

FANTASTIKA JOURNAL

In the Ruins of Time: The Eerie in the Films of Jia Zhangke

Sarah Dodd

Volume 4 Issue 1 - *After Fantastika*

Stable URL: <https://fantastikajournal.com/volume-4-issue-1>

ISSN: 2514-8915

This issue is published by Fantastika Journal. Website registered in Edmonton, AB, Canada. All our articles are Open Access and free to access immediately from the date of publication. We do not charge our authors any fees for publication or processing, nor do we charge readers to download articles. Fantastika Journal operates under the Creative Commons Licence CC-BY-NC. This allows for the reproduction of articles for non-commercial uses, free of charge, only with the appropriate citation information. All rights belong to the author.

Please direct any publication queries to editors@fantastikajournal.com



www.fantastikajournal.com

IN THE RUINS OF TIME: THE EERIE IN THE FILMS OF JIA ZHANGKE

Sarah Dodd

Since making his feature debut in 1997, Chinese film-maker Jia Zhangke has made a name for himself as a chronicler of China's urban landscapes and disaffected youth, turning an unforgiving eye on the damage inflicted by the country's transformation into an economic superpower. His films depict the landscape of contemporary China as a place of ruins and violence, where the headlong rush towards the future has left ordinary people behind. Amidst the documentary realism, however, the strange intrudes; surreal, impossible images which unsettle the films' representation of reality, and which plunge their characters back into a mythic past.

Whilst Jia's work has garnered much critical attention in recent years, the fantastical elements of his films are still being explored. Jia himself has stated that there is nothing stranger in his films than has really occurred in today's China:

I have the impression that a surrealist atmosphere prevails in China today, because the entire society faces an enormous pressure to speed up. As a result, many strange and unimaginable events have occurred in reality. As they say, "reality is more exceptional than fiction" (Lu, 2006, 126).

This article uses Mark Fisher's *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016) as a starting point to approach two of Jia's films – *Still Life* (2006), a study of two intertwined lives just before the flooding of the Three Gorges, and *A Touch of Sin* (2013), a brutal dramatisation of four recent criminal cases. I argue that the films explore the consequences of the speeding-up of time in the period of economic reform since Mao Zedong's death, providing slips into eerie and mythic time which draw attention to what is being lost and who is being left behind. The article will discuss how Fisher's work can open up new possibilities for an exploration of eeriness in contemporary Chinese film, whilst the focus on the Chinese context can enrich current scholarship on the fantastic and strange.

China and the Eerie

A man looks over the rubble of a town. A dog wanders into view and wanders away again. In the distance are mountains, and the water which will soon rise. Suddenly, figures wearing masks and white suits come into view, spraying something from packs on their backs. We never learn who these figures are, or exactly what they are doing. They seem to come from another place, another time, another film. Later, an Unidentified Flying Object appears, a building takes off like a rocket into the

night, a tightrope walker makes his way between two ruins.

Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* is set in a town about to be flooded as part of the Three Gorges Dam project. It bears all the marks of Jia's realism, yet is interrupted by moments of strangeness. Are these odd repetitions, coincidences, and out-of-place images 'uncanny'? How are we to read them? Sigmund Freud's concept of the *unheimlich* has become a standard way to approach texts and ideas caught up in the jumble of terms relating to the strange, the fantastic, the weird, the eerie. But its influence has perhaps meant that other ways of looking at these texts have been ignored. The *unheimlich* is tied up in ideas of homely and unhomely, the concepts bleeding into one another until the outside is on the inside, the strange within the familiar. Mark Fisher sees this as "a secular retreat from the outside... always processing the outside through the gaps and impasses of the inside" (10).¹ It also presupposes a shared understanding of 'home' which is very much situated within a modern, 'Western' way of thinking, in which the home (and by extension, the 'safe' human world) is within protected, man-made boundaries that embody an absolute separation between inside/outside in all forms. Everything 'other' is kept outside – the spiritual, the dead, the past. But this separation is not necessarily so strict in other cultural contexts, or when the experience of home is unsettled, as in the case of migrant workers or others for whom this link is broken. In the Chinese context there are thought to be more porous boundaries between the living and the dead, between the natural and the supernatural worlds, which mean that the movement between familiar/strange and inside/outside loses some of the power upon which the uncanny hinges – the bringing to light of what was secret and hidden.² From some of the earliest Chinese tales of the strange to contemporary novels and films, the otherworld is present within this one.³

Within this context the revealing of 'unhomeliness' – the strange within the familiar – is nothing special. The home, when it contains an ancestral tablet or altar, *already* links the living to the dead, the past is already 'present.' There is a more fluid understanding of time here than is allowed by the uncanny repetitions and returns within Freud's argument.

Fisher's conception of the eerie, then, can perhaps provide a more nuanced approach. He is focused much more on ideas of landscape and place, and his formulation is to do with presence and absence – or to be more specific, the *failure of absence* or *failure of presence*; something where there should be nothing, nothing where there should be something (61). He explains this firstly through the example of a bird's 'eerie cry' – "if there is a feeling that there is something more in (or behind) the cry than a mere animal reflex... a form of intent that we do not usually associate with a bird"; and secondly through the example of ruins or abandoned structures, where we are forced to ask the questions "*what happened* and *why?*" (62, original emphasis). Here, Fisher tackles the issue of the strange not from the inside (taking the human world as central) but from the perspective of the outside, allowing for a more neutral positioning which does not rely on the presumption of shared cultural conceptions of home.

Yet Fisher still takes a Western-centric approach of taking for granted the separation between the human and the supernatural worlds, underlining the 'otherness' of anything outside

of human experience. Behind all manifestations of the eerie, he argues, is “a sense of alterity, a feeling that the enigma might involve forms of knowledge... that lie beyond common experience” (62). In order to make use of this to approach Jia’s films, we need to supplement his theoretical framework with a different understanding of the strange and of “alterity.” Through an examination of the films through the lens of the eerie, I will argue that doubleness and multiplicity are vital to an understanding of eerie effects in the Chinese context, something which many Western theories of the fantastic and strange do not take into account – that things can be both natural and strange, both possible and unexpected.

Jia Zhangke

Jia Zhangke is part of what’s known as the ‘Sixth Generation,’ or ‘Urban Generation’ of Chinese filmmakers; directors and writers who were born towards the end of the Mao era, came of age in the early reform era in the 1980s – when China was opening its doors to the rest of the world and to a market economy – and started making their own films in the wake of Tiananmen Square in 1989 and the subsequent crack-down on cultural expression. Their lives and work have therefore been marked by great shifts in the country’s experience of time, including the Cultural Revolution, which was an attempt to destroy the ‘four olds’ of ‘Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas,’ and rocket the country into a socialist future under Chairman Mao’s guidance; a wiping out of the past which, as we shall see, has led to an eerie return in the present.

After 1976 the Communist Party began to try to distance itself from the excesses of the Mao era, and bring about a new era of ‘Reform and Opening.’ This saw another leap, from closed Communist country to major player on the world stage. The pace of development has seen the growth of megacities, and huge changes in social and economic experience. The directors of the Sixth Generation, however, turn their cameras away from the glossy shopping malls of Beijing and the skyscrapers of Shanghai, and towards those urban areas such as the *xiancheng* or ‘county-level city’; massive by United Kingdom standards but insignificant in comparison to the so-called ‘first tier cities’ which have been at the forefront of economic development. It is in these lesser known urban landscapes that Jia Zhangke finds his canvas and explores the effects of ‘sped-up’ time on those who have been left behind. His protagonists are migrant workers, hostesses, petty thieves – characters on the margins of society who are failing to benefit from the Party’s dreams, haunted by a past they have lost and a future in which they are not welcome. The landscape of his films is one of construction sites and the ruins of bulldozed homes. As the comparative literary scholar Akbar Abbas observed in a lecture in 2008:

In these films, everything happens in a present made up of two absences: on the one hand, the no-longer-there, a communist past that has gone forever; on the other hand, the not-yet-there, the as yet unrealized hope that the 21st century will prove to be the Chinese century. (10)

These absences open up the films to a reading through the lens of the eerie. Different temporalities bleed through in strange ways – not only the Communist past, but also the older past that the excesses of the Mao era tried to destroy, and even perhaps future and fictional time.

Still Life: The Eeriness of Ruins

Still Life tells two stories, connected only by their setting – the ancient town of Fengjie, which is soon to be flooded by the construction of the Three Gorges dam, the world’s largest hydropower project.⁴ The project can be seen as part of the state’s ‘grand narrative’; a rhetoric of unbroken progress and grand plans, looking confidently towards the future. But the Three Gorges has played much earlier roles in the country’s historical narrative, in the mythmaking surrounding the People’s Republic of China (including Mao’s famous swims in the Yangtze, proving his vigour as a leader), and further back still, in art and poetry. There are always layers of time here, something the film’s soundscape highlights when a passenger ferry on the river broadcasts a poem by the Tang poet Li Bai:

As long ago as the Tang dynasty, the great poet Li Bai wrote these lines: “From the walls of Baidi high in the coloured dawn / To Jiangliang by nightfall is a journey of one thousand miles / Yet the cry of monkeys from the riverbank behind me / Carries to my tiny boat over and over the thousand peaks” (*Still Life*).

As the voice on the loudspeaker continues, the poem gives way to the rhetoric of the Three Gorges Project, and a television screen on board the boat shows footage of Chairman Mao and other former leaders visiting the region. Philippa Lovatt, in an article on Jia Zhangke’s “spectral soundscapes,” points out that this mixing of audio and visual, of past and present, provides, “a sense of multiple temporalities – the copresence of the revolutionary past with the ‘progressive’ official discourse of the present” (427). This cinematic layering is repeated again and again in different ways throughout the film, calling attention to the lost and eerily returning past.

The protagonists themselves are searching both for their pasts and their futures. The first of the film’s stories follows Han Sanming, a migrant labourer who has come to look for his wife, who he had bought from traffickers years ago, and who had been rescued by the police and sent back to Fengjie. The second follows Shen Hong, who has come to look for her husband and ask for a divorce. Both characters wander through the ruined landscape, watching, occasionally talking, rarely showing emotion. Han Sanming finds work on one of the many construction (or destruction) sites, and the camera gazes across wide vistas of ruined buildings.

The director had originally come to Fengjie to make a documentary on the artist Liu Xiaodong. But fascinated by the landscape and the large-scale demolitions, he ended up staying and making a feature film as well:

When you approach the town of Fengjie by boat, it's like taking a trip back to ancient China. The landscapes have been written about and painted so much that they really do seem to have come out of a Tang Dynasty poem. As soon as the boat docks, though, you're thrust back into the modern world. It's extremely chaotic (Jia, 2008, in Mello, 278).

There's a doubleness to the experience of time in this description of Fengjie – both past and present together, reflecting the importance of landscape to the present. A focus on the landscape in the Chinese context can help develop Fisher's 'perspective of the outside,' further decentring the human and the human world. The immensity of the landscape has played a key role in developing the understanding of the relationship between the human and the natural world in China. From some of the earliest writing on the strange in China, human agency and centrality has been questioned, and the human place in the world unsettled.⁵ In visual art the sheer size of the landscape has been emphasised; traditional painting dwarfs its figures in huge landscapes, something which *Still Life* recalls in its horizontal panning shots, which, as Sheldon Lu in "Gorgeous Three Gorges at Last Sight: Cinematic Remembrance and the Dialectic of Modernization" (2009) points out, "mimic the physical act of unrolling scrolls of traditional Chinese landscape painting, and evokes a sense of the immensity of geological time as we imagine how little this view has changed over history" (52).⁶

But this view *is* changing. In a particularly pointed scene, Han Sanming holds up a ten yuan note. On one side is the face of Mao Zedong. On the other, the very spot by the Yangtze River where the film is set, which is about to be lost to the water. There are two pasts disappearing here – the long past embodied by the landscape itself, and the Communist past embodied by Mao. Both are being replaced by what that ten yuan note and many more like it have bought, the "immensity of geological time" being shaken by the forces of the globalised contemporary capitalist world. The landscape which had once dwarfed its human inhabitants is being changed, drowned.

This idea of 'disappearing land' plays an important part in Fisher's own conceptualization of the eerie. His book emerged from a collaborative audio-essay called *On Vanishing Land* (2013), on the Suffolk landscape, and he engages with the strange presences and absences of the English landscape. Other writers who have written on "the English eerie," such as Robert MacFarlane in "The Eeriness of the English Countryside" (2015), argue that it explores landscape in terms of its anomalies rather than its continuities (n.p.). Sceptical of ideas of 'dwelling' and 'belonging' and of packaging the past as 'heritage,' it is "an attempt to account for the turbulence of England in the era of late capitalism," and articulate pressing contemporary concerns, including environmental damage (MacFarlane). In the Chinese context this environmental damage – and the human damage inflicted alongside it – are particularly pressing, and approaching contemporary film through ideas of vanishing, absences, and spectres, seems wholly apt. But the deliberate, man-made vanishing in China adds an extra sense of urgency.

Most of the objects and places on screen are about to be lost. Everywhere we see buildings marked with the character *chai* – to be demolished. The soon-to-be-gone is everywhere in the present, making Fengjie into a haunted landscape even before its buildings and people have vanished. Ruins are inextricably linked with both a sense of anthropocentric belonging and loss, so when they are still inhabited they become charged with an eerie presence. This in-between state, so key to Jia's films and to contemporary China, is not considered by Fisher, but provides an important addition to his theoretical framework. It also provides a link between the physical buildings and the people within them – those inhabitants who are being forced to move, and the migrant workers who move to find a better life. They too are in-between, forgotten, or unseen. The modern word for ruins in Chinese, 废墟 (*feixu*), contains the character for 'abandon, give up, discard,' and the sense of being thrown away, discarded, is as apt for the people on screen as for the buildings.

Unlike Fisher's ruins, surrounded by an enigma, we know what is happening here – we see Han Sanming and the other migrant workers in the process of demolishing the buildings, and we know why. Yet part of what gives the film's ruined landscapes their eerie power is the unquestioning acquiescence to this vanishing. Han does not question what he is doing – none of the migrant workers do; it is enough that they are being given work. But it is work that turns them spectral, compelling those already on the verge of precarity to destroy their own past in order to eke out a semblance of a future, even though – paradoxically – this also removes them from that future. They have been made as ghostly and 'in-between' as the residents of Fengjie's ruined buildings, through a globalised capitalist mode that is itself (as will be discussed below) eerie and spectral. The longer he stays in Fengjie the more Han Sanming comes to the same unquestioning acceptance as its long-term residents, who dully watch the waters rise. Newly arrived, he is bewildered – he asks the motorcycle taxi driver why he would drive him to an address that he knows is already completely submerged. But the residents, in their soon-to-be demolished homes, just shrug. There is an absence of questions at the film's heart – an acceptance of ruin and loss which echoes Fisher's argument that "the eerie also entails a disengagement from our current attachments" (13). The eerie lacks the quality of shock associated with other aspects of the strange and instead has to do with a "detachment" from the everyday (13). The film's characters watch the disappearance of the past impassively, just as the appearance of a UFO passes without comment, collapsing past, present, and future, reality and fiction.

This can be seen as an example of negative hallucination – of *not seeing what is there*, which is, Fisher says, "both stranger and more commonplace than seeing what is not there" (74-75). Overlooking what does not fit in with our world view is common; we view the world through a constant 'editing process.' But here there seems to be a willing failure to see, a negative hallucination which has become so normal that it is unnoticed but utterly pervasive. There is a shared disconnect between what is there/not there/soon to be not there, which has of course happened on a larger scale over the past decades in China, where the tragedies of the Cultural Revolution are present but unacknowledged. The past is as much of an eerie presence as these other, unexplained, objects.

The image of the passive spectator and seeing/not seeing is a particularly meaningful one in the context of modern China. The “father of modern Chinese literature,” Lu Xun, famously wrote about this in *A Call to Arms* (1922), condemning a country and a culture which could only provide these passive onlookers. His work exhorted his readers to “wake up” and was part of a project of national renewal at the beginning of the twentieth century that finds an echo in Jia’s work at the beginning of the twenty-first. “We cannot stand by and become passive spectators of these tragedies,” Jia Zhangke has said, in relation to the stories that make up *A Touch of Sin*, which I turn to in the following section (Ma, 2013). Jia’s socially engaged cinema refuses to look away, instead drawing attention to the act of not seeing, and to the slippages between times, and between presences and absences, that create these eerie effects.

The foreknowledge of disappearance allows the film to be both slow and urgent at once, given extra pathos by the director’s habitual mixing of ‘the real’ and the staged. Whilst the film tells an invented story of two people and their spouses, many of the cast and the extras are real inhabitants of Fengjie, living in the soon-to-be demolished houses. It is a town which now exists only in memory and pictures, so the film functions as a record of disappearances and as an attempt to preserve both this process itself and what is left. This is perhaps also suggested by the clocks and watches hung up on lines of string in the home of Shen Hong’s old friend, an archaeologist who is trying to salvage what he can before the past is lost forever, an image clearly echoing Salvador Dali’s “The Persistence of Memory” (1931). Yet Dali’s image is a stubbornly ‘Western’ imagining – time melting, sliding away, whereas in Jia’s films, time gains an eerie repetition, with the past both disappearing and returning in unexpected ways. Fisher writes that “There is an irreducibly eerie dimension to certain archaeological and historical practices” (63). In the film this eerie dimension is strengthened; the archaeologist’s work is impossible (the site will be flooded before he can finish uncovering the past) yet the past returns, nonetheless. Here perhaps the film itself becomes a different form of archaeology – a record of the twice discarded, the doubly lost.

The image of the clocks strung on a line is echoed in the very last shot of the film, where a tightrope walker balances high in the air on a rope between two buildings, apparently unnoticed. This could be, as Abbas argues, a symbol of China today, suspended between a lost communist past and a fantasy of the future (15). It could also be another example of that eerie nether-space, where the layers of the past are both present and absent at the same time.

A Touch of Sin: The Eeriness of Mythical Time

To start to unpack this further it is helpful to turn to another of Jia’s films. *A Touch of Sin* is made up of four loosely linked stories, all based on real life events which gained media attention in China – a man whose frustration at corruption in his town leads him to a killing spree; a violent robber; a woman who works at an all-night sauna and kills a man who tries to molest her; and finally a young migrant worker who dies by jumping from his upper-floor dormitory.⁷

Like *Still Life*, the film is deeply rooted in place and time. Each story was filmed in the location where the real-life event took place, and the landscape and season change as the film goes on. Alongside these roots in reality, however, are echoes of the real and mythical past, and surreal encounters. Scenes from *The Water Margin* – a Ming Dynasty novel based upon real figures from Chinese history – play out on the stage of a travelling opera company, evoking a world of outlaws, violence, and tragedy. Later, in the ‘Nightcomer Sauna’ the 1993 Hong Kong film *Green Snake* (directed by Tsui Hark) plays on the television, conjuring up the myth of the White Snake and echoing the imagery of snakes which slither across this section of the narrative. The film is also a radical departure from the director’s previous work, in its shocking, bloody violence. Whilst *Still Life*’s violence was quiet and buried (the murder of a young man who befriends Han Sanming happens off-screen, his body buried under the rubble), in *A Touch of Sin* the violence is front and centre.

In the first story, a miner called Dahai (based on Hu Wenhai, a peasant vigilante who killed fourteen villagers in 2001 in northern China) becomes murderously frustrated by a bureaucracy which will not let him complain about the fact that the village chief has sold off the coal mine to the Victory Corporation, but pocketed the profits which should have been shared between the villagers. He cannot post a letter to the government because he does not know an exact address to write to, and when he complains to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the corporation he is viciously beaten, after which his bandaged head is mocked by the other villagers. Eventually he takes up his rifle, and at that moment there is a kind of growl on the soundtrack, as though he has become possessed by the tiger depicted on the rug he uses to cover up the gun. Turning from a simple villager to an avenging outlaw, he goes on a killing spree, murdering the accountant who covered up the corruption, the village chief, and the CEO of the Victory Corporation, ending up blood-spattered and smiling in the back of the CEO’s car.

Jia is one of the most ‘world-cinema-literate’ of contemporary Chinese directors, and in the film he nods to Westerns and gangster movies whilst also paying homage to homegrown *wuxia*, or martial arts cinema. *Wuxia* is a vital and continuing part of Chinese cinematic history, and the use of the genre’s typical images such as the avenging knight errant and the forest both anchors and unsettles the film’s stories and its exploration of real and imagined time. The characters are anchored in a time and place yet they are also unmoored, made timeless, by their transformation into myth.

Another of the stories is based on the case of Deng Yujiao, a hotel worker who in 2009 killed the man who tried to rape her. In the film she becomes Zheng Xiaoyu, working in the ‘Nightcomer Sauna,’ and is associated with snakes. Walking to work, a snake slithers across the road in front of her. As Jiwei Xiao in “China Unraveled: Violence, Sin, and Art in Jia Zhangke’s *A Touch of Sin*” (2015) points out, “as an archetypal animal of the netherworld, the snake is often associated with *yin* (feminine elements) in Chinese folk myths” (31). That evening she finds herself in a strange kind of fortune-teller’s caravan, surrounded by more snakes. Later, back at work, the 1993 Hong Kong film *Green Snake* plays on the TV, based on a legend of a snake-spirit and her human lover. She is then plunged deeper into myth after she has killed one of the customers at the sauna where she works, after he attacks her, and she stumbles into the night, covered in blood.

Aliza Ma in “A Touch of Sin: Histories of Violence” (2013), points out that:

This combination of historical, legendary, and mythical properties in character and overall narrative is in fact the premise of a form of storytelling called *Yan yi*, as ancient as the concept of migration in China. Jia cites influence from *Water Margin*, an epic *Yan yi* based upon true events about outlaws in the Song dynasty—victims-turned-perpetrators of corruption and torture, who migrated to seek transformation of their fate, and whose tragic destinies parallel those of the contemporary figures dramatized in Jia’s film. (n.p.).

Dahai and Zheng both become something vengeful and mythical, cast out of their own time and into an earlier, wilder time. In her transformation, Zheng recalls both the martial figure in King Hu’s famous film *A Touch of Zen* (1971) (which provides the inspiration for the film’s English title) and the older, spectral figure of the avenging ghost. Her walk through the night streets after the stabbing, covered in blood, casts her as a liminal figure, walking paths between the living and the dead, cast out of her own time. At the end of the film, she ‘returns to life’; a free woman, she goes to work for that same Victory Corporation seen in Dahai’s story. Yet she is still cast as an outsider, looking in.

A third story involves a character, Zhou San’er, who also seems to have stepped out of an earlier time – he is an almost wordless killer, roaming the countryside yet returning home to do his filial duty as a son. (He is based on Zhou Kehua, a fugitive who carried out a series of armed robberies in 2012). But he seems as much of an outsider as Zheng Xiaoyu and Dahai; we see him leaving his family behind, and killing a woman to steal her handbag. Xiao (2015) calls attention to his structural role in the film, tying the stories together. Always on the run, he is indirectly linked to the other characters; “As much a device as a character, Zhou is a needle, with which Jia sews seemingly unrelated characters and incidents into a larger tapestry of social ills and moral ‘sins’” (25). Following Zhou San’er’s travel routes, the four stories progress temporally around the Chinese New Year and spatially from the north to the south; “Personifying violence, Zhou San’er both binds the stories together and, as pulled by Jia, rips apart their social ‘fabric’ to expose the strands unspooling from it” (25).

All of these characters are ghostly – left behind by economic reform and globalisation, they are unseen and unheard, spectres of a lost past. They are unmoored, in different ways, from family relationships and from their hometowns, making them symbolic of the floating population of migrant workers who have driven China’s economic boom but who have been unable to benefit from it. As Xiao in “The Quest for Memory: Documentary and Fiction in Jia Zhangke’s Films” (2011) points out, the prevalence of transport and movement in Jia’s films represents, “the reality of a society in great flux as well as a metaphor for the inner restlessness of its citizens set adrift from home/land and trying to catch up with the change” (n.p.). The eerie can in this way be a more fruitful way of looking at lives in transit than the uncanny, with its unquestioning links to ‘home’ and to notions of

belonging. The migrant worker's presence is a vital component of China's economic rise, yet they are ignored and unseen. In the eyes of the state (which provides everyone with a living permit tied to their place of birth) they are an anomalous presence, denied the rights of urban dwellers whilst driving forward the economic progress which feeds such urban centres. Their eerie absence then becomes a bloody, unsettling presence, a sudden, violent embodiment, making them both utterly present whilst absolutely out of their time.

In the final section of the film, a young migrant worker named Xiao Hui leaves his factory and comes to work in a nightclub in Dongguan, called 'The Golden Age.' The narrative starts to play out like a love story – he meets a young girl, they fall in love; there seems finally to be an element of hope for a future that could be different. But the nightclub peddles a sexualised and nostalgic picture of the past to businessmen from Hong Kong and Taiwan. The girls here are dressed up as People's Liberation Army soldiers, singing Mao era 'Red songs' (a reference to the increasing number of clubs and restaurants that are appearing around China, part of what Dai Jinhua and Judy T. H. Chen (1997) call the "imagined nostalgia" of the reform era – a market-driven and market-enhanced nostalgia towards a socialist past).

The young man finds himself unable to cope with the strange unreality of the club and his girlfriend's role within it, so he leaves to find work at another factory. But here, rather than the country's past, it is his own past he is unable to escape, along with the demands of family, who accuse him of wasting money; eventually, he throws himself from the dormitory balcony. This narrative strand was inspired by incidents at a Foxconn factory in Shenzhen between 2007 and 2016, where dozens of migrant workers committed suicide in protest at the dehumanising working conditions and the exploitation of migrant labour.

This section of the film feels quite different from the previous three, as it seems much more grounded in a completely realistic setting. But it is also the most powerful depiction of the feelings of displacement and absence that the film explores. Unlike the other characters, the young protagonist does not resort to violence against others – he is never allowed to become mythic himself, never allowed to be anything more or less than utterly real and in his time. And so this reality, this absolute present, overwhelms him, and leads to his death. He sees through the uncanny simulacrum that the nightclub peddles, but his seeing – or his refusal to play into the pretence – makes it impossible for him to accept it, and thus to exist alongside it.

The Chinese title of *A Touch of Sin* literally means "Heaven will decide," and questions of fate seem to hang heavy around the interwoven stories of both this film and of *Still Life*. Fisher argues that the concept of fate is eerie in that it raises questions about agency; "who or what is the entity that has woven fate?" (12) But as we have seen, his approach seems to take for granted a common understanding of fate which is bewildering and 'other.' In the Chinese context of a closer relationship between the human and natural/supernatural world, this fearful otherness is not present – fate is not 'outside' in the same way. Furthermore, in the contemporary China of Jia's films it is in fact very clear what is acting upon the characters and their lives. It is the village boss who sells off

the coal mine and keeps the profits for himself and his cronies. It is the pointedly named 'Victory Corporation.' It is the faceless global corporation who exploits cheap migrant labour. Rather than a heavenly being, or even the Communist Party, it is business conglomerates who are in control of individual destinies.⁸

It is the eeriness of capital that is at the heart of much of Fisher's argument: "Capital is at every level an eerie entity: conjured out of nothing, capital nevertheless exerts more influence than any allegedly substantial entity" (11). But in post-socialist China, capitalism is eerie too because it is both present and absent, both seen and unseen, woven into euphemism as 'socialism with Chinese characteristics,' or as a 'socialist market economy.' Here is the 'failure of absence' and 'failure of presence' which are Fisher's markers of the eerie; something where there should be nothing; nothing where there should be something; a past which is both here and not here, or, as Abbas argues, a "spectral history of socialism" (12). China's turn to globalisation, he states, "can be thought of not as a contradictory about-face, or as a break with the socialist past, but as the form that a posthumous socialism takes" (10). Contemporary China is full of these eerie ellipses, not least in Xi Jinping's rhetoric of the "China Dream," which traces an unbroken line of history through millennia to the Communist Party's present. It is a dream of prosperity for all, a dream which Jia's films reveal to be empty; yet another failure of presence. The migrant workers and other characters who have lost their rootedness to ideas of home or place are thus forced into eeriness, suspended between time and place. I argue that they highlight the need to extend and develop Fisher's framework of the eerie, exploring the very different ways in which the "globally tele-connected capitalist world" is experienced by different people (64). Conceptions of alterity and experiences of time are not fixed; place and landscape can play different roles. The eerie opens up rich possibilities for future research.

A Touch of Sin ends on another striking image of *looking* – Zheng Xiaoyu, released from prison, sees an opera performance of the story of Su San – a wrongly imprisoned woman in the opera *The Trial of Su San*. As she watches the stage, the camera turns, abruptly, and the audience of the opera stares directly into the camera. Are we, as spectators, watching the film or being watched? It is a final, eerie questioning of the stories that we have just seen, and perhaps even of reality. After all the slips into mythic time, this final shot brings us resolutely into the present moment. It is suddenly the audience who are the eerie, uncertain presence – both absent, present, and complicit. Jia's films can in fact be seen as – paradoxically – both eerie objects and a defence *against* eeriness. In attempting to capture disappearance (of landscape, buildings, or people) Jia is confronting the eerie agency of political and economic forces, forcing the audience to see the reality of the world around them, and to pay attention to what has been lost.

NOTES

1. Fisher argues that, whilst Freud's essay raises interesting possibilities, it also ends in a psychoanalytical interpretation "as disappointing as any mediocre genre detective's rote solution to a mystery" – reducing the enigma of the *unheimlich* to castration anxiety (9).

2. It is also important to note that in Chinese, 家 (*jia*) can mean both 'home' and 'family,' meaning that the concept of home is not simply of a physical place.
3. For more on the natural/supernatural in traditional Chinese thought, see Judith Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Classical Chinese Tale* (1993).
4. The idea of the dam was conceived in the 1950s, with the aim of generating energy and controlling floods. Work began in 1993, and *Still Life* was shot on location in 2006, as the project was nearing its end. Over 1.5 million people were relocated to make way for the dam, and entire towns on the banks of the river were flooded. For more recent work on representations of the Three Gorges, see Corey Byrnes, *Fixing Landscape: A Techno-Poetic History of China's Three Gorges* (2019).
5. See Robert Campany's *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China* (1996) for an excellent introduction to the tradition of anomaly tales.
6. There has also been a strand of film-making and fiction in China since the beginning of the reform period in the 1980s, which displaces the human from the landscape. In Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (1993), for example, the human figures are swallowed by the vastness of the mountains, and then by water at the end. And in literary metafictional experiments from the same period there are many stories in which the protagonist's existence is thrown into doubt by a landscape turned strange. See, for example, Han Shaogong's "Homecoming" (1985), in which a young man arrives at a mountain village, only to find that its inhabitants have taken him for someone else, unsettling both his memories and his whole identity.
7. Originally approved by the Chinese Film Bureau in 2013, the film was scheduled to be released in November of that year. However, according to an interview with the director, officials "started worrying that the film might provoke social unrest," and the film has not yet been released in China (Rayns, 2014).
8. Xiao points out that the image of an apple appears throughout the film – eaten by Dahai at the very beginning, peeled by Zhou San'er for his son, or by Zheng Xiaoyu's lover – before being evoked in the final story. "The meaning is at once literal and symbolic: everyone partakes of the apple of sin. The allegorical meaning is tied to 'Apple,' the prime brand and icon that represents the triumph of global capitalism. Having bitten into its own 'apple' of capitalism, China is now experiencing euphoria as well as the painful spasms of its new twenty-first century" (2015, 30).

WORKS CITED

Abbas, Ackbar. "Poor Theory and New Chinese Cinema." CTI Irvine Lecture, 3 December 2008, Critical Theory Institute, University of California, Irvine, USA.

Byrnes, Corey. *Fixing Landscape: A Techno-Poetic History of China's Three Gorges*. Columbia University Press, 2019.

---. "Spectres of Realism and the Painter's Gaze in Jia Zhangke's *Still Life*." *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2012, pp. 52-93.

Campany, Robert. *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China*. State University of New York Press, 1996.

Dai, Jinhua and Judy T. H. Chen. "Imagined Nostalgia." *Boundary 2*, special issue on Postmodernism and China, vol. 24, no. 3, 1997, pp. 143-161.

Fisher, Mark. *The Weird and the Eerie*. Repeater Books, 2016.

Han, Shaogong. *Homecoming? and Other Stories*. Translated by Martha Cheung. Renditions Paperbacks, 1992.

Jia Zhangke, director. *A Touch of Sin*. Performances by Jiang Wu, Zhao Tao, Wang Baoqiang, and Luo Lanshan. Xstream Pictures and Office Kitano, 2013. Film.

---. *Still Life*. Performances by Han Sanming and Zhao Tao. Xstream Pictures, 2006. Film.

Lovatt, Philippa. "The Spectral Soundscapes of Postsocialist China in the Films of Jia Zhangke." *Screen*, vol. 53, no. 4, 2012, pp. 418-435.

Lu, Sheldon H. "Gorgeous Three Gorges at Last Sight: Cinematic Remembrance and the Dialectic of Modernization." *Chinese Ecocinema in the Age of Environmental Challenge*. Edited by Sheldon H. Lu and Jiayan Mi. Hong Kong University Press, 2009, pp. 39-55.

Lu, Tonglin. "Trapped Freedom and localized globalism." *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*. Edited by P. G. Pickowicz and Y. Zhang. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2006, pp. 123-41.

Ma, Aliza. "A Touch of Sin: Histories of Violence." *Reverse Shot*. 17 October, 2013. <http://reverseshot.org/reviews/entry/1658/touch_sin>

MacFarlane, Robert. "The Eeriness of the English Countryside." *The Guardian*, 10 April, 2015. <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/10/eeriness-english-countryside-robert-macfarlane>>.

Mello, Cecilia. "Space and Intermediality in Jia Zhang-ke's *Still Life*." *Aniki: Portuguese Journal of the Moving Image*, vol 1, no. 2, 2014, pp. 275-291.

Rayns, Tony. "The Old and the New." Interview with Jia Zhangke. *Sight and Sound*, vol. 24, no. 6, June 2014, pp. 30-34.

Xiao, Jiwei. "China Unraveled: Violence, Sin, and Art in Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin*." *Film Quarterly*, vol. 68, no. 4, Summer 2015, pp. 24-35.

---. "The Quest for Memory: Documentary and Fiction in Jia Zhangke's Films." *Senses of Cinema*, 59, June 2011. <<http://sensesofcinema.com/2011/feature-articles/the-quest-for-memory-documentary-and-fiction-in-jia-zhangke%E2%80%99s-films/>>

Zeitlin, Judith. *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Classical Chinese Tale*. Stanford University Press, 1993.

BIONOTE

Sarah Dodd is a lecturer in Chinese Studies at the University of Leeds, UK. She is deputy director of the Leeds Centre for New Chinese Writing, and part of the Transcultural Fantastic project. She also co-edits *Samovar*, an online magazine of speculative fiction in translation.