Realism and Event in Postwar Chinese Cinema

A 1948 article in the Guangzhou periodical *Literary Field* (文坛) highly praised the “truth” (zhenshi 真实) of the film *Spring River Flows East* (一江春水向东流; Cai Chusheng 蔡楚生 and Zheng Junli 郑君里, 1947), remarking that audiences throughout China, which recently had been through the horrors of war and Japanese occupation, were receptive to its depiction of the “shared suffering of our national history.” The article even claimed that *Spring River Flows East* augured the arrival of a “new realism” that contrasted with the “bygone realism” in that it did not simply represent “typical characters in a typical environment” but “also criticized reality from the standpoint of the possible development of things,” indicating a growing ambition to use realism not only to expose society’s ills but to propel history forward into the revolutionary future. This impression of the film’s realism from a Chinese critic not long after its first release contrasts starkly with a more recent evaluation by Chinese film historian Paul G. Pickowicz, who found the “cultural politics” of *Spring River Flows East* to be “decidedly conservative” and its style to be “classic melodrama,” having not “much to do with cinematic realism.”

Such discrepancies, as Kristin Thompson argues, “indicate strongly the historical nature of perceptions of realism.” Her primary example is Jean Renoir’s *The Rules of the Game* (La règle du jeu; 1939), which “met with much incomprehension upon its initial release, and it was only after years had passed, and such films as *Bicycle Thieves* (Ladri di bicicletta; Vittorio De Sica, 1948) had taught audiences new viewing skills, that *Rules* also won widespread acclaim as a realist film.” A similar fate was met by Fei Mu’s
费穆 1948 low-budget film *Spring in a Small Town* (*Xiao cheng zhi chun* 小城之春). Released the fall after *Spring River Flows East* had dominated Chinese movie theaters, this film had much more modest success at the box office and was criticized for being bourgeois, decadent, and out of touch with the times. It was almost entirely forgotten after the establishment a year later of the People’s Republic of China (PRC)—at least until the post-Mao era, when it was not only rediscovered and praised belatedly as a masterpiece but even famously crowned the greatest Chinese film of all time in a 2005 poll of critics conducted by the Hong Kong Film Awards on the centenary of Chinese filmmaking. To be sure, the reasons for the film’s disappearance from public and critical consciousness for decades had much to do with the politics of the intervening Mao era and the power of the Communist film industry and critical establishment in narrating Chinese film history. Nonetheless, the film’s rebranding as a timeless classic in the 1980s–2000s clearly was tied to the aesthetics of the emerging mainland Chinese art cinema of the so-called Fifth and Sixth Generations of filmmakers as well as to the parallel blossoming of the Taiwan New Cinema movement across the Taiwan Strait. These in a sense taught audiences, both domestic and abroad, to re-view *Spring in a Small Town* through the lens they provided, now seeing it as an exemplary instance of the sort of “long-take realism” that had been praised by the influential French film theorist and critic André Bazin in the 1940s–50s. In retrospect, much about *Spring in a Small Town* seemed to fit the mold of the kinds of French and Italian films that Bazin had credited with reinventing film language. In other words, a film whose novelty had failed to enthrall its original audience, certainly not like *Spring River Flows East*, had decades later come to be regarded as an artistic triumph on a level with, say, the postwar Italian Neorealist masterpieces that were in fact contemporaneous with it. This provided Chinese filmmakers and critics of the 1980s and beyond with a newly excavated lineage of Chinese art cinema that helped to legitimize the rising auteurs of Chinese post-socialist realism (see chapter 6) in the post-Mao era of “reform and opening.”

I will examine both of these films in much more depth later in this chapter, but for now these historical differences in the evaluation of each, including such disparate judgments regarding their degrees of realism, call
our attention to the highly contingent nature not only of the impression of realism but of our experience of cinema in general. Realism is not simply a matter of whether a film corresponds to a reality it seeks to represent; in fact, films ultimately are part of reality, and our experiences of films are enmeshed with all the other life experiences that form our impressions of reality. In a very real sense, every viewing experience of a film (even a repeat viewing of the same film by the same viewer) is a unique event, situated in a very particular, highly contingent set of circumstances that will help determine whether the experience is weak or powerful, whether the viewer experiences the film as true and real; weird and incomprehensible; conventional and boring; or perhaps conventional, but in an engaging and entertaining way, as in the case of a well-made genre film. A film’s relationship with real life is inseparable from the historical moment in which the viewing takes place, and in that sense, the capacity of a film to stand out from others depends in part on the degree to which it seems to embody real processes with which viewers already are engaged—whether those involve postwar Chinese audiences coming to terms with recent historical traumas, post-Mao filmmakers fitting their current strands of Chinese cinema into an international tradition of art cinema, or indeed (in the case of the third film we will examine in detail in this chapter) contemporaneous audiences experiencing an actual revolution.

The so-called golden age of Shanghai cinema is generally considered to have begun in the 1930s—or, more specifically, during 1932–37, when the Left-Wing Film Movement left its mark (see the previous chapter)—and then resumed briefly in 1946–49, after being interrupted by the Japanese occupation and World War II during the intervening years. The last chapter described how the conventional, official PRC film historiography—exemplified by the two-volume History of the Development of Chinese Film—would characterize Republican cinema as featuring a number of classics of progressive critical or social realism that stood out from the more regressive films offering mere entertainment and often reinforcing traditional “feudal” values. Following the standard Marxist orthodoxy regarding art and literature, those works of critical realism were said to be steps in a predetermined historical development from capitalism to
Communism, in which first a group of relatively progressive “prodigal son” (and daughter) artists from the bourgeoisie expose the hypocrisy, greed, and general moral failings of their own class through a practice of closely observed critical/social realism, and then later socialist realism proper takes a further step by directly representing the perspective and aspirations of the proletarian class itself. This theory of artistic development became standardized at the same time that socialist realism itself was being formally proposed and installed as the official artistic style of the global Communist movement. Thus the films of Shanghai cinema’s “golden age” that were made by left-leaning filmmakers (including many notable writers, directors, and actors) were retroactively said to have constituted the critical realist phase of artistic development during the bourgeois Republican period—progressive for their time, but destined to be replaced by the socialist realism (or variously named “proletarian realism” or “revolutionary realism”) of the Mao era after the Communist victory in the civil war.

This story has been criticized as an oversimplification by various critics and scholars. Pickowicz, for example, has critiqued not only Spring River Flows East but also many other key “leftist” films from both the 1930s and the 1940s as betraying their ostensibly progressive credentials, rooted in the New Culture Movement that had begun among Chinese artists and intellectuals in the 1910s, by embracing the melodramatic form favored by the popular film industry. As a result, according to Pickowicz, “there would be no place for the complexities and subtleties, and most of the crucial middle ground, of May Fourth socialist thought in melodramatic representation” in those films. In fact, as the next two chapters argue in detail, while melodramatic representation may not capture the subtleties and complexities of May Fourth thought (itself quite a varied phenomenon), it lends itself quite well to certain aspects of Communist cultural policy, even if it arguably has fundamental contradictions with Marxism’s underlying philosophy of dialectical materialism.

This chapter explores the short-lived revival of Shanghai cinema in the late 1940s through three key films. Spring River Flows East exemplifies Pickowicz’s point about ostensibly leftist filmmakers fully embracing a melodramatic mode of storytelling. At the same time, it gave audiences
the sense of truth or realism noted earlier by convincingly narrating in the postwar period a broader social history—in this case, a comprehensive account of the suffering of the Chinese people during and immediately after the Japanese occupation, with a morally legible sketch of degrees of culpability of those who either collaborated or profited from the war and its enormously economically challenging aftermath. Toward the end of the decade, another very popular film now considered a classic of the period, *Crows and Sparrows* (*Wuya yu maque* 乌鸦与麻雀; Zheng Junli, 1949), also would attempt to grasp a social totality—the class structure of urban China at the very brink of its transformation through revolution. In contrast to these ambitious attempts to paint large social and historical pictures through some form of verisimilar critical realism (however mixed with the genres of melodrama and comedy), *Spring in a Small Town* is analyzed as an exemplary instance of what I call *apophatic* realism—which uses negation or absence to point to a real beyond representation. The preceding chapter argued that films of the 1930s included apophatic gaps that subverted classical cinema norms through their sometimes jarring mixing of genres and their lack of narrative closure. *Spring in a Small Town*, conversely, employs an apophatic realism typical of art cinema—which, as David Bordwell highlights in his definitive chapter on the topic, is characterized by “permanent and suppressed gaps” and does not assume “reality” as a necessarily coherent and knowable thing.  

Although the three films examined in this chapter are generically diverse (a melodrama, an art film, and a comedy), all make certain claims on realism, and their examples allow for an exploration of how different genres and modes interact in complex ways with different sorts of realism. Despite—or rather in some ways through—its melodrama, *Spring River Flows East* attempts to present a coherent story of the previous years of war and the state of China in its aftermath, thus making claims to social realism even in the midst of its emotional excess. In its elliptical narration as well as its long-take style, in retrospect, *Spring in a Small Town* fits well into postwar global art cinema, while also exemplifying the idea of apophatic realism as proposed in this book. Finally, for all its success as a comedy, *Crows and Sparrows* makes a serious attempt to distill the social totality of China in the midst of revolution through its representation of
the various residents of a single tenement house, while also manifesting the beginning of a shift from verisimilar critical realism to what the next chapter delineates in detail as prescriptive realism.

In examining these three films, we also will see how crucially the effect of realism depends in various ways on temporality. Using what Jane Gaines proposes as the historical time theory of melodrama, I argue that the overwhelming pathos of Spring River Flows East is fundamentally tied to the irreversibility of history, and the film’s enormous popularity suggests that in the immediate aftermath of the war, many Chinese people needed simply to look back in traumatized horror at what had been irretrievably lost—even if, as the movie review cited at the beginning of this chapter claimed, it may have implicitly pointed to “the possible development of things,” presumably meaning revolution. Despite its vast difference in style and genre, Spring in a Small Town also has been convincingly interpreted as a response to the trauma of war, and I will show how its narrative management of time suggests both personal desire at an impossible standstill and history at an impasse. By decade’s end, in contrast, Crows and Sparrows captures history suddenly hurtling forward before our very eyes, pointing with both anxiety and great hope toward a future that suddenly promises entirely new possibilities.

**HISTORY AS MELODRAMA: SPRING RIVER FLOWS EAST**

As mentioned earlier, Pickowicz critiques the ostensibly progressive films of the Republican era in part by calling out the traditional, even reactionary, moral universe from which they often draw their melodramatic force. While the progressive May Fourth Movement had advocated the rejection of Confucian tradition in favor of individual freedom, the popular “progressive” melodramas of Shanghai cinema in fact drew much of their emotional power from “certain core Chinese values” that were “very Confucian and culturally conservative.” Aside from the traditional values invoked in particular Republican-era films, Pickowicz’s critique also reinforces the impression that melodrama is an intrinsically reactionary mode of narration. In seeking moral clarity through Manichean divisions of good and evil, eliminating any ambiguity or middle ground,
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melodrama would seem to deny the profound relativism and loss of secure metaphysical or religious grounding that are key markers of modernity itself, instead offering the false reassurance of what melodrama theorist Peter Brooks called the “moral occult” that melodrama reconstructs in its narratives. Certainly Pickowicz is right to distinguish between the practice of melodrama and the ideal of critical or social realism, a more respectable modern narrative mode exemplified by nineteenth-century realist novels that specialized in exposing the hypocrisies of the modern bourgeoisie and the brutalities of modern life for the working classes, often through subtle satire. Melodrama, in contrast, was a comparatively middle- or lowbrow phenomenon in the West, with origins in nineteenth-century popular theater. Following Pickowicz in a fashion, I argue in detail in chapter 5 that there is a fundamental contradiction between melodrama as a narrative form and Marxism as a philosophy. Nonetheless, the contemporaneous accounts of spectators show that the popular audience found *Spring River Flows East* to be both deeply moving and realistic as far as their own experience was concerned.

At the heart of *Spring River Flows East* (originally titled *Tears of Yangtze* in English), a sprawling film released in two parts totaling 190 minutes in length, is Sufen (played by Bai Yang, who had played the female lead in *Crossroads*, discussed in the previous chapter), a textile factory worker swept off her feet by the handsome and patriotic teacher Zhang Zhongliang in the period between Japan’s incursion into Manchuria in 1931 and its all-out invasion of China in 1937. The couple quickly marry and have a child, only to be separated when the war breaks out and Zhongliang leaves home to serve as a medic at the war front. He is captured by the Japanese, and the film quickly establishes a key part of its melodramatic moral framework, depicting those “Eastern Devils” oppressing the Chinese (whom the Japanese want to turn into “enslaved running dogs”) through several scenes that feature the cruelty of Japanese soldiers toward Chinese civilians. Meanwhile, Sufen herself lives in poverty with her son and mother-in-law, sacrificing everything during the war to keep the family together and await Zhongliang’s return from the war.

The melodrama of *Spring River Flows East* represents in florid fashion the enormous suffering and sacrifice of the Chinese people during the
war. In a trope typical of Republican-era fictional narratives, the virtuous and unjustifiably victimized Sufen stands in for the nation as a whole, her tribulations emblematic of China’s own unjust oppression by imperialist powers not just during the war against Japan but in the entire preceding century going back to the British aggression against China in the First Opium War (1839–42). At the same time, Sufen more particularly represents the suffering of the Chinese masses at the hands not only of foreign colonialists but of their own economic and political elite during the rule of the Guomindang (Nationalist Party, or KMT). Indeed, while in the first installment of the film, the Japanese military occupiers are depicted in all their cruelty, equally outrageous is the corruption portrayed in the ranks of the Chinese plutocracy—which Zhongliang joins after he escapes his Japanese captors, makes his way to the wartime capital of Chongqing, and is taken in by a seductive former acquaintance named Wang Lizhen, who gets him a job at her godfather’s Daxing Trading Company. In a key scene in the film’s second installment, after the war is over, the Chinese domestic exploiting class is exposed as Zhongliang is introduced to the tycoons who control China’s markets for automobiles, precious metals, rice, and textiles, all of whom are attending a lavish banquet featuring imported lobster from Calcutta. Here melodrama, however conservative it may appear as an aesthetic form, still implicitly supports a revolutionary politics; although it is true that traditional Confucian family ethics are appealed to, it is equally clear that the evil in melodrama’s Manichean imaginary is not individualized, as it often is in Hollywood melodramas, but unambiguously aligned with a very modern form of monopoly capitalism, which by implication needs to be overthrown. Even Zhongliang does not really personify evil in that, as Panpan Yang notes, his “corruption—portrayed as a reluctant, gradual, and almost inevitable process—can be read as the fate of a helpless man engulfed by an evil world out of his control.” Yang concludes, “By recognizing the crisis of a turbulent era that needs to be ended as the real evil, rather than the moral status of an individual, Chinese cinema of this period acculturates social change through the capacity of melodrama to address modernity, incorporating it into China’s revolutionary nation-building discourse.”

The film’s melodramatic pathos revolves around the specific figure of
Sufen as the suffering innocent. According to Linda Williams, the “basic vernacular” of melodrama “consists of a story that generates sympathy for a hero who is also a victim and that leads to a climax that permits the audience, and usually other characters, to recognize that character’s moral value,” so that “what counts in melodrama is the feeling of righteousness, achieved through the sufferings of the innocent.”13 Spring River Flows East features virtually all the key features that Williams sees as characterizing melodrama. It “begins in a space of innocence,” “offering a moment of virtue taking pleasure in itself”: a smiling Sufen, still young and single, concludes a day of work at the textile factory and proceeds to a workers’ supplementary education class of the kind that had been celebrated in earlier classics of the left-wing cinema movement, such as New Women, directed thirteen years earlier by the codirector of Spring River Flows East, Cai Chusheng.14 The proletarian Sufen’s hunger for self-improvement is rewarded with a passionate, patriotic lesson on the Japanese incursion into Manchuria delivered by the handsome and charismatic Zhongliang, the man who would soon marry and eventually betray her.

Another key feature of melodrama identified by Williams is that the virtue of the victim-hero must be recognized, not only by the audience, but by the other characters in the story world itself, often in a climactic scene of astonished reckoning. This occurs thirty minutes from the end of Spring River Flows East, after Sufen—in a case of the kind of highly implausible yet morally apt coincidence typical of melodrama—has been hired as a servant by the very family that is harboring her philandering husband now that he is at last back in Shanghai. The emotion-packed reencounter of the suffering wife with the husband who has abandoned her becomes inevitable when Sufen is enlisted to serve drinks at a lavish party the family is hosting. In the moments just before they spot and recognize each other, Sufen is shown in extreme long shot in a clear space in the middle of an otherwise large, crowded room, as if she is taking center stage in preparation for the drama to come, with all the other partygoers ready to serve as witnesses. When she hears her husband’s name and then trades shocked looks of recognition with him, she drops the tray of drinks she is carrying, collapses to the floor, and is soon surrounded by all the party guests, who thus bear witness to her horrible moment of
revelation that the husband whom she had assumed had been kept away only by hardship or possibly death had in fact abandoned her. After well over an hour in screen time (covering years in story time) of Sufen’s innocent suffering crosscut with Zhongliang’s growing exploits in both business and romance (with two different women besides his wife), the dramatic moment of revelation finally has arrived: when the guests demand to know what is wrong with Sufen, she points accusingly at Zhongliang and, in the presence of the two women he has had affairs with, discloses that they are married and have a nine-year-old child.

In a typical film melodrama, Williams explains, the climactic scene of revelation of the hero/victim’s suffering and exposure of her (or his) persecutor’s guilt generally launches the remainder of the film into a new direction involving intense pathos or action, or both (the dialectic between pathos and action being one of the defining features of melodrama that Williams theorizes). In *Spring River Flows East*, the big “sensation” scenes following the revelation are decidedly those of what Williams calls “prolonged ‘feminine’ pathos.” In fact, for the film’s entire final thirty minutes, beginning with the moment of revelation, virtually every scene features the shedding of tears—and in many cases heightened weeping and wailing. This extended orgy of pathos culminates in Sufen hurling herself into the river to drown (the same Huangpu River that had been the site of the suicide by drowning at the end of *Crossroads*, discussed in the preceding chapter).

This bleak ending is one of the few things that was criticized about *Spring River Flows East* at the time of its popularity, as it was said to offer insufficient hope for the future, but this lack of a future orientation is consistent with the film’s intense focus on the unbearable intensity of suffering in China’s immediate historical past. Between melodrama’s “dialectic of pathos and action—a give and take of ‘too late’ and ‘in the nick of time,’” *Spring River Flows East* emphatically falls on the side of “too late”—too late for Zhongliang to reunite with his family and atone for his years-long neglect of them, too late for Sufen to be rescued from her tragic death by suicide, too late for China to have avoided the horrors of war. As Christine Gledhill notes, melodramatic pathos involves not only sympathy or pity but also the more complex recognition of both “how
things are and how things ought to be.” The audience regrets Sufen’s extreme suffering all the more for knowing that it should not have been, or rather that it could have been greatly lessened and would have ended happily, if only her husband had cared for her and their child rather than betraying them. The finality of her death is all the more unbearable because of our sense that it could have been avoided. In other words, the emotional impact on the viewer depends in part on what Steve Neale calls “temporal irreversibility across a structure of knowledge and point of view”: while Sufen and Zhongliang were ignorant of each other’s tribulations and (in his case) betrayals during their separation, the audience has had a privileged point of view that revealed the full pattern as well as its relation to the broader tragedies of history—and that point of view, with the “if only . . .” it entails, accentuates the pathos of the acknowledgment of Sufen’s suffering during the film’s climax.

Jane Gaines argues that in melodramas ending with the death of an innocent protagonist, the pathos generated is that of temporal irreversibility in general, or ultimately of historical time itself. In this “too late” pattern of melodrama, “what is lost is not only past happiness but, in addition, happiness ‘yet to be,’” which is to say, in the case of Sufen, the “unreached future” of happy family reunion, which had been the dream sustaining her through nine years of grueling hardship. Insofar as Sufen stands in for the suffering of the Chinese masses under the conditions of war and its aftermath, including being governed by the inept kleptocracy that the ROC had become (embodied here by the corrupted Zhongliang), her suicide demonstrates precisely that her oppression was ultimately unbearable. Rather than any sort of “just in time” rescue, her tragic end dramatizes the irreversibility of the historical suffering she has been through, the finality of which no doubt contributed to the powerful impression of the film’s realism for spectators still coping with their own traumas and irreversible losses during the war.

Of course, because we normally think of them as opposed terms, a seeming incongruity appears when we refer to the realism of a melodrama. In critiquing how the serious thought of the May Fourth Movement was sold out by the popular appeal of melodrama in the case of left-wing cinema, Pickowicz observes that though filmmakers thereby “introduced
basic Marxist notions of class struggle, capitalism, and imperialism,” the genre’s “drastic simplifications” reduced such ideas to “stereotypes and caricatures.”

This undercut any leftist claims to social realism in cinema, because “the melodramatic mode is hostile to realism” owing to its oversimplifications in the interest of clear moral polarities.

Pickowicz is, of course, hardly alone here—the opposition between realism and melodrama has long been a premise in theories of both.

However, more recent scholarship on melodrama has challenged the ostensible dichotomy between realism and melodrama—the former “good,” the latter “bad”—as itself a rather melodramatic oversimplification. Gilberto Perez points out that “both realism and melodrama are modern forms that emerged in opposition to classicism” and that, rather than being opposed, they “are better looked upon as complementary.”

In “Melodrama Revised,” the definitive essay to which we have been referring here, Linda Williams argues that one of the five key features of melodrama is in fact that it “appears modern by borrowing from realism.” Williams means not only that melodramatic films will employ, say, realistic sets and costumes or Hollywood-style fictional realism but, more important, that, like critical realist films, they may address serious contemporary social problems—the biting class critique of the second half of Spring River Flows East, for example. We could say either that the conventions of melodrama contribute to the affective power of realism in representing social problems (the latter of which would be emphasized in official PRC film histories) or that the social realism of class disparities is placed in the service of melodrama’s pathos (in keeping with the hierarchy suggested by Williams, in which realism serves melodrama); in either case, realism and melodrama are more mutually constructing than absolutely opposed to each other.

For melodrama to have the effect of realism, however, its depictions of victimization and the eventual revelation of virtue must resonate with the particular historical moment in which it is consumed. John Mullarkey, drawing on Rick Altman and Henri Bergson, among others, encourages us to think of films in terms of processes and events rather than in terms of objects or texts: “There is no art object.”

Our experience of watching a film, like our experience of life in general, depends on what moments,
movements, or “events” we recognize as worthy of our attention. Thus, just about any spectator will find the moment of anguished reunion of Sufen and her husband in *Spring River Flows East* to be an event of significance, while perhaps only a few will consciously isolate a micro-event within that event: the split-second racking of Zhongliang into focus at the moment Sufen first recognizes him—a technical choice that subtly adds to the shot’s effect as a point-of-view shot from her perspective. Each viewer dwells on what seems most significant at the moment, and the mainstream “classical” style will clearly signal what audiences are expected to take as the film’s crucial events or moments, even if its methods for doing so—like the racking of focus just described—could be isolated as events in themselves by some viewers. But films as a whole also are events that play out in cultural history, sometimes repeatedly in different ways. In 1947, *Spring River Flows East* was not only a film text but a cultural event, insofar as its long, successful box-office run showed that it had powerful public resonance—the strong sense of “reality” that critics praised and to which audiences responded at the historical moment of its release.

**APOPHATIC REALISM: SPRING IN A SMALL TOWN**

The release of *Spring in a Small Town* the following year was another story. Audiences in Shanghai mostly ignored it, though it reportedly did better in Kunming and Chongqing, and although some critics praised it, those on the left condemned it for its lack of political progressiveness. As mentioned earlier, banned and forgotten during the Mao era, its real “eventhood” would come decades later, when it was rediscovered and praised by leading critics and filmmakers alike.

At the time of its release, *Spring in a Small Town* was an anomaly, but still with partial precedents both in China and abroad. Upon its appearance, it would have been in the category of *wenyi* or “literary art” films, a genre that has received much scholarly attention recently. In some cases, this category would seem to coincide with the English *melodrama*, but it also can imply just a film based on a literary source or, more broadly, one with ostensibly literary or artistic sensibilities. *Spring in a Small Town*, despite its emotional intensity, shows few of the hallmarks...
of melodrama as discussed in the case of *Spring River Flows East* but instead in retrospect brings together the Chinese *wenyi* genre with the aesthetic that eventually would be labeled as art films—including, in the 1930s–50s, French Poetic Realism and Italian Neorealism but also some non-Western postwar films, such as those of Yasujiro Ozu and Satyajit Ray. Indeed, in his formal analysis of the film’s style, James Udden has called Fei Mu “a *victim* of his time,” in that the originality and brilliance of his “proto-modernist” art film experiment went largely unrecognized and unappreciated owing to the lack of “portals” for Chinese filmmakers in world cinema at the time, unlike their postwar contemporaries in France, Italy, and Japan. Only later would Western critics and film historians grant it canonical status in world cinema, with David Bordwell, for example, describing it as a “milestone of world cinema, which anticipates so much of what we find in Antonioni and other postwar European filmmakers.”

Existing scholarship has discussed many aspects of this film’s themes and distinctive style. I will approach it by means of elaborating the mode of realism that I call *apophatic realism*, one of the six conceptual categories of realism that were outlined in the introduction. *Apophatic* means obtained through negation or represented indirectly by not being represented—for example, in the case of apophatic or negative theology, which says that God or the absolute cannot be defined positively but only described in terms of what it is *not*. By apophatic realism, then, I mean a mode of cinematic representation that seeks to acknowledge its own fundamental limitations, to take the real as in some way exceeding or defying representation, and consequently to build into its narrative and technique an opening toward something beyond what that representation can directly express, often figuring negatively as gaps or absences.

*Spring in a Small Town*, I argue, is essentially about an event that does not happen, and as such, it is structured as circling around a void in at least three different ways that will be outlined here. First, in both its fictional narrative about a family and its actual historical postwar context, the film represents a traumatic or melancholic absence or loss. This reading has already been made in existing scholarship, but I will point out some ways that traumatic or melancholic loss is presented specifically in an apophatic manner in the film and contrast the sense of time and history in the film
with those of *Spring River Flows East* and the final 1940s film I analyze, *Crows and Sparrows*. Second, the film’s dark energy, as it were—the sense of the proximity, and even the *attraction*, of an engulfing nihility—comes from a romantic attraction or sexual obsession that is depicted mainly negatively, which is to say, as a void that sets the entire plot in motion but is only realizable through an ethical transgression, an act that would destabilize the social and symbolic order and hence appears as a negating potential. Third, and most important in the broader context of this book, I want to explore the ways in which the void at the center of the film is expressed through specific cinematic techniques—in particular, the film’s very distinctive use of elliptical editing.

The plot of *Spring in a Small Town* is simple. In spring 1946, just months after the end of the war and Japanese occupation, a family compound partially ruined by the war has been reoccupied by its owner, Dai Liyan, his wife, Zhou Yuwen, and his little sister, Dai Xiu, as well as the only remaining family servant, Lao Huang. Liyan has been rendered impotent by tuberculosis and heart problems, and his wife, Yuwen, spends her days in desolate isolation. One day, Liyan’s old friend Zhang Zhichen, now a doctor of Western medicine, arrives on an unexpected visit. Coincidentally, and unbeknownst to Liyan, his friend and his wife had themselves been in love as youths, and soon a love triangle—or even a quadrangle—develops, as Yuwen and Zhichen realize they are still in love with each other, while Liyan dreams of setting up his sixteen-year-old sister eventually to marry Zhichen, while also still occasionally displaying unrequited love toward his wife, Yuwen. The tension in the film centers on the question of whether Yuwen and Zhichen will consummate their rekindled passion and run away together, and the truth of their entanglement gradually becomes evident to the little sister, Dai Xiu, as well as the husband, Liyan. The emotional toll of the situation leads to Yuwen contemplating suicide and Liyan actually attempting it, though he is saved by his doctor friend and rival. In the end, Zhichen leaves the town again, and Liyan and Yuwen’s marriage remains intact.

The constitutive void in *Spring in a Small Town* can first be approached through the metaphorical tropes of the ruined family compound and the frail, emasculated Liyan, both of which have been said to represent a
weakened China devastated by a century of imperialist aggression capped by the eight years of Japanese occupation. Through Yuwen’s ambiguous voice-over narration—one of the film’s most notable formal features—we are told in an early sequence that the main house of the Dai family compound is ruined to the point of being uninhabitable, so that the ill Liyan and his wife sleep instead in separate rooms in the garden courtyard. The main structure of the fallen landed gentry family thus lies unused, like a language that can no longer be spoken. The parallel between the devastated property and Liyan’s own bodily health is made clear when he comments to Lao Huang early in the film, “I’m afraid my health is like this house, destroyed beyond repair.” The gaping holes in the walls of the compound, frequently featured in the film’s mise-en-scène, like the abandoned main house itself, are a constant reminder of the dilapidated and inadequate state of the old Confucian family structure, and Liyan’s habit of milling about aimlessly in the garden grounds—where, we are told, he takes solitary refuge each morning—demonstrates his general inadequacy and uselessness as both a husband and a head of household. As an indicator of a wartime and postwar crisis of Republican-era Chinese masculinity, the tubercular, impotent, often masochistic Liyan shares much in common with the protagonist Wang Wenxuan in Ba Jin’s novel *Cold Nights* (*Han ye* 寒夜), published the year before *Spring in a Small Town* was released.\(^{33}\)

The separate sleeping quarters of Liyan and Yuwen literalize a more fundamental gap between the two, which had its origins in a presumably arranged marriage in which any affection she had for him was forced from the beginning, while his illness and impotence have only reinforced their estrangement into a profound, inexpressible alienation. In her early voice-over narration, Yuwen says that the two might exchange only three sentences in a day and often see each other without saying a word. In the first scene with the two of them, Liyan begs her to talk things over. Her retort—*women you shenme ke tan de* 我们有什么可谈的?—has been translated in English subtitles as “What’s there to talk about?” or “What’s there to discuss?”\(^ {34}\) but the Chinese is more accurately rendered as “What do we have *that can be* talked about?”—itself an apophatic assertion that emphasizes not only something’s absence but its unspeakability. The gulf between her and her husband is part of a more general void that threatens
the core of Yuwen’s subjectivity; she describes herself as feeling empty or insubstantial (空空洞洞的) and plagued by a mood of helplessness (无可奈何的心境) as she wanders every day atop what she calls the “broken down and hollowed-out old city wall,” her emotional void echoed by the ruined city wall she frequents, just as Liyan’s emasculation is embodied by the ruined family compound in which he wanders.

We are first introduced to Liyan in such a state, in a series of shots that emphasize the bombed-out gaps in the walls of the compound and the piles of rubble that resulted. In a remarkable shot that begins a game of concealment and revelation that plays out in various ways throughout the film, the camera first pans along a fragmented wall to find the servant Lao Huang, who looks through a hole in the wall in a search for the “hiding” Liyan. It continues panning with Lao Huang as he moves to another opening through which he can walk. Then, however, the camera suddenly leaves him to track forward and pan again to the left, as if conducting its own independent search for Liyan and choosing to glide through the gaping hole through which Lao Huang had first looked. As the hole expands to fill the screen, we in turn find Liyan seated in the ruined garden, where Lao Huang reenters the frame from off-screen right.

This sort of game of concealment and revelation involving off-screen space is returned to frequently. Long takes often observe multiple characters in their courtyard rooms, where character and camera movement combine to form complex shots in which characters are successively inside and outside the frame, gazes off-screen are often of primary significance, and private desires are manifested in a way that is often readable to the audience but not to other characters. The dialectic of concealment and disclosure plays out particularly in the depiction of Yuwen and Zhichen’s rekindled mutual attraction, which for a time at least is evident to the audience but not to Liyan and his little sister. For instance, while on a collective outing, Zhichen daringly holds Yuwen’s hand for a moment, but he drops it before anyone else can notice. Similarly, when Liyan and Dai Xiu sing a folk song together on a boat ride, they remain oblivious to several exchanges of smoldering looks between Yuwen and Zhichen, though the audience cannot miss them. As if to pervert matters further,
the song the siblings sing to unwittingly arouse the secret lovers’ passion, “In that Faraway Land” (“Zai na yaoyuan de difang 在那遥远的地方”)—a seeming shepherd’s folk song written for the film by Wang Luobin 王洛宾—describes a man’s submissive longing for an unobtainable woman:

In that faraway land
There’s a fine girl
When people pass by her side
They all turn their heads with glimpses of longing
That smiling pink face of hers
Is like the red sun
Her pretty, charming eyes
Are like bright, beautiful evening moonlight
I wish I could be a little lamb
Following at her side
I wish she would grasp a delicate leather whip
And keep lightly striking my body

The masochistic erotic fantasy expressed in song brings us to another key sense of the void at the heart of Spring in a Small Town, one that goes beyond the historical and national allegorical associations of the ruined house and Liyan’s impotence or the emptiness of Yuwen’s life with him—namely, the foreclosed attraction between Yuwen and Zhichen and the radical ethical choice that it raises. That is, their desire itself appears as a dangerous vortex that threatens not only to suck them in but to destroy what is left of Liyan’s marriage and family, and yet, at the same time, it is an attraction that creates conflicted desires not only in the fictional characters but in the spectator—who, oriented in particular by Yuwen’s voice-over narration, can hardly help but align at least partially with her desires, especially in the early scenes of the film. Like Yuwen and Zhichen, however, the viewer is likely to feel more conflicted as the film goes along, and the destructive implications of their passion are manifested in their own evident growing misery, to the point that Zhichen eventually accuses Yuwen of “tormenting” him.

In the depiction of Yuwen and Zhichen’s obsessive love, the film’s apophatic technique is extended beyond the literal gaps in the mise-en-scène—the holes in both the city wall and the family compound walls—
or plays with off-screen space and a camera that selectively reveals and conceals; to these it adds an editing quirk that appears repeatedly in the film, namely, ellipses within scenes that seem to exceed any of the usual narrative motivations for elliptical editing. These peculiar dissolve ellipses occur during the first of three instances in which Yuwen goes to visit Zhichén in his room alone at night, and then again during the second of two instances in which the two engage in a private liaison on the old city wall.

In the initial sequence of Yuwen and Zhichén alone in the latter’s room, the first dissolve ellipsis occurs when Yuwen appears at his door and he invites her to come in, initiating a dissolve to a shot of her standing in the room. Later in the scene, there are two more ellipses, in which we know some time has passed because of the changes in position of the characters in addition to the dissolve cuts that join the shots. What did they say or do in the missing interim between the shots? We do not know. There is a fourth instance that is not as immediately obvious as an ellipsis; it lacks the dissolve punctuation and could be read as a cutaway to a view from outside the room, and yet it still feels discontinuous. Zhichén is suddenly holding a candle in the second shot, and we somehow go from an emotional and even intimate moment, ending with Zhichén’s grasping of Yuwen’s hand, which had also happened just before the second ellipsis, to Yuwen exiting the room. Moreover, in the view from outside the room, we can see from the shadows of human figures moving behind the window curtain that the characters are not in the same place in the room as in the previous shot, seemingly walking to the door from the area of the bed rather than the table right next to the door, where they had been in the previous shot.

In interpreting such ellipses, particularly in this context of would-be forbidden lovers meeting secretly in a bedroom, it is tempting to associate them with a type of elision typical in classical Hollywood cinema, namely, the sex scene as a constitutive absence. As Linda Williams has demonstrated, in pre-1960s cinema, a simple touch or kiss often functioned as a synecdoche for the entire sex act, particularly if followed by a telling ellipsis. This convention—an ellipsis standing in for unrepresentable sexual content—points to the way in which ellipses can have opposite functions, depending on how they are deployed. Virtually all films have
a variety of minor editing ellipses that simply skip ahead to the next significant event in the plot’s causal chain. In such cases, for reasons of economy, story content is left out because of its insignificance. Other ellipses, such as for a sexual act, appear to have the opposite function: they skip story content that is highly significant, even crucial to the plot, not for reasons of economy but because the filmmaker either cannot or chooses not to directly represent them. A sex scene may be crucial to the narrative but elided owing to censorship, ratings, or simply cultural mores; it is also possible, though, that an ellipsis best captures a certain elusiveness or resistance to representation of sexual enjoyment itself. Similarly, an act of violence or death may be elided in a film not only to spare the viewer an unsightly spectacle but also in acknowledgment of the resistance of such trauma to representation. An unrepresented story event paradoxically may have more power in the narration than the same event shown explicitly.

However, as tantalizing as it may be to speculate about what might have happened between when Zhichen grabbed the sobbing Yuwen’s hand in the dark and when the next shot shows her leaving his room, the couple are unlikely to be interpreted by the spectator as having consummated their affair during Zhichen’s visit to the Dai family compound. Near the film’s end, Zhichen confesses to Liyan that he “almost did something inhuman,” implying that nothing sexual happened between him and his friend’s wife beyond the several instances we observe of them grasping each other’s hand or arm, subtly leaning their bodies into each other at various points in the film, or, most scandalously, a moment during a later nighttime bedroom visit when Zhichen suddenly sweeps Yuwen into his arms, as if to carry her to the bed, only then to have second thoughts and set her back down. Still, even if no sexual act occurs, as the two circle warily around the vortex of their mutual desire, the odd ellipses that Fei Mu inserts into otherwise continuous scenes nonetheless apophatically gesture toward an impossible real of their passion as well as the abyss of the choice they are tempted to make. They only intermittently confront this choice directly while also sparring with each other by means of, for example, the highly implausible alternative of Zhichen instead marrying the little sister, Dai Xiu—a possibility that Liyan asks Yuwen to discuss
with Dai Xiu, but which she instead uses to tease Zhichen in another scene that features strange elliptical cuts even more prominently.

That scene is the second of two crucial ones in which Zhichen and Yuwen meet alone on the crumbling town wall that is Yuwen’s favorite haunt. The first, which begins nearly thirty-six minutes into the film, appears to renew their passion by edging their relationship back toward their youthful romance of years before. After delicately discussing the missed opportunity of their youth, Zhichen directly raises the question of whether Yuwen would leave with him if he asked her to. She responds, “Really?” He does not answer, but they are then shown walking away arm in arm. The second scene between the two of them on the old city wall is like an inversion of the first, in that now their relationship clearly is becoming more contentious. Here Yuwen clings to Zhichen’s shoulder in a gesture of physical intimacy, but then she rather cruelly taunts him with Liyan’s suggestion that Zhichen might be a good match for his sister, forcing Zhichen angrily to reject the idea. Later in the scene, he expresses regret that he did not find a matchmaker to unite him with Yuwen in their youth, while she scolds him for that failure, eventually saying she does not want to be with him after all and then literally running away from him. In the course of this conversation on the wall, two prominent dissolve cuts show the two figures as having changed places on the screen, suggesting temporal ellipses of unknown duration between the shots (Figure 14).

Here the ellipses obviously do not conceal physical intimacies between Yuwen and Zhichen, but the uncertainty they present to the audience—what exactly are we missing, both in their conversation and in their relationship?—conveys those characters’ own uncertainty as they contemplate the radical choice they face. The film’s forbidden love story as a whole dramatizes the conflict between what Haiyan Lee calls the Confucian structure of feeling—in which passion, or qing 情, is meant to be kept in balance with ritual propriety, or li 礼—and the modern “enlightenment” structure of feeling, in which the individual is what Lee calls “the basic and irreducible unit of moral choice and action” and free love attains a kind of absolute value as a basis of identity. As the would-be lovers are drawn to the enlightenment structure of feeling,
the radical possibility they face (to which the spectator is cued to be at least somewhat sympathetic) is what post-Lacanian theorists of ethics and love, including Alenka Zupančič, Slavoj Žižek, and Alain Badiou, would call an act or event that represents a modern subject’s taking of responsibility for the creation of her own world, an act of intentional self-constituting that in a sense would transform the subject through its self-orientation around a new truth, constituted in this case by a love relationship. In the Badiouian conception of such a “truth procedure,” the possibility of the transformative event necessarily appears first as a void or empty term within the preceding state of affairs, simply because the previously accepted reality does not admit of the possibility of that truth. It is precisely this void that is evoked by the peculiar ellipses in the scenes between Yuwen and Zhichen: the abyss of their own desire, but also both the seeming impossibility of its realization and the traumatic destruction that would result. That is, if the subject takes the plunge, commits the act, and thereby radically transforms herself and the course of her life, the existing reality experiences the consequences as violence
because the act causes something that was previously forbidden to appear. As Zupančič asserts, “any act worthy of the name is by definition ‘evil’ or ‘bad’ (or will be seen as such), for it always represents a certain ‘overstepping of boundaries,’ a change in ‘what is,’ a ‘transgression’ of the limits of the given symbolic order (or community)”—though for Zupančič, in terms of ethics, it is in reality not so much “evil” as a suspension of received ideas of good and evil in favor of a new, freely chosen universalizing gesture that overturns them.\footnote{41}

In the cultural production of 1940s China, we can find no better distilled representation of the attraction of such an act in the context of love than the short story “Sealed Off” (\textit{Fengsuo} 封锁) by Zhang Ailing 张爱玲 (Eileen Chang), whom Haiyan Lee calls “perhaps the most artful chronicler of the transformations of intimacy and the dilemmas of the metropolitan personality who is incapable of the heroism of renunciation and yet yearns to be in touch with the heroic and transcendent” under the enlightenment structure of feeling.\footnote{42} In “Sealed Off,” two strangers, a single young woman who teaches English and a married male bank accountant, strike up a conversation while stuck on a tram car that is stopped in transit due to an air raid drill in occupied Shanghai during the war.\footnote{43} The suspension of ordinary life caused by the air raid drill encourages them to slip into a fantasy-tinged state in which they seem to fall passionately (if rashly) in love, seeing in the other a soul mate who transcends the mundanity of being a “good” person and is instead a “real” person—a distinction explicitly made in the story that outlines the stakes of “the act” as described above: can these two people suspend their habituated norms of “good” versus “bad” behavior, instead to try to grasp a “real” of their love that transcends the received distinction? The notion of becoming a couple despite his marital status suddenly looms as a genuine, life-altering possibility. However, soon the air raid drill ends, the life of the city returns, the tram resumes its route, and the dream dissipates with an almost tragic suddenness; the man now proclaims their fantasy impractical, and the woman silently gives up any hope of true love and happiness. In short, just as in \textit{Spring in a Small Town}, “Sealed Off” (which was published five years earlier) gets its energy from an affair that does not actually happen, as the couple concerned consider a radical act
of, in Badiou’s terms, fidelity to the life-changing event of their falling in love but then back away from the traumatic possibility, which would have upended their lives if pursued.

In her reading of *Spring in a Small Town*, Carolyn Fitzgerald also invokes Zhang Ailing, in particular her self-proclaimed preferred aesthetic of “desolation” or *cangliang* 苍凉, which certainly seems appropriate to the overall tone of the film as well as the description within the film of Yuwen’s life as “desolate” or *qiliang* 凄凉.44 Aside from “desolation,” Fitzgerald cites as relevant to *Spring in a Small Town* Zhang Ailing’s fondness for the aesthetic effects of “equivocal contrasts,” or *cenci de duizhao* 参差的对照, which can also be translated as “uneven contrast” or simply “incongruence.”45 The metaphorical example given by Zhang Ailing herself is the color combination of “scallion green” with “peach red”—as opposed to the more seamless complementarity of true red and true green. Zhang does not elaborate directly on what she means by the “unevenness” of such a contrast, but the word *cenci*, which can also mean “serrated” or “jagged,” suggests an imperfect fit, a joining of two things that leaves spaces or gaps. The example Zhang gives in her essay immediately after introducing the term is the main couple from her story “Love in a Fallen City,” whose relationship represents a compromise in which neither character is entirely transformed, nor does either become completely fulfilled. In other words, the idea of uneven contrasts, in the context of Zhang Ailing’s stories as well as *Spring in a Small Town*, seems to evoke in part the inevitable mismatching of desires between a couple in love, where each person can never quite fully embody the other’s fantasy—or, to put it another way, where the actual other in the intersubjective relationship will never entirely coincide with the imagined object of one’s love, propped up as it is by subjective fantasy. In this sense, the gap between Yuwen and Zhichen—despite, or rather because of, how in love they are—may be even more traumatic than the silent, unbridgeable gulf between Yuwen and her husband. In fact, as Victor Fan points out in his reading of the film, all four main characters suffer from unfulfilled or mismatched desires: Liyan’s desire for Yuwen, who repeatedly though subtly rebuffs him throughout the film; Yuwen’s desire for her real, lost love, Zhichen; Zhichen’s desire for Yuwen, blocked by his sense of
propriety and loyalty to his friend Liyan; and Dai Xiu’s desire to be desired romantically by Zhichen, who instead continues to treat her like a niece.⁴⁶ Each case may be thought of in the sense of Zhang Ailing’s technique of “uneven contrast,” which she says can “show the reality in the emptiness” of people’s lives.⁴⁷ Things generally fail to match up perfectly, and people learn to live with the gaps; in fact, it is precisely those gaps that indicate the resistance of the real to the personal fantasies of fulfillment that people pursue.

In its depiction of dangerous desires, as Carolyn Fitzgerald has pointed out, Spring in a Small Town has curious resonances with 1940s Western film noir.⁴⁸ Among the noir elements that it echoes are the theme of doomed love, the reliance on voice-over narration, and the potentially dangerous sexual agency of Yuwen, whose depiction approaches that of a femme fatale—an association importantly mitigated, however, by the fact that the voice-over narration is hers, not that of any man she seduces or betrays, so that she remains the film’s point-of-view character, despite not always being a sympathetic one.⁴⁹ The love-triangle cuckolding plot, nonetheless, can invoke associations with international films noir from earlier in the decade that depicted an irresistible woman seducing a man into helping her dispose of her unloved husband, including Double Indemnity (Billy Wilder, 1944), The Postman Always Rings Twice (Tay Garnett, 1946), and the Italian proto-neorealist film based on the same literary source as the latter, Luchino Visconti’s Obsession (Ossessione; 1943). In particular, the moment in Spring in a Small Town when the would-be lovers are speculating on what is to be done and Yuwen suddenly blurts out, regarding her husband, Liyan, “Unless [pause] he were to die”—after which she immediately claps her hand over her mouth as if scared of her own thought—is reminiscent of these Western films, in which the husband’s death is desired to clear the way for the extramarital love affair to proceed unhindered.⁵⁰ Yuwen’s partial femme fatale characterization also is evident, for example, in a scene in which she toys with Zhichen’s emotions while repeatedly holding her scarf up to cover half her face—a veiling gesture that recalls famous desired women in cinema history, from the Princess of Bagdad in the Douglas Fairbanks vehicle The Thief of Bagdad (Raoul Walsh, 1924) to Marlene Dietrich in Joseph von Sternberg’s The Scarlet Empress (1934).
Of course, the connection to noir is only partial, and Yuwen, as much as she does seem sometimes to derive sadistic enjoyment from toying with Zhichen’s desires, in the end is driven not by cold personal greed or excessive cruelty but by her own tortured emotions. Nonetheless, the moral ambiguity and potentially fatal gaps in knowledge that characterize the distinctive modernism of films noir are similar to the uncertainties that plague the characters in *Spring in a Small Town*, caught as they are between a ruined Confucian tradition that they cannot fully recover and a challenging modernity that they seem inadequate to face.

Even more crucial than the noir connection is how *Spring in a Small Town* has appeared to various critics to be, on one hand, possibly the closest thing to a feature-length modernist art film that China produced before the 1980s and, on the other, an example of an indigenous, even traditional Chinese aesthetic manifesting in cinema. In terms of the former association, even more than film noir or Italian Neorealism, French Poetic Realism of the 1930s may be the closest global cinematic antecedent to what Fei Mu achieved in *Spring in a Small Town*. This is true primarily in terms of style, but even in terms of plot and theme, there are strong similarities. In his study of French Poetic Realism, Dudley Andrew describes its “subdued, whispering tone, letting audiences monitor the incredible pressure underneath the sad routine of ordinary life”—a description that well describes the deceptively calm yet subtly oppressive atmosphere of much of *Spring in a Small Town*.51 In their *Film History*, Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell write that the protagonists of poetic realist films typically, “after a life of disappointment . . . find a last chance at intense, ideal love. After a brief period they are disappointed again, and the films end with the disillusionment or deaths of the central characters. The overall tone is one of nostalgia and bitterness.”52 This description certainly fits *Spring in a Small Town* (although no one dies), and it also is notable that many of the genre-defining poetic realist films cited by Thompson and Bordwell involve impossible or forbidden love, leading to doomed romances.

In the present context, just as striking as the similarities in plot and theme between French Poetic Realism and Fei Mu’s aesthetic is the precise mode of cinematic realism that they pursue. Much has been made of Fei Mu’s long-take style—*Spring in a Small Town* has an average shot
length (ASL) of more than twenty-four seconds—as well as his preference for long shots that employ lateral panning or tracking rather than cutting to closer shots of different characters. These characteristics fit the style of realism that André Bazin praised among several filmmakers in the 1930s–50s from France, Italy, and America—including Jean Renoir, perhaps the greatest French Poetic Realist director. Bazin credits Renoir with “laying the foundation” for the later Italian Neorealism and says his style can be summed up as an “aesthetic of discrepancy”—an interesting parallel with the Zhang Ailing aesthetic of “incongruity” or “uneven contrasts” applied to Spring in a Small Town. More generally, Bazin felt that the stylistic choices of long takes with minimal cutting and longer shot distances were most suited to developing the intrinsic realism of the film medium because they preserved the continuity of time and space and thus more closely approximated our actual experiences of the world. The long takes of Spring in a Small Town are unusual in comparison not only to Hollywood but also to other Chinese films at the time. Compared to the other films discussed in this chapter, for example, its twenty-four-second ASL is more than twice the ASL of Spring River Flows East (ten seconds) and Crows and Sparrows (eleven and a half seconds).

Even more relevant to my current analysis are Bazin’s ideas regarding editing ellipses. Discussing Italian Neorealist filmmaker Vittorio De Sica, Bazin notes that ellipses are essential to the overall structure of his narratives: “The empty gaps, the white spaces, the parts of the event that we are not given, are themselves of a concrete nature: stones which are missing from the building” (a metaphor that conveniently evokes the gaps in the ruined walls featured in Spring in a Small Town). As with long takes and long shots, Bazin grounds his appreciation for ellipses in the idea that they are in their own way verisimilar, in the sense that a lack of complete knowability of the story world mimics that of our own real world: “It is the same in life: we do not know everything that happens to others.” Here we have a justification for ellipses that returns us to what I am calling apophatic realism—the idea that cinema may seek to represent negatively to grapple with a real that is understood as exceeding representation or knowledge. In his study of French Poetic Realism, Dudley Andrew asserts that certain types of film realism
This is the essence of apophatic realism, which uses devices including off-screen space and editing ellipses precisely to point to a real that exceeds our own situated viewpoint. The fact that such a technique may strike us as modernist is not surprising, given that it shares in what Umberto Eco has described as the modernist “open work,” in which an artwork’s resistance to closure or sure meaning becomes an “epistemological metaphor” that indexes a general loss of any sort of certainty or absolute bearings under modernity.⁵⁸

As mentioned earlier, while Fei Mu’s techniques and themes may lend themselves to interpretations in terms of Bazinian realism, modernist art cinema, and Lacanian psychoanalysis, he also is one of the directors most likely to be brandished by those asserting a distinctively Chinese or “Eastern” style that is imagined as carving out an aesthetic based on Eastern tradition different from Western cinema in general and Hollywood cinema in particular.⁵⁹ (Here he is joined by other canonized East Asian filmmakers, such as Sun Yu, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Yasujiro Ozu, and Kenji Mizoguchi.) Fei Mu himself contributes to this association of his aesthetic with traditional Chinese culture through the essays he wrote, in which, for example, he advised Chinese filmmakers to find inspiration for an indigenous film aesthetic in the formalism of Chinese opera or in the oblique suggestiveness of Chinese painting, which famously makes use of blank, unpainted spaces and thus arguably has a strongly apophatic aspect. Taiwan film scholar Ray Jiing (Jing Yingrui 井迎瑞) identifies this technique of liubai 留白 (literally “leaving blank”) as one of the main facets of the artistic triumph of Spring in a Small Town, and he describes it apophatically: “what is unsaid must be greater than what is said.”⁶⁰ In one of the first English-language article-length studies of the film, Susan Daruvala brought together the modernist and traditionalist readings of the film: “the film . . . through its cinematic techniques becomes a truly
modernist work. It is, in fact, these aspects that seem the most closely related to Chinese aesthetics.”

In his discussion of Fei Mu in his book *Cinema Approaching Reality*, Victor Fan notes that commentaries on the director suffer from the danger of reducing him either to a cultural essentialism or to a parallel with certain trends in Western cinema, both of which have been partially indulged earlier in this chapter. In the context of the current discussion, however, most important is the contrast between Fei Mu’s apophatic style in *Spring in a Small Town*, on one hand, and the attempt to grasp and clearly represent totalizing truths of history and society in *Spring River Flows East* and *Crows and Sparrows* (considered shortly), on the other. While *Spring in a Small Town* offers an apophatic realism of the unknown—an epistemological metaphor for a profound uncertainty or skepticism as well as a degree of moral ambiguity in life—the other two films suggest a world that is both essentially knowable and morally legible. In them, history proceeds inexorably in one direction, leaving trauma in its past but possibly promising redemption by revolution in its future. *Spring in a Small Town*, in contrast, presents history at a seeming standstill, even caught in a circular vortex. Described earlier as circling around a void, the film literally has a circular narrative structure: though a first-time viewer is unlikely to notice it, one of the final shots of the film—an extreme long shot showing Zhichen leaving the small town, escorted by Dai Xiu and Lao Huang—in fact already had appeared during the film’s opening credits. The movie ends where it began, or rather begins where it ends. This odd temporal ambiguity is reinforced by Yuwen’s voice-over narration, which, as others have noted, seems to slip between narrating in the present, as if stating Yuwen’s thoughts as they occur, and narrating in flashback in a more omniscient manner, as if she is remembering or even reliving the events after knowing how they will turn out. The effect of all these temporal aspects of the film is to give a sense of both the oppressive stasis of Yuwen’s life and marriage, from which she ultimately will not escape, and the circular whirlpool of her impossible desires, which are cyclically activated and disappointed in the film’s narrative structure, evoking a feeling of life and time itself as snagged on a void of the Real, unable to proceed.
WHEN CINEMA AND HISTORY CONVERGE: CROWS AND SPARRROWS

If *Spring River Flows East* constituted a look back at the traumas of the recent historical past and *Spring in a Small Town* seemed to be stuck in a cyclical present in which temporality is collapsed and human desire thwarted, *Crows and Sparrows* on the contrary was one of those rare films that seemed so much to coincide with a tectonic transformation in human social life that watching the film feels almost like watching history itself hurtle forward before our eyes. Like *Spring River Flows East*, the film drew massive audiences, with an estimated 287,000 people viewing it in Shanghai alone. Produced by the same Kunlun Film Company and directed by one of the codirectors of *Spring River Flows East*, Zheng Junli, *Crows and Sparrows* benefited from a stellar cast of popular veteran actors, a finely honed screenplay, inventive camerawork and editing that made the most of its limited settings, and a tightly wound plot that gathers momentum as the film progresses and uses many of the narrative techniques of classical Hollywood. The official PRC Chinese film history mentioned earlier discussed it as an example of the social realism practiced by progressive directors before liberation; as Cheng Jihua puts it, the film was a “true portrayal of social life on the eve of the collapse” of the Nationalist regime. Leading Western scholars have agreed; Leo Ou-fan Lee, for example, also frames it as a work of social realism, shining a light on contemporary social injustices and making audiences feel that they are watching a story from, and learning from a critique of, the very world in which they have been living. In the fullest existing discussion of the film in English scholarship, Yiman Wang acknowledges the film’s social realism but emphasizes as well its utopian anticipation, using allegory to grapple with the limits of representation in a film that “straddles a historical threshold moment.”

*Crows and Sparrows* is set mostly inside one Shanghai tenement house, in which the rightful property owner, an aging newspaper proofreader surnamed Kong, has been shoved aside by a Nationalist Ministry of Defense section chief, Hou Yibo, who had taken advantage of being a collaborator during the Japanese occupation to seize the house from Kong.
The occupants of the building’s apartment spaces represent various social classes in urban China—the intellectuals, the petty bourgeoisie or small merchants, and finally, the truly property-less proletarians—making the film also a national allegory in the May Fourth tradition of fiction writers like Lu Xun, who excelled at creating vividly individualized characters who nonetheless also represented social types in a China still filled with injustice and inequality. By focusing on how individual tenants from each of these classes work at cross-purposes before finally uniting to overthrow their landlord (representing the corrupt ruling kleptocracy), the film functions partly as a microcosm of the wider revolution. Even the film’s title captures this dynamic of the weak overcoming the strong by banding together, evoking the idiom *jiuzhanquechao* 鸠占鹊巢, “the turtledove occupies the magpie’s nest”—in which one type of bird taking over the home of another is a metaphor for forceful displacement from a place or position by someone more powerful but also demonstrating how emboldened small sparrows might chase away a more powerful crow by fighting back together as a flock.

After the opening credits and an explanatory opening text that sets the scene as Shanghai in winter 1948, only months before the city would be taken by the Communist Party’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA), the film begins with a close-up of a newspaper advertisement offering the tenement house for sale. This sets in motion one of the structuring principles of the narrative, a deadline as a plot device guiding the story’s causality for the rest of the film. As the building’s tenants will soon find out, Hou, the Nationalist officer who took over the house during the war, now wants to sell it in anticipation of having to flee the city entirely as the Communist army advances; consequently, all who live there, including the house’s previous (and still rightful) owner, will have to leave and find new homes in the midst of the economic chaos of the postwar years, when triple-digit inflation threatened the livelihoods of all but the ultra-rich. Much of the rest of the narrative follows each family of tenants trying to cope with this approaching deadline separately, before finally uniting to keep their hold on the house and, in solidarity with the imminent Communist liberation, help chase their landlord out of the house and city entirely.

Following the close-up of the newspaper advertisement, *Crows and
Sparrows cuts to a matching address plate at the front door of the house itself, as a visitor arrives to ring the doorbell, holding in his hand the newspaper with the real estate ad. These expository shots establish the film’s main location and position the viewer to enter its interior, as the sequence goes on to introduce the house’s various spaces and the people who occupy them, all while launching the deadline plot device as a potential buyer gets a tour of the house. First we meet the glamorous-looking Yu Xiaoying, the concubine of the villain Hou, whose status as a villain herself is humorously established with the first shot of her reading (as her maid, A-Mei, mischievously steals a glance over her shoulder) a pop fiction edition of *The Legend of the White Snake*, a traditional folk tale about two snakes who transform themselves into seductive women. Soon after, as A-Mei is sent to answer the door, in an expression of the interconnectedness of the building’s flats as well as the social groups they contain, a flamboyant shot tracks down from a medium-long framing of Xiaoying to a floor below as if looking through a transparent fourth wall—in the same manner as in the Hollywood silent classic *7th Heaven*, a camera movement that already had been adapted by other Chinese films in the 1930s (as described in chapter 2). In the apartment below, we encounter “Little Broadcast” Xiao—so nicknamed because of his propensity to spread rumors (played by Zhao Dan, hardly recognizable compared to his lead roles in *Street Angel* and *Crossroads*, discussed in the preceding chapter)—and his wife and several boisterous children. The couple are arranging stacks of American canned goods to sell, showing their social class as petty bourgeois commodity speculators trying to stay ahead of inflation and always coming up with schemes to make quick profits. They observe A-Mei leading the potential buyer into the building and escorting him upstairs. In the stairwell a half level up from the Xiao family, the visitor is peeked at as well by Mrs. Hua, who is helping her husband, Hua Jiezhi, a high school teacher, as he secretly burns politically sensitive publications for fear of being caught with them. Xiaoying eventually escorts the potential buyer back down to examine each room in the house, thus introducing us finally also to Mr. Kong, the building’s rightful owner, in the smallest room at the ground level. Soon afterward, the residents all begin speculating about Mr. Hou’s plans for the place.
These characters, played (besides the children) by experienced and highly skilled actors, all will emerge as vivid individuals as the audience watches the film, but, as mentioned earlier, each also is meant to typify his or her social class, including the strengths and weakness of that class and, in particular, the shortcomings that must be overcome for the characters—and the classes they represent—to play a positive role in the unfolding Communist revolution. Will Teacher Hua take the risk of supporting student activism, even though it may threaten the privileges he has earned as an intellectual with the support of his pro-KMT school administration? (Will intellectuals in general identify with the proletarian class and get behind the revolution?) Will Little Broadcast and his wife keep scheming to get rich quick through small-time commodities arbitrage as the Republican economy continues to collapse, or will they instead join with their neighbors to oppose and overthrow the system that offers financial security only to the lucky few and the already rich? (Will the petty bourgeoisie in general give up capitalist ideology and instead cast their lot with the revolutionary working class?) Will the oppressed maid A-Mei continue to follow the orders of the landlord Hou Yibo and his demanding concubine, or will she revolt against them? (Of course, as a true proletarian, it should have gone without question that A-Mei would not only join but help lead the revolution, and the relative sideling of A-Mei as a character is a point on which the director would later criticize his own film.)

The balancing of characters as vivid individuals and as representatives of their social group has long been a central issue of theories of social (and socialist) realism in general and of Marxist aesthetics in particular. As the prominent Chinese Marxist critic (and later PRC vice-minister of culture) Zhou Yang wrote in 1936, “creating types entails extracting from a certain social group the most characteristic traits, habits, tastes, aspirations, actions, speech, and so forth and embodying these in a character, ensuring that the character does not lose its distinctive personality.” He then quotes Friedrich Engels: “Every character is a type, and at the same time a fully unique individual—‘this one,’ as Hegel said.” Here we see that Chinese artists and critics were fully engaged in the aesthetic debates of Marxist and Communist circles around the world in the early to mid-twentieth
century. In 1954, Hungarian philosopher and literary historian Georg Lukács would cite the same Engels quotation in a discussion of types, but then he would broaden the concept beyond just characters in novels, arguing more generally that a work of art could, at least in the most crucial respects, manifest reality through selective representation:

The goal for all great art is to provide a picture of reality in which the contradiction between appearance and reality, the particular and the general, the immediate and the conceptual, etc., is so resolved that the two converge into a spontaneous integrity in the direct impression of the work of art and provide a sense of an inseparable integrity. The universal appears as a quality of the individual and the particular, reality becomes manifest and can be experienced within appearance, the general principle is exposed as the specific impelling cause for the individual case being specially depicted.72

Thus the work of realist art can, through a relatively small number of characters and situations, give a picture of the processes of history and society as a whole. This is obviously an approach diametrically counter to the apophatic realism described earlier, although it is not as if the social (or socialist) realist naively believes that any representation can encompass all of reality. As Lukács wrote, although “the extensive totality of reality necessarily is beyond the possible scope of any artistic creation,” the realist work of art should nonetheless achieve an “intensive” totality that circumscribes and orders “those factors which objectively are of decisive significance for the portion of life depicted.”73 If the work of art achieves “a directly perceptible unity of the individual and the universal”—for instance, through characters who are not only distinctive individuals but representatives of broader social types—then it can represent the essential features of the social totality at a moment in time even if it does not represent all of that totality.74

An example of how Crows and Sparrows vividly paints characters who also represent types while seamlessly blending comedy with social realism can be found in the way the film introduces the villain Hou Yibo. As Yiman Wang has analyzed, the appearance of his initially disembodied voice is followed later by a complex scene transition via a dialogue hook in which Little Broadcast imitates the Zhejiang accent of Nationalist leader Chiang
Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi 蒋介石), and then, following a cut back to Hou’s penthouse quarters, a camera movement connects Hou’s photographic portrait on his apartment wall to a signed one of Generalissimo Chiang himself. The chain of ironically juxtaposed signifiers (right down to the pair’s matching pencil-thin mustaches, soon to become a sure marker of a villain in Chinese Communist films) all establish Hou as the haughty and feared landlord connected to the corrupt Republican-era ruling class while also subjecting him, and by extension Chiang Kai-shek himself, to the audience’s ridicule. Wang concludes that the sequence “begins with Little Broadcast parodying the dictator Chiang and ends by satirizing Hou as a self-important monkey [the children of the house call him ‘monkey’ in a pun on his surname] who ludicrously mimics Chiang, his master.”

One imagines the valve-release-like boisterous laughter such a sequence would have provoked in audiences just months after the flight of the ruthless Chiang and his loyalists, and it raises the broader question of the role comedy plays in Crows and Sparrows, as well as the way it employs classical cinematic conventions in general. Of all the published discussions of the film mentioned so far in this chapter, none takes the film primarily as a comedy, and only Cheng Jihua’s official account and Yiman Wang’s study even mention that it has satirical elements. In fact, the comedic elements of the film go well beyond social satire to include abundant punning, slapstick, and humorously exaggerated characterizations. In general, the Xiao family provides the slapstick, while Hou Yibo and his consort, Yu Xiaoying—played with pitch-perfect smarmy comic brilliance by Li Tianji 李天济 and Huang Zongying 黄宗英, respectively—provide magnetically grotesque caricatures of the privilege, corruption, and self-interest of the departing ruling class.

The relative scholarly silence about the comic element in Crows and Sparrows finds an exception in the first English-language book on Chinese cinema, by Jay Leyda, who identifies the film as one that “takes a tragic situation, the desperate measures employed by little city people to stay alive, and translates it, successfully, into comedy.” Leyda in fact endorses Crows and Sparrows as “a milestone in Chinese film history, worthy to be shown alongside the best of international cinema produced in the postwar years,” noting, as does Leo Ou-fan Lee, the film’s similarities with Italian
Neorealism. The comparison has its limits, but intentionally or not, it draws attention to the extent to which postwar films considered as classics of social realism—including, more than is often acknowledged, several in the Italian Neorealist canon—also often fully engaged the resources of classical Hollywood narration. In fact, *Crows and Sparrows* skillfully deploys all the storytelling power of classical film narration while redirecting it to revolutionary ends and also creatively testing the limits of the classical system, particularly in its management of narrative space.

In some ways, *Crows and Sparrows* fits exactly in the classical Hollywood narrative mode. Its average shot length, eleven and a half seconds, for example, corresponds perfectly with that of Hollywood in the period 1947–60. Moreover, the plot element it deploys to launch the entire story—the deadline by which all the “sparrows” will have to move out of the building that is put into motion by the newspaper advertisement—is an extremely common classical device for organizing story time and building narrative tension or interest. As David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson write in their classic study of classical Hollywood, “the deadline proper is the strongest way in which story duration cooperates with narrative causality. In effect, the characters set a limit to the time span necessary to the chain of cause and effect.” In fact, Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson find “one or more clearly articulated deadlines” in the plots of three-quarters of classical Hollywood films from their representative sample of one hundred. In *Crows and Sparrows*, virtually all of the main characters’ goals are organized around the deadline, from Hou’s desire to sell the house and flee Shanghai to the tenants’ various strategies for either finding new housing or finding ways to stay where they are. The way the deadline is deployed in the film, however, is distinctive in that the deadline comes to coincide not only with the fate of the building but with the revolutionary overthrow of the Nationalist regime locally, so that the deadline for the sale (or, as it turns out, just the abandonment) of one tenement house becomes part of the film’s national allegory.

In its style, *Crows and Sparrows* shows a mastery of classical Hollywood scene and sequence construction. The fast-paced story is hustled along by punctuation cuts including wipes (twelve), fades (thirteen), and especially dissolves (forty-five), and Hollywood-style montage sequences to
condense story information—for example, when Mrs. Hua visits a series of offices (a barrister, the Shanghai Department of Education, the police headquarters) to appeal for help in locating and freeing her husband after she learns he has been apprehended at school. Such a classical montage sequence, as opposed to the more experimental Soviet-style montage that Yuan Muzhi had used in the opening credit sequence of *Street Angel* (see chapter 2), “selects representative moments from a process” and thereby “compresses a considerable length of time or space.” In this case, Mrs. Hua’s desperate but fruitless pleas at three different offices in Shanghai are all compressed into one minute of screen time punctuated by wipe cuts between offices and dissolves from the exterior to the interior at each location. Such sequences are, according to David Bordwell, “classical narration’s most acceptable rhetorical flourish.”

*Crows and Sparrows* allows itself other flourishes as well, displaying an inventiveness that bends and occasionally even breaks the “rules” of the classical continuity system or tests the bounds of spatial representation to sometimes favor expressionistic exaggeration rather than straightforward verisimilitude. The latter is evident, for example, in a strongly affecting shot nearly three-quarters into the film, when the Huas’ daughter has become seriously ill during the period when Teacher Hua has been abducted by the authorities. The shot in question begins as a medium shot of Mrs. Hua seated on their bed holding her unconscious daughter in her lap, but then there is a dramatic track back from the two characters. Evidence from shots in the same room earlier in the film (particularly a high-angle shot from above the bed that shows the whole reverse space) makes it clear that the camera here has receded far beyond the actual spatial dimensions of the fictional room; the set has been altered to allow the camera to track back much farther than the previously shown space would allow. However implausible, the technique concludes with an eloquently poignant shot of the poor mother tearfully clinging to her ailing daughter in extreme long shot, surrounding darkness closing in on the isolated patch of light in the room that they occupy (Figure 15).

In general, *Crows and Sparrows* makes the most of the capacity of highly mobile camera work and variations in shot scale to keep the viewer interested in the cramped space of the tenement house. Slightly more
than one-third of the film’s shots feature a moving camera, sometimes combined in novel ways with character positioning. Instead of the common classical decoupage editing technique of beginning a scene with an establishing long shot and then cutting or tracking to closer shots, for example, the film often begins a scene with a close-up or medium shot and then tracks back to a wider shot—as in the first shot of Hou’s mistress Xiaoying, which begins as an extreme close-up of the cover of the *White Snake* comic she is reading.

Another example of subtle experimentation within the classical norms of cinematography and editing comes in a scene in which Mr. and Mrs. Hua are engaged in a temporary power struggle about which one has the better plan for coping with the sudden housing crisis—Teacher Hua’s scheme to ingratiate himself into getting housing from his workplace or Mrs. Hua’s attempts to beguile Mr. Hou into arranging for them to stay on in their residence after the building is sold. As the argument heats up, a series of whip pans alternately frame each of them in medium shot as they speak. The fourth such whip pan yields a surprise, however: Mr. Hua now fills the screen from top to bottom, changing the shot scale.

![Figure 15. Mrs. Hua and her daughter following the camera’s track-out in *Crows and Sparrows* (1949).](image-url)
(Figure 16). It seems that either the camera has almost impossibly tracked significantly closer to the subject during the whip pan or else there is a very well-hidden cut. After the fifth whip pan, Mrs. Hua is framed the same way, significantly closer to the camera. Only upon close frame-by-frame analysis does it become apparent that the two performers have moved from one mark to another one, closer to the camera, while off-screen, when the camera was on the other performer. The remarkable effect is as if there has been a cut to a closer shot, in which the character fills more of the screen, even though the shot has in fact been continuous through five whip pans in a seventeen-second take. The closer scale subtly, even humorously, ratchets up the drama of the moment, as Mrs. Hua gains the upper hand in the couple’s argument, without breaking the whip pan pattern, which finally culminates in a cut to an even closer shot of an initially empty space that both characters will enter in turn to conclude the discussion facing each other in a two-shot close-up.

One of the film’s most blatant departures from the rules of classical continuity is its habitual breaking of the so-called 180-degree rule, which states that within a certain space during a scene, no matter how much variation there is in scale and angle from shot to shot, the camera will remain on one side of the “axis of action” formed by the placement of the main characters. It essentially means that a cut will not suddenly reverse which side of the screen the characters are on (or, if off-screen, the side where they are understood to be), as such a reversal has long been said to be disorienting to viewers. *Crows and Sparrows* violates this “rule” no fewer than twenty-eight times, spread over thirteen different scenes. Occasionally the violations seem to be motivated by the narrow spaces of hallways and stairwells, where continual camera placement on one side of the axis of action would require the camera to be positioned in an impossible space inside a wall (Figure 17). However, as we have seen in the case of the track-out from Mrs. Hua and her daughter, the film is not averse to doing that as well; in fact, in one scene in which Mr. Hou has taken Mrs. Hua to a fancy restaurant in an attempt to blackmail her into having sex with him, the film both violates the 180-degree rule and positions itself for one shot as if inside a now apparently transparent wall.
FIGURE 16. Teacher Hua after the, $a$, second and, $b$, fourth whip pans in a scene in *Crows and Sparrows* (1949).
FIGURE 17. Breaking the 180-degree rule in *Crows and Sparrows* (1949).
Such disregard of the 180-degree rule is hardly unheard of—the idiosyncratic Japanese director Yasujirō Ozu is just one famous example of a master filmmaker who had little use for the convention—but it is highly unusual in classical Hollywood. In their representative sample of Hollywood films, Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson found that more than 98 percent of cuts followed the classical continuity system, including the 180-degree rule. However, they also note that films can maintain spatial coherency even when violating the rule if the viewer has been sufficiently oriented by other means, such as wider establishing shots in the same scene. This is generally the case in *Crows and Sparrows*. In fact, a recent empirical study found that viewers’ experience of a scene shot on video is *not* generally negatively affected by cutting across the axis of action and that there was no significant preference for versions of a scene that followed the rule versus those that did not. Zheng Junli and the film’s cinematographers (Miao Zhenhua and Hu Zhenhua) and editor (Wu Tingfang) appear to have simply decided that in the spaces they were filming, occasionally cutting across the axis of action was more visually interesting than following the “rule.”

After much drama and hardship—Teacher Hua being arrested and jailed for a time, his wife sexually harassed by Mr. Hou while he is detained, Little Broadcast and his wife beaten by a gang in a food riot—in a climactic scene, Hou and his concubine are faced down by all their tenants and end up fleeing Shanghai and leaving the house to its rightful owner, Mr. Kong. The film concludes with a stereotypical *datuanyuan* or “big reunion” ending, in which all the tenants celebrate the Chinese New Year together in early 1949, anticipating the new society to come with the Communist victory and the establishment of the PRC later that year. The film—which had featured so much comedy, drama, and intrigue until this point—shifts into a more stiff and didactic mode as Mr. Kong announces that “this new year brings with it a new society” and Teacher Hua gives a mini-speech exhorting his neighbors to begin “a new way of thinking” and to become “a new people” adequate to the dawning new society. Film spectators at the time no doubt understood that Teacher Hua was speaking directly to them as much as to his diegetic audience.
This ending of *Crows and Sparrows* anticipates a historical change in film aesthetics by briefly shifting from comedic social realism to the prescriptive mode of realism that we will explore in depth in the next chapter. Unabashedly pedagogical, the narrative tone at the end seeks not only to accurately represent the current reality but to point to its future development, when the transition from capitalism to socialism will demand a new revolutionary culture and way of life. The abstraction from reality made by social realist conventions like character types gets extended, in this new prescriptive realist mode, into a projected future ideal. In other words, there is a hint, in the conclusion of *Crows and Sparrows*, of the transition from social realism to socialist realism, which is justified by a more explicitly mass rather than elite perspective. As Barbara Foley has pointed out, such self-consciously “proletarian” art may seem simplistic and artistically inferior—indeed, even “preachy” or “propagandistic”—to those of us steeped in bourgeois aesthetic standards, but we must take seriously the performative function at which such art aims—transparently seeking to spur political action and social praxis, not just aesthetic appreciation. The ending of *Crows and Sparrows* is both a closure and an opening. The film as a whole is like a hinge between two historical eras. It shows the moment when historical necessity and radical opportunity suddenly merge, when a new order becomes not only possible but inevitable. It renders immediate and palpable the eventness of what might later become (in China) a mere label in officially narrated history—or what some (in the capitalist world) might even dismiss as an ideological cliché: liberation.
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