

The Cinematic Poet on the Edge of the City: A Discussion on Jia Zhangke's Documentary Aesthetics

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Abstract. Director Jia Zhangke's documentary visual aesthetics, while rooted in realism, emphasizes a subversion of tradition, navigating between realism and idealism. Among the sixth generation of directors, Jia Zhangke places a distinct emphasis on fragmented narrative characteristics. Without overly highlighting causal logic in the unfolding of stories, he intentionally slows down the narrative pace to reflect on reality. This paper, by examining his series of works, analyzes his enduring pursuit: exploring reality while maintaining the authenticity of life, achieving a documentary aesthetics that juxtaposes the unity of artistic truth and the truth of life.

Keywords: Jia Zhangke; Documentary Aesthetics; Artistic Truth; Ordinary Individuals.

1. Introduction

Jia Zhangke hails from a small town on the Loess Plateau, and throughout his career in documentary filmmaking, he has woven the traditional northern Chinese cultural essence, providing glimpses into the lives of the grassroots in society. Graduating from the Beijing Film Academy in the 1980s, part of the fifth generation of directors alongside figures like Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, Jia Zhangke is dedicated to showcasing the development of New China and the national responsibilities through the power of imagery, distinct from the narrative styles of his predecessors.

The cinematic style of the sixth generation of directors, with Jia Zhangke as a prominent representative, takes on a markedly different aesthetic. He once stated, "Documentary is a retrospective look at history and a focus on the current reality."

2. Organization of the Text

2.1. Fragmented Narrative Features of the Sixth Generation Directors

Fragmented narrative refers to the sixth generation directors' departure from the fifth generation's conventional narrative structure, which emphasized a chain of causality. Instead, they employ abrupt temporal and spatial jumps and downplay internal narrative logic. Examples from Jia Zhangke's works include "Still Life" and "Mountains May Depart." In contrast to the fifth generation directors who emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, the sixth generation directors were still refining their creative styles during this period. Their aesthetic consciousness was evolving while grappling with the transformations brought about by socio-economic development, clashes between various old and new ideologies, and the evolving role of film as it became more integrated into the daily lives of ordinary people, transitioning from high art to a consumable product. In response to the increasing commercialization of the film industry and the growing emphasis on entertainment, the sixth generation directors chose to establish a serious aesthetic stance, focusing more on the survival status of individuals in society, especially the difficult lives of the lower class. This shift led to a departure from theatrical performance, bringing forth a clear indication of a changing era. Their films often showcase modern urban settings, the experiences of marginalized characters, the rock and roll lifestyle, presenting a concentrated look at the characteristics of the new generation of cinema—raw presentation, MTV style, unconventional compositions, and scattered narrative structures.

In Jia Zhangke's films, the features of fragmented narratives are evident in several aspects:



He does not pursue strict causal logic between story elements, slowing down the narrative pace to make it challenging for the audience to discern continuous cause and effect. For instance, in "Still Life," the story of Han Sanming searching for his wife is intertwined with Shen Hong's quest for her husband. While seemingly unrelated, both stories are connected by the search for a partner in the Three Gorges Reservoir area. However, the differences in their identities and experiences make the connection less obvious. The introduction of characters such as Little Ma, Boss He, and Chunyu, along with their respective events, appears detachable from the central plot, creating obstacles for the audience's immersion and understanding.

Jia Zhangke's films feature prose-like paragraph symbols. In "Mountains May Depart," the young boy with the oversized knife does not serve as the narrative focus nor does he drive the plot forward. Instead, his symbolically charged presence sparks diverse interpretations. Jia Zhangke has mentioned in interviews that this character represents every "poetic moment" that people encounter in real life, not contributing to the narrative or serving as a supplement. Instead, he embodies the concrete manifestation of the director's aesthetic consciousness.

The dilution of dramatic conflicts and the avoidance of suspense characterize Jia Zhangke's films. Drama is the cornerstone of performing arts, and in narrative films, dramatic conflicts often sustain the entire story. However, Jia Zhangke's films exhibit intense dramatic conflicts, such as in "Ash Is Purest White," where Binbin, who considers himself a big shot, almost loses his life in a brawl, leading to his girlfriend saving him with a gun. She ends up in prison for illegal possession of a firearm. Subsequent incidents involve a stolen wallet and harassment by a motorcycle taxi driver, sharply highlighting conflicts in Qiao Qiao's experiences. Yet, on the whole, Jia Zhangke is adept at downplaying dramatic conflicts through a subtly narrated story. He refrains from creating decisive moments for the characters' destinies and avoids inserting "emotional nodes" to manufacture misunderstandings between characters. Regarding the avoidance of suspense, audiences often anticipate unresolved conflicts, yet in Jia Zhangke's films, he does not deliberately introduce suspense to cater to the audience's expectations. In his "Hometown Trilogy," the focus remains on the mundane aspects of life, appearing unremarkable but resonating with subtle ripples. In his films, the world captured by the camera is not a symbolic existence; it seems to be the genuine portrayal of life itself. The creativity and watchability of his films do not rely on puzzle-solving games.

2.2. Philosophical Speculation on Idealism and Realism

As a new generation filmmaker following the fifth generation directors in China, Jia Zhangke has brought forth new possibilities for independent Chinese cinema. His work, "Xiao Wu," breaks from tradition, shifting the societal perspective downward and broadening the artistic horizon by focusing on the lives of the lower strata.

2.2.1. New and Old: Rational Reflection on Social Change

In the 1980s and 1990s, China was in the midst of social transformation and the tide of reform and opening up. Life was rapidly changing, and faced with past poverty and present high consumption, many people were disoriented and perplexed. Some seized the opportunity to become overnight wealthy, while others remained stagnant. The character Xiao Wu in the film represents the latter. The director directs the lens towards the lower strata of society, using typical characters and vivid details to illustrate the helplessness and despair felt by marginal individuals, represented by Xiao Wu, amidst the rapid changes of societal transformation and reform.

2.2.2. Ordinary Individuals: The Gray Area Between Black and White

Gray exists in the awkward position between black and white, much like the character "Xiao Wu" portrayed by the director in the film. The opening scene of Xiao Wu pickpocketing on a bus establishes his identity as a marginalized individual. Subsequent scenes, such as Xiao Yong's wedding and his love for Mei Mei, reveal Xiao Wu's character traits of deep emotions and loyalty. A shot of Xiao Wu sitting at the entrance of a repair shop, a symmetrical geometric composition, contrasts his

gloominess with the people beside him chatting and laughing. Jia Zhangke cleverly changes the character's state with a fixed long shot, making Xiao Wu a small existence in the flow of people and traffic. In the interactions with Mei Mei, the director portrays Xiao Wu standing at a lower position than Mei Mei, suggesting his inner inferiority complex and his societal status. By placing the characters in the "gray area," the director triggers philosophical reflections on life, which is the unique aspect of the film.

2.2.3. Reality and Representation: Snapshot of an Era in Documentary Creation

Jia Zhangke's humanistic care for lower-strata individuals is vividly displayed in the film "Xiao Wu." His portrayal is calm and unpretentious, making effective use of long shots to reveal real phenomena hidden and ignored by the public. Through a documentary-style approach, he expands on the things he wants to convey, focusing on the subtle aspects of life. Through dramatic plot elements, he reflects the zeitgeist, presenting a style that is real, natural, and even complex and turbid in the straightforward social reality. The director's emphasis on the humanity of lower-strata individuals, the use of a realistic style, and the portrayal of a complex yet warm atmosphere make the film a snapshot of the era.

2.3. Aesthetic of Movement in Cinematic Imagery

From the documentary aesthetics under the umbrella of new realism to the fractured narrative of Eastern aesthetics, both highlight the distinctive features of Jia Zhangke's films. However, the uniqueness of his films lies in the characters moving alongside the camera. Jia Zhangke is not known for static storytelling but rather maintains a state of movement, a habitual "method" for depicting the ebb and flow of the fate of ordinary individuals. His cinematic aesthetic of movement is manifested primarily in two aspects: horizontal lateral movement and vertical upward movement in visual form. This type of motion is often evident in crucial scenes where characters make their entrance.

In "Xiao Wu," for example, when Xiao Wu visits Xiao Yong's home, the camera follows the protagonist through the streets, accompanied by the operatic sounds of "Farewell My Concubine," leading to Xiao Yong's house. In a scene where Xiao Wu eats an apple in the projection room on the second floor, the background sound is the voice from the TV playing "A Better Tomorrow," while downstairs, Xiao Wu's subordinates and his girlfriend are seen moving. After Xiao Wu is expelled from his family, he surveys the surrounding streets, with the background sound being the broadcast of the Hong Kong handover. When Xiao Wu accompanies Mei Mei to get a haircut, the two take a walk on the county town streets. In a staircase scene with one on the upper side of the frame and the other on the lower side, one wanting to leave and the other unwilling, the lateral movement of the long shot creates an atmosphere of inner turmoil and struggle for the small characters. Following the director's viewpoint allows a more intimate view of the true nature of life.

Jia Zhangke's cinematic motion imagery seeks to resonate emotionally with the wanderings of Jianghu beneath the ebb and flow of worldly affairs, presenting his vision of "life" in a poetic manner. In an interview, he mentioned, "One place is Shanxi; it's a place that can evoke my personal experiences. The other place is along the Yangtze River, Sichuan, Chongqing, and the vicinity of the Three Gorges because its waterways are still bustling... You easily get a sense of the rivers and lakes... Another is Guangdong, a distant place for me. It's the southern region, not the center of China, but the disorderly vitality there, like the plants, arrogantly growing, attracts me a lot." In Jia Zhangke's films, Shanxi, Sichuan, and Guangdong constitute a geographical and topographical map. In this map, migrants entering the city and passersby returning to their hometowns are continually on the move, literary youths and chivalrous women engage in reciprocal encounters. The rushed feeling created by the motion imagery in the film perfectly aligns with Jia Zhangke's vision of Jianghu.

2.4. From "Rural Imagination" to "Turning the Sea Blue" Narrative Aesthetic Features

2.4.1. Reflections on Rural Ethics

Renowned anthropologist Mr. Fei Xiaotong pointed out in his work "From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society" that, "From the grassroots perspective, Chinese society is rooted in the rural. This explains the roots of human growth. The rural, being the main source of inspiration for artists, awakens a sense of identity among people under the same land through the temporal and spatial memories it carries. Whether it's Mo Yan's hometown in Gaomi, Shandong, Yu Hua's Haiyan in Zhejiang, or Chen Zhongshi's White Deer Plain, these literary figures invariably infuse their profound love for their hometowns into their blood, vividly reflected on paper. When we depart from the most sincere blood-soaked land of our hometown, even if we use unfamiliar expressions, we ultimately return to the narrative thread of our homeland. Of course, "homeland" has already become an image bloodland with the umbilical cord cut in the assumed plot of the director. Even if the bones are broken, the same bloodline continues to flow. For Jia Zhangke, the exploration of rural narrative ethics means searching for historical connections and synchronous emotions to break free from the intricacies of various materials. In the creation of rural films, the director is not merely a creator but a seeker. While expressing ethical consciousness, he lays the groundwork for the return to the hometown for "me" - Jia from Fenyang. The film "Ash Is Purest White" or Jia Zhangke's delineation of the rural blueprint in his memories carries a profound rural consciousness. The rebellion, however, lies in the humanistic concern under the destiny of the times. "Swimming Out Till the Sea Turns Blue" not only revolves around the homeland in its narrative center but also takes the emotion of "writing from the countryside" as the main theme, picking up the common rural imprints between the author and the audience. Jia Zhangke constructs a framework of homesickness, filled with obedience to destiny and discontent. Fortunately, his cinematic style is inheritable. Whether traveling to the Three Gorges, Xinjiang, or Australia, the protagonist ultimately chooses to return to the homeland due to a deep connection. This also confirms Jia Zhangke's creative principle in rural ethics: the homeland is both the starting point of creation and the emotional destination and homecoming.

2.4.2. Diminution and Return of Family Ethics

The key manifestation of family ethics lies in the individual pursuit of freedom and equality. The core of modern family ethics is the emphasis on the connection between the family and the public sphere, a focal point in recent years in the creation of film and television content. Jia Zhangke's films, while continually examining rural ethics, also return the focus to the ethical identity of the family. Thus, amidst the changing times, it showcases the stage-specific direction of family ethics and its developmental ethical emotions. The narrative of Jia Zhangke's films is set within the domain of family ethics, where all ethical stories are articulated and expressed within the family scope. This implies that he not only views the family and rural ethics similarly but also affirms and deems the attitude towards family ethics as positive and inevitable. For instance, in "Mountains May Depart," the emotional relationship between Zhang Jingsheng, Liangzi, and Tao, revolves around existing "family concepts" or scrutiny of traditional family and the confined space of modern life. Zhang Jingsheng's character is, in essence, a microcosm of the rural, representing a symbol that chooses the latter amidst the temptations of materialism in the hometown but loses the "family identity." The earlier departure from the hometown sets the stage for the later nostalgic glances at the homeland. In Australia, Zhang Jingsheng and his fellow villagers lament the unchanging local accent, making homesickness diminish within individual experiences, more vivid and concrete. In these films, the self-choice of the protagonists is full of the director's cold observation of young people in this era, seeming indifferent but ultimately returning to the central emotion of homesickness. Although Liangzi has a family, in other words, is someone who possesses a "family," he himself is a loser in rural ethics. His lost look when leaving home represents emotional loss. Thus, he chooses to discard the key with the symbol of "home" as he leaves. In Jia Zhangke's films, there are no jubilant comedies; instead, they are full of the manifestation of human nature, offering direct impacts rather than concealed ones. He always creates emotional climaxes that are memorable to the audience in the expression of audio-visual language. The tiger trapped in the cage in the film, a symbol with

metaphorical significance, reflects the struggles of Liangzi, who has experienced ups and downs, facing a kind of "struggle of trapped beasts" in the secular world. Jia Zhangke opens a gap for us to observe family ethics through the film. In "Swimming Out Till the Sea Turns Blue," Jia Zhangke chooses to showcase the rise and fall of individuals in the grand background of the era, combining literary emotions with cinematic emotions in a new way, portraying each generation's family ethical views with a "symphony" mixture of chapters. The family ethics in Jia Zhangke's films respond to rural ethics, whether it's the lower-class characters "abandoned" in the process of urban development or the "wanderers" who ponder due to identity issues. This, to some extent, reveals the relationship between family and rural areas. "Home" and "village" are inseparable existences, and it is through the realm of ethics that reflections and perplexities about reality and the era are refracted. This is the greatest characteristic of Jia Zhangke's film narrative ethics.

2.4.3. Urban Ethics: Dilemma and Way Out

As films evolve under the rapid development of urbanization, they examine traditional rural ethics and family ethics from diverse perspectives. They demonstrate the ethical confusion of individuals detached from rural ethics amidst urban development, with drifting urban individuals often unable to assimilate into unfamiliar cities. Simultaneously, urban architecture itself has certain defects, and accepting and accommodating outsiders is a prevalent problem. Therefore, the development of the city is bound to create more diverse film themes and genres, with the struggles and helplessness of marginal figures in pursuit of identity resonating with the soft spots of the audience. Jia Zhangke's viewpoint often concentrates on these figures. In his films, whether it's the train station, the bar, or the street, representing fixed urban spaces, they symbolize consumerism and point to public space symbols with extended urban ethics significance. These urban spaces make these characters a microcosm of social and individual life growth. Looking back at his trilogy about hometowns, they are all in a state of discussing urban ethics in the process of social development. In the film, transient spaces such as train stations, airplanes, and ships represent ethical reflections on fleeting emotions. The typical portrayal of the helplessness and turmoil of lower-class individuals becomes the emblematic feature of the fluidity of urban space. The forgetting of the shattered dreams of the lower-class individuals symbolizes their self-destruction in the fluidity of the city. In this way, Jia Zhangke expresses both reflection and care for societal conditions and humanistic concern.

Another prominent feature of urban ethics lies in the contradictions of generational ethics or the human gaps after the differentiation of the city. In the film "Mountains May Depart," the estrangement between Zhang Jingsheng and his son reflects the same confusion faced by contemporary young people — the generation gap. Zhang Daole, as a contradictory figure in ethics, is endowed with a multicultural growth background. His rebellion against traditional ethics precisely demonstrates the ethical decline in the urban development process. The way forward for urban ethics also implies the forgetting of the "hometown accent." Combining rural ethics with urban ethics, Jia Zhangke uses the visual and auditory language to shape this ethical mission. The "hometown accent" as a memory intersection is often part of the narrative context. Jia Zhangke does not hesitate to use local dialects to showcase geographical characteristics and local customs when presenting the stories of lower-class individuals. This can be seen as a director's artistic self-awareness and Jia Zhangke's personal life ethics consciousness.

Jia Zhangke's films embody a nuanced and personalized innovation within the realm of contemporary directorial art. Laden with a profound sense of historical mission and social responsibility, these directors engage in reflections on history and cultural criticism, transforming their heavy historical burden into a contemplation of real-life experiences in the 1990s. They shift from the rational and objective grand narrative of the 1980s to subjective and personalized stories of historical experiences in the 1990s, narrating the joys and sorrows of ordinary people.

3. Conclusion

Jia Zhangke, employing a documentary-style approach, skillfully highlights his deep understanding of human nature. Against the backdrop of China entering a new era in the early 1990s, his films vividly depict the struggles and loneliness of grassroots individuals. His adept use of documentary techniques not only reveals his mastery but also reflects the director's unique perspective on life. When documentary filmmaking transcends being a mere technique and becomes a natural expression of one's outlook on life, it attains a level of innocence and authenticity.

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