

Anti-hero, Anti-drama and Surreal——On the Poetic Presentation of Jia Zhangke's Films

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper aims to analyze and synthesize the poetic depiction methods employed in Jia Zhangke's filmography. Through meticulous film screenings and literature reviews, several recurring features have been identified in his works, including a focus on anti-heroic, marginal characters, an anti-dramatic narrative tendency, and the incorporation of surreal scenes and open-ended conclusions with poetic metaphors.

Approach/Methodology/Design: The study employs a qualitative analysis approach, conducting in-depth film screenings and extensive literature reviews to meticulously examine Jia Zhangke's cinematic works. The methodology emphasizes the interpretation of the films' visual storytelling, character development, and symbolic meanings to uncover the underlying significance of his poetic expression.

Findings: The research reveals that Jia Zhangke's films are characterized by the following features: firstly, his narratives often revolve around anti-heroic, marginal figures, observing their lives amidst shifting times; secondly, he avoids conventional "four-act" narrative structures, exhibiting an anti-dramatic inclination, and employs block narration; lastly, Jia integrates open-ended conclusions and surreal scenes laden with poetic metaphors into his films, constructing narratives with symbolic implications.

Practical Implications: The study provides insights for filmmakers on incorporating poetic elements and offers a fresh perspective for audiences to engage with cinematic art.

Originality/value: This research contributes to the understanding of Jia Zhangke's unique approach to filmmaking, highlighting his contribution to the global cinema landscape through his poetic and socially insightful works.

1. Introduction

Jia Zhangke, a prominent figure among the sixth generation of Chinese directors, is renowned for the distinctive poetic aesthetic qualities embodied in his works (Holtmeier, 2014; Rugo, 2013). His films are deeply rooted in the soil of realism and, through poetic expression, sketch out vivid social tapestries (Rugo, 2013; Schultz, 2016). This paper aims to delve into and synthesize the methods of poetic depiction employed in Jia Zhangke's oeuvre. Through meticulous screenings of Jia Zhangke's films and a review of literature, several recurring features

have been identified: firstly, his narratives often revolve around anti-heroic, marginal characters, observing their daily lives amidst shifting times; secondly, he eschews the conventional "four-act" narrative structure, exhibiting an anti-dramatic tendency, and employs block narration. By steering clear of suspenseful plot devices and softening the logical coherence of his film stories, he cultivates a poetic narrative akin to prose poetry. Lastly, Jia Zhangke incorporates open-ended conclusions and surreal scenes laden with poetic metaphors into his films, thereby constructing narratives with symbolic implications. This approach elicits empathy from viewers, imbuing Jia Zhangke's films with a profound sense of poetry and offering inspiration for filmmakers seeking to incorporate poetic elements into their creations.

Jia Zhangke's films are characterized by their non-dramatic narrative approach, endowing them with a pronounced poetic style. This is evident in his avoidance of hero worship, his focus on socially marginalized "aphasic" groups, and his disregard for a strictly coherent storyline. The narrative unfolds in an open-ended manner, emphasizing the poetic use of cinematographic language, rich spatial metaphors, and the crafting of a captivating filmic ambiance. The core of his films lies not in the recitation of the story or the portrayal of plot details but in the depiction of the lived experiences of ordinary people that underpin the narrative. Within this poetic narrative framework, the film invites viewers to actively engage in thought, fostering a sense of empathy and shared experience.

Amidst the tide of globalization and commercialization, Jia Zhangke's films stand like a refreshing stream, contributing a new perspective to the world of film art with their unique artistic style and profound social insight. His works not only document the changes of an era but also reflect the struggles and resistance of individuals in the tide of society. Through in-depth study of Jia Zhangke's films, we can not only better understand the artistic pursuits of this director but also more deeply feel how film, as an art form, captures and expresses the complexity of human experience. This paper will reveal how Jia Zhangke uses film as an artistic medium to convey profound insights into human nature, society, and culture by analyzing the anti-heroic images, anti-dramatic narratives, and surrealistic elements in his films.

Table 1 A list of Jia Zhangke's films

English Name	Brief Plot
Xiaoshan Going Home	This marks Jia Zhangke's debut film, winning the Best Story Film Award at the Hong Kong International Film Festival's Short Film Competition.
Xiao Wu, Artisan Pickpocket	It explores the life of a small-time thief, Xiao Wu, on the fringes of society, highlighting the struggles and humanity of those at the bottom rung.
Platform	Focusing on the youth subculture in a small, lagging-behind town during the reform era, it portrays their confusion and pursuits amidst societal upheaval.
Unknown Pleasures	The final installment of Jia's "Hometown Trilogy," it tells the story of young people in Fenyang during the 1990s.
The World	Jia's first domestically released film and his debut within the mainstream system, it shifts its setting to Beijing, a metropolis.

Still Life	Set against the backdrop of the Three Gorges Dam construction, it follows two migrant workers from Shanxi searching for loved ones in the Three Gorges region.
24 City	Based on true events, it chronicles the rise and fall of a state-owned factory in Chengdu, blending interviews and dramatic narrative to depict the lives and emotions of its workers and families.
A Touch Of Sin	A multi-narrative film exploring violence and crime in Chinese society, drawing from real-life incidents to reveal the anger and helplessness of those at society's margins.
Mountains May Depart	Spanning from 1999 to 2025, it tells the story of three generations of the Shen Tao family in Fenyang, intertwining love, friendship, and growth.
Ash Is Purest White	Centered around the love story between Qiaoqiao, a girl from Fenyang, and her gang leader boyfriend Bin Ge from 2001 to 2018, it unfolds through Qiaoqiao's perspective, showcasing her growth and transformation in the criminal underworld.

2. Anti-Heroes: Ordinary Folk Against a Grand Backdrop

In the early Chinese films, narrative subjects often revolved around heroes with unyielding resolve. These characters possessed noble traits, lofty revolutionary ideals, and an indomitable spirit, serving as mythical symbols (Lovatt, 2012). However, with the influx of Western film culture, audience aesthetics shifted towards individuality and freedom. While people still seek positive spiritual guidance from heroes, they also gravitate towards characters that are more relatable and down-to-earth. Consequently, the narrative focus of contemporary Chinese films has evolved. Rather than solely pursuing heroes as the central theme, these films now tend to present a more diverse array of civilian characters and their living conditions.

Jia Zhangke, born in 1970, has personally witnessed the profound transformations that occurred after China's reform and opening-up policy. His approach to filmmaking is distinct, diverging from the conventional portrayal of "lofty" heroic figures in mainstream and commercial films. Instead, Jia's camera lens is trained on the youth in marginal areas, capturing their living conditions and mundane daily lives. The protagonists in his films are predominantly ordinary individuals who lack a voice in society (Holtmeier, 2014). The narrative space is concentrated on small county towns, where the dilapidated surroundings and the challenging living circumstances of those at the societal bottom serve as mirrored reflections of one another. Amidst the backdrop of significant era changes, the small, helpless, and fragmented sensations of these ordinary people lend an intriguing, poetic symbolism and irony to Jia's films.

2.1 The actor: the social identity of the anti-hero

Foucault's sociological theory has drawn scholars' attention to marginalized and vulnerable groups in society, such as women, ethnic minorities, and individuals with depression (Hinkle, 1987; Power, 2011). This focus has provided greater visibility to these groups (Hinkle, 1987). Similarly, Jia Zhangke's films shine a light on the aphasia groups in real life—those who are often marginalized and live cautiously. They are easily overlooked in social life and even harder to find on the big screen. As a prominent figure of the sixth generation of directors, Jia Zhangke consistently explores and highlights marginalized groups worthy of attention amidst the rapid flow of time in his films. He continually presents the diverse social identities of narrative subjects,

offering a rich and nuanced portrayal of these often-overlooked individuals.

The first category centers on anti-hero or negative characters. In Jia Zhangke's film *Xiao Wu*, Artisan Pickpocket the protagonist is a craftsman thief. Thieves are a social group that is often overlooked in society. They are not noticed and dare not be noticed. In past film and television works, such negative characters rarely received attention, and when they did, it was usually as supporting villains. Jia Zhangke chose *Xiao Wu* as the narrative subject, focusing on the joys, sorrows, and struggles of thieves. They have their own professional ethics; for example, they will return ID documents after stealing wallets. They have their own sense of identity, considering themselves craftsmen. In the face of family, friendship, and love, they have their own set of values and judgment criteria. *Xiao Wu* is an invisible person rejected by society and a lonely wanderer who tries to be a hero. In *A Touch Of Sin*, the protagonist is a murderer. As a thorn in the village, he tries to lead the villagers to fight together against the collusion between the village head and the coal boss, who are making a lot of ill-gotten gains. The generous sea is a murderer who is accustomed to using violence to solve problems, but he is also a civilian hero who pursues fairness and justice. Both *Xiao Wu* and *Da Hai* have typical anti-hero identities—thieves and murderers. These protagonists are not simply good or bad; they are ordinary people who were killed by the invisible violence of the times.

The second category focuses on young people and unemployed workers in small towns. In Jia Zhangke's film *Unknown Pleasures*, Bin Bin and Xiaoji are unemployed young people who have recently entered society. They spend their days riding motorcycles around the streets, observing the same idle crowd, or wandering aimlessly. They frequent street pool tables and gather among card players, as if every city has such "idle" small-town youths. When facing their families, Bin Bin confidently declares, "I fired my boss." However, internally, he is extremely inferior and sensitive. He falsely claims to work at a textile factory when he is actually at a barber shop. This desire for social identity and recognition from others is tortured by the ruthlessly consuming society. These characters represent the struggles and frustrations of young people and unemployed workers in small towns, who are often overlooked and marginalized in society.

The third category focuses on literary and art workers who have a passion for literature and art but are facing decline. In the film *Platform*, the protagonists Yin Ruijuan and Cui Mingliang, as members of an art troupe, could have shone on the stage and become sought-after actors. However, during a specific historical period, they lost their individuality and ideals as performers. In order to survive, Yin Ruijuan gave up her place in the art troupe and could only secretly dance during work breaks to maintain her original love for the art. Cui Mingliang, on the other hand, chose to stick with it. To survive, he resorted to using twin sisters dancing as a gimmick. Eventually, he was reduced to performing on a roadside truck, where he was applauded by the audience but lost the aura of a protagonist that originally belonged to the performer. These characters represent the struggles and challenges faced by literary and art workers during times of social and cultural change. They are forced to adapt and compromise in order to survive, often at the cost of their artistic integrity and ideals.

In Jia Zhangke's films, the inner world of ordinary folk is continually expanded, revealing the spiritual struggles of marginalized groups who are struggling to adapt to the new era, new environment, and new world of the market economy. These characters are often disrespected in society, and it is the period of social transformation that has created their marginalized status. These individuals originally had dreams and pursued inner order, but in the face of a rapidly changing and unfamiliar world, they find themselves at a loss. Their superficial rebellious and impetuous attitude towards life is often just a mask hiding their inner loneliness and despair. Jia Zhangke's films delve into the complexities of these characters' emotions and experiences,

offering a nuanced portrayal of their struggles and resilience in the face of adversity.

2.2 The multitude of ordinary people against the broader backdrop

Jia Zhangke's film characters are not the traditional protagonists; instead, the times themselves take center stage. The protagonists in Jia Zhangke's films typically reside in small cities. One category features stories of Shanxi people set in Shanxi, such as *Xiao Wu*, *Artisan Pickpocket* and *Mountains May Depart*. The narrative space for these films is located in Fenyang, and *Unknown Pleasures* and *Ash Is Purest White* tell the story of Datong. All of these films depict the stories of small towns in Shanxi undergoing reform. The other category involves Shanxi people venturing to other cities to seek opportunities. For instance, the construction site of the Three Gorges Dam in *Still Life* is located in Fengjie, Chongqing, and the story of *The World* unfolds in Beijing. However, despite their new surroundings, the social identity of the protagonists remains rooted in Shanxi. As outsiders, they still carry a strong Shanxi flavor, and most of the people they associate with are fellow Shanxi people who have also left their hometowns to work.

Jia Zhangke seeks out the ordinary people in his film narratives, granting them a space within the small urban settings. Simultaneously, the experiences of these ordinary people are often implicitly woven into the backdrop of social change. For instance, the story of *Xiao Wu*, *Artisan Pickpocket* coincides with the period of Reform and Opening-up of China, and the film suggests an indispensable aspect of China's modernization process: Demolition and Relocation(D&R) . The city of Fenyang, undergoing D&R, is depicted in the narrative space of the film. *Xiaoshan Going Home* tells the story of how the arrival of the consumer society has transformed the simple family community environment in small cities into a social atmosphere where money is supreme, and people have gradually become indulged in the materialistic commodity economy. *Still Life* discusses the sacrifice of living space and spiritual home that many indigenous people have had to make behind the great cause of the Three Gorges Dam Project. One scene in *Unknown Pleasures* focuses on Beijing's successful bid for the Olympic Games, signaling the impending arrival of a new era. Meanwhile, Datong, as a traditional industrial city, is undergoing painful transformations. Jia Zhangke's films are often described as difficult to understand because they present not just the meaning of the images and stories themselves, but the truth of what really happened in the past and present, reflecting the pains of the times during China's modernization process.

In Jia Zhangke's movies, there is a distinctive blending of political events with private and national affairs. This technique of intertwining family matters with ordinary, trivial occurrences lends the films a humorous, implicit, and ironic artistic effect. For instance, in the scene *Xiao Wu*, *Artisan Pickpocket*, where Xiaowu is driven out of his house by his father, the news broadcast of Hong Kong's return to the China plays in the background. This not only serves to indicate that the story is set in 1997 but also highlights the contrast between the increasing unity of the country and the gradual breakdown of Xiaowu's family. Similarly, in *Platform*, when Zhong Ping is slapped by Zhang Jun and suffers an abortion, the radio in the hospital operating room is playing music to celebrate the 35th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. The juxtaposition of the national celebration of the motherland's birthday and the personal tragedy of Zhong Ping's abortion creates a poignant irony. By placing these ordinary people within the backdrop of the times and coordinating or juxtaposing them with larger events, Jia Zhangke achieves an ironic and poetic effect in his films.

Overall, director Jia Zhangke skillfully interlaces elements of the grand and the mundane, the subjective and the objective, the indigenous and the foreign, as well as history and the present. This creates a poetic construction wherein everything unfolds amidst contradictions. In the

tumultuous current of time, individuals from various backgrounds share an emotional identity as "heartbroken people at the end of the world." Here, "heartbroken people" embody the heroes' hesitation, helplessness, and struggle, while also serving as a metaphor for the rapidly shifting backdrop of the times. Jia Zhangke's films feature a dual construction of "ordinary people in the big time," which lends them a certain rational, hazy beauty. To fully appreciate the profound philosophical poetry of these films, the audience must engage in deep contemplation and empathize with the characters. This allows them to grasp the intricate interplay between the personal struggles of the characters and the broader historical context, thereby enriching their understanding and appreciation of Jia Zhangke's cinematic art.

Anti-drama: slow pace and weak conflict

Traditional film stories often adhere to a fixed narrative structure, providing audiences with a familiar yet novel sense of storytelling at specific time nodes. Two highly recognized structures are Robert McKee's three-act structure and Christine Thompson's four-act structure.

Robert McKee divides the story into three stages: the beginning (setup), the middle (confrontation), and the end (resolution). This structure emphasizes the gradual build-up of tension and conflict, followed by a climactic resolution (Brütsch, 2015). On the other hand, Christine Thompson divides screen creation into four stages: setup, conflict and confrontation, development, and climax (Norden, 2007). Each stage is separated by a key "plot turning point," which drives the story forward and keeps the audience engaged.

In China, the fourth and fifth generations of directors, as well as some commercial film directors, mostly adopt a four-stage plot logic clue structure (Holtmeier, 2014; Rugo, 2013). This approach emphasizes the pursuit of contradictions and conflicts in film narration, also known as drama. By doing so, these films can satisfy the audience's "novelty-seeking" psychology and provide them with a strong audio-visual experience.

With the advent of post-modernism, traditional linear narratives have become insufficient for expressing creators' ideas. As a result, creators have sought to innovate by developing new, anti-drama narrative structures, utilizing novel editing techniques. Jia Zhangke, a representative figure of the sixth generation of directors, adopts an anti-drama strategy in his overall narrative structure. In Jia Zhangke's films, there is often a notable absence of key "plot turning points" in the story's progression. Additionally, the boundaries between the four traditional stages of a film story, particularly the "development" and "climax," are blurred. This approach results in a smooth, life-like narrative rhythm that closely mirrors the everyday experiences of his characters. By eschewing traditional dramatic structures, Jia Zhangke's films offer a fresh and unique perspective on storytelling, inviting audiences to engage with his characters and their stories in a more intimate and immersive way.

3.1 Slow Rhythm — Long Takes Create the 'Poetry' of Life

The long lens theory originated from André Bazin and was derived from his research findings on the essence of documentary film aesthetics (Nordberg, 2023). This theory emphasizes maintaining the unity of film narrative space, time, and story progression, while fully restoring the inherent nature and connotations of people and things possible. Jia Zhangke skillfully employs long shots in his films, resulting in a slow-paced storytelling rhythm where plot development unfolds in "silence," imparting his films with distinct poetic qualities.

The utilization of the long lens is akin to the ideography of poetry. Instead of bluntly expressing the creator's ideas, it relies on image transmission to evoke a vast artistic space through the audience's contemplation and appreciation. When the lens focuses on a particular

space or character for an extended period, the audience cannot obtain indicative information through montage editing. Therefore, they must actively engage in thinking; otherwise, they cannot grasp the significance of this cinematic language, making the long lens a conveyor of meaning akin to poetry.

Jia Zhangke leverages the slow and prolonged expression of the long lens to depict linear narration and spatial changes, subtly conveying the truths of life to the audience. Within the long lens, characters tell their stories, creating an effect of silent gazing for the audience—quietly observing in the slow rhythm(Mello, 2022), and fostering a realistic poetic atmosphere that stems from life yet transcends it. His long shots are neither hasty nor impatient, capturing and magnifying the details of life and characters' emotions. They imply the helplessness of ordinary individuals against the larger backdrop and praise their love for life, imbued with an oriental poetic essence.

At the ending of *Platform*, there is a captivating long shot lasting over two minutes (Figure 1). Cai Mingliang is curled up on the sofa with a cigarette in hand, while his wife, Yin Ruijuan, walks around the doorway of their small house with their child in her arms. As the mother and child play intimately, the water on the gas stove begins to boil. The film ends with the sharp noise of the kettle, echoing the howling at the beginning of the film (the howling of the train in the drama performance), creating a sense of beginning and end. This serves as a testament to the ordinary "literary and art workers" who refuse to submit to a mediocre society.



Figure 1 The ending of Platform



Figure 2 A clip of Unknown Pleasures

In the film of *Unknown Pleasures*, Jia Zhangke use of a four-minute long shot in the film featuring the character "Bin Bin". Firstly, the long shot aimed at Bin Bin, although lacking in aesthetic feeling and narrative deficiencies, was deliberately placed by Jia Zhangke in the final scene of the film *Unknown Pleasures*. This choice was made to create a broader imagination space for the audience, allowing them to interpret the complex emotions and themes of sadness, helplessness, truth, and force majeure conveyed in the film. Secondly, the long lens technique is highlighted as a powerful tool in cinema, capable of expressing characters' activity space, environmental atmosphere, and emotional state to a great extent. However, it also has its drawbacks, such as being slightly lengthy, which can make the audience feel sleepy and confused. Despite these potential issues, Jia Zhangke effectively utilizes the long lens to focus on marginal groups in society, such as thieves, security guards, literary and art workers, coal bosses, and miners(Soderbergh, 2024). By doing so, Jia Zhangke not only gives the film a poetic aesthetic feeling of life flow but also allows the audience to enter the inner world of the protagonist when they start to think. This approach highlights the director's belief that the true face of life is cruel and that the long lens can vividly showcase the inner emptiness, loneliness, confusion, and other complexities experienced by marginal groups living at the bottom of society(Zhang, 2021).

3.2 Weak Conflict - Fragmented Narration Endows with Poetic Implications

In the fragmented narrative, the conventional dramatic framework of "inheritance and

transition" is discarded (Morgan & Saxton, 1985). Time and space can shift abruptly, and there may not be a straightforward causal logic between events that is immediately apparent to the audience. Jia Zhangke's foundation for weak conflict narration was established through single-line narration in his earlier work, *Xiao Wu*, *Artisan Pickpocket*. As his filmmaking evolved, the storylines of some of his films gradually became more complex, yet they maintained the subtle dramatic and conflict tone set by *Xiao Wu*, *Artisan Pickpocket*. Jia Zhangke focuses on restoring realistic life scenes, diminishing the causal connections between storylines, and delving deeper into the authentic portrayal of life and the inner worlds of characters. His work carries a strong documentary flavor. It emphasizes the visual recording of life events rather than relying on sound and light effects or superficial storytelling. Through the lens, he presents the intricate details of the protagonist's life, allowing the audience to experience and perceive it firsthand. This approach exhibits distinct narrative characteristics of fragmentation.

Firstly, Jia Zhangke's films do not prioritize constructing logical causal relationships. For instance, in *Still Life*, he presents two sets of stories: Han Sanming's search for his wife and Shen Hong's search for her husband. The connection between these two sets of stories is quite abrupt, with almost no transition, which can initially confuse the audience. Despite this, such a blunt two-line narrative structure has garnered praise, largely due to the shared background of the two storylines—the Three Gorges immigrants. In *Mountains May Depart*, a teenager carrying a Guan Gong knife appears three times, yet he is not involved with any of the story's protagonists and has no direct connection to the main plotline. Jia Zhangke has stated that the teenager with the knife symbolizes the fleeting encounters in life, representing a poetic moment of karma (Zhangke, 2021). At the same time, this element aligns with the film's theme: everyone can only accompany you for a short while; there are brief reunions and constant partings, ultimately leading to the inevitable return to dust and dirt.

Secondly, Jia Zhangke does not pursue layers of suspense in his films. The creation of suspense can pique the audience's curiosity about the story's progression and the characters' fates, stimulating their enthusiasm for watching movies and capturing their attention and interest. However, Director Jia Zhangke has no intention of catering to the audience's curiosity; his films are more aligned with life itself. Of course, he did employ strong dramatic conflict in *Ash Is Purest White*. The protagonist, Qiaoqiao, fired a shot in the air to save the life of the "big brother" Bin Ge, shouldering all the responsibility and ultimately going to jail for five years. After being released from prison, he faced Bin Ge's indifferent attitude and embarked on a journey to find him in order to start anew. Along the way, he was robbed, molested by motorcycle drivers, and almost deceived into going to Xinjiang (Zhangke, 2021). The conflicts among the Jianghu children are intense, but the overall style of Jia Zhangke's films tends to weaken dramatic conflicts.

In *Mountains May Depart*, when Shen Tao sent her son to Australia, they were on a green leather train. Her son, Daole, asked, "Mom, why is this train so slow? Why don't we take a plane or high-speed train?" She replied, "The train is slower, and my mother will stay with you longer." This scene presents a sense of sadness about parting and the warmth between mother and son. Life is constantly faced with partings, and the slow passage of time on the train extends the emotional resonance with the audience. At the end of the film, accompanied by music, Shen Tao danced alone in the falling snowflakes, which was in sharp contrast to the excitement of everyone at the disco at the beginning. "Everyone can only walk with you for a while, and sooner or later, they will be separated." At the film's conclusion, the mountains and rivers remain, but the old friend has departed. The long shots and slow rhythm in the film cooperate with the theme and tone, advancing the internal rhythm of the film and subtly infecting the audience with a sense of sadness.

Jia Zhangke is adept at structuring stories through a block narrative mode, where he disrupts the coherence of time by employing interrupted narrative space transformations and juxtapositions. The seemingly unrelated content within his films requires placement within a broader historical context to be fully understood. By dispelling the dominance of the narrative process, Jia moistens the storytelling with subtlety, guiding the audience to actively deconstruct the film and delve deep into the living situations of the characters based on their own life experiences. This approach often results in a more profound impact. To some extent, this narrative style reduces the dramatic conflict typically found in films, instead enhancing the poetic and aesthetic qualities. Jia's films encourage viewers to engage with the material on a deeper level, allowing them to draw their own conclusions and find personal meaning within the storytelling. This approach not only challenges traditional narrative structures but also invites the audience to become more active participants in the viewing experience.

4.Surreality: Absurdity and Metaphorical Features

The surrealist movement in the 20th century was a significant artistic and cultural phenomenon influenced by Freud's concept of the subconscious mind(Posada-Carbó, 1998). This movement focused on exploring the essence of human existence beyond rational thinking, often manifesting as human spiritual alienation, causal deviation, and the split between phenomenon and essence. Surrealist artists and producers employed absurd and surreal behaviors and forms to escape the helplessness and confusion of real life, creating an artistic aesthetic feeling and poetic implication with a nothingness symbol. Unesco's critique of traditional drama in his article Drama Experience(Bailin, 1993) highlights the movement's rejection of "realistic truth" in favor of "surreal truth." This emphasis on the surreal can be seen in Marquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude, a representative work of surreal application(Posada-Carbó, 1998; Santana-Acuña, 2014). The novel reveals the nothingness and absurd nature of fate, filled with philosophical poetry that explores the reincarnation of life and the predetermined nature of human fate. Director Jia Zhangke has also incorporated surreal techniques and seemingly absurd elements into his films to interpret the hero's helplessness in the face of cruel life. By doing so, he invites viewers to engage with the material on a deeper level, encouraging them to consider the complexities and absurdities of human existence. Jia's use of surrealism not only challenges traditional narrative structures but also invites the audience to become more active participants in the viewing experience, much like the surrealist movement itself sought to challenge and disrupt conventional artistic and cultural norms.

4.1 Multi-dimensional perspective of absurd images

Director Jia Zhangke's use of surreal lenses to satirize real life creates a unique and profound ideographic space within his films. This technique is particularly evident in *Still Life*, where surreal elements such as UFOs, flying memorial towers(left in Fig3), and people walking on tightropes contribute to the film's absurd narrative space(right in Fig3). These surreal shots not only add interest to the film but also serve as a metaphor for the absurdity of urban real life amidst the demolition and change brought by the Three Gorges project. They highlight the struggles and uncertainties faced by the people living in the Three Gorges, who are forced to put on the coat of "good people" and wander around the world, with no one truly understanding their thoughts and feelings. Furthermore, these surreal elements add a touch of beauty to the cruelty of reality and contribute to the film's poetic aftertaste. They invite viewers to reflect on the broader social and historical context in which the story is set, and to appreciate the inherent poetic implication of the film. Overall, Jia's use of surreal techniques in *Still Life* enhances the film's artistic value and contributes to its profound exploration of the human experience amidst the

challenges and changes brought by modernization and progress.

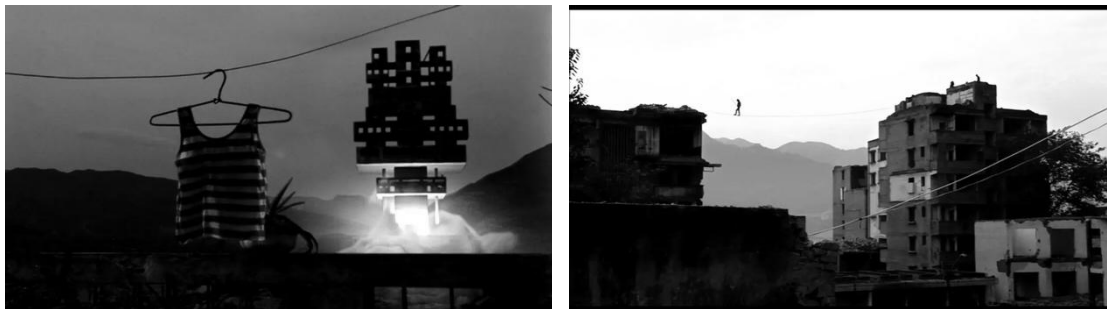


Figure 3 Clips in Still Life

In *The World* and *Mountains May Depart*, Director Jia Zhangke employs surreal techniques to enhance the form and depth of his films. In *The World*, he uses flash animations to present mobile phone short messages received by the characters, creating a somewhat abrupt but visually striking effect. This technique not only adds a sense of form to the film but also reflects Jia's pursuit of a spirit of freedom and popularization. By using relatively low-level electronic image effects, he aims to describe the "hyper-real" space of the characters' inner world, connecting the whole film through low-cost means and telling the story of migrant workers' struggles to integrate into society. Similarly, in *Mountains May Depart*, Jia uses surreal images such as the plane crash to depict the living space of the future world in 2025. This technique enriches the expression methods of film language and constructs a narrative context that requires the audience's participation. By implying the pain of the development of the times, Jia systematically explains his reflection on popular culture and the progress of society, while also interpreting the aesthetic implication of poetry and the simple, natural image style of his movies.

Overall, Jia's use of surreal techniques in these films adds a unique visual and narrative dimension, inviting viewers to engage with the stories and reflect on the broader social and historical context in which they are set. Through his innovative approach to filmmaking, Jia continues to push the boundaries of cinematic expression and explore the complexities of the human experience.

4.2 Symbolic metaphor of storyline

In Jia Zhangke's film *The World*, the title itself suggests a dual existence, representing two distinct worlds that coexist yet remain separate. The first world is World Park, a virtual, miniature landscape that encapsulates global icons such as Manhattan, the Eiffel Tower, Big Ben, Notre Dame de Paris, and the Twin Towers. This world allows characters like Zhao Xiaotao to traverse different countries without leaving Beijing, giving them a sense of living in the upper class. However, this fantasy world is juxtaposed against the harsh realities of the second world, the world of real life. The protagonists, actors and security guards in World Park, are the bottom people who struggle to integrate into the prosperous Beijing. Their lives are marked by neglect and destruction, as society's ruthlessness constantly wears them down. When Xiaotao encounters her old friend Weiwei in a bar bathroom, they are accompanied by two foreign sisters who cry bitterly. Despite their language barriers and different nationalities, they share a common experience of being neglected and destroyed in Beijing. This moment underscores the film's exploration of the helplessness and isolation that individuals can face in the face of life's challenges. Through these two worlds, one beautiful and false, the other cruel and real, "World" metaphors the gap between different social strata in the process of social development. The hero, living in Beijing but confined to a corner of the city, working in World Park but unaware of the world beyond its borders, prompts viewers to reflect deeply on the complexities of modern society and the disparities that exist within it. Jia's film invites us to consider the ways in which

our perceptions of the world are shaped by our experiences and our place within it, and to question the boundaries that separate us from one another.

In Jia Zhangke's films, the station serves as a significant and recurring space that holds a special place in his directorial vision. Whether it's a railway station, bus station, or dock, these locations often feature prominently in his works, including the character Ren Xiaoyao. In the scene described, Bin Bin arrives at a dilapidated station on a motorcycle, where a multitude of social situations unfold: Xiao Wu is arrested, fights break out near table tennis stalls, madmen perform opera, and idle unemployed youths mill around. This chaos at the station serves as a microcosm of the broader social landscape.

By emphasizing the station space, Jia's films not only narrate the story but also invite the audience to contemplate deeper meanings. In *A Touch Of Sin*, the film weaves together four storylines that explore themes of killing and suicide (Table 2). As the four stories unfold and reach their conclusions, the audience is left with unanswered questions about the fate of the protagonists. Will the character named Hai flee to avoid his crime or turn himself in? Will Saner escape successfully or ultimately be apprehended? Was Xiaoyu's action self-defense? The director deliberately refrains from providing clear answers.

Table 2 Four storylines of A Touch Of Sin

Time	Actor	Ending
38 mins	Dahai	Shooting and killing people, getting into the car with blood on his face
60 mins	Saner	Shoot to kill people and escape by bus
90 mins	Xiaoyu	Killing people with passion, hit policeman and surrender themselves
120 mins	Xiaohui	Can't stand the pressure of debt and commit suicide by jumping off a building

At the film's close, a group of people gather to watch a performance of Jin Opera under the city wall, and the film concludes with the haunting refrain, "Su San, do you know the crime?! Do you know the crime?! Do you know the crime?!" This abrupt ending leaves the audience with a sense of uncertainty and unfinished business, prompting further reflection on the complexities of human destiny and the consequences of our actions. Jia's use of the station as a backdrop for these stories underscores the transient and unpredictable nature of life, as well as the interconnectedness of individuals within the broader social fabric. In this way, the film not only tells a story but also invites the audience to engage in a deeper exploration of morality, justice, and the human condition. The open-endedness of the narrative encourages viewers to reflect on their own values and beliefs, and to consider the role that society plays in shaping individual destinies.

Discussion

5.1 Research Conclusion

Director Jia Zhangke is highly respected for his deep concern for marginal groups and his insightful thinking about the changes of the times. His stories often focus on the "aphasia" marginal groups that are overlooked in the mainstream of society. By delving into their inner worlds and living conditions, Jia gives them a voice and anticipates a decent existence for them. Jia's films are imbued with a strong sense of humanism, and like poetry, they require placement within the context of the times to fully appreciate their meaning. He builds monuments and biographies for the ordinary people, showcasing his profound insight and reflection on the

ever-changing times. Through his poetic lens, Jia presents various worlds amidst the popularization of commercialization, allowing movies to return to their essence and life. Jia's work not only highlights the struggles and challenges faced by marginal groups but also invites viewers to reflect on the broader social and historical context in which these stories are set. His films serve as a reminder of the importance of empathy, understanding, and compassion in our rapidly changing world.

5.2 Limitations and Future Directions

While this paper provides an in-depth analysis of Jia Zhangke's films, focusing on the poetic expression, anti-heroic characters, anti-dramatic narratives, and surreal elements that define his cinematic style, it acknowledges several limitations that suggest directions for future research. Firstly, the study primarily concentrates on Jia's oeuvre without comparative analysis with the works of other directors, which could have further highlighted the uniqueness of Jia's approach to filmmaking. A comparative study in future research could offer a broader perspective on Jia's contribution to cinema. Secondly, the paper does not incorporate diverse critical perspectives such as feminism or postcolonial theory, which could enrich the discussion on Jia's films by examining themes of gender, power, and cultural identity. Integrating these perspectives could provide a more nuanced understanding of the social and cultural implications of his work. Lastly, the study does not address the reception of Jia's films by audiences, critics, and the film industry, which is crucial for gauging the films' impact and influence. Future research could benefit from exploring audience reactions and critical responses to Jia's work to understand its societal and cultural resonance more comprehensively. By addressing these limitations, subsequent studies can build upon the foundation laid by this paper, offering a more holistic view of Jia Zhangke's cinematic artistry and its significance within the global film landscape.

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