

Issue 12: Book Reviews

The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century

By Zhang Zhen (ed.)

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A Review by Peter C. Pugsley, University of Melbourne, Australia

Introducing this collection, editor Zhang Zhen defines the Urban Generation as marking out a position for post-1989 Chinese cinema that moves beyond the restrictive definitions of the Fifth and Sixth Generation. The Urban Generation emerges as a "minority" cinema peopled by "a motley crew of plebeian but nonetheless troubled people on the margins of the age of transformation -- ranging from aimless bohemians, petty thieves, KTV bar hostesses, prostitutes and postmen" (3). Set against a background of "the bulldozer, the building crane, and the debris of urban ruins" (3) Urban Generation films reflect the fallibility of China's modernization drive, best exemplified by the migrant worker struggling to make good in the increasingly wealthy urban sprawls of Beijing or Shanghai. Marked by its "badge of independence" (9), the Urban Generation emerged from the shadows of the state-sponsored studio system with a body of "video-film amphibious" (18) directors showing a keen awareness for international networking. The book's convenient and effective division into three major parts: 'Ideology, Film Practice and the Market'; 'The Politics and Poetics of Urban Space'; and 'The Production of Desire and Identities', allows each section to feed into the others -- moving from the more prosaic elements of how the films manage to get made to analyses of how (and why) urban space is a key feature of post-socialist China, and ending with insights into the aesthetic beauty of the end product(s).

In Part I, Zhang Yinjin looks at how the production of state-subsidized and commercial films increased in the 1990s, while art films decreased, even though both "moved closer to official ideology" by the end of the 1990s (49). This chapter proposes that the Sixth Generation directors are more aligned with "post-socialism" because of their "institutionally imposed but self-glorified status of marginality," (53) with the "MTV-style" *Dirt* (AKA *Tou fa luan le*, Guan Hu, 1994) "symptomatic of the Sixth Generation in their formative years" (54). The lack of state support was evident in the utilisation of overseas funding from Hong Kong and Taiwan, with state bans merely adding to "generate more overseas investment" (62). Zhang also ponders the recurrent use of "disclaimers", where characters openly recant their actions -- reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution's self-criticisms -- either as a way of "clearing censorship" or a "tactical indictment of political oppression" (64). But Zhang's most unique claim is that "the notion of truth has been appropriated as a strategic position by the new Urban Generation" (70). The tripartite division of

leitmotif/art/entertainment film is joined by the underground film as a marker of marginality, but with "all four players" similarly centred on market responses (71).

Focusing on Jia Zhangke's films as "a type of aestheticised long-take realism" (82) Jason McGrath sees this style as reflecting "both an intervention into a specifically Chinese cultural discourse and a cultural commodity that appeals to contemporary global art film aesthetics" (83). McGrath feels that "post-socialist realist cinema" not only voices opposition to the state, but "indirectly critiques mainstream ideology by foregrounding the suffering of ordinary people" (85). Jia's use of a "distended post-socialist time" (90) counters "any master narrative of teleological progress" (89) -- a telling commentary on the failure of China's modernization process. Realism also features in Chris Berry's probe of the post-1989 independent documentaries that distanced themselves from earlier, formally-structured, "illustrated lectures" (117) by moving toward renegade documentary styles featuring spontaneity and spotlighting contemporary urban life. The "on-the-spot realism" of these documentaries emerged in parallel with the Urban Generation's fictional output, each offering a sense that time was "passing in a seemingly uncontrolled manner" (124). Berry also questions the term "independent" in an environment where state facilities (including television station equipment) are frequently utilized in the production of such documentaries.

Part II begins with Sheldon H. Lu's look at the visible reappropriation of China's urban landscapes by media artists intent on capturing the era where "residual traditional culture and socialist habits clash with the emergent capitalist economy" (138). Lu's brief cinematic gaze falls upon the destruction of Beijing presented in Zhang Yang's *Shower* (AKA *Xizao*, 1999), Shi Runjiu's utopian/dystopian Shanghai in *Beautiful New World* (AKA *Meili xin shijie*, 1998), and the impersonal hotel rooms in Feng Xiaogang's *A Sigh* (AKA *Yi sheng tan xi*, 2000). The "remaking" of China's urban spaces is not only reflected in the *auteur* works of those working on the silver screen, for Lu also explores the importance of the "avant-garde" photographers and video artists whose work rarely penetrates beyond Beijing's privately-owned galleries (149). Yomi Braester also discusses *Shower*, noting how Zhang's characters make a video record of the bathhouse demolition -- an important gesture, mimetic of Zhang's own attempts to record "history." Braester examines the "documentary impulse" that draws urban filmmakers to "focus on their use of demolition as a symbol for the need to chronicle the city's transformation" (161) and lists more than a dozen films that dwell on demolition, with "disoriented protagonists" watching the dismantling of their city (164). But rather than a confrontational approach, these films "foreground social issues" in an almost detached manner (165).

In her comparative overview of Yuan Muzhi's *Street Angel* (1937) and Shi Runjiu's *Beautiful New World* (1998), Augusta Palmer finds a "similar iconography, particularly the image of the skyscraper, to express entirely different ideologies about the nature and repercussions of cosmopolitan consumption" (182). *Street Angel* opens with a Shanghai skyscraper, panning from top to subterranean bottom, yet the skyscraper remains inaccessible, impenetrable, to the film's key protagonists -- the whole image an obvious nod to Fritz Lang's dystopian *Metropolis* (1927). Palmer claims that the 1990s was littered with nostalgic references and with "products that attempt to re-create the cosmopolitan aura of pre-liberation Shanghai" (181). While Beijing-based films highlighted the "radical break" from "party-centred public life to individual-centred consumerism," Shanghai-based films romanticized the city as returning to "its cosmopolitan past" (185), and thus *Beautiful*

New World emerged as "a virtual consumer primer" (191), and the Shanghai skyline itself as the very "image of success" (200). These cities, according to Linda Chiu-Han Lai, are "the nation's key evidence of modernization" and are "best approached as *heterotopia* [É] a single space with multiple orderings, encounters, cores and planes" (207). Lai's central concern is with films based on the "walker/drifter" character who "bears the scar of displacement or suffers from immense loneliness" (206, 213). Drawing from Lefebvre's thoughts on the "spatial practices" in which walking makes space meaningful, Lai concludes that walking and/or drifting "is a metaphor of the narrative materialization of the filmmaker's quest and critique of urbanity" (216). This chapter concludes abruptly with a brief word on the freedoms afforded by overseas investment and the ability to (partly) circumnavigate censorship issues.

Part III begins with three chapters exploring gender issues. Shuqin Cui investigates Ning Ying's cinematic 'Beijing trilogy' (*For Fun/ Zhao Le* (1992), *On the Beat/ Min jing gu shi* (1995), and *I Love Beijing/ Xiari nuanyangyang* (2001)) that draws on the "familiar mise-en-scène of Beijing behind its affluent districts" to create "an articulation of reality" rather than "an absolute authenticity" (244). Cui balances descriptive plot outlines with a considered critique of Ning's ability to play with stereotypical notions of gendered space. Cui exposes the seemingly contradictory aspects of this female director who "relies on a male filmmaker and a male perspective for her exploration of urban experience" (256), and questions whether Ning's "seeming lack of concern for feminism" is responsible for "consciously subverting or simply ignoring the major figures, trends and conventions" in her films (242).

BřrŽnice Reynaud reflects on Zhang Yuan's cinematic contribution to the "marginalised" and the rapid transformation of the cityscape which allows Zhang to create films where "the bastardization of the space and that of the subject overlap" (270). Concerned with the "proliferation of male-directed Sixth Generation films that reinsert the prostitute (or its many incarnations, from karaoke hostess to hairdresser) at the centre of the urban landscape" (288), Reynaud claims that Zhang has thankfully avoided "casting his female protagonists as whores" portraying them as "lost but not fallen" (288). Xueping Zhong, on the other hand, focuses on masculinity in the Shanghai-based *Mr Zhao* (AKA *Zhao xiansheng*, Lu Yue, 1998), and its intriguing conclusion with its mute, incapacitated protagonist sitting serenely in a wheelchair. Zhong unpacks the theme of male desire in relation to Mr Zhao's fall from grace as a "complete" male: husband, father and adulterer, and ponders the significance of Zhao's infirmity in the light of China's massive socio-economic reforms, and whether he represents "a tragic figure, or a redeemed one" (296). She notes the common theme of extramarital affairs in Urban Generation films, perhaps a reflection, or extension, of the liberalization of contemporary China and its "supposedly value-confused society" (299).

Yaohua Shi finds that using police officers as central protagonists is "not only narrative mastery but also a provocative tease of state authority and state discourse" (328). Shi distances these films from generic Hong Kong or western "cop films," instead offering them as "a way of exploring the complex dynamics between an often antagonistic triad: the city, police and film" (317). Shi's clever historicisation of these three "antagonists" argues that film's arrival in early twentieth century China coincided with the onset of "explosive urbanization and rampant crime" (318).

Editor Zhang's final chapter looks at similarities between Wan Quan'an's *Lunar Eclipse* (AKA *Yue shi*,

1999) and Lou Ye's multi-award winning *Suzhou River* (AKA *Suzhou he*, 2000). Not only do both films introduce enigmatic plots involving "phantom sisters," but they share cinematic arthouse styles including the use of "nonlinear narrative, jostling camera movement [and] jump cuts" (345). In harking back to 1933's *Sister Flowers* (AKA *Zi mei hua*, Zheng Zhengqiu), Zhang highlights the lure of the sister/twin as a thematic device. But it is the two contemporary films that best exemplify the "casualties inflicted by the ideology of progress" (379) of which the Urban Generation filmmakers have so successfully captured.

This is a magnificently presented work providing an extremely comprehensive and accessible overview of contemporary Chinese cinema. The briefly annotated filmography of the key Urban Generation directors (by Charles Leary) is a most helpful inclusion.

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