

*Screening China in the Era of
Globalization: Realism in
Contemporary Chinese Cinema*

呈现全球化时代中国： 当代中国电影里的 现实主义艺术

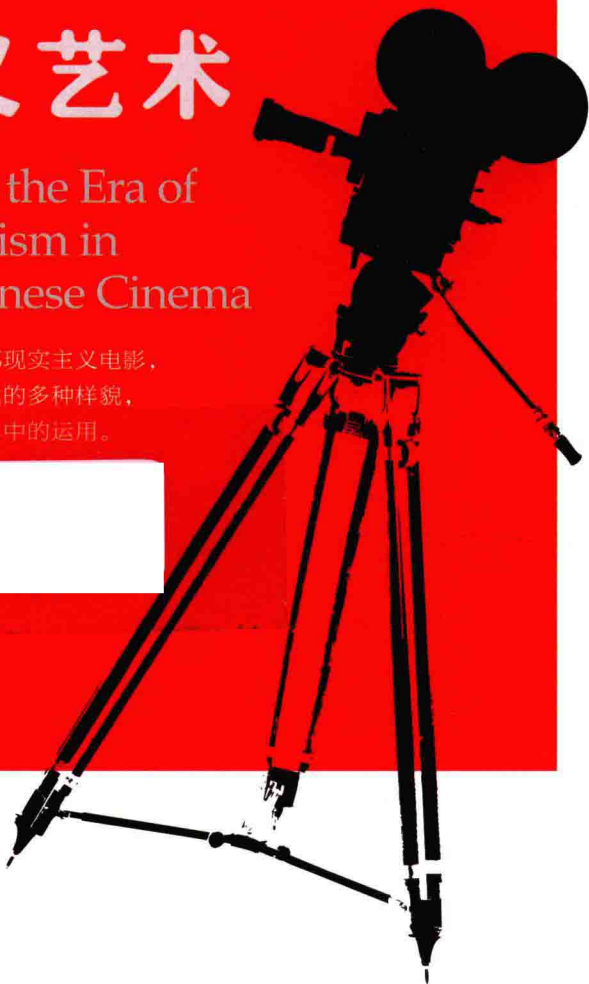
Screening China in the Era of
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精选分析当代中国新生代导演的十部现实主义电影，
呈现中国九十年代以来在全球化时代的多种样貌，
分析现实主义的文学叙述手法在电影中的运用。

王晓平 著



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Introduction

When China enters the era of an accelerated globalization since the late 1990s, a new cinema in China has emerged and continuously developed in the past twenty years, attracting the world-wide attention. The directors are either named “urban generation” for their early preoccupation with urban sensitivity and the subject matter of the urban-based spiritual malaise as well as the predominance of urban settings; or dubbed “newborn generation” and the “sixth-generation,” which “refer to the director’s ages and the period of their emergence in Chinese film history.”¹ Many times, they are also taken to be the “avant-garde,” which denotes “their artistic or stylistic character.”² Initiated and undertaken by young film-makers, this cinema has struggled against financial constraints of the time, gradually winning acclaim from international film critics and making a significant progress in China’s film production.

What are the historical and social conditions that gave rise to this alternative cinema? What constitutes its narrative content and what provides its aesthetic innovation? And ultimately, what kind of social and cultural messages it meant to convey? It is not difficult for us to see that these film-makers are engaging with “the wrenching economic and social transformations underway in China” since the late 1980s, a period that in China had been named the “post-New Period.” It is noted that “urbanization has spurred an energetic mass-consumer culture, including the establishment of a real estate that effectively has turned housing units and office and retail space into consumer goods. The relative stasis in the 1980s of the boundary between the city and countryside has been replaced by a far-flung nationwide movement, with millions of migrant workers...swarming into urban centers to partake in the demolition of old cities and the construction or expansion of globalizing

1 Zhang Yingjin. “My Camera Doesn’t Lie? Truth, Subjectivity, and Audience in Chinese Independent Film and Video.” in Paul G. Pickowicz and Zhang Yingjin, ed.. *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006, 26.

2 Ibid.



enclaves.”¹ In this light, what the directors screen in their cinematic works is the advancing market economy and the tides of commercialization and globalization, as observed,

the efforts to make visible the migrant workers and other marginal urban subjects, which is often done through the conscious exploration of a combination of humanist and modernist concerns and in an aesthetic both documentary and hyperreal, has endowed this cinema with a distinctive social urgency as well as a formal rigor.²

Indeed, the subject of migrant labor exposes “the internal rift between the city and the countryside, or the affluent eastern seaboard and the impoverished ‘vast west’,” accordingly, “the new urban cinema, especially its independent segment, articulates with this figure its radical contemporaneity and its localized critique of globalization.”³ As a result, they are regarded as “vanguard interpreters of the confusion and anxiety triggered by the massive urbanization of contemporary China.”⁴ This book, through analyzing ten representative movies by this generation, aims to provide a cognitive mapping of the aesthetics of this cinema by explicating its social unconscious and aesthetic innovations as well as their mutual, dialectic interactions. It focuses on its realistic aesthetics of screening contemporary China in the ferocious tide of globalization.

The Realistic Move of the New Generation Film-Makers

The artistic creation of the sixth generation directors started from the late 1980s. Around 1988-1989, there was a documentary movement, which distanced themselves from earlier formally-structured documentaries which look like illustrated lectures, and moved towards renegade documentary styles featuring spontaneity and spotlighting contemporary urban life. The earliest endeavors of the sixth-generation paralleled with the production of these documentaries. They both show a sort of “on-the-spot realism” that resorts to a gritty, seemingly unedited imagery concentrating

1 Zhang Zhen. “Introduction.” in Zhang Zhen, ed.. *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007, 5.

2 Ibid., 6.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

on aspects of reality. Endeavoring to portray the reality “as it is,” or as what they deemed it to be, the cultural workers applied realist approach to access to the objects of representation. In this way, they also positioned themselves in an “institutionally imposed but self-glorified status of marginality.”¹

This event occurred in a moment when there was a “radical break” from a sort of “party-centred public life” to an “individual-centred consumerism” in the Chinese society.² The transformation of which was expectedly first occurred in the urban sector, thus we witness the directors’ appropriation of China’s urban landscapes to capture the truth content of the era. It is in light of this fact that this group of young directors was named “urban generation” by some scholars at the time as “a new paradigm.”³ But this naming did not last long, for gradually these cultural reformers also casted their cameras on the rural sector of the country. Meanwhile, some other directors outside this group, including those of the fifth-generation, also produced films of similar urban subjects in this period. However, to name them as the “urban generation” is still understandable, as what gets represented in their early films is the scenes of the post-1989 metropolitan phenomena, in particular the anomie, anxiety, and agony of the intellectual-like figures, which is essentially a sort of self-portrayal and self-expression of the directors themselves. Shortly later, these innovationists also examine other marginal figures such as the newly unemployed and migrant rural workers in the city.

In terms of the cinematic skills, it is observed that harboring a sense of social urgency, the alternative cinema of this generation holds documentary impulses (thus

1 Zhang Yingjin. “Rebel without a Cause? China’s New Urban Generation and Postsocialist Filmmaking.” in Zhang Zhen, ed.. *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007, 53.

2 Augusta Palmer. “Scaling the Skyscraper: Images of Cosmopolitan Consumption in *Street Angel* (1937) and *Beautiful New World* (1998).” in Zhang Zhen, ed.. *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007, 185.

3 The “urban generation” refers to “works centered on the experience of urbanization by young film-makers who emerged in the shadow both of the international fame of the Fifth Generation directors and of the suppressed democracy movement in 1989.” See Zhang Zhen. “Introduction,” in Zhang Zhen, ed.. *The Urban Generation Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007, 1. Zhang Zhen herself suggests that this paradigm is better understood as “a critical category that places film practice right in the middle of a living, if often agitated, social, cultural and political experience.” Ibid., 19.



oftentimes using long takes) and prefers non-professional actors. By comparing their efforts to the famed writer Wang Xiaobo's "calling for greater attention to the 'weak groups' of Chinese society, and to understand the grievances and dissatisfaction of this silent majority with the system on its own terms,"¹ Sebastian Veg has aptly noticed their new intellectual (and thus subject) concerns. Since most of the directors just graduated from universities, they could not get official sanction from the state-sponsored studio system and could only finance themselves by personal savings or look for international networking. For this reason, they usually brandish the banner of independence, which invites great interests of Western critics. But many of these directors deny the habitual understanding, highlighting the artistic innovation of their works rather than their political significance. Among these innovations, the most salient is the realistic move,

the strength of that urgency to document the rapidly changing urban physiognomy and to expose through the cinematic lens the accompanying social contradictions is ... comparable only to the socially engaged urban cinema produced in Shanghai in the 1930s.²

Therefore, although the directors themselves are inclined to avoid using the term "realism" to describe their works³; nevertheless, being critics, "we can still draw parallels between their productions and cinematic realism in film history."⁴ In particular, "the glaring similarity between the two urban cinemas separated almost

1 Zhang Yingjin. "My Camera Doesn't Lie? Truth, Subjectivity, and Audience in Chinese Independent Film and Video," in Paul G. Pickowicz and Zhang Yingjin, ed.. *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006, 5.

2 Zhang Zhen, "Introduction," in Zhang Zhen, ed.. *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007, 6.

3 Zhang Yingjin points out that "The absence of references to realism is understandable ... because in its variant forms...realism has been endorsed officially for decades as the primary, politically correct methods of producing literature and art in China. An overloaded concept, realism has become formulaic, prescriptive, and representative of an authoritarian tradition that has alienated and infuriated... directors." Zhang Yingjin. *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010, 108.

4 Ibid.

by a life span” confirms the real nature of their productions.¹ What this comparability points to is their “struggle over the meaning of ‘modernization’ and its human cost.”²

The 1930s and 1990s stand out as strikingly parallel in terms of accelerated modernization and urban transformation, aggressive industrial or postindustrial capitalism, and an explosion of mass culture with the accompanying issues of social fragmentation and dislocation.³

Consequently, they have many “shared features such as the prevalent use of documentary footage of the actual city and the use of a combination of melodrama and a form of critical realism.”⁴ Just like “this approach allows the film-makers to explore the dialectic relationship between the cinematic and the social, both in form and content,”⁵ we as critics also need to heed to the two ways of interactions. The key to probe into this problematic is to look into the relationship between the directors’ personal truth claim and the “objectivity” of the cinematic works.

Realism, Objectivity and Truth Claim

Chinese sixth-generation directors screen China in the era of globalization with a spirit of realism. However, it is observed that curiously, they have “always avoided the term ‘realism,’ ” which is understandable

... in its various forms (e.g., “socialist realism” and “revolutionary realism”), realism has been endorsed officially for decades as the primary, politically correct method of producing literature and art in China. As an overloaded concept, realism has become formulaic and prescriptive, and symbolizes an authoritarian tradition.⁶

It is well-known that one banner of the sixth-generation directors is the slogan

1 Zhang Zhen. “Introduction.” in Zhang Zhen, ed.. *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007, 6.

2 Ibid. 7.

3 Zhang Zhen. “Introduction.” in Zhang Zhen, ed.. *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007,

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 27.



"my camera doesn't lie," which clearly indicates its intention of breaking with the officially made movie which, focuses on the positive aspects of the reality. Whereas this statement "authorizes them to proceed in a self-confident manner: my vision, my camera and my truth."¹ Yet while we acknowledge the sincerity of the directors who are determined to portray the objective state of conditions, the validity of the proclamation waits for a second thought, which to a great extent is comparable to the inquiries on the authenticity of the term "realism" itself.

There are two directions here ostensibly oppositional to each other. Although these directors might all agree the proclamation "my camera does not lie," they also have their specific stylistic choices and subjective foci. For instance, while Zhang Yuan (张元, 1963-) stresses his spirit of objectivity by asserting that "I make films because I am concerned about social issues and social realities...I don't like being subjective, and I want my films to be objective. It's objectivity that'll empower me;"² the other artist Jiang Wen (姜文, 1963-) claims that should the director become more subjective, the better his film would be, for "everything is subjective, and objectivity resides in subjectivity,"³ the position of which Jia Zhangke (贾樟柯, 1970-) apparently sides with. It is also widely acknowledged by critics that "an objective rendition of external reality is merely part of the picture; what really counts is his subjective perception of the real 'condition of life.'"⁴

In discussing the validity of the claim, Zhang Yingjin brings up the issue of the movie-makers' self-positioning. He points out that there are mainly three types of self-positioning among these independent directors. First, most of them intend to work as an auteur, speaking for, or on behalf of, the ordinary people. In some extreme

1 Zhang Yingjin. "My Camera Doesn't Lie? Truth, Subjectivity, and Audience in Chinese Independent Film and Video." in Paul G. Pickowicz and Zhang Yingjin, ed.. *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*. Lanham. Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006, 40.

2 Berenice Reynaud. "New Visions/New Chinas: Video-Art, Documentation, and the Chinese Modernity in Question." in Michael Renov and Erika Suderburg, eds.. *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices*. Minneapolis: University of Middlesota Press, 1996: 236.

3 程青松、黄鸥. 我的摄像机不撒谎: 先锋电影人档案——生于1961—1970. 北京: 中国友谊出版社, 2002:77.

4 Zhang Yingjin. "My Camera Doesn't Lie? Truth, Subjectivity, and Audience in Chinese Independent Film and Video." in Paul G. Pickowicz and Zhang Yingjin, ed.. *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*. Lanham. Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006, 28.

cases, they put aside the latter concern and retreat into the safe haven of subjectivity.¹ Second, Zhang contends that some other directors aim at promoting an egalitarian “amateur film-making,” as what we see in Jia Zhangke’s practice.² Third, a few of them intend to behave like an authority. Apart from the last position,³ both of the other two positions in his view show a more democratic approach and mind to the object of representation. In this way, the declaration “my camera doesn’t lie,” as well as the notion of truth, merely exemplify the producers’ purpose of occupying a strategic position by establishing the legitimacy in the field of cultural production.

However, these three positions—the auteur’s, the amateur’s, and the authority’s—are merely the artists’ stances towards movie-making themselves, which are intertwined with one another and could not be entirely separated into three disparate categories. Generally, they only show two attitudes to film—either elite or popular—as art and social practice. To be sure, generally, most of these cultural workers prefer labeling themselves as making movies for the people, by the people, and of the people. Nevertheless, by merely undertaking alternative film styles to delve into the lives of marginal subjects and subject matters, does it mean that they choose a point of view of the “ordinary people”? Any truth claim, sincere it might be, is worthy of careful examination to testify its presupposition. It is indeed that “the imperative to ‘get real’” under this urge is reminiscent of “the slang phrase ‘wise up’ or ‘stop dreaming,’”⁴ but as Zhang Yingjin also aptly notes, the truth as described by those directors is actually their perception of the truth, which is merely a subjective version.⁵ This knowledge

1 Zhang Yingjin. “My Camera Doesn’t Lie? Truth, Subjectivity, and Audience in Chinese Independent Film and Video.” in Paul G. Pickowicz and Zhang Yingjin, ed., *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006, 28.

2 Veg has stressed that “Jia Zhangke has repeatedly underlined that his use of the word ‘amateur’ refers to a mind-set in approaching his subject-matter, not to the technical quality (or lack thereof) of the films gathered under ‘this label.’” Sebastian Veg. “Introduction: Opening Public Spaces.” *China Perspectives*, No. 81, 2010, 7.

3 For this third position, Zhang does not discuss it in detail; accordingly, the readers could not learn how and why the directors position themselves in this way.

4 Chris Berry. “Getting Real: Chinese Documentary, Chinese Postsocialism.” in Zhang Zhen, ed., *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, Durham and London: Duke University press, 2007: 115. Sebastian Veg suggests that “the imperative to ‘stop dreaming’ does not seem to be a good description of Jia Zhangke’s films, for example, which are often dedicated to the aspirations, dreams, and fantasies of his protagonists.” Sebastian Veg, “Introduction: Opening Public Spaces,” 7.

5 Ibid.



points to its own ideological nature.

As a matter of fact, it is also in light of this concern that the latecomers of this group have self-consciously repudiated the realistic tenet. Jia Zhangke, for example, has stressed that realism is not his primary concern. Like the common knowledge literary critics now share, realism to him is the result of meticulously prepared and executed construction. Quoting Krzysztof Kieslowski, he asserts that “the closer you stick to reality, the more absurd and unreal the film becomes.”¹ Recently, he still claims that,

The truth is not presented in front of us so blatantly. The truth comes to us through the feelings and the understanding of one person towards another. Only this way we can grasp the truth. Truth or truthfulness does not lay bare in the life. You have to possess a certain degree of sensibility so as to straighten out the logic of emotion and disclose the buried truth. So it is only with the artist's ability to imagine based on the understanding of the character, that we can convey, by the means of fictionalization, what we feel about the truth and truthfulness. So the purpose of arts is not to fictionalize. The purpose of arts is to understand life and nature of life. But there are two paths to achieve such understanding — one is through non-fiction, the other is fiction.²

He goes so far as to suggesting that “fiction is also a bridge to truth [zhenshi]. Including our understanding of it—how it happens, how it becomes real; what are its levels? Truth itself is a kind of experience, a kind of judgment, not a style of documentary-making. That is why, in my documentaries there are many arranged shots, I make up a lot, and I use actual people to act.”³ In his view, cinematic reality and truth are merely construction, as shown in his acknowledgement that “[t]here is no absolute objectivity, there is attitude, and through this attitude, there is an ideal.”⁴ Likewise, another famed director Zhang Ming (章明, 1961-) asserts that “truth itself

1 Jia Zhangke and Du Haibin. “Jia Zhangke vs. Du Haibin.” *Mingpao Weekly*, 28 November 2009, 48.

2 Lesley Greytear. “Look Back in Anger: Interview with Jia Zhangke and Zhao Tao on a Touch of Sin.” <http://www.asiancinevision.org/look-back-in-anger-interview-with-jia-zhangke-and-zhao-tao-on-a-touch-of-sin/>. Accessed March 20, 2014.

3 Jia Zhangke and Du Haibin. “Jia Zhangke vs. Du Haibin.” *Mingpao Weekly*, 28 November 2009, 48.

4 Stephen Teo. “Cinema with an Accent—Interview with Jia Zhangke, Director of *Platform*.” *Senses of Cinema*, No.15, 2001.

never exists in a work of art. What we have are the author's vivid imagination, his [sic] attitude, taste, sensibility, and personality, as well as the extent to which you as an audience member identify with all these items."¹

Both the key figures of this group (Jia Zhangke and Zhang Ming) stress the director's own attitude and sensibility in knowing the reality. If truth itself is a kind of judgment or a result of an attitude—it seems so if we are familiar with the debate on realism in the history of literary theory—then how can we make our own judgment that whether they are valid or not? In this regard, Adorno's teaching about the relationship between objectivity and historical content gives us some hints. He contends that the authentic art must express the truth content of a society in a particular historical era,

aesthetics is under no obligation to deduce the objectivity of its historical content in historicizing fashion, as being the inevitable result of the course of history; rather, this objectivity is to be grasped according to the form of that historical content.²

Accordingly, whether or not the artistic work reveals the epochal truth is the key issue, the question of which can be put in its dialectic way, what kind of historical objectivity is ascertained following "the form of that historical content?"

It is perceptively observed that "Zhang Ming's perception of truth is significant because he acknowledges not only the importance of the artist's subjectivity but also the necessity of the audience's identification with—or at least appreciation of—the author's perception."³ Here, it is not difficult for us to understand that the "subjectivity" is a code word for the director's concepts or ideas of the society, the political, and the art, which are not ideologically free or immune to the popular social-political consensus of the time. The identification or not by the audience towards the cultural work still speaks to their implicit "political unconscious."

In this regard, it is of no need to elaborate the point that the director's

1 章明. 找到一种电影方法. 北京: 中国广播电视出版社, 2003: 27-28.

2 Theodore W. Adorno. *Aesthetic Theory*. London; New York: Continuum, 2004: 452.

3 Zhang Yingjin. "My Camera Doesn't Lie? Truth, Subjectivity, and Audience in Chinese Independent Film and Video." in Paul G. Pickowicz and Zhang Yingjin, ed.. *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*. Lanham. Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006, 27.



“subjectivity” infiltrates into his/her work to negotiate the perception and representation of the real world. It has been widely accepted that Jia’s films are “symptomatic of contending ideologies, of a major transition within China’s contemporary landscape,”¹ which is common among many members of the same group. In light of this, how does the director balance and make his judgment on the priorities, advantages and disadvantages of the differing ideologies? Or, is it possible that he is not conscious enough to differentiate them and merely present them “as it is?”

It seems that we reach a predicament here: on one hand, this group is more or less convinced that their perceptions and versions of the reality are more real; on the other, they have an “attitude” based on their own experience, which means their own ideological concepts; or, in Fredric Jameson’s terms, political unconscious. How can we solve this dilemma?

Self-Positioning and the Problematic of Representation

Regarding the perceived truth and directors’ own subjectivity, Zhang Yingjin insightfully points out that “deep in their minds, truth pertains not so much to external reality (e.g., physical landscape) as it does to their subjective perceptions of some transcendent entity (e.g., the soul or the spirit...) beyond or behind the visual or visible realm.”² Accordingly, the question for them is “how can my camera capture what I perceive as truthful?”³ In this sense, “stylistic choices,” such as “improvisation, non-dramatic plot, fragmented narrative and images” and “discontinued sound effects,” together with the “marginal subjects and sensitive subject matter,” are applied via “their subjective perceptions” as “modalities of truth, as vehicles that facilitate a two-way communication between their subjective perceptions and external realities.”⁴

1 Edwin Mak. “Postsocialist Grit: Contending Realisms in Jia Zhangke’s ‘Platform’ and ‘Unknown Pleasures.’” *Offscreen*, Vol. 12, No.7, 2008. http://www.offscreen.com/index.php/pages/essays/postsocialist_grit/. Accessed Oct. 10th, 2013

2 Zhang Yingjin. “My Camera Doesn’t Lie? Truth, Subjectivity, and Audience in Chinese Independent Film and Video.” in Paul G. Pickowicz and Zhang Yingjin, ed.. *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006, 28.

3 Ibid., 29.

4 Ibid., 29-30.

For instance,

Deployed with an existentialist lens, the documentary method is instrumental in laying bare the oscillation between representation and actuality and in foregrounding the subject-object relation between the film-maker and his or her subject matter so as to create a more intersubjective or democratic cinema.¹

In this light, the documentary approach is not what it seems to be the best way to reach the real or expose the truth as it is. Rather, “the quasi-documentary and hyperrealist aesthetic reveals that cinematic representation is hardly a transparent window onto reality but rather a form of interrogation of the ‘truth’ value of both its referent and its image and their indexical rapport.”²

However, this knowledge is oftentimes not what the directors’ intended goal—they but wish to confer upon the audience their vision of the real—but what we as critics need to probe into: this dialectic between the social/political narrative content and the cinematic form/skill poses us a series of questions regarding truth, reality, and subjectivity,

what constitutes the validity in the persistent truth claims from this generation for over a decade? For whom (e.g., auteur, audience, or authority) does a film appear true or real? What modalities of truth are documented or developed? And how does the director’s subjectivity infiltrate, negotiate, or enhance the perception and representation of the real?... How do we reconcile the politics of such unusual circulations of “truths” and the poetics of independent film and video making in contemporary China?³

But although it has been accepted that for the minority cinema, “rather than professing to show an ideological truth that underlies apparent reality, it seeks to reveal a raw,

1 Zhang Zhen. “Introduction.” in Zhang Zhen, ed.. *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007, 18.

2 Zhang Zhen. “Introduction.” in Zhang Zhen, ed.. *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007, 18.

3 Zhang Yingjin. “My Camera Doesn’t Lie? Truth, Subjectivity, and Audience in Chinese Independent Film and Video.” in Paul G. Pickowicz and Zhang Yingjin, ed.. *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*. Lanham. Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006, 24.



underlying reality by stripping away the ideological representations that distort it,”¹ oftentimes, the ideological nature of this very way of representation is itself neglected if not negated,

The claim to oppose received ideological representations with the revelation of real life in its primary condition is itself ideological, and we need not belabor the point that the “real” ostensibly unearthed... must be understood as a historically situated construct rather than as some non-discursive thing-in-itself that actually appears before the audience.²

Although this key issue has been brought up for quite several times; unfortunately, to this day, we barely see any discussion on this issue by scholars in the field, including the critics who have seriously teased out the problematic.

This is what the present study sets out to do. To understand the ideological content of their cinematic works, analyzing the self-positioning of the directors would be helpful. Zhang Ming asserts that in the contemporary age, “we no longer value Balzac’s type of omniscient point of view. We cannot see nor can we know everything. We are not the spokespersons of the nation. The age of the grand panoramic film is over.”³ Jia Zhangke shares with this point of view and holds that one has no right to represent the majority but only can work on behalf of himself.⁴ But just as Zhang Yingjin astutely remarks earlier, “the dilemma of self-positioning among independent directors” is that, “after renouncing their pre-assigned role as the ‘spokespersons’ of the nation and the party...they inevitably confront the question of whether they, as ‘auteurs,’ are speaking for ‘ordinary people.’”⁵ Although Zhang finds the issue, again he does not answer it or solve this dilemma. Nevertheless, he indicates that there are two ways tried by the directors to walk out of the predicament, although both are

1 Jason McGrath. *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008: 132.

2 Ibid., 133.

3 章明. 找到一种电影方法. 北京: 中国广播电视出版社, 2003: 27-28.

4 程青松、黄鸥. 我的摄像机不撒谎: 先锋电影人档案——生于1961—1970. 北京: 中国友谊出版社, 2002: 367.

5 Zhang Yingjin. “My Camera Doesn’t Lie? Truth, Subjectivity, and Audience in Chinese Independent Film and Video.” in Paul G. Pickowicz and Zhang Yingjin, ed.. *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006, 33.

unsatisfactory: one is declared by the famed documentary maker Wu Wenguang (吴文光, 1956-), who asseverates that “I would speak of myself rather than my position,”¹ as if he himself could enable himself to not stand on any position or to fly above the societal network; the second is held by Jia Zhangke, who seemingly opposes Wu’s elitist stance of producing “personal film” and promotes a sort of “amateurism,” which however is deemed precarious to make quality movies.² Facing this difficult situation, Zhu Wen (朱文, 1967-), the scriptwriter of *Rainclouds over Wushan*, declines to answer the question “for whom do you serve as a spokesperson?” in an interview.³

Historical/Political Hermeneutics of Cinematic Works

Confronting the present situation in the field, this study aims to throw new lights on the sixth-generation auteurs and their films by advocating a new paradigm, i.e., historical/political hermeneutics, which has rarely been implemented on the subject of study thus far. Our hermeneutics of the politics and aesthetics of the sixth-generation film will start from the interpretation of the cinematic text. It gives us some fragments of contemporary Chinese society and its culture, which is (semi-)autonomous. By critically engaging on it, we intend to acquire a cognitive mapping of the social-political totality and in some cases, the cultural logic of the era.

Yet to critically engage in the cinema, we need to heed to the teaching that film is a social practice. The ontology of the film itself decides that these movies are “loaded with textual, intertextual, subtextual, and contextual meanings that may or may not fit the intentions of the producers themselves.”⁴ Therefore, this hermeneutics demands us to tease out these elements instrumental for us to get its leitmotif message, especially the subtextual messages which are not always saliently and consciously presented on the surface.

1 吕新雨. 记录中国：当代中国新纪录运动. 北京：三联书店：2003:31.

2 Zhang Yingjin. “My Camera Doesn’t Lie? Truth, Subjectivity, and Audience in Chinese Independent Film and Video.” in Paul G. Pickowicz and Zhang Yingjin, ed., *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*. Lanham. Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006, 33-34.

3 张献民、张亚璇. 一个人的影像：DV 完全手册. 北京：中国青年出版社，2003：83.

4 in Paul G. Pickowicz and Zhang Yingjin, ed., *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*. Lanham. Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006, 26.



We have learned from the aforementioned discussions that “subjective perceptions...have produced what Zhang Ming calls a special ‘point of view.’”¹ And we also have stressed that the directors’ decision to “‘see’ from the otherwise alien point of view of ‘ordinary’ people...and to resist the feeling that they are intellectually superior to their subjects”² could not be taken as granted or at face value. Their own presuppositions need to be analyzed through the filmic text as well as the subtext via its cinematic architectonics, by which we can further appreciate its aesthetic characteristics as well as its limitations or blind spots. This critical inquiry is following the teachings of Fredric Jameson,

ideology is not something which informs or invests symbolic production; rather the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal “solutions” to unresolvable social contradictions.³

It is well known that Fredric Jameson points out that narrative essentially is a symbolic act, “whereby real social contradictions, insurmountable in their own terms, find a purely resolution in the aesthetic realm.”⁴ In this regard, individual texts are regarded as “parole” or “utterance” in an essentially collective and class discourse, or as political allegory.⁵ For the purpose of this analysis, the so-called “ideologeme” is “the smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourses of social classes.”⁶ For Jameson, “the advantage of this formulation lies in its capacity to mediate between conceptions of ideology as abstract opinions, class value, and the

1 Zhang Ming suggests that “An ordinary people, we see from the inside of human hearts, adopt a concrete human point of view, and accept individual personality (good or bad) and all its limitations—this kind of truthfulness (*Zhenshixing*) is hard to conceal.” 章明：找到一种电影方法。北京：中国广播电视出版社，2003：27-28。

2 Zhang Yingjin. “My Camera Doesn’t Lie? Truth, Subjectivity, and Audience in Chinese Independent Film and Video.” in Paul G. Pickowicz and Zhang Yingjin, ed.. *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*. Lanham. Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006: 31.

3 Fredric Jameson. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Social Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981: 41.

4 Ibid., 44.

5 Ibid., 57.

6 Ibid., 42.