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Uncertain Fictional Objects

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SUMMARY *The trope of formal rupture in the films of sixth-generation Chinese filmmaker Jia Zhangke is a key site where ethnography and fictionality merge. Situated in Jia's documentary-like aesthetic and oriented to a non-Chinese global art cinema audience, "uncertain fictional objects" are tasked with a great deal of mediating labor. They ultimately tell us not only about Jia's rural and upwardly mobile characters but also the cognitive leaps they and Jia's global audience must undergo to function within a landscape of unimaginably rapid industrialization and a world in which China is undermining Western hegemony. Uncertain fictional objects—figured as literal unidentified flying objects, animated intercut scenes, and non-diegetic voices from elsewhere—pose a frontal challenge to an abiding orientalist gaze and the very possibility of the ordinary in capitalism. Stripped of the familiar and compelled by the inexorable current of industrial economic policy, the totality and mode of cognition left to Jia and his characters are what I term "science fictionality," as opposed to simply "science fiction." [China, science fiction, film, Jia Zhangke]*

"What is the modernity-fictionality connection?"
—Catherine Gallagher, "The Rise of Fictionality," 345.

If Chinese director Jia Zhangke's "fondness for making films that *look like* documentaries" achieved its highest expression in his 2006 narrative feature *Still Life*, then one might say that the most anomalous scene in his *oeuvre* is the one that arrives near the film's mid-point, when, of all things, a UFO streaks across the sky (Chow 2014, 26). It is a daring gesture in several senses: not only as a formal experiment on Jia's part but also as a dare to the film's intended audience, who at this point in Jia's career were still predominantly the audiences of the global art cinema rather than domestic Chinese audiences.

Jia's own gloss on the UFO is daring in yet another way. He explains in an interview that China's "official speeches and pictures are like UFOs that never touch the ground," meaning that the UFO is no more a departure from reality than their transformative social and economic vision for the Three Gorges region (Jia 2009). While we would be justified in refusing the false choice altogether, I want to explore the choice's conditions of emergence, which are less about the tropes of science fiction being figuratively applied to China's

rapid industrialization and more about the form of totality that I call *science fictionality*. What anthropology might gain from adopting science fictionality as a lens or object of study is a focus on the material preconditions of the act of fiction-making itself. As I will show, Jia's films depict the cognitive challenge of grappling with a concrete reality stuffed with competing temporalities that sometimes appears to take the form of the science fictional. They do not, in other words, depict imaginative objects, even when they are set in the near future. They are not science fiction.

The UFO is, therefore, exemplary of Jia's subject matter, which has remained consistent across his more than a dozen feature-length films, and which we might describe as the subject-level experience of China's uneven and combined development. As the cultural critic Xudong Zhang impishly puts it, Jia's thematics "could all too easily be taken up as a list of topics for an academic conference on problems of contemporary Chinese development: its human cost (alienated youth in *Xiaowu* and *Unknown Pleasures*; migrant labor and population relocation in *Still Life*, *The World*, and *24 City*); its social and cultural cost (the erasure of collective memory, the destruction of families and communities, the flattening of culture and value, the shrinkage of time-space in *The World*); the environmental cost (the violation of nature and pollution in *Still Life*); etc." (Zhang 2011, 138).

Jia's approach to these topics adopts aesthetic strategies that, on the one hand, subordinate character and narrative to setting and temporality and, on the other hand, appeal to the tastes of the global art cinema. As Matthew Flanagan observes, "slow films tend to emerge from spaces that have been indirectly affected or left behind by globalisation" (quoted in De Luca and Jorge 2016, 13). Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge explicitly connect slow cinema to rapid economic development: "the fact that so many slow cinemas come from East Asia and China is noteworthy when set against the historically unprecedented pace at which modernisation has taken place in many of these regions in the last thirty years" (De Luca and Jorge 2016, 15).

What many commentators have described as Jia's ethnographic reliance on on-location scenes, natural lighting, stationary shots, high average shot lengths, non-professional actors, and decentering of plot has also secured his reputation as one of the preeminent practitioners of "slow cinema." Moreover, it has opened him to critiques of slow cinema that have been made against directors like Pedro Costa, Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Abbas Kiarostami, Tsai Ming-Liang, and Béla Tarr, who are "often accused of turning their backs on national audiences by aestheticising their own local cultures to a privileged international elite" (De Luca and Jorge 2016, 11; see also McGrath 2007, 106–8). These critiques, however, betray a reified understanding of the relation between the global art cinema and the global south, in which the latter becomes, at best, a passive object of ethnographic study and data collection and, at worst, a benighted subject that cannot discern its own best interests.

There is, in other words, an apparent contradiction between Jia's domestic subject matter and his global audience insofar as he can be accused of aestheticizing the domestic not for a domestic audience but for global consumption. The mounting issue here is one that Rey Chow leads us to through her observation, quoted above, about Jia's documentarian compulsions. For Chow, the

focus of Jia's films is not so much this or that topic as what she calls a "hyper-mediality," in which a "will to knowledge" about China joins expressions of a "native informant" to the expectations of a "foreign observer" (Chow 2014, 16). We should emphasize, however, that this contradiction refracts yet another set of contradictions whose consequences are domestic rather than global. For instance, Lisa Rofel has shown, from the perspective of Chinese who have lived through postsocialist transition, how "the mobilizing abilities of the nation-state and its public culture in the context of global articulations" makes urgent for individuals the finding of "their proper niche in the world order as subjects of national (and nationally diasporic) public cultures" (Rofel 2007, 20–21). Also involved here is a dispersion of knotted orientalist discourses that we can label "counter-orientalist" insofar as they reconfigure, rather than eliminate, the classic East-West binary (other examples include Fan 2015, Klein 2003, So 2016). For instance, Louisa Schein's account of the "internal orientalism" that shores up a Han-centric national identity via state-sanctioned "packaged" performances of ethnic minority cultural difference certainly implicate the foreign gaze but is ultimately about domestic power relations (Schein 2000). As Schein writes, "the 'orientalist' agent of dominant representation is transposed to that sector of the Chinese elite that engages in domestic othering" (Schein 1997, 73). Rather than give in to the ceaseless negotiation of orientalist difference, in this article, I show how Jia's films negotiate a kind of orientalist *sameness* in which the domestic and global are dialectically subsumed under a single process and in which Jia's audiences correspond to positions in this process rather than demographic categories.

The UFO makes visible a truth about "China" in the same gesture as it ironizes the global art cinema's gaze. It is an ironic figure that is paradoxically concrete rather than abstract. As Ackbar Abbas puts it in his reading of *Still Life*, the UFO is a figure of "the duplicitous, whose main characteristic is that it is not deceptive, but rather a provocation to thought" (Abbas 2008, 12). The challenge Jia faces, in other words, is how to register something about "China" when, from one side, the pace of change is so rapid that physical reality itself eludes the camera's gaze, and, from another side, that authenticity is overdetermined by the preconceptions of his global audiences: preconceptions that look to his films to overturn preconceptions. We recognize here the familiar shape of orientalism's will to knowledge. Commentary on Jia's films heavily emphasizes adjudicating the various realisms in his films. It thus carries an orientalist valence even if it renders that orientalism *critical* by praising Jia's focus on the ugly aspects of China's rapid development and the minutia of proletariat life. It is perhaps because of this incipient orientalism—or maybe even the predictability of orientalism's terms—that commentators have yet to appreciate the degree to which Jia's films engage directly with forms of orientalism and counter-orientalism. This is, at bottom, a question about the UFO. What kind of "provocation" is the UFO (to recur to Abbas)? What kind of knowledge does it generate? The political and cultural theorist Daniel Vukovich describes a form of orientalism that has adjusted to grapple with China's rise. Rather than posit the *difference* between East and West, an emerging "sinological-orientalism," he argues, posits *sameness*:

When one recalls the Marxist cultural analysis of capital as such, namely as an historical force of abstraction that makes unlike things alike on the basis of some third thing called the value-form. ... The relationship between this orientalism and global capitalism appears in sharper relief. Sinological-orientalism is in an important sense a capital-logic, just as historical capitalism betrays an orientalist one. ... The time is at hand. The denouement has inched closer. The last real constraint remains the Party state which will depart from the historical stage with our help. (Vukovich 2012, 1–3)

For better or worse, it is capital all the way down. The Chinese Communist Party is either heroically holding the line against global capitalism's completion or villainously holding it back. Either way, the figure of "China" is presumed to wield a world-historical power that throws into doubt the reliable production of the East-West hierarchy that is central to Edward Said's account of orientalism. "China" is thus an ironic figure in the sense of irony that Valentin Volosinov offers: of an "interference" of two ideological positions being voiced simultaneously. When personified, as we will see in this article's conclusion, this irony is expressed as a "double-faced" trope in which "both author [or director] and character [are] speaking at the same time" (Volosinov [1929] 1973, 144). Sinological-orientalism is thus symptomatic of the hegemonic transition from a US- to a China-centered systemic cycle of accumulation. Tracking Jia's ironic engagement with sinological-orientalism brings into relief a cognitive by-product of this hegemonic shift: science fictionality (as opposed to *science fiction*).

Rather than pursue depictions of this similarity via character (these people are just like us!), Jia pursues depictions of a mode of cognition—science fictionality—in which the shock of the dialectic is subsumed by the ordinary itself. In other words, the UFO brings to our attention a totalizing *condition* of science fictionality and the possibility that the formal rupture it indexes might pierce through reified modes of knowledge production like orientalism. As we will see, this rupturing certainly offers critical affordances but it promises no transcendence. Though we never see the UFO land, Jia's point seems to be that it is a *human* rather than an alien object: no rides to be hitched to the off-world. Indeed, it is Jia's commitment to a mode of commentary on the ordinary that has attracted anthropologists to his work (recent anthropological approaches to Jia's films can be found in Fitzhenry 2008, Gaetano 2009, Szeto 2009, Zhu 2011, Wang 2020, Swancutt 2021). What anthropology brings to our analysis of science fictionality, as we will see, is a kind of movement back and forth, from the particular to the general, close-up to long-shot: a dialectical movement, in other words, that produces what Andrew Brandel and Naveeda Khan, in the Introduction to this special section, call "the ordinary, the face to face, the tactile encounter, the assembly of people, the hum below the surface, these are the micropolitical technologies of building entire worlds within this one." Jia's uncertain fictional objects reveal a science-fictional dynamic within the ordinary that coordinates what one feels and knows with what one concretely experiences.

In the following, I engage with several of Jia's films to illustrate his multiple ethnographic approaches to this fundamental question about how the ordinary is produced in the midst of a domestic that is disorientingly global, and a global that is uncannily domestic. After clarifying science fictionality's mediation of orientalist sameness, I will show how science fictionality is immanent to the concrete situation of China's postsocialist economic development. Jia's argument,

in other words, seems to be that science fictionality is not merely a grab-bag of tropes, a superimposed framework, or a reading method. I will show how its immanence becomes clearest in the context of the *xiànjíshì*, a county-level administrative unit that is a recurring setting in Jia's films. I argue that the UFO and the *xiànjíshì* are structurally identical. In the space of the *xiànjíshì*, Jia's alleged foregrounding of temporality (i.e., his "slow cinema") is revealed as a spatialization of temporality: a kind of perceptual puzzle that unidentified fictional objects are tasked with solving.

Science Fictionality

My evocation of science fictionality is informed by cultural historian Roger Luckhurst's definition of the term as "the mass-cultural conditions for the emergence of recognizably generic sf," i.e., science fiction (Luckhurst 2012, 385). In Luckhurst's account, the world's fairs that began with London's 1851 Great Exhibition bring into focus the cultural, economic, and imperial forces that elevated a "technological sublime" into which visitors were immersed. These Exhibitions envisioned "a borderless flow of capital along streamlined routes of electronic communication" and a "globality ... imagined through the lens of Western imperial internationalism." Luckhurst identifies the Exhibitions from 1889 to 1939 as the high-water mark of an imperial science fictionality that, along with the Exhibitions themselves, has been steadily on the decline.

This distinctly Western conjuncture of science fictionality is satirized in Jia's 2004 film *The World*, which follows the lives of the performers and workers at Beijing's World Park, an actual theme park that features scale models of "wonders" of the world like the Eiffel Tower, the Taj Mahal, the Statue of Liberty, and the Great Pyramids of Giza (Luckhurst 2012, 393). The characters at the center of the film are rural migrants for whom the kind of international travel that the park fetishizes is still financially out of reach (a fact sharply ironized in a scene where the performers dress up as flight attendants and enjoy the park's attractions during the downtime between performances). They are nonetheless economically upwardly mobile and able to enjoy an increasing array of middle-class indulgences, especially class intermixing, which strains the characters' sexual relationships (leading to adultery, jealousy, and so on). These characters are contrasted with other migrants on the precipice of social death: other rural Chinese who have come to Beijing to work in construction and, markedly, the park's Russian performers, who have come to China desperate to forestall total freefall. The film's most formally striking moments are the animated intercut scenes that, like the UFO in *Still Life*, erupt during an otherwise consistent visual literalism. The scenes feature text messages between the two central characters, Tao and Taisheng: electronic communications that connect the space-time compression literalized by the park to a science fictionality evoked by the irrealism and techno-aesthetic of the animations.

The fictionality emitted by the animation's irrealism is akin, I want to propose, to the fictionality whose emergence Catherine Gallagher theorizes in a context that differs from Jia's reform-era China but also resembles it in regard to the radical transformations of social relations that it oversaw, in particular

those pertaining to economic reality. Gallagher argues that the “modern *concept* of narrative fiction developed slowly in early-modern Europe” and that “fiction seems to have been discovered as a discursive mode in its own right as readers developed the ability to tell it apart from both fact and (this is the key) deception” (Gallagher 2006, 338). The rise of the novel in the eighteenth century, particularly in England and France, was crucial to creating this distinction. Gallagher writes: “Novels promoted a disposition of ironic credulity enabled by optimistic incredulity; one is dissuaded from believing the literal truth of a representation so that one can instead admire its likelihood and extend enough credit to buy into the game. Such *flexible mental states* were the sine qua non of modern subjectivity” (Gallagher 2006, 346; my italics). The key point here is that the kind of fictionality promoted by the genre of the novel was homologous with the credulity and future-orientation demanded by the abstractions of a proliferating credit economy that was giving birth to industrial capitalism. “The same suspension of literal truth claims helped even common people to accept paper money: too wise to believe that the treasury held enough specie to cover all of their paper at once, they instead understood that the credit they advanced collectively obviated the need to hoard precious metals privately” (Gallagher 2006, 346–7).

One important difference between the rise of fictionality in Gallagher’s eighteenth-century Europe and the rise of science fictionality in Jia’s twentieth- and twenty-first-century China is that, for Gallagher, cognitive adjustment was voluntaristic. Disbelief, Gallagher emphasizes, was suspended *willingly*: “this sensation of individual control over disbelief set novel reading apart from those mandatory suppositional acts that required the constant maintenance of active skepticism” (Gallagher 2006, 347). In contrast, Jia’s uncertain fictional objects first compel their observers into a “mandatory” belief that can never be completely shaken. It is a belief in which scientific mastery looms off-screen beyond our perceptual capacities. Insofar as fictionality produces the ordinary by containing the shock of mandated belief in Gallagher’s eighteenth century, science fictionality does the same for the twenty-first century world-system. The UFO and the science fictionality it metonymically conjures is, therefore, a kind of “fantasy-production,” which the theorist Neferti X. M. Tadiar defines as “the imaginary of a regime of accumulation and representation of universal value, under the sway of which capitalist nations organize themselves individually and collectively in the ‘system’ of the Free World”—a discursive regime, she emphasizes, that reminds us that “representational practices are inseparably linked to practices of material production” (Tadiar 2004, 7, 107).

At this point, it would be fair to ask why an analytic of science fictionality is warranted, given *The World’s* aesthetic of cognitive mapping and textbook postmodernism. We can begin formulating an answer by acknowledging that the film is quite aware of all this and that Jia himself, a devoted student of film theory during his days at the Beijing Film Academy (BFA), is also quite aware of postmodernism’s fraught status in China. Zhang makes an important distinction between a general postmodernism and a particular “postmodernism in China,” which he defines as “the global discourse of postmodernism and postmodernity, whose entry into China is via the intellectuals who seek theoretical inspiration from, and discursive synchronization with, the West, and

is largely limited to small circles of literary and art criticism. ... Its aesthetic and political excitement comes mainly from its vision—and to an increasingly degree, its daily experience—of China as an integral part of the global market” (Zhang 2000, 399). When *The World* opens with Tao dressed in a sari, stalking the park’s backstage hallways, it presents its audience not with a *postmodern China* but of a postmodernism *in* China whose cultural logic—especially its orientalist vision of modernity—substantiates the identity of a new, urban middle class through the consumption of spectacle. Along the lines of sinological-orientalism, postmodernism in China is preeminently a discourse about Chinese capitalism and, as Vukovich points out, the commodity logic of general equivalence (Vukovich 2012, 1).

The Jamesonian association of postmodernism with late capitalism does not fully account for China’s developmental trajectory, in which “precapitalist economic relations ... coexist with capitalist and social relations” in dramatic form (Dirlik and Zhang 2000, 3). Postmodern aesthetics in Jia’s films, which find their sharpest ironization in *The World*, do not signal late capitalism so much as the “extraordinary unevenness in the rate of development of the different sections of mankind” that Ernest Mandel described as the “*starting point* of capitalism” ([1972] 1975, 23n30). Film scholar Chris Berry argues that postmodernism in China must be understood in relation to a “postsocialist” modality of Chinese postmodernism in which realism and totality persist alongside the Jamesonian topoi of nostalgic pastiche and spectacle. While this realism also rejects grand narratives—the teleology of state socialism and its official aesthetic, socialist realism—it nonetheless insists on depicting a totalizing modernity that engages with rather than simplistically rejects the forms of Western modernity that “arrived on gunboats” (Berry 2009, 117). This engagement comes not necessarily out of any ideological position but minimally because orientalism brings people to the park. If it also secures funding for Jia, that is not all that orientalism does for his films. To carry out Berry’s dialectical recommendations, however, we need to be able to account for the UFO and Jia’s other uncertain fictional objects as integral to his films rather than mere surface anomalies.

Science fictionality is the mode of cognition that articulates postmodernism in China (and its orientalist vicissitudes) to the dynamics of uneven and combined development. Indeed, rather than being counterpoised or ruptural, science fictionality is aesthetically continuous with realism. As the Warwick Research Collective (WReC) puts it in their elaboration of Trotsky’s analytic, “the ‘accordionising’ or ‘telescoping’ function of uneven and combined development [can be seen] as a form of time travel within the same space, a spatial bridging of unlike times ... that leads from the classic forms of nineteenth-century realism to the speculative methodologies of today’s global science fiction” (WReC 2015, 17). In other words, insofar as capitalist space is constituted by epochal difference and the technological “metabolism” of nature, science fictionality is always already an immanent conjuncture. Berry makes a similar point regarding China’s socialist realism, which he describes in Weberian terms as “the cultural counterpart of nationalism, science and the various other components of modernity.... It offered an apprehension of the world as secular, material and subject to human control and command” (Berry 2009, 118). When expressed aesthetically, science fictionality is therefore not reducible to

its tropes, which sometimes take the appearance of generic science fiction (the UFO) and sometimes don't (the animations).

The *Xiànjíshì* and "Slow Cinema"

I will return below to the larger question of science fictionality's status as a cognitive mode. First, I will demonstrate how science fictionality in Jia's films is dialectically related to two other key tropes, the *xiànjíshì* and "slow cinema," such that each of these tropes is a necessary precondition for the expression of the others. *Xiànjíshì* are "county-level cities" that provide key settings in nearly all of Jia's films. Administratively beholden to provincial and prefectural jurisdictions while simultaneously managing the smaller township and village units, the *xiànjíshì* literally mediate between the extremes of China's administrative divisions: between the premodern rural and futuristic Tier 1 cities like Beijing and Shenzhen. For this reason, these locales, which are not exactly cities but conflate county and city into a single administrative unit, "epitomize the historical as well as the theoretical contradictions" of China's uneven and combined development, in which "the industrial penetration of the rural also gives rise to a post-urban, decentralized, and place-based mode of development that promises to narrow rural-urban disparity and to rebuild rural communities in the market environment" (Dirlik and Zhang 2000, 5). We might therefore situate Jia's films within what anthropologist Aihwa Ong identifies, in her study of Asian neoliberalism, as the "space-time 'ecosystems'" of "knowledge, resources, and actors" that emerge in "hypergrowth zones": settings that blur the line between aesthetic and epistemological judgment (2006, 8).

The *xiànjíshì* is perhaps most foregrounded—as setting, narrative force, and characterological determinant—in Jia's 2002 film *Unknown Pleasures*. Set in the northern city of Datong, where apartment blocks and streets lined with modern storefronts run alongside seas of gravel and rubble and where one can step outside a glitzy, marbled hotel lobby directly into the occupied ruins of a *hutong* alleyway. As a "meeting place of all anachronistic forces," the space of the *xiànjíshì* manifests these forces not only in the same visual frame but also through the affects, gestures, and temporality of its characters (Zhang 2011, 142). Like *Still Life*, *Unknown Pleasures* began as a documentary project (the 2001 short film "In Public") but quickly turned to the people in the streets whose "directionless[ness]" (Yu 2002) Jia juxtaposed to the objective correlatives of the "lonely" and decrepit surfaces of the region's state-owned factories and coal mines, which were his initial focus. One of the key aspects of Jia's "slow cinema" aesthetic is the slowness of his actors, professional and non-professional alike. Their bodily movements are often inertial and uncertain, and they often take a great deal of time to cross spaces (even on motorbikes, which promise speed but often end up broken down or frustrated by the terrain). Dialogue is conspicuously stuffed with long pauses and stalls out in unresolved conflict (on the film's sound design, see Hayot 2012).

To account for Jia's prestige in global art cinema, commentators have generally followed Jia's lead in their readings of this slowness, tracing it back to his stated influences in the Taiwanese New Wave (especially Hou Hsiao-Hsien

and Tsai Ming-Liang) and Italian neorealism (especially Vittorio De Sica and Michelangelo Antonioni), as well as the work of André Bazin, which Jia studied at BFA. Gilles Deleuze's Bazinian account of the "time-image"—a post-war aesthetic of cinematic modernism that responds to the increasing pace of Hollywood cinema's "movement-image"—has been central to these conversations (see Deleuze 1989; on the [in]applicability of the "time-image" to Chinese cinema, see Li 2009, 98).

Overemphasizing the slowness of Jia's slow aesthetic presents certain dangers, however, since the dilation of temporality and the minute details of the everyday render slowness compatible with sinological-orientalism's will to knowledge. There is an underappreciated irony in Jia's slowness in which his commitment to documenting the irrealism of China's uneven and combined development is routed through an arch awareness of sinological-orientalism.

The moment in Jia's oeuvre that most explicitly addresses the vicissitudes of orientalism can be found in his 2010 documentary *I Wish I Knew*. A portrait of twentieth-century Shanghai told through found footage and interviews, one of its vignettes focuses on Zhu Qiansheng, who, as a young man, was assigned to assist Michelangelo Antonioni, who came to China at the invitation of premier Zhou Enlai to make a documentary about the country. The nearly four-hour-long film, *Chung Kuo*, was televised in 1973 and roundly criticized both in China and at home in Italy for its portrayal of Chinese people as backward and the "Potemkin village quality" of many of its scenes (Pinkerton 2018). Zhu explains that he personally criticized Antonioni for his orientalism: "We have very good things," he told him, "but you just shoot such backward stuff." Later, the leaders of the Cultural Revolution used the film as a pretext for undermining Zhou. Despite Zhu's criticisms of the film, his association with it made him a target for criticism sessions and denunciation. Zhu is bemused as he recalls these details and ends the interview with this: "Even now I have no clear idea of what exactly Antonioni had filmed. I've never seen the film. To this day, I don't know exactly what's in it." Along with this shaggy dog punchline, the editing of the interview offers an almost sarcastic take on the story's orientalist twists and turns. Zhu recounts these events from a window seat in a tea house that we know was featured in Antonioni's film because the interview sequence's interpolated b-roll alternates between footage from Antonioni's film and Jia's own footage of the tea house's patrons. It is as if Jia is showing us that not only is he just as adept at cinematic orientalism as Antonioni, but also that Chinese politics have transformed so profoundly since the Cultural Revolution that, on some topics, he can proceed with impunity—layered here is a nod to the fact that Jia's films, beginning with *The World*, have been approved by censors. While there is nothing particularly slow about Zhu's interview—neither in his pacing nor the editing—the same epochal temporality attributed to slow cinema emerges here.

There is certainly truth to the critique that Jia's slow aesthetic has been shaped in dialogue with art film audiences outside of China. According to Ying Zhu, Chinese independent cinema originates in this dialogue. Produced outside of the official studio system and thus excluded from funding and distribution channels, directors made "politically provocative underground films that catered to the international art film market in the hope of soliciting overseas

financing and distribution” (Zhu 2003, 7). Like his fellow sixth-generation directors, Jia was, in a sense, exiled into the status of “independent filmmaker.” This situation lasted until around 2003, when sixth-generation filmmakers began submitting their films to the state regulatory board to gain approval for distribution in China, a development that was less a capitulation on the part of independent filmmakers as the result of a negotiation with the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television, which, as Jia has said, “used to treat film as a propaganda tool. Now they saw it as an industry” (quoted in Osnos 2009).

Even in his films since *Still Life*, which rely more heavily on high production values, complex cinematography, professional actors, and shorter average shot lengths, the immense gravitational pull of the *xiànjíshì* is everywhere, albeit displaced from setting to narrative. *Mountains May Depart* (2015) dramatizes this arc most forcefully by setting its final act in 2025, when Dollar, the estranged, Australia-raised son of a woman named Tao, rejects the model minority trajectory assigned to him by his wealthy father (Tao’s ex-husband) and plans to reunite with Tao in her hometown of Fenyang (a *xiànjíshì* in Shanxi province: Jia’s hometown and the primal scene of his *oeuvre*). While the film’s small tokens of science fiction genre conventions (computer-generated images overlaid on fancy electronics and hand-held devices) might easily be dismissed as red herrings, I argue that they are, in fact, of a piece with the *xiànjíshì* and “slow” aesthetics: forms of appearance of uneven and combined development that, in Jia’s films, are at all times held in tension with science fictionality. The proleptic melancholia that Jia offers us in the film’s barely futuristic conceit is shaped by what Cecilia Mello calls Jia’s “desire to film disappearance” (2016, 138).

Rather than naïvely posit some mythological “China” disappearing into the rubble of rapid economic development (in many ways, this was the project of those fifth-generation filmmakers like Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige that Jia and his sixth-generation comrades rejected), Jia is more anxious about filming an authentic Chinese experience that disappears in the crosstalk of sinological-orientalism and the discourses of global art cinema. It is this anxiety that Tao tries to stave off in the film’s closing scene when she dances to the Pet Shop Boys’ “Go West” on a snow-dusted, graveled vista point overlooking Fenyang. From one camera angle, we see apartment blocks peeking out in the distant background; from another, we see the three-hundred-year-old Wenfeng tower. This panorama of the *xiànjíshì* presents us with the epochal distance Tao has traversed from the film’s opening scene on the eve of 1999, in which she is partying with friends to the same Pet Shop Boys song. Tao’s past romantic decisions now come into focus as choices between Chinese and Western modernity via a kind of “cross-time relation,” to use Brandel and Khan’s term, that is a hallmark of the genre of science fiction and, I would add, a key feature of science fictionality. That is, the co-existence and mutual referentiality of multiple developmental temporalities and the predominance of a positivist, scientifically describable temporality linked to economic growth is one way to understand science fictionality and the perceptual problems it provokes. Like *Still Life*’s UFO, the final scene’s most relevant feature is not its facticity or the knowledge it produces, but how Tao’s life appears through these layers of hypermediality just as quickly

as it disappears beneath an irresistible house beat. It is this dynamic of appearance and disappearance that constitutes Jia's locus of authenticity, not characters like Tao or even their class typicality. Like the UFO, Tao is fictional but also somehow undeniably real (a formulation that could just as easily be reversed). This irony—Volosinov's "double-faced" trope—finds its most efficient expression in a conceit that recurs in several of Jia's films (and that we have already seen in *The World*), in which a character named Tao is played by the actor Zhao Tao.

In that final scene of *Mountains May Depart*, just before Tao walks outside and begins dancing, we find her in a quiet moment at her kitchen counter chopping some meat. Suddenly but gently, amid this most quotidian of scenes, an off-camera voice—presumably Dollar's—can be heard whispering Tao's name. Tao lifts her head and looks around, incredulous. After a moment, she chuckles to herself and resumes cooking. This is another UFO moment. As viewers, we are offered the option of accepting that Tao has heard, improbably (or not—it is 2025, after all), her son's voice from thousands of miles away or that she has simply imagined it, thus bringing attention to the artifice of the film's editing. The mode of cognition that allows both of these choices to be true simultaneously is science fictionality. Anthropological works have helped excavate the specific ways in which China has been subject to the orientalist gaze and has itself been involved in crafting a distinct form of sinological orientalism, as well as the political-economic contextualization that enables such forms of representation (for example, Rofel 2007, Schein 1997, and Schein 2007). Jia's ethnographic approaches in his films contribute to this work by suggesting that if ethnography has striven for a kind of realism, this too flirts with orientalism. Science fictionality, as a mode of cognition appropriate to the unequal ways capitalism has embedded itself across the world, serves to caution observers of China's industrial development that they and their interlocutors may not be experiencing these realities in a "realistic" mode. Such examples then challenge us to think through how anthropology might take science fictionality on board (for example, Laughlin 2021, Slusser and Rabkin 1987).

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