

Between Ruins and Construction Sites: Performing Drifting Identities in Jia Zhangke's Films

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Cast through lenses of realism as well as rooted in historicized sensibility, local knowledge and lived experience, Jia Zhangke's cinematic cities articulate an emergent structure of feeling of drifting identities in an age of postsocialism in the PRC. Between city ruins and construction sites, the on-going processes of destruction and construction in Chinese cities can be vividly charted. Referring to Jia's "Homeland Trilogy" (*Pickpocket* (1997), *Platform* (2000), *Unknown Pleasures* (2002)), *The World* (2004), *Still Life* (2006), and *24 City* (2008), this paper explores how his cinematic cities perform an "art of *détournement*" in response to the domination of global capitalism and the historical legacies of the Maoist revolution. As the Situationist International critics would have called it, Jia's "art of *détournement*" reassembles and repositions Chinese contemporary reality into visual memories of diverse groups of drifting identities in postsocialist China.

What western thinkers call "creative destruction" in the context of capitalist modernity at the turn of the 20th century has been subject to new interpretations in Jia's film works in the new millennium. While philosophers like Nietzsche stress the importance of the vital energy of modernity, Jia's urban ruins and construction sites performatively construct new spatial and temporal configurations of Chinese cities in mutation. Rather than signifying a sense of pastness and futurity through ruinous spaces and construction sites respectively, Jia's cinematic cities hinge to the historicity of disjointed times and the cultural logic of postsocialism. His films explore the ways in which the breakdown of sequential chronological time gives rise to the invocation of the visual memories of the personal and the authentic. In such cases, when history in both ruins and construction sites is perceived as fragments and broken shards, time is spatialized. Instead of being seen as mere remnants of the past or as petrified landscape only, ruins point to an indefinite future as well as open up to other spaces metonymically. Similarly, the construction sites in Jia's films do not always foreshadow some teleological endpoints in the grand project of modernization and nation-building but suggest despair, death and inequality.

The complex spatial-temporal constructions of ruins and construction sites in Jia's films provide a stage for the drifting generation to perform and define their identities. These urban spaces are better associated with the psychological and semiotic-performative realms of Jia's film art. With an amazing array of drifters—migrant workers, floating artists, lost youth, anonymous border-crossers—Jia weaves together a tapestry of postsocialist identities in contemporary China. Some are the underprivileged and dispossessed whose victimhood demonstrates the darker side of modernization and globalization. Others are witnesses and participants in such processes, contributing to the shaping of their own histories through global popular culture and everyday experiences. Despite its documentary realism, the performativity of Jia's cinema is the main driving force that produces new and alternative perceptions of visualizing Chinese cities in transition. It demonstrates how auteurism and creativity interact to generate film art of independent spirit and vision within the global context.