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Remaking a European, Post-catastrophic *Atmosphere* in 2000s China: Jia Zhangke's *Still Life*, Iconology and Ruins
La recréation d'une atmosphère de fin du monde européenne dans la Chine des années 2000. *Still Life* de Jia Zhang-ke et l'iconologie des ruines

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Article abstract

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ABSTRACT

Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* (*Sānxiá hǎorén*, 2006) was shot in Fengjie, shortly before its flooding brought about by the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, the world's largest hydropower station in terms of capacity. The film remakes the post-apocalyptic atmosphere found in European films made after the Second World War. From a web of cinephilic, intermedial and intertextual references, which inscribes *Still Life* in a local and global history of art and of film, this text compares the way Jia films his characters in a disappearing Fengjie with sequences from Roberto Rossellini's *Germany Year Zero* (*Germania anno zero*, 1948) and Michelangelo Antonioni's *Red Desert* (*Il deserto rosso*, 1964). While remaking the composition of ruins framing Edmund, in the first case, and in the second, a complex relation between background and figure in a deserted industrial landscape, *Still Life* creates a strange temporality, combining the imminence of a future catastrophe with the memory of past ones.

The ancients have not yet achieved perfect skill in the painting of clouds: scattering on a piece of silk light [specks of] powder blown there by one's mouth is called "blowing clouds." Clearly, it seizes upon a natural principle. But although one may call it a wonderful solution, nevertheless there is no sign there of any brush stroke. So it cannot be called painting either. It is impossible to copy.

Zhang Yanyuan, "Lidai Ming Hua Ji"
(Damisch 1972, p. 205)

Efforts to define the word "catastrophe"—from the Greek *katastrophe*, formed with the preposition *kata*, which indicates a movement downward and at the same time toward an end point, and the root *stroph*, representing a spin—are frequently unsatisfactory. One of the difficulties of defining this word lies in the uniqueness of the events that the term connotes. Enlightenment thinking about disaster stems mainly from the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, as seen in the correspondence on this topic between Voltaire and Rousseau (Rousseau 1756 and Pujol 2008). More recently, Jean-Luc Nancy's reassessment of "catastrophe" (2012) was inspired by events in Fukushima. According to Nancy, the way the seism, tsunami and nuclear disaster were bound together in 2011, as well as the global reach of its effects, has changed the paradigm of "catastrophe." The philosopher somehow brushes a history of disasters against the grain, mindful of preceding situations of overlapping and outpourings. The French mathematician René Thom, determined to confront the paradox of contemplating a group of events that are defined by their uniqueness, developed a theory of catastrophe in the 1970s. Seeking to understand the epistemological novelty that each catastrophic event represents while creating material, historical and symbolic discontinuities, Thom (1977, p. 40, my translation; 1989) proposed a system in which every catastrophe could be included, and asserted that "if your means of observation are sharp enough, every point will seem catastrophic."

Nancy's work is consistent with Thom's proposition, as both search for essential elements out of unique catastrophes, accepting the paradox that their approaches represent. Once we take singularity and rupture of established patterns as pillars in defining "catastrophe," reproducing a catastrophic event seems impossible. Catastrophe challenges representation, and is at the basis of a long discussion about the "irrepresentable"[1] and the "sublime." If catastrophe itself is barely visible, its traces might present enormous potential in terms of visual portrayal. While examining pictures taken in Pompeii, Victor Burgin (2006, p. 79) coined a formidable neologism, affirming that the city presented itself as a "catastrographic image," and that "any

photograph of Pompeii is therefore the impression of an impression, the index of an index."

Would it be possible to transpose a catastrophic visuality from one work of art to another, to reproduce it? That question will be central to this article. My inquiry is based on the hypothesis of a *transfer of catastrophic atmosphere*, from a post-war Europe filmed by Italian directors to Jia Zhangke's Fengjie seen in *Still Life* (*Sānxiá hǎorén*, 2006). Amidst the effervescence of China's economic growth in the 2000s—of which the Three Gorges Dam, the world's largest hydropower station in terms of capacity, is one of the most notable icons—the landscape of ruins filmed by Jia seems to recall images introduced by post-World War II European cinema and its post-apocalyptic landscapes. Reminiscences of past catastrophes become now signs of imminent new catastrophes. The human characters, who earlier needed to live in a place where memories of disaster were over present, now are confined in a kind of *entre-deux*, "in-between" catastrophic times. Could this transfer of catastrophic atmosphere be considered as a peculiar kind of "film remake"? Could we think of a remake that does not focus on a story, a script, but rather on an *atmosphere*? The word "atmosphere" is used here in the Aristotelian sense, meaning the diaphanous air, which is only visible through the colour it borrows from something else; it is the almost invisible *milieu* the gaze needs to cross and which provokes a discontinuity in the space (Aristotle 1957; Vasiliu 1997, p. 22).

Among studies on remakes,[2] rare and recent are those freed from narrative and literary approaches and more interested in stylistic and iconological forms of remake. This is true of the work of Constantine Verevis (2005), who expands the understanding of the remake beyond its textual dimension, describing remake as both "an elastic concept and a complex situation, one enabled and limited by the interrelated roles and practices of industry, critics and audiences" (p. vii). And, although holding the remake within the scope of the Hollywood film industry—as do almost all studies on the subject—he opens up space for the remake as a critical category: his book addresses situations in which a film, within the logic of the canon, borrows from other elements of style, dialogue and visuality such as the expressions

of cinephilia by directors of the French New Wave (p. 160). This last mode of cinematic remake, distancing itself from the cinematic adaptation of literary works, is not as concerned with retaining the script as it is with retrieving particular elements of style and iconology.

Marie Martin's text in the present volume offers an original approach to the study of the film remake. Through her association of the term "remake" with the adjective "secret," we have a less "legal" understanding of the remake and a more "psychoanalytic" approach to it. As she explains, the work of the film has an equivalent in the work of dreams, which rewrite traumatic experiences, condensing and displacing them. In dialogue with Verevis' and Martin's approaches, the present article proposes to understand the transfer of catastrophic atmosphere found in *Still Life* as a particular kind of "secret remake." I will analyze films and film sequences present in *Still Life* not to inquire about the author's intentions or the genesis of the film, but to establish seemingly unnoticeable connections coming from the film's unconscious, and from the spectator's memory. Jia's cinema is clearly characterized by intertextuality—his films *quote and transform* former films, as Julia Kristeva (1978) would say. Of course the film quotations found in his films are a product of his multicultural cinephilia, inherited from that peculiar way of loving cinema that flourished in post-war Europe.

It is far from a secret that Jia Zhangke is an enthusiast of mid-twentieth-century French and Italian cinema, as he has repeatedly stated in interviews and texts. *Still Life* is also characterized by intermediality, and Chinese painting has an important place in the film's genealogy. Without discarding genetic information and the genealogies inscribed in *Still Life*, this article focuses on the idea of the *secret remake of an atmosphere*, the remake of a sensation produced through some specific encounters between human characters and landscapes, between figure and background. Based on Fredric Jameson's concept of "political unconscious," I will advance the hypothesis that the strange detachment between figure and background present in *Still Life* is a visual form of an imminent catastrophe. According to Jameson (1981), by inquiring into the political unconscious of an artwork, it is possible to

accede to an ideology of form. Jameson proposed, initially in a context of literary studies, that we search for paradigmatic master plots hidden in the work's unconscious. His studies establish a dialogue with Ernst Bloch's analyses of the latter's research on visions of the future in *The Principle of Hope* (1986). Bloch considers artworks as "blind spots" capable of predicting. Following Bloch's and Jameson's approaches, I will analyze the situations in which the landscape to be flooded in Fengjie, almost hidden behind the fog, functions as a kind of "blind spot," creating a permanent tension between visibility and invisibility. Through *Still Life*'s blind spots, we can see the effects of the presence of Italian neorealism as an act of spectatorship (Lefebvre 1995) or, from a Warburgian perspective, as an after-life of images (*Nachleben*). My analysis focuses on the presence of atmospheric elements, deriving from *Germany Year Zero* (*Germania anno zero*, Roberto Rossellini, 1948) and *Red Desert* (*Il deserto rosso*, Michelangelo Antonioni, 1964), as the basis of the transfer of catastrophic atmosphere.

The Pompeian Fengjie

Two parallel and independent narratives constitute the script of *Still Life*: a miner, Sanming, and a nurse, Shen Hong, both from Shanxi province, come to Fengjie in Sichuan looking for their spouses, from whom they have not heard in some time. The two quests take place amid real destruction: Fengjie is being demolished before being flooded to give way to the Three Gorges Dam. Jia's previous films had treated marginalized individuals' daily experience of the drastic economic, social, ideological and cultural transformations in China over the last thirty years. This is the case with *Platform* (*Zhantai*, 2000), *Unknown Pleasure*s (*Ren xiao yao*, 2002) and *The World* (*Shijie*, 2004). In this context, as pointed out by Lin Zhang (2007, p. 178), "geographic, social and visual spaces … play a crucial role as an indispensable expressive backdrop in allowing a vivid representation of ordinary people's everyday lives." In *Still Life*, it is the very landscape of the Three Gorges region that undergoes a radical transformation.

What is *remade* in *Still Life* is not so much the script as the catastro(gra)phic atmospheres that are created from it. Take, for

instance, the moment when Shen Hong (Zhao Tao) arrives at an archaeological site to meet Wang Dongming (Wang Hongwei), her husband's friend. The excavations might seem, at first, allusions to the archaeological sites discovered during the construction of the dam, as well as to the relocation and damaging of an ancient archaeological site. More than 2,000 years old, the oldest part of the city was already under water when the film was made. Shen Hong evokes the impossibility of communicating with her husband amid this backdrop of archaeological excavations, and, as in a *déjà vu*, the image resurfaces of Pompeii excavations in *Voyage to Italy* (*Viaggio in Italia*, Roberto Rossellini, 1954), when Katherine (Ingrid Bergman) and Alex (George Sanders) arrive in the midst of discussions about their divorce. In *Voyage to Italy*, the sight of the petrified bodies of a man and a woman who had died holding hands during the eruption of Vesuvius is an inflection point: a weeping Katherine opens the way for reconciliation. Unlike Katherine, Shen Hong looks for her husband determined to officialize their divorce; she doesn't cry, drinking water repeatedly instead. From Rossellini to Jia, the temporal relation between film and catastrophe changes: in *Voyage to Italy*, Pompeian excavations reveal the fixed instant of the two lovers' death, bringing up a disaster that occurred ages before; in *Still Life*, the work in the archaeological site prepares for a future flood. While watching both films altogether, the spectator is caught in a situation analogous to that of Paul Klee's angel, as seen by Walter Benjamin. It is impossible to separate the ruins of the past from apocalyptic visions of the future. The core of *Still Life* is made from this specific catastrophic temporality. And that catastrophic temporality is made from the encounter between elements from the film's unconscious.

My hypothesis of *Still Life* as a remake of a catastrophic atmosphere is based in the first place on a comparison with *Germany Year Zero*.[3] The way Jia's characters move about in a landscape of ruins, and are framed by them, evokes Rossellini's film, shot in Berlin right after the end of the war. More generally, we can view Jia's urgent need to film in a real setting presenting visual marks of history and tragedy as coming from Italian neo-realism, and from Rossellini. Proposing that the visual

presence of ruins in *Still Life* is related to how this *motif* appears in *Germany Year Zero* does not imply exclusively that there is a direct affiliation. It is more interesting to analyze visual similarities between the two films, and the consequences of this phenomenon in the spectator's memory and in the film's memory, than it is to suggest that Rossellini's film was a model or an influence for Jia Zhangke.

It is worth mentioning that the visual presence of ruins in *Still Life* obviously takes part in the evolution of this *motif* in Chinese art history, which is, at least in this particular case, inseparable from exterior influences. Ruins were seldom depicted in traditional Chinese art. Until the twentieth century, architectural ruins were not preserved as such: damaged buildings were generally repaired and restored, and their age was consequently masked. Paul Zucker's assessment—"the popular concept of ruins in our time has been created by the Romanticism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (1961, p. 119)—is also true for Chinese ruins. "Unknowingly, the Western concept of ruins has become a global one," remarks Wu Hung (2012, p. 7), in a text developing the ideas found in Zucker's work. The first realistic representations of ruins in China were made by foreign painters and photographers, and only afterwards by Chinese artists. Avant-garde artists and poets "re-embraced ruins" at the end of the Cultural Revolution, and since the 1990s, contemporary Chinese art has developed "a strong interest in urban ruins" (Wu 2012, pp. 8-9).

Cinephilic Memories 1: Berlin, 1948

Besides emphasizing the love of cinema (De Baecque 1995, 2005), cinephilia affirms a creative spectatorial posture, "a detour in place and space, a shift in register and a delay in time" (Elsaesser 2005, p. 30). *À bout de souffle* (1959), seen as the key film of the first generation of cinephile filmmakers, not only *quotes* Jean-Luc Godard's most-loved films, as Dudley Andrew (2009, p. 30) proposes, but also *remakes* some of their elements. Antoine de Baecque, focusing on the act of film remaking, describes Jean Seberg/Patricia's gaze at the camera at the end of the film and how it reproduces Bergman's way of including the

viewer in the act of infidelity that had won over so many admir-ers of *Monika* (1953) among the cinephiles who would later constitute the Nouvelle Vague. A similar dynamic occurs in *Still Life*, which borrows codes from Italian cinema and reproduces stylistic and script elements from films by Rossellini and Antonioni. The aim here, however, does not appear to be to demand the status of an auteur or to reveal stylistic affiliations. The *remake* of a ruined environment found in *Still Life* has strong moral and political consequences: it affirms that human characters living in Fengjie in the 2000s share a fragile condi-tion close to that of their counterparts in 1940s Berlin; and that both war and economic growth produce destruction.

In *Still Life*, the presence of *Germany Year Zero* and *Red Desert* goes far beyond the typical cinephilic quotation. Not only does it reaffirm the European side of Jia's cinephilia and his adoption of certain codes from neorealism;[4] it also adds, in a context of expanding infrastructure, the melancholy of the period follow-ing the disaster. In Jia's hands, twenty-first-century China inher-its the disenchantment with modernity typical of post-war industrial Europe.

Walter Benjamin's vision of progress as catastrophe, formulat-ed after seeing Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, is renewed through the lens of Jia Zhangke. In *Still Life*, catastrophe is not a synonym of Paul Virilio's accident (2005), but something intentionally built by humanity. Edited immediately after the archaeologists' scene, *Still Life* includes a shot of a partially destroyed building, filmed frontally and filling the entire frame, in which we see a small demolition man at work. Through its way of inserting the characters in ruin-centred landscapes, it becomes clear that *Still Life* shares a common repertoire of ruins with Rossellini's film. From one film to the other, some sequences and frame composi-tions are especially similar. At the end of Rossellini's film, Edmund walks inside the empty building in front of where he lives, and, through a big open hole in the wall, observes the arrival of the coffin that will take his father's body. The bricks frame his body, allowing us to see other nearby buildings in ruins. When the boy goes past one of these holes, in a kind of frame within the frame, the marks of the bombing of Berlin are

visible everywhere. It is from one of those openings that Edmund will jump at the end of the film. We see the high-angle shot of the boy lying on the ground, before the two final shots (a woman sees Edmund and approaches him; the camera pans upwards, showing the passing of a tramway and the destroyed façades of Berlin). The shot of the boy lying on the ground is composed in such a way that the twisted metal that remains of the structure of the building lies between the camera and the boy's body, which is more glimpsed than actually seen by the spectator (figs. 1-3).

In *Still Life*, walls of partially destroyed buildings also act as frames within the frame. Albeit there is a huge difference in the causes of the destruction—in *Still Life*, as we know, there is no bombing, but rather voluntary demolition—the visual result is similar. At first, this framing occurs in the sequence which establishes an exchange of glances between Sanming and the women of a brothel where he comes looking for his ex-wife and daughter. The women, framed by incomplete walls, seem to

Figs. 1-3. In *Germany Year Zero* (Roberto Rossellini, 1948), Edmund is framed by the ruins of the war.

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pose for Sanming—and consequently for the spectator. Later, just before the end of the film, Sanming and his ex-wife are inside a partly demolished building, observing the debris of the landscape surrounding them. Unlike Rossellini, Jia does not insert his characters in the middle of the hole: they sit on the right side of the frame and look to the skyscrapers in the distance, before one of them suddenly falls down, in a computer-generated effect (figs. 4-6).

The final take of *Still Life* can be seen as a counterpoint to Edmund's fall: a tightrope walker is shown in a low-angle shot, balancing on the wire that connects two buildings on the point of collapsing. As a parallel to the image of the boy's body on the ground, *Still Life* offers the image of a tightrope walker in an impending fall, filmed from below. This connection with *Germany Year Zero* reappears in *A Touch of Sin* (*Tian zhu ding*,

Fig. 4. In *Still Life* (Jia Zhangke, 2006), women of a brothel pose for the camera framed by partially destroyed walls.

Fig. 5. Jia does not insert his *Still Life* characters in the middle of the hole. From the right side of the frame, they look to a falling skyscraper in the distance.

Fig. 6. A tightrope walker balancing on the wire that connects two buildings on the point of collapsing. Can the final take of *Still Life* be seen as a counterpoint to Edmund's fall?

2013). A young man, not finding a solution to his problems, throws himself from an apartment building, in a scene that was compared with Rossellini's film by some Chinese critics. In *A Touch of Sin*, the temporal relation to catastrophe is neither one of *imminence* nor of *reminiscence*: it is the affirmation of a catastrophe taking place in the present, in broad daylight.

To return to *Still Life*, what are the implications of this transposition? Could we assert, through the spectral presence of *Germany Year Zero* in certain takes of *Still Life*, a kind of equivalence between two real situations considerably distant in time and space? There are clear similarities between Fengjie's landscape and Berlin's landscape in the aftermath of war, and a comparable smallness, the same fragility, of the human characters inside them. Catastrophes are, by definition, singular events and, as such, cannot be examined together. They "are not equivalent, neither in amplitude nor in desolation or consequences" (Nancy 2012, p. 11). Seeing *Still Life* as a remake of *Germany Year Zero*'s ruined atmosphere does not mean that Berlin and Fengjie were struck by equivalent catastrophes. On the contrary, the result of the remake operation in *Still Life* is an absolute originality. On the one hand, it creates a different temporality, in which the catastrophic event has not taken place but is already visible (even as it is visible through invisibility). On the other hand, it generates a new interpretation of neo-realism in its relation to the real referent. Jia's use of computer-generated special effects and evident unreal events (such as the passing of a flying saucer and the launching of a building as if it were a spaceship) while filming in a precise historical moment and a disappearing place problematizes his early classification as a "Bazinian director." In any event, it is certain that seeing characters develop their actions amidst a truly labile ground, doomed to disappear, awakens the cinephilic memory of a catastrophic war, disavowing any optimism towards changes in contemporary China.

Cinephilic Memories 2: Ravenna, 1964

Jia Zhangke's filmography is punctuated with nostalgic reflections on the fleeting aspect of time, for instance in *Platform* and *Cry Me a River* (*Heshang de aiqing*, 2008). Filming the dam

seems to be an opportunity to manipulate time more frontally. Unlike *Cry Me a River*, in which the observation of a river flow reinforces the feeling of passing time and getting older, *Still Life* takes advantage of a rare situation. The interruption of the water flow represented by the dam leads to the idea of a suspension in time. In this sense, Jia radicalizes one of the most fundamental capacities born with cinema. It is clear that, through filming contingency (accidents, transformations, catastrophe), since the late nineteenth century, film has offered a way of preserving and reproducing life and movement, a power that has been fascinating filmmakers, spectators and theorists for decades. The temporal situation found by Jia Zhangke offers, in that sense, an experience equivalent to the Lumières filming the demolition of a wall, but in close-up and slow motion; he offers his spectators the experience of watching a vanishing world in an extended duration.

Seeing a *vanishing* landscape sounds like a paradox. In fact, *Still Life* creates a complex way of showing and hiding the geography of a place that is preparing its own disappearance under the water. On the one hand, undeniable influences from Imperial Chinese painting and poetry can be found to explain this peculiar dialectics of *showing* and *hiding* a landscape, not with the aim of retracing the film's origins, but of inscribing it in a web of visual memories. On the other hand, this way of depicting landscape causes a complex relation between figure and background that can be seen as the remake of an atmosphere found in Antonioni's *Red Desert*.

As announced when the boat arrives in Fengjie, the construction of the dam is a tourist attraction: the dam makes the public eye turn there as it used to happen in ancient times. The banks of the Yangtze, however, are barely visible. It is indeed as if a hazy veil imposes itself between character and landscape, between figure and background,[5] compromising the sharpness of vision. A strange detachment is visually produced, enhancing the mass of air separating the landscape and the human figures who contemplate it from time to time, and consequently reinforcing the vulnerability of the setting where the characters are seen (fig. 7). In some aspects, this configuration is connected to Imperial Chinese painting,[6] characterized by the smallness of

human figures in contrast with the immensity of nature and by an acute visibility of clouds, a theme examined in depth by Hubert Damisch (1972). The presence of clouds in Chinese poetry and painting related to the Three Gorges region (for instance through verses by Li Bai, Du Fu and Wang Wei) helps to explain the cloudy medium that both separates human figures from the landscape in the film, and unites them with it.[7]

The cloudy and out-of-focus background in front of which Jia Zhangke's characters seem to float leads to *Red Desert*, Antonioni's first colour film and fully tied up with the history of painting. In *Red Desert*, the detachment between the human character and its surroundings is manifested through the management of focus and depth of field. Besides the meteorological similarity—pollution and humidity characterize both Antonioni's Ravenna and Jia Zhangke's Sichuan—Jia's way of shooting this landscape and inserting human figures into it is aesthetically close to the one created by Antonioni. The parallel between *Red Desert* and *Still Life* is set up from the opening sequences. A comparison of the two films reveals surprising similarities.

In *Still Life*, this initial sequence consists of ten takes, shot from a boat leading to the port of Chongqing. The three initial shots—three tracking shots—have oscillating focus: the first begins with a woolly image of the passengers' bodies that gradually become sharp, such as the girl looking at the camera, and which then blur again. The second shot reverses this scheme: the camera starts with a focus on a passenger lighting his cigarette and then switches to an observation of the smoke of burning tobacco, a shot that gradually loses sharpness. The third take inverses again, as the tracking shot leads from out-of-focus to sharpness. This tension between blurred and sharp focus is also present in the relation between the interior of the boat and the exterior landscape, as there is an extreme difference in brightness between the two.

Fig. 7. *Still Life* emphasizes the mass of air separating the landscape and the character, reinforcing the vulnerability of the setting.

The steep relief of the Three Gorges region always appears veiled, as the characteristic haze of the region is enhanced by overexposure (figs. 8-10).

Red Desert starts with an out-of-focus tracking shot showing some trees, and continues in this way until it reaches the silhouette of factory chimneys. The way in which credits are overlaid on *Still Life*'s unclear images, revealing and hiding the port and its landscape, seems to be a reference to the Italian director. When a fire-breather puts on a small show on the deck, he seems to remake the fire that issued from the chimneys of Italian factories. The megaphones of the strikers are recalled by the boat's speakers announcing the arrival in Chongqing, at which point the mists of Emilia Romana[8] find their Chinese equivalent. Both inside the boat and outside the plant, the passengers/workers who will not always reach the status of characters in the films deal with money: "You need to have dollars in your pocket to navigate on the water," says the show host on board. One of the magician's numbers is the transformation of Yuan notes into dollars. The collective spectacle that Giuliana (Monica Vitti) watches is the strike: she offers cash in exchange for the sandwich one of the unionists is eating (figs. 11-13).

Figs. 8-10. In the initial tracking shots of *Still Life*, there is a tension between soft and sharp focus, present as well in the relation between the interior of the boat and the exterior landscape. The steep relief of the Three Gorges region appears veiled.

Still Life recalls elements from Antonioni's Ravenna, the main one perhaps being the alienation of the characters created by the deployment of the figure against the background. In Antonioni's film, this is associated with the use of colour. The French theorist José Moure (2001, p. 14) considers discomfort towards the environment as a general trait of the Antonioni film: in most of the interiors we note absence, non-occupation, emptiness. Alienation also occurs, however, in the characters' relation to the landscape, especially in the industrial area. While the Italian plant is virtually empty because of the strike, the plant filmed by Jia Zhangke is a haunted monument to a past epoch: it has the reddish colour of rust and looks enormous, disproportional to human scale. Other films by Antonioni also frame industrial sites as if they were urban deserts, workplaces where activity has been suspended. As Moure states, the director's lenses transform plants into "ghostly mutants" and his landscapes are

> a desert, like the end of the world, where emptiness appears as a result of an industrial sedimentation and interrupted expansion which ended up suffocating any form of life. Every presence became impossible and the characters are consequently condemned to dream of other places (p. 32, my translation).

Figs. 11-13. *Red Desert* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1964) starts with an out-of-focus tracking shot showing a tree and the silhouette of factory chimneys. Jia's fire-breather recalls the fire issued by them; the way in which credits are overlaid on *Still Life*'s unclear images appears to be a reference to the Italian director.

It is also important to highlight fundamental differences between *Red Desert* and *Still Life*. While in the former film the hostility of the environment is experienced by the protagonist in a dramatic way—Giuliana appears "constantly assaulted by the architectural violence that surrounds her" (Moure 2001, p. 15)— in the latter film the detachment between characters and landscape is so deep that they seem indifferent. This detachment, or the problematic inclusion of human figures in the landscape, does not provide the opportunity to explore their psychology. In Jia Zhangke's cinema, catastrophe and tragedy are not seen from an individual perspective. Unlike Antonioni's *Red Desert*, *Still Life* neither explores its characters' emotions nor establishes any kind of homology between landscape and character. Even if Shen Hong's constant water drinking in *Still Life* might be construed as a metaphorical attempt to submerge herself the changing landscape is not reflected in Shen Hong or Sanming's psychology.

Conclusion

Less acknowledged than the other intertextual, intermedial, and cinephilic references present in *Still Life*, its connections with *Germany Year Zero* and *Red Desert* are a peculiar kind of film remake, one emerging from the film's political unconscious. The demolition scenes, the presence of characters in real locations punctuated by partially destroyed buildings, and the visual detachment of the characters from the defaced natural landscape give rise to post-catastrophic cinematographic images. *Still Life* has with *Germany Year Zero* and *Red Desert* a subtle and profound connection, taking the form here of a *remake of an atmosphere*, or a transfer of a catastrophic atmosphere. Contact with those two films emphasizes the temporality of an imminent disaster and the (in)visibility of an unrepresentable catastrophe in *Still Life*, consequently highlighting its belonging to the iconological repertoire of catastrophe. Thinking in terms of atmosphere, after Aristotle, means that the remake does not have a well-delimited object, but borrows its forms and colours from the landscapes and characters around it.

Representing catastrophe has been an unsolved question within art history. Many were those who explored this problem,

aesthetically and morally, with fascination, abjection or distance, from Lucretius to Kant (and, later, Rivette, Lanzmann, Didi-Huberman, etc.). *Still Life* does not propose a representation of ecological, political or human disaster. Through the difficult visibility of the landscape filmed, and through the problematic relation between the human characters and that landscape condemned to disappearing, the film joins a range of artworks problematizing that representation, and problematizing the posture of art after historical world catastrophes (and at a time new catastrophes are foreseen). More than an image of catastrophe, *Still Life* proposes a *catastrophic atmosphere—catastrographic*, according to Burgin's term—one that can be understood as a kind of *catastrophic image*, through its own invisibility.

By evoking the visuality of past catastrophes through the proximity with Rossellini's and Antonioni's films, *Still Life*'s images engender a strange temporality. Catastrophe is at once foreseen and remembered: visual memory functions as a haunting past, impelling the prefiguration of a catastrophe to come.[9] The misty atmosphere that hides the banks of the Yangtze in *Still Life*, reinforcing the separation between the human and the natural, figure and background, is formed by little particles of water that will, in a near future, flood everything. Paraphrasing Marshall Berman's acute reading of Marx in the light of a ruining modernity (1982), in *Still Life* all that is solid dissolves under water.

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NOTES

1. The debate on the legitimacy and interest of attempting to represent catastrophe, involving mostly thinkers in the French tradition, is too long and has too many actors to be properly resituated here. Following Jacques Rancière's proposition (2003) of a "régime esthétique de l'art," different from the "régime représentatif de l'art," this text does not intend to explore the *representation* of catastrophe. The "aesthetical revolution" depicted by Rancière transforms the way aesthetics and representation were opposed by establishing poetics as an immediate presence, as a kind of sensory thinking, blurring the frontiers between reality and fiction. The value of a form no longer lies in what it *represents* of reality, but in the form itself, as a presence that can be felt.

2. Among them that by Michel Serceau (1989), whose "strict definition" of the film remake is "the re-confection, by another filmmaker and from the same script, of

an already existing film" (p. 6, my translation) and by Daniel Protopopoff (1989), according to whom "the remake is a film which reproduces, with different actors, the first version of a successful film" (p. 13, my translation), in addition to works by Horton and McDougal (1998) and Leonardo Quaresima (2002).

3. Films produced in Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War are far from being the only cinematic influence in *Still Life*. In reality a host of films from different times and contexts have built bridges between Chinese and European cinephilia. The film's references also include Chinese and Asian films such as those by Hou Hsiao Hsien and John Woo. *A Better Tomorrow* (John Woo, 1986), explicitly remembered through a *quotation* (when Brother Mark, in his room, sees Chow Yun Fat on television), connects *Still Life* with Chinese gangster films, widely remade and quoted around the world. Lin Zhang (2007) asserts that the emotional impact of the demolition scenes is similar to that of many urban Chinese films made in the 1990s. Jason McGrath compares *Still Life* to other films made near the Three Gorges Dam, such as *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* (Dai Sijie, 2002), which tells the story of a Chinese intellectual living in France who returns to his home village just before its flooding. I cannot develop those affinities here as my purpose is not to establish a complete genealogy of Jia's film.

4. Lei-Wei (2008) and Berry (2009) maintain that André Bazin was a major influence on Jia Zhangke, as the French critic's texts were published in Chinese while Jia was a student at the Beijing Film Academy. Bazin's admiration for neorealist cinema has spread to China, especially in the case of Jia Zhangke.

5. For a historical analysis of the cinematic background, see Bonamy 2013.

6. This pictorial source is connected to the documentary *Dong* (2006), shot concomitantly with *Still Life*—actually, *Still Life* appears as a "side effect" of *Dong*, as Jia initially went to the Three Gorges region to meet the Chinese painter Liu Xiaodong, who had produced a series of large-scale portraits of workers there. *Dong* and *Still Life* share two shots and Han Sanming, who plays the male protagonist in *Still Life*, appears in a portrait by Liu Xiaodong, seen in the two films.

7. The curious temporality *Still Life* creates is particularly close to the poem *Departing from Baidi City in the Morning*, written by Li Bai (Li Po) in 757: "In the morning I bade farewell to Baidi amidst colourful clouds /And crossing a thousand li I returned to Jiangling in a single day. /While gibbons on the riverbanks cried endlessly, /My light boat already passed by myriad of mountains" (Lu 2009, p. 52). The poem evokes the clouds that shroud the city of Baidi, nestled on the headland that dominates the entrance of the Qutang Gorge, downstream of Fengjie. "Li" is a traditional Chinese unit of distance. Its length is now equal to 500 metres, but has varied over times.

8. Before *Red Desert*, Antonioni had shot *People of the Po Valley* (1947), which could also be compared to *Still Life*. The film starts with views of the banks of the Po, filmed from a boat, and the landscape appears under a dense mist. Like *Still Life*, *People of the Po Valley* stresses the sound of foghorns continuously.

9. Jia's view of the future as catastrophe acquires at once an extension and a confirmation in his *A Touch of Sin*, which can be seen as a sequel to virtually all his previous feature films. Some of his usual actors reappear; older versions of former characters face their destinies. The film begins in his native province of Shanxi—the same as *Pick Pocket* (*Xiao Wu*, 1997) and *Platform*, and also the place where Sanming came from in *Still Life*—and draws a path through the locations of Jia's filmography. Played by Han Sanming, the miner called Sanming is present again in *A Touch of Sin*, as was already the case in *Platform* and *Still Life*. He is now looking for work, and life has apparently not been kind to him. In fact, in this film, practically all stories have a tragic denouement. Unlike Jia's previous films, there are neither ellipses nor vague suggestions. The violence and the pain are now visible, even reiterated. Edmund's fall in

Germany Year Zero, to which the tightrope walker's imminent fall seen in the final sequence of *Still Life* served as a counterpoint, is now materialized: in *A Touch of Sin*, we see the entire fall, not only its imminence. Some sequences of *A Touch of Sin* take place in Chongqing, and the arrival of the boat seen at the beginning of *Still Life* is reproduced. The flood of Fengjie has already taken place and, instead of ruins, skyscrapers dominate the landscape. Once prefigured, the catastrophic future now becomes present. Ecological disaster is only a part of the problem: *A Touch of Sin* addresses political and social catastrophe as well, as violence is the response for the disintegration of a whole human fabric. The tragic individual stories are seen as consequences of a national crisis.

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RÉSUMÉ

La recréation d'une atmosphère de fin du monde européenne dans la Chine des années 2000. *Still Life* de Jia Zhang-ke et l'iconologie des ruines
Lúcia Ramos Monteiro

Tourné dans la ville chinoise de Fengjie peu de temps avant qu'elle ne soit engloutie par les eaux du barrage des Trois-Gorges, qui alimente la plus puissante centrale hydroélectrique du monde, *Still Life* (*Sānxiá hǎorén*, Jia Zhang-ke, 2006) recrée l'atmosphère postapocalyptique des films européens de l'après-guerre. Partant d'un réseau de références cinéphiles, intermédiales et intertextuelles qui inscrivent le film de Jia Zhang-ke dans l'histoire (nationale et mondiale) de l'art et du cinéma, l'auteure de cet article compare la façon dont le réalisateur filme ses personnages, dans une Fengjie vouée à disparaître, avec certaines séquences de l'*Allemagne année zéro* (*Germania anno zero*, 1948) de Roberto Rossellini et du *Désert rouge* (*Il deserto rosso*, 1964) de Michelangelo Antonioni : en reproduisant la composition des ruines qui entourent Edmund dans le film de Rossellini ou la relation complexe entre la figure et le fond dans un paysage industriel désert mise en scène par Antonioni, *Still Life* crée une étrange temporalité qui associe l'imminence d'une catastrophe à venir à la mémoire de catastrophes passées.