Chinese Film

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Conclusion

Bi Gan’s extraordinary film-poem *Kaili Blues* (*Lubian yecan* 路边野餐; 2015) was made on such a low budget that the director ran out of money and had to reduce the crew to four people, including himself, with 30 percent of the project remaining to be filmed. It nonetheless creates an entirely distinctive oneiric atmosphere, with mysterious shots that sometimes present riddles. The title card, for instance, does not appear until twenty-nine minutes into the film, and it occurs seemingly in the middle of a long take, interrupting a moment when the frame goes entirely dark while panning across a heavily shadowed wall within a narrow corridor. After the title is inscribed in both Chinese and English against the dark background for a full ten seconds, the long take continues and the pan resumes, eventually to reveal the other direction down the corridor.

Another shot in *Kaili Blues* presents a more challenging puzzle. The film’s main character, Chen Sheng, is arguing with his half brother, Crazy Face, about family affairs, which were affected by Chen having gone to prison for unspecified gang violence years earlier. The scene suddenly cuts to a shot of Chen and another small-time gangster disturbing a group of people gambling and demanding to know which of them reportedly chopped off the hand of the young son of one of Chen’s gang leaders, Monk. We know from hints elsewhere in the film that this new shot should be read as a flashback to the event that sent Chen to prison in the first place. Instead of showing us a violent eruption, however, the camera drifts to the left away from the human figures as they begin their confrontation and instead leaves them off-screen and focuses on a wooden table, on top of which water continuously drips and a drinking glass has been overturned. At first, we still hear the voices of the escalating argument, but then those
voices fade, and a poetry recitation takes their place on the soundtrack—a repeated motif in the film, in which the director’s own poetry is read by Chen’s voice in nondiegetic voice-over. Finally, the camera starts moving again, and diegetic voices reemerge on the soundtrack about thirty seconds after they had faded away. We hear the sounds of a scuffle, but when the camera pans farther left and tilts to reveal the people making the sounds, they are on the opposite side of the table from where the shot had left them, and in fact, they are a different set of people. They include Chen and his gangster friend, but now they are wearing different clothes, and instead of fighting the people from the beginning of the shot, the friend and two others are holding Chen back from lunging at his half brother, with whom he’d been arguing in the previous shot set in the film’s present. We realize we have flashed-forward again, returning to the postprison acrimonious relations between the brothers.

With this shot lasting nearly two minutes, Bi Gan creates a microcosm of the film’s theme of time travel and its epigraph intertitle shot (the second shot of the film) quoting the Diamond Sutra of Mahayana Buddhism. There is no sign of any hidden cut within the shot (as could have been the case in the title shot described earlier), so it must have been accomplished by the actors playing Chen and his friend literally changing clothes and moving from off-screen right to off-screen left while the camera lingered on the close-up of the wet table. The story, however, has traversed several years of time within seconds inside of one continuous take.² Here, as in the film as a whole, the sorts of sci-fi mysteries that other films spend hundreds of millions of dollars to explore—including the nature of time, memory, and karma—are inventively raised just through the unorthodox use of the basic tools of editing and cinematography in a film that combines elements of the post-socialist neorealism of chapter 6 with occasionally surrealist images, a haunting soundtrack by Lim Giong 林强, and a dream-like poetics of motif rhyming largely replacing logical cause-and-effect narration.³ The Diamond Sutra epigraph ends with the lines

过去心不可得  The past mind cannot be attained
现在心不可得  The present mind cannot be attained
未来心不可得  The future mind cannot be attained.⁴
The elusiveness of past, present, and future is encapsulated by this one time-traversing shot, first jumping from the previous shot’s present to the past, then skirting free of quite grasping the past event to which it has flashed back, then transitioning in the same shot to the future (Crazy Face is wearing different clothes at the end of the shot than he wore in the previous shot, indicating that we have not only come back to the film’s previous present but likely jumped ahead a little, in a way we can’t quite grasp). The shot’s middle simply shows the water dripping onto the wooden table surface while an impressionistic poem is recited on the soundtrack. Now oblivious to any dramatic action, the shot momentarily suspends us in our elusive present, as film viewers who experience cinema itself as something that moves on even as our thoughts try to catch up. The shot’s indifference to the actual drama unfolding off-screen and out of soundtrack, guiding us instead to the drip of water and the sound of a poem detached from the story, is simultaneously a radically apophatic gesture—a refusal to show us the film’s obvious, narratively motivated reality—and a transporting of the spectator not only from past to future but also from a social reality depicted in neorealist style to, temporarily at least, a profound pause in any dramatic development in favor of a fleetingly pure present awareness of the drip of water and the words of the poem: “Mountains, are the shadows of mountains / Dogs, are too lazy to evolve / Summer, human enzymes are stubborn / The enzymes of the soul are like water lilies.” Plot coherence is sacrificed in favor of the specificity of detail, from the grain of the wooden table to the particular images of the recited poem.

This book began with an anecdote about Jia Zhangke’s life being redirected by a chance encounter with *Yellow Earth*, which changed how he thought about movies and inspired him to learn how to make them. Bi Gan has described a similar encounter with Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* (1979) when he was a college student focusing on writing and directing for television. At first he hated the film and found it hard to watch, but “when I finished the film I was completely in awe. I felt very, very touched and moved by this particular film, and it really changed the way I think about films.” As with Jia Zhangke, it seems to have been a moment when a film intersected with a mind at just the right time and changed what
seemed important or possible. The contingency of such an encounter is highlighted by the fact that Bi says he would have stopped watching the movie early on, except that he had to write an assignment about it.

*Kaili Blues* itself can provide a similarly revelatory experience, giving the viewer an altered sense of what cinema can be. The film disrupts any easy dichotomies between digital indexicality-based realism and surreal virtuality. It seems disinterested in either the heroisms of prescriptive realism or the critical verisimilitude of social realism. It is a tribute to the rich, ever-renewable resources of the cinematic medium that a twenty-five-year-old Miao (Hmong) minority person from the relatively remote, underdeveloped province of Guizhou could create, on a budget consisting mostly of a nonreturnable donation from his former college teacher, something so spectacularly original that Oscar-winning director Guillermo del Toro called it an “astonishing first film about a geography of the soul.”

The film’s most remarkable stylistic feat is a forty-one-minute continuous take, shot with Steadicam on a cheap digital camera (a Canon 5D Mark III), that traverses much of the geography of a fictional village called Dangmai (played by a real village not too far from Kaili). Here Bi demolishes most of the clichés about “Asian slow cinema” even as he takes one of them—the long take—to an extreme. Rather than being contemplative, distanced, and objective, the shot is a visceral thrill ride, an embodied experience in which the camera sometimes approaches the myriad of characters so obtrusively that it almost seems to be a ghost trying to exist in their world, the story world, rather than just providing the audience’s disembodied window into it. And rather than offering up a slice of unvarnished real life, the shot functions more like the mysterious black box of *Mulholland Drive* (2001) by David Lynch (whom Bi credits as having had a “huge impact” on him). It is where the film goes from a seemingly straightforward though slow-moving narration into a dream logic of tangents and mysterious doublings: Chen’s dead wife reappears as a hairdresser who gives him a haircut while he tells her the story of the events that landed him in prison; his child nephew Weiwei has morphed into a teenager who makes a living giving taxi rides on his motorcycle to people, including Chen himself. Almost without warning, Chen finds
himself performing with a local pop band giving a street performance, singing horribly off-key in public, even though we had learned earlier that he never sings, even in karaoke bars with friends. He has left Kaili for Zhenyuan on an errand but been so hopelessly sidelined in the mysterious village of Dangmai that the audience is likely to have lost track of what he was looking for, even as he finds all kinds of other things that connect to his memories and dreams in oblique ways. Shooting on location with a DV camera and nonprofessional actors, Bi uses the techniques of neorealism to create his own kind of virtual realism—a world that feels powerfully real and phantasmagoric at the same time. Clearly the possibilities of digital cinema go far beyond just the creation of purely imaginary worlds or the recording of actualities.

The spectacular long take in *Kaili Blues* shows how falsely limiting it is to ascribe consistent meanings to stylistic choices that may vary widely in their motivations and functions, including the ways they may or may not produce an impression of realism. In his study of the long take in contemporary global cinema and moving image art, Lutz Koepnick makes such an argument for the long take, showing in particular how Asian filmmakers should not be seen as simply repeating the gestures of Western art cinema when in fact they may be up to something quite different. By extending a view beyond the time necessary to register narrative information, the long take displays a “relative indifference toward meaning and interpretation,” observes Koepnick, and in the case of twentieth-century European art film directors like Michelangelo Antonioni, that effect served “to allegorize the existential void, alienation, and disenchantment of postwar capitalism” and “the utter poverty of presentness in the modern world.” However, it is a mistake, argues Koepnick, to assume that the long take has served a similar function in recent decades in the works of filmmakers—most of them from Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe—who have made it essential to their style and taken it to ever greater extremes, including Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Jia Zhangke, Abbas Kiarostami, Kim Ki-Duk, Béla Tarr, Tsai Ming-liang, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, and Edward Yang. “Nothing could be more mistaken than to construct the formal rigor of their extended shot durations in terms of postwar auteurism,” asserts Koepnick, and “rather than merely repeating how
postwar cinema relied on long takes to represent existential alienation, ambiguity, disillusion, and emotional exhaustion, long take photography today, in its very effort to reconstruct spaces for the possibility of wonder, often appeals to the dreamlike and surreal, the indeterminate, playful, and open.” While the assertion might require partial qualification (alienation and disillusion arguably do constitute important themes of some of these directors), the point could not be made more emphatically than in Bi Gan’s wondrous forty-one-minute-long take in Kaili Blues. Rather than experiencing boredom or alienation, as viewers, we probe “the durational as an aesthetic laboratory to reconstruct our sense for experiencing things at first sight,” finding surprises at the camera’s every turn down a new alley, encountering people, things, and events that continually reconfigure the film’s previous themes and meanings. The extremity of the technique pulls us sensorially into the film as a process more than a text, an experience rather than a message.

Indeed, a film viewing is an experience that is only theoretically reducible to the encounter of a sovereign subject and a preexisting film text. It is in reality a process, one that is imbricated in all the countless other processes that serve to make up the “subject,” the “text,” and the entire context of the event of viewing. Realism thus cannot be conceived adequately if it is limited to the question of whether a film corresponds with reality according to the judgment of a viewer, because all these things—the film, reality, the viewer—are really abstractions from that processual reality of the experience of film viewing. When we speak of the realism of cinema of a certain era, we must think not so much about whether films offered verisimilar representations of social reality, reinforced by the photographic realism of the medium, as whether and how they moved spectators in terms of the real experiences they offered, particularly in ways that engaged or shaped their sense of their own broader reality.

Studying film history allows us to imaginatively reconstruct the process of viewing to understand how the effect of realism might have been achieved when specific historical audiences watched particular films. Spectators of silent film in China would have viewed films as emblems of modernity, finding not only verisimilar reflections of modern life but
an entire imaginary of how actually to become modern, including all the contradictions of that condition. The Left-Wing Film Movement of late silent and early sound cinema further foregrounded those contradictions, stretching classical film conventions in some cases to the point of breaking and opening up fissures through which the promise of a new reality could be glimpsed. The cinema of the Communist revolution posited that new reality through its prescriptive models, to the point where form began to reveal its own emptiness, prompting new efforts to explore reality’s contingency and openness in post-socialist neorealism. Chinese audiences today can seek out radical experiments in “digital indexicality” or be transported by the “virtual realism” of alternate realities enhanced by digital animation. In every case, an effect of realism depends on the situatedness of the viewing experience as much as on its objective content or techniques.

As Tom Gunning succinctly put it, “in the cinema, we are dealing with realism, not ‘reality.’” Whether we are speaking of slice-of-life realism or science fiction fantasy, although the goal may be for the viewer to experience a sense of immediacy—which is to say, the sensation of witnessing story events directly rather than a story mediated by the camera, editing, film conventions, and so on—that immediacy still remains an agreed-upon illusion. The audience knows realism is an effect achieved within what remains a “kingdom of shadows,” as Maxim Gorky famously called cinema upon his first viewing in 1896: “This is not life but the shadow of life, and this is not movement but the soundless shadow of movement.”

Gunning argues that cinematic movement is, in fact, real, but with the proviso that it is a real “impression of reality, not its materiality.” This is in keeping with Gilberto Perez’s assertion that “film offers us representations of perceptions,” which, however convincing as fiction they may be, are not mistaken for actual perceptions of reality itself, as Lacanian–Althusserian apparatus theory had seemed to assume. Gunning suggests that instead of thinking of film’s ontological realism as being the essence of the medium—a position that marginalizes the rich history of animated films even well before the arrival of CGI and its related theoretical problems—we might take movement itself as fundamental to cinematic realism, whether speaking of analog photochemical film, digital video, or
animation, and whether a particular film aims for realism, fantasy, or even avant-garde abstraction.  

Drawing on Henri Bergson, John Mullarkey argues that movement is central to the act of fabulation, meaning not just to tell a story but more broadly “to carve out events from the ‘continuity of the real.’” He cites the experiments of the psychologist Albert Michotte, who found that even when watching very simple animations of moving dots and squares, viewers tend to anthropomorphize them and imbue them with intentionality, causality, and narrative progression. Movement is central to such fabulation, and Mullarkey speculates that in this sense, “we might even say that all films are animations,” meaning that it is their movement that gives them life and prompts our “‘willing suspension of disbelief’ in fictitious events and our empathy for fictional characters.”  

In the analytical terms used in this book, the proposal to consider movement rather than indexicality as fundamental to the cinematic medium amounts to saying that perceptual realism is more universal to the experience of cinema than ontological realism, an assertion that gains credibility with the proliferation of computer effects and makes them less problematic in terms of forcing a reevaluation of what cinema is. At the same time, to say movement is the intrinsic element of realism in cinema is to make an even more universal claim than that of ontological realism, insofar as it means virtually every film ever made is, in that sense at least, a realist film. With the more limited categories of claims to cinematic realism delineated in this book, we can differentiate better how some films can be more realist than others, or rather at least the ways they can be considered so.  

The history of Chinese cinema would support the idea that ontological realism has been an essential aspect of the power of certain modes of cinema, from the ostensibly scientific recording of material reality in early silent cinema explored in chapter 1 to the somewhat more devious imprinting of historical films on the prosthetic memories of audiences examined in chapter 5 to the “on-the-spot” documentation of contemporary Chinese reality in the post-socialist realism of chapter 6. In this book, I have resisted prioritizing one category of claims to realism over another as a general rule, emphasizing instead how certain films or
historical moments have foregrounded one over the others. Any claim of one universal realism only reinforces its own theoretical priorities. Aside from the centrality of the perceptual realism of movement, for example, one could equally claim universality for apophatic realism, insofar as every film—indeed, every representation—necessarily excludes an infinity of aspects and details of the real, even as it makes certain ones visible or legible; every film is haunted by what it doesn’t show.

In this book, aside from dividing claims to cinematic realism into six categories—ontological, perceptual, fictional, social, prescriptive, and apophatic—I have been guided throughout by my reading of Roman Jakobson’s initial division of realism into two kinds, the conventional and the experimental, as a historical dialectic. To take the conventional wisdom of what techniques achieve realism at a given time and produce a work through those means may well appear realistic to audiences at that moment, but over time, the processes Jörg Schweinitz identifies as derealization and secondary semantization may make the same work feel conventionalized or even clichéd to a later audience. This can be true for the critical realism of the Republican era, the socialist realism of the Mao era, or even the neorealism of the post-socialist era after its initially radical approaches have become conventionalized. The artist wishing to provoke a fresh view of the world will then try to experiment to give her audience the kind of wondrous jolt that *Yellow Earth* provided to Jia Zhangke or *Kaili Blues* gave me (and many others) upon its release, when it felt like something genuinely new and strange, but also something that gave authentic expression to a region, a community, and an environment in a way that could be experienced as revelatory. This is the experience people seek when they are tired of seeing the same conventions, including those of “realism” at any given time, over and over.

Cinematic realism in this sense occurs when the real finds expression in film, whether the real is Fredric Jameson’s History (that which simultaneously drives but ultimately eludes historical narrative); Jacques Lacan’s Real (that which escapes the symbolic and haunts the imaginary); or the increasingly urgent “environmental uncanny,” with its “nonhuman interlocutors,” that Amitav Ghosh argues is shaking us free from our deadly, centuries-long obsession with ourselves as subjects and
the world as our object. It was arguably just this environmental uncanny that Dai Vaughan recognized in the Lumière brothers’ 1895 actuality Boat Leaving the Port (as discussed in chapter 1): the ocean inscribes its own agency onto the film, not only in terms of the ontological realism of the image but in actually “writing” the film’s “plot.” Cinema, with its ongoing power of indexicality, undoubtedly continues to be a powerful medium through which the real presses in on us, a medium for conveying the forces of history, materiality, and vitality. But if indexicality is at the heart of realism, it is an indexicality that extends beyond the ontological realism of photography to allow much more broadly for how the real asserts itself through the entire process of both making and viewing a film.

In the digital age, cinema continues to be a medium for such a broadly interpreted indexical mediation. As fundamental transformation, for better or for worse, of the planet and society looms, cinema, as a conduit to the real, can help fulfill what Ghosh calls “a new task: that of finding other ways in which to imagine the unthinkable beings and events of this era.”

We never know for sure, at least not for long. We think alongside the real, along with the real, and we try to arrest it both in thought and in artistic representation. As an art whose medium arguably is time itself, cinema has the ability to convey the movement of reality in a particularly powerful way. Still, it is precisely that movement that makes every thought, theory, or representation—including cinematic representation as well as academic studies thereof—necessarily tentative. The real always moves on, and so do we. But the movies do too.