

## Space and Intermediality in Jia Zhang-ke's *Still Life*

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It is a well-known fact that cinema's greatest innovators tend to thrive in periods of cultural and historical transition, when a new conjuncture calls for the articulation of a new language — or new languages — better suited to address and respond to a new reality. Such is the case of Chinese director Jia Zhang-ke, considered the leading representative of the so-called 'sixth generation' of Chinese cinema, also known as the 'urban generation' for its focus on the everyday life and the cityscapes of contemporary China. It would be fair to say that his cinema indeed springs from the articulation of an original aesthetics, which responds to a new historical and social conjuncture. As I will suggest, this original aesthetics is not only the fruit of a realist impulse but is also born out of the problem of intermediality. This means that, on the one hand, a bazinian belief in cinema's natural inclination towards realism transforms Jia's camera into a source of power. On the other hand, his cinema's articulation of reality shares aesthetic resources with other Chinese artistic traditions, such as painting, architecture and opera. Thus, 'intermediality' — which points to cinema's interbreeding with other arts — and 'realism' — normally associated with its specificity — are intertwined in Jia Zhang-ke's original aesthetic. This combination, which creates its own rules, is ultimately moved by a political impulse, fruit of the interaction between History and Poetry.

In this article, I propose an analysis of Jia's highly acclaimed *Still Life* (*San Xia Hao Ren* 三峡好人, 2006) from the point of view of its intermedial relationship with painting. The affinity between these two forms of art suggests that the director's discovery of a real landscape and a vanishing cityscape in this film is not only articulated by a universal cinematographic syntax but also shares aesthetic qualities with the tradition of Chinese landscape painting (in Chinese *shanshuihua*), mounted on hanging or hand scrolls. This leads to a reflection on cinema's spatial organization in light of current revisions in film theory, which propose that filmic space and its spectatorial experience should be considered, above all, from the point of view of touch and movement. It also allows for a broader understanding of the political implications of intermediality in Jia Zhang-ke's oeuvre, fruit of an organic bond between form and content that brings a historical resonance to a contemporary perspective.

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Firstly, I will introduce Jia Zhang-ke's *Still Life* in relation to the region of the Three Gorges. I will then consider cinema's connection with painting and the re-appreciation of cinematic space in film and audiovisual theory from the 1980s onwards. As way of conclusion, I look at how *Still Life* and the *shanshuihua* tradition are related, focusing on the issue of perspective, the use of the tracking shot and the notion of 'empty space'.

### ***Still Life* and the Three Gorges of the Yangtze River**

*Still Life*, winner of the 'Golden Lion' for Best Film in the Venice International Film Festival of 2006, is Jia Zhang-ke's fifth feature film and his second made with the approval of the Chinese government. It is set in a disappearing cityscape, against the backdrop of an 'immortal landscape'. Fengjie, located at the banks of the Yangtze River, is a 2000-year old city on the brink of being submerged by the Three Gorges Dam, the world's largest power station ever to have been constructed. The film follows Han Sanming (played by the director's cousin Han Sanming) and Shen Hong (played by Zhao Tao, the director's muse and wife), who come from Shanxi (Jia's hometown province in the north of China) to Fengjie in search of their estranged partners. As they arrive, the old city is being torn down to allow the new waterway to be fully navigable, as well as for the recycling of bricks and other construction material. Their quest thus unfolds against the backdrop of derelict buildings, collapsing walls, piles of rubble and rocks.

From the outset, it becomes clear that the film wishes to cast a look upon an ephemeral cityscape, both observing and reflecting on the atmosphere of intense transformation that dominates the region of the Three Gorges, as well as great parts of the country since at least the late 1980s. Such dramatic changes are a consequence of Deng Xiaoping's Era of Reforms (*Gaige Kaifang*, 1978-1992), which led China into market economy. Under Deng, following the harsh years of the Cultural Revolution, the country began to steadily improve its relations with the outside world and to open up its economy to foreign investment. Internally, China decollectivized agriculture, gradually privatized its industry and allowed for the appearance of private businesses. The effects of the economic reforms were felt with intensity in the urban spaces of the country, as Zhang Zhen points out:

In the 1990s Chinese cities both large and small have seen tremendous changes in both infrastructural and social dimensions. Vernacular housing compounds, neighborhoods and old communities of commerce and culture have been torn down to give way to expressways, subway stations, corporate buildings, and shopping malls — all in the wake of a ruthlessly advancing market economy and the incursion of global capitalism. (Zhang 2007, 3)

Jia's work, as he has acknowledged in several interviews over the past decade (see for instance Berry 2009; Fiant 2009; Jia, 2009), derives to a great extent from a desire to film disappearance, to register and to preserve — through cinema's unique recording ability — an ephemeral cityscape. Conscious of how memory is a spatial as much as a temporal phenomenon, and of how a disappearing space brings with it the loss of memory, Jia is moved by an urgency to film these spaces and its memories, as well as by a seemingly contradictory slowness in observation that has become one of the trademarks of his style.

The reason behind the disappearance of a historical cityscape as seen in *Still Life* is the construction of the Three Gorges hydroelectric dam on the Yangtze River. One of the greatest works of modern engineering, the dam was first proposed by the founder of the Chinese Republic Sun Yat-Sen and later prospected by Mao Zedong in the 1950s. Construction finally began in 1994 and was completed in 2012, inundating over 600 square kilometres of land — including archaeological and historical sites — and displacing over one million people. Behind the grandeur of the project lay one of China's most iconic landscapes, formed by the three Yangtze gorges. The first of the three — and also the narrowest — is Qutang Gorge, which stretches for eight kilometres and whose entering point is known as Kuimen Gate. Qutang is considered to be the most beautiful of the Yangtze gorges, and its combination of striking canyons, high mountains and green water have earned it a place on the 10 RMB banknote, as seen in one of the film's most poignant sequences in which Sanming holds a banknote against the actual landscape of Kuimen.





Images 1, 2 and 3: Sanming holds a banknote against the actual landscape of Kuimen  
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Moreover, Qutang Gorge and Kuimen have a place in the country's cultural and collective memory, largely due to their recurrent presence in classical poems and paintings from the Tang, Song and Yuan Dynasties. Prominently, Tang poet Li Bai found inspiration in the dramatic scenery of Qutang Gorge, immortalizing it in his verses. Today, most of Qutang's historical sites, which existed along the riverbanks, have been submerged by the rising water level.

The importance of the iconic landscape of the Three Gorges can be understood in light of its main constituting elements, that is, the Mountain and the Water. In the Chinese language the expression 'Mountain – Water' (山水) means, by way of a synecdoche, 'landscape'. Landscape painting is thus known as Mountain-Water painting, that is, *shanshuihua* (山水画). As François Cheng explains, mountains and water constitute to the Chinese the two poles of Nature, which in their turn correspond, according to the Confucian

tradition, to the two poles of human sensibility, the heart (mountain) and the spirit (water). From this we can infer that to paint a landscape is also to paint the portrait of a man's spirit. Mountain and Water are therefore more than terms of comparison or simple metaphors, for they incarnate the fundamental laws of the macrocosmic universe and its organic links with the microcosm of Man (see Cheng 1991, 92-93).

Jia Zhang-ke, who first went to Fengjie to shoot a documentary on painter Liu Xiaodong entitled *Dong*, now a sort of companion piece to *Still Life*, was equally impressed by the iconicity of the landscape and by the chaotic nature of the cityscape:

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, 7)

It is easy to see how Fengjie and the Three Gorges of the Yangtze functioned as source of inspiration to Jia, providing the film with its sophisticated superimposition of temporalities. The region was, after all, both a reflection and a symptom of the new China that emerged from the ashes of the Cultural Revolution, as well as the concretization of both a republican and a communist dream, and a site of cultural heritage, thus encapsulating not only the dreams and aspirations of the twentieth and twenty-first century but also two millennia of Chinese art history.

### Cinema, Painting, Space

In order to fathom the manifold connections between *Still Life* and Chinese landscape painting from both an aesthetic and a political point of view, it is first necessary to consider how theoretical approaches to the intermedial relationship between cinema and painting have evolved since the 1980s, in tandem with a revisionist trend in film and audio-visual theory which has put into question the psychoanalytic, structuralist and post-structuralist models of the 1960s and 1970s.

The affinity between cinema and painting harks back to the origins of the new art in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Ismail Xavier (2007), among others, has noted how the nascent art of cinema was indeed in tune with the artistic concerns of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which, in his words, "sought a connection with an unstable world, with the fugacious occurrences found in nature or in modern urban life". The Impressionist Movement became emblematic of the artistic concerns of the period by electing light and air as pictorial objects, trying to grasp the instant and to make it visible, something which cinema somehow accomplished. In *L'oeil interminable: cinéma et pein-*

ture (1989), Jacques Aumont borrows from the dialogue in *La Chinoise* (1967) the title to one of his chapters, “Lumière, ‘le dernier peintre impressionniste’” (“Lumière, ‘the last of the impressionist painters’”), thus corroborating the affinity proposed by Jean-Luc Godard between early cinema and painting.

Departing from what could almost be described as an ontological bond, a vast field of possible connections between cinema and painting opens up, ranging from more theoretical studies of the question of intermediality and filmic space to more specific analysis of direct interactions such as those observed during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the avant-gardes. In face of this multitude of possible theoretical approaches, I suggest drawing a parallel between the affinities of cinema with landscape painting and an understanding of cinematic space that derives from a new theoretical model. It is a well-known fact that the theory of the cinematographic apparatus (Baudry 1986) and the notion of spectatorship as analogous to the regression to the mirror stage as defined by Lacan (Metz 1982), proposed in the 1960s and 1970s by structuralist and psychoanalytic theories, have been both criticized and revised, especially since the early 1990s. In *The Cinematic Body* (1993), Steven Shaviro proposed a radical criticism of this model and brought to the fore the active and corporeal elements of the cinematographic experience. His revision was undoubtedly influenced by the work of Gilles Deleuze, who in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia 2* (1987), with Félix Guattari, and in his study of the work of painter Francis Bacon (2005), evidenced the tactile function inherent to vision.

This tactile function became known as haptic, a word of Greek origin which designates any form of communication involving touch. It was first used in the field of aesthetics by Austrian historian Alois Riegl, curator from 1887 to 1897 of the textile art sector of the Imperial and Royal Austrian Museum of Art and Industry (today the MAK Vienna: Austrian Museum of Applied Arts/Contemporary Art). As noted by Giuliana Bruno (2007, 247), Riegl referred to the haptic experience as an evolutionary step in modern perception towards the optic. It was Walter Benjamin who subverted this logic, suggesting that modern perception would in fact be a haptic experience. Moreover, Benjamin (1999, 231) linked the modern haptic perception to the novel experience provided by cinema in his famous 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”:

The distracting element of [the film] is also primarily tactile, being based on changes of place and focus which periodically assail the spectator. Let us compare the screen on which a film unfolds with the canvas of a painting. The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed.

To the purpose of this analysis, it is important to highlight how an emphasis on the haptic nature of the cinematographic experience challenged understandings of cinematic space as proposed, for instance, by Pascal Bonitzer (1985), Jean-Louis Comolli (1971-72) and Stephen Heath (1976), which, much in tune with the tradition of a semiotic and psychoanalytic-inspired film theory, saw the flat surface of the film screen as comparable to the illusory three-dimensionality of painting (Bonitzer 1985). As Philip Rosen explains, theorists such as Comolli and Heath “made claims for the dominance of Renaissance perspective in image technology,” connecting this persistence “to the appeal of a ‘centred’ subject-position, whose geometrical construction in perspective they understood through certain kinds of historical materialism and psychoanalysis” (Rosen 2001, 14). According to these authors, the idea of perspective was linked to “a visualized epistemological ideal manifesting a standard of reliable visual knowledge and the imagination of a stable subject position, which is incorporated into cinema even as perspectival composition is integrated with other elements of filmic space, such as movement” (Rosen 2001, 14). Heath also believed that narrative worked as a guarantor of a coherent filmic space, regardless of the inherent mobility of cinema.

The process of theoretical revision concerning the issue of, among others, cinematic space, included David Bordwell’s (1985) proposition for a cognitivist understanding of perspective and Jonathan Crary’s (1990) rejection of the idea of a single objective position of knowledge in film. More recently, the writings of Giuliana Bruno expanded on the sensorial quality of the cinematographic experience as identified by Gilles Deleuze (1986; 1989), as well as on the affinity between cinema and architecture (Eisenstein, 2010 [1938]), to suggest that cinema should be considered above all an art of space:

The English language makes this transition from sight to site aurally seamless. Site-seeing, too, is a passage. As it moves from the optic into the haptic, it critiques scholarly work that has focused solely on the filmic gaze for having failed to address the emotion of viewing space. ... Locked within a Lacanian gaze, whose spatial impact remained unexplored, the film spectator was turned into a *voyeur*. By contrast, when we speak of site-seeing we imply that, because of film’s spatio-corporeal mobilization, the spectator is rather a *voyageur*, a passenger who traverses a haptic, emotive terrain. (Bruno 2007, 15-16)

Bruno’s work is in tandem with Crary’s and Bordwell’s, and it would be fair to say that nowadays the idea of cinema as a direct heir of Renaissance perspective has been completely rebuffed. In its place, the cinematographic experience has emerged as an essentially mobile and emotional one, with Bruno (2007, 16) approximating the words ‘motion’ and ‘e-motion’ and describing film viewing as “an imaginary form of *flânerie*”. My take on *Still Life* adopts Bruno’s con-

tention of cinema as a spatial art, or, at least, understands it as a simultaneously spatial and temporal art. In thinking of space, I take it to be defined by its dynamic characteristics and by movement, distinct from the idea of representation or of a static moment in time with which it is usually associated (Massey and Lury 1999; Massey 2005). From this premise that sees the cinematographic experience as promoting a journey through spaces, I will now look at *Still Life* as a spatial practice, departing from a real space and resulting in a new one, the filmic space, woven from the urban/landscape sites/sights and sounds in movement, and through which the characters and the viewers travel and feel.

### Cinema and Chinese Landscape Painting

If cinematic space can no longer be seen as an inheritor of Renaissance perspective, the affinity between cinema and Chinese landscape painting, an art that was founded upon the notion of a mobile and multiple perspective much before the appearance of moving images, becomes suddenly more evident. As explained by Linda C. Ehrlich and David Desser (1994), Asian pictorial arts do not rely in any significant way upon the vanishing point or upon the *horror vacui* (the fear of empty space) which characterises Renaissance art. This suggests that the type of spatial organisation of Chinese landscape painting is closer, in principle, to the type of spatial practice of film and audiovisual media. This approximation, though, requires some caution. As Jerome Silbergeld (2012) rightly points out in his essay "Cinema and the Visual Arts of China," it could be dangerous to simply bring together cinema and landscape painting without any sort of prior consideration as to the specificities of this relation. What paintings, for instance, and from what periods, should form the basis for this comparison? Should the focus lie on an investigation about vague cultural affinities between cinema and painting or on a direct historical and artistic influence? Would it be fair to say that the use of the tracking shot, for instance, in East Asian cinema derives primarily from the scroll painting tradition of China and Japan? But isn't this aesthetic resource simply common currency, employed not more or not less in Asian cinema than in world cinema in general?

Taking Silbergeld's questions into consideration, as well as trying to avoid a false binary opposition between Western and Chinese art, I would like to propose an analysis that is not concerned with a search for specificities or singularities; quite the contrary, it aims to find within the art of Chinese landscape painting certain theoretical and aesthetic traits that are transmuted into Jia Zhang-ke's film as a political gesture. Moreover, whilst running the risk of a certain simplification, I believe it is still possible to think of a regional or maybe even a national notion of cultural heritage. Many of China's Fifth Generation directors such as Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, as

well as Taiwanese director Hou Hsiao-hsien, Japanese director Kenji Mizoguchi and Jia Zhang-ke himself have all corroborated this vision by commenting on how they were influenced by traditional Chinese and Japanese landscape painting. This authorial intentionality, frequently associated with the directors' biographies (many studied painting before making films), certainly does not serve as a 'seal of approval' to the supposed parallel between cinema and landscape painting, but it at least raises another fundamental question: why was this aesthetic interrelation important, and what is the consequence of this influence in their films?<sup>2</sup>

### *Shanshuihua and Still Life: intermedial connections*

I would suggest that the connections between cinema and landscape painting in *Still Life* are intertwined with this film's sophisticated spatial practice, with both aesthetic and political connotations. I believe that a focus on this specific instance of intermediality brings a historical dimension to a film so decidedly located within the landscape of contemporary China — the country of massive public works and intense transformations. This investigation thus favours a 'geological' approach rather than a cartographic one, in order to suggest that behind the many transnational and cinephilic connections that inform Jia Zhang-ke's cinema there lies an acute observation and a conscious recuperation of Chinese art history's aesthetic traditions. Ultimately, this shows how Jia Zhang-ke is able to integrate form and content in an organic way and confer a political stance to his film through an aesthetics of intermediality.

The first point of connection between *Still Life* and the *shanshuihua* concerns the issue of perspective, directly related to the critique of an understanding of cinematic space as heir of Renaissance perspective, as explained above. As François Cheng observes, perspective in *shanshuihua* is, above all, a mental organization of the elements which are being depicted, and through which everything becomes a matter of balance and contrast:

Differently from a linear perspective which pre-supposes a privileged point of view and a vanishing point, Chinese perspective is qualified both as aerial and cavalier. It is, in fact, a double perspective. The painter, in general, is supposed to stand on a high point, thus enjoying an overall view of the landscape (in order to show the distance between different elements floating in an atmospheric space, he uses contrasts between volume, form and tonality); but at the same time he seems to move around the painting, espousing the rhythm of a dynamic space and contemplating things from afar,

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<sup>2</sup> The cinema of the Fifth Generation in China, for instance, seemed to cast a look towards the past, with an emphasis on intermediality, in order to by-pass censorship and provide a comment on the country's political situation.

from up close and from different angles... More than an object to be looked at, a painting is to be lived. (Cheng 1991, 101)

Cheng still quotes from Song illustrious painter Guo Shi, who wrote that a landscape painting is to be contemplated, traversed, lived in and strolled through: “The painting should create in the beholder the desire to be there” (Guo Shi, quoted in Cheng 1991, 102). Guo Shi was, in fact, one of the greatest innovators in the technique of multiple perspectives, rejecting a static mode of appreciation and calling for a moving visuality.

If *shahshuihua* invites the eye of the spectator to adopt different points of view and to traverse the painted landscape, its spatial organization seems to be much closer to the cinematographic experience as understood by Giuliana Bruno than the vanishing point and the three-dimensional illusion of Western Renaissance perspective. In *Still Life*, Jia strives to achieve a multiple-perspective spatial organization akin to that of traditional Chinese painting by employing a type of *découpage* that often shifts from a voyeur position, inspecting space from a vantage point of observation, to a street-level view of the city, with the camera placed at the height of a person's shoulder. I would go so far as to say that the whole film employs this alternation of points of view that becomes one of the keys to its sophisticated spatial practice, as can be seen in the two images below.





Images 4 and 5: Between *voyeur* and *voyageur* in Jia Zhang-ke's *Still Life* (2006)  
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Additionally, the notion of a multiple perspective emerges in *Still Life* in the prolific use of the tracking shot, oftentimes associated with the bazinian long take which is one of the marks of the film's realism. As Jia explains, "The river, the mountains and the fog are taken from the fundamental elements in Chinese painting. That is why I use those panning shots, recalling the gesture of unrolling a classical scroll painting, opening it out in space" (Jia 2008, 15). In *Still Life*, the tracking shot serves as the third element, alongside shots from vantage points and street-level views, in the film's depiction of the landscape and cityscape of the Three Gorges and Fengjie. Here, it is important to consider how the use of the tracking shot has been studied in relation to the cinema of Japanese master Kenji Mizoguchi and Japanese scroll painting. The term 'scroll-shot', for instance, was coined by French-American theorist and critic Noël Burch (1979) in order to describe the tracking shots employed by Mizoguchi in many of his films and which, according to Burch, aimed at emulating the mobile experience of a traditional Japanese painting (*e-makimono*). As Lúcia Nagib explains, "departing from the idea of decentering and self-reflexivity innate to Japanese art, Burch (often in tune with Tadao Sato) compares the structure of Mizoguchi's long take with that of the *e-makimono* (Japanese scroll painting), which opens up in order to show the figures (...) in a continuous action" (Nagib 1990, 11). Burch saw this aesthetic option in opposition to the classical *découpage* or continuity editing of Hollywood cinema, given that the long take in a lateral movement (the tracking shot) dispensed with the spatial decomposition of shots and their subsequent amalgamation in the editing. Mizoguchi could thus be seen as a modern director, even before modern cinema emerged as a notion or as a trend in Europe and the United States, challenging as such the

traditional binary opposition of Classical versus Modern in film history and theory.

If Mizoguchi's use of the 'scroll-shot' was mainly an aesthetic option directly connected with the *e-makimono* and other Japanese artistic traditions, in *Still Life* it is combined with vantage points and street-level views in order to convey the relationship between the human figure and its surroundings, bringing to the fore the superimposition of temporalities that defines Fengjie and, ultimately, the whole country. As a result, the main characters in the film are seen contemplating a space, traversing a space, as well as being themselves 'traversed' by the camera gaze that moves across spaces providing a multiple and moving perspective in the style of a scroll painting.





Images 6, 7 and 8: the “scroll-shot” in *Still Life* by Jia Zhang-ke (2006)  
© Xstream Pictures

This combination of shots and camera movement also highlights the seemingly unchanging presence of a natural landscape against the speed of change promoted by human force, heightening these opposing forces in a sort of lament for the loss of slowness and history. As Fabienne Costa has accurately pointed out, *Still Life* shows not only how the building of the Three Gorges Dam has impacted the lives of those living in the region — and the natural landscape surrounding them — but also how it has violently disrupted the ancestral Chinese notion of landscape or *shanshui* (Costa 2007, 46). The disappearance of cities and historical sites would therefore also seem to suggest the disappearance of a cultural and collective memory connected to this landscape, and this renders Jia’s use of the tracking shots and multiple perspectives a decidedly political stance. For what he seems to be suggesting is that the speed of change in Fengjie — and in China as a whole — is such that History and Heritage/Memory are inexorably being left behind, forgotten, destroyed. Thus his aesthetic choices, when faced with the disappearing cityscape of Fengjie and the immortal landscape of the Three Gorges, would have to hark back to a traditional form of art in order to bring historical resonance to a contemporary reality.

The intermedial relationship between *Still Life* and *shanshui-hua* can also be investigated through the notion of ‘empty space’, as central to the Chinese system of thought as that of the Yin-Yang (Cheng 1991, 45). In painting, ‘empty space’ means an area in the visual composition that exists between other major elements such as the mountains and the water. As François Cheng explains, in certain paintings of the Song and the Yuan Dynasties ‘empty space’ occupies two-thirds of a painting. Yet empty space is not inert, for it is crossed by *souffles* that bring together the visible and the invisible worlds.

That is how an element such as the cloud can be seen to perform a link between the Mountain and the Water by occupying large areas of a painting. Moreover, the empty space between these two elements is seen as necessary to avoid a rigid opposition between them. This means that 'shan' and 'shui' have to go through the empty space in order to become one another, in an incarnation of the dynamic law of the Real (Cheng 1991, 47).

But how does the notion of 'empty space' manifests itself in cinema, and more specifically in *Still Life*? In a sort of intersemiotic translation, I believe that empty space appears, to employ a term coined by Laura Mulvey (2006) in relation to the cinema of Abbas Kiarostami, in the form of a 'delayed' narrative style, one which allows time for what appear to be 'moments of emptiness'. Accordingly, what may seem in *Still Life* a 'narrative halt' is in fact the time devoid of any action, when the characters are allowed to take their time, to be by themselves, to think and to feel, as can be seen in the image below.



Image 9: Empty Space, Delayed Cinema  
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These 'empty moments' also allow the spectator to embark on more reflective thoughts, free from the pressure and constraints of a narrative of cause-and-effect, slowly filling in the gaps with their own reflections and emotions.

### Conclusion

To conclude this brief appreciation of the possible intermedial connections between the tradition of Chinese landscape painting and Jia Zhang-ke's film *Still Life*, I would like to suggest that while his origi-

nal aesthetics can be read as a response to a new historical and social conjuncture, it is also born out of the problem of intermediality, bringing with it a historical dimension to a contemporary perspective. Therefore, while Zhang Zhen is right in suggesting that the “historicity of this particular ‘new’ or contemporary urban cinema is precisely anchored in the unprecedented large-scale urbanization and globalization of China on the threshold of a new century” (Zhang 2007, 2), it would be unwise to neglect how *Still Life*, and Jia Zhang-ke’s cinema in general, relates to artistic traditions that belong to China’s past (Mello 2014).

Recently, his new film *A Touch of Sin* (*Tian Zhu Ding* 天注定, 2013) has revealed how the affinity between cinema and Chinese landscape painting is not limited to the question of perspective, the tracking shot and the notion of empty space. For while *A Touch of Sin* still uses the ‘scroll-shot’ as an aesthetic and political gesture, repeated in the section of the film set in the region of the Three Gorges, it also incorporates the panoramic impulse behind Chinese landscape painting into its narrative structure. Thus, by setting his film in four very distinct parts of China, moving from Shanxi in the north to Chongqing in the southwest, and from Hubei in central China to Dongguan in the southern province of Guangdong, Jia attempts to ‘paint’ a picture of the whole country, uniting the aesthetic impulse of a traditional form of art with his acute observation of the country’s contemporary phenomenon of internal migration and violence. And as is the case in *Still Life*, it is precisely the combination of form and content through aesthetic resources related to Chinese traditional painting that allows him to reflect not only on his country’s current era of rapid change but also on its cultural and artistic past. This is how the director known as the ‘poet of globalization’ equally becomes a ‘historian’ of China’s era of transformations (Berry 2008), and the combination of these two forces, motivated by an at once contemporary and retrospective gaze, brings forth the actuality and the political force of Jia’s cinema.

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