 123), and in which, the present is constantly questioned by that past. However, a closer look at Jia's collaboration with nonprofessional actors in *Still Life* through the notion of "archive effect" and "archive affect" brought into view by Jaimie Baron (2014) in *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History*, I would like to retouch Berry's interpretation and propose an alternative reading of Jia's temporality as "in-the-now-then." This temporality, instead of suggesting a separation between the past and present, emphasizes the

present-ness that is constituted of the archive effect that, by reminding the viewers of the past, constantly adheres the past to the present.

In regard to illustrate my interpretation of Jia's "in-the-now-then" temporality, it is essential to contemplate upon the landscape of the Three Gorges Dam, which is the heart of Jia's *Still Life*. Jia's concern about urbanization as a "process" through his contemplation upon the demolition-in-process of the Three Gorges Dam and its surrounding landscape is always revealed through his portrayal of the nonprofessional actors. In many times, Han Sanming is filmed with overtly long takes when he lingers in the middle of the ruins of Fengjie village, or when he wanders about those half-demolished buildings, on which construction workers are at the same time taking down the rest of the buildings. Thus time becomes a vital concept to *Still Life* due to the coexistence of multiple performativity and temporality of Han Sanming, among other characters, and of the vanishing landscape.

However, it is worth noting that the distinction between the various temporalities is actually blurred by Jia's collaboration of nonprofessional actors because these nonprofessional actors, who are at the same time, social actors, share the same temporality with the reality, and therefore seals *Still Life* within a single unified time frame—the present. In this sense, the time of *Still Life* is organized in accordance with the "life time" and therefore offers the experience of time as "simple duration in a life that is more full of quotidian moments, inactivity, and boredom than spectacular events even in an era of dramatic historical change" (McGrath, 2007, p. 98). By rooting *Still Life* profoundly in the present, *Still Life*, therefore, reaches a "more direct access to time as duration opens up" (Berry, 2007, p. 124).

In this notion of time as duration, Baron's (2014) conception of the "archive effect" foregrounds the present-ness of *Still Life*, in which the past is constantly unfolding in the present through Jia's contemplation upon the dramatic transformation landscape, and therefore enables the sense of "documentary-ness" to disturb the viewers' perception of *Still Life* as merely fiction film by directing their attention to the landscapes through which the "life time" unfolds. Instead of utilizing cinematic cues, such as flashbacks and voiceover to contrast different times and create a subjective consciousness of memory and history, *Still Life* "teem[s] in period-authentic details and traffic[s] in their effects" (Xiao, 2011) to evoke both the "archive effect" and "archive affect." Such archive effect and affect are most obviously transmitted by Xiaomage in *Still Life*, through whom a particular soundscape, mixed with the soundscape of the demolition at the time of the filming of *Still Life* is realized. Pop songs, voices, dialects, accents, gestures and demeanors, together with the markers sprayed onto many walls of the village buildings that indicate the water level of 156.5 meters during the third phase of the construction, together evokes the archive effect and affect that register year 2005.

In his pursuit of grasping the drastically transforming Chinese society and the bewilderment of the people impacted by the transformation, Jia's collaboration with nonprofessional actors in *Still Life* also teams up with the animated documentary's vision to uncover a "more real truth" (Schäuble, 2011, p. 209) through the production of the "internal images" (p. 211) of the characters. Jia's utilization of computer-generated special effects intervenes at several key moments to intensify the character's state of mind. A UFO flashes across the sky above Fengjie village upon

Shen Hong and Han Sanming's arrival in Fengjie village to search for their long lost other half. A mysterious monument behind Shen Hong takes off while she is stuck in her memories. Finally, a man walks on the high wire connecting two half-demolished buildings while Han Sanming is leaving Fengjie for the life-risking coal miner job back in his hometown. Corresponding to Michaela Schäuble's (2011) perspective in "All Filmmaking is a For of Therapy," Jia achieves this "more real truth" in *Still Life* with his utilization of the computer-generated special effects, which bring into view the "uncertainties and different states of consciousness" (p. 209) that constitute the real life condition of those ordinary Chinese citizens impacted by the Three Gorges Dam project. According to Jia's explanation (2006), he believes that when two thousand years of history can be wiped off within two years, the surrealist atmosphere is already part of China's reality, in which speedy changes beyond human logic is evident everywhere. Therefore, these special effects actually become the most realist approach, a "magical realism" (McGrath, 2009, p. 42) that can most truthfully deliver the puzzlement and bewilderment of the ordinary Chinese citizens and therefore becomes a remarkably suitable way to constitute the "documentary-ness" of *Still Life*.

This "more real truth" emerged from Jia's special effects in *Still Life* is achieved at the confluence of Schäuble's and Vaughan's perspectives, in which both of them pay special attention to the perception of the viewers. Schäuble's (2011) argument that "the audience understands that the [animated] images is created entirely from the artist's hand" (p. 204), in this sense, corresponds to Vaughan's (1999) conception of the "documentary response," in which the viewers "do not reject a fictive option for a known nonfiction, but rather select a mode of apprehension in full knowledge of their own ignorance" (p. 79). In this regard, Jia skillfully intervenes the viewers' perception of the special effects to enhance the "documentary-ness" of them.

As the special effects in *Still Life* do not dramatize those elements or events evident in the real life and subsequently offer the viewers no tangible connection to their real-life experience, they therefore emphasize their detour from the real world by remaining enigmatic to the viewers. Operating as what McGrath (2009) terms as "magical realism" (p. 42), Jia's cinematic technique that strictly positions the special effects as only the "internal images" of the characters" subsequently establishes the "documentary-ness" of these special effects, and makes possible for the special effects to be perceived as documentary.

## **Conclusion**

Finally, the examination of Jia's collaboration of nonprofessional actors, his contemplation upon the vanishing landscape, and his utilization of computer-generated special effects in *Still Life* demonstrates how his documentary-inflected realism complicates the filmmaker-text-viewer relationship in documentary. In this regard, while critics such as Vaughan, Berry, Baron and Schäuble emphatically ground their critiques of the ambiguous qualities of documentary films on the province of the viewers, Jia alternatively complicates this "documentary response" with the "documentary-ness" he artfully crafts through his documentary-inflected realism. For Jia, the power of decision lies in the hands of the filmmakers as the filmmakers' chosen cinematic techniques can intentionally unsettle the viewers' perception and judgement by blurring the boundary between documentary and fiction films. For this reason, even those computer-generated special effects, which probably



carry the least documentary quality, can fulfill the viewers' desire to perceive a given image as documentary. However, Jia's utilization of those computer-generated special effects in *Still Life* can actually offer us an alternative reading concerning the filmmaker-text-viewer relationship in documentary, in which the privilege of the viewers further brings into view the notion of "conspiracy" between the filmmakers and the viewers. In this sense, all the "documentary-ness" conveyed through Jia's documentary-inflected realism discussed in this paper, especially those achieved through his "magical realism" only become possible if the viewers agree to hold hands with Jia and his cinematic techniques. This "conspiracy" between Jia and his viewers, therefore, unceasingly confirms the "documentary-ness" of *Still Life*, and further fulfills the viewers' desire for a documentary film, and, eventually, encourages the viewers' "documentary response" for reading *Still Life* as an expanded documentary work.

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## **Films**

*Still Life* (Jia Zhangke, 2006)

*Dong* (2006)

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