

Realism and
Convention
from the
Silent Era to
the Digital Age

JASON McGRATH

CHINESE CINEMA

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JASON MCGRATH



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS

MINNEAPOLIS
LONDON

The publication of this book was supported by an Imagine Fund grant for the Arts, Design, and Humanities, an annual award from the University of Minnesota's Provost Office.

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Portions of chapter 1 are adapted from “Acting Real: Cinema, Stage, and the Modernity of Performance in Chinese Silent Film,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinemas*, edited by Carlos Rojas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear. Portions of chapters 4 and 5 are adapted from “Cultural Revolution Model Opera Films and the Realist Tradition in Chinese Cinema,” *The Opera Quarterly* 26, no. 2–3 (2010): 343–76; by permission of Oxford University Press. Portions of chapter 6 are adapted from “Post–Socialist Realism in Chinese Cinema,” in *Red Legacies in China: Cultural Afterlives of the Communist Revolution*, edited by Jie Li and Enhua Zhang, published by the Harvard University Asia Center, 2016.

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Published by the University of Minnesota Press
111 Third Avenue South, Suite 290
Minneapolis, MN 55401-2520
<http://www.upress.umn.edu>

 Available as a Manifold edition at manifold.umn.edu

ISBN 978-1-5179-1402-8 (hc)
ISBN 978-1-5179-1403-5 (pb)

A Cataloging-in-Publication record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

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Preface and Acknowledgments

In the introduction to his landmark study of realism in modern Chinese literature, written around the height of the “linguistic turn” in critical theory, Marston Anderson noted that the very term *realism* had become somewhat embarrassing for Western critics to use, requiring typographical alterations like scare quotes “to dissociate themselves from the now thoroughly discredited epistemology the term assumes.”¹ Anderson wryly observed that using terms like *classicism*, *expressionism*, or *romanticism* would provoke no such suspicion that the critic had “fallen into an uncritical endorsement of the mode and the theoretical presuppositions that support it.”² Three decades later, and in the medium of cinema rather than literature, the topic is not quite so sensitive. While film theory made its own turns to structural linguistics, poststructuralism, and Foucauldian and Althusserian ideological analysis in the 1960s–80s, classical theories of cinematic realism, such as those of André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer, were eventually rejuvenated, sometimes with a lingering semiotic twist, such as reinterpreting Bazin through the concept of indexicality. Still, we continue to use the term *realism* cautiously, knowing how carefully circumscribed the concept has to be if it is to avoid having the dreaded adjective *naïve* attached to it. This book certainly makes an effort to exercise that caution, but without going to the extent of assuming that naivety is intrinsic to realism.

The seed of the idea for this book was planted many years ago in a conversation I had while still preparing for my PhD preliminary exams at the University of Chicago, when Tom Gunning mentioned that it would be interesting to sketch a history of Chinese cinema centered on the question

of realism(s). The notion seemed simple—even obvious, now that he'd mentioned it—yet it had not been done, despite that it has been widely acknowledged that realism was *the* master signifier of modern Chinese aesthetics for most of the last century, with several landmark studies of realism in modern Chinese literature, such as Anderson's, already having been published, for example. While the plan for the book changed greatly over time (during which I also completed a different book project and other related and unrelated studies), what has remained constant is the conviction that questions of, or claims for, realism constitute a conceptual thread along which one can string together a cogent and useful, though obviously not comprehensive, history of mainland Chinese cinema. Each of the chapters could have been a book in itself—and some almost were, considering the sizes of the files of scraps that were cut to get the chapters down to (almost) manageable lengths. There are so many more examples that could have been included, so many additional interesting films and related issues that could have been discussed, not to mention many counterexamples that could further complicate my arguments.

Nonetheless, this book offers a number of ideas that I believe are tools that others might find useful—the concepts of prescriptive and apophasic realisms, for example, or the study of socialist formalism in Maoist cinema, or the expanded concept of post-socialist realism proposed in chapter 6. Still, my debt to many preceding studies of both film theory and Chinese film history will be evident. Although I obviously hope to have made a contribution that is original, I have no particular ideological or theoretical commitment to valuing startlingly counterintuitive readings for their own sake. Instead, many of my arguments try to develop ideas shared with others in new or more in-depth ways, in an effort to understand the objects of study in more formal detail.

My goal has been to make this book of wide practical use to scholars, teachers, and students. I am delighted that an open access Manifold edition, with linked film clips and more images, is available to all through a link given on the copyright page as well as through academic databases, thanks to a Toward an Open Monograph Ecosystem (TOME) grant from the University of Minnesota's Libraries and College of Liberal Arts. To make the book accessible both to students of Chinese culture who are

not film specialists and to film scholars who are not China specialists, each group will occasionally need to endure basic explanations provided for the benefit of the other, or for general readers. Because works like this often are read not from cover to cover but in piecemeal fashion to suit the needs of a particular research project or academic course, I have tried to make each chapter able to stand on its own. Still, the arguments are intended to fit together in a way that I hope will be apparent to any reader of the whole book, with sustained threads of thought weaving through multiple chapters. Of course, the desire to make each chapter intelligible on its own inevitably leads to some repetition for those who read the book straight through.

This project has taken a long time to complete, and the number of interlocutors who have, knowingly or not, given me ideas, inspiration, and productive criticisms is so large that I have long since abandoned any intention of trying to list them all here. I sincerely hope that all the colleagues with whom I have participated in relevant panels, conferences, invited talks, or informal discussions over the last decade plus will recognize something of our conversations in the pages to follow and know that I am deeply thankful for their input. I am especially grateful to the hosts and funders of conferences and talks where I have presented pieces of this project, at institutions including Central China Normal University (Wuhan), Columbia University, Duke University, Harvard University, Hong Kong University, National Central University (Taiwan), New York University, Oklahoma State University, Oxford University, Princeton University, Rutgers University, Stanford University, the University of California–Berkeley, the University of Chicago, the University of Edinburgh, the University of Leeds, the University of Michigan, the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities, the University of Notre Dame, the University of Oklahoma, the University of Pittsburgh, the University of Texas at Austin, the University of Toronto, the University of Washington–Seattle, the University of Wisconsin–Madison, the University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point, and Yale University. The vibrant and ever-growing cohort of Chinese film scholars (as well as scholars in related fields) has provided me with a supportive and inspiring community without which I never could have carried such

an unwieldy project to completion, and I treasure both the intellectual stimulation and the many friendships that have developed along the way.

I also thank my past and current colleagues at the University of Minnesota for their companionship and good humor, my undergraduate students for being unwitting early listeners to many of my film readings, and my graduate students for countless rich and enlightening conversations. In the late stage of the project, Jiwei Xiao and Aleksander Sedziarz read chapters and offered encouragement and helpful suggestions while also inspiring me with their own work. My most trusted proofreader/critic and (incidentally) life companion, Stacey Burns, helped greatly with crucial final edits even in the midst of hard times. The research for the project was partially funded by a residency at the Institute for Advanced Study, two Grants-in-Aid, and a McKnight Land-Grant Professorship, all at the University of Minnesota, where I have also benefited from caring mentors and supportive department chairs, including Joe Allen, Paul Rouzer, and Christine Marran, who nudged, shoved, and cheered (as necessary) the project to completion. The University of Minnesota Press has been a pleasure to work with; thanks especially to Jason Weidemann, Zenyse Miller, Holly Monteith, Ana Bichanich, Eric Lundgren, and David Fideler, and to the anonymous manuscript reviewers who offered both overall validation and much-appreciated critical suggestions that helped to guide final revisions.

INTRODUCTION

Inscribing the Real

CINEMATIC REALISM AND CONVENTION

In an interior Chinese province in 1990, a young art institute student wandered into a cheap local movie house. The theater was showing a film already a few years old at the time, an austere, ambiguous Chinese art film that had caused a belated stir but had gone mostly unnoticed during its initial run in domestic cinemas. Years later, the viewer would describe his experience, insisting he was not exaggerating: “Within ten minutes of watching it, I was in tears, and those tears continued all the way to the end.”¹ Having walked in with no higher aspiration than to someday run his own small advertising firm, the spectator was so moved that he left the theater determined to make movies.² Three years later, he would enter the Beijing Film Academy, and within little more than a decade, he would become the most globally celebrated Chinese film director of his generation.

Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯 has described his encounter with *Yellow Earth* (*Huang tudi* 黄土地; Chen Kaige 陈凯歌, 1984) as a “shock” or “jolt,” having to do not just with the content of the film but with a realization of the expressive power of cinema as such: “I felt that it had greater capacity and potential than any mode of expression I had ever known: besides being visual and auditory, it also was temporal—in such an extended period of time, you could transmit an extremely rich set of life experiences.”³ With this film, Jia felt that he was experiencing for the first time the truth of the lives of the farmers who lived in landscapes similar to those in *Yellow Earth*, not far from his Shanxi province hometown. Viewed from the distance of a passing bus on the highway, such areas had been both “too familiar” and simultaneously “abstract” to the young Jia, the conditions

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endured by the people there never seeming real or relevant to him until he experienced the shock of this film.⁴

Jia Zhangke's reaction is a testament to the power of cinematic realism. The verisimilar depiction of poverty-stricken farmers, many played by actual residents of the locations where *Yellow Earth* was filmed, exposed him to the reality of such people's lives in a way that provoked new recognition. At the same time, his viewing experience can hardly be reduced to the mere transmission of facts by a seemingly objective record or text. His emotional, embodied response suggests not just an intellectual exposure to marginally new facts about reality but also the exhilarating shock of contact with the unknown *real* itself—a raw, charged experience that was in some way inassimilable to reality as he had previously known it.⁵ Indeed, the event called for nothing less than a reordering of his own life in view of the new truth he had experienced—not just the world shown in the movie but the power of the cinematic medium itself—so that his future would take an entirely different course after this chance encounter with a film.

The subjective nature of such an experience suggests that the power of realism in cinema is variable and unpredictable, residing as much in the viewer and the viewing situation as in the film, as much in the context as in the text. Who knows whether Jia Zhangke would have had such an intense reaction had he seen *Yellow Earth* a few years—possibly even a few days—earlier or later? In fact, the same film had been dismissed by a befuddled *New York Times* critic as Communist propaganda, and for very different reasons, Jia himself would later be highly critical of the generation of filmmakers who had made it.⁶ Some aspects of the film that originally had seemed unconventional and groundbreaking (the critic Li Tuo 李陀 had compared it to answering the door expecting an old friend and being confronted instead by a complete stranger)⁷ would appear almost as clichés a few years later, having been repeated in numerous Chinese “Fifth Generation” films featuring flamboyantly modernist compositions with robust, salt-of-the-earth peasants enacting apparently ancient rituals.⁸ Nonetheless, to this day, the unsuspecting first-time viewer is likely to be awed by the raw power of *Yellow Earth*'s images and sounds, a set of visceral provocations with no tidy, obvious message yet bearing an unshakeable sense of import, mystery, longing, strength, and sadness.⁹

INSCRIBING THE REAL

An ambiguity is built into the particular Chinese term for *realism* that gives this chapter its title.¹⁰ *Xieshizhuyi* 写实主义 combines a character meaning “to write,” “to inscribe,” or “to describe” (*xie* 写) with a character meaning “real” or “actual” (*shi* 实), followed by a suffix indicating an -*ism* (*zhuyi* 主义) or school of thought or art. *Realism* is thus literally a *credo of inscribing the real*, where *credo* can indicate anything from a set of techniques or conventions to a full-fledged aesthetic ideology. For Chinese artists, realism was intimately linked to modernity itself, in particular to the concepts of a modern nation and its citizenry. Chinese intellectuals of the early twentieth century—spurred by the historical rise and imperialist aggression of nation-states in the West, with their associated vernacular national cultures—believed that a modern, realist style had to replace the more stylized aesthetics of traditional Chinese literature, drama, and visual art.

By the early twentieth century, the modern practice of *xieshi* 写实, or “inscribing the real,” was (and still is) sometimes defined in opposition to what is considered the more traditional Chinese aesthetic of *xieyi* 写意, literally “inscribing the meaning/sense/idea/intention,” variously translated as *expressionism*, *impressionism*, *conceptualism*, and *symbolism*. In imperial China, *xieyi* referred specifically to a poetic, literati style of free-brushstroke painting, the opposite of which was not *xieshi* (as it would be in modern times) but rather the style of detailed court painting known as *gongbi* 工笔, or roughly “meticulous brush” painting.¹¹ While *gongbi* referred to a specific genre of painting, the closest equivalent to a more general meaning of “realism” in premodern Chinese aesthetic theory may have been simply *zhen* 真, which signifies more broadly “authenticity” rather than necessarily a mimetically accurate representation of reality,¹² so that a more formalist or expressionist work could just as well be credited with truthfulness, sincerity, or authenticity as a rigorously verisimilar one.¹³

In contrast to such a single-character sign for truth, authenticity, or an ultimate spiritual reality, the modern four-character term for realism, *xieshizhuyi* 写实主义, clearly implies a mimetic representation, promising access to an external reality through some form of inscription or

recording. At the same time, the inclusion of that character for “writing” or “inscription” (*xie* 写) as well as the suffix for an *-ism* or doctrine (*zhuyi* 主义) suggests the potential for representation itself to become problematic. That is, if the real is “inscribed” by art through a doctrine or set of conventions, then a potential gap opens up between the representation and the reality it purportedly captures; the *real* real threatens always to elude or exceed the ostensibly realist work of art, and the process of inscription itself may take on autonomous qualities beyond the “reality” it records. Such autonomies of form over “real” content could range from the formalisms of high modernism to the generic conventions of popular entertainments. In either case, a tension develops between any claim to realist representation and the formal conventions that are employed to achieve such contact with the real.¹⁴

DIALECTICS OF REALISM AND CONVENTION

It is precisely this tension that Roman Jakobson explicates in his concise 1921 essay “On Realism in Art,” which sketches what can usefully be taken as an abstract model of the historical dialectics of realism. Jakobson begins by distinguishing two types of realism. One is “the conservative tendency to remain within the limits of a given artistic tradition, conceived as faithfulness to reality.”¹⁵ At the time of his writing, this tendency would have corresponded, in literature, to the nineteenth-century European realist novel or, in painting, to the kind of Renaissance-based “academic” realism still taught in established art academies. The opposing model of realism, however, was “the tendency to deform given artistic norms” and, moreover, to view such “deformation as a more accurate rendition of reality.”¹⁶ At the time, this tendency would have been embodied by the various modernist avant-gardes then erupting in both literature and the visual arts, a major purpose of which was precisely to eliminate the distance between art and life.¹⁷ In the former case of realism, “I hold my own values (the tradition to which I belong) to be the most realistic” and “I declare that the only genuine realism is the one on which I was brought up,” whereas in the latter case, “I can readily ascribe a realistic tendency . . . to forms which were never conceived as such” as long as

they are shattering conventions while “a new truth [is] being sought.”¹⁸ Such an insight into what Jakobson calls “the extreme relativity of the concept of ‘realism’” suggests the potential for historical cycles in which a set of radically new approaches first challenges the old aesthetic order but then may itself become hegemonic and in need of challenging after its conventions no longer appear to provide access to the real but, on the contrary, seem to have become clichéd formulas that block such access—at which time the cycle can begin anew with the radical breaking of those (no longer) realist conventions.¹⁹

The focus for most of this book will be on historically situated, contextual readings of various claims to, or models of, realism in the history of mainland Chinese fiction film.²⁰ How does any film, and the critical discourse surrounding it, stake out a claim to “realism” by reference to other types of cinema or other cultural forms that are deemed to be “unrealistic”? And how does such a claim to realism itself assert a set of conventions, whether preexisting or new at the time, that other (often later) artists or critics may in turn find artificial, constricting, and therefore in need of shattering for the sake of provoking a fresh confrontation with the real? Jakobson’s model suggests that such questions are inescapably questions of history, so that any claim to a universal, ahistorical definition of *realism* unwittingly finds itself caught in the same historical dynamic; if we were to settle on a singular concept of what constitutes realism, no matter how ingenious or true we might find it today, we ultimately may only be seen as adhering to another “conservative tendency” destined for historical oblivion.

Jakobson’s model of artistic change described in the preceding paragraphs, insofar as it shows that realism is inextricable from convention, could even be taken to support the idea that the ostensible *referent* of realism—the *real* itself, whatever that is—must be acknowledged as fundamentally inaccessible. Thus, in structural linguistics (developed by Ferdinand de Saussure and a major influence on Jakobson), signs are studied in terms of the signifier—the sound of a word, for example—and the signified, taken to be not a real thing but rather the concept that the word means, while the referent or nonlinguistic reality to which the latter may correspond is “bracketed” as beyond the scope of analysis of the

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system of symbolic representation.²¹ Such a potentially problematic gap between the “bracketed” real and the ways we experience, conceptualize, or represent it is of course evident in many forms of modern philosophy and critical theory—for example, Immanuel Kant’s idea of the *noumenal* “thing-in-itself”: while we have the *idea* that things exist entirely independently of our experience of them, they remain inaccessible to us *in themselves*.²²

This can lead to a paradoxical view of the real as a mere *effect* of culture and therefore nothing but a kind of representational illusion; I only posit a reality “out there” because I am cued to do so by language or conventions “in here,” within my own culturally mediated experience. However, such a radical constructivism amounts to a form of philosophical idealism, neglecting the material realities of both natural and historical forces. An account of the pictorial arts in particular (and especially the photographic arts) that reduces all realism *solely* to conventions of representation—to the point that any role played by an “objective” external reality is denied altogether—commits an overt textualization of the image. The typical viewer does not merely experience a film, for example, as a set of symbolic signs to be read but also generally grasps the image (and, after the silent film era, sound) as an immediately recognizable perception—and does so not in a case of pure hallucination induced by artistic and ideological conventions but rather because, in the usual case of live-action photography, the images seen are in fact generated by a material reality that was before the camera. Thus a filmed shot, say, of a tree (the famous wind-blown leaves of *Baby’s Meal* [*Repas de bébé*; Louis Lumière, 1895], for example) has a level of cross-cultural recognition that no spoken sound or written word (“tree,” *shù* 树, etc.) could ever have, given the arbitrary differences between languages and the distinction between linguistic comprehension and perceptual apprehension. Even in the case of animation, the moving image provokes a visceral sense impression that is different from the reading of symbolic signs such as in a written text. I therefore reject any idea—possibly inspired by art historical studies like those of Erwin Panofsky and E. H. Gombrich, in addition to structuralism, poststructuralism, and the late twentieth-century “linguistic turn” in cultural theory and philosophy as a whole—that pictorial representation

in general or photography in particular is a *purely* conventionalized and culturally constructed visual experience.²³

Thus, despite the importance of Jakobson's insight into the conventionality of realism, cinematic realism should not be analytically approached in a way that reduces realism *entirely* to the conventions of arbitrary symbolic systems. Even Jakobson's essay implies that artists, particularly when they are trying to overcome entrenched conventions, are acting in some sense under the *pressure of the real*, in however mediated a form, so that his model suggests not just a historical dialectic between different sets of conventions—in which ones formerly labeled “realist” are periodically replaced by new ones in a seemingly random series—but implicitly an additional dialectic between art and reality itself. Art may always engage conventions of various sorts, but it cannot help but both impinge upon and be inflected by the real, if only as an “absent cause” that cannot necessarily be fully revealed or expressed in a narrative or work of art. Here I refer to Fredric Jameson's rejection, even in the case of literature, of the poststructuralist notion that the “much maligned ‘referent’ itself” does not exist at all just because “it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious.”²⁴ While it is no doubt true that we are always already within culture (and its “political unconscious”), we nonetheless do not merely navigate through arbitrary symbols or narratives in an endless game but also inevitably deal with the embodied pains and pleasures of our lived experiences of human history, including the broader biological and geological forces in which humans are embedded—experiences that help to forge and reshape those symbols or narratives in a never-ending, and never entirely successful, effort to account for the wonder and the agony of the real.

We must live, in addition and as a result, with an *anxiety of the real*—including an at least semiconscious awareness that there are aspects of the real that escape our current, culturally mediated construction of “reality.” As Catherine Belsey puts it, “if anything resists the sovereignty of the symbolic order, we always risk the uncanny possibility of an encounter that exceeds what culture permits us to define.”²⁵ In this view, the *real*

is not just some semiotic sleight of hand generated by culture, not just a constructed *reality*; it is, rather, the limit of culture, the determinate constraint and anxiety with which we contend and to which we adjust *through* culture. As Jacques Lacan precisely defined it, “the real is what does not depend on my idea of it,” and yet it is what our ideas and conventions seek to tame.²⁶ What is at stake in theorizing realism is at least in part the fact that we always live in a certain limited reality that we provisionally understand and anticipate, yet we are never far from a limitless universe of things in time and space that we do not. In cinema, albeit in an always mediated fashion, the processes of a real universe *press in* on us, sometimes in reassuringly familiar forms, other times in ways novel and unsettling. Of course, audiences generally treasure the familiar—hence popular genre cinema—yet in cinema, we also risk an unexpected encounter with the real, an experience that can then change our “reality,” sometimes even to the extent that Jia Zhangke’s reality was changed by *Yellow Earth*.

CINEMATIC REALISMS

This book distinguishes several different conceptual approaches to cinematic realism, each of which implicitly posits its own particular level of reality that is captured, whether it be the empirical material world; the world of embodied sensory experience; the illusory world of a fiction; a social or historical totality; or a philosophical, ethical, or ideological truth. Claims to realism in cinema have much overlap with similar issues in the other arts but also take on particular forms in assessing the medium of film. The categories sketched in what follows are meant to be neither exhaustive nor neat divisions; they are intended to categorize not necessarily films themselves but rather theoretical or analytical takes on realism—divergent approaches that often can be applied to the same films. Given the slipperiness and historical variability of the term *realism*, the differentiation of a few different models of it in the case of cinema can help to prevent category errors in which claims to one type of realism are mistakenly refuted by reference to assumptions rooted in a very different understanding of the term. What follows, then, is a preliminary mapping of six categories of cinematic realism—ontological realism, perceptual

realism, fictional realism, social realism, prescriptive realism, and apophasic realism—with brief discussions that also point toward the most relevant later chapters in this book.

Ontological realism refers to the notion that the technology of photography provides a uniquely intimate and direct connection to material reality. This idea—which is sometimes (and somewhat problematically) summarized as “indexical” realism—arises from an important strain of classical film theory, represented in particular by André Bazin.²⁷ The point is that photography—and, by extension, film, because conventionally, it was composed of twenty-four still photographs projected each second—has a uniquely strong tie to the objects it represents owing to the existential, causal relationship between object and photographic image. Traditional photography “automatically” records whatever is in front of the camera lens in a direct manner because light reflected from the object itself creates patterns in the emulsion on the filmstrip. Of course, human agency is required to decide—and quite possibly manipulate—what is to be filmed, but the optical and photochemical processes of the lens and filmstrip allow the camera to mechanically capture even parts of the material reality before the camera (“profilmic” reality) that perhaps were not intended or even noticed by the photographer.

This direct existential relation of the photograph to its objects appears to be what Bazin meant by his assertion that what photography gives us is “the object itself, but liberated from its temporal contingencies. . . . It has been created out of the ontology of the model. It is the model.”²⁸ Many later film theorists also have drawn upon and elaborated similar arguments about the intrinsic ontological realism of photography or film—including, to name only a few, Dudley Andrew, Roland Barthes, Stanley Cavell, Mary Ann Doane, Laura Mulvey, D. N. Rodowick, and Philip Rosen.²⁹

This idea of a direct relationship between the filmic image and a preexisting profilmic reality—which in some ways also subtends other arguments for realism listed in the following pages—is addressed most directly in chapters 1 and 7 of the current study. In chapter 1, which deals with discourses of realism and performance style in Chinese silent cinema and particularly the relationship of cinema to theater, we see how film’s ability to capture real locations as well as actors’ bodily performances was

said to give it a privileged position among the performance arts in the context of an overall shift toward realism as China underwent semicolonial modernization. The relatively sudden rise in importance of realism in the arts in turn relates to a much broader discourse of *scientism* in Chinese intellectual life of the early twentieth century. Indeed, the type of *real* posited by ontological realism is in part that of the physical sciences—actual, discrete objects that make up “objective” material reality, the evidence of which can be recorded, measured, and at least in some sense *known* with the aid of instruments like the camera.

Chapter 7 reexamines claims to ontological realism in light of the rise of digital cinema, including both low-budget digital video (DV) filmmaking and special-effects blockbusters that make extensive use of computer-generated imagery (CGI). As has been widely discussed in cinema and new media theory, the digital revolution potentially calls into question the film medium’s previous claims to ontological realism, though I will argue that there remains a very important strain of Chinese digital cinema that continues to rely heavily on the viewer’s sense of the ontological realism of the image. The concept of photographic ontological realism is also key to several intervening chapters. For example, chapter 5 deals in part with how the ontological realism of cinema potentially lends increased credibility even to fictional representations of historical events, whereas chapter 6 notes that a reaction against master narratives of history may draw upon the capacity of film to register contingent detail and unexpected events.

Claims for what I am calling *perceptual realism*, our second category of cinematic realisms, emphasize not the ontological relationship between the cinematic image and a preexisting profilmic reality but rather the capacity of the moving image, whether photographic or otherwise (*animation*, CGI), to engage our perceptual apparatus and seize our attention, presenting itself to our senses as “real” whether or not it is seen as representing something else that is ontologically real.³⁰ This could also be called *phenomenological*, *experiential*, or *virtual* realism, as it has to do with immediate visual and aural perception and the “real” embodied sensory experience that results even as the spectator remains intellectually aware that the images and sounds are not “real.” Extreme examples

would include the feeling of dizziness induced by a shot from a camera on a moving roller coaster or the reflexive bodily flinching provoked by a sudden scare in a horror film. The difference between perceptual realism and ontological realism can be quickly grasped when we consider the fact that such reactions can be elicited by well-crafted animation or CGI as much as by live-action cinematography.

The tension between the perceptual realism of the moving image and the intellectual knowledge that it is “fake”—even live-action shots are really just flat images on a screen—always has been central to the fascination of cinema. Tom Gunning has described an “aesthetic of astonishment” among viewers of early film, who experienced a “pleasurable vacillation between belief and doubt” and appreciated the realism of the cinematic illusion all the more for knowing that it was an illusion.³¹ More recently Gunning has made further arguments regarding the centrality of *movement* to the perceptual realism of the moving image, with important consequences not only for early celluloid cinema but for animation and contemporary digital cinema.³² Indeed, perceptual realism is crucial to the concept of *immediacy* as elaborated by new media theorists Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, who note that most makers and consumers of visual culture “continue to assume that [the illusion of] unmediated presentation is the ultimate goal of visual representation and to believe that technological progress toward that goal is being made.”³³ Many of the technological advances in the history of cinema—from the additions of sound and color to contemporary advances of 3-D and CGI techniques—have been driven by the goal of providing ever greater immediacy to the viewer’s perceptual experience, to move toward what Bazin called the “myth of total cinema”—a “complete realism” that provides a “perfect illusion of the outside world.”³⁴

Of course, as Gunning emphasized, spectators, whether today or in early cinema, do not naively or delusively mistake an illusion for the real thing. Perceptual realism involves something far more complex: an ongoing, enjoyable play between realism and illusionism, between immediate sensory perception and intellectual awareness of the image’s artificiality. New technological developments—most recently virtual reality, for example—continually seek to renew that sense of wonder evoked by the

tension between the sensory *experience* of perceptual realism and the cognitive *awareness* of illusionism.

Both ontological realism and perceptual realism, as defined herein, contribute to the more culturally dependent categories of *fictional* and *social* realism outlined in what follows, because the apparent reality and immediacy of the moving image help to facilitate audience absorption and promote the plausibility of a film's fictional world. For example, the spectator's possible mimetic response to the image—any tendency to imitate what is seen on screen, such as laughing or crying—is enabled partly by perceptual realism, and thus so is identification with the actor's performance, as is discussed in the next chapter. However, the issues raised by perceptual realism will be returned to most directly with the discussion of CGI in chapter 7. We will see that perceptual realism can survive and even thrive when other, closely related types of realism (such as ontological and social realism) are abandoned.

In this book, *fictional realism* will refer to the tendency of narrative film to encourage diegetic immersion, in which a fictional world (*diegesis*) is taken as provisionally “real” for the purpose of feeling (positively or negatively) for characters and enjoying the story, whether or not the story’s world actually resembles our own. Alternative labels for this include “absorptive realism” and “diegetic illusionism.”³⁵ So-called classical fiction film narration—as pioneered by figures like D. W. Griffith, standardized in Hollywood by the 1920s, adopted to varying degrees by other entertainment cinemas throughout the world, and analyzed in landmark works of film scholarship—can be thought of largely as an effective system for producing fictional realism.³⁶ For example, the so-called continuity system of editing consists of conventions designed to keep the viewer focused on information from the fictional world rather than the formal devices that deliver that information. A type of edit like an eyeline match, for instance, habituates the viewer to connect a shot of a person looking off-screen with a subsequent shot of an object in a way that obscures the rupture of the cut by creating a larger unit of story-based meaning: character *a* looked at object *b*. The cut is thus made “invisible” to viewers insofar as they are focused on the events of the fictional world rather than the formal devices that reveal—or, rather, *construct*—such events.

The constructed world of a fiction film usually will have much overlap with the real world, but it also will have key differences. It may be set in a real city, for example, but have imaginary characters. The fictional world will tend to obey the basic laws of physics that govern our world—gravity, for example—except in cases where it does not, say, in a martial arts fantasy like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (*Wohu canglong* 卧虎藏龙; Ang Lee 李安, 2000).³⁷ A fictional world may more or less successfully imitate our world in a multitude of its small details (costumes, furniture, architecture, incidental human behavior) precisely to draw us in and help us accept what might otherwise be the far-fetched make-believe of its story.³⁸

V. F. Perkins has emphasized that we must take seriously the idea that a fiction film creates its own world, sharing aspects of ours but still distinct, which we are encouraged through cinematic technique to imagine as whole: “We are offered an assembly of bits and pieces from which to compose a world. Fragmentary representation yields an imagined solidity and extensiveness.”³⁹ Anyone who has walked by a film shoot in progress likely has been struck by its artificiality. Almost any shot in a conventional fiction film would, if the camera were simply to track back farther than the shot allows, suddenly reveal many markers of its own constructedness—boom microphones, various types of artificial lights and reflectors, film crew members, possibly other cameras, dolly tracks, and so on. What is remarkable is the seeming ease with which a classical fiction film spurs us to lose ourselves in a fictional world that is in fact so fragmented and constructed on a shot-by-shot basis. Even the camera itself, while directing our gaze throughout the film, is disavowed by the world it shows us: “It is not that these characters are oblivious to the camera. There is no camera in their world.”⁴⁰

Fictional realism thus results when film narration coaxes fragmentary representation to yield a cohesive world with the help of the viewer’s imagination. We tend to think that, for a successful film made according to classical norms, after we leave the theater, it will seem that it all fits together. Countless details will have been seen as appropriate to the film’s world; there will be no important hanging plot threads; gaps of time (narrative ellipses) and space (shifts of camera position between

shots and scenes) will not have fundamentally disrupted the narrative chain of events; resolutions of major conflicts will have occurred; and in all likelihood (for Hollywood films at least), the coherent fictional world will be imagined to continue its existence in a provisionally positive and stable (if not necessarily happily-ever-after) mode after the film's story is over (or at least until some new crisis necessitates a sequel).

Considering its function of making the film world seem like a unified whole, we can see why the film narration must rely on nondiegetic stylistic elements in addition to fictional events depicted on-screen. To return to the example of continuity editing, the potential disruption presented by the technique of the cut is trumped by the way it can facilitate the directing of audience attention to the most relevant characters, objects, and events in the story world. As long as editing remains roughly within the conventions of the continuity system, it enables classical narration and thus fictional realism; only when editing becomes especially unconventional does it draw attention to itself and potentially disrupt the viewer's diegetic absorption. Another example is a typical fiction film's soundtrack, which, in addition to the sounds that seem to emanate directly from the fictional world, frequently will include some nondiegetic music, which (Perkins points out) often "dictates a mood that is the film's and not that of any of its characters"; it "is part of the film and not part of the fiction."⁴¹ Soundtrack music, like continuity editing, though not itself part of the fictional world, nonetheless helps to unify that world into a seeming whole by presenting or reinforcing important information, even if that information is just a mood that we are encouraged to sense at a particular moment in the fictional narrative. Thus, in the classical film, elements of style and convention are more likely to facilitate fictional realism than they are to disrupt it.

As noted earlier, although here we distinguish fictional realism for analytical purposes, in our actual viewing experience, it is in many ways inseparable from ontological and perceptual realism, insofar as both the intrinsic realism of photography and the phenomenological realism of the moving image greatly facilitate our propensity to suspend our disbelief and lose ourselves in fictional worlds. However, fictional realism extends beyond those elements to include countless conventions of

characterization and storytelling, relying on aspects like acting styles and genre standards to construct the story world. Generally, by the end of a classical Hollywood-style film, we feel we know all that is necessary to be satisfied that the world we have seen is unified and the story has reached, if not a final closure, then at least a “closure effect,” in which we are reassured that at least *this* story in the fictional world is over.⁴² However, Perkins reminds us that the classical self-contained solidity of the story world is only one option for a filmmaker and that it can be equally artistically valid to challenge such unity and closure: “The degree to which the filmmaker maintains the independence, solidity, and coherence of the fictional world is a matter of choice and a variable. The decisions have great significance for style and meaning but no immediate bearing on achievement.”⁴³

This point brings us to one of the central concerns of chapter 2, which examines how late silent and early sound cinema in China freely borrowed conventions from classical Hollywood and elsewhere in the West yet also frequently disrupted the unifying function of the narration. Sudden shifts in characterization, tone, or theme might transform a romantic comedy into a work of social critique. Inserted metacinematic sequences might subtly call into question the escapism of entertainment cinema in general. Films might conclude with open-ended questions rather than any sort of reassuring closure effect. The resulting cinema of the Shanghai Left-Wing Film Movement, while greatly indebted to the classical standard and arguably constituting an example of its global spread as “vernacular modernism,” nonetheless in many cases departed fundamentally from classical norms, in part by eschewing the unity of classical fictional realism in favor of a more artistically avant-garde and socially critical practice.⁴⁴

Chapter 3 as well is directly concerned with fictional realism, introducing in particular the degree to which a fictional film world presents us with what Umberto Eco has called an “epistemological metaphor.”⁴⁵ Using three classic Chinese films of the late 1940s, it explores how a fictional world can model reality as either essentially knowable or unavoidably resistant to epistemological certainty. A film with a more classical form—including the canonical films of the Mao era (see chapters 4 and 5)—will imply both a totality (a unified, knowable fictional world) and a teleology (a purposive direction of events toward a predestined conclusion), while films with a

more “open” form, such as many art films in general but also specifically some of the 1930s left-wing Chinese films discussed in chapter 2, the unique film by Fei Mu discussed in chapter 3, and the post-socialist realist cinema examined in chapter 6, will present built-in gaps in knowability, with no sure, final outcome. The former reassure us with the sense that the world is knowable, whereas the latter may uncomfortably confront us with the limits of our knowledge. The fictional world of a film thereby suggests a “structural homology” with epistemology in general.⁴⁶

Insofar as fictional realism relates metaphorically to our own world, it also invites the question of plausibility, or whether the world presented by a film corresponds to what a particular community takes to be the “real” world. Indeed, in everyday discussions of the movies, the meaning of *realism* tends to revolve not around the ontological, perceptual, or fictional varieties discussed earlier but rather quite simply around the degree of correspondence between the fictional world and the social reality of a given audience. The effect of *social realism* builds on the three categories of realism already discussed; a film obviously relies quite heavily on the ontological realism of photography, the perceptual realism of the moving image and changing sounds, and the perceived cohesiveness or knowability of a fictional world to achieve a sense of verisimilitude. However, social realism goes beyond those aspects to embrace as well complex sociological and cultural factors. For example, do the language and behavior of the characters appear to be similar in their details to what spectators see in their daily lives? Do important categories of social life, such as gender, race, sexuality, nationality, and class, appear to be accurately represented? It is in factors such as these that cinematic realism also may be most apt to appear as historically and culturally contingent. Acting, for instance, that appears as entirely naturalistic at the time and place a film is made may appear as highly mannered to an audience a half century later or in a very different culture. The verisimilitude of acting styles is the focus of the next chapter, which considers how the shift from Chinese traditions of dramatic performance to modern notions about film performance was connected to historically specific cultural developments, such as the introduction of Western scientism into Chinese intellectual life, as mentioned previously.

Social realism is associated with the classic nineteenth-century realist novels of Europe, which continued to wield a strong influence on realist aesthetics well into the twentieth century, including in China. As early as 1854, Karl Marx glowingly praised “the present splendid brotherhood of fiction writers in England, whose graphic and eloquent pages have issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together.”⁴⁷ What particularly impressed Marx was these writers’ damning portraits of the bourgeois middle class in England. Implicit in these observations from the mid-nineteenth century was a premise that would continue to guide proponents of social realism decades later, including many of the leading intellectuals of China’s New Culture Movement during the May Fourth era (approximately 1915–25) and beyond as well as important leftist European literary theorists, such as Georg Lukács: the idea that in unflinchingly and accurately reflecting society, complete with all its problems, realist art implicitly serves the function of social critique and thereby helps to lay the groundwork for social progress.

Owing to this function of critique, particularly in literary studies, *social realism* often is used interchangeably with *critical realism*. However, for the purposes of my typology of claims to cinematic realism, I would like to insist on the former category being in principle more expansive than the latter, which nonetheless forms a large and important subset within it. That is, in defining social realism as a sense of verisimilitude in the social reality constructed within a film, we do not *necessarily* have to take that depiction as serving the function of social critique in the service of some implicit reform or revolutionary agenda; if a spectator says “No Dai minority farmer from southern Yunnan would be speaking such perfect Beijing Mandarin!” she is applying the standards of social realism without regard to whether the film in question serves to critique society.

Still, the history of realism as a self-conscious practice in modern China, both in cinema and in the other arts, quite often has emphasized the potential of social realism for critique. The films of the 1930s Left-Wing Film Movement discussed in chapter 2 became canonized as classics of critical realism (although, as we will see, that is far from all they were). In revealing the desperate conditions of life for those suffering from both

economic hardship and encroaching war during that decade, these films implicitly called for social reform, resistance, and even revolution. The tradition was renewed in the immediate postwar period, as chapter 3 examines. Afterward, with the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the trend of politicized realism continued but also morphed from critical *social* realism into China's version of *socialist* realism (see the subsequent discussion). Later, in the post-Mao reform era, the tradition of critical realism found renewed vitality with what I describe in chapter 6 as the phenomenon of post-socialist realism that spanned several decades.

In my typology of the various sorts of realist claims for cinema, I use the term *prescriptive realism* to refer to the idea that a film might seek to represent, not just reality as it now appears, but a truer reality that lies beneath the surface or is yet to be fully realized. Such a film thereby encourages the awareness or realization of that higher or deeper reality by presenting it as an abstracted form or ideal. In choosing the term *prescriptive*, I suggest an analogy with what is known in linguistics as prescriptive grammar—which aims to describe how people *should* talk according to the supposed inner logic of a language (or simply the “rules” as taught to children in school)—as opposed to *descriptive* grammar, which describes how people actually *do* talk (analogous to verisimilar social realism).

Chapter 1 shows how even mundane repetitions of Hollywood conventions can serve as prescriptive guides to the practice of being modern, and in later chapters, we will observe how social realism can abstract from surface appearances to try to show social reality's deep structure, as Lukács as well as many Chinese critics argued. This is the moment when a realist mode begins to become prescriptive, insofar as a formal idea or argument of some kind is emphasized, potentially at the expense of surface-level verisimilitude. In the shades of difference between social realism and prescriptive realism, sometimes visible within a single film, we trace a historical progression of realism in China from the Republican to the Communist era (as well as from the revolutionary to the reform era, when the pendulum swung back).

In this book, then, prescriptive realism is most obviously represented by the cinema of the PRC during the Mao era (1949–76). As mentioned earlier, the cinema of that era could also be referred to as China's variant

on the international phenomenon of socialist realism, which was first formalized in the Soviet Union in the early 1930s and later spread throughout the Communist world during the Cold War. Commonly dismissed in the West as propaganda but in many cases achieving both popular appeal and artistic success, socialist realism was the official art form of the Comintern-based Communist bloc and was aimed explicitly at serving the revolutionary cause. In China itself, the term *socialist realism* was only in common use between 1953 and 1958; instead, other terms, such as *proletarian realism*, *revolutionary realism*, or even a *combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism*, were favored in official discourse.

However, that variation in naming is only one of the reasons I use the more general (and less ideologically laden) term *prescriptive realism*. Chapters 4 and 5 show how the revolutionary realist form drew heavily on the conventions of melodrama, and indeed it shared a similar basis and function as melodrama does more generally—to use conventionalized character stereotypes and narrative scenarios to represent social truths and moral universes that underlie daily reality. In fact, I suggest in chapters 6 and 7 that this prescriptive mode of realism is not at all limited to socialist or revolutionary realism but also can describe, for example, the typical martial arts film—or, for that matter, a large number of American westerns, action films, or fantasy films. By the 1990s and 2000s, many Chinese films manifested prescriptive realism in the new form of *capitalist realism*—idealized representations of the neoliberal subject in the era of globalization. In each of these cases, “unrealistically” typified representations are used to convey “real” romantic, moral, or ideological ideals.

The final mode of realism that I define as a general type is *apoplectic realism*, which returns us to the question raised earlier of a real that by definition escapes representation and thus calls for, as Laura Mulvey put it in a discussion of Abbas Kiarostami’s films, “an aesthetic of reality . . . in which the cinema acknowledges the limitations of representation.”⁴⁸ Under the category of fictional realism, we touched upon Eco’s notion of the “open work,” in which a work of art serves as a metaphor for a more generalized epistemological uncertainty. We can relate this both to Jakobson’s discussion of the dynamics of realism and to the notion of a film’s “world” as analyzed by Perkins. Eco and Jakobson were responding,

each in his own moment in the development of both semiotics and art, in large part to the challenges raised by the twentieth-century avant-gardes in visual art and literature. Jakobson noted that when an accepted set of “realist” conventions no longer appears sufficient to grasp a current reality, the urge to break those conventions will arise to facilitate the search for a new truth. Eco similarly attributes the rise of the “open work” to “a different vision of the world,” through which “an ordered world based on universally acknowledged laws is being replaced by a world based on ambiguity, both in the negative sense that directional centers are missing and in a positive sense, because values and dogma are constantly being placed in question.”⁴⁹ Serving as an epistemological metaphor, a work of narrative art may thus manifest a general uncertainty or skepticism about accepted reality by opening up fissures in narrative conventions and gaps in the world thus constructed, leaving open questions, unresolved issues, and blind spots in the narration. As Perkins put it, in films, we are “led to understand more than we have seen”—that is, we grasp things that the narrative only implies; but at the same time, “to be in a world is to know the partiality of knowledge and the boundedness of vision—to be aware that there is always a bigger picture.”⁵⁰ Indeed, there is always the possibility that the bigger picture will exceed what we are capable of seeing, and indeterminacy thereby becomes an inevitable, if generally denied, part of the world (*any* world). The occluded bigger picture actually is an unavoidable result of what Francesco Casetti calls “the partiality of the cinematic gaze”: “In showing one thing, it can and perhaps must leave something else out, even though what escapes us is sometimes at the heart of the story. Everything visible is accompanied by the invisible, and the invisible may constitute the essential.”⁵¹

To the extent that the real defies or exceeds a system of representation, it—or rather, its impossibility within the capacity of current conventions—can only be represented in a negative or subtractive manner, through silence, gaps, *unsaying*, that is, through apophysis.⁵² Just as apophatic theology insists that God or the absolute cannot be defined positively but only in terms of what it is not, apophatic realism is a mode of representation that seeks to acknowledge its own fundamental limitations, to build into its system an opening toward something beyond what representation

can express.⁵³ Though that opening may appear as a kind of *nothing* (gap, absence, lack, void) within what is represented, apophatic discourse is not nihilism but rather an acknowledgment that the real is more immeasurable, complex, rich, multiple, and mysterious than even a “realist” representation of it can possibly account for. Apophatic realism thus suggests that a proper ontology of cinema must concern itself not only with film’s capacity to reveal either known or new parts of reality to us but also with its capacity to point to what exceeds representation, to acknowledge the unrepresentable, the pure multiple of potentiality, an infinity that can only be figured as a nothing.

Of course, the idea, or anxiety, that something of the real inevitably escapes any human system of thought or representation has been expressed in many ways in various schools of philosophy and aesthetics in the modern West—for example, Ludwig Wittgenstein’s unspeakable, Martin Heidegger’s *Being/Sein*, Roland Barthes’s third or obtuse meaning, Jacques Derrida’s *differance*, Jacques Lacan’s Real, Luce Irigaray’s indeterminateness, Alain Badiou’s indiscernible, and Graham Harman’s fundamentally “withdrawn” objects, to name a few examples. The fact that these thinkers’ various projects are vastly different in so many ways only makes more notable the structural homology of a deeply apophatic moment in their thought—an insistence not only that there is something that exceeds representation or understanding but that that something may turn out to be the most important thing of all, threatening the system it exceeds but also potentially offering the utopian promise of liberation from that system. In fact, while seemingly characteristic of modernity, apophatic discourse goes back thousands of years in the West and also has a key position in the history of traditional Chinese thought and art, particularly in its Daoist and Chan Buddhist strains.⁵⁴ Traditional Chinese thought and aesthetics may even lend themselves to the expression of modern apophatic anxieties, and we can trace their influences on certain Chinese filmmakers without necessarily resorting to simplistic cultural essentialisms.

Apophatic realism in film does not deny the powers of cinema to pursue the other types of realism already discussed, but it does find ways to gesture toward an openness of meaning or surplus of reality beyond the

knowable world of a film. Cinema has many resources for indicating the unfigurable. Off-screen space can become not just an assumed extension of the story world or a space from which something new might appear but also a way to point to an irreducible limit to our understanding of the fictional world (which, again, functions as an epistemological metaphor for our own world). Edgar Morin described the camera lens as fixing a look “on the edge of the real”; off-screen space can be used to remind us of the real beyond that edge.⁵⁵ Ellipses in narrated time can serve much the same function, particularly when they skip not only events that can be either inferred or ignored as irrelevant but ones that may be crucial to the unity of the story world. Bazin, discussing Italian Neorealist filmmaker Vittorio De Sica, notes that ellipses are essential to the overall structure of his narratives: “The empty gaps, the white spaces, the parts of the event that we are not given, are themselves of a concrete nature: stones which are missing from the building.” Bazin goes on to note that these gaps are themselves verisimilar, in that the lack of complete knowability of the story world mimics that of our own: “It is the same in life: we do not know everything that happens to others.”⁵⁶ Besides being skipped by ellipses, events can be shown, but in ways that still highlight the necessary incompleteness of the spectator’s knowledge. We see the final event of *Goodbye South, Goodbye* (*Nanguo zaijian, nanguo* 南国再见, 南国; Hou Hsiao-hsien 侯孝贤, 1996), but from a vantage point that makes it impossible to really decipher. Alternatively, we may see the same events from a multiplicity of viewpoints in a way that calls any singular understanding of the events into question. Famously, in Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* (1950), we see irreconcilable versions of ostensibly the same events, so that the apophtic realism of the film lies precisely in the unbridgeable gaps between the alternative versions of the story. More subtly, in Béla Tarr’s *Sátántangó* (1994) and Gus Van Sant’s *Elephant* (2003), we eventually circle around to see identical narrative moments from the perspectives of different characters, calling our attention to the fundamental discrepancies between different subjects’ experiences of the world and therefore the limits of each perspective. As a general category, apophtic realism can cover either a narration that is highly *knowledgeable* but less *communicative*—withholding information from the audience—

or one whose knowledgeability itself is limited.⁵⁷ That is, an apophasic technique could simply withhold information about the film's world that it could have included, frustrating viewer expectations or knowledge of the fictional world, or it could more drastically suggest that there is something fundamentally withheld from knowledge or presence in our world in general; it could choose not to represent something that it *could have*, or it could gesture to something as *fundamentally unrepresentable*.

The idea of apophasic realism proposed here draws on various important strands in the history of film theory. Aside from Bazin's thoughts on ellipses, a kind of apophasis is implicit in the idea of cinematic *excess*—the exceeding of narrative meaning or signifying exposition in a film—as explored in particular by Kristin Thompson in the case of fiction film and Bill Nichols in the case of documentary.⁵⁸ In another context, Thompson and Bordwell have identified a radical openness of meaning in the films of Yasujiro Ozu as an aesthetically modernist impulse rather than, as others had suggested, showing the influence of Japanese Zen Buddhism, particularly the concept of *mu* (無; *wu* in Chinese) or nothingness.⁵⁹ As suggested, however, such a dichotomy between Eastern “traditional” thought and Western modernism may be misleading when discussing apophasic realism in films from East Asia. Indeed, it is notable that our most in-depth discussions of that mode of realism will be in considering a filmmaker who has been called among the most distinctively “Chinese” in his aesthetics, Fei Mu (chapter 3).⁶⁰

As mentioned earlier, these categories of cinematic realism are intended not as exhaustive or universal but mainly as heuristic devices for the purposes of the present study; other categories could be added for different objects of study.⁶¹ They are analytical tools to provide clarity in considering theoretical and critical claims, not necessarily a typology for categorizing specific films, nor even as always clearly distinguishable aspects of our moment-to-moment experience of watching films. In terms of actual spectatorial attention, for example, in a film with live-action photography and few special effects, ontological and perceptual realism will usually reinforce each other to the point of being essentially indistinguishable, while also contributing to a more general sense of fictional

and potentially social realism. A strong feeling of fictional realism, that is, thorough immersion in a compelling story world, may in turn help to cultivate prescriptive realism—the sense that the fictional world provides a clarity that can mold our values and guide our actions in our own more corrupted and confusing world. The six categories I have named, then, are a reminder that realism can mean so many different things as to become meaningless unless such distinctions are made, yet each historically situated film or critical claim, when examined in all its complexity, likely will bring into play multiple approaches to realism.

CINEMATIC CONVENTIONS

André Bazin famously ends his essay “The Ontology of the Photographic Image”—a foundational text for the theory of ontological realism described earlier—with an enigmatic disclaimer: “then again, film is a language.”⁶² It is moments like this that have led later scholars, beginning with Peter Wollen, to graft Bazin’s arguments onto those of the pioneering nineteenth-century semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce, in particular his division of cultural signs into three types—iconic, indexical, and symbolic.⁶³ In this argument, a film image not only looks like its referent in the manner of an *iconic* representation, such as a painting or drawing, but also has an *indexical* tie to it, pointing to the original by means of a direct existential relationship (the automatic inscription of light from the object on the filmstrip), thus constituting the medium’s ontological link to the real. Language, on the other hand, is a *symbolic* sign system, by which Peirce means that the relationship of sign to referent is a matter of arbitrary convention.

Thus Bazin’s statement that “film is [also] a language” puts us on notice that, besides drawing on the ontological/indexical realism of photography, cinema is *in addition* a matter of culturally constructed conventions. Indeed, as Thomas Elsaesser notes, another of Bazin’s landmark essays, “Evolution of the Language of Cinema,” expands on the language metaphor to understand cinema “as a practice governed by rules and conventions,” so that, while Bazin asserted ontological realism as “the content of the form” of cinema, he paradoxically also makes an argument

“amenable to a constructivist view of verisimilitude.”⁶⁴ Here Elsaesser cites another of Bazin’s paradoxical statements: “realism in the arts can only be achieved one way—through artifice.”⁶⁵

Such observations point to the complexity of the dualism of realism and convention—terms that indicate not mutually exclusive opposites but rather a mutually constitutive pair. It is not simply that the intrinsic realism of photography, taking the “real world” as its raw material, is then manipulated by conventions of various sorts, from stylistic choices, such as framing and editing, to more elaborate genre conventions and cultural stereotypes. Rather, what strikes a particular audience as believably (or even shockingly) “realist,” in any of the varieties described in the previous section, inevitably is constituted largely by a set of methods that themselves may strike a different or later audience precisely as stylized or conventional—as we have already seen from the historical dialectics of realism suggested by Jakobson, in which realism is shown to be historically and culturally specific and thus highly relative and variable. The spectator’s perception of immediacy, transparency, verisimilitude, or truthfulness in a film is achieved only through the rigorous application of the technological possibilities of cinema at a particular moment as well as the skillful activation and manipulation of audience expectations formed through a culturally specific background, including previous viewing experiences.

We can begin to approach the question of cinematic convention through Stanley Cavell’s notion of *automatism*. This starting point might seem somewhat counterintuitive, given that Cavell’s initial conception of automatism appears to be closely related to Bazin’s ontological realism. Early in *The World Viewed*, Cavell describes automatism as cinema’s capacity for “removing the human agent from the task of reproduction”—a claim that appears very similar to Bazin’s observation that photography captures the world not just through an artist’s vision but through “another object” (the camera): “For the first time, an image of the outside world takes shape automatically, without creative human intervention, following a strict determinism.” Thus, “all art is founded on human agency, but in photography alone can we celebrate its absence.”⁶⁶ Of course, neither Bazin nor Cavell is suggesting that there is no human agency in producing photography or film but only that a very important component of the

power of those media comes not from the artist but from the “specific possibilities and necessities of the physical medium of film” or, more simply, from “film’s physical basis.”⁶⁷ This basis includes both the material world that photography “automatically” captures and the “physical mechanisms of camera and projector,” which, at any given moment in the development of the medium, possess a particular set of determinate possibilities and limitations.⁶⁸

Significantly, however, in a discussion of modernism in the arts in general and music in particular, Cavell expands the meaning of *automatism* to embrace not just basic physical and technological capacities but also the cultural forms through which the artist works:

The use of the word seems to me right for both the broad genres or forms in which an art organizes itself (e.g., the fugue, the dance forms, blues) and those local events or *topoi* around which a genre precipitates itself (e.g., modulations, inversions, cadences). In calling such things automatisms, I do not mean that they automatically ensure artistic success or depth, but that in mastering a tradition one masters a range of automatisms upon which the tradition maintains itself, and in deploying them one’s work is assured of a place in that tradition.⁶⁹

This expansion of the meaning of automatism to include “form and genre and type and technique” combines (however “perverse” it may seem, as Cavell acknowledges) film’s ostensible ontological realism—its direct link to reality beyond human manipulation (though enabled by technology)—with the entirely human realm of cultural convention.⁷⁰ As D. N. Rodowick summarizes, “automatisms in this sense are forms, conventions, or genres that arise creatively out of the existing materials and material conditions of given art practices. These in turn serve as potential materials or forms for future practices.”⁷¹ Or, as Cavell succinctly puts it, “a movie comes from other movies.”⁷² Conventions can function as automatisms in that they “act as variable limits to subjectivity and creative agency” as they “circumscribe practice, setting the conditions for creative agency and the artistic process.”⁷³ Because the limits set by conventional automatisms are variable, artistic agency still is enabled—as we have seen, conventions can be altered or ignored in the “progressive” realist tendency identified by Jakobson, for example—but all artists cannot help but work within their

own historical moments in the development of their art. An individual artist's originality—prized by the standards of modernism but less important, say, for much traditional, commercial, or socialist realist art—cannot even be “identified without the background of repetitive automatism.”⁷⁴ Even fiction filmmakers who radically break certain conventions are no doubt following others, perhaps even unconsciously, in that they generally, at least to some extent, are speaking the language they know—telling stories through film in the way that seems “natural” for their time and place and that can be understood by their intended audience.

The trope of film as a language certainly has its limits; indeed, the ontological and perceptual aspects of cinema’s realism themselves prove the inadequacy of the language metaphor.⁷⁵ Still, insofar as *film conventions* function to some degree like a language, we can analytically group them into two types that are roughly analogous to syntax and semantics, or grammar and meaning. The first category includes technical facets, such as camera movement, editing, and countless choices in framing, focusing, lighting, and so on, whereas the more semantically oriented conventions have to do with the cultural meanings produced through settings, props, costumes, casting, performance, script, and so on—all of which adds up to stereotypes of genre, character, narrative scenario, and, ultimately, ideology. In practice, of course, these two broad categories of conventions are intimately intertwined. In “classical” film narration, the syntactical elements generally work to highlight the semantic message of the story, while in an avant-garde film, the opposite may well be true.

The most comprehensive theoretical treatment of semantic conventions in popular cinema to date is Jörg Schweinitz’s *Film and Stereotype*, which serves as a useful reference point for several later chapters in this book. Drawing on concepts from social psychology, linguistics, art history, and literary studies, in addition to film studies, Schweinitz defines *stereotypes* quite broadly, referring to them at one point as “conventionalized representational patterns shared and accepted by artists and viewers within a given period.”⁷⁶ Like an idiom in language, a film convention or stereotype serves as a useful shortcut to meaning for a particular cultural community, but it also runs the danger of losing its aesthetic (and possibly communicative) power over time by becoming mere cliché. Relating to our

earlier discussion, Schweinitz also refers to stereotypes as *automatisms* and their conventionalization as a form of automatization. *Conventionalization* is broadly but concisely defined as “standardization or codification in an intersubjective field,” with the implication that “stereotypes form and structure the intersubjective imaginary world of our time.”⁷⁷ Representational tropes that may have begun with a conscious propositional meaning can become unquestioned automatisms that sustain an ideological worldview for a public without regard to whether their original perceived truth is still consciously evaluated. Indeed, the process of conventionalization tends eventually to be accompanied by what Schweinitz calls *derealization*, through which film stereotypes gradually lose their originally claimed connection with reality. For example, character types “first seeming to be plausible representations of reality increasingly resemble puppets in a game as they become entities of convention.”⁷⁸ Even later, such stereotypes can undergo a kind of “*secondary semantization*” in which they represent the entire context in which they emerged, such as a particular historical social sphere or cultural genre.⁷⁹ This in part illuminates how conventions that seemed comfortably “realist” at one moment—not just fitting into but indeed helping to construct the “reality” of their time—may strike later viewers as highly stylized or artificial, pointing not to the “real” world but to a particular cultural formation that subsequently has become *passé* or even alien.⁸⁰

One example that we will trace in later chapters is Chinese revolutionary cinema. That tradition began with a critical realist impulse that coexisted, sometimes awkwardly, with conventions of Hollywood entertainment cinema in classic Chinese films of the 1930s (chapter 2). It continued with postwar masterpieces like *Crows and Sparrows* (*Wuya yu maque* 乌鸦与麻雀; Zheng Junli 郑君里, 1949), which seemed to grasp and represent, through such means as character types, the precise social totality of its own historical moment of political revolution (chapter 3). In *Cinema of the Seventeen Years* (1949–66), partly under the influence of Soviet socialist realism, Chinese revolutionary cinema developed an arsenal of codified stereotypes that (as is the case with classical Hollywood genres, such as the western) both entertained mass audiences and reinforced conventionalized and affectively charged collective values

regarding morality, behavior, politics, and community belonging (chapter 4). The eventual sedimentation of such codes into clichés coincided with the bureaucratization of political rule in general and the lessening of the ideological fervor of revolution. This danger was answered politically by the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), which in cinema eventually resulted in a striking new phenomenon, the films based on the revolutionary “model works” of opera and ballet. This new cinematic form, however, was even more rigorously conventionalized than the popular cinema that preceded it, so that, particularly given the model works’ repetitive appearances in culture (not just in cinema and drama but also through magazines, books, posters, and so on), its stereotypes became easily “denaturalized,” or “conspicuous” *as conventions* (chapter 5).⁸¹

By the beginning of the post-Mao period, in a case of the “secondary semantization” described by Schweinitz, the mere citation of one of the model works could serve to represent the milieu of the Cultural Revolution as a whole. Indeed, whereas on one hand, a reaction against the conventions of revolutionary or socialist realism led to the phenomenon of *post-socialist realism*—an “aesthetics of opposition” in Schweinitz’s terms⁸² that I argue is a long-term trend across multiple “generations” in postrevolutionary Chinese cinema (chapter 6)—on the other hand, to this day, the stereotypes of Mao-era revolutionary cinema continue to be reflexively cited in contemporary culture for purposes ranging from parody to nostalgia.

As the example of revolutionary cinema’s realism and convention illustrates, this book offers a narrative of Chinese film history with interconnections between the various chapters, though without pretending to be seamless or comprehensive. My interests are both historical, seeking to recover particular moments in film history in their complexity, and theoretical, using examples from the Chinese experience to explore more general questions of cinematic realism and convention. Chapter 1, “Acting Real in Chinese Silent Cinema,” uses the debates over performance styles in silent cinema and the effort to set cinema apart from stage drama as means of introducing some of the basic concepts of realist film theory, while also exploring how realism, with its close connection to broader notions of

science and objectivity, became a master signifier of modern aesthetics across the arts in early twentieth-century China. Chapter 2, “Shanghai-ing Hollywood in the 1930s,” explores how the conventions of classical Hollywood cinema were redeployed in Shanghai’s early sound cinema to create a left-wing cinema that was not only politically progressive but also formally radical, leading to a reconsideration of the relationship between classical Hollywood and Chinese cinema as “vernacular modernism(s).” Chapter 3, “Realism and Event in Postwar Chinese Cinema,” examines three classic films of the late 1940s in terms of their temporal structures and relations to history, whether lingering on the irretrievable losses of the recent war, circulating around a void of impossible desire that seems to suspend time, or hurtling forward through a historical rupture. Chapter 4, “Prescriptive Realism in Revolutionary Cinema of the Seventeen Years,” reconceptualizes Mao-era cinema as a form of prescriptive realism and reconsiders the idea of sublimation in revolutionary aesthetics via an examination of classical narration and genre stereotypes. Chapter 5, “Socialist Formalism and the End(s) of Revolutionary Cinema,” extends these considerations into the model drama films of the Cultural Revolution, the “socialist formalism” of which exposes contradictions between dialectical materialist philosophy and state Communism that the Cultural Revolution ultimately failed to resolve. Chapter 6, “A Long Take on Post-Socialist Realism,” proposes that a transgenerational “post-socialist realism” threaded through the decades of the post-Mao period in part as a reaction against the prescriptive socialist realism that preceded it. Chapter 7, “Chinese Cinematic Realism(s) in the Digital Age,” addresses the question of how different modes of Chinese film have been transformed (or not) by the transition to digital cinema, from CGI-heavy blockbusters to independent films made on DV.

In the end, the question of realism concerns not only the correspondence between a fictional world and our world but, more fundamentally, the relation between appearance and being as such. The relationship between the fictional world and our world revolves around questions like “verisimilitude” and “plausibility”; the relationship between appearance and being, however, suggests another, even more basic problem of realism. Here, by appearance I mean not simply a visual image but more broadly

the way our world or reality appears to us precisely as structured through codes and representations, including language, the encyclopedic knowledge of our culture, the stereotyped images and conventions that help us understand our daily lives (including the fictional worlds we consume), the deep-rooted assumptions that guide our thought and behavior, and (not least) the sensory and cognitive capacities of our biology. In this sense, our “world” serves as a filter through which we (fail to) grasp the multiplicity of being; rather than forcing us to confront the real, it is more likely to help shield us from the profound indeterminacy that is our lot, given the limited senses and intelligence with which our species faces the universe (or multiverse) in which we exist.

Because appearance, or being as grasped—a coherently perceived image or, more broadly, a “world” that it fits into—inevitably falls short of being as such, when we humbly acknowledge such limits, we may embrace a realism (what I am calling apophatic realism) that deals not only with what the fictional world tells us about our world but with how the narrated world potentially gestures to the limits of appearance, pointing to the traces of new possibilities, challenging our sedimented sense of ourselves and our world, and placing us—temporarily, exhilaratingly—outside our usual framework. As Dudley Andrew summarizes a strain of film thought and practice that stretches from Bazin and Italian Neorealism through the other *Cahiers* critics and French New Wave and on to the contemporary cinema of Jia Zhangke and Hou Hsiao-hsien, such a realism both insists on cinema’s intimate tie to the real and renounces mere representation as the nature of that tie.⁸³ This cinema exists not primarily to entertain, instruct, or reassure us by elaborating our existing understanding of reality but to jolt us out of that reality through an encounter with the real.

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Acting Real in Chinese Silent Cinema

Common scientific knowledge is something that can be understood by all. The people of the Republic of China, however, sorely lack this scientific consciousness. They constantly neglect scientific rationality. . . . This makes us the butt of many a joke. . . . Lately, many already have come to this realization and are taking it upon themselves to impart scientific knowledge to our people. Film is a powerful medium for this endeavor.

—Gu Kenfu, “Introducing *Shadowplay Magazine*”

We have gone beyond Babel, beyond words. We have found a universal language.

—D. W. Griffith, *The Movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me*
(Lillian Gish)

In 1876 the Qing Empire sent its first official ambassador to Europe, partly to resolve a current diplomatic dispute with Britain but also to gather knowledge about the ways of Westerners. John Yu Zou recounts how, during the journey, the ambassador, Guo Songtao—already a “seasoned bureaucrat and renowned expert on Western affairs”—took great interest, as recorded in detail in his diary, in the code of etiquette and system of signals followed by two Western ships passing each other on the sea.¹ The Chinese diplomat’s diary entry concluded: “Alas, with such balanced civility and spontaneity were the rituals maintained. China is indeed trailing far behind.”² Zou explores the complexity of the ambassador’s response: from one perspective, the power of the West “loses its strange menace” a bit when it seems to be expressed through the kind of ritualized conventions

at which the Chinese literati had long excelled. Then again, the need for a detailed explanation showed that these international conventions remained “beyond the interpretive horizon” of the Chinese, who thereby suffered an “insufficiency of knowledge and lack of immediate linguistic access” to the relentlessly universalizing codes of the modern West.³

The incident suggests the sorts of difficult contradictions that, for a slightly later generation of Chinese intellectuals, would lend a particular type of utopian attraction to the methods of science, the accompanying notion of “objectivity,” and the technology of film. The imperialist West appeared to operate by its own set of arbitrary codes—as suggested by the etiquette of two passing ships—which, if not impenetrable, nonetheless put the weaker Asian power always in a position of translation, of either bafflement (“the rituals among these Western men” being a “closed book” to Guo Songtao)⁴ or, at best, the conscious decoding of what functioned in the West as a more automatic flow of information. Science, however, insofar as it aspires to “a set of neutral values and truths in spite of cultural and historical differences,” offered the promise of a universal language, which the Chinese need not approach as translators faced with sometimes indecipherable Western languages but rather as equally “objective” observers of a common material reality. Science thus figured prominently in what Zou labels the “transfer of modernity” to China during the late Qing and early Republican eras.⁵

The semicolonial condition of China lent a particular twist not just to the status of science but to the exuberant and widespread claims for cinema as a universal language as its popularity rose rapidly across the world in the early decades of the twentieth century.⁶ Such a claim to universality rests on the idea that cinema, like science, bypasses the conventionality and arbitrariness of cultural codes to establish a direct rapport with reality, a trick accomplished in large part through the ostensible ontological realism of the photographic image. Siegfried Kracauer, whose *Theory of Film* argued that cinema offers the “redemption of physical reality,” optimistically concluded that “ideology is disintegrating” under the “steadily increasing prestige of science,” with film offering the kind of “physical data” that would ensure future beliefs would be grounded in the real itself.⁷ Much earlier, the Hungarian critic Béla Balázs had similarly declared

that “the art of film seems to hold out the promise of redemption from the curse of Babel. The screens of the entire world are now starting to project the *first international language*, the language of gestures and facial expressions.”⁸ Balázs thus tied the photographic realism of silent cinema particularly to its capture of nonverbal human expression, which was said to have the ability to communicate much more widely than verbal or written language. Kracauer’s “redemption of physical reality” hence facilitates Balázs’s “redemption from the curse of Babel”; an audience with direct access to a performer’s bodily movements and facial expressions can grasp a silent film’s meaning without needing recourse to the symbolic codes of verbal or written language.

However, it is telling that Balázs himself, in the very same paragraph in which he asserted cinema’s “internationalism,” predicted that it would “help to produce a uniform type of the white race.”⁹ This stark turn to the rhetoric of race suggests that cinema may be “more universal for some than for others”¹⁰ and that non-European peoples may only gain access to this universality by in some sense attempting to become more “white,” not least in the details of bodily gesture and facial expression. In other words, this passage from Balázs captures a tension, if not an outright contradiction, between the claim to universal access to material reality through cinema and science, on one hand, and the ongoing relevance of culturally specific, ideologically laden codes, on the other—that is, a tension between realism and convention.

As Balázs’s focus on film actors’ gestures and facial expressions indicates, a key place where the claims for cinema’s objective realism met the ongoing relevance of culturally relative conventions was in the theory and practice of film acting. This was true even during the age of silent film, before spoken language entered the medium to more emphatically assert the cultural specificity of cinematic performance. In this chapter, the example of film performance and discourses about acting allows us to explore the claims for cinema’s ontological realism both in China during the silent film era and in canonical film theory more generally. This exploration leads inevitably to the potentially contradictory evidence of the centrality of convention in film performance, even when the latter is predicated on an assertion of realism. Related questions concern fiction

film's status as both a variation of and a departure from drama in general: how was film acting conceived in relation to stage acting? In examining the claims for an intrinsic ontological realism of cinema, made by both Western film theorists and their Chinese counterparts, as well as the much broader discourses of realism in Republican China, in this chapter, we will find that the cinematic medium did not so much provoke entirely new ideas about the nature of representation as it rather uniquely embodied new ideologies of mimesis, objectivity, and scientism circulating in Chinese culture at the time. Meanwhile, the rise of a star culture in Shanghai silent cinema offers a case study not just of the claims of film's realism but also of the phenomenon of reverse mimesis, in which real life mimics cinema, new conventions are propagated through "realist" means, and realism thereby becomes not only verisimilar—reflecting the existing reality—but also prescriptive, pointing the audience toward a desired reality.

RUAN LINGYU, REALISM, AND THE STAR'S PERFORMANCE

The silent era of Shanghai cinema is the setting for *Ruan Lingyu* 阮玲玉 (called *Centre Stage* or *The Actress* in English), Stanley Kwan's 1992 film commemorating the eponymous silent film star's life and tragic death by suicide. The film's experimental narrative structure edits together three distinct elements: (1) standard documentary materials, including photographs, film stills, and clips from Ruan's actual filmography as well as interviews with surviving people who knew her; (2) a straightforward biopic in which the contemporary Hong Kong star Maggie Cheung (Zhang Manyu 张曼玉) plays Ruan Lingyu; and (3) a self-reflexive, "making-of" documentary about the biopic, in which the movie set is visible as such and the actors and filmmakers reflect on Ruan's life as well as the film they are currently making about it.

Possibly the most gut-wrenching moment of the film occurs in a striking sequence in which Ruan's corpse lies in state in an open casket at her 1935 funeral. In the sequence, all three levels of the film's narration are combined. Maggie Cheung, performing as Ruan, is holding her breath to appear corpselike during the shooting of a scene from the star's funeral (Figure 1a). After an off-screen Kwan orders "Cut!" Cheung opens her



FIGURE 1. Ruan Lingyu's corpse, *a*, as played by Maggie Cheung and, *b*, in reality, from *Centre Stage* (1992).

mouth and breathes deeply—which is precisely when the film cuts to a graphically matched archival photo of the actual corpse of Ruan at her funeral, an image of unbreathing death frozen in time (Figure 1b). The edit provides a shock due to the sudden transition from the living actor Cheung to an uncomfortably similar image of the corpse of the “real” Ruan Lingyu, confronting us with the ultimate, brute reality of death.

The poignancy of the actual photograph of Ruan’s lifeless countenance in this scene relies in part on the ontological realism specific to

photographic media; it strikes us not just as a verisimilar *representation* of reality but as its uncanny *doubling*. The frighteningly real image of Ruan's prone body thus belies in a particularly forceful way the preceding image of Cheung's mimicry of her. If the film had cut to an artist's sketch of the scene or a description from a newspaper, for example, those would be just another secondhand representation, but the photographic image of Ruan's actual cadaver has a presence and finality that provide the jolt of the real itself.

It is worth noting, however, that Ruan's funeral featured another image that complicates the relationship between the photographic image and the “real” world. The enlarged photo of Ruan used to accompany her actual funeral procession (Figure 2a) was in fact an image from within the fictional world of her film *New Women* (*Xin nüxing* 新女性; Cai Chusheng 蔡楚生, 1935), in which Ruan had played Wei Ming, a female author who becomes a celebrity and then commits suicide after being hounded by the scandal-obsessed tabloid press. The photo of Ruan used at her own funeral had been a prop within that film, appearing as a publicity still of the fictional author she had played.¹¹ The same photo is hung on the wall of the fictional Wei Ming's own home and appears in the background in multiple scenes in *New Women* (Figure 2b), including the one in which she overdoses on sleep medicine—the very method by which Ruan Lingyu would take her own life only weeks after the premiere of the film in Shanghai. The photo used at Ruan's funeral thus suggests a much more complicated relationship between the real and the photographic image. While the publicity photo indubitably records the appearance of Ruan herself at a particular instant during the last year of her life, it nonetheless also serves as a representation of the fictional character Wei Ming, and the circulation of this image between fiction and reality alerts us to the slippery nature of cinematic realism itself. Any film with live-action footage makes use of the uncanny mimesis of life by its photographic trace—and, in the case of a fiction film, puts that ontological realism to work in the service of illusion. And yet fictional cinematic images themselves circulate in real life, so that films not only draw from reality (art imitates life) but affect reality by their own power of suggestion (life imitates art); mimesis goes both ways.¹²



FIGURE 2. Publicity still of fictional Wei Ming, *a*, as used at Ruan Lingyu's funeral and, *b*, in *New Women* (1935).



Ruan's death was imbricated in a complex network of social and cultural phenomena in 1930s Shanghai, including a broad and contentious discussion of the "new woman" in urban semicolonial China and the rise of a modern, scandal-hungry press—issues that have been explored in detail in existing scholarship.¹³ *New Women* also is among the films marking the transition from silent to sound film in China, and here we will take Ruan the actor as the impetus for a look back on the Chinese silent film era that ended at roughly the same time as her life.¹⁴ In fact, her tragic end aside, Ruan now is widely recognized as one of the great performers of global silent cinema. In the first book written in English on Chinese cinema, Jay Leyda asserted that "any one of her films, even one of her worst, will support my opinion that here was one of the great actresses of film history, as perfectly and peculiarly adapted to film as we recognize Greta Garbo to be."¹⁵ As we will see, many of Ruan's contemporaries, including actors and directors with whom she worked closely, shared the view that Ruan embodied the essence of great cinematic acting. But what exactly does it mean to describe a performance style as being perfectly adapted to the medium of film? What constellation of ideas about art, performance, medium, and modernity led to the standards by which Ruan's peers in the 1930s—as well as film scholars decades later—evaluated her work so highly? If Ruan represented great cinematic acting, what performance styles were felt *not* to be appropriate to film, and why? To answer such questions, the claims of the realism of the cinematic image must be understood in the context of a larger consumerist star culture as well as broader social discourses about science and objectivity in the early decades of the Republic of China.

In a discussion of Shanghai film actresses of the 1920s and 1930s, Michael G. Chang notes that both the public and private lives of female movie stars were widely covered in the popular press, and the "phenomenon of the female movie star was a form of discourse consisting not only of written words, but also of a number of new urban practices such as movie-going, reading fan magazines, writing fan letters, circulating and collecting personally autographed photographs, writing movie criticism, ranking of stars in contests, and so on."¹⁶ In Chang's analysis, the journalistic texts covering the movie stars "were even more 'realistic' than films

because they were filled with direct references to ‘real-life’ people and events outside of the movie theater.”¹⁷ The point is valid so far as the distinction between fact and fiction is concerned (although, as the preceding brief discussion of the film *New Women* shows, the line between the two could become remarkably blurred in some cases). However, from the standpoint of a rather different meaning of “realism”—that of the ontological realism of the moving image—one could argue the opposite: that amid the highly developed star culture of Shanghai during this period, consisting of all the various practices and experiences described by Chang, it is the film performances themselves, viewed by an audience in a movie theater, that constitute a privileged moment of realism within the larger star culture.

This point follows the argument John Ellis has made that “stars are incomplete images outside the cinema: the performance of the film is the moment of completion of images in subsidiary circulation, in newspapers, fanzines, etc.”¹⁸ These other aspects of star culture include everything from slick publicity stills to sensationalist gossip to reports of mundane details of the stars’ lives, setting up the paradox that stars are simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary; that is, they have real lives with families, pets, favorite recipes, and the like, yet they also appear larger than life, transcending the ordinary with their fabulous lifestyles, fame, apparent physical perfection, and so on. Ellis further argues that the paradoxical simultaneity of ordinariness and transcendence of the star image echoes the fundamental photo effect of the film medium itself in that cinema provides a contradictory “present-absence,” in which the star appears right before our eyes, but “in the impossible mode of ‘this is was,’” being both near and remote, both present and absent, provoking our desire yet remaining beyond reach.¹⁹

The film performance also is a unique moment within the larger movie star phenomenon for other reasons. One is its relative rarity, because a star appears in at most a handful of films per year, whereas what Ellis calls the other “subsidiary” forms of circulation of the star image and persona are ubiquitous in the media.²⁰ More important, however, the film performance provides an exclusive opportunity for spectatorial voyeurism that only the film medium can provide:

Introduced here is a whole new dimension of the star: not just the star-in-movement, but also the incidental aspects of that movement. The star's performance in a film reveals to the viewer all those small gestures, particular aspects of movement and expression, unexpected similarities to acquaintances or even to self.²¹

The film-viewing experience gives the audience the opportunity to examine meticulously even the seemingly unconscious aspects of the star's performance, incidental details of gesture and expression, giving the impression that the star is being caught unaware, revealing glimpses of a real personality, a real *being*, beyond either the fictional character or the constructed and commodified star image.

This quality of the star performance in film results from the fact that, as Gilberto Perez has pointed out, even a fiction film provides a "documentary image," insofar as the reels of film record actual performances that happened in the past—as Jean-Luc Godard reportedly once said, "every film is a documentary of its actors."²² Because actors are also real human beings, there is always at least the possibility that the actor's "own material reality begins to assert itself outside the boundaries that are supposed to be set by his [or her] role."²³ Within star culture, it is this raw material reality of the actor as a physical being that becomes most available to us in the film performance, in which even the unintended aspects of the actor's mannerisms are displayed for our observation.

Put another way, star culture here exploits the capacity of film that Walter Benjamin dubbed the "optical unconscious"—the "scientific" function of the film image, particularly through techniques like the close-up and slow motion, that allows the viewer to register aspects of reality that might otherwise have escaped conscious notice.²⁴ Thus, in the movie theater, the star is simultaneously a transcendent being and object of desire as well as a specimen available for our repeated inspection. Far from having the effect of demystifying the star, the uncanny reality of her physical being revealed in the filmed performance only adds to the fascination the actor holds for the spectator. Thus Perez counters Benjamin's assertion of the loss of art's "aura" in photography and film due to the mass reproducibility of those media, asserting that "a photographic image has its own kind of aura—the aura of a remnant, of a relic—stemming from the uniqueness,

the original particularity, not of the picture but of the referent whose emanation it captures.”²⁵ Miriam Hansen also has qualified Benjamin’s assertion of the lost “aura” in film precisely by reference to his concept of the “optical unconscious,” which offers at least the possibility of an “auratic mode of experience” even for the mass film spectator.²⁶

Returning to the privileged position of the film performance within the broader star culture as asserted by Ellis, it is clear that the power of the film image, and the apparently even unconscious aspects of the star’s being that it reveals, result from what André Bazin and others have theorized as the ontological realism intrinsic to the photographic medium. As the introduction explained, for Bazin, a photographed image has a heightened realism because it not only resembles its referent in the real world in the manner of a painting but also has an intimate existential physical relation to its object in the “indexical” manner of, say, a footprint to a foot or smoke to a fire. Thus Bazin asserts that “the existence of the photographed object . . . shares in the existence of the model, like a fingerprint.”²⁷ It is this property of photography that makes the fiction film as star vehicle able to make us feel the uncanny *presence* of the movie star despite her actual absence from the room in which we view her. She is not *actually* there, yet we gaze at *her* with fascination nonetheless.

To explore further the thesis that the film performance grants the audience unique access, via film’s ontological realism, to the physical being of an actor whose star persona had already been established by previous films in addition to all the “subsidiary” phenomena of film culture, such as fan magazines, let us examine a brief scene in one of Ruan Lingyu’s latest, and greatest, films—*The Goddess* (*Shennü* 神女; Wu Yonggang 吳永剛, 1934). In that film, Ruan plays a single mother who is forced to work as a prostitute as the only means of raising her son and providing him with an education.²⁸ In the scene in question, which comes early in the film, Ruan’s character (who is never named, though the title *Goddess* came from a Shanghaiese slang term for “prostitute”) ducks into a random doorway while trying to flee a policeman, only to find that the room is occupied by a burly local thug whom she had seen in an altercation on the street earlier. This small-time gambler (who will later become her pimp, phony “husband,” and abuser) vouches for her to get the police off her

back but then demands that she spend the night with him as payment for the favor. What follows are two memorable shots that show the reaction of the “goddess” while also powerfully showcasing Ruan’s acting ability and serving well to illustrate Ellis’s arguments regarding the film performance of the star. In the first shot, at medium range, Ruan ruminates on the thug’s proposition, showing through her expressions a series of apparent thoughts and emotions—first calculation over whether there is any way out of the situation, then sadness at the realization that there is not, and finally resignation to her fate for the evening. The shot that follows is a long shot showing much of the room, in which Ruan walks slowly by the gangster, sits on the edge of a table, asks the man for a cigarette, and then takes a deep puff before the shot fades (thus eliding the blackmailed sex that assuredly soon follows).

One thing this shot illustrates is the tendency identified by Ellis for certain moments in a star’s film performance to exceed the fictional narrative and tend toward a “point where the fiction is suspended in favour of the pure performance: the ‘fetishistic’ moment.”²⁹ Here Ellis undoubtedly is recalling Laura Mulvey’s arguments about the tendency of classical Hollywood films to provide moments in which the narrative becomes secondary as the female body is displayed for the male gaze to enjoy as a fetish—in contrast to the *voyeuristic* male gaze, which sadistically watches the female character go through a series of ordeals that effectively punish her for the threat presented by her sexuality.³⁰ Whereas the latter, *voyeuristic* moment is essentially tied to the fictional narrative, the former, *fetishistic* image detaches itself, however briefly, to indulge the spectator in the enjoyment of the actress just as a spectacle. In fact, both conceptions are relevant to *The Goddess*, insofar as the narrative is a maternal melodrama in which the protagonist prostitute is punished through a series of increasingly harsh traumas that end with her locked in a jail cell and forever separated from the son who provides the only real meaning in her life.³¹ In the scene in question, though, the narrative gives way momentarily to the *fetishistic* display of Ruan in the role of the sexualized “modern woman” (*modeng nüxing* 摩登女性 in the Chinese parlance of the time).

Despite Ellis’s implicit reference to Mulvey, this kind of “fetishistic”

moment is not limited to female star performances, and the gaze involved is not necessarily a masculine one. Instead, we might interpret this sort of moment in *The Goddess* more broadly as an instance in which predominantly narrative cinema gives ground briefly to the “cinema of attractions,” the kind of voyeuristic, nonnarrative display that Tom Gunning theorized as the key aesthetic of early cinema and one that survives in later narrative cinema, but in an “underground” form—coming to the fore, for example, in the song-and-dance numbers in Hollywood musicals.³² Miriam Hansen adds to this category—the residual manifestations of a cinema of attractions in later feature filmmaking—precisely “the erotic appeal of particular stars.”³³ In other words, the fetishistic moments identified by Ellis, in which the star’s performance seems to appeal to the audience beyond even the narrative motivations of the fictional story, are often the moments in which the star’s physical attractiveness is put on display in a way that directly engages the spectator’s desire rather than being contained within the diegetic world. The spectator may temporarily enjoy the “attraction” as such without regard to its function in the ongoing story.

This shot in *The Goddess*, in fact, almost works *against* the ostensible requirements of the narrative. In the film as a whole, the audience is generally cued to see Ruan’s character as a maternal martyr sacrificed on the altar of society’s hypocrisy. She has a properly Confucian devotion to her only son, which is clearly her sole reason for prostituting herself, having no other way to provide for him. The thug who comes to dominate her, in contrast, is depicted as a complete villain, never provoking the slightest audience sympathy, and in general the film’s narrative provides very little in the way of titillating enjoyment of the protagonist’s status as a sex worker. In this scene, however, after the protagonist has agreed to spend the night with this stranger, she seems to subtly change her character—sauntering slowly across the room, displaying her legs to the audience through the slit in her *cheongsam* dress as she sits down, asking for and then smoking a cigarette with the weary air of a woman who has seen it all (Figure 3a). In short, if only for the length of this shot, she appears more in the character of a sex worker than a mother, countering the vulnerability of her position with an attitude of toughness and self-assured sexuality—even briefly living up to Ruan’s tag as the “Chinese Garbo.”³⁴ The shot



FIGURE 3. *a*, Ruan Lingyu and, *b*, Maggie Cheung playing the same scene in *The Goddess* (1934) and *Centre Stage* (1992).

makes a display of Ruan Lingyu herself, the accomplished actor who nonetheless is also a commodity in the emerging urban consumer culture. In such a moment, the audience might briefly pause to enjoy every aspect of the star's performance—her gait, her gestures, her peculiar mixture

of weary sadness with erotic appeal—in a manner that goes beyond the requirements of the fictional narrative and the character she plays in it.³⁵

Here a comparison of *The Goddess* with Stanley Kwan's 1992 biopic of Ruan Lingyu's life offers an interesting test of the thesis that the film performance provides a unique opportunity to experience the singular aura of a star through her actual movement captured in time, while also forcing us to reckon with the complications of labeling a performance style as realist or naturalist as opposed to being in some way theatrical or conventionalized—a central concern of this chapter. As mentioned earlier, in *Centre Stage*, Ruan is played by Maggie Cheung, who also comments, as herself, in the self-reflexive documentary portions of the film. Cheung herself is quite an accomplished film actor—arguably one of the best in the world of her generation—her fame and acting skill simultaneously making her a strong candidate for capturing something of Ruan's “aura” and also possibly distracting the audience with her own.

One shot in *Centre Stage* mimics the previously mentioned shot in *The Goddess* in which the heroine walks across the floor, sits down, and lights the cigarette proffered by the man who has trapped her (Figure 3b). *Centre Stage* does not attempt a total re-creation of the original shot, depicting rather the *shooting* of the original shot; it is in color and has sound, unlike the silent *The Goddess*, for example. However, it is clear that Kwan tried to get every element right in the set, costumes, and so on and, more important, that Cheung tried to capture all the details of Ruan's performance: her look of resignation, the gait of her walk across the floor, the subtle toughness of her attitude, her exact body language in swaying her head and upper body back while taking the first drag on her cigarette. Kwan encourages a comparison of the remade scene with the original by editing in the original scene's footage in close proximity to Cheung's reenactment. The two performances inevitably vary in a number of small details—differences in the two women's build, features, and body language as well as small discrepancies in action (Cheung, for example, slightly overplays the bodily tilting back during the puff on the cigarette). Most fundamentally, however, the problem is precisely that all the details of movement and gesture that had appeared more or less unconscious in the original performance are here imitated in such a conscious manner

as to call into question the apparent naturalness of the performance. The self-conscious mimicry of a performer celebrated for the realism of her acting inevitably results in a performance that now looks conventionalized due to its second-order nature. Even more, the reenactment calls our attention to the theatricality of the original performance, which may have seemed entirely “real” or “natural” on its own; the juxtaposition of two great actors forces the audience to realize that even the most realist acting is staged.

FILM VERSUS STAGE PERFORMANCE

Indeed, this example draws our attention to the distinction—and yet close relationship—between the ostensibly intrinsic realism of the film medium and the issue of acting styles or methods, which may present themselves as more or less realist in their aesthetic. As the history of early cinema in China shows, the medium itself appeared to dictate, over the course of the 1910s–30s, major changes in the art of acting in the view of the contemporary actors and filmmakers themselves. Discussions of acting became means of differentiating cinema from the other arts, in particular various forms of stage drama, as well as placing film in a privileged modern position within the dramatic arts in general.

These issues are evident in what has been called the first work of Chinese film theory, the April 1921 introduction to the inaugural issue of *The Motion Picture Review*, or literally “Shadowplay Magazine” (*Yingxi zazhi* 影戏杂志). The Chinese word for *film* used here—*yingxi* 影戏 or “shadowplay”—alerts us to the fact that the “prehistory” of cinema varies across cultures owing to different preexisting dramatic forms and optical entertainments (including, in China, shadow puppetry), and the intermedial relationships that result will vary accordingly. The word *shadowplay* was a shortening of two earlier terms for cinema—*Western shadowplay* (*xiyang yingxi* 西洋影戏) and *electric shadowplay* (*dianguang yingxi* 电光影戏)—and film commentators in China tended to see film both as an extension of existing dramatic forms and as a significant departure from them. In fact, as in the West, early Chinese film theory often revolved around the question of just *how* film distinguished itself from theater,

and arguments for cinema's medium specificity served to justify both its artistic value and its wider social function.

The introduction to *Shadowplay Magazine* (I use the more literal translation of the journal title to underscore the connotations of the original)—written by chief editor Gu Kenfu 顾肯夫, a drama actor who would soon go into film production—describes the “raw materials” of cinema as being of three types: technique, literature, and science. Under the rubric of technique, Gu emphasizes performance style, and although in some passages, he treats cinema as simply another form of drama, after a discussion of how the dominant trend in “world drama” is the “realist school” (*xieshipai* 写实派), with its emphasis on being “true-to-life” (*bizhen* 逼真), he asserts that film is the dramatic art most capable of such verisimilitude.³⁶ Traditional dramatic forms like Beijing (Peking) opera (*jingju* 京剧) are said to be particularly deficient in this regard, especially in comparison to cinema. Gu describes Beijing opera as “stylized” or “patternized” (*tu'anshi de* 图案式的) and film in contrast as “lifelike” (*xieshengshi de* 写生式的), without any “exaggerated expression.”³⁷

Gu illustrates the problem of China’s tradition of exaggerated or overly stylized performance through the specific example of the Beijing opera *The Drunken Concubine* (*Guifei zuijiu* 贵妃醉酒), in which the main character acts out intoxication in an acrobatic manner, striking the pose known as the “reclining fish” (*woyu* 卧鱼). Gu complains that, “ever since the beginning of human life on earth, no matter whom you ask in all the nations of the world,” in real life, one will never find anyone who behaves drunkenly in this particular manner.³⁸ This global consciousness is of course particularly significant in the context of the aspirations of Balázs, mentioned earlier, for cinema to help achieve an “international language . . . of gestures and facial expressions.”³⁹ Gu, too, aspires to a universality of body language that would allow no place for the symbolic poses that even the Beijing opera performer “only half understands.”⁴⁰ He goes on to list several other standardized opera conventions that he also views as irredeemably unrealistic—indeed, as nothing less than “jokes.”⁴¹

At least in the context of a rapidly globalizing urban modernity, it is no doubt true that the reclining fish pose did not appear to represent drunkenness as mimetically as, say, the slapstick performance of Harold

Lloyd (whose face had graced the cover of that first issue of *Shadowplay Magazine* in 1921) as a drunk man in *High and Dizzy* (Hal Roach, 1920).⁴² The relatively conventionalized and stylized nature of Beijing opera may be seen from the fact that one can look up the “reclining fish” pose in a recent encyclopedia of traditional Chinese drama with more than 650 pages of specialized opera terms.⁴³ The entry describes and illustrates the pose and explicitly mentions *The Drunken Concubine* as one of the standard repertoire performances in which it is featured.

As the entries in such comprehensive dictionaries make clear, traditional Chinese opera performance tends toward *semiosis*, or the indication of symbolic meaning by convention, rather than *mimesis*, or lifelike verisimilar performance. The performers’ poses, actions, makeup, and costumes follow codified sign systems shared by performers and spectators, and while the world depicted is of course in some sense still mimetically related to human reality, it is a highly stylized version of that reality, with narrative events that demand semiotic reading from a culturally literate audience. Silent cinema, on the other hand, had aspirations to universal intelligibility, and the mimetic directness of, say, Harold Lloyd’s slapstick comedy or D. W. Griffith’s melodramatic rescue sequences indeed seemed to allow engaged viewership from people of vastly different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Of course, as I use them here, *semiosis* and *mimesis* are relative and inescapably intertwined terms; just as traditional Chinese opera has mimetic elements, cinema always engages any number of social, cultural, technical, and artistic conventions.⁴⁴ Still, a film shot of an actual mountain, for example, is more immediately and universally recognizable as such than is a chair on a Beijing opera stage that is being used to represent a mountain. Or, as Peter Wollen put it in his classic discussion of the “semiology of the cinema,” symbolic rhetoric “may still hold good in the Chinese theatre where a complicated code is used to express, say, weeping,” but in the kind of realist performance preferred in cinema, “to show one is weeping, one must weep.”⁴⁵

Gu Kenfu’s similar point regarding naturalistic rather than conventionalized acting was in keeping with his overall goal of enlightening his readers about the ostensibly world-dominant “realist school” and the utmost importance of verisimilitude. Such a concern would be reiterated

by a variety of Chinese filmmakers, actors, and critics throughout the 1920s who felt that cinema called for a drastic change in performance style. Exaggerated acting had to be replaced by subtle performance, stylized gestures had to give way to realistic body language and facial expressions, and the practice of having men play women's roles had to be put to an end. This latter point was emphasized by many critics in the 1920s, because Chinese-made films in the 1910s had followed the traditional convention in Chinese drama of separating the gender of a character from that of the performer. In fact, films from that period had largely still followed the Qing dynasty ban on female actors, even though by this point the regime had fallen and the ban had been officially lifted. Thus the films of the 1910s had featured all-male casts playing both male and female roles.⁴⁶ However, it is interesting to note that, with the exception of filmed performances of traditional Chinese operas, most of the film actors of the time were drawn from the burgeoning New Drama (*xinju* 新剧) theater movement that had been influenced by the Japanese *shingeki* (the same characters as the Chinese term), a self-avowedly "modern" form of drama inspired by Western theater. It was thought that New Drama performers had a more realistic performance style than actors in traditional Chinese drama and thus were more suited to the new medium of film.

By the 1920s, further developments in acting practices were motivated by the medium's perceived demand for realism. First, women's roles began to be played by female actors, partly because it was believed that film made male actors look ridiculous in female roles. This change was explicitly connected to the realism that was viewed as required by the new medium. For example, as a 1927 argument in *Women's Journal* (*Funü zazhi* 妇女杂志) put it,

because movies have no sound and words that might assist in expression, everything depends on movements and gestures. The performance is completely real and is completely intolerant of disguise. Thus, women must be sought out to play the female roles that must be included in movies.⁴⁷

Second, even New Drama actors fell out of fashion in film roles, in favor of actors in the even more "modern" movement of "spoken drama"

(*huaju* 话剧), which was supposed to be the equivalent of vernacular plays in the modern West. That is, spoken drama actors now appeared to be more “realistic” than New Drama ones, just as the latter had appeared more realistic than Chinese opera performers and thus more suited to cinema.⁴⁸

These developments were tied in particular to cinema’s variable shot distance, and especially to the spread of the close-up to Chinese filmmaking in the 1920s. In a 1925 essay, pioneering Chinese filmmaker Zheng Zhengqiu 郑正秋 argued that actors needed to adjust to such differences if they wished to make the leap from New Drama acting to film acting. Drama, he asserted, “is made for exaggeration rather than subtle performance” because of the relatively distant stage in a theater that is often crowded, noisy, and filled with distractions.⁴⁹ In film, however, “the situation is completely different”; whereas drama actors remain on the stage at a more or less set distance from the audience, in film, “the camera can move and magnify in close-up with ease.” Even “extreme long shots that resemble stage distance” are different because of the magnification of scale in screen projection. Thus, whereas stage actors must move about in an exaggerated manner, “it is inappropriate to overact on screen, as everything is big and close,” an injunction that applies even to “extremely subtle expressions such as frowning eyebrows or a smiling face,” not to mention to bodily movements. “Hence,” Zheng concludes, “film and stage drama are completely different things.”

In the same year, New Drama turned film actor Feng Xizui 凤昔醉 also emphasized the difference in the type of performance required by the two media, outlining the “interior performance” (*neixin biaoyan* 内心表演) called for by cinema. In this type of performance, actors must first feel the emotions of their characters, whereupon this interior feeling will be communicated to the spectator through facial expressions.⁵⁰ In another 1925 essay with the same title, “On Interior Performance,” actor/director Wan Laitian 万籁天 confirmed that “the film actor’s eyes are equivalent to the stage actor’s mouth.”⁵¹ The idea of interior acting and the importance of the eyes in communicating feelings again were related to the closer proximity afforded by variable camera distance and to the broader rhetoric of the increased need for realism in modern acting. A

decade later, in a 1935 article drawing on Soviet filmmaker and theorist Vsevolod Pudovkin, the actor and later director Zheng Junli 郑君里 (who had costarred with Ruan Lingyu in her final two films) argued that on stage, exaggerated acting inevitably will turn into a sort of “schematism” (*tushizhuyi* 图式主义) and that stage acting could not resolve “the contradiction between the rich content of real life and the cramped spatial and temporal capacities of the stage,” whereas film, with the help of such techniques as the close-up and editing, could solve this problem and thus genuinely capture reality.⁵²

Film techniques like editing and variable shot distances already had reshaped cinema as a dramatic form in China by the end of the 1920s. In fact, the transition from stage to film acting is readily evident even in films based on traditional drama. In the classic play *Romance of the Western Chamber* (*Xixiangji* 西厢記), for example, there is a key scene in which the young scholar Zhang Sheng meets the beauty Cui Yingying on the grounds of a Buddhist temple. In the original Yuan dynasty play, the chance encounter is rhapsodized through lengthy and redundant prose descriptions and verses about Yingying’s beauty and the effect she has on Zhang Sheng.⁵³ In a stage performance, this meeting would be represented through stylized bodily gestures in addition to the sung verses. In Hou Yao’s 侯曜 1927 film adaptation, in contrast, one finds neither singing (the film is of course silent, though live singing accompaniment could conceivably have been added during exhibition) nor dramatic gestures or poses from opera; instead, there is a series of shots that largely follow the conventions of classical Hollywood. Zhang Sheng’s initial interest in Yingying is clearly signaled by medium shots of his enamored gaze (Figure 4a). His attention is noted by the monk who is guiding him on his tour of the temple, with close shots of the monk’s face pivoting sideways to trace the line of sight from Zhang Sheng to Yingying.⁵⁴ Finally, Yingying, who initially had responded to Zhang Sheng’s attention with the appropriately modest gesture of averting her gaze and covering her face, just before leaving the area through a gate, turns around to throw a flirtatious glance back to Zhang Sheng (Figure 4b). This final quick glance is accentuated by the scene’s only close-up, reinforcing for the viewer Yingying’s reciprocation of amorous interest by employing the capacity of cinema to make a brief,



A



B

FIGURE 4. *a*, Zhang Sheng shows his interest in medium shot and, *b*, Yingying reciprocates in close-up in *Romance of the Western Chamber* (1927).

subtly expressive performance the bearer of crucial narrative information by means of closer shot distance.

In tracing the particular powers of film to the close-up and noting the different style of acting the medium thus called for, Chinese critics and filmmakers articulated an incipient Chinese film theory that was not far from that of many of their contemporaries in the West. Balázs, for example, declared that “close-ups are film’s true terrain” through which film is uniquely able to create “the microdrama of the moment.”⁵⁵ Benjamin, too, as already mentioned, identified the close-up as one of the means through which photography and film reveal the “optical unconscious” and fulfill the “scientific” function of the photographic image.⁵⁶ In China, as in the West, the close-up was a privileged emblem of cinema’s medium specificity, an example of how its art was—or could be, even *should* be—fundamentally its own, rather than an imitation or extension of stage drama or any other art form. The specific implications of the close-up for acting for these Chinese commentators also resembled the conclusions of their Western counterparts. In their emphasis on the importance of the eyes and facial expressions for film acting, enabled by the use of the close-up, Zheng Zhengqiu, Feng Xizui, Wan Laitian, and Zheng Junli again appear in sync with Balázs and particularly his rhapsodic celebration of “the play of facial expressions” allowed by film in contrast to theater.⁵⁷

Theoretical and critical speculation aside, an actual transition to a new acting style to suit the medium of film already had occurred relatively early in Western cinema. By the late nineteenth century, European stage drama itself had developed a more naturalistic mode of acting to supplant a more broadly stylized or “idealized” classical method, and, as Johannes Riis has argued, from the silent to the early sound eras, European cinema tended increasingly toward an even newer naturalism in acting.⁵⁸ Roberta Pearson similarly has traced how the performance style in the early Biograph films of D. W. Griffith shifted over five years or so beginning in 1908, transforming from a “histrionic” style with roots in nineteenth-century stage melodrama to a more subtle and film-specific “verisimilar” style.⁵⁹ Griffith’s unprecedented reliance on closer shots accompanied the shift in performance styles.⁶⁰ The director himself denigrated stage performance and advocated “real acting” and the use of close shots to capture the

emotional states of performers, whom he believed felt the emotions they were acting and externalized them through their faces and bodies (or roughly what the Chinese critics in the 1920s called “interior performance”).⁶¹

This movement toward a more realist style of acting to suit the new medium, in China as in the West (and no doubt heavily influenced by the latter), provided the framework through which Ruan Lingyu was judged to be a model of naturalistic performance. According to Zheng Junli, for example, “the characters created by Ruan Lingyu in her films nearly all had a high degree of authenticity and persuasiveness. Each character seemed like an authentic person in reality.”⁶² Like Griffith’s muse Lillian Gish, of whom Balázs celebrated the “crazy rapidity” with which emotions played across her face, Ruan seemed to have the uncanny ability to communicate contradictory emotions almost simultaneously.⁶³ Indeed, apparently utilizing what Balázs called “the microphysiognomy of the camera close-up,” allowing us to see “the face *beneath the play of expressions*,”⁶⁴ Ruan was skilled at conveying both a seemingly feigned surface emotion and an apparently genuine underlying one—most often taking the form of an inner sorrow to which the audience could bear witness even as the other diegetic characters were fooled by a forced smile.⁶⁵ *The Goddess* director Wu Yonggang praised Ruan’s “astonishing natural gift for acting. Ruan Lingyu was like a highly sensitive piece of ‘fast’ film: whatever you required, you just had to explain it to her and she would immediately produce it in her performance—in the proper manner, and with great precision.”⁶⁶ Later film scholars have echoed these high assessments. Katherine Hui-ling Chou describes Ruan as being ahead of her time in developing a naturalistic style that approximated Stanislavskian method acting, even though the latter was unknown in China until the late 1930s and did not predominate until much later.⁶⁷ Ruan Lingyu nonetheless was not just an exceptional example of acting skill but more important, in the context of the present discussion, represents the epitome of a broader valuation of verisimilitude in acting that began many years earlier and would continue as part of an overall prioritization of realism.

REALISM ACROSS MEDIA

We have seen how filmmakers and critics in China, no less than many of their Western counterparts from Griffith to Balázs, laid claim to a distinctively cinematic realism that formed the basis of film art and called for a naturalistic or verisimilar performance style that made stage acting inappropriate for cinema. Such arguments are crucial for understanding not just the nature of cinema as perceived by early twentieth-century practitioners and thinkers but also the self-positioning of those same figures as they attempted to establish the cultural capital of film, and by extension themselves, within the social, cultural, and artistic arenas of the time. In particular, their claims must be understood in the context of a much broader discourse on realism in China that began in the late nineteenth century, intensified during the New Culture Movement from 1915 into the 1920s, and became increasingly politicized by the 1930s. Indeed, assertions of a uniquely realist aesthetic for the cinema only gained their effectiveness in the context of a cultural ecology in which virtually *all* the arts in China were scrambling to reestablish themselves on a new foundation of realism that was largely imported from abroad. In this sense, the realism of film, like that of all the arts, rests not just on medium-specific technologies like the camera and techniques like the close-up but also on a response to the aggressively imposed modernity of semicolonial capitalism and the epistemic violence that went along with it, sweeping away other modes of thought, art, and culture and imbuing Chinese artists and intellectuals with both an inferiority complex and a determination to catch up with the West and Japan—culturally and artistically as well as politically, economically, and militarily—as a precondition for national survival. The favoring of modern realism over the stylization of traditional Chinese operatic forms is hardly surprising given the “demand for authenticity that burdened modernity,” so that the modern age perceived itself as intrinsically antitheatrical, in contrast to other periods (such as the Renaissance and postmodernity) that are more self-consciously theatrical.⁶⁸ Indeed, under high modernity, “not even the theater itself was theatrical.”⁶⁹

In the field of modern Chinese literary studies, the importance of realism is unquestioned, or rather, it is so widely assumed that alternatives to it are studied precisely as that—essentially as pockets of resistance to the realist hegemony.⁷⁰ Going back to reformers such as Liang Qichao 梁啟超 before the fall of the Qing dynasty, Chinese intellectuals had been calling on a representationally realistic and linguistically vernacular fiction to aid in the project of building a modern nation. Such efforts had a foundation in China's own late imperial vernacular classics (indeed, *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅 may well be among the world's first realist novels),⁷¹ but by the early twentieth century the desired modern style of realism was viewed equally as a necessary import from the West, particularly during the May Fourth Movement and its calls for literary reform and revolution in the pages of the magazine *New Youth* (新青年) beginning in 1915.⁷² Later, China's variant of socialist realism would be ensconced by the Communist Party as the officially sanctioned form of literature (and film—see chapters 4 and 5) in the Mao era.

In painting as well, the late Qing and Republican periods saw a wave of experimentation and a struggle to define a new, cosmopolitan mode of realism that, for leading figures such as artist and curator Xu Beihong 徐悲鴻 in the 1920s, had to replace the outdated aesthetics of China's indigenous artistic traditions. The modern approach of realism (*xieshi* 写实) was explicitly contrasted with the traditional value of expressionism (*xieyi* 写意) (see the introduction). As Eugene Wang explains, in Chinese literati ink painting, forms are “evoked rather than depicted,” and a few highly expressive brushstrokes capable of capturing the artist's subjective experience of the spirit of the object are valued over representational detail or a verisimilitude that provides the illusion of the object's actual presence.⁷³ By the May Fourth era, in contrast, there was, as David Derwei Wang describes, increasingly a “shared notion among contemporary Chinese literati and artists that the foundation of artistic merit would necessarily be the authentic representation of the Real.”⁷⁴ The effort to establish Western-style mimetic realism as the new artistic style for a modern China would proceed, in the 1920s and over the next several decades, in various ways, in tension with the countervailing desire to

assert a Chinese cultural identity through a distinctively Chinese expressionist style. Even Xu Beihong himself, the leading advocate of realist painting in the 1920s, would return to a more expressionist style later in his career, not least because Chinese “sketch conceptualism” offered a veritable branding of Chinese artists in Europe, with intriguing overlaps with Western aesthetic modernism.⁷⁵ At home as well, the conventions of traditional art forms would often find a wider audience owing to their familiarity among the masses, for whom Western realism could at first be an alien experience. In fact, as David Der-wei Wang emphasizes, realism itself could amount to a kind of formalism, insofar as it demanded rigid adherence to the conventions of mimetic illusionism.⁷⁶

Finally, and perhaps most important in relation to film, the successive waves of reforms even in Chinese *stage* drama belied any notion that cinema was unique in its concern for realism, even if filmmakers with roots in theater insisted on the radical difference of film acting from stage performance. As mentioned earlier, in the early twentieth century, new dramatic forms based on Western influences were introduced—first the New Drama, also called “civilized play” (*wenmingxi* 文明戏), from which much Chinese cinema of the 1910s was derived, and then the even more “modern” (i.e., Westernized) “spoken drama” that became a respected literary form and also an increasing influence on film in the 1920s, as we have seen. In 1918, *New Youth* devoted an entire issue to drama reform.⁷⁷ As was the case with much Chinese literature and painting of the same period, the new dramatic forms sought to adopt a Western-style realism and thereby set themselves apart from the various “traditional” Chinese operatic forms.⁷⁸ In an illustration of how compulsory the aesthetic of realism had become in Republican China, even Beijing opera underwent a major reform movement just as it was being elevated to the status of a national form; the great actor and cultural ambassador Mei Lanfang 梅兰芳 may have inspired Bertolt Brecht with the stylization and ostensible alienation effect of traditional Chinese drama, but the same actor met, praised, and absorbed the lessons of none other than the pioneering naturalistic actor and director Constantin Stanislavski in the Soviet Union. Under the influence of the drama reformer Qi Rushan 齐如山, Mei put

increased emphasis on facial expressions in his opera acting, and Mei and Qi subscribed to the notion that only when actors lose themselves in their characters can those characters be fully realized.⁷⁹

All this would suggest that even a “traditional” dramatic form like Beijing opera was reforming to reflect the priorities of modern realism, such as visual mimesis and interior performance. However, it would be more accurate to say that the distinction between modern realism and traditional formalism was *itself* a product of modernity. Indigenous Chinese drama did in fact posit a correspondence between the fiction of the theater and the truth of life, and some of the modern realists’ claims for a radical rupture with traditional theater aesthetics appear to be overstated. The seventeenth-century theater impresario Li Yu 李渔, for example, had emphasized that an aria must be sung not just with the mouth but with the heart and that it should be reflected in facial expressions and bodily movements.⁸⁰ Indeed, the notion that performers should feel the emotions of their characters and then convey them through facial expressions was by no means foreign to premodern Chinese drama aesthetics. According to Qing dynasty scholar Ji Yun 纪昀, an actor in 1747 once explained, “When I impersonate a female on the stage, I not only try to look like a female in my physical appearance; I also try to feel like a female in the depth of my heart. . . . I always put myself in the shoes of my characters, completely identifying with their emotions: happiness, anger, sorrow, or joy as well as kindness, resentment, love, or hate.”⁸¹ It is true that this actor was claiming to be the exception rather than the rule—“the reason I am the best on the stage is because I am different from the other female impersonators, who may look and move like their female characters but do not feel like them”—but his remark nonetheless suggests that interior performance was not a concept completely alien to traditional Chinese drama.⁸² What was new in the early twentieth century was an idea of mimesis that emphasized not so much the subjective state of the performer in capturing the emotional meaning of the character as the connection of such a performance to the ideology and technologies of modernity, including cinema, with its apparent ability to serve as a medium for accurately conveying the affect of the performance in all its detail.

REALISM AND SCIENTISM

Here the fascination with cinema, including the attempt to elevate cinema over previous dramatic forms, is closely tied to the overwhelming concern for *science* among Chinese intellectuals of the early twentieth century. Recall that in 1921, Gu Kenfu called science one of the three bases of film (the other two being literature and technique). His emphasis on science is certainly in keeping with the spirit of the contemporaneous May Fourth Movement, in which students, artists, and intellectuals called for the introduction of “Mr. Science” (along with “Mr. Democracy”) into China. Here science represented not just a set of theories or laboratory procedures but a whole new way of being in the world, a mode of existence in which the arbitrary biases of ancient opinions would be dropped in favor of an “objective” view of reality.⁸³ Thus, according to Shu-mei Shih, science “was not so much a system of knowledge for the study of physics, biology, or technology, as an ideology promising a new theory and praxis of culture.”⁸⁴ Extending beyond the hard sciences to “the studies of society, politics, ethics, and morality” as well as “humanistic studies such as literary, historical, and philosophical research,” science became “a *cultural ideology* necessary for the enlightenment of the mind, while a broad understanding of the experimental method as a daringness to rebel against the old and to try something new was applied to all realms of cultural practice and discourse.”⁸⁵

Indeed, as Wang Hui 汪晖 has analyzed in detail, a comprehensive “scientism” (*weikexuezhuyi* 唯科学主义) pervaded the thought of the intellectuals and artists who were most crucial to the May Fourth and New Culture Movements that dominated the Chinese arts and humanities of the late 1910s to early 1920s and had repercussions for decades beyond.⁸⁶ For these thinkers, science was an overall “spirit of the age” that China must learn to catch up with the West, and its principles had to be applied to virtually all aspects of life. For example, Chen Duxiu 陈独秀, the editor of *New Youth* and later a founding member of the Chinese Communist Party, believed that science held the key to understanding the material basis of all life. In an early *New Youth* essay on education reform, Chen used the

term *xianshizhuyi* 现实主义—which would become the accepted translation of *realism* for generations of artists—to describe the overall spirit of the age under the sway of scientific objectivity. This spirit, according to Chen, would manifest in every realm of human thought and activity under different guises—in philosophy as empiricism and materialism, in morality as utilitarianism, in religion as atheism, and so on. In the realm of literature and the fine arts, it would be expressed as mimetic *realism* (*xieshizhuyi* 写实主义, or “inscribing the real”) or as *naturalism* (*ziranzhuyi* 自然主义).⁸⁷ In each case, one puts one’s faith only in the empirically observable material world: “within the real world [*xianshi shijie* 现实世界] there is merit; outside the real world there is no hope.”⁸⁸ Human individuals are transient, but the material world of which they are part is an ever-evolving reality. As Wang Hui put it, “Chen Duxiu thus came to believe that the signal feature of science was the search for the pure objective causality underlying reality and completely negating the subjective role of human beings.”⁸⁹ Such an ideal of objectivity, in turn, called for a new mode of subjectivity whereby objective reality would determine human thought and behavior, and recognition of scientific truth would remold the human subject and allow human society to progress rationally.⁹⁰ This presented a challenge to any aesthetic philosophies that emphasized artistic truth as a subjective, perhaps even emotional experience—as seen, for instance, in the premodern aesthetics of expressionism (*xieyi* 写意), authenticity (*zhen* 真), or passion (*qing* 情). In a 1921 lecture titled “The Scientific View of Life,” activist/intellectual Yang Quan 陽泉 cautioned that aesthetic philosophies ranging from those of traditional China to that of Victorian poet Matthew Arnold tended to be based on emotion, whereas the scientific worldview was based on objectivity.⁹¹ In this context, then, *realism* became the aesthetic ideology that would bridge the gap between modern scientism, on one hand, and literature and the arts, on the other, inoculating the latter against the potential irrationality and emotionalism to which they had been prone and setting them firmly within the broader parameters of the realist worldview of science itself.

It is thus no surprise that Gu Kenfu, in his essay introducing *Shadow-play Magazine* (which appeared in the same year as Yang Quan’s lecture on “The Scientific View of Life”), attempted to link cinema closely with

science. His views on the superior verisimilitude of film as compared to other modes of drama were implicitly tied to the ability of photography to directly capture the real world. He notes that theater, “when it encounters a reality it cannot perform, resorts to supplementary narration or indirect methods of depiction. Only film can show [reality] immediately and directly,” replacing the inert or “dead” stage with real locations.⁹² Similarly, in his discussion of acting technique, Gu notes that actors in cinema, unlike those in traditional drama, had to master such skills as swimming, riding a horse, driving a car, or even flying an airplane.⁹³ The realism of the medium demanded it, as these activities could be filmed in reality rather than represented by semiotic convention as in traditional theater—a prop such as a tasseled whip representing horseback riding, for instance. Film did not just *represent* the real world but *showed* it, thus potentially superseding the other arts in its ability to manifest the objective, scientific spirit of the modern age.

The linking of a new faith in objectivity to photographic media echoed that of modern Western scientists, particularly in the mid- to late nineteenth century, when scientists stopped using drawings of ideal types in favor of photography and other, more mechanical means of representing specimens—not only because photography seemed better for the task but because scientific knowledge itself was being redefined in a way that emphasized the elimination of the vagaries of human agency. Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, in their fascinating study *Objectivity*, trace a shift from a scientific ideal of “truth-to-nature” to one of “mechanical objectivity” in the course of the nineteenth century through the case study of imaging for scientific atlases.⁹⁴ Earlier scientists had sought to produce images that were *true*, with the understanding that the scientist’s own knowledge and judgment were instrumental in producing this truth. This resulted in the practice of representing ideal types through sketching and painting: “the type was truer to nature—and therefore more real—than any actual specimen.”⁹⁵ Later, however, partly through the testing of such representations of ideal types against the instantaneous automated images of photography, scientists became doubtful of their ability to reason out the truth without distorting it through the interference, however unintended, of their own subjectivity, thus producing “a paradoxical

contrast between truth and objectivity, between reasoned and objective images.”⁹⁶ Thus, as early as the mid-nineteenth century, an “argument was advanced in favor of photography as a distinctly *scientific* medium. The automatism of the photographic process promised images free of human interpretation—*objective* images, as they came to be called.”⁹⁷ In fact, mechanical observation in general became favored, but “one type of mechanical image, the photograph, became the emblem for all aspects of noninterventionist objectivity,” largely because “the camera apparently eliminated human agency.”⁹⁸

Here the scientific reliance on photography brings to mind similar claims made in classical film theory and its successors, from Bazin’s ontology of the photographic image to Benjamin’s optical unconscious to the cinematic “automatisms” explored by Stanley Cavell and more recently elaborated by D. N. Rodowick.⁹⁹ The mechanical nature of the photographic image—the fact that it can capture aspects of reality not necessarily noticeable to the naked eye or intended by the photographer—not only appears to be essential to its art but also puts it in a privileged relationship to the discourses of scientism and objectivity in both China and the West.

In fact, for the purposes of this book, we might extend Gaston’s and Galison’s distinction between the subjectively mediated ideal type and mechanical objectivity beyond issues of scientific imaging and draw from them different general trajectories of thinking about cinematic realism. On one side would be the idea that—armed with steadfast principles and reliable knowledge (concerning, for example, the perceived laws of nature, society, and history)—the artist can render a representation of reality that is *more true* (as in Gaston’s and Galison’s notion of “truth-to-nature”) than any mere random reflection of reality’s surface appearances could be. In this view, with the proper understanding and scientific approach, the artist can eliminate distracting, irrelevant details and bring out the inner structure of reality and the direction of its evolution. The script writer or film director, for example, might create fictional characters not as random individuals but rather as types that distill larger social realities and historical forces. This, of course, would be especially relevant in later Chinese film history (examined in chapters 3–5) when social class became

an overriding concern—and it is important to bear in mind that, even as early as the 1920s, many Chinese artists and intellectuals viewed Marxism as a *science* of history, with principles every bit as reliable as those of other branches of modern science. In this model of realism, then, a properly formed subjectivity—one with the “correct” understanding—could penetrate the jumbled surface of reality and render clearly its inner structure, essential features, and direction of movement in the same way that a scientist might render an “ideal type” that is more *true* than a random specimen.

Another general approach to realism involves a more modest claim to truth, building on the mechanical objectivity of the camera itself, particularly its ability to inscribe events without necessarily foregrounding the intentionality of the filmmaker. Among other things, this would capitalize on cinema’s capacity to surprise us with the random event or the unexpected detail, delivering revelations of truth that do not necessarily come packaged with explanations. Such was the impression provided even by some of the earliest documentary film images. Dai Vaughan, for example, in an essay about the reactions of audiences to the earliest film screenings, meditates in particular on Louis Lumière’s actuality *Boat Leaving the Port* (*Barque sortant du port*, 1895). The brief (forty-nine-second) film simply shows a rowboat with three men aboard leaving a harbor while a small group of women and children stand on a jetty. What Vaughan particularly emphasizes is a moment in the film when the boat, having gone beyond the protective jetty, suddenly is knocked sideways by ocean waves, so that the men must struggle to turn it back around. For Vaughan, it is this moment of spontaneity that captures something about the essence of cinema. In such a moment of unplanned cinematic realism, we feel the presence of “the sea itself: a sea liberated from the laboriousness of painted highlights and the drudgeries of metaphor.”¹⁰⁰ The human actors, too, “by responding to the challenge of the spontaneous moment, . . . become integrated into its spontaneity”; they are “drawn into the contingency of events.”¹⁰¹ For Vaughan, this moment in early cinema represents an ideal of a cinema that is “free . . . of the threat of its absorption into meanings beyond it,” and such spontaneous revelations remain “the secret of its beauty.”¹⁰² Just as nineteenth-century scientists were surprised at the

unruly world that confronted them through photography's mechanical objectivity—which often annoyingly failed to manifest the ideal types the scientists had conceived—twentieth-century filmmakers and spectators alike had to be prepared to see things unexpected, to confront aspects of reality uncovered by the technology of cinema that may lie outside of their existing understanding of the world.

Vaughan relates the amazement of early film audiences to the *movement* of the image, in particular, images of things such as water, leaves, and steam. It is this, Vaughan argues, that gave cinema “its ability to portray spontaneities of which the theatre was not capable.”¹⁰³ Interestingly, Gu Kenfu’s landmark 1921 essay also emphasizes movement as central to cinema’s unique power and its scientific advantage over theater. In fact, Gu’s claims for cinema’s relation to science do *not* rest simply on arguments about the mimetic fidelity of the photograph or other such contentions that could fall under the rubric of ontological realism (though such claims are implicit elsewhere in the essay, as described earlier). Instead, in the explicit discussion of film and science, it is the illusion of movement produced by the film projector that is said to provide cinema’s scientific credentials: “Film in essence is a phenomenon of science. That a series of frames passing in front of a projector can produce a moving image is a phenomenon that makes use of optics—film is a product of science.”¹⁰⁴ Gu’s essay thus not only reveals a concern with the ontological, mimetic realism of film in a manner consistent with classical Western film theorists like Bazin; it also lends support to the argument that the movement of the image itself provides film (or animation, or digital video) with a compelling *perceptual* realism that is at least as important to the viewer’s engagement.¹⁰⁵ The importance of movement goes beyond the matter of the mimetic fidelity of the image to reality, as it is the key to the emotional engagement of viewers—the power of drama, mentioned by Gu in his first sentence, to elicit sympathetic tears of sadness or belly laughs of pleasure from spectators. Gu in fact carefully connects realism and verisimilitude to our capacity to be swept away by an unfolding drama and respond reflexively to the characters we watch, and it is on this basis that he asserts the superiority of cinema. Positing that the goal of acting should be a verisimilitude in which both actors and spectators identify fully with

and are moved by the emotions of the fictional characters, Gu concludes that, of all the dramatic arts, film can best approach this standard.¹⁰⁶ He thus suggests that there is a connection between the mimetic realism of the “moving” (*huodong* 活动) image at the heart of cinema’s science and its ability to make the audience feel “moved” (*gandong* 感动). The unprecedented verisimilitude of film is put in the service of transporting the audience into a realm of feeling to a degree that Gu thinks no previous dramatic arts could match. Here the artist/critic Gu arguably departs from the strict scientism of the intellectuals mentioned earlier, insofar as he encourages emotional engagement rather than simply objectivity.

In the mimetic response of the spectator to the filmed drama, we begin to approach not just the claims made for the realist nature of the medium by early film commentators in both China and the West but also the more recent conception of popular cinema as a “vernacular modernism” that provided “a sensory-reflexive horizon for the experience of modernization and modernity.”¹⁰⁷ In their embodied responses to cinema—the laughter and tears mentioned by Gu—spectators publicly and collectively found in the strikingly “real” presence of the actor a means of reflecting on their own experiences of both the perils and the promise of modernity. Ruan Lingyu herself, in her wrenching performance of the ultimately fatal double bind in which the glamorous “new woman” was caught, provided a convincing and moving reflection—however larger than life and melodramatized—for the contradictions experienced daily by countless women in urban China at the time.

In fact, Ruan’s story serves as an exemplary case of reflexivity and multifaceted mimesis. Katherine Hui-ling Chou notes that the “realism” of Ruan’s acting style helped lead to a collapsing in public consciousness (and, Chou speculates, in the performer’s own mind near the end of her life) of Ruan the actress with the roles she played, leading to the enigmatic echoes between fact and fiction noted earlier in this chapter, such as the use of a fictional character’s publicity still to represent the deceased Ruan Lingyu at her funeral or the eerie similarities between the fictional death of the character in *New Women* and the actual suicide of Ruan herself.¹⁰⁸ This uncanny slippage between fact and fiction alerts us to the fact that

the ostensible “realism” of a particular performance style, or indeed the intrinsic realism of the film medium, is tied in part to the pedagogical function of popular cinema in literally showing people how to *be* modern; cinema’s performativity both draws on and contributes to that of everyday life. Chou provides much evidence that, rather than saying, for example, that a performer such as Ruan Lingyu accurately reflected real people in her roles as a “new woman,” it may be just as accurate to say that real women learned how to be “realistically” modern precisely by watching films like hers. As was the case for the broader discourse of science, in this period, the very term *realism* was inseparable from the imperative of learning the ways of the West, whether those of scientific thought, artistic aesthetics, or practical matters, such as styles of dress, personal grooming, and details of gesture and facial expression—or indeed codes for ships passing on the high seas. Actors in either modern drama or film learned how to move in foreign-style clothing by watching Western films, for example, which thus taught them how to “realistically” act out Westernized roles.¹⁰⁹

In 1926, the leading film producer of the period, the previously mentioned Zheng Zhengqiu, noted that Chinese actors were not even capable of depicting public displays of affection between lovers except by reference to the models provided by foreign films because, in traditional Chinese society, the sexes were so carefully segregated that such public displays of affection were virtually unheard of, and “whenever Chinese actors tried to act out any intimate love scene, their performance often appeared ‘European’ to the audience.”¹¹⁰ Thus, for the dominant Shanghai performance group of the late 1920s, Nanguoshe 南国社, a female actor playing the role of a woman was *not* supposed to accurately depict how an ordinary Chinese woman would behave; rather, she was supposed to “realistically” reflect and model the idealized modern, Westernized “new woman.”¹¹¹

In other words, employing the categories mapped out in the introduction, we are dealing here not just with an ontological realism that captures the real image of the star performer’s face and body, a perceptual realism that engages the spectator with the apparent movement of the image, and a social realism that reflects the actual contradictions of life under modern, semicolonial capitalism in Shanghai; we are dealing as well with a form of

prescriptive realism insofar as the film provides models (“ideal types”) for the audience to emulate. In China’s semicolonial situation of the Republican era, these models flowed largely from West to East, including not just a wide variety of conventions (of behavior, gesture, and expression, for example) but also the ideal of a scientific, objective view of reality that could bypass linguistic, cultural, and historical differences. Film, with its basis in photography’s ontological realism, seemed to be both a dramatic form and a pedagogical tool that best embodied that modern, scientific ideal, but it also served as a vehicle for the propagation of Western cultural conventions. As we will see in the next chapter, those included the conventions of Western genre cinema and “classical” cinematic language, but filmmakers of the so-called golden age of Shanghai cinema were far from uncritical in their adaptations of those conventions as they strove for a realism that would serve the Chinese nation.

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2

Shanghaiing Hollywood in the 1930s

A group of four happy, cap-and-gown-wearing young male friends graduate from college only to face unemployment and desperate circumstances due to the global economic depression of the 1930s. Within a year, one has died in despair, and the others struggle to maintain some semblance of their youthful idealism. Such is the plot of both the 1934 Hollywood film *Gentlemen Are Born* (Alfred E. Green) and the 1937 Shanghai cinema classic *Crossroads* (*Shizijietou* 十字街头; Shen Xiling 沈西苓). Both films explore whether severe economic hardship can be overcome by a combination of romantic love and social solidarity. They also share some fleeting minor details, such as scenes of the young men rolling around on furniture like boys at horseplay after receiving good news, raising the question of whether the Chinese film borrowed directly from its Hollywood precedent.

Such cinematic parallels, while legion, are not easily reduced to either mere coincidence or rote imitation, particularly because evidence for the tracing of “influences” almost invariably is incomplete. Attributing plot or stylistic equivalences to random coincidence would ignore the fact that Chinese cinema of the 1930s existed very much in the same world as other cinemas of East Asia, Europe, and North America—a world of mutually imbricated material realities as well as an emerging globalized culture of modernity. An estimated 80 percent of Hollywood films of the time would screen in theaters in Shanghai, often within weeks or months of their premieres in America.¹ *Gentlemen Are Born*, which opened in the United States in November 1934, screened in Shanghai by the following April, when it was praised by a film review periodical for raising “a loud outcry on the problem of a path forward for university students” and

thereby “exposing a real concrete ill of society.”² Still, even if there were direct evidence that *Gentlemen Are Born* had been viewed by the makers of *Crossroads* (I have verified only that it was prominently exhibited in Shanghai), an account of simple imitation would underplay the agency and originality of Chinese filmmakers as participants in a global flow of film techniques and storytelling devices. That flow is as old as cinema itself, and virtually all films—ever since the competition between Thomas Edison and the Lumière brothers at the birth of cinema—have engaged in rampant repetition of ideas from previous films and other cultural sources as well as moments of originality and difference in the deployment of those ideas.

Gentlemen Are Born and *Crossroads* serve in part as reflections of the harsh economic, political, and social realities of the 1930s—in particular unemployment due to a global depression, which helped lead to the attractions of fascism in both Europe and East Asia and to the growing global strength of Communism and other socialist movements that promised working people salvation from their desperate plight. The two films thus show that, as a medium lending itself to verisimilar representation, cinema from disparate places would reflect, often in a social realist mode, the then current global conditions of despair-inducing poverty and unemployment. In addition to sharing related social conditions that constituted the “real world,” however, cinema shared a common visual vocabulary—a vast, overlapping, and ever-evolving set of conventions and stereotypes that went beyond the global reach of Hollywood-based “classical” techniques of shooting, lighting, editing, and so on to embrace as well plot devices, character types, and generic forms that included not only social realism but, for example, melodrama, slapstick, and romantic comedy. These sorts of conventions, just as much as the technological tools of the film studio, constituted the means by which filmmakers could represent and communicate the realities they wished to convey. Such conventions do not mitigate so much as enable—while also existing in tension with—cinematic realism; thus, in this instance, the struggles with unemployment of a foursome of recent college graduates constitutes a repeated narrative scenario through which the reality of economic desperation was conveyed. As was suggested in the introduction (and following Stanley Cavell and

D. N. Rodowick), the range of plot devices, character types, and genre codes available to artists in mainstream film industries can be thought of as automatisms—pregiven mechanisms constituting the filmic medium at a particular cultural and historical moment—just as we might think of the state of technology available to a director or film studio at a given time.³ Filmmakers work with such conventions even as they introduce variations on them or occasionally even work against them or seek to introduce new ones.

This chapter explores the mode of realism of Shanghai cinema's "golden age" of the 1930s—particularly what later became labeled the Left-Wing Film Movement within the major Shanghai studios—with a view to how such a realism was intimately articulated with, and indeed *through*, a critical engagement with the conventions of Western mainstream cinema, particularly (but not only) Hollywood. As much recent scholarship has recognized, a clear distinction between oppositional and mainstream cinemas in 1930s China, manifested in critical debates of the time, such as that between advocates of "hard" (political or educational) and "soft" (art or entertainment) film, is much more difficult to maintain when one closely engages the films themselves.⁴ Many soft films raised real social problems, while even films later canonized as hard critical realism invariably contained large measures of soft material, such as slapstick comedy, melodrama, romance, and sex appeal (often all in the same film). After exploring more generally the issue of borrowed elements or shared conventions with Western entertainment cinema, I will focus in particular on how two Chinese films of the 1930s offered not only an imitation of but sometimes a highly reflexive critical commentary *on* the same popular Hollywood-derived conventions that they used in their stories. *Crossroads* illustrates how Shanghai's popular left-wing cinema carried out an implicitly anticolonial critique of the entertainment film conventions that it simultaneously deployed for audience pleasure, while *Street Angel* (*Malu tianshi* 马路天使; Yuan Muzhi 袁牧之, 1937) veered from a seeming imitation of the wildly popular and ultimately uplifting love stories of Hollywood's Frank Borzage to a dark, almost despairing examination of Shanghai's underclass.

In addition, it will become clear that the realism of the cinema of this

period has to do not only with verisimilar depictions of social hardship but just as importantly with the opening of structural fissures in mainstream cinema. Eschewing the classical Hollywood strictures demanding narrative unity and an eventual sense of closure, these films tended to suddenly shift their modes of narrative address, characterization, and affect and to leave the viewer with open questions, unconsummated possibilities, and unresolved conflicts. Such fissures, far from representing an inferior imitation or inadequate adaptation of classical Hollywood, with its preference for unity and closure, constitute instead the very essence of these films' unique and historically determined practice of realism.

In terms of Roman Jakobson's two basic forms that can be taken by realism (defined as "the artistic intent to render life as it is"), in these films, we see not only "the conservative tendency to remain within the limits of a given artistic tradition" (here the fictional realism of classical Hollywood narration, with a social realist message) but also "the tendency to deform given artistic norms" to reach "a more accurate rendition of reality."⁵ That is, through their adept citation of classical Hollywood norms, these films deploy the particular form that entertainment cinema took as a largely imported commodity in the urban culture of 1930s Shanghai; but the same films sometimes intentionally frustrate the expectations raised by those Hollywood conventions and thus amounted to an intervention by leftist Shanghai filmmakers to at least partially undermine the very conventionalized forms they were employing. They thereby attempted to push the audience past their habitual modes of enjoyment into a more precarious exposure to a pressing reality of social crisis and a future seemingly foreclosed unless truly revolutionary change could be mustered.

Or, to put it in terms of the six broad categories of cinematic realism I outlined in the introduction—ontological realism, perceptual realism, fictional realism, social realism, prescriptive realism, and apophatic realism—in the "Shanghaiing of Hollywood" in the 1930s, we will find not only a clash between the impulses of critical ("hard") *social* realism and entertaining ("soft") *fictional* realism but also a systematic narrative strategy that may be more adequately described as an *apophatic* mode of realism, which gestures to a reality that remains unrepresentable. In this case, a revolutionary *real* was not positively manifested but negatively

configured as a structuring absence by fundamentally destabilizing the norms of Hollywood fictional realism (even as it also deployed them), pointing to an insurgent *beyond* that could not yet achieve concrete figuration. The new, aspirational revolutionary reality was not directly offered as an alternative to the present one (in the mode of *prescriptive* realism—to be discussed fully in chapter 4) but indirectly prefigured precisely through the intentional sabotage of fictional realism's usual narrative and affective closure. The verb *to shanghai* entered colloquial English in the nineteenth century to name the practice of abducting people and forcing them into maritime labor against their volition (Shanghai being an example of where a ship might take them); by the “Shanghaiing of Hollywood” in this chapter’s title, I mean the Shanghai left-wing filmmakers’ analogous hijacking of classical Hollywood conventions to subvert them and force them into aesthetic and affective labor for which they were not originally intended.

This discussion ends with a reconsideration of the theorization of Hollywood-style popular cinema as a global “vernacular modernism,” a perspective that has inspired much recent scholarship on the early history of East Asian cinemas. In the case of the leftist films of 1930s Shanghai, partly as a counter to the official Chinese Communist film histories that saw those films simply as instances of oppositional critical realism that implicitly promoted revolution and thus prepared the way for socialist realism proper, the perspective of vernacular modernism acknowledges that the same films were in fact works of entertainment that were themselves heavily influenced by Hollywood. In this perspective, the Hollywood style of filmmaking provided what Miriam Hansen called a “sensory-reflective horizon” through which people across the globe could process their own experiences of modernity, including by making and viewing popular entertainment films more or less based on the Hollywood model within their own film cultures.⁶ Michael Raine puts a further twist on the phenomenon by arguing that we should view such films as both “the most immediate mediation of everyday life *and* as a game of citation, an ‘adaptation’ not simply from other media . . . but from other texts, in particular Hollywood cinema as the ‘Big Other.’”⁷ As Raine emphasizes, such adaptations do not simply take the form of imitation but rather often employ complex elements of parody, critique, and repurposing of

Hollywood conventions. The Shanghai films we will examine illustrate these tendencies well, and in fact, they depart significantly enough from the Hollywood mode of “classical narration” that they raise the question of whether such classicism should necessarily be taken as a defining feature of cinema as vernacular modernism—or at least whether it may in some cases be sabotaged even as it is deployed.

WHEN CONVENTIONS TRAVEL

By the 1930s, the classical Hollywood mode of narration had been more or less adopted by Chinese filmmakers in terms of the basic principles of continuity, such as scene construction using varying shot scales determined by narrative motivation and punctuation cuts (wipes, fades, dissolves) between scenes. Many examples of borrowing from specific Hollywood films also can be found. The earliest still extant Chinese film, *Laborer's Love* (*Laogong zhi aiqing* 劳工之爱情; Zhang Shichuan 张石川, 1922), for example, drew some of its comedic gags from Hollywood films of just a year earlier, including Buster Keaton's *The Haunted House* and Harold Lloyd's *Never Weaken*.⁸

One type of intertextual citation of Hollywood found in Chinese films is the incidental—or even accidental—mimicking of an isolated image or motif. Take, for instance, an iconic image from Wu Yonggang's silent classic *The Goddess*, from 1934 (Figure 5a): Ruan Lingyu plays a victimized prostitute who tries to raise and educate her young son despite being preyed upon by the gambler/pimp whose legs we see in the foreground. Was this striking visual composition inspired by King Vidor's 1932 film *Bird of Paradise* (Figure 5b)? It certainly is possible. *Bird of Paradise* had run at the opulent Nanjing Theater in Shanghai beginning on January 1, 1933, and its flamboyant style and racy, pre-Code content was sure to have drawn the attention of many Shanghai film artists. On the other hand, the same composition had been used at least once earlier, in the 1931 Hollywood film *Gentleman's Fate* (Mervyn LeRoy).⁹ In fact, the composition is such a compelling one—for both its symmetry and its ability to convey the dynamics of power, including an implicit sadomasochistic eroticism, of



A



B

FIGURE 5. Similar compositions in, a, *The Goddess* (1934) and, b, *Bird of Paradise* (1932).

its narrative content—that one can imagine various filmmakers, whether Western or Asian, either independently deploying it or readily copying it.

If such parallels are relatively inconsequential, given that the rampant transnational pilfering of cinematic ideas has been the rule since the birth of the medium, a more complicated case arises when we go beyond the borrowing of isolated images or technical devices and look instead at the colonially inflected spread of more extensive genre and plot elements from Hollywood to China. One example would be the status of *The Goddess* itself as a maternal melodrama that drew upon not only traditional Confucian values regarding family sacrifice and education but also Hollywood precedents like *Stella Dallas* (Henry King, 1925).¹⁰ Indeed, the broader availability of melodrama as both a quotable Hollywood film *genre* and a transcultural and transhistorical narrative *mode* calls attention to the ways in which Western cinematic and narrative conventions were creatively combined with indigenous storytelling traditions.¹¹

A fascinating case of such combinations (though far less well-studied than *The Goddess*) is the 1931 Chinese film *A Spray of Plum Blossoms* (*Yi jian mei* 一剪梅; *Bu Wancang* 卜万苍), which features a tangle of cross-cultural signifiers, all within a loose adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. In its details, the film draws simultaneously on Chinese cultural reference points and Western cinematic precedents. The "Silvia" character, for example, has an affinity for the titular plum blossoms (a symbol of endurance in China), leading to flower-themed set designs of her personal quarters in her warlord father's mansion that recall the camellia icons of the 1921 Hollywood film *Camille* (Ray C. Smallwood), an adaptation of *The Lady of the Camellias* (*La Dame aux Camélias*); original novel by Alexandre Dumas fils) starring Alla Nazimova and Rudolph Valentino.¹²

By the latter third of *A Spray of Plum Blossoms*, even though the setting in modern times has been made clear by, for example, the arrival of the "Proteus" character in a biplane, the "Valentine" character's adopted outlaw band after his unjust banishment appears to be drawn partly from the Chinese cultural imagination of the *jianghu* 江湖—literally “rivers and lakes,” the half-real, half-mythical traditional setting of martial arts fiction (somewhat akin to the Wild West in the American imagination).



FIGURE 6. Outlaw heroes in *Robin Hood* (1922) and *A Spray of Plum Blossoms* (1931).

More confusingly, however, after he becomes an outlaw leader, Valentine's costume in *A Spray of Plum Blossoms*, featuring a jerkin-style vest, immediately recalls not Chinese martial arts heroes so much as the Hollywood version of Robin Hood exemplified by Douglas Fairbanks, who was as wildly popular in China as he was in the West (Figure 6).

Here we see not just an isolated citation, nor only the adoption of the basic principles of classical continuity, but a more thorough interpenetration of themes, motifs, and imagery, suggesting a substantially new cultural imaginary in which Hollywood has been thoroughly absorbed into the Chinese cinematic and narrative consciousness. Much of the critical discussion of 1930s Shanghai cinema, both at the time and in more recent scholarship, has in one way or another touched on the question of the relationship, whether actual or desired, between the ubiquity of Hollywood and the Left-Wing Film Movement itself, in which progressive and Communist-sympathizing directors, screenwriters, and other film artists made a number of films which—despite censorship by the Nationalist government—turned a critical mirror on contemporary Chinese society and at least implicitly promoted revolutionary change as well as defense against the growing economic and territorial encroachments of imperialism. In Chinese Communist film historiography, long represented by the two-volume *History of the Development of Chinese Film*, edited by Cheng Jihua 程季华, these films are appreciated for their left-leaning sentiments and their social realism, which is seen as a precursor to the more fully developed Chinese socialist realism that would follow the

establishment of the People's Republic in 1949.¹³ However, most scholars more recently have rejected this official teleological narrative. As early as 1989, for example, Chris Berry placed Cheng Jihua's account in the context in which it was originally published, in 1963, and suggested that the connection of these filmmakers to the Communist Party was not as seamless as Cheng's account had made it seem.¹⁴ Later, Paul Pickowicz would argue that because many of these films are melodramas, they are in fact not revolutionary at all but rather reactionary—at least insofar as they actually adhered to Hollywood genre formulas.¹⁵ Still later, in Zhang Zhen's indispensable history of Chinese cinema up to 1937, the relationship between Chinese films of the 1930s and classical Hollywood is treated with an unprecedented degree of detail and nuance, though, on balance, Zhang, too, deemphasizes these films' positions in a Communist genealogy, examining them instead as reflections of and influences on the daily lives of Chinese people living under the new conditions of urban modernity.¹⁶ Even more recently, Zhiwei Xiao has questioned the actual coherence of any singular leftist film "movement" and pointed out that historical narratives of it often have been self-serving and intended to celebrate specific figures and downplay others according to later political developments.¹⁷

Rather than being mutually exclusive, these films' competing priorities of Hollywood-style entertainment and leftist critique are better viewed as yielding what Siegfried Kracauer has called the "strange constructs" that result not only from cinema's capacity for realist recording of reality but from its ability to combine disparate things in new ways.¹⁸ Zhang Zhen cites these "strange constructs" as helping to constitute "the revolutionary potential of the cinema."¹⁹ Clearly any account of 1930s Shanghai leftist cinema that depicts it solely as politicized critical realism will fail to account for a great deal of what made this cinema so engaging both to its original audiences and to students of Chinese cinema today. At the same time, reducing these films simply to Chinese variations on Hollywood entertainment fails to capture the unique combination of classical entertainment film formulas with genuine revolutionary impulses that they embody. Rather than seeing certain scenes in an ostensibly leftist film as representing the filmmakers' more politically correct

(“hard”) critical realist impulses and others as caving to Hollywood conventions in a concession to the audience’s desire for (“soft”) entertainment and the studio’s desire for profits, here I will explore how the very invocation of Hollywood conventions was sometimes done in a subversively critical manner that generated irrepressible tensions within the classical form.

MIMICRY AS CRITIQUE: CROSSROADS

Despite being considered a classic of the Left-Wing Film Movement and indulging in moments of bleak critical realism—such as an attempted and then actual suicide by drowning of one of the four college graduates introduced at the beginning of the film—*Crossroads* is primarily, for most of its running time, a romantic comedy. One would not know that from reading the *History of the Development of Chinese Film*, which includes a nearly four-page discussion of *Crossroads* that never once describes it as a comedy of any sort (and romance is mentioned only in a brief aside stating that two of the characters fall in love in the course of the film).²⁰ Nonetheless, *Crossroads* not only is clearly identifiable as a romantic comedy but also follows a particular plot pattern within that genre that I will call the *romantic comedy of misrecognition*—where much of the comedy and suspense (the delaying of full romantic coupling typical of rom-coms) is derived from a plot twist in which two potential lovers are unaware that they already share some life connection without recognizing the other’s identity.

A paradigmatic Hollywood rom-com of misrecognition is the 1940 Ernst Lubitsch film *The Shop around the Corner*, in which a shop clerk (James Stewart) feuds with a coworker (Margaret Sullavan) while falling in long-distance love with a pen pal, without realizing that they are one and the same person. In a late-century variation, *You’ve Got Mail* (Nora Ephron, 1998), Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan enact much the same scenario of open professional rivalry and dislike combined with a more private anonymous epistolary romance (in this case, through email). Such a repeated narrative device qualifies as what Carl Plantinga labels a “paradigm scenario”—or conventionalized and learned “types and

sequences of events that are associated with certain emotions.”²¹ In the case of the rom-com of misrecognition, the plot activates the audience’s strong desire for the misrecognition to be overcome and the couple to be permanently united.

Like so many Hollywood paradigm scenarios, the rom-com of misrecognition goes back to the silent era. In *Crazy Like a Fox* (Leo McCarey, 1926), for example, a young woman runs away from home, outraged because her father has engaged her to a friend’s son whom she has never met. Meanwhile, the groom-to-be also hopes to get out of the marriage and hatches a plan to pretend to be mentally unstable when he meets the bride’s family. The resolve of the man and woman to elude the arranged marriage is amplified when they meet as strangers at the train station and fall in love at first sight, not realizing the other’s identity. Needless to say, all ends well when the misrecognition is resolved and the arranged marriage partner turns out to have conveniently coincided with the actual love interest.²²

Precedents for the cinematic rom-coms of misrecognition can be found in the sorts of ironic twists of fate featured in the popular American literature of O. Henry (William Sydney Porter) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One of his most reliable formulas, in stories such as “The Gift of the Magi” and “The Unfurnished Room,” was an improbable coincidence and consequent misunderstanding that served to demonstrate the depth of a young couple’s love. Paul Fejos confessed to adding a corny “O. Henry twist” to his masterpiece *Lonesome*, a 1928 rom-com of misrecognition that straddled the transition from silent to sound cinema.²³ The plot is simple: a factory worker and a telephone operator meet at Coney Island and quickly fall in love. When they become unwittingly separated in the crowd of thousands, it appears that they will never find each other again, but upon returning home, it turns out that they live in adjacent rooms in the same tenement building. In the final scene, the man and woman have independently returned home, exhausted and brokenhearted. The film crosscuts between their separate rooms, occasionally combining them into one shot to show visually how the sound of the phonograph the man plays to console himself reaches the woman’s space. She becomes angry at the noise coming from her anonymous neighbor

and goes to complain to him, only to find that he is in fact her lost lover, so that they are now joyfully reunited and the film ends.

Similarly, in the Chinese *Crossroads*, one among the group of four struggling male college graduates carries on a battle of the sexes with his unseen neighbor, who, unbeknownst to him, is the same young woman with whom he flirts when they cross paths every day in their respective streetcar commutes. Miriam Hansen speculates that *Crossroads* borrows from *Lonesome* its basic misrecognition scenario—two people feud as unseen next-door neighbors in a tenement house while falling in love as anonymous others who randomly encounter each other outside in the city.²⁴ It may well be true that the makers of *Crossroads* remembered *Lonesome* from less than a decade earlier, but the director's account of the plot's inception does not make open acknowledgment of the influence of that or any other film. In an article published just before *Crossroads* was released, director Shen Xiling wrote that the inspiration for the film came partly from a friend of his, who suggested the following plotline, as quoted by Shen:

I want to write about a contemporary money-craving couple. They don't know they are living together because of their different work schedules. At home they fight every day, yet when they run into each other, they pretend they are rich and deceive each other—at last the whole thing is discovered and it becomes a joke.²⁵

It is unclear whether Shen himself knew this, but his friend's suggested plot synopsis in fact exactly describes the 1932 German film *I by Day and You by Night* (*Ich bei tag und du bei nacht*; Ludwig Berger), a masterful romantic comedy of misrecognition that also was in part an extended meditation on how the movies structure our fantasy lives in ways that can be both pleasurable and problematic in the context of socioeconomic class divides—much as *Crossroads* would do in a key sequence to be discussed shortly.²⁶

In *I by Day and You by Night*, in an arrangement typical of the economic hardship of the time, a man and a woman separately rent the same bed in a furnished apartment room. The man works all night as a waiter in a local nightclub, while the woman works by day as a manicurist. Both

are young and poor, and each sleeps in the rental bed while the other is at work. They never cross paths in the apartment, but each often becomes angry at the absent other for his or her personal habits in the space they must share. Naturally, the two happen to meet outside of the domestic space and quickly fall in love, while, through a series of misunderstandings, both also come to believe that the other is rich and put on airs accordingly to deceive the other about his or her actual poverty. The climactic scene comes near the end of the film, when the man returns home while the woman is still in bed, leading to their comical discovery of each other's true identities and a happy ending. A metacinematic element is introduced by the fact that the man's friend is a movie theater projectionist, and the role of popular cinema in modeling happiness and structuring our fantasy lives is a running joke in the film.

The arrangement in *Crossroads* shares even more with the situation in *I by Day and You by Night* than *Lonesome* in that it returns frequently to the domestic proximity gag rather than just revealing the coincidence at the end. In *Crossroads*, however, the eventual revelation is a surprise only to the man, Lao Zhao (played by Zhao Dan 赵丹), because the woman, Yang Zhiying (Bai Yang 白杨), had figured it out relatively early in the film but kept him in the dark just to play a prank on him. Lao Zhao, cheerful because he is in love, continues his usual practice of singing loudly and throwing trash over the wall into the room next door to annoy his unseen nemesis, who he is convinced is actually his cranky landlady, unaware that it is in fact his new girlfriend. Adding to the comic misunderstanding is Lao Zhao's pose, instigated by a friend who gave false information to Zhiying, that he lives in a wealthy neighborhood when in fact he is unemployed at the beginning of the film and, by the end, has been laid off again from his night job as a proofreader for a newspaper. Much of the film's humor, but also its politics, derives from the precarious class status of both Lao Zhao and Zhiying as "petty urbanites" (*xiao shimin* 小市民)—a class of literate city dwellers in modestly paying salaried jobs (or, increasingly, unemployed)—in depression-era Shanghai. (Zhiying is a women's vocational school graduate who serves as a trainer at a cotton mill.) The clash between the aspirations represented by Lao Zhao's pose as a higher-class romantic prospect and the actual precarity of his and

his unemployed college friends' real lives constitutes a central theme of the film.

With a crucial dream sequence that occurs approximately midway through the film, *Crossroads* shrewdly relates those aspirations to the cultural imaginary offered by Hollywood and subtly critiques the inadequacy of Hollywood's fantasy world for capturing the realities of life in China. In this sequence, the leisurely reading of a novel leads Zhiying to doze off and have an erotic dream featuring a romantic encounter between her and Lao Zhao. The novel that inspires her libidinal fantasy is the Chinese translation of *La dame aux camélias*. By this time, *Lady of the Camellias* had enjoyed decades of wide popularity in China and prominence in the modern Chinese cultural imagination, epitomizing the imported modern Western romantic ideology of heterosexual love as providing the ultimate meaning of life for the individual.²⁷ It had inspired several Chinese rewrites and sequels as well as countless stage adaptations beginning in the late Qing dynasty and continuing well into the Republican period—including one that had starred Bai Yang, the actor playing Zhiying, during her stage career before she began to act in films.²⁸

Literary and stage precedents aside, with the *Crossroads* dream sequence, we have not only the sleeping character Zhiying imitating *Lady of the Camellias* protagonist Marguerite Gautier in her dream but the director Shen Xiling, in his filming of the dream sequence, imitating Western directors like George Cukor, whose own Hollywood version of *Camille* had been released the previous year, or Fred Niblo, who had directed another Hollywood version in 1926, or even Ray Smallwood, who had directed the 1921 *Camille* mentioned earlier. These are just a few of the dozens of film adaptations of *La dame aux camélias* that had appeared by the time of *Crossroads*—including at least three Chinese film versions in addition to many from the United States and Europe.²⁹ The dream sequence in *Crossroads* thus serves as a metacinematic commentary on the very influence of Western film that is visible elsewhere in *Crossroads* as well as in other films of its time. The effect of Western films on the petty urbanites of semicolonial Shanghai is parodied precisely by the casting, within the imagination of Zhiying's erotic dream, of her as Marguerite and Lao Zhao as her lover Armand, so that her erotic desire for Lao Zhao essentially

takes the form of a Western movie scene based on the French romance.

Though awkward and fumbling in real life, in Zhiying's dream, Lao Zhao is as charming, smooth, and confident as his dashing, aristocratic European costume would suggest, whereas Zhiying appears as a beautiful and refined young woman of the world. After he sways her around on a Western-style swing (including a wonderful tracking shot in which the camera moves as if attached to the swing), the two retire to an interior space, where Lao Zhao boldly kisses Zhiying's bare shoulder and then her lips in a close-up (Figure 7). Kisses on the lips are extremely rare in Chinese films of this time, and I am aware of no other instance in which the lips touch any part of the lover's body below the neck. In fact, given the much more modest standards of physical intimacy found in Chinese films compared to Hollywood in the 1930s, I would go so far as to speculate that this shot could *only* happen within a dream sequence, and particularly one that clearly is imitating Hollywood—and perhaps especially one that parodically invokes Greta Garbo, who had starred in the most recent Hollywood version of *Camille*. The kisses in the *Crossroads* dream sequence appear to consciously mimic amorous affections paid to Garbo not only in *Camille* but also in other of her films, such as *Mata Hari* (George Fitzmaurice, 1931)—precisely the sort of “fleshly” (*rougan* 肉感) erotic displays that Chinese audiences and critics found both excessive and transgressively titillating in Hollywood movies but generally did not see in Chinese productions.³⁰

Lao Zhao maintains his masculine confidence throughout the sequence, but the fantasy performance of Westernized romance is comically undermined by the scene that immediately follows the dream sequence, in which Lao Zhao at last has a perfect opportunity to go beyond the nervous smiles he has shared in previous coincidental streetcar encounters with Zhiying (enabled by the fact that she takes the same streetcar to work during the day that he takes home after his night shift). This time, instead of passing her quickly on the streetcar steps, he remains on the car with her, helps her retrieve something she has dropped, and then finds himself standing right in front of her during the ride, yet he cannot muster the confidence to say a word to her despite her obviously flirtatious smiles and glances. The scene thus humorously negates Zhiying's



FIGURE 7. Erotic dream sequence in *Crossroads* (1937).

previous dream fantasy of Lao Zhao as a highly sophisticated, confidently amorous Europeanized lover.

In the *Lady of the Camellias* dream sequence in *Crossroads*, the object of satire is not so much a Western “original,” because so many adaptations already had proliferated in both the West and China. Nor does the humor come simply from Zhiying’s desire for Lao Zhao, though that is certainly the denotative narrative content of the scene in terms of its plot motivation. Instead, by articulating Zhiying’s desire in this particular way, the scene appears to satirize the mimicking of Western looks and behaviors, learned in large part through movies, as the way to be modern, as well as the imperialist context from which such mimicry arises (see chapter 1). The real object of gentle satire is the *imagined selves* of Zhiying and Lao Zhao in the scene.³¹ These alternative selves are both *real*, in the sense of being new modes of existence made conceivable in part through the co-opted imagination of Western literature and film, and *impossible*, in that the material conditions of poverty and colonial exploitation ensure that the fantasies shaped by Hollywood’s dream factory will remain only fantasies, even though the desires expressed through or activated by them are real.

The blunt failure of the fantasized world in Zhiying’s dream to bear much resemblance to her real life is made clear even within the dream

during its most comic moment. When Lao-Zhao-as-Armand makes his initial appearance with a triumphant smile, his visage is suddenly obscured by a superimposed image of a tag reading “unemployed no. B.” This label is one that Lao Zhao and his three college friends had taped to their graduation photos in a darkly satirical gag to make light of the fact that they all had suffered from unemployment after finishing their degrees. It was when Zhiying discovered Lao Zhao’s portrait and tore off the label covering his face that she first realized her despised neighbor was the handsome young man she had been seeing in the streetcar. The irruption of the “unemployed no. B” label into Zhiying’s dream, once again obscuring Lao Zhao’s face, thus serves as a comic reminder of who this debonair Armand character really is, in the process ironically setting off the opulent world of the fantasy from the much more desperate conditions of the couple’s real life and thus serving as a moment of social critique, however lighthearted, within the dream sequence.

The *Crossroads* dream sequence’s apparent critique of Hollywood-based fantasy as incompatible with contemporary Chinese reality has a precedent in the 1931 classic film *Love and Duty* (*Lian’ai yu aiqing* 恋爱与义务; *Bu Wancang* 卜万苍). Starring two of the biggest Chinese movie icons of the day, Ruan Lingyu and Jin Yan 金焰, the film as a whole is partly a romantic story of illicit love and partly a maternal melodrama.³² In fact, the film appears to have borrowed some elements from Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, including the theme of a woman in a loveless marriage having a passionate affair with her true soul mate as well as the intense internal conflict stirred by her attachment to her offspring, from whom she must part when she finally leaves her husband for her lover. In the years before *Love and Duty* was released, a popular adaptation of *Anna Karenina* starring Greta Garbo and John Gilbert (*Love*, Edmund Goulding, 1927) had played in Shanghai. In *Love and Duty*, some aspects of Ruan Lingyu’s character, Yang Naifan, seem to borrow from Garbo’s Anna. There is, for instance, a moment soon after she has left her husband and taken flight with her lover when the sight of some anonymous small children drives her to tearful despair because they remind her of her own children, whom she has abandoned. Also in both films, the forsaken husband falsely tells the children that their mother is dead.

Most interesting in the present context is a fantasy sequence in *Love and Duty* that features its male protagonist in a heroic sword-fighting role clearly drawn from Western cinema precedents, particularly Douglas Fairbanks films like *The Three Musketeers* (Fred Niblo, 1921), *Robin Hood* (Allan Dwan, 1922), and *The Black Pirate* (Albert Parker, 1926). Read against the film as a whole, the sequence serves not only to reveal the extent of Hollywood's colonization of the horizons of the public imagination in Shanghai at the time but also, as would be the case with *Crossroads*, to critique that same set of romantic conventions as ultimately empty in the face of the reality in China. In the period of taboo romance before Yang Naifan leaves her husband, her lover, Li Zuyi, picks up a novel while he is at home alone, yearning wistfully for her. A close-up shows the book cover with the title *A Hero* in English and *Qinghai yingxiong* 情海英雄 (Hero of boundless passion) in Chinese. Spurred by reading the text, Li has a daydream fantasy that casts himself in the hero's role. In the fantasy sequence, his dress and demeanor strongly resemble those of Douglas Fairbanks in *The Black Pirate*. While strumming a Spanish mandocello on a veranda, he hears the cry of his lover, cast in his reverie as a damsel in distress being molested by a bearded pirate. In physical Douglas Fairbanks fashion, the hero zip-lines down from the porch on a rope, leaps off a ledge to reach the woman, wrests her away from the scoundrel, and challenges the latter to a duel with drawn sabers as she looks on in alarm. During their fight, the hero manages to flip his rival's saber into the air and catch it, thus disarming his opponent, but he only laughs cavalierly (just as Fairbanks would smile through sword fights in *The Black Pirate*) while chivalrously tossing the saber back to the villain (as Fairbanks does in *The Three Musketeers*) to continue the fight evenly. After fatally stabbing the pirate, the hero is, of course, rewarded with the embrace of the rescued maiden. The film then cuts to an intertitle of the novel's text, reading, in part, "In the end he won the final victory in affairs of the heart." Later, after his real-life lover has agreed to leave her husband and run away with him, Li grabs the same novel, kisses it, raises his fists and his gaze to the air in a dramatic gesture, and announces, "I've won!" As in *Crossroads*, the sequence shows the extent to which the character's fantasy life—and, to some extent, his actual behavior—has been

determined by the narrative tropes and iconography of Western popular romance as promulgated by Hollywood (the novel clearly prompting the cinematic imaginary of Fairbanks films). However, the entire sequence is rendered ridiculous in retrospect when, in the film's "real" world, Li and Yang soon live in hopeless poverty after she leaves her husband, Li literally works himself to death for almost no money (apologizing for ruining Yang's life before dying), and then Yang labors as a seamstress to raise their daughter and can only watch her other children in anonymity from afar, à la *Stella Dallas*, eventually committing suicide to spare her now-grown daughter the shame of her existence. In short, the film ends in such unrelenting melodramatic pathos that the Hollywood-fueled fantasy of romantic heroism is exposed as a dangerous lie—even if it is exposed as such partly through the deployment of *other* Hollywood conventions, particularly those of maternal melodrama.

Insofar as they serve as parodies of Hollywood and implicitly as critiques of the inadequacy of the Hollywood imaginary for molding the sorts of citizens needed by China in times of national crisis, the dream sequences in *Love and Duty* and *Crossroads* were cinematic counterparts to critiques already abundant in Chinese critical discourse by the early 1930s. Lu Xun 鲁迅, for example—widely considered the “father of modern Chinese literature” and China’s most prominent cultural commentator until his death in 1936—aimed his satirical ridicule both at Hollywood and at Chinese intellectuals naive enough to think they could change Hollywood by criticizing it. In 1930, a year before *Love and Duty* was released, Lu Xun mocked Chinese audiences for indulging in Hollywood-induced fantasies, imagining they could enjoy pleasures that were in fact only available to their colonizers (bearing in mind that Shanghai itself was a colonized city at that time, with large sections of it outside Chinese sovereignty in the form of foreign concessions)—making such audience pleasure essentially a form of masochism.³³ In an introduction to his translation of the Japanese essay “Modern Film and the Bourgeoisie,” Lu Xun derided Chinese fans’ worship of “valorous knight-errant” figures in Hollywood movies, and he specifically criticized the Chinese reception of Douglas Fairbanks.³⁴ Leading leftist screenwriters and critics Zheng Boqi 郑伯奇 and Xia Yan 夏衍 also wrote scathing critiques of the influence of Hollywood on the

Chinese imagination. In a 1932 essay, Zheng Boqi (under the pseudonym Xi Naifang 席耐芳) described Hollywood films as “poison” and criticized Chinese filmmakers for imitating the bourgeois content and ideology of Western films (though he acknowledged that those films should be studied for their methods and techniques).³⁵ During the hard film versus soft film debate, Xia Yan denounced Frank Capra’s *Lady for a Day* (1933) as “merely a kind of fantasy” (using the English word *fantasy* in the original).³⁶ In the context of Japan’s invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and bombing of Shanghai in 1932, Zheng Boqi wrote the following:

Right now in China the situation intensifies by the day. The entire old society is rapidly crumbling. Imperialism invades ever more powerfully, carving up the country like a melon. The petty urbanites, habituated to daydreaming, cannot help but gradually face these grim realities. At such a time, we can expose the stark social realities for them to see, no longer needing to gingerly pander to them with saccharine fantasies.³⁷

The dream sequences of *Love and Duty* and *Crossroads* can thus be seen as cinematic representations of the “daydreaming” and “fantasies” that Zheng Boqi and Xia Yan insist the petty urbanite audience needs to go beyond, presumably with the help of more critically realist leftist Chinese films.

Indeed, in *Crossroads*, particularly in the beginning and ending, the lives of Lao Zhao and Zhiying ultimately are framed not in terms of their potential romantic coupling as the ultimate means of personal fulfillment but rather in terms of generational crisis due to economic depression and imperialist aggression, thus earning the film its status as a social realist work of the Left-Wing Film Movement. In his review of the film, Xia Yan specifically praised as “utterly scrupulous” the melancholy opening segment, in which Lao Zhao prevents his despondent classmate from committing suicide and then they together lament their situation in Shanghai’s back alleys—though Xia also commented that the screenplay becomes “completely careless” later, presumably corresponding to the switch in tone from critical realism to romantic comedy.³⁸ At the film’s end, the romantic couple Zhiying and Lao Zhao both have lost their jobs and apparently each other. But then, running into each other by chance

along with each of their best friends at the same spot on the river where the other friend—one of the original four college graduates—had earlier tried to drown himself, they learn from a newspaper report that he in fact has now committed suicide, and they consider their own lives as facing a choice represented on one side by the suicide victim's loss of hope and on the other by another old college friend who had returned to his homeland in northeast China to fight against the invading Japanese. The remaining friends quickly vow to bravely go on living and struggling, and they march back into the Shanghai cityscape arm-in-arm in an on-location extreme long shot. I will return to the questions raised by this ending and those of other left-wing films, as well as the sometimes jolting contrasts in tone between the comic main part of the film and these more serious segments, but first let us look in detail at another leftist classic of 1937 that borrowed even more explicitly from Hollywood than did *Crossroads* but that also subverted Hollywood conventions yet more starkly.

UNDERMINING ELEVATION: *STREET ANGEL*

Yuan Muzhi's *Street Angel* took its title from Frank Borzage's 1928 silent classic of the same name and borrowed many of its motifs from that film as well as from Borzage's international blockbuster *7th Heaven* from a year earlier. In Yuan's film, however, Borzage's themes of poverty and redemptive love get reworked in a way that both borrows from the master of Hollywood melodrama and also fundamentally undermines his type of storytelling, thus serving as another prime example of the "Shanghaiing of Hollywood" in the 1930s.

In analyzing the various elements of adaptation from one film text to another, we can usefully employ Jörg Schweinitz's study of film "stereotypes," which he defines broadly as "conventionalized representational patterns shared and accepted by artists and viewers within a given period."³⁹ Schweinitz takes stereotypes as "differentiated functional forms that ensure the activation of affective responses (as intended in aesthetic fictions) in the addressee."⁴⁰ That is, insofar as they activate codes already understood by the viewer, stereotypes create affect as part of the spectator's activity, as we already saw in the case of the "paradigm

scenarios” presented by the “rom-com of misrecognition” in *Crossroads*. In other words, viewers’ emotional responses—such as the pleasurable (because temporary) anxiety evoked by misunderstandings between lovers in romantic comedies—are cued not only by the film they are currently watching but by the previous films from which the spectator learned the same conventions.

One type of conventionalized pattern or stereotype that helps to constitute popular film narratives is the repeated (and therefore immediately recognizable) character type. Yuan Muzhi’s *Street Angel* shares several character stereotypes with its Borzage antecedents. The male protagonist is a handsome, talented, and good-hearted young man, played by Charles Farrell in both of Borzage’s films and by a youthful Zhao Dan (the same lead actor as in *Crossroads*) in Yuan’s film (Figure 8). Opposite him is a virtuous young beauty, played by Janet Gaynor in both of Borzage’s films and by the popular singer Zhou Xuan 周璇, in her first film role, in Yuan’s film (Figure 9). In *7th Heaven*, the heroine has an evil older sister, on which the heroine’s sister in Yuan’s *Street Angel* initially appears to be modeled—even down to such details as the penciling of her eyebrows (Figure 10). In Borzage’s *Street Angel*, a prostitute neighbor tries to come between the main couple in a manner that appears to be quoted with the older sister (also a prostitute) in Yuan’s film (Figure 11). The male protagonists in both *7th Heaven* and Yuan’s *Street Angel* have a ragtag band of misfit friends, simultaneously illustrating that they are respected and that they identify with society’s lower stratum (Figure 12). Several other details of the Chinese *Street Angel* also are borrowed from Borzage, from the visual trope of a makeshift skywalk between two facing apartments (Figure 13) to the plot scenario of the female protagonists being protected from menacing policemen by a false claim of residency (both of which had appeared in *7th Heaven*).

According to Schweinitz, “classical film genres are nothing more than open-structured repertoires of narrative stereotypes,” including “plot patterns” and “narrative formulas” in addition to character types. The basic plot pattern that Yuan’s *Street Angel* shares with Borzage’s films is a love story that includes the clichéd “boy loses girl” part of the stereotypical romantic progression. That is, just as some sort of misrecognition was

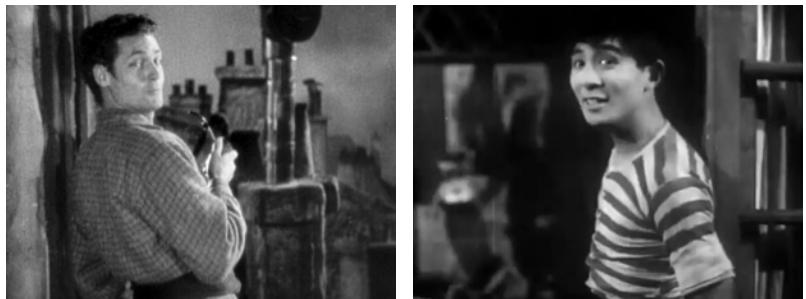


FIGURE 8. Charles Farrell in *7th Heaven* (1927) and Zhao Dan in *Street Angel* (1937).



FIGURE 9. Janet Gaynor in *7th Heaven* (1927) and Zhou Xuan in *Street Angel* (1937).



FIGURE 10. Sister characters in *7th Heaven* (1927) and *Street Angel* (1937).



FIGURE 11. Competitors for boyfriend's affections in Frank Borzage's *Street Angel* (1928) and Yuan Muzhi's *Street Angel* (1937).



FIGURE 12. Bands of friends in *7th Heaven* (1927) and *Street Angel* (1937).



FIGURE 13. Skywalk between apartments in *7th Heaven* (1927) and *Street Angel* (1937).

key to the rom-com paradigm scenario in *Crossroads*, these films use the familiar narrative formula in which a romance is threatened either by a falling out between the lovers based on a misunderstanding or by external forces that tear them apart. In both of Borzage's films, Gaynor plays a young woman who, having initially been forced into prostitution by desperate circumstances, finds redemption through a romance with the handsome and caring young man played by Farrell. In *7th Heaven*, made in Hollywood but set in Paris, just as the couple have committed to marriage, the man, Chico, is torn away by conscription to fight in World War I. He eventually is reported to have died in battle, but the couple is happily reunited in the end when it turns out he survived. In the case of Borzage's *Street Angel*, made in Hollywood but set in Naples, the woman is thrown in jail by an unforgiving cop—unbeknownst to the man, who believes she has simply abandoned him, leaving him heartbroken and furious with her.

A paradigm scenario of a lovers' quarrel based on a misunderstanding not only temporarily pits the lovers against each other but also in a sense pits the spectator against the protagonists, insofar as the former still wants the romance to succeed while the latter, at least ostensibly, have given up on it. That is, in terms of how the film is, as Carl Plantinga puts it, "affectively prefocused" for the spectator, the lovers' quarrel section of a romantic comedy introduces a "benign incongruence" between spectator and character desires: whereas one or more of the lovers has decided that the romance is no longer possible or even desirable—often owing to a mistaken construal of the other's intentions or character based on some kind of misinformation or misinterpretation—the spectator construes the situation quite differently and strongly desires that the misunderstanding be cleared up and the couple reunited.⁴¹ In Borzage's *Street Angel*, the male protagonist's false belief that his lover has intentionally left him, when in fact she has only been unwillingly separated by circumstances, is cleared up in the film's climax, when the lovers are reunited and all is forgiven after her release from jail. In Yuan's *Street Angel*, the scenario of misunderstanding and breakup occurs when the male protagonist, Xiao Chen, mistakenly believes that his girlfriend, Xiao Hong, is falling for a man who is in fact preparing to purchase her as his concubine from her

guardians, the owners of a teahouse. Rather than talking things through, the lovers have an angry quarrel and are separated during the following scenes, causing the same sort of temporary benign incongruence between the desires of the audience and the behavior of the protagonists. The incongruity is resolved and the lovers reunited only after Xiao Hong learns of her guardians' plan to sell her and, in desperation, goes to Xiao Chen for help.

Yet, it is after this reconciliation—the final “boy gets girl back” stage of the clichéd rom-com formula—that the Chinese *Street Angel* departs significantly from the narrative formulas of the Borzage films. The latter feature happily-ever-after endings at the very moment that the artificial separations are ended and the couples reunited. In Yuan Muzhi’s film, however, this romantic plot pattern is resolved with fully half of the film still remaining, and the plot will now take several twists that do not echo anything from Borzage’s films. Taken together, these developments fundamentally shift the central theme of Borzage’s films—the transcendent spiritual power of heterosexual romantic love—to a social realist exploration of class, in particular, the plight of the urban poor and especially women, who are exploited and trafficked.

One clear way in which Yuan’s *Street Angel* reworks its Hollywood antecedents is through the metaphorical use of verticality in urban architecture. In the most celebrated shot in *7th Heaven* (actually two, though the spectator is not supposed to notice the cut), when Chico first takes Diane to his place to allow her to hide from the police by posing as his wife, the couple climb a spiral staircase all the way to the seventh floor while the camera tracks up in sync with them as if looking through a transparent fourth wall. (In fact, the shot was achieved by a camera rising in an elevator on a set that lacked that fourth wall.) The ascent of the camera to the seventh floor emphasizes the symbolism of the couple’s rise to the utopian space of Chico’s living quarters—the “seventh heaven” of the film’s title—an implausibly spacious apartment atop a high rise in Paris (implausible because Chico is only a city sewer worker), where the couple will fall in love, safe from the dire social conditions that previously had threatened them. In Borzage’s slightly later film *Street Angel*, the theme is repeated when Farrell’s character tells his lover, “This is just the

beginning! We are going to climb . . . higher and higher!”—which amounts to an intertextual reference to the very popular previous film. Love in Borzage’s films has its sensuous elements, but it is above all a spiritual condition that offers redemption and an almost mystical, telepathic bond between two souls. Indeed, in terms of affective impact on the spectator, the love on the seventh floor activates what Plantinga calls the emotion of *elevation*. Following psychologist Jonathan Haidt, Plantinga defines *elevation* as “the opposite of social disgust, triggered by the witnessing of acts of human beauty or virtue,” and drawing its “power from a desire for moral betterment.”⁴² In Plantinga’s view, “this emotion of elevation quite aptly describes the sort of emotional response generated by many narratives of the melodramatic variety,” a genre that Borzage’s films mix with romantic comedy.⁴³

In Borzage’s Hollywood films, elevation is both the effect of love and the implied purpose of art. In *Street Angel*, for example, the male protagonist, Gino, is a painter who falls in love with a young woman, Angela, who has run away with a circus to escape a criminal justice system that tried to jail her for robbery and solicitation for prostitution when she was desperately trying to get money to buy medicine for her dying mother. During the couple’s courtship, Gino paints a portrait that depicts Angela in a golden light, looking divine and innocent. She finds it beautiful but protests that she is not really like the figure in the painting, to which Gino answers that it is how he sees her. The painting eventually is sold for a pittance to a dishonest art dealer, who adds a halo to her head to make her literally angelic and sells it to a church as a lost masterpiece. At the film’s climax, after Gino attacks Angela and chases her into the very same church in retaliation for leaving him and breaking his heart, it is the occasion of unexpectedly seeing the painting again that makes him see her once more as angelic rather than evil and find it in his heart to forgive her, even without having cleared up the misunderstanding between lovers (that she in fact did not leave him willingly but was rediscovered by the Naples police and arrested). The painting thus serves the same function for Gino that Borzage hopes his films will serve for the viewer: it elevates him to a more spiritual plane of existence, where he can see the good and beauty in life. If it is a realist representation, it is in a prescriptive rather

than only descriptive or verisimilar mode, depicting in art an ideal that can then change the viewer's perceptions and behaviors.

In contrast to Borzage's affective elevation, associated with literal architectural elevation in the case of *7th Heaven*, some Shanghai films of the 1930s would put quite a different twist on the theme. The 1933 film *Daybreak* (*Tianming* 天明; Sun Yu) imitates the upward tracking shot of *7th Heaven* when its protagonists, a young couple from the countryside, first climb the stairs to the Shanghai apartment that they would now share with friends.⁴⁴ The idea of climbing to a refuge from the social ills of the city is cruelly mocked in a later shot, however, when we see the heroine, played by Li Lili 黎莉莉, make the same climb after having been raped by the boss of her factory—the first of a sequence of events that would have her tricked and sold into prostitution.

Yuan's *Street Angel* systematically employs the trope of elevation as a metaphor for class. The film introduces its fictional world with a shot of a tall skyscraper (clearly a model). The camera tilts down from a view of the top of the building to the bottom, even going beneath ground level to metaphorically reveal what a subtitle calls “Shanghai’s underground stratum.” The shot thus reverses the direction of Borzage’s elevation in *7th Heaven*, instead frankly taking the viewer into the dregs of urban humanity rather than offering the fantasy of any heaven on high accessible to the poor. Even though, later, there are endearing scenes of Xiao Chen and Xiao Hong falling in love while interacting through the space between their two apartments—both by singing and playing music to each other and by crossing on their makeshift skyway—their rooms are only on the second floor of the Shanghai tenements, and in any case, they abandon those quarters to go into hiding after Xiao Hong’s guardians try to sell her. The theme associating architectural elevation with class is explicitly returned to when Xiao Chen and his friend attempt to find protection for Xiao Hong by visiting a lawyer whose ad they had seen in an old newspaper. The lawyer’s office is high up in a skyscraper—“This truly is heaven!” remarks the friend—but the poor, shabbily dressed young men are depicted as comically out of place in such an upper-class location, from which they indeed are ejected as soon as it becomes apparent that they cannot pay the lawyer’s fees.

Yuan's *Street Angel* evokes but then departs from the paradigm scenarios of Borzage's films in other significant ways. The character type of the evil sister, for example, seems to follow its *7th Heaven* precedent during the first part of the film, when Xiao Hong's "sister" (most likely just another orphan purchased by the teahouse owners, who then forced her into prostitution while making Xiao Hong entertain guests with her singing) mildly disciplines Xiao Hong and blocks her from spending more time with Xiao Chen, for whom the sister, Xiao Yun, harbors a crush of her own. Later in the film, however, Xiao Yun facilitates Xiao Hong's escape, develops a romance with one of Xiao Chen's friends, and occupies a hideout together with the lead couple and their companions. Following this affective rehabilitation of the evil sister figure, the character is sacrificed in the end when her former master finds her and fatally wounds her with a knife.

The incredibly dark final scene of Yuan's *Street Angel*, in which the sister dies slowly for lack of money for medical care and the young protagonists seem to have nowhere left to hide from the social evils that victimize them, could not be more different from the elevated endings of Borzage's films, in which love conquers all and the couple is happily reunited. Near death, after her love interest, Lao Wang, is mentioned, Xiao Yun babbles her final words: "He's a good man . . . he helps poor people . . . like ants . . . ants." What starts as a comment on her boyfriend seemingly turns incoherent, but this apparent non sequitur in fact refers to a broader discourse of social commentary in Shanghai in the mid-1930s. As Wen-hsin Yeh has detailed, the widely read leftist journal *Dushu shenghuo* 读书生活 (Reading and livelihood) had popularized the use of "ants" as a metaphor for China's swelling numbers of petty urbanites. In a social commentary section in May 1935, contributor Li Gongpu 李公朴 had written that while petty urbanites might think of themselves as nothing but "ants," they should consider themselves as potentially forming "an army of ants in defense of the nation" in the face of Japanese imperialism.⁴⁵ Soon an Ants Club (*yishe* 蚁社) formed and grew to a membership of more than ten thousand, some of whom eventually joined the Communist base in Yan'an during the war against Japan.⁴⁶ Xiao Yun's dying reference to "ants" thus not only evokes despair at the helplessness of

her and her friends' current situation of oppression but implicitly hails a potential future of collective revolutionary resistance.

IRRESOLUTIONS, FISSURES, AND TRANSFORMATIONS

The ending of Yuan's *Street Angel* obviously departs fundamentally from Hollywood's style of storytelling. Hollywood's classical mode of narration, as David Bordwell has detailed, will as much as possible reach a satisfying conclusion for its main plot threads, providing, if not total closure—because inevitably some details will remain unresolved—then at least a “closure effect,” which, more often than not, features the lead romantic couple in a stable state of happiness.⁴⁷ As David R. Shumway puts it, in classical Hollywood screwball romantic comedies, romance is “a complex and tenacious ideology” that “holds ‘the bliss of genitality’ to be the *end* of desire. When the right man or woman is found and returns one’s love, the subject will be satisfied, will lack no more.”⁴⁸ The story is over. In contrast, by the end of Yuan Muzhi's *Street Angel*, the film has shifted into a mode of unsparing critical realism, in which nothing is happily resolved and the love story itself has become secondary to the larger story of social oppression and the strongly implied need for class struggle and revolutionary change. The final shot reverses the first shot after the opening credits, tilting from “Shanghai’s lower stratum” back up the towering skyscraper, but by now such a metaphorical elevation has taken on a wholly ironic tone. Far from leaving the movie theater with a sense of moral elevation, satisfaction at the plot’s resolution, and happiness for the attractive fictional couple, the audience would leave with a deep sense of uneasiness, incompleteness, and perhaps something more like moral outrage.

The irresolution with which Yuan Muzhi's *Street Angel* ends, so uncharacteristic of classical Hollywood, was in fact common among Shanghai's leftist films of the 1930s.⁴⁹ Yuan's previous film, *City Scenes* (*Dushi fengguang* 都市风光, also translated as *Metropolitan Scenes* or *Scenes of City Life*; 1935), which was both a comedy and an avant-garde experiment, ends with all the main characters literally pulling in different directions, unsure of which way to go, until the shot gives way to a giant animated question

mark that fills the frame and ends the film.⁵⁰ The 1933 film adaptation of Mao Dun's famous May Fourth-era novel *Spring Silkworms* (*Chuncan 春蚕; Cheng Bugao 程步高*) shows the devastation of the Chinese craft silk industry by imperialist economic competition and military aggression without offering any sort of resolution or solution. Another 1933 leftist classic, Sun Yu's silent *Little Toys* (*Xiao wanyi 小玩意*), ends with its heroine losing her sanity and shouting in the streets, warning of imminent destruction by imperialist invaders, while the same director's *Big Road* (*Da lu 大路*; 1934) concludes with most of its main characters being killed by strafing Japanese fighter planes—until, through double exposure, the spirits of the slain appear to rise up from their own corpses, as if to struggle on.⁵¹ The ending of *Crossroads*, described earlier, also provides little closure: the remaining protagonists have vowed to struggle rather than commit suicide, but what will actually happen to them? We have no idea.

Refusal of any reassuring closure not only goes against the tenets of classical Hollywood; it even defies the conventions of much critical realism. In his study of British social problem and working-class realist films, John Hill argues that the nature of narrative itself dictates that fictional resolutions be provided to the problems presented in social realist films. Citing Tzvetan Todorov's definition of a "minimal complete plot" in narrative—an initial equilibrium, a disturbance of that stable state by some force, a struggle against that force, and finally the reestablishment of a new equilibrium—he concludes that "there is a presumption, built into the very structure of conventional narrative, that 'problems' can be overcome, can, indeed, be resolved."⁵² Hill quotes Thomas Elsaesser as also finding a link between an ideology of "affirmation" and the conventions of narrativity: "As he explains it, there is 'a kind of *a priori* optimism located in the very structure of the narrative . . . whatever the problem one can do something about it.'"⁵³ Therefore, argues Hill, "it is in the nature of the conventions of narrative that these 'problems' be overcome"; "the articulation of the film's 'social problem' into the problem-solving structure of narrative necessarily implies that it too is capable of resolution."⁵⁴ This often leads to socially progressive critical realist films having incongruously reassuring or traditional conclusions: "it is this need for some sort

of narrative resolution which tends to encourage the adoptions of socially conservative endings.”⁵⁵ An intractable problem like poverty, for example, the real resolution of which may only be accomplished by transformation of the entire social order, may appear in a film to attain a piecemeal resolution that leaves the film’s characters in a more positive equilibrium at the film’s end. This is partly due to the convention of classical cinema to have individual characters act as the principal agents of causality in the film’s plot; the problems they deal with might be as broad as society, but their resolutions are artificially reduced to the fortunes of individuals.⁵⁶

This kind of resolution is evident in countless Hollywood films that might raise difficult issues, such as class disparity, but then solve them through fanciful and purely personal means. A typical example is *Sunny Side Up* (David Butler, 1929), which played in Shanghai and was the first “talkie” starring the already famous screen couple Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell—the same pair that had starred in Borzage’s *7th Heaven* and *Street Angel*. Intertitles at the film’s beginning establish the stark divide between the poor masses (the “four million” of New York City) and the ruling upper class (the “400” of a rich Long Island suburb). A shop clerk played by Gaynor goes with her three friends to the posh suburb, where a rich young man (Farrell) wants to use her to make his girlfriend jealous. Class conflict is resolved through a happy ending when the rich fellow realizes he has fallen in love with the poor shop girl and wants to marry her instead. The protagonists as causal agents thus appear to overcome intractable class divisions through individual romantic coupling and random twists of fate.

Some 1930s Shanghai films considered to be progressive, if not fully “left wing,” also resorted to such measures, providing an audience-pleasing “bright tail” (*guangming de weiba* 光明的尾巴) ending that implausibly “solves” the problems of poverty and injustice for their protagonists.⁵⁷ The leftist films on which we have focused in this chapter, in contrast, radically refuse recourse to any pat resolution, whether an appeal to conservative Confucian family values, a reversion to Hollywood-style genre formulas, or a resort to the tendency even of social realist films to provisionally “solve” their problems at the end, at least at the level of individual characters. Instead, the problems are presented as unresolved

or left to the films' protagonists—and, more to the point, implicitly to its spectators—to collectively solve after the films' endings. In defying classical cinema's convention of resolution, leftist filmmakers like Shen Xiling and Yuan Muzhi (who wrote as well as directed *Crossroads* and *Street Angel*, respectively) were responding in part to the calls of prominent leftist critics. Victor Fan has detailed, for example, how Zheng Boqi called on screenwriters to "reconfigure the classical Hollywood notion of plot development and resolution, in order to avoid providing imaginary solutions to real social problems that required political actions."⁵⁸ He instead wanted spectators to experience the social contradictions represented without being reassured, so that the pain of the injustices depicted was not washed away by the pleasure of a hopeful ending.

Aside from the refusal of resolution, other challenges to classical film narration in Shanghai leftist films include sometimes abrupt shifts in tone of narration and in characterization. Audiences today, certainly including those who continue to be raised mainly on Hollywood cinema, often perceive these sudden shifts of tone and character as weaknesses or even mistakes in the films' construction. As early as 1916, Hugo Münsterberg, in one of the first theoretical discussions of the cinema, insisted that the "chief demand" in the depiction of characters in film "is that the characters remain consistent."⁵⁹ More broadly, as Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson have detailed, the classical Hollywood narration highly values what they call the "homogeneity of the fictional world."⁶⁰ The classical film pursues, in addition to closure at the end, a sense of diegetic unity, a clear chain of cause and effect in plot, and characters with consistently demarcated traits as well as, in the case of protagonists, psychological depth—meaning, for example, that any change of heart has obvious motivations through narrative events that may entail personal growth. We have seen how Yuan's *Street Angel* shifts from a typical rom-com formula to a darker social realism at about the midway point (though romantic comedy reappears at some points later), finally ending in tragedy. The ending of *Crossroads* at the waterfront, too, seems not only out of character with the rom-com formula but also quite sudden—the entire scene of reunion, revelation of the friend's suicide, and collective vow to struggle on lasts less than two minutes. Even at the time of its release, Zheng Boqi and

Xia Yan, though generally praising the film, criticized its inconsistencies and choppy changes in tone from comedy to tragedy.⁶¹ In her study of 1930s leftist Shanghai films, Laikwan Pang also notes that *Crossroads* “is a light-hearted romance comedy, but the comic portion is sandwiched by two tragic sections. . . . The tragic and comic sections are juxtaposed to each other without any transition.”⁶² Such shifts often involve what appear to be sudden, seemingly unmotivated changes in character psychology. One well-known example is the Li Lili vehicle *Daybreak*, in which the lead character transforms from being a simple country girl to an undercover revolutionary with very little of the process of political education that would have been depicted, at least in a quick montage sequence, in a standard socialist realist film from the Soviet Union or later in China. Another Li Lili film directed by Sun Yu, *Blood of Passion on the Volcano* (*Huoshan qing xue* 火山清血; 1932), appears to be a work of melodramatic social realism about class exploitation in China for the first thirty-seven minutes but then, for the last hour or so, becomes a romantic adventure/revenge story set on an unnamed tropical island in the Pacific Ocean.

Pang notes that the “sudden emotional shifts” and “‘jumpy’ structure” of many Chinese films of this time can be traced in part to the conventions of traditional Chinese novels and plays, conventions that not only survived but thrived in the burgeoning popular literature of the early twentieth century.⁶³ In the Chinese narrative tradition, as Andrew Plaks has shown, there is an “essential ambivalence in the apprehension of human character,” the upshot of which is “the impression of *inconsistency*: wavering, backtracking, side-switching, mood-changing, in the portrayal of the heroes of the narrative tradition.”⁶⁴ He goes on to suggest that while some examples of this might be explainable in terms of psychological realism, “it may be more accurate to understand the phenomenon in terms of an aesthetic system that simply does not demand consistency in the representation of human behavior. Far from being a critical fault, this sort of flexibility, or fluidity, in character portrayal stands as a clear index of the greatness of a given work.”⁶⁵ According to Plaks, what is valued in the traditional Chinese hero is not necessarily a consistent nobility of character but rather “the capacity of the hero to respond to the needs of the moment” or “to move with the times,” rather than just to have

“singleness of purpose as a heroic quality.”⁶⁶ Given such narrative conventions, it is reasonable to assume that the majority of Chinese film spectators in the 1930s—not the intellectual elite, whose tastes had been formed by the May Fourth Movement, but the “petty urbanites,” who were likely also to be readers of both the classic Chinese vernacular novels and the so-called Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies fiction that had become popular in the Republican era—would have more readily accepted sudden shifts in characterization and narrative direction.⁶⁷ In fact, for the purposes of leftist film viewing, fictional protagonists’ capacity for personal metamorphosis to respond to the needs of the moment would only reinforce the filmmakers’ implicit agenda of transforming petty urbanite spectators into revolutionary subjects.

Despite the possible influence of the vernacular storytelling tradition in China, in the context of the Hollywood-dominated box office in 1930s Shanghai, we must view the left-wing films examined here as radical in their departures from the Hollywood norm in terms of form as well as content. Leftist filmmakers like Yuan Muzhi were very cognizant of the recent Soviet experiments in film form, as is evident in part from the spectacular urban montage sequence that he used both in *City Scenes* and as the opening title sequence of *Street Angel*, one of the finest examples of an avant-garde montage aesthetic in Chinese cinema of the time. For over two minutes, beneath the opening credits of *Street Angel* is a dazzling and disorienting montage of Shanghai city life that has precedents in “city symphony” films like Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927) and Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) as well as the city montages in some Hollywood films, such as Murnau’s *Sunrise* or even the self-conscious opening montage of the Jean Harlow vehicle *Bombshell* (Victor Fleming, 1933). The *Street Angel* title sequence frames the entire film to follow with a rapid series of urban scenes and rhetorical tropes that serve to summarize semicolonial Shanghai. The montage lasts 130 seconds and consists of eighty-six shots (including some repetitions of the same shots). The resulting average shot length of one and a half seconds still does not convey the disorientation of the montage’s speed of juxtaposition, as two sections of the montage consist of a series of superimposed shots—all of this occurring underneath the further superimposition of

the film's title credits themselves, so that, counting the titles, there are two to three image layers virtually throughout the title sequence. The dazzling sequence is packed with disparate images: shaky travelling shots propelling the viewer down brightly lit Shanghai streets; closer shots of neon signs, in both Chinese and English, advertising restaurants, inns, places of entertainment, Western products like whisky and Palmolive soap, and international corporations like Frigidaire; shots of city parks with strolling, well-to-do people juxtaposed with quicker shots of city streets and bridges packed with ordinary people, cars, motorcycles, buses, rickshaws, bicycles, and streetcars; Western statues superimposed in contrasting canted angles; a cascade of coins suggesting riches (very similar to that in the *Bombshell* title-sequence montage); four shots of a pair of bronze lions, cast in England, which for decades guarded the entrance to the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank; shots that tilt up the facades of various Western-style buildings, several of them identifiable as Christian churches, offering not only a survey of Shanghai's famous architecture but an exposé of the city's semicolonial status; and a spectacular finale in which twenty-five shots in just twenty-one seconds juxtapose fireworks explosions with shots of ballroom dancing as well as chorus girls, superimposed electric street lamps, and, finally, the return of the beginning phantom ride down a neon-lit Shanghai street at night, metaphorically suggesting that the eighty-four shots in between had represented views from a whirlwind trip through the city.

This opening sequence no doubt is indebted to the Soviet theories of montage, which had entered China in the early 1930s in the form of screenings of landmark Soviet films like *Storm over Asia* (Vsevolod Pudovkin, 1928) and *The Road of Life* (Nikolai Ekk, 1931) as well as translations of Russian film theory, particularly Pudovkin's *The Film Director and Film Material* (1926), detailing his theory of montage, which had been translated into Chinese in 1933 by Xia Yan and Zheng Boqi. Moments of Soviet-style montage had appeared in landmark films of the Chinese Left-Wing Film Movement by the mid-1930s. In *Big Road*, for example, the climactic scene in which the films' protagonists are attacked by Japanese fighter planes is cut in a manner that briefly recalls Eisenstein, while Jessica Ka Yee Chan has detailed how a Pudovkin-style contrast montage sequence

is used to demonstrate class divisions in *New Women* (*Xin nǚxing* 新女性; Cai Chusheng 蔡楚生, 1934).⁶⁸

What I wish to emphasize, however, is not just the influence of Soviet avant-garde aesthetics on certain montage sequences but more particularly how the overall structure of the films also features jarring juxtapositions that function in a way analogous to Soviet montage. In other words, the principles of montage—as Eisenstein put it, “Collision. Conflict between two neighboring fragments. Conflict. Collision”—are operative through the relationships between scenes and sequences, not just between shots.⁶⁹ That is, although the lack of unity in left-wing Shanghai films no doubt is due in part to the conflicting demands of political priorities (Communist-leaning writers and directors who wished to use cinema to awaken the revolutionary masses) and commercial priorities (film studios’ need to attract popular audiences weaned largely on Hollywood imports), such clashes also become the very means of the films’ agitation. The conflicting agendas of political art versus entertainment are demonstrated, for example, by the opening three sequences of *Street Angel*, in which the experimental city montage title sequence, loaded with politically charged rhetorical tropes emphasizing Shanghai’s imperialist oppression and stark class divisions, is followed by a nearly four-minute slapstick comedy sequence in which several of the film’s main characters are introduced in the context of a wedding procession down Shanghai’s narrow streets, a parade that includes a full Western-style marching band in which the main male protagonist, Xiao Chen, plays the cornet. The comedy sequence features eight distinct sight gags, as, for example, when Xiao Chen peeks into the bridal sedan, sees that the bride is cross-eyed (a joke with class connotations, because she must come from a rich family) and goes temporarily cross-eyed himself in response. With the end of the comical parade sequence, the film suddenly shifts gears again, becoming a vehicle for featuring a popular music star after Xiao Hong, who had been looking down on the wedding parade from a second-floor balcony, turns to go back into the teahouse in which she works as a singing hostess.⁷⁰ Zhou Xuan was already a popular singer playing her first starring role in a film, so that the song she sings for the guests, “Song of Four Seasons,” would have been an attraction in itself for the film’s original audience,

who could even sing along with the help of the lyrics provided in Chinese subtitles, complete with a little white ball bouncing from word to word to help spectators sing in time with the song, karaoke-style.

Thus, just within the first ten minutes of *Street Angel*, there is an avant-garde city montage, a slapstick comedy sequence, and a pop song performed by a popular singer. In addition to all that, however, there is in these first few minutes a strong undercurrent of documentary-style critical realism, and not just through the shots of city street scenes in the opening montage. The wedding procession sequence, as well, uses footage from a real parade and includes no fewer than sixteen shots of groups of random onlookers watching from the sidewalk and from windows and balconies. These are grouped into two sequences of eight quick shots each, lasting less than a second per shot but evidently showing real people rather than actors. Then, during Xiao Hong's performance of "Song of Four Seasons," the film repeatedly cuts away from shots of her singing to images illustrating her song of woe—including shots of war and fleeing refugees, as we gather that she herself was orphaned by war in the northeast. In this way—much as in the case of a similar performance by Li Lili in Sun Yu's *Big Road* in 1934—the spectacle of the attractive singing star is disrupted by disturbing documentary-style scenes of chaos and destruction.⁷¹

In sum, the juxtaposition of these different styles—Soviet-style montage, slapstick comedy, musical, documentary—like the broader collision of light romantic comedy and dark social realism evident in both *Crossroads* and *Street Angel*, creates stylistic and narrative fissures within the texts, which, along with the lack of Hollywood-style resolution in the plot, represent a fundamental departure from classical Hollywood narration. On one hand, the promiscuous mixing of genres recalls that of early (preclassical) cinema, in which, as Miriam Hansen has described, "the juxtaposition of generically distinct frames of reference creates a moment of surprise, a glimpse of a type of narrative whose outcome need not necessarily be known," requiring a viewer capable "of shifting between diverse positions and referential contexts," thus arguably encouraging agency in the public sphere in a way that would be lessened by Hollywood's comparatively unified fictional realism.⁷² At the same time, given that the leftist Shanghai films of the 1930s intervened in a cinematic culture that already was

largely defined by Hollywood's hegemony, their genre mixing and narrative fissures also suggest a more overtly avant-garde practice, specifically in the sense of the modernist "open works" analyzed by Umberto Eco.⁷³ They use affectively pre-focused paradigm scenarios and character types based on the precedents of Hollywood and other entertainment cinemas to stir strong emotions and identifications in the audience, but then they quite intentionally leave those attachments suspended rather than being reassuringly resolved.⁷⁴ The spectator is expected to be agitated by unresolved contradictions and nudged, not only by critical realist content but also by the provocatively open narrative form to take action in some way or another.

Cinema, with its "strange constructs," is ideally suited to perform such work on the imagination. As Hansen argues in a discussion of Kracauer, constantly transforming images on the cinema screen provoke a "psycho-physiological mimesis [that] affords the viewing subject the sensation of participating in this transformation, evoking the possibility—both threatening and liberating—of liquefying fixed structures of social, critical-intellectual, gendered identity."⁷⁵ In this light, the Hollywood-inspired fantasy worlds critiqued by left-wing critics and parodied by the dream sequences in *Love and Duty* and *Crossroads* should not be taken merely as instances of false consciousness that must be overcome to create properly revolutionary subjects. On the contrary, the very practice of envisioning new selves and ways of being, metamorphoses enabled even by Hollywood cinema and often required for survival itself in the rapidly modernizing world of semicolonial Shanghai, might have prepared a spectator not only for new modern possibilities like amorous encounters with an attractive neighbor within the anonymity of urban life but for transformations of a more politically revolutionary nature as well. Films like *Crossroads* and *Street Angel* encourage the viewer to imagine both potentialities, without necessarily providing the singular ideological point of view presented in official histories of the Left-Wing Film Movement. Moreover, though my argument does not apply to all the films that have been grouped within that movement, neither does it identify a peculiarity of only a couple of classics from 1937. In fact, Victor Fan has made very similar arguments about the early 1930s films of Sun Yu, perhaps the greatest Chinese

filmmaker of his generation. Fan argues that Sun's films were "narrativized with textual openness" that made room for the spectators' active political interpretations.⁷⁶

Consequently, we may view the type of realism in these films as not simply *social* realism, in which the real ills of society find representation on-screen, nor a variation on the *fictional* realism prized by Hollywood, but rather—or in addition—a practice of what I have called *apophasic* realism, in which it is hinted that there is a more essential "real" that escapes representation. Within the fissures created by unresolved juxtapositions of narrative modes, beyond the irresolutions with which these films end, represented only indirectly by open-ended questions (literally, in the case of the question mark ending *City Scenes*), lies an urgent yet elusive *real* of revolutionary transformation that could not yet be given positive configuration in cinematic representation in the context of the seemingly intractable social, economic, political, and military calamities of China in the 1930s, not to mention government censorship. Beyond showing the social realities of immediate crisis, these films endeavored to open up spaces in which, with the help of the spectator's imagination and will, a revolutionary real could potentially make an appearance in the near future. Failures of diegetic unity allow for a shift of the affectively charged spectators' attention toward the extradiegetic world of their real lives but with the opportunity to see that reality anew and the possibility of changing it. These films thus sought to instill a state of revolutionary liminality, in which the future may not yet have taken on any positive form but past imaginary identifications have been challenged, the present has been rendered unstable, and the possibility for reimagining the self through new social solidarities has been created.

THE QUESTION OF VERNACULAR MODERNISM

The foregoing discussion suggests that the understanding of Shanghai leftist cinema of the 1930s as "vernacular modernism" must be clarified, taking into account possible contradictions within the concept of vernacular modernism itself when it is applied to cinemas around the globe. In her initial proposal of the concept, Miriam Hansen was addressing

specifically the classical Hollywood film, arguing that we should see it as an instance of modernist art or culture because it not only is “part of the historical formation of modernity” but in fact offered “something like the first global vernacular”—a cultural form mediating the experience of modernity that could have global appeal and intelligibility partly because even its initial American mass audience, a diverse nation of immigrants, already required the negotiation of great differences.⁷⁷ In this formulation of vernacular modernism, the visual vernacular language of modernity *is* the cinema produced in Hollywood.

In Hansen’s later discussions of the same concept, however—as well as in the work of several of her former students and others inspired by her work—the focus shifts from the films of Hollywood itself to the popular cinemas of other societies around the world, in particular, China and Japan, and the ways in which those popular cinemas creatively adapted the classical Hollywood narrative mode.⁷⁸ Such a broad application of the idea of “vernacular modernism” opens it up to criticism that it homogenizes world cinema, ignoring the different historical contexts of each local experience of modernity as well as the vastly different cultural and linguistic forms and heritages that may get articulated and even preserved through local or regional cinematic practices.

In a sympathetic critique of Hansen’s concept of vernacular modernism, Daniel Morgan argues that the theory becomes least viable when it is presented as “a claim about the medium itself”; if any film that engages in some way with the condition of modernity is therefore a case of vernacular modernism, then *every* film would have to be included, if only because the medium itself is a modern one.⁷⁹ Instead of taking this approach—which Morgan believes Hansen sometimes mistakenly pursues—vernacular modernism, according to him, has to be “based on an engagement with individual films, including their specific historical contexts.”⁸⁰ In her own final (and longest) essay on the topic, Hansen herself calls vernacular modernism “a heuristic and analytic framework for comparing individual films and tracing particular currents in film culture.”⁸¹ She argues that even if classical Hollywood, because of its actual historical global hegemony, must be “the ground against which the stylistic accomplishments of indigenous filmmakers can be analyzed,” that still “does not make them

simply variants of a dominant style.”⁸² Instead, local cinemas can take “different positions vis-à-vis Hollywood hegemony,” so that “the question is *how* filmmakers have appropriated Hollywood (along with other foreign cinemas as well as their own cultural pasts) in creative, eclectic, and revisionist ways to forge aesthetic idioms, and to respond to social conflicts and political pressures, closer to home.”⁸³ Vernacular modernism becomes, therefore, a “comparative lens” rather than a homogenizing singular style or mode of filmmaking that spreads across the world.⁸⁴ In other words, vernacular modernism is more of a research agenda than a unitary concept, in that local articulations of cinema as a global vernacular will always and crucially be inflected by their historically and culturally specific contexts.

This view, however, still fails to resolve, at least in the case of left-wing Shanghai cinema of the 1930s, the extent to which vernacular modernism is necessarily prescribed by the “classical Hollywood” mode (as defined by the work of Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, cited by Hansen) through which it was originally delineated as a concept. Given the neglect of defining traits like character consistency, diegetic unity, and closure in the films examined in this chapter, it seems that, despite all their rampant borrowing from Hollywood and other Western sources, they cannot be described as being fundamentally or unproblematically within the classical narrative mode. Instead, their practice of vernacular modernism borrowed as well from global, often leftist avant-garde practices and included fissures and irresolutions that fundamentally undermined the unity of classical Hollywood narration in an effort to subvert Hollywood itself, challenge its hold on the imagination of China’s “petty urbanites,” and spur the latter to reimagine themselves as potential agents in a collective revolutionary movement rather than as aspirants to the romantic fantasies of individual (or coupled) happiness propagated by Hollywood.

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3

Realism and Event in Postwar Chinese Cinema

A 1948 article in the Guangzhou periodical *Literary Field* (*Wentan* 文坛) highly praised the “truth” (*zhenshi* 真实) of the film *Spring River Flows East* (*Yi jiang chun shui xiang dong liu* 一江春水向东流; Cai Chusheng 蔡楚生 and Zheng Junli 郑君里, 1947), remarking that audiences throughout China, which recently had been through the horrors of war and Japanese occupation, were receptive to its depiction of the “shared suffering of our national history.”¹ The article even claimed that *Spring River Flows East* augured the arrival of a “new realism” that contrasted with the “bygone realism” in that it did not simply represent “typical characters in a typical environment” but “also criticized reality from the standpoint of the possible development of things,” indicating a growing ambition to use realism not only to expose society’s ills but to propel history forward into the revolutionary future.² This impression of the film’s realism from a Chinese critic not long after its first release contrasts starkly with a more recent evaluation by Chinese film historian Paul G. Pickowicz, who found the “cultural politics” of *Spring River Flows East* to be “decidedly conservative” and its style to be “classic melodrama,” having not “much to do with cinematic realism.”³

Such discrepancies, as Kristin Thompson argues, “indicate strongly the historical nature of perceptions of realism.”⁴ Her primary example is Jean Renoir’s *The Rules of the Game* (*La règle du jeu*; 1939), which “met with much incomprehension upon its initial release, and it was only after years had passed, and such films as *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di biciclette*; Vittorio De Sica, 1948) had taught audiences new viewing skills, that *Rules* also won widespread acclaim as a realist film.”⁵ A similar fate was met by Fei Mu’s

费穆 1948 low-budget film *Spring in a Small Town* (*Xiao cheng zhi chun* 小城之春). Released the fall after *Spring River Flows East* had dominated Chinese movie theaters, this film had much more modest success at the box office and was criticized for being bourgeois, decadent, and out of touch with the times. It was almost entirely forgotten after the establishment a year later of the People's Republic of China (PRC)—at least until the post-Mao era, when it was not only rediscovered and praised belatedly as a masterpiece but even famously crowned the greatest Chinese film of all time in a 2005 poll of critics conducted by the Hong Kong Film Awards on the centenary of Chinese filmmaking. To be sure, the reasons for the film's disappearance from public and critical consciousness for decades had much to do with the politics of the intervening Mao era and the power of the Communist film industry and critical establishment in narrating Chinese film history. Nonetheless, the film's rebranding as a timeless classic in the 1980s–2000s clearly was tied to the aesthetics of the emerging mainland Chinese art cinema of the so-called Fifth and Sixth Generations of filmmakers as well as to the parallel blossoming of the Taiwan New Cinema movement across the Taiwan Strait. These in a sense taught audiences, both domestic and abroad, to re-view *Spring in a Small Town* through the lens they provided, now seeing it as an exemplary instance of the sort of “long-take realism” that had been praised by the influential French film theorist and critic André Bazin in the 1940s–50s. In retrospect, much about *Spring in a Small Town* seemed to fit the mold of the kinds of French and Italian films that Bazin had credited with reinventing film language. In other words, a film whose novelty had failed to enthrall its original audience, certainly not like *Spring River Flows East*, had decades later come to be regarded as an artistic triumph on a level with, say, the postwar Italian Neorealist masterpieces that were in fact contemporaneous with it. This provided Chinese filmmakers and critics of the 1980s and beyond with a newly excavated lineage of Chinese art cinema that helped to legitimize the rising auteurs of Chinese post-socialist realism (see chapter 6) in the post-Mao era of “reform and opening.”

I will examine both of these films in much more depth later in this chapter, but for now these historical differences in the evaluation of each, including such disparate judgments regarding their degrees of realism, call

our attention to the highly contingent nature not only of the impression of realism but of our experience of cinema in general. Realism is not simply a matter of whether a film corresponds to a reality it seeks to *represent*; in fact, films ultimately are *part of* reality, and our experiences of films are enmeshed with all the other life experiences that form our impressions of reality. In a very real sense, every viewing experience of a film (even a repeat viewing of the same film by the same viewer) is a unique event, situated in a very particular, highly contingent set of circumstances that will help determine whether the experience is weak or powerful, whether the viewer experiences the film as true and real; weird and incomprehensible; conventional and boring; or perhaps conventional, but in an engaging and entertaining way, as in the case of a well-made genre film. A film's relationship with real life is inseparable from the historical moment in which the viewing takes place, and in that sense, the capacity of a film to stand out from others depends in part on the degree to which it seems to embody real processes with which viewers already are engaged—whether those involve postwar Chinese audiences coming to terms with recent historical traumas, post-Mao filmmakers fitting their current strands of Chinese cinema into an international tradition of art cinema, or indeed (in the case of the third film we will examine in detail in this chapter) contemporaneous audiences experiencing an actual revolution.

The so-called golden age of Shanghai cinema is generally considered to have begun in the 1930s—or, more specifically, during 1932–37, when the Left-Wing Film Movement left its mark (see the previous chapter)—and then resumed briefly in 1946–49, after being interrupted by the Japanese occupation and World War II during the intervening years. The last chapter described how the conventional, official PRC film historiography—exemplified by the two-volume *History of the Development of Chinese Film*—would characterize Republican cinema as featuring a number of classics of progressive critical or social realism that stood out from the more regressive films offering mere entertainment and often reinforcing traditional “feudal” values.⁶ Following the standard Marxist orthodoxy regarding art and literature, those works of critical realism were said to be steps in a predetermined historical development from capitalism to

Communism, in which first a group of relatively progressive “prodigal son” (and daughter) artists from the bourgeoisie expose the hypocrisy, greed, and general moral failings of their own class through a practice of closely observed critical/social realism, and then later socialist realism proper takes a further step by directly representing the perspective and aspirations of the proletarian class itself. This theory of artistic development became standardized at the same time that socialist realism itself was being formally proposed and installed as the official artistic style of the global Communist movement. Thus the films of Shanghai cinema’s “golden age” that were made by left-leaning filmmakers (including many notable writers, directors, and actors) were retroactively said to have constituted the critical realist phase of artistic development during the bourgeois Republican period—progressive for their time, but destined to be replaced by the socialist realism (or variously named “proletarian realism” or “revolutionary realism”) of the Mao era after the Communist victory in the civil war.

This story has been criticized as an oversimplification by various critics and scholars. Pickowicz, for example, has critiqued not only *Spring River Flows East* but also many other key “leftist” films from both the 1930s and the 1940s as betraying their ostensibly progressive credentials, rooted in the New Culture Movement that had begun among Chinese artists and intellectuals in the 1910s, by embracing the melodramatic form favored by the popular film industry. As a result, according to Pickowicz, “there would be no place for the complexities and subtleties, and most of the crucial middle ground, of May Fourth socialist thought in melodramatic representation” in those films.⁷ In fact, as the next two chapters argue in detail, while melodramatic representation may not capture the subtleties and complexities of May Fourth thought (itself quite a varied phenomenon), it lends itself quite well to certain aspects of Communist cultural policy, even if it arguably has fundamental contradictions with Marxism’s underlying philosophy of dialectical materialism.

This chapter explores the short-lived revival of Shanghai cinema in the late 1940s through three key films. *Spring River Flows East* exemplifies Pickowicz’s point about ostensibly leftist filmmakers fully embracing a melodramatic mode of storytelling. At the same time, it gave audiences

the sense of truth or realism noted earlier by convincingly narrating in the postwar period a broader social history—in this case, a comprehensive account of the suffering of the Chinese people during and immediately after the Japanese occupation, with a morally legible sketch of degrees of culpability of those who either collaborated or profited from the war and its enormously economically challenging aftermath. Toward the end of the decade, another very popular film now considered a classic of the period, *Crows and Sparrows* (*Wuya yu maque* 乌鸦与麻雀; Zheng Junli, 1949), also would attempt to grasp a social totality—the class structure of urban China at the very brink of its transformation through revolution. In contrast to these ambitious attempts to paint large social and historical pictures through some form of verisimilar critical realism (however mixed with the genres of melodrama and comedy), *Spring in a Small Town* is analyzed as an exemplary instance of what I call *apophatic* realism—which uses negation or absence to point to a real beyond representation. The preceding chapter argued that films of the 1930s included apophatic gaps that subverted classical cinema norms through their sometimes jarring mixing of genres and their lack of narrative closure. *Spring in a Small Town*, conversely, employs an apophatic realism typical of art cinema—which, as David Bordwell highlights in his definitive chapter on the topic, is characterized by “permanent and suppressed gaps” and does not assume “reality” as a necessarily coherent and knowable thing.⁸

Although the three films examined in this chapter are generically diverse (a melodrama, an art film, and a comedy), all make certain claims on realism, and their examples allow for an exploration of how different genres and modes interact in complex ways with different sorts of realism. Despite—or rather in some ways *through*—its melodrama, *Spring River Flows East* attempts to present a coherent story of the previous years of war and the state of China in its aftermath, thus making claims to social realism even in the midst of its emotional excess. In its elliptical narration as well as its long-take style, in retrospect, *Spring in a Small Town* fits well into postwar global art cinema, while also exemplifying the idea of apophatic realism as proposed in this book. Finally, for all its success as a comedy, *Crows and Sparrows* makes a serious attempt to distill the social totality of China in the midst of revolution through its representation of

the various residents of a single tenement house, while also manifesting the beginning of a shift from verisimilar critical realism to what the next chapter delineates in detail as *prescriptive* realism.

In examining these three films, we also will see how crucially the effect of realism depends in various ways on temporality. Using what Jane Gaines proposes as the *historical time* theory of melodrama, I argue that the overwhelming pathos of *Spring River Flows East* is fundamentally tied to the irreversibility of history, and the film's enormous popularity suggests that in the immediate aftermath of the war, many Chinese people needed simply to look *back* in traumatized horror at what had been irretrievably lost—even if, as the movie review cited at the beginning of this chapter claimed, it may have implicitly pointed to “the possible development of things,” presumably meaning revolution. Despite its vast difference in style and genre, *Spring in a Small Town* also has been convincingly interpreted as a response to the trauma of war, and I will show how its narrative management of time suggests both personal desire at an impossible standstill and history at an impasse. By decade’s end, in contrast, *Crows and Sparrows* captures history suddenly hurtling forward before our very eyes, pointing with both anxiety and great hope toward a future that suddenly promises entirely new possibilities.

HISTORY AS MELODRAMA: *SPRING RIVER FLOWS EAST*

As mentioned earlier, Pickowicz critiques the ostensibly progressive films of the Republican era in part by calling out the traditional, even reactionary, moral universe from which they often draw their melodramatic force. While the progressive May Fourth Movement had advocated the rejection of Confucian tradition in favor of individual freedom, the popular “progressive” melodramas of Shanghai cinema in fact drew much of their emotional power from “certain core Chinese values” that were “very Confucian and culturally conservative.”⁹ Aside from the traditional values invoked in particular Republican-era films, Pickowicz’s critique also reinforces the impression that melodrama is an *intrinsically* reactionary mode of narration. In seeking moral clarity through Manichean divisions of good and evil, eliminating any ambiguity or middle ground,

melodrama would seem to deny the profound relativism and loss of secure metaphysical or religious grounding that are key markers of modernity itself, instead offering the false reassurance of what melodrama theorist Peter Brooks called the “moral occult” that melodrama reconstructs in its narratives.¹⁰ Certainly Pickowicz is right to distinguish between the practice of melodrama and the ideal of critical or social realism, a more respectable modern narrative mode exemplified by nineteenth-century realist novels that specialized in exposing the hypocrisies of the modern bourgeoisie and the brutalities of modern life for the working classes, often through subtle satire. Melodrama, in contrast, was a comparatively middle- or lowbrow phenomenon in the West, with origins in nineteenth-century popular theater. Following Pickowicz in a fashion, I argue in detail in chapter 5 that there is a fundamental contradiction between melodrama as a *narrative* form and Marxism as a *philosophy*. Nonetheless, the contemporaneous accounts of spectators show that the popular audience found *Spring River Flows East* to be both deeply moving and realistic as far as their own experience was concerned.

At the heart of *Spring River Flows East* (originally titled *Tears of Yangtze* in English), a sprawling film released in two parts totaling 190 minutes in length, is Sufen (played by Bai Yang, who had played the female lead in *Crossroads*, discussed in the previous chapter), a textile factory worker swept off her feet by the handsome and patriotic teacher Zhang Zhongliang in the period between Japan’s incursion into Manchuria in 1931 and its all-out invasion of China in 1937. The couple quickly marry and have a child, only to be separated when the war breaks out and Zhongliang leaves home to serve as a medic at the war front. He is captured by the Japanese, and the film quickly establishes a key part of its melodramatic moral framework, depicting those “Eastern Devils” oppressing the Chinese (whom the Japanese want to turn into “enslaved running dogs”) through several scenes that feature the cruelty of Japanese soldiers toward Chinese civilians. Meanwhile, Sufen herself lives in poverty with her son and mother-in-law, sacrificing everything during the war to keep the family together and await Zhongliang’s return from the war.

The melodrama of *Spring River Flows East* represents in florid fashion the enormous suffering and sacrifice of the Chinese people during the

war. In a trope typical of Republican-era fictional narratives, the virtuous and unjustifiably victimized Sufen stands in for the nation as a whole, her tribulations emblematic of China's own unjust oppression by imperialist powers not just during the war against Japan but in the entire preceding century going back to the British aggression against China in the First Opium War (1839–42). At the same time, Sufen more particularly represents the suffering of the Chinese masses at the hands not only of foreign colonialists but of their own economic and political elite during the rule of the Guomindang (Nationalist Party, or KMT). Indeed, while in the first installment of the film, the Japanese military occupiers are depicted in all their cruelty, equally outrageous is the corruption portrayed in the ranks of the Chinese plutocracy—which Zhongliang joins after he escapes his Japanese captors, makes his way to the wartime capital of Chongqing, and is taken in by a seductive former acquaintance named Wang Lizhen, who gets him a job at her godfather's Daxing Trading Company. In a key scene in the film's second installment, after the war is over, the Chinese domestic exploiting class is exposed as Zhongliang is introduced to the tycoons who control China's markets for automobiles, precious metals, rice, and textiles, all of whom are attending a lavish banquet featuring imported lobster from Calcutta. Here melodrama, however conservative it may appear as an aesthetic form, still implicitly supports a revolutionary politics; although it is true that traditional Confucian family ethics are appealed to, it is equally clear that the evil in melodrama's Manichean imaginary is not individualized, as it often is in Hollywood melodramas, but unambiguously aligned with a very modern form of monopoly capitalism, which by implication needs to be overthrown. Even Zhongliang does not really personify evil in that, as Panpan Yang notes, his “corruption—portrayed as a reluctant, gradual, and almost inevitable process—can be read as the fate of a helpless man engulfed by an evil world out of his control.”¹¹ Yang concludes, “By recognizing the crisis of a turbulent era that needs to be ended as the real evil, rather than the moral status of an individual, Chinese cinema of this period acculturates social change through the capacity of melodrama to address modernity, incorporating it into China's revolutionary nation-building discourse.”¹²

The film's melodramatic pathos revolves around the specific figure of

Sufen as the suffering innocent. According to Linda Williams, the “basic vernacular” of melodrama “consists of a story that generates sympathy for a hero who is also a victim and that leads to a climax that permits the audience, and usually other characters, to recognize that character’s moral value,” so that “what counts in melodrama is the feeling of righteousness, achieved through the sufferings of the innocent.”¹³ *Spring River Flows East* features virtually all the key features that Williams sees as characterizing melodrama. It “begins in a space of innocence,” “offering a moment of virtue taking pleasure in itself”: a smiling Sufen, still young and single, concludes a day of work at the textile factory and proceeds to a workers’ supplementary education class of the kind that had been celebrated in earlier classics of the left-wing cinema movement, such as *New Women*, directed thirteen years earlier by the codirector of *Spring River Flows East*, Cai Chusheng.¹⁴ The proletarian Sufen’s hunger for self-improvement is rewarded with a passionate, patriotic lesson on the Japanese incursion into Manchuria delivered by the handsome and charismatic Zhongliang, the man who would soon marry and eventually betray her.

Another key feature of melodrama identified by Williams is that the virtue of the victim-hero must be *recognized*, not only by the audience, but by the other characters in the story world itself, often in a climactic scene of astonished reckoning. This occurs thirty minutes from the end of *Spring River Flows East*, after Sufen—in a case of the kind of highly implausible yet morally apt coincidence typical of melodrama—has been hired as a servant by the very family that is harboring her philandering husband now that he is at last back in Shanghai. The emotion-packed reencounter of the suffering wife with the husband who has abandoned her becomes inevitable when Sufen is enlisted to serve drinks at a lavish party the family is hosting. In the moments just before they spot and recognize each other, Sufen is shown in extreme long shot in a clear space in the middle of an otherwise large, crowded room, as if she is taking center stage in preparation for the drama to come, with all the other partygoers ready to serve as witnesses. When she hears her husband’s name and then trades shocked looks of recognition with him, she drops the tray of drinks she is carrying, collapses to the floor, and is soon surrounded by all the party guests, who thus bear witness to her horrible moment of

revelation that the husband whom she had assumed had been kept away only by hardship or possibly death had in fact abandoned her. After well over an hour in screen time (covering years in story time) of Sufen's innocent suffering crosscut with Zhongliang's growing exploits in both business and romance (with two different women besides his wife), the dramatic moment of revelation finally has arrived: when the guests demand to know what is wrong with Sufen, she points accusingly at Zhongliang and, in the presence of the two women he has had affairs with, discloses that they are married and have a nine-year-old child.

In a typical film melodrama, Williams explains, the climactic scene of revelation of the hero/victim's suffering and exposure of her (or his) persecutor's guilt generally launches the remainder of the film into a new direction involving intense pathos or action, or both (the dialectic between pathos and action being one of the defining features of melodrama that Williams theorizes).¹⁵ In *Spring River Flows East*, the big "sensation" scenes following the revelation are decidedly those of what Williams calls "prolonged 'feminine' pathos."¹⁶ In fact, for the film's entire final thirty minutes, beginning with the moment of revelation, virtually every scene features the shedding of tears—and in many cases heightened weeping and wailing.¹⁷ This extended orgy of pathos culminates in Sufen hurling herself into the river to drown (the same Huangpu River that had been the site of the suicide by drowning at the end of *Crossroads*, discussed in the preceding chapter).

This bleak ending is one of the few things that was criticized about *Spring River Flows East* at the time of its popularity, as it was said to offer insufficient hope for the future, but this lack of a future orientation is consistent with the film's intense focus on the unbearable intensity of suffering in China's immediate historical past.¹⁸ Between melodrama's "dialectic of pathos and action—a give and take of 'too late' and 'in the nick of time,'" *Spring River Flows East* emphatically falls on the side of "too late"—too late for Zhongliang to reunite with his family and atone for his years-long neglect of them, too late for Sufen to be rescued from her tragic death by suicide, too late for China to have avoided the horrors of war.¹⁹ As Christine Gledhill notes, melodramatic pathos involves not only sympathy or pity but also the more complex recognition of both "how

things are and how things ought to be.”²⁰ The audience regrets Sufen’s extreme suffering all the more for knowing that it should not have been, or rather that it could have been greatly lessened and would have ended happily, if only her husband had cared for her and their child rather than betraying them. The finality of her death is all the more unbearable because of our sense that it could have been avoided. In other words, the emotional impact on the viewer depends in part on what Steve Neale calls “temporal irreversibility across a structure of knowledge and point of view”: while Sufen and Zhongliang were ignorant of each other’s tribulations and (in his case) betrayals during their separation, the audience has had a privileged point of view that revealed the full pattern as well as its relation to the broader tragedies of history—and that point of view, with the “if only . . .” it entails, accentuates the pathos of the acknowledgment of Sufen’s suffering during the film’s climax.²¹

Jane Gaines argues that in melodramas ending with the death of an innocent protagonist, the pathos generated is that of temporal irreversibility in general, or ultimately of historical time itself. In this “too late” pattern of melodrama, “what is lost is not only past happiness but, in addition, happiness ‘yet to be,’” which is to say, in the case of Sufen, the “unreached future” of happy family reunion, which had been the dream sustaining her through nine years of grueling hardship.²² Insofar as Sufen stands in for the suffering of the Chinese masses under the conditions of war and its aftermath, including being governed by the inept kleptocracy that the ROC had become (embodied here by the corrupted Zhongliang), her suicide demonstrates precisely that her oppression was ultimately unbearable. Rather than any sort of “just in time” rescue, her tragic end dramatizes the irreversibility of the historical suffering she has been through, the finality of which no doubt contributed to the powerful impression of the film’s realism for spectators still coping with their own traumas and irreversible losses during the war.

Of course, because we normally think of them as opposed terms, a seeming incongruity appears when we refer to the *realism* of a *melodrama*. In critiquing how the serious thought of the May Fourth Movement was sold out by the popular appeal of melodrama in the case of left-wing cinema, Pickowicz observes that though filmmakers thereby “introduced

basic Marxist notions of class struggle, capitalism, and imperialism,” the genre’s “drastic simplifications” reduced such ideas to “stereotypes and caricatures.”²³ This undercut any leftist claims to social realism in cinema, because “the melodramatic mode is hostile to realism” owing to its oversimplifications in the interest of clear moral polarities.²⁴ Pickowicz is, of course, hardly alone here—the opposition between realism and melodrama has long been a premise in theories of both.

However, more recent scholarship on melodrama has challenged the ostensible dichotomy between realism and melodrama—the former “good,” the latter “bad”—as itself a rather melodramatic oversimplification. Gilberto Perez points out that “both realism and melodrama are modern forms that emerged in opposition to classicism” and that, rather than being opposed, they “are better looked upon as complementary.”²⁵ In “Melodrama Revised,” the definitive essay to which we have been referring here, Linda Williams argues that one of the five key features of melodrama is in fact that it “appears modern by borrowing from realism.”²⁶ Williams means not only that melodramatic films will employ, say, realistic sets and costumes or Hollywood-style fictional realism but, more important, that, like critical realist films, they may address serious contemporary social problems—the biting class critique of the second half of *Spring River Flows East*, for example. We could say either that the conventions of melodrama contribute to the affective power of realism in representing social problems (the latter of which would be emphasized in official PRC film histories) or that the social realism of class disparities is placed in the service of melodrama’s pathos (in keeping with the hierarchy suggested by Williams, in which realism serves melodrama); in either case, realism and melodrama are more mutually constructing than absolutely opposed to each other.

For melodrama to have the effect of realism, however, its depictions of victimization and the eventual revelation of virtue must resonate with the particular historical moment in which it is consumed. John Mullarkey, drawing on Rick Altman and Henri Bergson, among others, encourages us to think of films in terms of processes and events rather than in terms of objects or texts: “There is no art object.”²⁷ Our experience of watching a film, like our experience of life in general, depends on what moments,

movements, or “events” we recognize as worthy of our attention. Thus, just about any spectator will find the moment of anguished reunion of Sufen and her husband in *Spring River Flows East* to be an event of significance, while perhaps only a few will consciously isolate a micro-event within that event: the split-second racking of Zhongliang into focus at the moment Sufen first recognizes him—a technical choice that subtly adds to the shot’s effect as a point-of-view shot from her perspective. Each viewer dwells on what seems most significant at the moment, and the mainstream “classical” style will clearly signal what audiences are expected to take as the film’s crucial events or moments, even if its methods for doing so—like the racking of focus just described—could be isolated as events in themselves by some viewers. But films as a whole also are events that play out in cultural history, sometimes repeatedly in different ways. In 1947, *Spring River Flows East* was not only a film text but a cultural event, insofar as its long, successful box-office run showed that it had powerful public resonance—the strong sense of “reality” that critics praised and to which audiences responded at the historical moment of its release.

APOPHATIC REALISM: SPRING IN A SMALL TOWN

The release of *Spring in a Small Town* the following year was another story. Audiences in Shanghai mostly ignored it, though it reportedly did better in Kunming and Chongqing, and although some critics praised it, those on the left condemned it for its lack of political progressiveness.²⁸ As mentioned earlier, banned and forgotten during the Mao era, its real “eventhood” would come decades later, when it was rediscovered and praised by leading critics and filmmakers alike.

At the time of its release, *Spring in a Small Town* was an anomaly, but still with partial precedents both in China and abroad. Upon its appearance, it would have been in the category of *wenyi* 文艺 or “literary art” films, a genre that has received much scholarly attention recently.²⁹ In some cases, this category would seem to coincide with the English *melodrama*, but it also can imply just a film based on a literary source or, more broadly, one with ostensibly literary or artistic sensibilities. *Spring in a Small Town*, despite its emotional intensity, shows few of the hallmarks

of melodrama as discussed in the case of *Spring River Flows East* but instead in retrospect brings together the Chinese *wen yi* genre with the aesthetic that eventually would be labeled as art films—including, in the 1930s–50s, French Poetic Realism and Italian Neorealism but also some non-Western postwar films, such as those of Yasujiro Ozu and Satyajit Ray. Indeed, in his formal analysis of the film's style, James Udden has called Fei Mu “a victim of his time,” in that the originality and brilliance of his “proto-modernist” art film experiment went largely unrecognized and unappreciated owing to the lack of “portals” for Chinese filmmakers in world cinema at the time, unlike their postwar contemporaries in France, Italy, and Japan.³⁰ Only later would Western critics and film historians grant it canonical status in world cinema, with David Bordwell, for example, describing it as a “milestone of world cinema, which anticipates so much of what we find in Antonioni and other postwar European filmmakers.”³¹

Existing scholarship has discussed many aspects of this film's themes and distinctive style.³² I will approach it by means of elaborating the mode of realism that I call *apophatic realism*, one of the six conceptual categories of realism that were outlined in the introduction. *Apophatic* means obtained through negation or represented indirectly by not being represented—for example, in the case of apophatic or negative theology, which says that God or the absolute cannot be defined positively but only described in terms of what it is *not*. By apophatic realism, then, I mean a mode of cinematic representation that seeks to acknowledge its own fundamental limitations, to take the real as in some way exceeding or defying representation, and consequently to build into its narrative and technique an opening toward something beyond what that representation can directly express, often figuring negatively as gaps or absences.

Spring in a Small Town, I argue, is essentially about an event that does not happen, and as such, it is structured as circling around a void in at least three different ways that will be outlined here. First, in both its fictional narrative about a family and its actual historical postwar context, the film represents a traumatic or melancholic absence or loss. This reading has already been made in existing scholarship, but I will point out some ways that traumatic or melancholic loss is presented specifically in an apophatic manner in the film and contrast the sense of time and history in the film

with those of *Spring River Flows East* and the final 1940s film I analyze, *Crows and Sparrows*. Second, the film's dark energy, as it were—the sense of the proximity, and even the *attraction*, of an engulfing nihilism—comes from a romantic attraction or sexual obsession that is depicted mainly negatively, which is to say, as a void that sets the entire plot in motion but is only realizable through an ethical transgression, an act that would destabilize the social and symbolic order and hence appears as a negating potential. Third, and most important in the broader context of this book, I want to explore the ways in which the void at the center of the film is expressed through specific cinematic techniques—in particular, the film's very distinctive use of elliptical editing.

The plot of *Spring in a Small Town* is simple. In spring 1946, just months after the end of the war and Japanese occupation, a family compound partially ruined by the war has been reoccupied by its owner, Dai Liyan, his wife, Zhou Yuwen, and his little sister, Dai Xiu, as well as the only remaining family servant, Lao Huang. Liyan has been rendered impotent by tuberculosis and heart problems, and his wife, Yuwen, spends her days in desolate isolation. One day, Liyan's old friend Zhang Zhichen, now a doctor of Western medicine, arrives on an unexpected visit. Coincidentally, and unbeknownst to Liyan, his friend and his wife had themselves been in love as youths, and soon a love triangle—or even a quadrangle—develops, as Yuwen and Zhichen realize they are still in love with each other, while Liyan dreams of setting up his sixteen-year-old sister eventually to marry Zhichen, while also still occasionally displaying unrequited love toward his wife, Yuwen. The tension in the film centers on the question of whether Yuwen and Zhichen will consummate their rekindled passion and run away together, and the truth of their entanglement gradually becomes evident to the little sister, Dai Xiu, as well as the husband, Liyan. The emotional toll of the situation leads to Yuwen contemplating suicide and Liyan actually attempting it, though he is saved by his doctor friend and rival. In the end, Zhichen leaves the town again, and Liyan and Yuwen's marriage remains intact.

The constitutive void in *Spring in a Small Town* can first be approached through the metaphorical tropes of the ruined family compound and the frail, emasculated Liyan, both of which have been said to represent a

weakened China devastated by a century of imperialist aggression capped by the eight years of Japanese occupation. Through Yuwen's ambiguous voice-over narration—one of the film's most notable formal features—we are told in an early sequence that the main house of the Dai family compound is ruined to the point of being uninhabitable, so that the ill Liyan and his wife sleep instead in separate rooms in the garden courtyard. The main structure of the fallen landed gentry family thus lies unused, like a language that can no longer be spoken. The parallel between the devastated property and Liyan's own bodily health is made clear when he comments to Lao Huang early in the film, "I'm afraid my health is like this house, destroyed beyond repair." The gaping holes in the walls of the compound, frequently featured in the film's mise-en-scène, like the abandoned main house itself, are a constant reminder of the dilapidated and inadequate state of the old Confucian family structure, and Liyan's habit of milling about aimlessly in the garden grounds—where, we are told, he takes solitary refuge each morning—demonstrates his general inadequacy and uselessness as both a husband and a head of household. As an indicator of a wartime and postwar crisis of Republican-era Chinese masculinity, the tubercular, impotent, often masochistic Liyan shares much in common with the protagonist Wang Wenxuan in Ba Jin's novel *Cold Nights* (*Han ye* 寒夜), published the year before *Spring in a Small Town* was released.³³

The separate sleeping quarters of Liyan and Yuwen literalize a more fundamental gap between the two, which had its origins in a presumably arranged marriage in which any affection she had for him was forced from the beginning, while his illness and impotence have only reinforced their estrangement into a profound, inexpressible alienation. In her early voice-over narration, Yuwen says that the two might exchange only three sentences in a day and often see each other without saying a word. In the first scene with the two of them, Liyan begs her to talk things over. Her retort—*women you shenme ke tan de* 我们有什么可谈的?—has been translated in English subtitles as "What's there to talk about?" or "What's there to discuss?"³⁴ but the Chinese is more accurately rendered as "What do we have *that can be* talked about?"—itself an apophatic assertion that emphasizes not only something's absence but its *unspeakability*. The gulf between her and her husband is part of a more general void that threatens

the core of Yuwen's subjectivity; she describes herself as feeling empty or insubstantial (*kongkongdongdong de* 空空洞洞的) and plagued by a mood of helplessness (*yizhong wukenaixe de xinjing* 一种无可奈何的心境) as she wanders every day atop what she calls the “broken down and hollowed-out old city wall,” her emotional void echoed by the ruined city wall she frequents, just as Liyan’s emasculation is embodied by the ruined family compound in which he wanders.

We are first introduced to Liyan in such a state, in a series of shots that emphasize the bombed-out gaps in the walls of the compound and the piles of rubble that resulted. In a remarkable shot that begins a game of concealment and revelation that plays out in various ways throughout the film, the camera first pans along a fragmented wall to find the servant Lao Huang, who looks through a hole in the wall in a search for the “hiding” Liyan. It continues panning with Lao Huang as he moves to another opening through which he can walk. Then, however, the camera suddenly leaves him to track forward and pan again to the left, as if conducting its own independent search for Liyan and choosing to glide through the gaping hole through which Lao Huang had first looked. As the hole expands to fill the screen, we in turn find Liyan seated in the ruined garden, where Lao Huang reenters the frame from off-screen right.

This sort of game of concealment and revelation involving off-screen space is returned to frequently. Long takes often observe multiple characters in their courtyard rooms, where character and camera movement combine to form complex shots in which characters are successively inside and outside the frame, gazes off-screen are often of primary significance, and private desires are manifested in a way that is often readable to the audience but not to other characters. The dialectic of concealment and disclosure plays out particularly in the depiction of Yuwen and Zhichen’s rekindled mutual attraction, which for a time at least is evident to the audience but not to Liyan and his little sister. For instance, while on a collective outing, Zhichen daringly holds Yuwen’s hand for a moment, but he drops it before anyone else can notice. Similarly, when Liyan and Dai Xiu sing a folk song together on a boat ride, they remain oblivious to several exchanges of smoldering looks between Yuwen and Zhichen, though the audience cannot miss them. As if to pervert matters further,

the song the siblings sing to unwittingly arouse the secret lovers' passion, "In that Faraway Land" (*Zai na yaoyuan de difang* 在那遥远的地方)—a seeming shepherd's folk song written for the film by Wang Luobin 王洛宾—describes a man's submissive longing for an unobtainable woman:

In that faraway land
 There's a fine girl
 When people pass by her side
 They all turn their heads with glimpses of longing
 That smiling pink face of hers
 Is like the red sun
 Her pretty, charming eyes
 Are like bright, beautiful evening moonlight
 I wish I could be a little lamb
 Following at her side
 I wish she would grasp a delicate leather whip
 And keep lightly striking my body

The masochistic erotic fantasy expressed in song brings us to another key sense of the void at the heart of *Spring in a Small Town*, one that goes beyond the historical and national allegorical associations of the ruined house and Liyan's impotence or the emptiness of Yuwen's life with him—namely, the foreclosed attraction between Yuwen and Zhichen and the radical ethical choice that it raises. That is, their desire itself appears as a dangerous vortex that threatens not only to suck them in but to destroy what is left of Liyan's marriage and family, and yet, at the same time, it is an attraction that creates conflicted desires not only in the fictional characters but in the spectator—who, oriented in particular by Yuwen's voice-over narration, can hardly help but align at least partially with her desires, especially in the early scenes of the film. Like Yuwen and Zhichen, however, the viewer is likely to feel more conflicted as the film goes along, and the destructive implications of their passion are manifested in their own evident growing misery, to the point that Zhichen eventually accuses Yuwen of "tormenting" him.

In the depiction of Yuwen and Zhichen's obsessive love, the film's apophatic technique is extended beyond the literal gaps in the mise-en-scène—the holes in both the city wall and the family compound walls—

or plays with off-screen space and a camera that selectively reveals and conceals; to these it adds an editing quirk that appears repeatedly in the film, namely, ellipses *within* scenes that seem to exceed any of the usual narrative motivations for elliptical editing.³⁵ These peculiar dissolve ellipses occur during the first of three instances in which Yuwen goes to visit Zhichen in his room alone at night, and then again during the second of two instances in which the two engage in a private liaison on the old city wall.

In the initial sequence of Yuwen and Zhichen alone in the latter's room, the first dissolve ellipsis occurs when Yuwen appears at his door and he invites her to come in, initiating a dissolve to a shot of her standing in the room. Later in the scene, there are two more ellipses, in which we know some time has passed because of the changes in position of the characters in addition to the dissolve cuts that join the shots. What did they say or do in the missing interim between the shots? We do not know. There is a fourth instance that is not as immediately obvious as an ellipsis; it lacks the dissolve punctuation and could be read as a cutaway to a view from outside the room, and yet it still feels discontinuous. Zhichen is suddenly holding a candle in the second shot, and we somehow go from an emotional and even intimate moment, ending with Zhichen's grasping of Yuwen's hand, which had also happened just before the second ellipsis, to Yuwen exiting the room. Moreover, in the view from outside the room, we can see from the shadows of human figures moving behind the window curtain that the characters are not in the same place in the room as in the previous shot, seemingly walking to the door from the area of the bed rather than the table right next to the door, where they had been in the previous shot.

In interpreting such ellipses, particularly in this context of would-be forbidden lovers meeting secretly in a bedroom, it is tempting to associate them with a type of elision typical in classical Hollywood cinema, namely, the sex scene as a constitutive absence. As Linda Williams has demonstrated, in pre-1960s cinema, a simple touch or kiss often functioned as a synecdoche for the entire sex act, particularly if followed by a telling ellipsis.³⁶ This convention—an ellipsis standing in for unrepresentable sexual content—points to the way in which ellipses can have opposite functions, depending on how they are deployed. Virtually all films have

a variety of minor editing ellipses that simply skip ahead to the next significant event in the plot's causal chain.³⁷ In such cases, for reasons of economy, story content is left out because of its insignificance. Other ellipses, such as for a sexual act, appear to have the opposite function: they skip story content that is highly significant, even crucial to the plot, not for reasons of economy but because the filmmaker either cannot or chooses not to directly represent them. A sex scene may be crucial to the narrative but elided owing to censorship, ratings, or simply cultural mores; it is also possible, though, that an ellipsis best captures a certain elusiveness or resistance to representation of sexual enjoyment itself.³⁸ Similarly, an act of violence or death may be elided in a film not only to spare the viewer an unsightly spectacle but also in acknowledgment of the resistance of such trauma to representation. An unrepresented story event paradoxically may have more power in the narration than the same event shown explicitly.

However, as tantalizing as it may be to speculate about what might have happened between when Zhichen grabbed the sobbing Yuwen's hand in the dark and when the next shot shows her leaving his room, the couple are unlikely to be interpreted by the spectator as having consummated their affair during Zhichen's visit to the Dai family compound. Near the film's end, Zhichen confesses to Liyan that he "almost did something inhuman," implying that nothing sexual happened between him and his friend's wife beyond the several instances we observe of them grasping each other's hand or arm, subtly leaning their bodies into each other at various points in the film, or, most scandalously, a moment during a later nighttime bedroom visit when Zhichen suddenly sweeps Yuwen into his arms, as if to carry her to the bed, only then to have second thoughts and set her back down. Still, even if no sexual act occurs, as the two circle warily around the vortex of their mutual desire, the odd ellipses that Fei Mu inserts into otherwise continuous scenes nonetheless apophytically gesture toward an impossible *real* of their passion as well as the abyss of the choice they are tempted to make. They only intermittently confront this choice directly while also sparring with each other by means of, for example, the highly implausible alternative of Zhichen instead marrying the little sister, Dai Xiu—a possibility that Liyan asks Yuwen to discuss

with Dai Xiu, but which she instead uses to tease Zhichen in another scene that features strange elliptical cuts even more prominently.

That scene is the second of two crucial ones in which Zhichen and Yuwen meet alone on the crumbling town wall that is Yuwen's favorite haunt. The first, which begins nearly thirty-six minutes into the film, appears to renew their passion by edging their relationship back toward their youthful romance of years before. After delicately discussing the missed opportunity of their youth, Zhichen directly raises the question of whether Yuwen would leave with him if he asked her to. She responds, "Really?" He does not answer, but they are then shown walking away arm in arm. The second scene between the two of them on the old city wall is like an inversion of the first, in that now their relationship clearly is becoming more contentious. Here Yuwen clings to Zhichen's shoulder in a gesture of physical intimacy, but then she rather cruelly taunts him with Liyan's suggestion that Zhichen might be a good match for his sister, forcing Zhichen angrily to reject the idea. Later in the scene, he expresses regret that he did not find a matchmaker to unite him with Yuwen in their youth, while she scolds him for that failure, eventually saying she does not want to be with him after all and then literally running away from him. In the course of this conversation on the wall, two prominent dissolve cuts show the two figures as having changed places on the screen, suggesting temporal ellipses of unknown duration between the shots (Figure 14).

Here the ellipses obviously do not conceal physical intimacies between Yuwen and Zhichen, but the uncertainty they present to the audience—what exactly are we missing, both in their conversation and in their relationship?—conveys those characters' own uncertainty as they contemplate the radical choice they face.³⁹ The film's forbidden love story as a whole dramatizes the conflict between what Haiyan Lee calls the Confucian structure of feeling—in which passion, or *qing* 情, is meant to be kept in balance with ritual propriety, or *li* 礼—and the modern “enlightenment” structure of feeling, in which the individual is what Lee calls “the basic and irreducible unit of moral choice and action” and free love attains a kind of absolute value as a basis of identity.⁴⁰ As the would-be lovers are drawn to the enlightenment structure of feeling,



FIGURE 14. Midpoint of dissolve cut in *Spring in a Small Town* (1948).

the radical possibility they face (to which the spectator is cued to be at least somewhat sympathetic) is what post-Lacanian theorists of ethics and love, including Alenka Zupančič, Slavoj Žižek, and Alain Badiou, would call an *act* or *event* that represents a modern subject's taking of responsibility for the creation of her own world, an act of intentional self-constituting that in a sense would transform the subject through its self-orientation around a new *truth*, constituted in this case by a love relationship. In the Badiouian conception of such a "truth procedure," the possibility of the transformative event necessarily appears first as a void or empty term within the preceding state of affairs, simply because the previously accepted reality does not admit of the possibility of that truth. It is precisely this void that is evoked by the peculiar ellipses in the scenes between Yuwen and Zhichen: the abyss of their own desire, but also both the seeming impossibility of its realization and the traumatic destruction that would result. That is, if the subject takes the plunge, commits the act, and thereby radically transforms herself and the course of her life, the existing reality experiences the consequences as violence

because the act causes something that was previously forbidden to appear. As Zupančič asserts, “any act worthy of the name is by definition ‘evil’ or ‘bad’ (or will be seen as such), for it always represents a certain ‘overstepping of boundaries,’ a change in ‘what is,’ a ‘transgression’ of the limits of the given symbolic order (or community)” — though for Zupančič, in terms of ethics, it is in reality not so much “evil” as a suspension of received ideas of good and evil in favor of a new, freely chosen universalizing gesture that overturns them.⁴¹

In the cultural production of 1940s China, we can find no better distilled representation of the attraction of such an act in the context of love than the short story “Sealed Off” (*Fengsuo* 封锁) by Zhang Ailing 张爱玲 (Eileen Chang), whom Haiyan Lee calls “perhaps the most artful chronicler of the transformations of intimacy and the dilemmas of the metropolitan personality who is incapable of the heroism of renunciation and yet yearns to be in touch with the heroic and transcendent” under the enlightenment structure of feeling.⁴² In “Sealed Off,” two strangers, a single young woman who teaches English and a married male bank accountant, strike up a conversation while stuck on a tram car that is stopped in transit due to an air raid drill in occupied Shanghai during the war.⁴³ The suspension of ordinary life caused by the air raid drill encourages them to slip into a fantasy-tinged state in which they seem to fall passionately (if rashly) in love, seeing in the other a soul mate who transcends the mundanity of being a “good” person and is instead a “real” person — a distinction explicitly made in the story that outlines the stakes of “the act” as described above: can these two people suspend their habituated norms of “good” versus “bad” behavior, instead to try to grasp a “real” of their love that transcends the received distinction? The notion of becoming a couple despite his marital status suddenly looms as a genuine, life-altering possibility. However, soon the air raid drill ends, the life of the city returns, the tram resumes its route, and the dream dissipates with an almost tragic suddenness; the man now proclaims their fantasy impractical, and the woman silently gives up any hope of true love and happiness. In short, just as in *Spring in a Small Town*, “Sealed Off” (which was published five years earlier) gets its energy from an affair that does not actually happen, as the couple concerned consider a radical act

of, in Badiou's terms, *fidelity* to the life-changing event of their falling in love but then back away from the traumatic possibility, which would have upended their lives if pursued.

In her reading of *Spring in a Small Town*, Carolyn Fitzgerald also invokes Zhang Ailing, in particular her self-proclaimed preferred aesthetic of “desolation” or *cangliang* 苍凉, which certainly seems appropriate to the overall tone of the film as well as the description within the film of Yuwen’s life as “desolate” or *qiliang* 凄凉.⁴⁴ Aside from “desolation,” Fitzgerald cites as relevant to *Spring in a Small Town* Zhang Ailing’s fondness for the aesthetic effects of “equivocal contrasts,” or *cenci de duizhao* 参差的对照, which can also be translated as “uneven contrast” or simply “incongruence.”⁴⁵ The metaphorical example given by Zhang Ailing herself is the color combination of “scallion green” with “peach red”—as opposed to the more seamless complementarity of true red and true green. Zhang does not elaborate directly on what she means by the “unevenness” of such a contrast, but the word *cenci*, which can also mean “serrated” or “jagged,” suggests an imperfect fit, a joining of two things that leaves spaces or gaps. The example Zhang gives in her essay immediately after introducing the term is the main couple from her story “Love in a Fallen City,” whose relationship represents a compromise in which neither character is entirely transformed, nor does either become completely fulfilled. In other words, the idea of uneven contrasts, in the context of Zhang Ailing’s stories as well as *Spring in a Small Town*, seems to evoke in part the inevitable mismatching of desires between a couple in love, where each person can never quite fully embody the other’s fantasy—or, to put it another way, where the *actual* other in the intersubjective relationship will never entirely coincide with the *imagined* object of one’s love, propped up as it is by subjective fantasy. In this sense, the gap between Yuwen and Zhichen—despite, or rather *because of*, how in love they are—may be even more traumatic than the silent, unbridgeable gulf between Yuwen and her husband. In fact, as Victor Fan points out in his reading of the film, all four main characters suffer from unfulfilled or mismatched desires: Liyan’s desire for Yuwen, who repeatedly though subtly rebuffs him throughout the film; Yuwen’s desire for her real, lost love, Zhichen; Zhichen’s desire for Yuwen, blocked by his sense of

propriety and loyalty to his friend Liyan; and Dai Xiu's desire *to be desired* romantically by Zhichen, who instead continues to treat her like a niece.⁴⁶ Each case may be thought of in the sense of Zhang Ailing's technique of "uneven contrast," which she says can "show the reality in the emptiness" of people's lives.⁴⁷ Things generally fail to match up perfectly, and people learn to live with the gaps; in fact, it is precisely those gaps that indicate the resistance of the real to the personal fantasies of fulfillment that people pursue.

In its depiction of dangerous desires, as Carolyn Fitzgerald has pointed out, *Spring in a Small Town* has curious resonances with 1940s Western film noir.⁴⁸ Among the noir elements that it echoes are the theme of doomed love, the reliance on voice-over narration, and the potentially dangerous sexual agency of Yuwen, whose depiction approaches that of a femme fatale—an association importantly mitigated, however, by the fact that the voice-over narration is *hers*, not that of any man she seduces or betrays, so that she remains the film's point-of-view character, despite not always being a sympathetic one.⁴⁹ The love-triangle cuckolding plot, nonetheless, can invoke associations with international films noir from earlier in the decade that depicted an irresistible woman seducing a man into helping her dispose of her unloved husband, including *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett, 1946), and the Italian proto-neorealist film based on the same literary source as the latter, Luchino Visconti's *Obsession* (*Ossessione*; 1943). In particular, the moment in *Spring in a Small Town* when the would-be lovers are speculating on what is to be done and Yuwen suddenly blurts out, regarding her husband, Liyan, "Unless [pause] he were to die"—after which she immediately claps her hand over her mouth as if scared of her own thought—is reminiscent of these Western films, in which the husband's death is desired to clear the way for the extramarital love affair to proceed unhindered.⁵⁰ Yuwen's partial femme fatale characterization also is evident, for example, in a scene in which she toys with Zhichen's emotions while repeatedly holding her scarf up to cover half her face—a veiling gesture that recalls famous desired women in cinema history, from the Princess of Bagdad in the Douglas Fairbanks vehicle *The Thief of Bagdad* (Raoul Walsh, 1924) to Marlene Dietrich in Joseph von Sternberg's *The Scarlet Empress* (1934).

Of course, the connection to noir is only partial, and Yuwen, as much as she does seem sometimes to derive sadistic enjoyment from toying with Zhichen's desires, in the end is driven not by cold personal greed or excessive cruelty but by her own tortured emotions. Nonetheless, the moral ambiguity and potentially fatal gaps in knowledge that characterize the distinctive modernism of films noir are similar to the uncertainties that plague the characters in *Spring in a Small Town*, caught as they are between a ruined Confucian tradition that they cannot fully recover and a challenging modernity that they seem inadequate to face.

Even more crucial than the noir connection is how *Spring in a Small Town* has appeared to various critics to be, on one hand, possibly the closest thing to a feature-length modernist art film that China produced before the 1980s and, on the other, an example of an indigenous, even *traditional* Chinese aesthetic manifesting in cinema. In terms of the former association, even more than film noir or Italian Neorealism, French Poetic Realism of the 1930s may be the closest global cinematic antecedent to what Fei Mu achieved in *Spring in a Small Town*. This is true primarily in terms of style, but even in terms of plot and theme, there are strong similarities. In his study of French Poetic Realism, Dudley Andrew describes its “subdued, whispering tone, letting audiences monitor the incredible pressure underneath the sad routine of ordinary life”—a description that well describes the deceptively calm yet subtly oppressive atmosphere of much of *Spring in a Small Town*.⁵¹ In their *Film History*, Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell write that the protagonists of poetic realist films typically, “after a life of disappointment . . . find a last chance at intense, ideal love. After a brief period they are disappointed again, and the films end with the disillusionment or deaths of the central characters. The overall tone is one of nostalgia and bitterness.”⁵² This description certainly fits *Spring in a Small Town* (although no one dies), and it also is notable that many of the genre-defining poetic realist films cited by Thompson and Bordwell involve impossible or forbidden love, leading to doomed romances.

In the present context, just as striking as the similarities in plot and theme between French Poetic Realism and Fei Mu's aesthetic is the precise mode of cinematic realism that they pursue. Much has been made of Fei Mu's long-take style—*Spring in a Small Town* has an average shot

length (ASL) of more than twenty-four seconds—as well as his preference for long shots that employ lateral panning or tracking rather than cutting to closer shots of different characters. These characteristics fit the style of realism that André Bazin praised among several filmmakers in the 1930s–50s from France, Italy, and America—including Jean Renoir, perhaps the greatest French Poetic Realist director. Bazin credits Renoir with “laying the foundation” for the later Italian Neorealism and says his style can be summed up as an “aesthetic of discrepancy”—an interesting parallel with the Zhang Ailing aesthetic of “incongruity” or “uneven contrasts” applied to *Spring in a Small Town*.⁵³ More generally, Bazin felt that the stylistic choices of long takes with minimal cutting and longer shot distances were most suited to developing the intrinsic realism of the film medium because they preserved the continuity of time and space and thus more closely approximated our actual experiences of the world.⁵⁴ The long takes of *Spring in a Small Town* are unusual in comparison not only to Hollywood but also to other Chinese films at the time. Compared to the other films discussed in this chapter, for example, its twenty-four-second ASL is more than twice the ASL of *Spring River Flows East* (ten seconds) and *Crows and Sparrows* (eleven and a half seconds).⁵⁵

Even more relevant to my current analysis are Bazin’s ideas regarding editing ellipses. Discussing Italian Neorealist filmmaker Vittorio De Sica, Bazin notes that ellipses are essential to the overall structure of his narratives: “The empty gaps, the white spaces, the parts of the event that we are not given, are themselves of a concrete nature: stones which are missing from the building” (a metaphor that conveniently evokes the gaps in the ruined walls featured in *Spring in a Small Town*). As with long takes and long shots, Bazin grounds his appreciation for ellipses in the idea that they are in their own way verisimilar, in the sense that a lack of complete knowability of the story world mimics that of our own real world: “It is the same in life: we do not know everything that happens to others.”⁵⁶ Here we have a justification for ellipses that returns us to what I am calling apophatic realism—the idea that cinema may seek to represent negatively to grapple with a real that is understood as exceeding representation or knowledge. In his study of French Poetic Realism, Dudley Andrew asserts that certain types of film realism

signify not just the authenticity of their images, but the excess of reality beyond what can be actually seen on the screen. Particularly with Renoir we are made to feel the inexhaustible extension or surface of material life as well as the nearly infinite webs of interrelation suggested by any slice of it. In his films every shot seems to vibrate with unexplored possibilities and with the sense that something more waits at the edges of the frame.⁵⁷

This is the essence of apophatic realism, which uses devices including off-screen space and editing ellipses precisely to point to a real that exceeds our own situated viewpoint. The fact that such a technique may strike us as modernist is not surprising, given that it shares in what Umberto Eco has described as the modernist “open work,” in which an artwork’s resistance to closure or sure meaning becomes an “epistemological metaphor” that indexes a general loss of any sort of certainty or absolute bearings under modernity.⁵⁸

As mentioned earlier, while Fei Mu’s techniques and themes may lend themselves to interpretations in terms of Bazinian realism, modernist art cinema, and Lacanian psychoanalysis, he also is one of the directors most likely to be brandished by those asserting a distinctively Chinese or “Eastern” style that is imagined as carving out an aesthetic based on Eastern tradition different from Western cinema in general and Hollywood cinema in particular.⁵⁹ (Here he is joined by other canonized East Asian filmmakers, such as Sun Yu, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Yasujiro Ozu, and Kenji Mizoguchi.) Fei Mu himself contributes to this association of his aesthetic with traditional Chinese culture through the essays he wrote, in which, for example, he advised Chinese filmmakers to find inspiration for an indigenous film aesthetic in the formalism of Chinese opera or in the oblique suggestiveness of Chinese painting, which famously makes use of blank, unpainted spaces and thus arguably has a strongly apophatic aspect. Taiwan film scholar Ray Jiing (Jing Yingrui 井迎瑞) identifies this technique of *liubai* 留白 (literally “leaving blank”) as one of the main facets of the artistic triumph of *Spring in a Small Town*, and he describes it apophatically: “what is unsaid must be greater than what is said.”⁶⁰ In one of the first English-language article-length studies of the film, Susan Daruvala brought together the modernist and traditionalist readings of the film: “the film . . . through its cinematic techniques becomes a truly

modernist work. It is, in fact, these aspects that seem the most closely related to Chinese aesthetics.”⁶¹

In his discussion of Fei Mu in his book *Cinema Approaching Reality*, Victor Fan notes that commentaries on the director suffer from the danger of reducing him either to a cultural essentialism or to a parallel with certain trends in Western cinema, both of which have been partially indulged earlier in this chapter.⁶² In the context of the current discussion, however, most important is the contrast between Fei Mu’s apophasic style in *Spring in a Small Town*, on one hand, and the attempt to grasp and clearly represent totalizing truths of history and society in *Spring River Flows East* and *Crows and Sparrows* (considered shortly), on the other. While *Spring in a Small Town* offers an apophasic realism of the unknown—an epistemological metaphor for a profound uncertainty or skepticism as well as a degree of moral ambiguity in life—the other two films suggest a world that is both essentially knowable and morally legible. In them, history proceeds inexorably in one direction, leaving trauma in its past but possibly promising redemption by revolution in its future. *Spring in a Small Town*, in contrast, presents history at a seeming standstill, even caught in a circular vortex. Described earlier as circling around a void, the film literally has a circular narrative structure: though a first-time viewer is unlikely to notice it, one of the final shots of the film—an extreme long shot showing Zhichen leaving the small town, escorted by Dai Xiu and Lao Huang—in fact already had appeared during the film’s opening credits. The movie ends where it began, or rather begins where it ends. This odd temporal ambiguity is reinforced by Yuwen’s voice-over narration, which, as others have noted, seems to slip between narrating in the present, as if stating Yuwen’s thoughts as they occur, and narrating in flashback in a more omniscient manner, as if she is remembering or even reliving the events after knowing how they will turn out.⁶³ The effect of all these temporal aspects of the film is to give a sense of both the oppressive stasis of Yuwen’s life and marriage, from which she ultimately will not escape, and the circular whirlpool of her impossible desires, which are cyclically activated and disappointed in the film’s narrative structure, evoking a feeling of life and time itself as snagged on a void of the Real, unable to proceed.

WHEN CINEMA AND HISTORY CONVERGE: *CROWS AND SPARROWS*

If *Spring River Flows East* constituted a look back at the traumas of the recent historical past and *Spring in a Small Town* seemed to be stuck in a cyclical present in which temporality is collapsed and human desire thwarted, *Crows and Sparrows* on the contrary was one of those rare films that seemed so much to coincide with a tectonic transformation in human social life that watching the film feels almost like watching history itself hurtle forward before our eyes. Like *Spring River Flows East*, the film drew massive audiences, with an estimated 287,000 people viewing it in Shanghai alone.⁶⁴ Produced by the same Kunlun Film Company and directed by one of the codirectors of *Spring River Flows East*, Zheng Junli, *Crows and Sparrows* benefited from a stellar cast of popular veteran actors, a finely honed screenplay,⁶⁵ inventive camerawork and editing that made the most of its limited settings, and a tightly wound plot that gathers momentum as the film progresses and uses many of the narrative techniques of classical Hollywood. The official PRC Chinese film history mentioned earlier discussed it as an example of the social realism practiced by progressive directors before liberation; as Cheng Jihua puts it, the film was a “true portrayal of social life on the eve of the collapse” of the Nationalist regime.⁶⁶ Leading Western scholars have agreed; Leo Ou-fan Lee, for example, also frames it as a work of social realism, shining a light on contemporary social injustices and making audiences feel that they are watching a story from, and learning from a critique of, the very world in which they have been living.⁶⁷ In the fullest existing discussion of the film in English scholarship, Yiman Wang acknowledges the film’s social realism but emphasizes as well its utopian anticipation, using allegory to grapple with the limits of representation in a film that “straddles a historical threshold moment.”⁶⁸

Crows and Sparrows is set mostly inside one Shanghai tenement house, in which the rightful property owner, an aging newspaper proofreader surnamed Kong, has been shoved aside by a Nationalist Ministry of Defense section chief, Hou Yibo, who had taken advantage of being a collaborator during the Japanese occupation to seize the house from Kong.

The occupants of the building's apartment spaces represent various social classes in urban China—the intellectuals, the petty bourgeoisie or small merchants, and finally, the truly property-less proletarians—making the film also a national allegory in the May Fourth tradition of fiction writers like Lu Xun, who excelled at creating vividly individualized characters who nonetheless also represented social types in a China still filled with injustice and inequality. By focusing on how individual tenants from each of these classes work at cross-purposes before finally uniting to overthrow their landlord (representing the corrupt ruling kleptocracy), the film functions partly as a microcosm of the wider revolution. Even the film's title captures this dynamic of the weak overcoming the strong by banding together, evoking the idiom *jiuzhanquechao* 鸠占鹊巢, “the turtledove occupies the magpie's nest”—in which one type of bird taking over the home of another is a metaphor for forceful displacement from a place or position by someone more powerful but also demonstrating how emboldened small sparrows might chase away a more powerful crow by fighting back together as a flock.

After the opening credits and an explanatory opening text that sets the scene as Shanghai in winter 1948, only months before the city would be taken by the Communist Party's People's Liberation Army (PLA), the film begins with a close-up of a newspaper advertisement offering the tenement house for sale. This sets in motion one of the structuring principles of the narrative, a deadline as a plot device guiding the story's causality for the rest of the film. As the building's tenants will soon find out, Hou, the Nationalist officer who took over the house during the war, now wants to sell it in anticipation of having to flee the city entirely as the Communist army advances; consequently, all who live there, including the house's previous (and still rightful) owner, will have to leave and find new homes in the midst of the economic chaos of the postwar years, when triple-digit inflation threatened the livelihoods of all but the ultra-rich. Much of the rest of the narrative follows each family of tenants trying to cope with this approaching deadline separately, before finally uniting to keep their hold on the house and, in solidarity with the imminent Communist liberation, help chase their landlord out of the house and city entirely.

Following the close-up of the newspaper advertisement, *Crows and*

Sparrows cuts to a matching address plate at the front door of the house itself, as a visitor arrives to ring the doorbell, holding in his hand the newspaper with the real estate ad. These expository shots establish the film's main location and position the viewer to enter its interior, as the sequence goes on to introduce the house's various spaces and the people who occupy them, all while launching the deadline plot device as a potential buyer gets a tour of the house. First we meet the glamorous-looking Yu Xiaoying, the concubine of the villain Hou,⁶⁹ whose status as a villain herself is humorously established with the first shot of her reading (as her maid, A-Mei, mischievously steals a glance over her shoulder) a pop fiction edition of *The Legend of the White Snake*, a traditional folk tale about two snakes who transform themselves into seductive women. Soon after, as A-Mei is sent to answer the door, in an expression of the interconnectedness of the building's flats as well as the social groups they contain, a flamboyant shot tracks down from a medium-long framing of Xiaoying to a floor below as if looking through a transparent fourth wall—in the same manner as in the Hollywood silent classic *7th Heaven*, a camera movement that already had been adapted by other Chinese films in the 1930s (as described in chapter 2). In the apartment below, we encounter “Little Broadcast” Xiao—so nicknamed because of his propensity to spread rumors (played by Zhao Dan, hardly recognizable compared to his lead roles in *Street Angel* and *Crossroads*, discussed in the preceding chapter)—and his wife and several boisterous children. The couple are arranging stacks of American canned goods to sell, showing their social class as petty bourgeois commodity speculators trying to stay ahead of inflation and always coming up with schemes to make quick profits. They observe A-Mei leading the potential buyer into the building and escorting him upstairs. In the stairwell a half level up from the Xiao family, the visitor is peeked at as well by Mrs. Hua, who is helping her husband, Hua Jiezhi, a high school teacher, as he secretly burns politically sensitive publications for fear of being caught with them. Xiaoying eventually escorts the potential buyer back down to examine each room in the house, thus introducing us finally also to Mr. Kong, the building's rightful owner, in the smallest room at the ground level. Soon afterward, the residents all begin speculating about Mr. Hou's plans for the place.

These characters, played (besides the children) by experienced and highly skilled actors, all will emerge as vivid individuals as the audience watches the film, but, as mentioned earlier, each also is meant to typify his or her social class, including the strengths and weakness of that class and, in particular, the shortcomings that must be overcome for the characters—and the classes they represent—to play a positive role in the unfolding Communist revolution. Will Teacher Hua take the risk of supporting student activism, even though it may threaten the privileges he has earned as an intellectual with the support of his pro-KMT school administration? (Will intellectuals in general identify with the proletarian class and get behind the revolution?) Will Little Broadcast and his wife keep scheming to get rich quick through small-time commodities arbitrage as the Republican economy continues to collapse, or will they instead join with their neighbors to oppose and overthrow the system that offers financial security only to the lucky few and the already rich? (Will the petty bourgeoisie in general give up capitalist ideology and instead cast their lot with the revolutionary working class?) Will the oppressed maid A-Mei continue to follow the orders of the landlord Hou Yibo and his demanding concubine, or will she revolt against them? (Of course, as a true proletarian, it should have gone without question that A-Mei would not only join but help lead the revolution, and the relative sidelining of A-Mei as a character is a point on which the director would later criticize his own film.)⁷⁰

The balancing of characters as vivid individuals and as representatives of their social group has long been a central issue of theories of social (and socialist) realism in general and of Marxist aesthetics in particular. As the prominent Chinese Marxist critic (and later PRC vice-minister of culture) Zhou Yang wrote in 1936, “creating types entails extracting from a certain social group the most characteristic traits, habits, tastes, aspirations, actions, speech, and so forth and embodying these in a character, ensuring that the character does not lose its distinctive personality.” He then quotes Friedrich Engels: “Every character is a type, and at the same time a fully unique individual—‘this one,’ as Hegel said.”⁷¹ Here we see that Chinese artists and critics were fully engaged in the aesthetic debates of Marxist and Communist circles around the world in the early to mid-twentieth

century. In 1954, Hungarian philosopher and literary historian Georg Lukács would cite the same Engels quotation in a discussion of types, but then he would broaden the concept beyond just characters in novels, arguing more generally that a work of art could, at least in the most crucial respects, manifest reality through selective representation:

The goal for all great art is to provide a picture of reality in which the contradiction between appearance and reality, the particular and the general, the immediate and the conceptual, etc., is so resolved that the two converge into a spontaneous integrity in the direct impression of the work of art and provide a sense of an inseparable integrity. The universal appears as a quality of the individual and the particular, reality becomes manifest and can be experienced within appearance, the general principle is exposed as the specific impelling cause for the individual case being specially depicted.⁷²

Thus the work of realist art can, through a relatively small number of characters and situations, give a picture of the processes of history and society as a whole. This is obviously an approach diametrically counter to the apophasic realism described earlier, although it is not as if the social (or socialist) realist naively believes that any representation can encompass *all* of reality. As Lukács wrote, although “the extensive totality of reality necessarily is beyond the possible scope of any artistic creation,” the realist work of art should nonetheless achieve an “intensive” totality that circumscribes and orders “those factors which objectively are of decisive significance for the portion of life depicted.”⁷³ If the work of art achieves “a directly perceptible unity of the individual and the universal”—for instance, through characters who are not only distinctive individuals but representatives of broader social types—then it can represent the *essential* features of the social totality at a moment in time even if it does not represent *all* of that totality.⁷⁴

An example of how *Crows and Sparrows* vividly paints characters who also represent types while seamlessly blending comedy with social realism can be found in the way the film introduces the villain Hou Yibo. As Yiman Wang has analyzed, the appearance of his initially disembodied voice is followed later by a complex scene transition via a dialogue hook in which Little Broadcast imitates the Zhejiang accent of Nationalist leader Chiang

Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi 蒋介石), and then, following a cut back to Hou's penthouse quarters, a camera movement connects Hou's photographic portrait on his apartment wall to a signed one of Generalissimo Chiang himself. The chain of ironically juxtaposed signifiers (right down to the pair's matching pencil-thin mustaches, soon to become a sure marker of a villain in Chinese Communist films) all establish Hou as the haughty and feared landlord connected to the corrupt Republican-era ruling class while also subjecting him, and by extension Chiang Kai-shek himself, to the audience's ridicule. Wang concludes that the sequence "begins with Little Broadcast parodying the dictator Chiang and ends by satirizing Hou as a self-important monkey [the children of the house call him 'monkey' in a pun on his surname] who ludicrously mimics Chiang, his master."⁷⁵

One imagines the valve-release-like boisterous laughter such a sequence would have provoked in audiences just months after the flight of the ruthless Chiang and his loyalists, and it raises the broader question of the role comedy plays in *Crows and Sparrows*, as well as the way it employs classical cinematic conventions in general. Of all the published discussions of the film mentioned so far in this chapter, none takes the film primarily as a comedy, and only Cheng Jihua's official account and Yiman Wang's study even mention that it has satirical elements.⁷⁶ In fact, the comedic elements of the film go well beyond social satire to include abundant punning, slapstick, and humorously exaggerated characterizations. In general, the Xiao family provides the slapstick, while Hou Yibo and his consort, Yu Xiaoying—played with pitch-perfect smarmy comic brilliance by Li Tianji 李天济 and Huang Zongying 黄宗英, respectively—provide magnetically grotesque caricatures of the privilege, corruption, and self-interest of the departing ruling class.

The relative scholarly silence about the comic element in *Crows and Sparrows* finds an exception in the first English-language book on Chinese cinema, by Jay Leyda, who identifies the film as one that "takes a tragic situation, the desperate measures employed by little city people to stay alive, and translates it, successfully, into comedy."⁷⁷ Leyda in fact endorses *Crows and Sparrows* as "a milestone in Chinese film history, worthy to be shown alongside the best of international cinema produced in the postwar years," noting, as does Leo Ou-fan Lee, the film's similarities with Italian

Neorealism.⁷⁸ The comparison has its limits, but intentionally or not, it draws attention to the extent to which postwar films considered as classics of social realism—including, more than is often acknowledged, several in the Italian Neorealist canon—also often fully engaged the resources of classical Hollywood narration. In fact, *Crows and Sparrows* skillfully deploys all the storytelling power of classical film narration while redirecting it to revolutionary ends and also creatively testing the limits of the classical system, particularly in its management of narrative space.

In some ways, *Crows and Sparrows* fits exactly in the classical Hollywood narrative mode. Its average shot length, eleven and a half seconds, for example, corresponds perfectly with that of Hollywood in the period 1947–60.⁷⁹ Moreover, the plot element it deploys to launch the entire story—the deadline by which all the “sparrows” will have to move out of the building that is put into motion by the newspaper advertisement—is an extremely common classical device for organizing story time and building narrative tension or interest. As David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson write in their classic study of classical Hollywood, “the deadline proper is the strongest way in which story duration cooperates with narrative causality. In effect, the characters set a limit to the time span necessary to the chain of cause and effect.”⁸⁰ In fact, Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson find “one or more clearly articulated deadlines” in the plots of three-quarters of classical Hollywood films from their representative sample of one hundred.⁸¹ In *Crows and Sparrows*, virtually all of the main characters’ goals are organized around the deadline, from Hou’s desire to sell the house and flee Shanghai to the tenants’ various strategies for either finding new housing or finding ways to stay where they are. The way the deadline is deployed in the film, however, is distinctive in that the deadline comes to coincide not only with the fate of the building but with the revolutionary overthrow of the Nationalist regime locally, so that the deadline for the sale (or, as it turns out, just the abandonment) of one tenement house becomes part of the film’s national allegory.

In its style, *Crows and Sparrows* shows a mastery of classical Hollywood scene and sequence construction. The fast-paced story is hustled along by punctuation cuts including wipes (twelve), fades (thirteen), and especially dissolves (forty-five), and Hollywood-style montage sequences to

condense story information—for example, when Mrs. Hua visits a series of offices (a barrister, the Shanghai Department of Education, the police headquarters) to appeal for help in locating and freeing her husband after she learns he has been apprehended at school. Such a classical montage sequence, as opposed to the more experimental Soviet-style montage that Yuan Muzhi had used in the opening credit sequence of *Street Angel* (see chapter 2), “selects representative moments from a process” and thereby “compresses a considerable length of time or space.”⁸² In this case, Mrs. Hua’s desperate but fruitless pleas at three different offices in Shanghai are all compressed into one minute of screen time punctuated by wipe cuts between offices and dissolves from the exterior to the interior at each location. Such sequences are, according to David Bordwell, “classical narration’s most acceptable rhetorical flourish.”⁸³

Crows and Sparrows allows itself other flourishes as well, displaying an inventiveness that bends and occasionally even breaks the “rules” of the classical continuity system or tests the bounds of spatial representation to sometimes favor expressionistic exaggeration rather than straightforward verisimilitude. The latter is evident, for example, in a strongly affecting shot nearly three-quarters into the film, when the Huas’ daughter has become seriously ill during the period when Teacher Hua has been abducted by the authorities. The shot in question begins as a medium shot of Mrs. Hua seated on their bed holding her unconscious daughter in her lap, but then there is a dramatic track back from the two characters. Evidence from shots in the same room earlier in the film (particularly a high-angle shot from above the bed that shows the whole reverse space) makes it clear that the camera here has receded far beyond the actual spatial dimensions of the fictional room; the set has been altered to allow the camera to track back much farther than the previously shown space would allow. However implausible, the technique concludes with an eloquently poignant shot of the poor mother tearfully clinging to her ailing daughter in extreme long shot, surrounding darkness closing in on the isolated patch of light in the room that they occupy (Figure 15).

In general, *Crows and Sparrows* makes the most of the capacity of highly mobile camera work and variations in shot scale to keep the viewer interested in the cramped space of the tenement house. Slightly more



FIGURE 15. Mrs. Hua and her daughter following the camera's track-out in *Crows and Sparrows* (1949).

than one-third of the film's shots feature a moving camera, sometimes combined in novel ways with character positioning. Instead of the common classical decoupage editing technique of beginning a scene with an establishing long shot and then cutting or tracking to closer shots, for example, the film often begins a scene with a close-up or medium shot and then tracks back to a wider shot—as in the first shot of Hou's mistress Xiaoying, which begins as an extreme close-up of the cover of the *White Snake* comic she is reading.

Another example of subtle experimentation within the classical norms of cinematography and editing comes in a scene in which Mr. and Mrs. Hua are engaged in a temporary power struggle about which one has the better plan for coping with the sudden housing crisis—Teacher Hua's scheme to ingratiate himself into getting housing from his workplace or Mrs. Hua's attempts to beguile Mr. Hou into arranging for them to stay on in their residence after the building is sold. As the argument heats up, a series of whip pans alternately frame each of them in medium shot as they speak. The fourth such whip pan yields a surprise, however: Mr. Hua now fills the screen from top to bottom, changing the shot scale

(Figure 16). It seems that either the camera has almost impossibly tracked significantly closer to the subject *during* the whip pan or else there is a very well-hidden cut. After the fifth whip pan, Mrs. Hua is framed the same way, significantly closer to the camera. Only upon close frame-by-frame analysis does it become apparent that the two performers have moved from one mark to another one, closer to the camera, while off-screen, when the camera was on the other performer. The remarkable effect is as if there has been a cut to a closer shot, in which the character fills more of the screen, even though the shot has in fact been continuous through five whip pans in a seventeen-second take. The closer scale subtly, even humorously, ratchets up the drama of the moment, as Mrs. Hua gains the upper hand in the couple's argument, without breaking the whip pan pattern, which finally culminates in a cut to an even closer shot of an initially empty space that both characters will enter in turn to conclude the discussion facing each other in a two-shot close-up.

One of the film's most blatant departures from the rules of classical continuity is its habitual breaking of the so-called 180-degree rule, which states that within a certain space during a scene, no matter how much variation there is in scale and angle from shot to shot, the camera will remain on one side of the "axis of action" formed by the placement of the main characters. It essentially means that a cut will not suddenly reverse which side of the screen the characters are on (or, if off-screen, the side where they are understood to be), as such a reversal has long been said to be disorienting to viewers. *Crows and Sparrows* violates this "rule" no fewer than twenty-eight times, spread over thirteen different scenes. Occasionally the violations seem to be motivated by the narrow spaces of hallways and stairwells, where continual camera placement on one side of the axis of action would require the camera to be positioned in an impossible space inside a wall (Figure 17). However, as we have seen in the case of the track-out from Mrs. Hua and her daughter, the film is not averse to doing that as well; in fact, in one scene in which Mr. Hou has taken Mrs. Hua to a fancy restaurant in an attempt to blackmail her into having sex with him, the film both violates the 180-degree rule and positions itself for one shot as if inside a now apparently transparent wall.



FIGURE 16. Teacher Hua after the, *a*, second and, *b*, fourth whip pans in a scene in *Crows and Sparrows* (1949).



FIGURE 17. Breaking the 180-degree rule in *Crows and Sparrows* (1949).

Such disregard of the 180-degree rule is hardly unheard of—the idiosyncratic Japanese director Yasujirō Ozu is just one famous example of a master filmmaker who had little use for the convention—but it is highly unusual in classical Hollywood. In their representative sample of Hollywood films, Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson found that more than 98 percent of cuts followed the classical continuity system, including the 180-degree rule.⁸⁴ However, they also note that films can maintain spatial coherency even when violating the rule if the viewer has been sufficiently oriented by other means, such as wider establishing shots in the same scene.⁸⁵ This is generally the case in *Crows and Sparrows*. In fact, a recent empirical study found that viewers' experience of a scene shot on video is *not* generally negatively affected by cutting across the axis of action and that there was no significant preference for versions of a scene that followed the rule versus those that did not.⁸⁶ Zheng Junli and the film's cinematographers (Miao Zhenhua 苗振华 and Hu Zhenhua 胡振华) and editor (Wu Tingfang 邬廷芳) appear to have simply decided that in the spaces they were filming, occasionally cutting across the axis of action was more visually interesting than following the “rule.”

After much drama and hardship—Teacher Hua being arrested and jailed for a time, his wife sexually harassed by Mr. Hou while he is detained, Little Broadcast and his wife beaten by a gang in a food riot—in a climactic scene, Hou and his concubine are faced down by all their tenants and end up fleeing Shanghai and leaving the house to its rightful owner, Mr. Kong. The film concludes with a stereotypical *datuanyuan* 大团圆 or “big reunion” ending, in which all the tenants celebrate the Chinese New Year together in early 1949, anticipating the new society to come with the Communist victory and the establishment of the PRC later that year. The film—which had featured so much comedy, drama, and intrigue until this point—shifts into a more stiff and didactic mode as Mr. Kong announces that “this new year brings with it a new society” and Teacher Hua gives a mini-speech exhorting his neighbors to begin “a new way of thinking” and to become “a new people” adequate to the dawning new society. Film spectators at the time no doubt understood that Teacher Hua was speaking directly to them as much as to his diegetic audience.

This ending of *Crows and Sparrows* anticipates a historical change in film aesthetics by briefly shifting from comedic social realism to the prescriptive mode of realism that we will explore in depth in the next chapter. Unabashedly pedagogical, the narrative tone at the end seeks not only to accurately represent the current reality but to point to its future development, when the transition from capitalism to socialism will demand a new revolutionary culture and way of life. The abstraction from reality made by social realist conventions like character types gets extended, in this new prescriptive realist mode, into a projected future ideal. In other words, there is a hint, in the conclusion of *Crows and Sparrows*, of the transition from social realism to socialist realism, which is justified by a more explicitly mass rather than elite perspective. As Barbara Foley has pointed out, such self-consciously “proletarian” art may seem simplistic and artistically inferior—indeed, even “preachy” or “propagandistic”—to those of us steeped in bourgeois aesthetic standards, but we must take seriously the performative function at which such art aims—transparently seeking to spur political action and social *praxis*, not just aesthetic appreciation.⁸⁷ The ending of *Crows and Sparrows* is both a closure and an opening. The film as a whole is like a hinge between two historical eras. It shows the moment when historical necessity and radical opportunity suddenly merge, when a new order becomes not only possible but inevitable. It renders immediate and palpable the *eventness* of what might later become (in China) a mere label in officially narrated history—or what some (in the capitalist world) might even dismiss as an ideological cliché: *liberation*.

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Prescriptive Realism in Revolutionary Cinema of the Seventeen Years

The previous chapter concluded with the moment of transition from the Republican era to the Mao era in China. Lasting from the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 until the death of Mao Zedong 毛泽东 and the subsequent fall of the Gang of Four in 1976, the Mao era generally is subdivided into the Seventeen Years (1949–66), during which the transition from capitalism to state socialism was consolidated and various experiments in the name of Communism were carried out, and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–76), a period that began with renewed revolutionary activity and intense grassroots struggle but later settled into a more doctrinaire, top-down political and cultural situation. The end of the Cultural Revolution was soon followed by the beginning of the era of “reform and opening” that was launched in the late 1970s and would set the course of the PRC for the following decades.

Discussions of Mao-era cinema, particularly those which treat it only briefly as a point of comparison to what came before or after, often dismiss it as political propaganda—as if the fact that its aesthetic was guided by politics (in accordance with the tenets of socialist realism) disqualifies it from having either a political message or an aesthetic form worthy of serious consideration. This betrays an overall resistance to taking socialist realist art seriously or, as Barbara Foley has put it in the case of proletarian literature, on its own terms.¹ Of the films of the Seventeen Years that have been regarded as most worthy of serious study by scholars in the West, some—including *The Unfinished Comedies* (*Meiyou*

wancheng de xiju 没有完成的喜剧; Lü Ban 吕班, 1957), *Early Spring in February* (*Zaochun eryue* 早春二月; Xie Tieli 谢铁骊, 1963), and *Stage Sisters* (*Wutai jiemei* 舞台姐妹; Xie Jin 谢晋, 1965)—hardly had a theatrical run for Chinese audiences of their time due to being pulled from circulation for their ostensible ideological errors or screened only for the purposes of criticism. The Cultural Revolution is commonly looked upon as even more of a wasteland for cinema. Its early, chaotic stages resulted in the complete cessation of feature film production from 1966 to 1970, and after filmmaking returned, initially it consisted only of film adaptations of the *yangbanxi* 样板戏 or model stage performances—revolutionary operas or ballets that were committed to film only after first being performed onstage. Later, beginning in 1973, regular fiction film production resumed, but a significant number of the new films were remakes of revolutionary films from before the Cultural Revolution that were updated from black and white to color with minor script changes.

This and the following chapter consider as the main touchstones of cinema of this period, not the artistically intriguing but politically marginalized films mentioned in the preceding paragraph but rather more mainstream hits, such as *The White-Haired Girl* (*Bai mao nü* 白毛女; Shui Hua 水华 and Wang Bin 王滨, 1950) and *The Song of Youth* (*Qing-chun zhi ge* 青春之歌; Cui Wei 崔嵬 and Chen Huakai 陈怀皑, 1959). Of particular interest are two titles that each had three different versions filmed over the course of the Mao era, allowing us to track changes in cinematic aesthetics in films retelling the same stories. This chapter begins to discuss *Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse niangzijun* 红色娘子军), first made as a fiction film directed by Xie Jin in 1960 and released in 1961, then remade during the Cultural Revolution as a revolutionary model ballet film (Pan Wenzhan 潘文展 and Fu Jie 傅杰, 1970), and finally once more as a revolutionary model opera film (Cheng Yin 成荫, 1972). The next chapter considers also *Guerrillas on the Plain* (*Pingyuan youjidui* 平原游击队), which appeared first as a generic war film in 1955 (Su Li 苏里 and Wu Zhaodi 武兆堤) and then reappeared in 1974 as both a revolutionary model opera film (renamed *Fighting on the Plain* [*Pingyuan zuozhan* 平原作战; Cui Wei 崔嵬 and Chen Huai'ai 陈怀皑]) and a color remake of the original fiction film (Wu Zhaodi [again] and Chang Zhenhua 常甄华).

These films provide examples of Chinese revolutionary cinema's countless reiterations of founding, legitimating myths of the PRC as a party-led state, including the Communist insurgency's victory over the semifeudal, semicapitalist social order and the Communist army's victory over the Japanese invaders during World War II. Calling these stories *myths* does not mean they are false; it means that, like the myths promulgated by American westerns as analyzed by Gilberto Perez, these stories have a "rhetorical value" and "social function . . . in shaping the imagination of a people and holding a polity together."² One thing I will try to trace is the complicated relationship between realism and myth, or the ways in which fictionalized historical stories can either reinforce a particular view of reality or sometimes become so obviously rhetorical that their own formal devices become foregrounded at the expense of their ostensible historical referents.

In these chapters, I follow Ban Wang and Jessica Ka Yee Chan in referring to "revolutionary cinema" rather than simply "Mao-era cinema" in recognition that cinema of that period had far greater generic diversity than is often acknowledged.³ For the purposes of this book's tracing of various claims to realism in the history of mainland Chinese cinema, I limit my discussion largely to dramatic films with revolutionary historical stories, leaving aside other genres of this period, such as comedies, ethnic minority films, musicals, traditional opera films, and so on, all of which are equally deserving of close study in other contexts.

Under Communist rule, including in liberated areas, such as Yan'an, during the civil war and the war of resistance against Japan, the official formula for cultural production was variously called *proletarian realism* (in Chinese Communist writings during the civil war), *socialist realism* (for a few years in the 1950s, before the Sino-Soviet split), and finally a *combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism* (a formula first promulgated by Mao in 1958). In practice, the films of the Seventeen Years mostly followed the rules of Eastern bloc socialist realism—which is to say, they employed classical Hollywood narration, often in a melodramatic mode, but with occasional formal flourishes reminiscent of early Soviet montage cinema, all in support of a more explicitly political message than one usually finds in classical Hollywood (though the formula

also was nativized in various ways, such as through the use of Chinese folk music).⁴ Such labels do not suffice to tell us how the cinema of the Seventeen Years worked on the levels of affect and entertainment rather than just ideological education and, most important how these different levels were articulated together and whether they worked together or potentially at cross-purposes.

I reconsider Mao-era cinema partly by reframing its mode of address in a broader way than is suggested by terms like *proletarian realism*, *socialist realism*, or even *combining revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism*. Instead, I categorize these films under the more general term *prescriptive realism* to refer to the intention to represent not only reality as it now appears but an ostensibly truer reality that lies beneath the surface or is yet to be fully realized.⁵ A film in this mode encourages the awareness or realization of that deeper or projected future reality by representing it in an at least somewhat abstracted form. As noted in my introduction of this idea in the introduction, in choosing the term *prescriptive*, I suggest an analogy with what is known in linguistics as prescriptive grammar—which aims to describe how people *should* talk according to the supposed inner logic or “rules” of a language, as opposed to *descriptive* grammar, which describes how people actually *do* talk.

The latter would correspond more to a mode of verisimilar critical or social realism, a style of literature praised by Karl Marx as early as 1854 for its ability to expose the ugly realities of life under bourgeois hegemony.⁶ Such a realism was recognized by Mao in his 1942 “Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art,” when he acknowledged the need to “expose” social ills through realist art.⁷ At the same time, however, social realism potentially abstracts from surface appearances to try to show social reality’s deep structure, as Georg Lukács as well as many Chinese critics argued (as was discussed in chapter 3, particularly in the case of the transitional film *Crows and Sparrows*). This is the moment when a social realist mode begins to become prescriptive, insofar as a formal idea or argument of some kind is emphasized, potentially at the expense of surface-level verisimilitude, and with Mao’s insistence that artists not only “expose” social ills but also “extol” the revolutionary *future* in progress, the narrative mode decisively shifts from verisimilar or descriptive social

realism to prescriptive socialist realism.⁸ It is this hopeful look to the future—the utopian element that is intrinsic to Maoism and Communism more generally—that calls for a prescriptive mode of realism. As Maurice Meisner has written, “utopian conceptions of the world as it should be clash with the world as it is to generate a sense of tension between what Max Weber termed ‘the actually existent and the ideal,’ and at the same time generate a sense of hope for the future.”⁹

FILM STEREOTYPES

I will begin with some analytical concepts that allow for a more rigorous description of the mode of narration and audience address that I am calling prescriptive realism. In particular, we need a more meticulous approach to the study of conventions like character stereotypes and narrative scenarios in Mao-era socialist cinema, because it is through such repeated conventions that prescriptive realism builds a rapport with its audience. For example, in a chapter defining the “classical” paradigm of “pedagogical cinema” in the PRC, Chris Berry identifies “didactic” scenarios—the “meeting scene,” for instance—that are regularly presented to the “pupil-spectator” in that cinema.¹⁰ Berry’s outline of the Mao-era classical paradigm is quite useful, but its use of terms like *didactic*, *pedagogical*, and *pupil-spectator* reinforce what arguably is a frequent overstatement of the difference between classical Hollywood and Mao-era cinema. As Berry himself emphasizes, the Maoist cinema he analyzes presents “a variation on the classical cinematic mode particularly associated with Hollywood during the studio era.”¹¹ Often elided when discussing socialist realism in contrast with Hollywood are not just the degree to which socialist realism borrows from Hollywood but also the extent to which Hollywood or global entertainment cinema itself is what Francesco Casetti has called “a veritable drill ground”—in the sense “that a film somehow indicates the presence of its spectator, that it assigns this spectator a precise place, and finally, that the spectator must complete a genuine trajectory.”¹² Casetti’s language here may evoke the ideological “interpellation” model of by-gone “apparatus” film theory, but his semiotic/narratological approach describes not so much a process of ideological subject formation as an

understanding between filmmaker and spectator based on shared codes. In fact, the seemingly endless repetition, with slight variations, of character stereotypes, narrative scenarios, and story trajectories that may strike a contemporary viewer as didactic in Maoist cinema is really not so formally different from the formulaic nature of Hollywood's genre cinema.

Therefore, in analyzing the way such a cinema addresses the spectator, we need not necessarily resort to theories of propaganda or ideology before first studying the phenomenon with more general tools of film analysis. For that purpose, I return to a work already cited in the introduction and chapter 2, Jörg Schweinitz's *Film and Stereotype*, a study of the way semantic conventions are used in popular cinema. Schweinitz defines *stereotypes* as "conventionalized representational patterns shared and accepted by artists and viewers within a given period."¹³ He compares conventional film stereotypes to linguistic idioms, in that they serve as shortcuts to meaning for a particular community or audience, and refers to the process of conventionalization as "standardization or codification in an intersubjective field," with the implication that "stereotypes form and structure the intersubjective imaginary world of our time."¹⁴ Recalling Perez's assertion, referenced earlier, of cinema's power to uphold the myths that shape people's imagination and hold polities together, it becomes obvious that film conventions or stereotypes are its fundamental tools for building and reinforcing those myths. Needless to say, these include the myths of Communism—hence Vladimir Lenin's famous assertion in 1922 that "of all the arts the most important for us is the cinema" for the purposes of building a Communist society in the new Soviet Union.¹⁵

Schweinitz writes of Western, mostly Hollywood film, but these concepts allow us to reconceive the history of Chinese revolutionary cinema in a way that avoids othering socialist realist cinema as mere propaganda and thus reinforcing the demonization of Maoism in Western discourse on China.¹⁶ His approach instead allows us to conceive of Maoist film stereotypes or conventions not simply as didactic but as facilitating meaning among a particular cultural community in the way that all "classical" cinema has done. As Schweinitz puts it, "the repetition of highly conspicuous forms within a specific narrative context, which is then gradually subsumed by those forms (in the audience's perception)," allows for a more efficient

narration, in that soon “it suffices to only show the conspicuous form, in order to summon the standard context, even in absentia.”¹⁷ This is not so much a technique of propaganda as what Schweinitz calls “a fundamental mechanism of sign formation and language acquisition.”¹⁸ For one quick example, consider the stereotypical landlord character in Mao-era cinema. In countless films of the Seventeen Years—including classics like *The White-Haired Girl*, *Third-Sister Liu* (*Liu sanjie* 刘三姐; Su Li 苏里, 1960), and *The Red Detachment of Women*, to name only a few—the cinematic stereotype of the villainous evil landlord became so well established that such a character alone could signify for audiences the entire system of semicapitalist feudal exploitation in the countryside during the Republican era. Moreover, in what Schweinitz labeled “secondary semantization,” in the post-Mao era, such a character could signify not the historical “reality” of landlord exploitation but instead the very film tradition in which the character stereotype had been established and thereby the Mao era as a whole. Thus a properly costumed “feudal” landlord figure would become an automatically recognizable gag in parodic films like *The Troubleshooters* (*Wanzhu* 顽主, or literally *Masters of Mischief*; Mi Jiashan 米家山, 1988) or *Party A, Party B* (*Jiafang yifang* 甲方乙方, aka *Dream Factory*; Feng Xiaogang 冯小刚, 1997). The character types in Maoist cinema thus function in the same way as, for example, the stereotype of the scrappy female newspaper reporter in a 1930s Hollywood screwball comedy, the development of which Schweinitz traces in one of his chapters. Such a character not only quickly became a Hollywood cliché that signified in shorthand a host of ideas relating to changing gender roles and social cynicism under capitalist urban modernity; it also became available to much later filmmakers to cite in parodic fashion and thereby signify the whole ethos of classical Hollywood in the early sound period.¹⁹

FROM REVOLUTIONARY REALISM TO REVOLUTIONARY ROMANTICISM: MAOIST MELODRAMA

How can Communist art and literature actually reach and inspire the potentially revolutionary masses? One of the first Chinese cultural critics to consider this question was Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白, an early Communist

partisan who had studied Marxism with Li Dazhao 李大钊 and a young Mao Zedong at Beijing University in the early 1920s, before spending time in Moscow and serving briefly in the late 1920s as chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In a series of essays in the early 1930s, while he was a leader of the Shanghai League of Left-Wing Writers, Qu identified a problematic gap between the ostensibly progressive literature being written by the May Fourth generation of intellectuals, on one hand, and the masses of laboring people who should be carrying out the revolution, on the other. In 1932 he argued that “the May Fourth New Culture Movement has had almost no impact on the masses,” partly because the vernacular literature movement favored a form of Westernized Chinese writing that was not intelligible to ordinary Chinese people.²⁰ In fact, Qu believed that even “traditional” Chinese vernacular literature was a better stylistic model for revolutionary writers, because it was at least comprehensible and enjoyable to the Chinese masses when read aloud. Qu concluded that “revolutionary popular literature and art must begin by utilizing the strong points of traditional forms—things the people are accustomed to reading or viewing such as fiction, lyrics or drama—gradually adding new ingredients and cultivating new habits among the people, so that by working together with the people the level of art will be raised.”²¹ Ten years later, Mao’s famous 1942 “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art,” which laid out the theories of correct Communist cultural practice that would guide China for decades to come, directly addressed the tension between the artists’ and intellectuals’ desires to “raise standards” of artistic excellence in China and the question of “popularization,” or reaching the masses. He firmly gave priority to the latter, arguing by means of the vivid metaphor of lifting a bucket of water: “Where is it to be raised from if not the ground? From mid-air?”²² Making art according to the standards of petit bourgeois intellectuals would be the equivalent of trying to raise a bucket from midair; only by beginning with the tastes of workers, peasants, and soldiers could the bucket be raised from where it is, on the ground.

Here we find one obvious reason why ostensibly realist art might deploy forms ranging from Chinese folk singing to cinematic melodrama: those forms were already popular with the masses. It also shows, however,

that a new vision of realism, heavily indebted to the theories of socialist realism that were consolidated in the USSR in the early 1930s, was being very self-consciously developed and promoted by Chinese leftists in the 1930s and 1940s. In an essay from 1936, the Communist literary theorist and future vice-minister of culture Zhou Yang 周扬 followed Maxim Gorky in calling nineteenth-century literary realism “critical realism” and contrasting this “old-style realism” with a “new realism” that in fact finds a deeper, truer “reality.” Zhou called on this new realism to avoid “sinking intoxicated into the minutiae of ‘microscopic realism’”—that is, pursuing a bourgeois naturalism that merely empirically observes the present reality. Instead, artists should be “remolding themselves” and “moving towards reality’s future.”²³ This key diachronic move gives artists possessed of the “correct” knowledge of the objective laws of history—meaning, according to Marxist orthodoxy, the inexorable progress toward a Communist utopia—authorization to supplement in their artworks the objective reality of the present with the projected reality of the future. Second, in a synchronic sense, Zhou argued that artists must go beyond the surface of reality to uncover its underlying truths: “On the surface, all objective phenomena appear jumbled and difficult to fathom. Only by penetrating their outer layer and probing to the very heart of objective reality can we temper and substantiate our subjectivity, and only then will we acquire the ability to grasp the ordered nature of objectivity.”²⁴ In sum, artists must not just reflect the world they perceive immediately around them but grasp both “reality’s essence” and “its direction and future prospects,” and this is how the “new” realism would distinguish itself from the “old” realism.²⁵ In his “Talks at the Yan’an Forum” six years later, Mao referred to the “new realism” as “proletarian realism,” but it clearly amounted to the Chinese version of socialist realism—the model of artistic production that had been promulgated as the official line in the Soviet Union beginning in 1933. When a new edition of Mao’s talks at Yan’an was published in 1953 after the establishment of the PRC, the term “proletarian realism” was in fact changed to “socialist realism,” and, as mentioned earlier, that appellation was favored for five years, until it was supplanted by the formula of “combining revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism.”

Whatever it is called, how did the new prescriptive form of realism advocated by the CCP differ on a textual level from the critical realism of, for example, the progressive films of the Republican era? As a quick example of the new aesthetic, let us consider a sequence in the 1950 film *The White-Haired Girl*, based on the popular revolutionary play about oppressed peasants who eventually rise up against their landlord with the aid of the Communist army. In this sequence, the young peasant Wang Dachun, his fiancée having been enslaved and raped by their evil landlord, flees across the Yellow River to the Communist-controlled region of Shanxi with the intention of joining the Red Army. Although the film contains elements of descriptive social realism in a general sense—it includes, for example, a number of what would later be called “middle characters” (characters who are not depicted unfavorably but also are not heroic—that is, believably ordinary people)—there is nonetheless much evidence of what separates the new prescriptive realism from the preceding aesthetic of social realism. The Communist guerrilla soldiers who Wang Dachun finds at the top of the river bluff are subtly idealized—dressed in what appear to be brand-new, sparkling clean uniforms and shot in a low-angle composition in which they loom heroically against the sky in the manner of Soviet cinema of the time. Most notable of all in terms of film style is a dissolve to an extradiegetic shot of the Communist flag to drive home the ideological import of Wang Dachun’s union, and, by implication, that of the Chinese peasantry in general, with the Red Army. With this flag montage, the film veers briefly but obviously from any semblance of realism toward something more like formalism, as the viewer’s diegetic immersion is at least partially disrupted by the self-consciousness of the film’s political rhetoric as manifested in the nondiegetic, ideologically encumbered insertion of the flag.

Finally, with another dissolve from the flag to the last shot of the sequence (Figure 18), we apparently leap into the future to see that Wang Dachun has joined the ranks of the heroic Red Army soldiers. He is now also framed valiantly against the sky, and in his look to the horizon, we can even detect an early form of what Stephanie Donald has labeled the “socialist realist gaze.” Tracing the history of this gaze to the countless images in Soviet cinema of “faces staring exultantly off screen,” Donald



FIGURE 18. Wang Dachun as a Communist soldier in *The White-Haired Girl* (1950).

argues that “in these shots the romanticism of socialist realism is very clear. The gaze off screen is a fixed stare out to a horizon, beyond the diegetic world, and apparently also beyond the world of the audience.”²⁶ She describes this gaze as “quintessentially anti-individual,” belonging either to great leaders or to “representatives of collective action”—as Wang Dachun becomes in this film when, for example, he finally returns to his home village and helps to administer Communist rent reforms and struggle sessions against the landlord class.²⁷

Zhou and Mao would not have quibbled with Donald’s discovery of a romanticist element in socialist realism. In fact, even in its original Soviet formulation in the early 1930s, Andrei Zhdanov and Gorky had inscribed what already had been labeled “revolutionary romanticism” into the socialist realist formula.²⁸ As early as 1933, Zhou himself had published an article titled “On ‘Socialist Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism’” in the Shanghai modernist periodical *Les Contemporains*.²⁹ At the All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, Zhdanov declared that “our literature, which stands with both feet firmly planted on a material basis,

cannot be hostile to romanticism, but it must be a romanticism of a new type, revolutionary romanticism”—thus already implying that socialist realism would be precisely a combination of realism (“with both feet firmly planted on the basis of real life”) and romanticism.³⁰ Gorky as well wrote that while the basic method of realism was “to extract from the totality of real existence its basic idea and to embody this in an image,” “if to the idea extracted from the real we add the desirable and the potential and if the image is thereby supplemented, we obtain that romanticism which lies at the basis of myth and which is very useful in that it facilitates the arousing of a revolutionary attitude towards reality.”³¹ Indeed, the Soviet discourse of “revolutionary romanticism” that in 1934 got incorporated into the official formulation of “socialist realism” had already made an impact on Chinese filmmakers before that time; Yizhong Gu notes that by 1932, Sun Yu, possibly the greatest Chinese director of the 1930s, “regarded revolutionary romanticism as his major artistic principle” after having read about Gorky’s ideas on the topic.³²

Two years after the 1934 Soviet Writers’ Congress, Zhou argued that “in the history of literature, realism has generally been understood as the opposite of romanticism. This distinction is rigid and inaccurate. In fact, these two currents often intertwine, permeate each other, even fuse together.”³³ As for the Chinese-style socialist realism he was now attempting to formulate, Zhou wrote that “the new realism not only does not reject romanticism but in fact requires it as one of its intrinsic elements.”³⁴ Zhou closely followed the lead of Zhdanov and Gorky when he asserted that romanticism gives a narrative the power of myth necessary to inspire readers and audiences to achieve the future utopian reality indicated by the revolutionary realist work of art; that is, the romanticist element helps make its realism *prescriptive*. The embrace of romanticism, therefore, was inseparable from the call for the new realism both to project the present into the revolutionary future and to pierce the surface of reality to reveal its underlying essence. As Mao put it in his talks at Yan’an, people need art in addition to their everyday lives precisely because, “although both are beautiful, life as reflected in works of literature and art can and ought to be on a higher plane, more intense, more concentrated, more typical, nearer the ideal, and therefore more universal than actual everyday life.”³⁵

Sixteen years later, in 1958, at the launch of the Great Leap Forward, Mao made this romanticist element explicit with the further shift in official terminology from “socialist realism” to “combining revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism.”

In practice revolutionary romanticism contained a strong element of melodrama. This is not at all surprising when one considers how closely the role of melodrama in the West had in fact anticipated the truth function of socialist art as defined by the critics mentioned earlier in both the USSR and China. In his classic study of Western melodrama, Peter Brooks described its subject as “the true wrested from the real”; that is, the melodramatic work tries “to go beyond the surface of the real to the truer, hidden reality.”³⁶ What Brooks labeled the “moral occult”—or “the domain of operative spiritual values which is both indicated within and masked by the surface of reality” and which melodrama serves to locate and articulate—is a place taken in Mao-era art by the moral universe of class struggle, including both the horrible suffering of the masses and their eventual, inevitable victory over the forces of oppression through the leadership of the Communist Party.³⁷

If revolutionary romanticism, and the melodrama that it employs, sought to wrest the true from the real, it is not surprising that, in terms of film aesthetics, socialist realism in general could regularly depart from what we normally think of as cinematic realism to indulge briefly in formalism, particularly in its most ideologically loaded “epiphanic” moments aimed at driving home a higher, more abstract truth. That is, referring back to the preceding quotation of Mao, taking a film’s story from “actual everyday life” to a “higher plane, more intense, more concentrated, more typical, nearer the ideal,” often was accomplished through some foregrounded cinematic technique that clearly marked an abstraction from everyday reality. Two common instances of this are what we have already seen in the sequence from *The White-Haired Girl*: montage insertions of extradiegetic ideological symbols and the socialist realist gaze itself, the representation of which became increasingly stylized during the cinematic history of the Mao era (a point taken up again in the next chapter).

More examples of these are found in one of the cinematic masterpieces of revolutionary romanticism, the previously mentioned epic three-hour

film *The Song of Youth*, adapted in 1959 from the wildly popular novel by Yang Mo 杨沫. The story is a bildungsroman set in the Republican era in which the female protagonist, Lin Daojing, goes from being a lonely and suicidally depressed intellectual to eventually joining the Communist Party and helping to lead mass protest rallies against the Japanese incursion into Manchuria. The plot follows closely the narrative arc that Katerina Clark has described in the case of Soviet fiction, in which the protagonist typically progresses from a state of “spontaneity” to one of “consciousness” as he is guided by paternalistic elders within the Communist Party.³⁸ In the early stages of this progression, the protagonist may instinctively identify with the struggles of the proletariat or peasant, but he must learn the truths of Marxism-Leninism before bringing those tendencies to fruition in full awareness of the laws of historical materialism.

In *The Song of Youth*, this coming to consciousness of the heroine is evident, for example, in a shot in the film’s penultimate sequence, in which Lin Daojing—having undergone such trials as working for Communist sleeper cells in Beijing, helping to organize peasants in the countryside, and being imprisoned and tortured by the Nationalists for her activities—has, through her personal sacrifice and tireless learning from her Communist mentors, finally applied and been admitted as a party member, meriting an initiation ceremony filmed as a moment of near rapture (Figure 19). Chris Berry follows Ma Ning in labeling this kind of shot “epiphanic.”³⁹ An epiphanic shot usually occurs at the end of a scene and consists of a moment in which the character or characters on-screen suddenly become stationary and silent as a significant meaning, usually with strong ideological import, is meant to dawn on the audience through the characters’ frozen poses and expressions. Berry lists the epiphanic shot as one instance of what he calls “heightened engagement” of the “pupil-spectator,” moments that “simultaneously enhance identification with character emotions and thoughts and, by virtue of their very heightening quality, draw attention to themselves and so promote conscious reflection on the part of the pupil-spectator.”⁴⁰ Here again, the terminology emphasizes the difference of “didactic” Maoist classical cinema with merely entertaining classical cinema from the West (which is driven, as Berry notes, primarily by the profit motive).⁴¹ However, in his study of



FIGURE 19. Lin Daojing at a party initiation ceremony in *The Song of Youth* (1959).

emotion in American film, Carl Plantinga similarly identifies “elevation” as a type of emotion often evoked by Hollywood, particularly at climactic moments. (This was discussed in chapter 2 in the context of *Street Angel*.) Following psychologist Jonathan Haidt, Plantinga defines *elevation* as “the opposite of social disgust, triggered by the witnessing of acts of human beauty or virtue” and drawing its “power from a desire for moral betterment.”⁴² The epiphanic shot in Chinese socialist realist cinema would seem to be a particular convention used to generate such moments of “elevation.” In Plantinga’s view, “elevation quite aptly describes the sort of emotional response generated by many narratives of the melodramatic variety,” so it is not surprising that epiphanic shots aiming for an affect of elevation would characterize moments of revolutionary romanticism in Mao-era films.⁴³

Clearly what Stephanie Donald calls the socialist realist gaze is an example of the epiphanic shot described by Berry and Ma, and the shot of Lin Daojing at the end of her party induction ceremony is an exemplary instance of both. The shot begins with her looking almost directly to the

camera, which, through the editing pattern already set up, we interpret as a look directed at the cadre performing the ceremony. As the shot progresses, Lin slowly and steadily turns her head and redirects her gaze to a seemingly transcendent off-screen space. As Jessica Ka Yee Chan has detailed with reference to notes from the filmmakers, to appear actually to be seeing the ideological truths relayed by the socialist realist gaze, Xie Fang 谢芳, the actor playing Lin Daojing, reported that in performing the shot, she made herself think of fantastical images of red flags, a rainbow, a golden gate, and the congratulatory visages of her character's fictional mentors in the film so that her gaze would not appear "blank."⁴⁴ Her efforts in performing such a moment are not surprising, because the socialist realist gaze paradoxically must have no clear diegetic object while also seeming to behold a resplendent Truth. In fact, Lin's induction into the party apparently *empowers her with* this gaze, indicating to spectators her ability to perceive sublime ideological truths to which they have only secondary access through imaginary identification with her character. With this moment that relays our gaze through her own, attaching our desire to her visual possession of a transcendent off-screen ideological space, the narrative pauses to allow for maximum emotional and rhetorical impact. As Stephanie Donald puts it, "the socialist-realist gaze freezes the narrative while producing for the narration a sublime and completely bogus moment of completion. Present, past, and future lock together on screen and off in a moment of ecstatic communion."⁴⁵ The account of such a gaze "freezing" the narrative is similar to Berry's description of the epiphanic shot as "frozen," thus allowing the viewer a moment to fully grasp and appreciate the deeper ideological lesson at such a narrative high point.⁴⁶ (The next chapter has much more to say about the effects of depicting ideological consummation through "frozen" shots.)

Although the socialist realist gaze suggests an ideological truth to which the spectator has only secondary access through the heroic character's off-screen look, we have already seen, in the case of *The White-Haired Girl*, that a somewhat discontinuous cutaway to a seemingly nondiegetic object is one possibility in Mao-era prescriptive realism. In that case, the film cut from a waving Communist flag to Wang Dachun as a new recruit of the Communist army, seemingly looking intently at a distant horizon.



A



B

FIGURE 20. *a*, Flag cutaway and, *b*, Lin Daojing's gaze in *The Song of Youth* (1959).

Although the flag makes no literal claim to having been in the same setting as Wang Dachun but rather fills the screen for a purely symbolic purpose, it nonetheless appears rhetorically as a kind of reverse eyeline match, in that it represents the ideal on which the peasant-turned-revolutionary-soldier is now fixated. The induction scene in *Song of Youth* has a similar and even more direct false eyeline match: Lin Daojing's gaze after taking her party oath is followed by a cutaway to a Communist flag (Figure 20a), which is further sutured into the narrative by a cut back to Lin's frozen gaze, now in extreme close-up (Figure 20b). Although a flag might normally be present at a party swearing-in ceremony, the flag in this shot is unfurled and flapping dramatically in a wind that could not exist in the room in which Lin is standing. This gives it a clear nondiegetic quality similar to the flag cutaway in *The White-Haired Girl*, making it more a rhetorical insert than an actual prop in the story.⁴⁷

The flag functions as a powerful metonym to attach both the character and the viewer to the Communist movement through one of its core signifiers in a way that momentarily halts the progression of the narrative to indulge in a moment of ideological epiphany; the formalist film language of revolutionary romanticism thus produces an underlying Truth that an aesthetic of social realism could not achieve. In chapter 2, we saw how some Chinese films of the 1930s Left-Wing Film Movement, while engaging in both Hollywood-style entertainment and harsh critical realism, also gestured toward a seemingly inaccessible revolutionary *real* indirectly—or, as I put it, apophatically—not giving it any kind of positive configuration. In Mao-era prescriptive realism, such an ideal is no longer represented indirectly by an absence but rather is invoked and imbued with affect more concretely, as when the socialist realist gaze is supplemented by the cutaway to a flag. At the same time, insertions of such symbolically laden images at moments of epiphany or elevation also have their own apophatic or indirect quality, insofar as the motifs function in a fetishistic manner, standing in for something still impossible to present directly and fully, the transcendent Truth available only to the party (which itself has a fetishistic function insofar as it claims to be the very embodiment of the will of the people—the workers, peasants, and soldiers)—or, by the time of the Cultural Revolution, in a sense available fully only to Mao himself.⁴⁸

Epiphanic moments like the socialist realist gaze rely on audiences investing fully in their semantic power. Donald shows how the socialist realist gaze need only be displaced to a different historical moment and tweaked slightly in its representation to suddenly appear “powerfully ironic,” revealing that its sense of sublime completion all along was “bogus.”⁴⁹ In Schweinitz’s terms, such film stereotypes can easily be “derealized” and satirized by later film audiences who recognize them as clichés. In their time, though, how did these films accumulate affective force sufficient to power such moments of ecstatic ideological communion in a way the audience would accept? One way that has been suggested is through the dynamics of sublimation, in which libidinal or romantic impulses are awakened only to have their energy channeled into revolutionary zeal.

SUBLIMATION: GENRE, SEX, AND DEATH

A key way that Mao-era films differed from classical Hollywood, at least according to conventional historiographical wisdom and a certain strain of post-Mao feminist scholarship, was in their relative suppression of romantic love as a central plot element and an accompanying denial of both gender difference and sexuality. It is precisely the ostensible *replacement* of private libidinal desire with the appeal of a revolutionary sublime, to which Communist film protagonists directed their longing, that has led to a conception of revolutionary narration as a process of sublimation. To my knowledge, in the study of Chinese revolutionary cinema, the sublimation thesis was first advanced by Chris Berry in his analysis of the Republican-era classic *Big Road* (*Da lu* 大路; Sun Yu, 1934), which, in Berry’s reading, “attempts to arouse revolutionary ardor by the arousal of libidinal drives and their redirection towards the object of revolution.”⁵⁰ Later, Ban Wang developed the sublimation thesis with a view to explaining how Mao-era revolutionary films provided pleasure for spectators:

Far from repressing the individual’s psychic and emotional energy in a puritanical fashion, Communism is quite inclined to display it—with a political sleight of hand. It recycles the energy, as if it were waste products or superfluous material lying outside the purposive march of history, by

rechanneling it into transforming the old and making the new individual. This method launches individuals on the way to a more passionate and often ecstatic state of mind and experience.⁵¹

Consequently, argues Wang, “an intense emotional exuberance marks Communist culture,” and instead of seeing the sublimation process as “the dreaded ‘collectivization of the self’” of Cold War caricature, we should acknowledge that in revolutionary films of the Mao era (as no doubt was the case for many in the revolution itself), it is precisely through collective action that the individual finds the greatest meaning and fulfillment.⁵²

One of Wang’s primary examples is the aforementioned transformation of the heroine of *Song of Youth*, Lin Daojing, from lonely and depressed young woman to Communist Party member fully and exuberantly engaged in the mass opposition to Japanese imperialism. Along the way, she experiences a number of potential or actual romantic attachments but ends up committed first and foremost to the revolutionary struggle itself.⁵³ In the film’s finale, occurring just after her party induction imbues her with the socialist realist gaze, Daojing helps to lead an anti-Japanese protest march in 1935, bravely persevering in the face of police swords and water hoses. The exciting sequence conveys not only the revolutionary potential of the masses but, just as importantly, the deep personal fulfillment that she has gained by joining the collective struggle; Communism has brought her happiness as well as purpose.

The libidinal sublimation that, according to Wang, facilitates both aesthetic pleasure and ideological messaging in these films often plays out by way of an implied romance between the protagonist and an attractive Communist who acts as a mentor. Both *Song of Youth* and *Red Detachment of Women* follow this pattern: in the former, Daojing develops emotional attachments to a series of Communist Party members, two of whom become martyrs in the course of the film; in the latter, the slave-girl-turned-revolutionary Wu Qionghua is romantically linked, albeit only implicitly, with the Communist Party commissar in the Women’s Detachment, Hong Changqing, the handsome young cadre who liberates her from bondage and teaches her about Marxist revolution. In both cases, the shift in the object of cathexis suggested by the sublimation thesis, from another person as sexual/romantic object to the party as sublime object, is facilitated



FIGURE 21. Lin Daojing returning home at dawn in *The Song of Youth* (1959).

by the depiction of party members as robustly attractive, physically and socially, and the eroticization of the party by means of these characters is often surprisingly direct.

An example of this dynamic in *Song of Youth* comes when Daojing's husband mistakenly accuses her of adultery. The husband, Yu Yongze, depicted as a student of the reform-minded scholar Hu Shi 胡适 (who would be villainized under Communism), had seduced her with his liberal-bourgeois romantic outlook after saving her from her suicide attempt in the film's opening sequence. However, during their marriage in Beijing, she becomes increasingly disenchanted by his lack of revolutionary consciousness while being drawn to Lu Jiachuan, the handsome cadre who first teaches her about Marxism-Leninism. One night, Daojing daringly stays out all night posting Communist agitprop fliers while disguised as a bourgeois "new woman" of the jazz age out for a night on the town—dressed in a fashionable cheongsam accessorized with jewelry and high heels. When she returns home in the morning thus attired—and with a glow of sated pleasure about her as well (Figure 21)—her husband flies

into a jealous rage and accuses her of having an affair. On the denotative level, of course, his accusation is false and only serves to increase the distance between them and accentuate his own lack of understanding of the revolutionary cause to which she has committed herself. The real problem with his accusation, however, is of course not that it is false but rather that it is absolutely *true* at a deeper level: Daojing has been swept away by the party, which, by way of its attractive representative Jiachuan, has completely replaced Yongze as the object of Daojing's desire.

This, then, is the sublimation thesis, which these revolutionary films basically bear out in their overall narrative trajectories: structured as revolutionary bildungsromans, the films trace their protagonists' progression from ideological ignorance to enlightenment by means of an attractive Communist Party member whose charm is coded at least partially as heteroromantic. The romantic relationships are not consummated, however, and by the end of the film, it is the heroine's passionate commitment to revolution that is highlighted. If sexuality or romantic love is thereby sublimated, it is nonetheless worth analyzing what specific conventions present it for the purposes of sublimation in the first place, as that will lead us to yet another way in which Maoist films of the Seventeen Years vary less from the classical Hollywood model than we might have thought. In fact, not only is sublimation achieved in part through the deployment of classical Hollywood conventions but, insofar as those make their appearance, the repressed actually returns, or rather turns out never to have been effaced in the first place—or at least to have been so in a way that is different from Hollywood only in degree rather than in kind.

In sum, the ostensibly repressed theme of romantic love can only be sublimated if it is at first made present, which is done in the form of narrative conventions—classical Hollywood stereotypes that are borrowed but then ultimately belied by the overall narrative of the film. In this analysis, sublimation is not conceived only in terms of drives or desires within the libidinal economy of the films' fictional protagonists (a character desires sex but settles instead for revolution), nor in terms of similar desires in the viewing audience, for whom the film functions as dream work or fantasy to structure desire through a narrative vector (a spectator hopes to see sexualized romance but settles instead for political victory). We can only

speculate about those effects if the ostensibly sublimated libidinal content is “there” in the first place, and film conventions make it so. Narrative elements from previous modes of filmmaking—elements that formerly had served as textual dominants in heteronormative Hollywood romance conventions—appear in the new context as visual subtexts destined to be ultimately suppressed within the new narrative system, which (and this is, of course, key to the sublimation dynamic) does not simply obliterate them but rather steers their affective power to its own ends.

Song of Youth and *Red Detachment of Women* both redirect conventions of classical Hollywood romance through scenes that, in the script at least, seem to be all about the growing bond between the female protagonist and the Communist cause but, in the visual elements of their mise-en-scène and editing patterns, unmistakably deploy classical Hollywood conventions for depicting heteronormative romance. For example, in *Red Detachment*, when now woman-soldier Qionghua reunites after a period of separation with Changqing, the cadre who had saved her from slavery, the scene may be read as the growing comradeship between an aspiring Communist Party member and her mentor, but the use of shot/reverse-shot editing, close-ups, and nonverbal performance cues leads us to a much more personal conclusion. The first romantic cue in the scene is the speed and excitement with which Qionghua and Changqing rush to seize this unexpected opportunity to share a moment together when they encounter each other on a country road. When they come face-to-face, their expressions and body language even suggest that it is with some restraint that they *only* salute and take each other’s hand in greeting. She smiles bashfully when he suggests they sit down to talk away from the others and chivalrously relieves her of her backpack. As the scene progresses, with Qionghua reminiscing about the last time they had been at the same location, when he had liberated her from slavery and directed her toward the women’s revolutionary unit, the editing pattern hews closely to classical Hollywood depictions of romantic couples. The camera tracks in from a two-shot of both of them (Figure 22a) to a close-up of Qionghua abashedly describing her initial feelings of suspicion and hatred for Changqing (in disguise as a rich capitalist at the time)—and, by implication, how much they have changed. She directs a broad smile at him (Figure 22b), and Changqing



A



B

FIGURE 22. Amorous reunion of Wu Qionghua and Hong Changqing in *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961), from, *a*, two-shot of both to, *b*, close-up of Qionghua, *c*, reverse close-up of Changqing, and, *d*, two-shot with a look of love.



C



D

smiles just as warmly back at her in a reverse-shot close-up (Figures 22). This cuts back to a medium shot of both of them as Qionghua continues her narrative of her changed feelings, without explicitly stating the end result but just concluding with “But it’s really, it’s really interesting.” She does not say precisely *what* is so interesting, and there really is no need to, because her following smile says it all: this, by all appearances, is a woman in love (Figure 22d). A brief ellipsis and wipe cut bring us to the same couple now walking together on a bridge, and the next line of dialogue is again Qionghua, now saying, “There’s something I hardly dare to tell you,” a line that could easily be interpreted as a dialogue hook continuing from her observation of how “interesting” her feelings for Changqing had become, but after he encourages her to tell him what is on her mind, she instead offers a rough plan for her to personally assassinate her hated enemy, the landlord Nan Batian. Thus, despite the strong intimations of romantic love in the shots just moments earlier, Qionghua herself leads the process of sublimation by moving on to the topic of the class enemy whom they both hate. The lesson in sublimation is made explicit when Changqing critiques Qionghua’s plan and seizes the chance to deliver, in the immediately following scene, what amounts to a lecture on the necessity of sacrificing personal desires to the larger struggle—although in this case, what is to be sacrificed is the desire for personal vengeance.

To position the chance reencounter of Qionghua and Changqing, including the sexual tension implicit in it, vis-à-vis the classical Hollywood model from which it seems to draw its visual language, we can compare briefly a similar scene in the roughly contemporaneous Hollywood film *The Bravados* (Henry King, 1958), a western starring Gregory Peck as a man who shows up as a stranger in a small American town near the Mexican border. As he checks himself into the local hotel, a woman (played by Joan Collins) suddenly appears and greets him warmly. They are, it turns out, former lovers now separated for four years, and the restraint with which she (only) shakes hands with him upon this unexpected meeting is similar to that of the reunited Qionghua and Changqing. Like the latter couple, they immediately take the opportunity to sit and have a brief conversation to get reacquainted, a conversation that includes reminiscences about their previous time together. The editing goes from a long shot of the

two entering the hotel's saloon and sitting down to a medium two-shot of the couple to medium close-ups of each in a shot/reverse shot pattern as they continue talking, then back to the medium two-shot. The body language and facial expressions of the woman in particular show the same kind of bridled affection for the man that Qionghua seems to have for Changqing in *Red Detachment*, but, like the Chinese couple, the American one will end their conversation after a few minutes and suppress, for the moment at least, any lingering romantic longing for each other. In other words, even in the Hollywood film, the sexual romance is suppressed in the content of their conversation but conveyed mainly by visual conventions. The difference is that the same couple in *The Bravados* will end the film united into a family unit, whereas Qionghua's apparent yearning for Changqing will of course be thoroughly sublimated to her devotion to the broader Communist cause. Still, even with this example, we see that the differences between the two are not as stark as the stereotypical notions of Hollywood's ostensible sexual forwardness versus puritanical Communist sublimation would imply.

Similar examples of barely sublimated cinematic conventions of romance occur in *Song of Youth*. Most notable is the scene immediately preceding the party initiation ceremony scene described earlier. Daojing, the protagonist, meets with Jiang Hua, the last in the series of party mentors in her story and someone who appears to be a potential romantic partner (and in fact *is* in the popular novel on which the film was based).⁵⁴ They row a boat on Beijing's famous Beihai Lake in a quintessentially romantic setting—whether the precedent is traditional Chinese drama and fiction, in which the garden often serves as the site of a romantic liaison, or Hollywood, where a couple on a rowboat floating among the weeping willows is a long-standing trope.⁵⁵ In the scene in *Song of Youth*, here again the editing pattern—from establishing shot (Figure 23a) to shot/reverse shot (Figures 23b and 23c)—the framing (ever closer as the scene progresses), and the performances (shy smiling and sharing of intimate moments) closely follow the conventions of Hollywood romance. In fact, reading the scene only visually and out of context, one would guess that the gentle yet confident man is finally making a marriage proposal to the shy yet overjoyed woman, the scene ending with a close-up of her happy



A



B

FIGURE 23. Lin Daojing and Jiang Hua meeting on Beihai Lake in *The Song of Youth* (1959): *a*, establishing shot; *b*, shot and, *c*, reverse shot; and, *d*, close-up of Daojing's tears of joy.



C



D

smile and a tear of pleasure in her eye (Figure 23d).⁵⁶ The impression would seem to be borne out by the cut to the following scene, in which Daojing stands next to Jiang Hua to make a solemn oath. Of course, this visual reading is belied by the actual film script: what really has played out on the lake is that Jiang Hua informed her that she was at long last being admitted to the Communist Party, the following scene being the induction ceremony discussed earlier.

Here again, then, the genre conventions of Hollywood romance are deployed in a way that would seem to facilitate sublimation. Given that the implied romances do not actually occur, the conventions of classical Hollywood romance appear here as a kind of generic residue—leftovers from an earlier mode of narration that survive because Chinese cinematic “revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism,” like the broader category of transnational socialist realism of which it is a variety, is in fact highly dependent on classical Hollywood narration in its stylistic details. At the same time, it is precisely *through* these generic signifiers of Hollywood-style romance, though now apparently loosened from their original signifieds (modern heteronormative love), that sublimation is carried out on the textual level, with the romantic genre cues now redirected toward the Communist cause rather than a sexual pairing of characters (thus constituting a specific example of the “political sleight of hand” described by Ban Wang in the passage quoted earlier). The sublimation thesis thus holds that spectators cued by conventions to invest their desire in romantic love through identification with characters have their cathexis gingerly shifted from the sexual bond to the political, in theory losing little of its libidinal intensity.

Yet, if this is how the sublimation process plays out through the details of cinematic narration, we may speculate whether contemporary audiences necessarily experienced the films this way. Did the political meanings inscribed in the film scripts in the end necessarily thoroughly sublimate the romantic implications of the Hollywood conventions deployed? Might audiences not have consciously and fully enjoyed a sort of alternative narrative provided by the visual text, without necessarily having that pleasure rechanneled into the political cathexis? As John Mullankey puts it, “the art of cinema involves a fabulation of images, a narrative of images

that may well (indeed, will) ‘thwart’ the textual narrative, interrupting it, contradicting it.”⁵⁷ In fact, it is a privileging of the written script over the visual text that would create an opening for post-socialist realist filmmakers of the early reform era—particularly Fifth Generation innovators in the 1980s, such as Chen Kaige 陈凯歌 and Zhang Yimou 张艺谋—to surreptitiously subvert revolutionary film conventions just by virtue of tweaking the imagery in various subtle ways, while using scripts that were relatively uncontroversial (a phenomenon considered in chapter 6).⁵⁸ In the case of the revolutionary films examined here, we can and should analyze the textual practices through which the sublimation process was mapped out, but we also should recognize the possibility that audiences may have enjoyed reading the visual cues of Hollywood romance according to their “original,” unsublimated meanings and taken pleasure in the implied love stories featuring attractive actors, whether or not the political meanings had much effect on them. Indeed, in the form of visual conventions and genre cues, the “repressed” libidinal content turns out not so much to return as to have remained there on the surface all along.

And yet, we should perhaps also be wary of stopping at this alternative reading, in which the sublimation process is potentially unsuccessful and the implicit “original” libidinal meaning subverts the political master narrative that is supposed to subdue and sublimate it. The idea of audiences reading the visual texts against the grain of the more didactically political screenplays, producing a “subversive” reading in which Hollywood triumphs after all and libido is not repressed by politics, may seem academically appealing for its deconstructive virtue, but it also arguably bolsters a facile Western liberal fantasy of oppressed subjects under Communism yearning to be free and thus undertaking whatever furtive acts of individual rebellion are available to them. Films in the revolutionary *bildungsroman* genre we have examined here undoubtedly place a priority on the narratives of political awakening rather than romantic love, yet it is far from true that romantic sexual love is absent in these films, and even less in many other films that represent other genres of the Seventeen Years. Not only could romantic love be evident in performances in ways not reflected in the screenplay—Zhu Xijuan 祝希娟, the actor playing Qionghua in *Red Detachment of Women*, has stated

that she saw her character as having fallen in love with Changqing, for example—but aside from the moments of sublimated romance analyzed earlier, there are other instances of straightforward love and marriage in the same films.⁵⁹ In *Red Detachment*, Qionghua's best friend, with whom she flees the Nationalist area to join the Red Army, is thereby able to consummate a marriage of choice with her childhood sweetheart, and by the end of the film, the two have had a baby, all of which—the romance, the wedding, the childbirth—are foregrounded by the film and celebrated as among the fruits of liberation. Many other films of the time featured romance as a dominant narrative strain, with political messages bolstering the romance rather than the other way around. This is true not simply of a minority comedy musical romance like *Five Golden Flowers* (*Wu duo jinhua* 五朵金花; Wang Jiayi 王家乙, 1959) but also of Xie Jin's earlier dramatic film *Woman Basketball Player No. 5* (*Nü lan wuhao* 女篮五号; 1957).

One final necessary qualification regarding the sublimation thesis comes from the fact that the elliptical presentation of sexual love in these films is really only an extension or exaggeration of the discretion shown by classical Hollywood itself. As was mentioned in the last chapter, in her study *Screening Sex*, Linda Williams details how in Hollywood's golden age, the sexual act was *only* represented indirectly, for example, by a kiss followed by a telling ellipsis.⁶⁰ In this sense, the repression of the libidinal drive and its representation only through coy subterfuge is not so much a corruption of Hollywood codes by the political demands of the socialist realist aesthetic as it is a continuation of Hollywood's own practices, but now in the service of making revolution rather than making money. This brings us back to the point that prescriptive realism is not limited to socialist realist cinemas; in countless Hollywood action thrillers or superhero films, a heterosexual romance subplot adds a deeper affective investment to the mission that constitutes the main plot of the film, in which heroic deeds serve to model ideal moral behavior and often are rewarded in part by romantic union.

The difference in the revolutionary films we are examining is that the happiness of romantic coupling is generally reserved for secondary characters; the main characters usually fully sublimate any romantic longings they had into the revolutionary cause itself. Indeed, the depth

of their commitment often is demonstrated by a more extreme form of sublimation: the heroes' sacrifice of their bodies or even life itself to the revolutionary cause. It is no exaggeration to say that these revolutionary films often stage veritable orgies of ecstatic masochism, in which the protagonists' commitment to revolution is manifested bodily in injuries, mutilation, and sometimes death, filmed in a way that makes these sufferings appear transcendent. Often the pain endured by heroic figures is part of the overall pattern of melodrama; as Linda Williams puts it, "if virtue is not obvious, suffering—often depicted as the literal suffering of the body—is."⁶¹ The display of a wounded or suffering body thus is often deployed in service of "the mute pathos inherent to melodrama."⁶² A key moment of *Red Detachment of Women* occurs when Qionghua has first made her way to the liberated area where the women's revolutionary army detachment trains. When the female commanding officer tells Qionghua and her friend that they will have to explain why they wish to join the fighting force, Qionghua steps forward, dramatically rips her top aside to reveal welts left by a whip on her upper chest and shoulders, and shouts, "Just for this!" Such a display of wounds by an abused woman to garner sympathy in a key moment was a long-standing classical cinema convention, in many cases, as in *Red Detachment*, being explicitly linked to the desire for vengeance.⁶³

In fact, *Red Detachment of Women* is at its core a sometimes lurid revenge fantasy. Early scenes show Qionghua's bound and partially clothed body hanging and being whipped in the dungeon of Nan Batian, the landlord who had enslaved her, and she joins the women's detachment partly just to get revenge, as her display of scars vividly illustrates. After joining the Communist struggle, she seizes the first chance she gets to attempt to assassinate her former master, after which she is scolded by her superiors and told that her personal desire for revenge must be subordinated to the national struggle for liberation through revolution. In the scene mentioned earlier that follows Qionghua's semi-romantic meeting with Changqing at the crossroads, he delivers a veritable lecture on the necessity of sublimation, using a map to convince her that their local struggle is but a microscopic piece of a nationwide movement, so her personal desire for vengeance must not result in rash individual action but instead must

be folded into the collective struggle. A key point, however, is that *after* Qionghua has succeeded in learning revolutionary discipline, *after* she has been admitted as a party member and become the party representative for the women's detachment, she is in fact rewarded in the narrative by getting the opportunity to kill her nemesis when Nan Batian suddenly lunges for a knife to attack her after being captured. Quickly seizing her opportunity, Qionghua shoots him, not once but three times—presumably first to kill him, and twice more for the sheer pleasure of it. Thus, despite all the political messaging, *Red Detachment of Women* functions in part as a pleasurable revenge flick with a plot structure not unlike the salacious Hong Kong female revenge fantasy *Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan* (*Ai nu* 爱奴; Chor Yuen 楚原, 1972).

Aside from the display of bodily wounds and torture, films of the Seventeen Years very often featured revolutionary martyrdom in which Communist protagonists either were executed or otherwise intentionally sacrificed their lives for the cause, encouraging a masochistic longing for ultimate self-negation in service of the revolutionary sublime. These include the two main films we have been discussing, *Song of Youth* and *Red Detachment of Women*, in addition to *Zhao Yiman* 赵一曼 (Sha Meng 沙蒙, 1950), *Dong Cunrui* 董存瑞 (Guo Wei 郭维, 1955), *Undying Wave* (*Yong bu xiaoshi de dianbo* 永不消逝的电波; Wang Ping 王萍, 1958), *There Will Be Followers* (*Zi you houlai ren* 自有后来人; Yu Yanfu 于彦夫, 1963), and *Living Forever in Burning Flames* (*Liehuo zhong yongsheng* 烈火中永生; Shui Hua 水华, 1965), to name only a few.⁶⁴ In both *Song of Youth* and *Red Detachment of Women*, the main heroines gain additional revolutionary resolve in the course of watching their now captured Communist mentors bravely go to their execution by the enemy in ultimate sacrifice to the cause. In the case of *Red Detachment*, the scene is particularly devastating given that Hong Changqing, now in enemy custody, had been not only Qionghua's mentor but her potential love interest. She sneaks up and watches from a hill above just at the moment he is about to be executed by being tied to a tree and then set afire as an example to the local villagers. A series of eyeline match cuts guides the viewer into the extreme drama of the situation as he literally burns before her eyes. The final shot of him tracks in to a close-up of his face as he defiantly shouts the obligatory last

words “Long live the Chinese Communist Party!” as flames rise to cover his face, whereupon the film cuts to an extreme close-up of Qionghua’s anguished face looking on from afar as the nondiegetic soundtrack surges. The moment implicitly represents a double sublimation, in that while he gives his life for the revolutionary sublime, she simultaneously sees the object of her private libidinal desire immolated, transforming that desire into intense dedication only to the revolution for which he had sacrificed his life.

FLAG ELEVATIONS

Instances like these, including the emotional excess of such an ultimate sacrifice and the formalist flourishes in film style (such as extreme close-ups) that help to elicit a strong affective response, are the sorts of moments that strike noncontemporary audiences as departing far from anything that should be called “realism” and instead appearing rather blatantly as propagandistic manipulation. Here at least, does Chinese “revolutionary romanticism,” with its melodramatic extremes and its shift to a more formalist film style in its most “epiphanic” moments of maximum ideological import, become incompatible with Hollywood-style classical cinema? In fact, that is not the case, and I will argue in the following chapter that it is only with the formally experimental *yangbanxi* or model stage performance films that Chinese revolutionary cinema genuinely departs from Hollywood’s classical style, narrative principles, and fictional realism. To illustrate the similarity between Chinese socialist realism and Hollywood, let us examine, as one example, the pivotal scene in *Red Detachment of Women* that immediately precedes the execution scene, followed by a similar scene in the Hollywood World War II film *Sands of Iwo Jima* (Allan Dwan, 1949).

In the scene leading to his execution, Hong Changqing has been captured in battle and, now injured, fallen into the custody of the villainous landlord Nan Batian. The order to execute him is given only after he refuses to sign a written confession that will betray his cause. The confession refusal scene is lifted to a heroic, romanticized plane by the now familiar pattern of the epiphanic socialist realist gaze. We already have seen how

such a gaze might be provided with an apparent object of vision through editing—an object that may be represented in a symbolic sense through a false eyeline match, as was the case with the cuts between heroic Communist figures and apparently nondiegetic waving of Communist flags in *The White-Haired Girl* and *Song of Youth*. In those cases, the flag is a montage insertion that stands, in a metonymic or even fetishistic sense, for the unrepresentable ideological Truth to which the characters presumably gain access when they join the army or party. In the case of the confession rejection scene in *Red Detachment of Women*, the beaten-down Changqing grasps a writing brush over the blank paper provided for his confession, but then he hesitates and looks around the room, which still bears the marks of a brief period when the residence, along with the rest of the town, had been seized by the Communist guerrillas. As the soundtrack swells, eyeline matches provide the hero's gaze with actual diegetic objects in the form of pro-Communist graffiti left on the landlord's wall during the occupation of his village. (Such lingering revolutionary graffiti in an area retaken by Nationalist forces was an established trope in historical civil war films of the Seventeen Years, having appeared, for example, in the classic *Fighting North and South* [Nanzheng beizhan 南征北战; Cheng Yin 成荫 and Tang Xiaodan 汤晓丹, 1952; also known in English as *From Victory to Victory*]). In the series of eyeline matches in *Red Detachment*, the shot distances get progressively shorter, from shots of Hong Changqing from the shoulders up when he first notices the graffiti (Figure 24a) to an extreme close-up of his rapturous face when he focuses on a Communist flag (Figure 24b). In between, the shots of the wall progress from a longer shot showing the enlightened messages of graffiti left by the Communists, such as *nanni pingdeng* 男女平等 (gender equality), to a closer shot panning from right to left across the slogan *Gongchandang wansui* 共产党万岁 (Long live the Communist Party) with the small Communist flag pasted next to it (Figure 24c). This flag, though clearly located in the actual fictional space of the scene, is nonetheless elevated to a more abstract level of meaning through editing and framing, particularly in a final extreme close-up of the flag, now suddenly appearing epic in scale, upon which, after a moment, is superimposed a final extreme close-up of the hero's face, at an even closer distance than before (Figure 24d).



FIGURE 24. Hong Changqing reacting to graffiti and a flag on the wall in *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961): *a*, noticing the graffiti; *b*, close-up of his rapturous face; *c*, graffiti and flag; *d*, superimposed extreme close-ups of the flag and face.

Thus, although the flag in this case is diegetic rather than a purely rhetorical insert, the montage's conclusion, with the superimposed extreme close-ups of hero and flag and nothing else visible in the frame, functions much like the instances of nondiegetic flags in *The White-Haired Girl* and *The Song of Youth*. Rather than a mere piece of colored paper stuck to a wall, the flag becomes a master signifier of the hero's (and the film's) entire system of meaning, and the denotative meaning of the sequence of shots—Changqing sees the flag on the wall—pales in comparison with its connotative meaning: Changqing's consciousness and the Communist movement represented by the flag have become unified in a singular will destined for final victory (and you, the spectator, should aspire to similar sublime ecstasies of devotion). Having started the scene as an injured prisoner weakened by torture, Changqing consequently ends it—writing a defiant note rather than a confession on the piece of paper after his spiritual union with the flag on the wall—as a heroic figure who gladly

accepts death in the name of a revolution through which he will continue to live, insofar as his very subjectivity is now fused with the collective cause. Such, apparently, is the metonymic power of a small flag decal on a wall for a Communist hero endowed with the socialist realist gaze.

The scene clearly enacts the tension between realism and romanticism in Chinese socialist realism. In the early shots in the realistic diegetic space of a landlord's house that has recently changed hands in armed struggle, Changqing, just captured in a military battle, appears believably sweaty, dirty, and clearly injured, with a stooped posture and a look of doubt or even defeat on his face, but in the course of the scene, this verisimilar realism gives way to the more clearly prescriptive realism that foregrounds his heroism and the abstract ideals for which he will sacrifice his life. This prescriptive mode shifts the film's style more toward formalism with the employment of montage, superimposition, and extreme close-ups.

Audiences today will quickly identify the scene as Communist propaganda, but in fact such toggling between a more verisimilar and a more prescriptive realism (or between realism and romanticism) can easily be found in classical Hollywood films. The narratively and stylistically parallel scene in *Sands of Iwo Jima* occurs at the end of the film, when a group of American Marines watch the famous raising of the American flag on Mount Suribachi after defeating Japanese forces in the Battle of Iwo Jima in February 1945 (a moment captured in the iconic photograph by Associated Press photographer Joe Rosenthal).⁶⁵ In the fictional film, at the Marines' feet is the body of Marine Sergeant John Stryker, the film's hero, played by John Wayne. Stryker has just been killed by a Japanese soldier who had remained hidden after the battle, and now his men stand witness simultaneously to his corpse on the battlefield and the flag being raised on the hill above them. Accompanied by a dramatic orchestral soundtrack, the film cuts from the flag raising to increasingly tightly framed close-ups of each of the five remaining Marines in the squad gazing up at it before looking down again at Stryker's prone corpse, now also in close-up, with his name visible on his uniform. Meanwhile, the soundtrack has switched from a generic orchestral score to the Marines' "Halls of Montezuma" hymn. At the conclusion of this deeply moving—and deeply ideological—moment, the remaining squad members march off to finish the war, and

the film ends. The images—faces in close-up, flag—and the ways they are presented, with repeated eyeline match cuts between flags and faces, extreme close-ups, and a surging emotional soundtrack, are really not so different, and no less affectively manipulative, than those in the scene in *Red Detachment of Women*, and they serve equally to glorify a sublime cause so great that people should be willing to die for it, even if that cause can only be represented metonymically, in the form of a flag. Even in Hollywood, then, particularly at moments of affective “elevation,” films might veer from devices, such as “invisible editing,” that promote diegetic immersion and fictional realism and instead become both more formalist and more clearly rhetorical and prescriptive. If Chinese socialist realism differs in this regard, it is again a matter of degree rather than of kind.

Let us review briefly what this chapter has argued about Chinese revolutionary cinema during the Seventeen Years, pending the expansion of the argument into the Cultural Revolution in the next chapter. First, we have found that the Chinese variant of socialist realism, whether it is called that or revolutionary realism combined with revolutionary romanticism, may be understood as an example of the broader category of *prescriptive* realism, meaning a mode of realism that prioritizes the depiction of ideological truths or projected future modes of being (like the heroic “new socialist human”) rather than mirroring the surface-level reality of the present. It does so largely through the propagation of conventions like character stereotypes, repeated plot scenarios, and other genre conventions in a narrative mode similar to classical Hollywood cinema.⁶⁶ Like the latter, it frequently employs melodrama, which is not surprising because it prioritizes an underlying truth over surface verisimilitude. It is precisely at moments of “epiphanic” ideological impact that these films are likely to shift from the diegetic immersion of classical-style fictional realism to more narrative self-consciousness through formalist techniques like extreme close-ups, superimposed shots, and montage. Through these repeated conventions, prescriptive realism achieves the “sublimation” of affective energies, including the attractions of romantic or sexual desires and the extreme emotions of violent heroic deaths, into the political message and revolutionary cause itself.

My main engagement with the sublimation thesis has been not to challenge it but to show its mechanics in terms of film form, including genre stereotypes and visual citations of the conventions of classical Hollywood romance. However, I have also suggested that viewers may watch films for their own purposes, and it is quite possible to enjoy the ostensibly “sublimated” material as still very much available for consumption and enjoyment on its own terms. Indeed, in her important study of Chinese film spectatorship during the socialist era, informed by dozens of ethnographic interviews, Chenshu Zhou finds that many remember enjoying moviegoing during the Mao era in completely apolitical ways.⁶⁷ The point is not to choose whether we should consider Mao-era films as successful exercises in sublimation and thus public political indoctrination or as opportunities for “subversive” readings for private enjoyment but rather to acknowledge that as John Mullarkey puts it, “film cannot be *one* object of reflection at all”; rather, “the impact of film is not located solely in the film, but in the multiple processes of film viewing.”⁶⁸ Just as we found in chapter 3, that, in some cases, we cannot necessarily say for certain whether social realism is placed in the service of melodrama or vice versa, we likewise cannot treat any Mao-era film as having a singular meaning or impact, even for its contemporary audience, no matter how utilitarian the intention may have been for art to serve politics.

Beyond the questions of sublimation and aesthetics—whether realist, formalist, or romanticist—the prescriptive mode of filmmaking of the Seventeen Years serves also as an index of the progression of revolution itself. As we saw in chapter 2, revolution in the early to mid-1930s appeared in cinema more as a signifying absence, an anticipation, than as something with concrete narrative formulation. By the last film examined in chapter 3 (*Crows and Sparrows*), revolution appeared in the narrative with the profound *eventness* of a moment-in-progress. With cinema of the Seventeen Years, however, revolution needed to be depicted not as future or present but as both *past* and *ongoing*—past because its heroes needed commemoration and ongoing because once a revolution is finished, which is to say, once it is conventionalized—it may indeed be finished, as the next chapter explores in detail.

5

Socialist Formalism and the End(s) of Revolutionary Cinema

In May 1966, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) chairman Mao Zedong launched the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution to thwart “new bourgeois elements” that he saw as threatening the socialist society of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), including “capitalist roaders” within the CCP itself.¹ One oversimplified yet often repeated explanation of the “real” reason for the Cultural Revolution is that Mao launched it to retaliate against his enemies in the party, consolidate his own power, and reassert control of China after having been somewhat sidelined within the party leadership following the disasters of the Great Leap Forward (1958–62).² This view is complicated by the fact that Mao in fact gave up much control in the first stage of the Cultural Revolution and let unforeseen events proceed on their own terms, believing that this would allow the significant contradictions in Chinese society to become clear and indicate the best way forward—though the resulting chaos made that impulse relatively short-lived.³ Another misconception is to view the Cultural Revolution as an attempt to launch China straight from socialism into “final-stage” Communism and hence as the ultimate expression of Mao’s utopianism. This ignores the fact that Mao’s thinking by the final decade or so of his life had taken a dramatically pessimistic turn, and he viewed the Cultural Revolution not at all as final but rather as the first in many such “revolutions” that would continue to be necessary, because by this time, he believed that problematic contradictions would always arise, even under Communism, resulting in the need for “continuous revolution.”⁴ This idea potentially stands in opposition to the very nation-state form of which the PRC was an example, because revolution by definition

is incompatible with a stable state. In any case, after the initial years of turmoil in the late 1960s, the latter stage of the Cultural Revolution saw Mao's own health declining and a new power struggle emerging between the more moderate reform faction in the party led by Zhou Enlai 周恩来 and Deng Xiaoping 邓小平, on one hand, and the more ideologically extreme "Gang of Four" consisting of Mao's wife, Jiang Qing 江青, and three of her allies.⁵ That faction briefly seized control after Mao's death in 1976 but soon was defeated from within the party, clearing the way for Deng Xiaoping's reform faction to gain control of the party and government by late 1978. In other words, the end of the Cultural Revolution eventually brought to power the very leadership that it initially had been intended to oust, and those who had been suspected of being "capitalist roaders" would indeed steer China into what would become, by the twenty-first century, a leading position in the capitalist global economy. Theories about why Mao launched the Cultural Revolution tend to ignore the fact that his openly stated reason was very well substantiated by subsequent history after it failed, and rarely confronted in contemporary China is the extent to which Mao might have been horrified by the enormous concentrated wealth and consumption, alongside gaping class disparities, of the twenty-first-century Chinese party state that still reveres him as its founding father, given that he launched the Cultural Revolution precisely to counter what he perceived as new class disparities emerging under Communist rule.

The history of the Cultural Revolution has tended to be popularly narrated in a melodramatic mode. In the years immediately following its end, for example, the writers of popular "scar" literature (*shanghen wenxue* 伤痕文学) within China often would cast the Gang of Four and their followers as the clear villains in a morality tale in which the innocent suffered, injustice flourished, and all would be set right now that the "white-boned demon" (Jiang Qing) and her cronies had been arrested and a new party leadership (initially led by Hua Guofeng 华国锋) installed.⁶ In the West, the period is best known through lurid memoirs of personal abuse and suffering, such as Jung Chang's 1991 best seller *Wild Swans*, as well as similarly tear-jerking films from China, such as *Farewell My*

Concubine (*Bawang bie ji* 霸王别姬; Chen Kaige 陈凯歌, 1993), *The Blue Kite* (*Lan fengzheng* 蓝风筝; Tian Zhuangzhuang 田壮壮, 1993), and *To Live* (*Huozhe* 活着; Zhang Yimou 张艺谋, 1994), all of which won international film festival awards. In these narratives, CCP ideologues play the villains, while the ordinary Chinese people are depicted mostly as suffering innocents, with the poignant further tragedy being that some of them became pawns of authority and inflicted more suffering on their own loved ones. The full story of the Cultural Revolution is, of course, quite a bit more complicated.

The cinema created during the Cultural Revolution itself, which drew upon and yet in key ways contrasted with that of the Seventeen Years period that preceded it, reveals how a fundamental impasse of revolutionary thought and practice found indirect expression in film form. That is, in this chapter, the study of the Cultural Revolution's cinema provides a means for grappling with the implications of the event as a whole and its ultimate failure to forestall the restoration of class and capitalism in China. Focusing on a counterintuitive trend of *socialist formalism* that culminated in the Cultural Revolution "model theater" or *yangbanxi* 样板戏 films, I will trace a progression of cinematic aesthetics beyond the shift from social/descriptive to socialist/prescriptive realism (as discussed in the preceding chapter) to an even more formalized state that coincided with a "performative shift" in day-to-day ideological practice, particularly by the 1970s, when the intense passions of the early Cultural Revolution (1966–68) had subsided and unpredictable tumult had been replaced by repetitive performances of ideological conformity. As I will show, certain aspects of Cultural Revolution films illustrate a broader contradiction between revolutionary Marxist theory and party state rule. We begin with a discussion of how cinematic depictions of revolutionary history drew upon film's ontological realism, followed by an account of how the automatization of revolutionary film conventions, combined with the sheer repetition of stories, potentially led to the "derealization" of film aesthetics and the detachment of film representations from history. Looking in particular at the *tableaux vivants* that ended most of the *yangbanxi* films and the culmination of the "socialist realist gaze"⁷ in cinema

(a discussion begun in the previous chapter), I will relate these to questions of dialectical materialist philosophy, actual ideological practice, and cinematic “excess.”

HISTORY AND ONTOLOGICAL REALISM

The preceding chapter referenced Soviet writer and theorist of socialist realism Maxim Gorky’s admiration for the romanticism at the heart of myths and the need, as he saw it, to bring that romanticism into realist representation in Communist art—a formula for Communist aesthetics that would become a core part of socialist realism in general and Mao’s “combination of revolutionary realism with revolutionary romanticism” in particular. In that light, although the romanticist element helped to imbue the films with mythical import and affective force, the challenge of the realist side of the formula was to make romantic myths convincing by grounding them in apparent reality, using all the tools of cinematic realism—whether ontological, perceptual, fictional, or social.⁸

The Chinese revolutionary films discussed in both this and the preceding chapter drew heavily upon founding myths of the PRC, including, in the case of war films, the Communist-led victories over the Japanese occupation of 1937–45 and the battle against the Nationalists or Guomin-dang during the civil war both before and after the Japanese occupation. Calling these founding myths, of course, does not imply that they never happened in actual history; rather, the repeated retelling of those stories in the most inspiring form possible, both to the generations that lived through the events and to the new generations that would grow up under Communist rule, was deemed essential for building communal identity and legitimizing the CCP’s leadership and the PRC state itself.

The narration of these myths in the form of feature-length fiction film was an exercise in creating the sort of “prosthetic memories” of historical events at which cinema had long excelled. Alison Landsberg defines prosthetic memory as “a new form of public cultural memory” under modernity that “emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site such as a movie theater or museum.”⁹ Through an experience like a public film

screening, a “person sutures himself or herself into a larger history” in a way through which he or she “does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live.”¹⁰ Because of the sort of personal, affective investment involved, “prosthetic memory has the ability to shape that person’s subjectivity and politics.”¹¹ Landsberg theorizes that with modern technologies like photography and cinema, “it becomes possible to have a mediated memory that one nevertheless experiences as real or genuine.”¹²

Cinematic realism facilitates the credibility of a fiction film’s vision of history even though audiences understand that they are watching a fictionalized representation of past historical events rather than a direct documentation of those events. The ontological realism of the film image—the fact that photographic media directly record whatever real things are before the camera—plays a key, but somewhat devious, role in achieving the sense of credibility of the historical representation. Philip Rosen’s analysis of this kind of cinematic representation of history and the way it is bolstered by the ontological realism of film is premised on the fact that even a fiction film can be considered a documentary of its actors’ performances, directly recording those as well as any objects or settings (even if they are actually film props or studio sets) in front of the camera. A historical film thus offers “an image that represents not one but two past times”—the time of the historical events it references but also the time of the film’s making.¹³ Strictly speaking, only the latter representation possesses the ontological or “indexical” realism of the photographic image—the direct existential link between the people and objects being filmed and the resulting image. However, in connecting the fictionalized representation of history to the actual historical events referenced, the film in a sense transfers this ontological realism and thereby lends an “indexical credibility” to the fictionalized representation of history.¹⁴ Such films thus enact “a conversion from one time to another, from the past time of the camera’s operation to the temporal setting of a different past, that of the narrative,” and the persuasiveness of the fictionalized historical narrative is increased by the fact that “as photographic cinema there is a certain documentary force at work in these images.”¹⁵ The

sense of “referential pastness” of the historical film is further increased by the careful use of historically convincing props, costumes, buildings, hairstyles, and countless other features that provide what Roland Barthes called the “reality effect” attained through the use of incidental details in the modern realist novel, in that such details serve “to convince the reader [or viewer] of a direct link between the signifier and referent by means of an impression of precise accuracy.”¹⁶ Here Rosen (via Barthes) borrows the terms of structural linguistics, in which a sign is broken down into a signifier and a signified, both of which are distinguished from an actual referent in the material world. For Rosen, the historical film on the screen is a signifier, with the signified being the fictionalized story acted out before the camera at a previous time—a story, however, that claims to have a referential relationship to a historical real *before* the time of performance. It is precisely through the ontological realism of the medium that a fictionalized historical film gains documentary force that transfers from the signified fictional performance to the historical referent itself. That is, to be a convincing representation of *history* rather than just the diegeticized *fiction*, the historical film must elide the signified (the performance) and seem to make a direct link from signifier (the film viewed) to referent (historical reality). The connection is precarious, because “the diegeticized profilmic, as historical representation, inevitably falls short of the kind of documentary authority claimed by the image as an indexical trace of the profilmic.”¹⁷ That is, the recording of the performance has an actual ontological realism—what Rosen calls indexical credibility or what Bill Nichols calls the indexical “stickiness” of a documentary film image—that the claim to historical representation lacks.¹⁸ However, Rosen suggests, “there is . . . a kind of passage or play between document and diegesis, but with a kind of residue, as if the diegeticized film attempts to retain something of the factual convincingness of the document.”¹⁹ The ontological realism of the image subtly but powerfully lends credibility to the film’s claim of historical representation, even though it only directly shows us a fictional performance.

To put it briefly in terms of the 1961 version of *The Red Detachment of Women*, discussed in chapter 4, audiences at the time of its release, even if they knew that there really was a women’s detachment of

Communist revolutionaries on tropical Hainan Island in south China during the Chinese civil war, would also have known that they were watching a performance of fictionalized characters; historical films need not claim that their main characters are based on real historical figures if they can only convince the audience that this is what the real people were *like*. No original audience of *Red Detachment of Women* would have naively thought they were seeing history directly; they knew they were watching a fiction film. However, if the characters “came to life” through the performance, and most of the incidental details seemed historically accurate, the actual ontological realism tying the film to the performance could transfer and lend a “residue” of heightened realism to the claim of historical representation. It is not that the spectators suffer from the delusion that they really are directly seeing history but that the imprinted trace of the past in the moving image gives it, as Bazin says, “the irrational power to bear away our faith”—which, as Tom Gunning points out, makes Bazin’s argument about the power of ontological realism far from just a description of a logical process of using photographs as signs.²⁰ In this way, cinema’s ontological realism or indexical stickiness helps to enable films to imprint as current generations’ prosthetic memories of past historical events even though the viewers do *not* naively and literally read the moving image as an actual indexical imprint from the historical events referenced.

Needless to say, this transfer of indexical stickiness or ontological realism from the fictional performance (Rosen’s “diegeticized film”) to the historical referent is in a basic sense a contrivance. Because the historical film’s ontological realism is in reality an index of the film’s performance rather than of its historical referent, such a film arguably has less of an actual indexical tie to the real historical event than would, say, a newspaper illustration by an early “newspainter” sent along as a correspondent to a war zone in the early days of modern print media or a print journalist’s written account of an observed historical event.²¹ Although paintings, drawings, lithographs, and newspaper stories lack the ontological realism of the photographic image, they are indexical insofar as the artist or writer uses firsthand, on-the-scene impressions to create the image or narrative. Nonetheless, the persuasiveness of film’s ontological realism provides a unique fuel for the credibility of cinema as historical representation.

Of course, such a crafty imbuing of indexical credibility to a historical fiction film is vulnerable to a sudden loss of persuasiveness, because the representation of history in fact lacks the “documentary authority” that it possesses as a document of a performance. The “passage” or transfer of such credibility to historical representation can suddenly break down for any number of reasons—from a character too obviously having a hairstyle from the time of filming rather than the historical time represented to a changed context of reception, whether following a cultural or ideological shift or just a different perspective afforded by multiple viewings of the same film. In any of those cases, one can suddenly start to view the performance *as a performance* rather than as a convincing historical representation.

AUTONOMIZATION AND DEREALIZATION

The sense of realism cultivated by Chinese revolutionary historical films is in continual tension with the films’ conventions, whether they be the generic conventions of the war film, the conventions of Chinese socialist realism, or the conventions of ballet or Beijing opera in the case of the *yangbanxi* films. Conventions serve to orient the viewer and tell the story but also potentially call attention to themselves in a way that undercuts the realism of the historical representation. The tradition of Chinese revolutionary cinema not only gradually became less realist and more romanticist but in fact increasingly displayed and eventually culminated in a very distinctively Chinese version of what David Bordwell has called “socialist formalism.” Bordwell has used the term to refer to Soviet socialist realist filmmakers who drew upon their more avant-garde 1920s predecessors to create moments of formalism even during the Stalinist period as well as later Soviet filmmakers who conducted similar explorations in parallel with the renewed interest in formalist montage during the French New Wave.²² In the case of China, I use *socialist formalism* to refer first to the more stylistically formalist moments in Chinese revolutionary films of the Seventeen Years—the appearances of flamboyant montages, extreme close-ups, superimpositions, dramatic off-screen gazes, and so on that tend to happen at “epiphanic” moments as discussed in the

preceding chapter—and second in particular to the *yangbanxi* films, which are among the most formalist instances of mass cinema in the history of the medium, comparable, say, to Hollywood musicals of the first decade or so of the sound era, such as *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939).

But the phenomenon discussed here is not only a matter of whether cinematic style is more realist or more formalist; it is also a question of the developmental dynamics of cinematic conventions or stereotypes. Returning to Jörg Schweinitz's theory of film stereotypes discussed in earlier chapters, we can identify a gradual process of what he calls *derealization*. Character types within a genre, for example, following a process of increased conventionalization and autonomization, may eventually be “experienced not so much as direct representations of reality but as roles played out in an imaginary world.”²³ Character stereotypes in this way become less “vehicles of knowledge” about reality or history than “personified agents of a repeatable experience of pleasure found in a ritualized, self-similar game constantly offered anew by the individual films of a genre.”²⁴ In other words, there is an intrinsic tendency toward derealization or denaturalization that occurs with the repetition of genre stereotypes.

Taking the example of the villainous landlord from the preceding chapter, immediate audience recognition of this character type was facilitated by its repetition across many films as well as literature and drama of the revolutionary period. Krista Van Fleit has shown how Chinese Communist critical debates about the issue of “typicality” from the 1930s to the 1950s sometimes centered on the landlord as type.²⁵ The stereotyping of the landlord in cinema was further bolstered by the phenomenon of “villain stardom,” in which the same actors were enlisted to play similar roles in different films, such as Chen Qiang’s 陈强 repeat performances, a decade or so apart, as evil landlord in *The White-Haired Girl* and the original *Red Detachment of Women*.²⁶ (In the latter, the landlord’s name, Nan Batian, means literally “tyrant of the south,” as if the audience needed more evidence of his stereotypical villainy.) The tendency toward derealization or consumption of the landlord stereotype as stereotype would have reached its peak with the *yangbanxi* films, including the remakes of *Red Detachment of Women* first as a revolutionary model ballet film in 1970 and again

as a revolutionary model opera film in 1972. In a study of gender in the model operas, Rosemary Roberts has argued that counterrevolutionary villains in those works are systematically emasculated and feminized as part of an overall gendered system of representation. She notes that in both the model ballet and model opera versions of *Red Detachment of Women*, the villainous landlord and his cronies have longish hair in a style more like the female characters in the same films than like the heroic male characters, and they wear the kinds of traditional silk gowns that had been rejected as effeminate in twentieth-century China.²⁷ The emasculation of Nan Batian in these films is also expressed by the shortened stature of the submissive crouches he tends to assume in both films when in the presence of the films' hero, Hong Changqing (who replaces the slave-turned-revolutionary Wu Qionghua as the main protagonist in the *Red Detachment yangbanxi* films, in contrast to the original film, which had focused on her as heroine). These instances of systematic gendered caricature would have increased the sense of derealization of the landlord character type, who would have appeared less as a realistic representation and more as simply a genre stereotype—a reading reinforced by the shift from the more classical fictional realism of the original film to the opera aesthetics of the final version, because Chinese opera in general relies on repeated and relatively rigid character role types that are immediately identifiable through signifiers of make-up, costuming, and performance.

The derealization that results from the repetition and autonomization of character types occurs as well with other types of conventions, such as repeated narrative scenarios. For example, the preceding chapter discussed the repeated scenes of execution and martyrdom in Mao-era revolutionary films. The idea of a revolutionary hero or heroine going bravely to his or her death in sacrifice to the revolution had maintained a powerful hold on the imaginations of Chinese youths going back to the late Qing dynasty, when idolized heroes included Russian nihilist revolutionary Sofya Perovskaya, who had been executed by hanging in 1881 at age twenty-seven, as well as the young rebels against Manchu rule Zou Rong 邹容 and Qiu Jin 秋瑾, who became celebrated revolutionary martyrs at ages twenty and thirty-one, respectively, during the final decade of the dynasty.²⁸ In Chinese cinema, scenes of revolutionaries being

apprehended and appearing gladly to accept execution go back at least to *Daybreak* in 1933. At the end of that film, the heroine, Lingling, who has transitioned from country girl to factory worker to prostitute and, finally, to Republican revolutionary, primpes her hair and straightens her clothes before being led to the firing squad—a conventional detail still evident, for example, in the 1971 popular revolutionary model opera film *The Red Lantern* (*Hong dengji* 红灯记; Cheng Yin 成荫).²⁹ By the time of the latter, several other conventions had become standard in scenes where martyrs are executed—scenes repeated across dozens of Chinese revolutionary films, including *The Song of Youth* and all three versions of *Red Detachment of Women*, in addition to many more.³⁰ Aside from the ritual primping of hair and straightening of clothes in preparation for a dignified death, such conventions included the playing of the Communist “Internationale” on the nondiegetic soundtrack during scenes of execution, the martyrs shouting “Long live the Communist Party!” and “Long live Chairman Mao!” just before dying, and often a cutaway to an extreme long shot of a sublime natural landscape immediately after the death (which almost always remains off-screen). As with other revolutionary film conventions, execution scenes attained their most rigorously formalized expression in the *yangbanxi* films, specifically *The Red Lantern* opera film and the *Red Detachment of Women* ballet and opera films.

Such repetitions of revolutionary film conventions have important consequences in terms of their impact on the viewer. First, audience affective experience will shift significantly from *fiction emotions* to *artifact emotions*. Carl Plantinga uses the former term to label emotions that “take as their object some element of the film’s fictional world” and the latter for emotions that “take as their object the film as a constructed artifact.”³¹ Fiction emotions are stirred by the process generally called “identification” with fictional characters (though Plantinga himself avoids that term because of its psychoanalytic connotations). In the original *Red Detachment of Women*, when Changqing is burned at the stake while his would-be lover Qionghua watches from afar, the spectator presumably feels intense admiration for his bravery as well as strong sympathy for the agonizing loss she is suffering. Artifact emotions, in contrast, might include annoyance at the predictability of the screenplay (Changqing

shouts “Long live the Chinese Communist Party!” as his dying words), admiration for the outstanding ballet dancing skills of the performer playing Changqing in the model ballet film version of the story, or appreciation of how the cinematographer’s mobile framing adds dynamism and variation in shot scale to the lengthy shots of the character dancing and singing in the opera film version during the minutes before his execution. Such emotions are stirred not by immersion in the story world but by the film as a constructed and performed work of art. It stands to reason that as genre conventions, through abstraction and repetition, become derealized and recognized more consciously by audiences *as conventions*, audience affective experience will shift at least somewhat from fiction emotions to artifact emotions, appreciating not so much the fictional realism of the films’ worlds as the skill or artistic invention with which expected conventions are repeated or varied. It also seems likely that the *yangbanxi* films would have brought such a shift to a culmination, particularly given that Chinese opera has traditionally been viewed in a way that emphasizes artifact emotions; when a seasoned Beijing opera viewer shouts *hao* 好! (bravo!) while viewing a performance of a canonized opera scene, the object of approval is less the fictional event or character than the artistic excellence of a particular singing performance, acrobatic sequence, or standardized pose (*liangxiang* 亮相) struck by a particular performer.

Aside from shifting the spectator’s affective experience from fiction emotions to artifact emotions, the endless repetition of revolutionary film stereotypes also would have altered the films’ perceived relationship to history, in that film scenes increasingly would be read as referring to other film scenes employing the same conventions rather than to the prior historical reality that is referenced. As Mikhail Iampolski put it in his study of intertextuality in cinema, a seeming quotation of one film within another “violates the link between sign and objective reality (the mimetic link), orienting the sign toward another text rather than a thing.”³² In other words, such intertextual citations work at cross-purposes with the effect of ontological or indexical realism cited earlier in our discussion of Rosen’s ideas of film and history: whereas Rosen saw the historical film as effecting a direct link from signifier (the film) to referent (history), short-circuiting the signified (the recorded fictional performance), Iampolski implies that

intertextual repetition calls attention to the signified (the fictional performance) because of its relation to other fiction films, thereby lessening the effect of realism ("the link between sign and objective reality"). In Rosen's terms, a *yangbanxi* film of the Cultural Revolution in particular would have been experienced not as an accurate representation of history but as "a document of performed virtuosity" owing to its "foregrounding of artifice."³³ History is converted into conventionalized spectacle in a way that loosens the film from its referential claims to historical reality.

In this context, we can add to the trilogy of *Red Detachment of Women* films another series of remakes to consider: as mentioned in the preceding chapter, the 1955 black-and-white revolutionary war film *Guerrillas on the Plain* was remade twice in 1974, as a color film in the same classical mode as the original and also as a revolutionary model opera film under the slightly different title *Fighting on the Plain*.³⁴ This set of examples allows us to look not only at how classical-style fiction films of the Seventeen Years were turned into formalized *yangbanxi* spectacle films of the Cultural Revolution, as in the case of *Red Detachment*, but also, in the next section, at how classical-style films began to be remade in the final years of the Cultural Revolution, with small but telling differences from those before the Cultural Revolution.

The 1955 *Guerrillas on the Plain* focuses on Communist guerrilla commander Li Xiangyang as he leads guerrilla actions against occupying Japanese forces in Hebei province in 1943, in coordination with the Communist Eighth Route Army. The fictional Li Xiangyang was said to be based on a real-life war hero, guerrilla fighter and deputy regimental commander Zhen Fengshan 甄风山, so the film makes a relatively direct claim to historical referentiality. In addition, like the original *Red Detachment of Women*, it is an engaging and skillfully made war movie with charismatic actors in the main roles, particularly Guo Zhenqing 郭振清 as Li Xiangyang, but also Fang Hua 方化 as the main villain, Japanese captain Matsui. The opening sequence puts us realistically on location in a river gorge, and in general, the film aims for the same sort of combination of social and fictional realism that a contemporaneous Hollywood war film would have displayed. It also similarly concludes with a major battle victory within an ongoing war (just as does *Sands of Iwo Jima*, the

1949 Hollywood war film used as a point of comparison in a different context in chapter 4).

The 1974 revolutionary model opera film version makes some significant changes to the story—introducing a heroic elderly woman as one of the main characters, eliminating some scenes, adding others—but the biggest changes are simply the vast differences in aesthetic between classical-style fiction films and revolutionary model operas, which combine a Cultural Revolution Maoist worldview with techniques drawn from Beijing opera. Model opera films, such as *Fighting on the Plain* and the opera version of *Red Detachment of Women*, adopted many characteristics of traditional Chinese theater that defy the norms of the mimetic fictional realism found in mainstream classical-style cinema, including the other two film versions of *Guerrillas on the Plain*. These include elements of both mise-en-scène and narration.

In terms of mise-en-scène, Chinese opera sets are traditionally more spare and artificial than those of Western theater. While not nearly as minimal as those of traditional opera, the Cultural Revolution model dramas had sets and props that, when set to film, defied the supposed naturalism of the cinematic medium with blatantly artificial objects, from architecture to vegetation and natural scenery. Human figures were similarly stylized. Rather than individualized protagonists and antagonists with realistic idiosyncrasies and psychological depth, characters would conform to a limited number of role types that determined their behavior. The stereotyped roles of traditional Chinese opera (the young scholar, the beauty, the warrior, and so on) were replaced with those of revolutionary mythology (the virtuous worker, peasant, or soldier; the self-sacrificing Communist hero; the villainous landlord or Japanese occupier). Though not as extreme as in traditional operas, characters in the model opera films nonetheless generally have makeup that exceeds lifelike verisimilitude and costumes that appear highly schematized rather than realistic. This includes color codification of costume and makeup for different character types, such as wan-faced villains wearing black or green and ruby-cheeked heroes wearing red or white.

Narrative elements are similarly stylized in Beijing opera. Actions are expressed as much through symbolic signs (semiosis) as through

verisimilar representations (mimesis), most obviously in the use of *liangxiang* (striking a pose) to signify important narrative moments and emotional states. Chinese opera forms use representations that are often “suppositional” (*jiading* 假定) or “subjunctive” (*xuni* 虚拟) rather than mimetic, meaning that elements of the story world are supposed in the mode of “as if” rather than directly represented.³⁵ For example, in the first revolutionary model opera film, *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (*Zhiqiu Weihu Shan* 智取威虎山; Xie Tieli 谢铁骊, 1970), when the hero, Yang Zirong, has to fight off a tiger while riding his horse through the forest, neither the horse nor the tiger is seen; instead, the horse riding is represented through the traditional *tangma* 趟马 performance technique, in which the actor represents horse riding by going through a series of poses and dancing motions while holding a stylized riding crop, while the tiger is indicated only by an audible roar on the soundtrack and the character’s gestures of tracking and shooting something unseen by the audience. Both horse and tiger are cued to be *supposed* by the viewer but not directly shown. Performances in general rely on gestural language and pantomime. Emotions are not so much realistically performed as codified through standardized gestures.³⁶ Speech is stylized rather than imitative of speech in regular life, and the frequent arias, of course, break even more sharply from any semblance of mimesis of reality (just as the Hollywood musical was among the most formalist of popular film genres and thus the most apt to break with classical Hollywood norms of fictional realism).

The *yangbanxi* and the films made from them were consumed in ways marked by repetition, attractions, and narrative distension, all of which pushes spectator affect toward artifact emotions rather than fiction emotions. Particularly by the time the *yangbanxi* films were distributed, PRC audiences already were familiar with the narratives through stage performances, books, and other product tie-ins,³⁷ and in any case, the films were viewed repeatedly owing to the relative lack of other options in movie exhibition. Consequently, as with traditional opera, any given spectator would already be familiar with the narrative from previous repetition and thus not processing plot revelations so much as enjoying the staging of a spectacle depicting an already well-known story. For that reason, as a cinematic mode, *yangbanxi*, like their precedents in traditional theater,

are much more focused on presenting attractions than on efficiently conveying cause-and-effect chains of narrative events.³⁸ They frequently linger extensively on each narrative moment far beyond the length necessary to transmit it as plot information, instead offering prolonged visual spectacle and commentary relating to each event, particularly through arias and dance movements. The 125-minute-long *Fighting on the Plain* model opera film thus extends 42 percent longer than the 1955 narrative film version and 25 percent longer than the 1974 narrative film version.

A nearly nine-minute scene that begins one-third of the way into *Fighting on the Plain* demonstrates the conventions described as well as the artistic quality and excitement as spectacle that the *yangbanxi* films were capable of achieving. The hero—whose name in the opera version has been changed from Li Xiangyang to Zhao Yonggang (赵勇刚; literally “surpassingly brave and strong”)—has disguised himself as a coachman for a horse wagon, with several of his guerrilla comrades pretending to be coolies, all arriving undercover at a Japanese-held area ostensibly to help transport grain. In keeping with the suppositional aesthetic of Chinese opera, the actual horses are not seen, though they are heard in the form of off-screen neighing and hooves clopping on the soundtrack. While the mise-en-scène is elaborate, it is still obvious that the action takes place on an artificial studio set, with painted backgrounds to represent the distant landscape and many objects that are obvious as props rather than real-world things, including a prominent tower that is featured in the action to come. In cinematographic reinforcements of character stereotypes, shots of Zhao Yonggang tend to be framed at a slightly low angle so that we look up to him, while shots of the Japanese enemy and their Chinese collaborators tend toward high-angle framing so that we look down on them. Zhao makes his entrance carrying an elaborate horse whip and singing a brief aria, the first of two times he breaks into song in the scene before his cover is blown. His makeup gives his brightly illuminated cheeks a rosy hue, whereas the sallow, scowling face of the Japanese soldier in charge tends to be in shadow. Even before the real action starts, Li Guang 李光, the opera performer playing Zhao, frequently spins around or breaks into other dancelike moves punctuated by *liangxiang* poses accompanied by synchronized Beijing opera cymbals.

After Zhao is revealed to be a Communist guerrilla rather than a simple cart driver, the scene erupts into an exhilarating staging of highly acrobatic hand-to-hand combat between the Japanese soldiers and Zhao and his men. This segment of the scene lasts nearly a minute and a half, averaging just over two and a half seconds per shot, though the highlight is a fifteen-second continuous shot in which a handheld camera puts us right in the midst of the action, bobbing and weaving as the blows are struck and the bodies fly in all directions. By the end of the fight, Zhao alone has dispatched twenty-five enemy soldiers, using punches; kicks; throws; the occasional improvised weapon, such as a sack of grain; and, finally, a Japanese saber he seizes from the enemy to dispatch his last few opponents. When the fight is over, he concludes with a victorious solo *liangxiang* pose, after which his men quickly reassemble for a group *liangxiang* pose that ends the scene in *tableau vivant* fashion (Figure 25). The fight segment of the scene is remarkably similar to the choreography of contemporaneous martial arts and kung fu films from Hong Kong studios like Golden Harvest and the Shaw Brothers, and there could be no better evidence for combining opera films and martial arts cinema into one “shadow opera mode” of Chinese filmmaking, as proposed by Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar.³⁹ The entire scene, including the lead-up to the fight, has sixty-eight shots, nearly half of which (46 percent) feature mobile framing of all types: pans, tilts, tracks, crane shots—even two paired zooms on the saber (one in, one out) when Zhao seizes it.⁴⁰ Considering also the mostly smooth editing continuity of matches-on-action—but with the occasional more expressive, slightly discontinuous sorts of cuts characteristic of Hong Kong action sequences—the scene lays to rest any notion that the *yangbanxi* films are merely stage documentaries rather than highly cinematic works of art. On the contrary, despite their rejection of classical-style cinematic realism, their basis in theater, and their adoption of many Chinese opera conventions, the *yangbanxi* films in general are carefully and creatively engaged in the most distinctively cinematic of formal elements, including editing and camera movement.⁴¹



FIGURE 25. Victorious group *liangxiang* pose in *Fighting on the Plain* model opera film (1974).

FORMALISM AND IDEOLOGY

Still, however cinematic they would become in their film versions, all the *yangbanxi* began as stage performances. Aesthetic factors that lean away from realism toward stylization, abstraction, and theatricality no doubt were partly what made *yangbanxi* adaptations the focus of filmmaking during 1970–73, when film production resumed after ceasing entirely during the early stage of the Cultural Revolution throughout 1967–69. The *yangbanxi* films' rejection of certain common understandings of realism was an intentional part of their politically inflected offering as prescriptive "models" for new cultural production appropriate to the Cultural Revolution. Although Mao's wife, Jiang Qing—the former film actress widely credited with sponsoring, steering, and indeed sometimes micro-managing the production of the *yangbanxi* and their film adaptations—claimed that even model theater should aim to "reflect . . . real life,"⁴² she also explicitly attacked and ruled out modes of critical social realism that

some artists and critics had advocated in periods of relative liberalization of cultural policy during the Seventeen Years, even though the advocates of those theories already had long since been purged.⁴³ Such notions of critical realism were considered to be opposed to the sanctioned formula of combining revolutionary realism with revolutionary romanticism, and the ongoing criticism of them was deemed an essential counterpart to the promotion of the *yangbanxi* as exemplary revolutionary works of art.⁴⁴ Their prescriptive quality is suggested by the very naming of the works and their heroes as *yangban* 样板 (“template,” “prototype,” or “model”). Jiang Qing herself acknowledged that “the art of Peking opera is based on exaggeration” and that *yangbanxi* should aim “to model the image of the contemporary revolutionary hero on our opera stage.”⁴⁵ As a result of such intentional idealization, as Pang Laikwan notes, “*yangbanxi* heroes were deemed the ultimate heroes—far greater than any ordinary person could aspire to become.”⁴⁶ The *Fighting on the Plain* fight scene just described exemplifies the point: the hero’s defeat of twenty-five opponents in just a minute and a half of hand-to-hand combat is more in keeping with a martial arts or superhero movie than with a historical war film.

Such extreme larger-than-life exaggeration is readily apparent if we compare the scenes of the hero Hong Changqing’s execution in *The Red Detachment of Women* as transformed from the original 1961 film into the later Cultural Revolution model ballet and opera film versions. In the 1961 film, as described in the last chapter, the moment when Changqing is burned at the stake as the local villagers helplessly watch (and his implied potential romantic partner, Wu Qionghua, likewise looks on from afar) is romanticized and melodramatized. The final close-up of his face as he defiantly shouts “Long live the Chinese Communist Party!” just before flames rise to cover him no doubt constitutes an “epiphanic moment” of high heroism. Still, even in this moment, there are plenty of markers of a verisimilar form of realism: on-location extreme long shots mark the scene as plausibly exterior (even if the closer shots were likely done on a studio set), and his tight binding to the tree on which he is immolated, with his arms tied behind him, show him as believably tied down and immobilized by the enemy; his ripped, rumpled, and dirty clothing, along with the dirt and profuse sweat evident on his face, all realistically show

the dire situation he is in (Figure 26a). In contrast, the model ballet and model opera versions, both of which combine into one scene his refusal to sign a confession and his resulting execution, transform the believable setting in a tropical village to a distinctively theatrical, stagelike location, where, through gestures, dance, and poses, the landlord villain offers Changqing a paper on which to write his confession and Changqing rejects his cowering captor in heroic fashion. In the subsequent execution, no attempt is made to make the fire look realistic, and Changqing dances under his own power to his own execution bonfire, where, unbound, he finally strikes a defiant—even downright victorious—*liangxiang* pose that suggests immortality even as the obviously fake flames surge around his body (Figure 26b).

Recalling the discussion in chapter 1 of the transition in acting from a “histrionic” stage style to a “verisimilar” film style during the early silent film era, as described by Roberta Pearson, the *yangbanxi* films obviously swing very strongly back to the “histrionic” pole.⁴⁷ Pearson notes that in the histrionic mode of stage melodrama and early cinema, meaning often was communicated through discrete gestures or poses that acted as semantic units rather than inseparable parts of a continuous flow of performance: “Actors deliberately struck attitudes, holding each gesture and abstracting it from the flow of motion until the audience had ‘read it.’”⁴⁸ Similarly, the model opera films’ *liangxiang* poses, in which the actors periodically come to a momentary rest, are an essential part of the performance and a principal means by which the performance is made legible and enjoyable to the audience. These ritualized, frozen postures punctuate passages of movement, dialogue, or song and dance and thus become both syntactic and semantic units in the narrative. As in the histrionic stage style of Western acting analyzed by Pearson, they strive not for resemblance to real human behavior (*mimesis*) but rather for a codification of emotion (*semiosis*) that the audience can read through their familiarity with dramatic conventions, while also enjoying the rhythm of the performance, with its periodic pauses to mark the ends of particular segments of narrative.

Returning to the *Guerrillas on the Plain* series, aside from the 1955



A



B

FIGURE 26. Hong Changqing's final moments alive in, *a*, the original *Red Detachment of Women* (1961) and, *b*, the model opera film (1972).

original and the 1974 model opera remake already discussed, there remains the odd fact that, in the same year the opera film was released, the original also was remade in its more classical fiction-film style, but this time in color. This was not an isolated phenomenon. When non-*yangbanxi* feature filmmaking resumed in 1973 for the first time since the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, in the absence of officially sanctioned original screenplays, one practice was to reshoot previously approved black-and-white films of the Seventeen Years as color films. Besides *Guerrillas on the Plain*, other films that were remade in the period 1973–75 included *Conquering the Flood* (*Zhan hong tu* 战洪图; Su Li 苏里 and Yuan Naichen 袁乃晨, 1966), *The Younger Generation* (*Nianqing de yidai* 年轻的一代; Zhao Ming 赵明, 1965), *Pine Ridge* (*Qingsong ling* 青松岭; Liu Guoquan 刘国权, 1965), *Reconnaissance across the Yangtze River* (*Du jiang zhencha ji* 渡江侦察记; Tang Xiaodan 汤晓丹, 1954), and *Fighting North and South* (aka *From Victory to Victory*; *Nanzhengbeizhan* 南征北战; Cheng Yin and Tang Xiaodan, 1952).

When a historical war film is remade, the temporality of its representation becomes even more complicated. Recalling Rosen's point that a historical fiction film represents two different past times—the time of the documented performance of the fiction and the time of the historical events referenced—these Cultural Revolution remakes add a third representation, that of the earlier film that is being imitated, with which Chinese filmgoers of the mid-1970s would have been familiar before seeing the remake. Such an added level of fictional signification would have further problematized the transfer of the “indexical stickiness” of the documented performance's ontological realism to lend credence to the historical representation because not one but two documented fictional performances mediate the relation of film to actual history. Consequently, while the 1974 model opera film remake of *Guerrillas on the Plain* would have been unlikely to be taken as a realistic historical representation owing to the extremity of the opera form's stylization and theatricality, the more conventionally realistic remake also would have any claimed tie to history weakened because of being a re-presentation of a prior representation of history.

Beginning in 1966, Xing Ye 邢野, cowriter of the script for the original

1955 *Guerrillas on the Plain*, was enlisted by Jiang Qing to join a team that began the process of adapting the screenplays for what would eventually become the model opera version of the story as well as the 1974 color remake. His account of that process sheds light on the issues of realism and the representation of history as the Mao era advanced from the Seventeen Years to the Cultural Revolution.⁴⁹ He reports that the writers had access to many actual stories from the life of Zhen Fengshan—the real-life war veteran on whom the fictional protagonist was based, who was still alive during the first stage of the revision process and talked with the writers. In Xing's and other writers' views, those stories could have enriched the screenplay: "In terms of the complexity of history and the richness and uniqueness of a figure's personality, these incidents would have enabled the character to be written much more brilliantly."⁵⁰ Xing reports that one writer's participation in the project was ended after he tried to add a new plot incident based on Zhen's actual war experiences. The guerrilla leader had been involved in an unusual incident in which a Japanese captain had kidnapped Zhen's wife in an attempt to force his surrender, so Zhen in turn had kidnapped the captain's daughter-in-law and forced a hostage exchange to get his wife back. (The ploy worked, but he was disciplined by the army for pulling such a stunt.) When Jiang Qing saw the incident added to a draft script during the revision process, she angrily rejected it as defiling the reputations of the CCP and the Eighth Route Army, ordered it cut, and fired the writer from the project.⁵¹ Not simply an interesting anecdote, this incident—and the broader rejection of adding real biographical and historical details that would make the story more rich and complex and the character more rounded—illuminates just how prescriptive Chinese revolutionary realism had become; as Pang Laikwan has put it, "the regime found fiction more reliable than reality."⁵²

Xing laments that if they had been allowed to incorporate such details into the film, they may even have approximated something like the accomplishments of the classic Soviet film *Chapaev* (Georgi Vasilyev and Sergei Vasilyev, 1934) in depicting its eponymous war hero as "a man with a character that was so complicated, so full of historical depth and breadth."⁵³ The comparison is telling, given that *Chapaev* has long been

regarded as embodying the type of complexity and ambiguity that would soon disappear from most Stalinist cinema as the dogmas of Soviet socialist realism took firmer hold of cultural production. Calling it “the masterpiece of Soviet films with historic heroes,” André Bazin celebrated “with what intelligence the failings of Chapayev, even in his manifestly most heroic acts, are suggested without diminishing him at all psychologically.”⁵⁴ In contrast, later Soviet historical films about Stalin turn the Soviet leader into such a superhero that he becomes “History incarnated,” making it “impossible to define him through his character, his psychology, or his personality,” which Bazin compares unfavorably with the commander in *Chapaev*.⁵⁵ Xing Ye’s memoir of the rewriting of *Guerrillas on the Plain* makes clear that the flattening and idealization of the hero as a character and the altering of historical reality resulted both from ideological strictures on the arts and from the desire to please audiences. For example, noting that the wiping out of an entire large Japanese military unit and the killing of its commander never happened in Hebei in 1943, Xing explains that “our thinking was still in pursuit of so-called ‘combining revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism’” and that these fictional exaggerations would be more “entertaining to the masses.”⁵⁶

Such distortions of history had existed in the original film as well. In fact, in terms of the intertextual relations between the three films, whereas the model opera film version took many liberties with the story and characters of its predecessor, the more classical color remake of the same year is remarkably faithful to the original performance of almost two decades earlier (if not to real historical events). Most of the script remains the same, and often, cinematically, it looks like a shot-by-shot imitation, with even the less dramatic shots often mimicking the original in the details of their mise-en-scène, framing, and even the nonverbal gestures and expressions of the actors (Figure 27). And although the main hero is played by a different actor in the remake to retain his youth, in another instance of “villain stardom,” the Japanese commander Matsui is once again performed with great expressiveness by Fang Hua, who had played him in the original (and had been typecast in Japanese enemy roles going back to his earliest films in the late 1940s).⁵⁷



FIGURE 27. Similar shots in *Guerrillas on the Plain* (1955) and the 1974 color remake.

In the context of such surprising sameness, the differences between the 1955 film and the 1974 color remake become all the more notable, revealing the changed political circumstances and the heightened prescriptiveness of culture and the arts in the wake of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. The intervening Sino-Soviet split, for example, requires that a reference to the “great Soviet Army” fighting Adolf Hitler be changed to “all the people in the world will defeat Hitler this year.” At the end of the film’s climactic battle, the Japanese commander, who had been given the dignity of at least attempting to commit ritual suicide (*seppuku*) in the original film, now is simply trying to run away at the moment he is caught (and, soon after, shot dead). But the most notable differences in the largely identical scripts are those that best fit what Chris Berry calls the “pedagogical” and “didactic” tendencies of Mao-era cinema, as discussed in the preceding chapter.⁵⁸ Whereas Mao Zedong is never mentioned in the original 1955 feature, the 1974 remake adds lines including the following:

With the help of the Party, Chairman Mao, and the Masses, we can fulfill any mission!

The hearts of the common people are all with the Party. Stick to the strategy of protracted warfare introduced by Chairman Mao, and the [Japanese] devils won’t live for long.

As Chairman Mao says, “the strategy of risking life is shortsighted in military operations. We need to look forward and plan wisely.”

We are the people and the army led by the Communist Party and Chairman Mao! You can muster all the divisions of your country, and we will still wipe out the invaders without mercy.

The remake also adds two brief musical sequences, in which montages of the good characters fighting and then (in the second such sequence that ends the movie) celebrating victory are accompanied by a nondiegetic choral soundtrack with rousing lines like “Chairman Mao’s strategy is mighty!” and “Chairman Mao leads us bravely forward!”

Particularly given how closely the film’s script in general hews to its 1955 precedent, when the remake is viewed after the original, the

now-obligatory lines of homage to Mao and the party feel awkwardly inserted, as if they are brief rhetorical rituals that interrupt the momentum of the film's dialogue and plot. Their addition to the screenplay reflects a shift in ideological rhetoric in the course of the Cultural Revolution. Many have noted that the early stage of 1966–68—marked by the chaos of local uprisings, often violent struggle sessions within schools and other communities, Red Guard factional warfare, and mass migrations of young people to Beijing to be reviewed by Mao himself in Tiananmen Square—was quite different from the much longer, later stage from 1969 to 1976. As Pang puts it, “the Cultural Revolution could be separated roughly into two periods: the first three years corresponded to a period of semi-anarchy, after which the state largely resumed its functions.”⁵⁹ In terms of art and culture, Pang continues, the earlier stage’s “drive was to establish a new culture, while the second part aimed to solidify the status quo.”⁶⁰ By 1974 the almost liturgical recitations of praise to Mao and the party in the *Guerrillas on the Plain* remake likely struck audiences at the time less as the sort of intensely passionate youthful commitment to Mao and revolution that the early Red Guards experienced and more as the voice of the state enforcing the expected ideological orthodoxy.

Indeed, in his book on the cultural aspects of the Cultural Revolution, Paul Clark makes several observations that suggest that the formalist and formulaic nature of Cultural Revolution culture, notably the *yang-banxi*, gradually lessened their effectiveness as propaganda. According to Clark, Cultural Revolution formulas like the “three prominences,”⁶¹ partly through sheer repetition, resulted in a kind of banality in which, for example, the endless copying of heroic figures’ images “rendered them into kitsch icons” that were “empty of real substance,” akin to the omnipresence of Coca-Cola or Nike advertising logos in the visual culture of capitalist societies.⁶² Similarly, according to Clark, the model operas in particular “failed because of their very success in filling China’s stages and screens.”⁶³ While the cliché of “800 million people watching eight shows” (the initial “eight model works”) is an overstatement of the paucity of artistic offerings during the Cultural Revolution,⁶⁴ it was still the case that, as Clark puts it, the model operas “could not be avoided during the Cultural Revolution,” to the point that although they may have

been “enjoyed . . . on a first or even fifth viewing,” they eventually became tiresome.⁶⁵ Clark notes that by 1974, Chinese audiences welcomed any new feature films *not* based on *yangbanxi*, including the color remakes of older films, just to have a break from the repetitive hyping of the same *yangbanxi* heroes—indicating that, “by the mid-1970s, mass cynicism regarding the rhetorical hyperbole surrounding the model theatrical works was widespread.”⁶⁶ As a rare Westerner who lived in China as the Cultural Revolution drew to a close in 1974–75, Clark remembers that there was a notable rise in irony by the end of the period: “A certain tone in singing an aria from one of the model operas, a certain flick of the head in exaggerated parody of one of the central heroes, a clever rewording of a well-known verse could provide an outlet for a largely unspoken but shared sense of the ridiculous.”⁶⁷

PERFORMATIVE SHIFT AND TRANSCENDENT MASTER

All these observations on the repetitive and ritualized nature of political rhetoric in art by the time the two *Guerrillas on the Plain* remakes were released suggest that the transition from the initial stage of the Cultural Revolution to its later period just before Mao died may have reproduced in 1970s China what Alexei Yurchak has dubbed a “performative shift” in ideological rhetoric in the Soviet Union after the death of Stalin. Drawing on the distinction in linguistics between *constative* statements, which claim to accurately describe an objective reality, and *performative* utterances, which are not really evaluable as true or false but instead are meant to perform an action by their very utterance, Yurchak argues that after the death of Stalin, “the performative dimension of ritualized and speech acts rises in importance (it is important to participate in the reproduction of these acts at the level of form), while the constative dimension of these acts becomes open-ended, indeterminate, or simply irrelevant.”⁶⁸ Or, as Yurchak puts it, “it became increasingly more important to participate in the reproduction of the *form* of these ritualized acts of authoritative discourse than to engage with their constative meanings.”⁶⁹ In other words, owing to what Yurchak calls the “hegemony of form,” the ideological discourse, while losing none of its omnipresence as form, became

oddly detached from reality, in that Soviet citizens started to experience it precisely *as performative* rather than as constative, as keeping up an appearance rather than being real.

This distinction corresponds closely with the development of the historical war film in Mao-era China from the *Seventeen Years* to the Cultural Revolution, including, in the case of the latter, both the *yangbanxi* films and the remakes of earlier classical-style fiction films. The loss over time of those films' credibility in claiming to represent actual historical reality and their tendency to instead become generically stereotypical, artistically formalist, and ideologically formulaic exercises is not just analogous to but *part of* a performative shift in revolutionary rhetoric. Moreover, the broader performative shift in Chinese Communist ideological discourse illustrated by Chinese socialist formalism in cinema may ultimately have contributed to the same sort of instability of ideological meaning that Yurchak finds in Soviet rhetoric following the performative shift after Stalin's death, leading to possibilities for "increasingly frozen" and "replicated" ideological forms to suddenly develop new, unintended meanings or to lend themselves to the kinds of cynicism and irony Clark saw in China by the end of the Cultural Revolution.

The potential for this instability, explains Yurchak, grows out of what he dubs "Lefort's paradox," referring to French philosopher and anti-Stalinist socialist Claude Lefort, and in particular the latter's ambitious 1974 essay "Outline of the Genesis of Ideology in Modern Societies."⁷⁰ Lefort explains ideology in modern societies in terms of a basic contradiction or aporia that arises when human communities become aware of their own historicity or contingency, a phenomenon that is considered to be constitutive of the modern condition insofar as global modernities—including Communist movements in China and other non-Western societies—are inflected by certain modes of Enlightenment thought that helped to launch the modern age. In particular, modern forms of social organization and government are based on a conception that human societies are self-constituting. Forms of government are not consecrated by God or other supernatural origins but are created by human beings themselves as the primary agents of their own history. Whereas premodern civilizations conceived of their social organization as being determined from

elsewhere—the divine right of kings, the mandate of heaven, and so on—a modern society realizes that its structure is created immanently through its own historical processes, so that humans in theory also can change, abolish, or recreate their social forms and institutions at will according to what they think will lead to happiness and prosperity. The freedom this grants, however, is necessarily accompanied by a lack of any firm grounding—given the instability and contingency of the historical real itself—a tenuousness that must then be dissimulated if a stable political and social order is to be instituted. Any hegemonic political power must at least partially disavow its own contingent origins and instead develop a system of representation that consecrates its system of rule and makes it seem anchored to something permanent. In a modern society, “the external character of the ‘elsewhere’” comes not from “religious or mythical knowledge” but from “the transcendence of ideas”—ostensibly eternal values, such as those of the Enlightenment itself.⁷¹ This, for Lefort, is the very definition of ideology in modern societies. Certain ideas, “realized as pure transcendence” and ostensibly immutable, function to conceal the historicity and contingency of the social by claiming a certainty and stability beyond the historical real, an ability to grasp the social totality from some vantage point outside of it; however, because modernity itself teaches us that both these ideas and the social system they serve originated precisely in the social and in history, they are necessarily “haunted by tautology,” by the contradiction between the actual contingency and immanence of their creation and their claim to lie outside that contingency and connect to something transcendent that helps to establish the stability of the state and the social order.⁷² In the Chinese party state, what presented themselves as transcendent in order to solve that tautology were first the reified party, embodiment of the masses, in which the heroes in this and the preceding chapter found immortality, and second, especially during the Cultural Revolution, Mao himself.

It is part of the complexity of the Cultural Revolution that Mao was both the revolutionary advocating for shattering the stability of ossifying structures of society and culture and also the transcendent figure offering ideological stability through the turbulence. Mao’s launching of the Cultural Revolution was rather unique in that he called in effect for a

rebellion against the very state and party structures that he had helped to build. The danger that Mao sensed was what Wang Hui summarizes as the “statification” of the revolutionary party, in which its function as an insurgent historical political movement gives way to its integration into the framework of the state.⁷³ As Lefort has put it in the case of the USSR, “bureaucracy became a class in the Soviet Union at the very moment when, paradoxically, it integrated itself entirely into the state.”⁷⁴ For Wang, the Cultural Revolution was an attempt to forestall that tendency, and its failure meant precisely the further “statification” of the party and depoliticization of social life that occurred afterward in the reform era. But the process of statification arguably resumed not only after 1976 but after the early, more anarchic phase of the Cultural Revolution was over in the late 1960s. For Lefort (writing about Stalinism), with the transformation of a revolutionary party into a party state, “the claim to circumscribe within the boundaries of the organization access to the truth of revolutionary doctrine” is one of the aspects of party ideology that becomes totalitarianism once the party has been consolidated into a state structure.⁷⁵

In his study of the Soviet Union, Yurchak notes in particular Lefort’s suggestion that totalitarian modern societies can conceal the paradox of their own historicity through the figure of a “master” who is seen as standing outside both ideological discourse and history and having external knowledge of objective truths in a similar way to which an imagined religious or mythical “elsewhere” provided legitimacy to premodern social orders.⁷⁶ This, of course, was the ideological function of Stalin during his rule of the USSR—an idea that echoes Bazin’s argument that Stalin was represented in Soviet cinema as the “God of History,” who cannot be allowed to “fall into human contingency.”⁷⁷ In revolutionary China, the imaginary external position that rendered ideological discourse stable was of course embodied by the figure of Mao and all his metonyms, such as the scriptural “little red book” of his quotations. This had not been true in the early years of the PRC, when the party explicitly rejected “personality cults”; however, with the launching of the Great Leap Forward in 1958, as documented by Maurice Meisner’s study “The Cult of Mao Tse-tung,” Mao began “appearing on the historical scene as supreme leader and utopian prophet,” assuming a “unique and transcendent role,” a “cult

of the individual” that Mao himself argued was justified as long as “the individual concerned represents the truth. If he does, then he should be revered.”⁷⁸ In the following decade, with the Cultural Revolution, “the cult of Mao was to manifest itself in forms far more extreme than Stalin’s ‘personality cult’ ever had assumed,” with explicitly religious connotations, such as aligning Mao with heaven, the sun, and thereby “the forces of the cosmos”; calling “Mao Zedong thought” a “magic weapon” in a manner reminiscent of Daoist mysticism; and labeling his foes with terms drawn from the popular Buddhist supernatural imagination of monsters and demons.⁷⁹ Meisner notes that after the Cultural Revolution waned in fervor in 1968 and Mao himself moderated its radicalism, “the cult of the Chairman, ironically, grew ever more extravagant,” but now appeared less like a “spontaneous mass revolutionary movement” and more like “the performance of the established rituals of an orthodox church”—an observation in keeping with Yurchak’s idea of a “performative shift” and my descriptions of the increasing formalization of film style and conventionalization of cinematic narrative (including obligatory homages to Mao in film scripts).⁸⁰ As Meisner concludes, the Mao cult became “one of the most extreme examples in modern history of the alienation of the social power of the people into fetishized political authority.”⁸¹

The socialist realist gaze into off-screen ideological space by the heroes in revolutionary films reproduces the structure of Mao’s supposed transcendental perspective and can be read as a veritable illustration of Lefort’s paradox. Ideological discourse must claim to represent an “objective truth” outside of it, but the very external nature of this truth renders it unrepresentable within the discourse—which is thus forced to resort to an array of rhetorical sleights of hand. On one hand, the unrepresentable Truth is suggested as an off-screen sublime presence that, if not available to the direct gaze of the audience, is at least secondarily accessed by the relay of the socialist realist gaze of the heroic character, who, it is suggested, has gained access to it by becoming a true Communist. On the other hand, the Truth can yet be symbolized by the substitute image of a loaded ideological symbol, such as a flag, a simple signifier that nonetheless seems to transcendently anchor the entire symbolic field. In their access to ideological truth, fictional Communist protagonists thus

served as Mao surrogates, representing the party's access to the Truth through their own heroism. This imaginary link from the revolutionary romanticist hero to the party as a whole and ultimately to Mao himself became obvious, for example, in the case of the *Red Lantern* model opera film, in which the martyred hero Li Yuhe was played by lead actor Qian Haoliang 钱浩梁, who was said to have been picked in part because of a physical resemblance to Mao himself. So strong was the imaginary link between fictional heroes and the Great Helmsman that Qian was richly rewarded by Jiang Qing and eventually became deputy minister of culture toward the end of the Cultural Revolution (only to be persecuted soon thereafter, following the fall of the Gang of Four).

COMING TO A STANDSTILL

In *yangbanxi* cinema, with the entire film embracing socialist formalism, the overdetermination of every detail by ideological rather than realistic motivations goes hand in hand with an unmooring of form from reality, potentially destabilizing that very ideology in the manner that Yurchak describes with the performative shift. The stylized performance becomes such pure spectacle that the ideological content, precisely by being so rigorously formalized, threatens to become a mere surface itself, a superficial appearance that in fact signifies nothing. For example, the briefly frozen *liangxiang* poses of traditional drama, as adapted to *yangbanxi*, offer an obvious opportunity to turn the socialist realist gaze into something rigorously standardized as a discrete unit of meaning, in the same way that the histrionic poses of nineteenth-century Western melodrama were abstracted from the flow of the performance to be read as semantic units by the audience, as described by Pearson. Certainly many of the *liangxiang* struck by *yangbanxi* heroes appear to be gazes toward some off-screen horizon that could indicate the superior ideological vision of the socialist romanticist hero. However, in the sheer repetitiveness of the poses as well as the artificiality of the sets, the sense that the hero is in fact looking at something can be lost. Instead, particularly on repeated viewings, such looks could have struck audiences as being purely formulaic, possibly even vacant. In this sense, the adaptation of body language, particularly that

of the eyes, of *liangxiang* poses from traditional opera to revolutionary *yangbanxi* may have unintentionally clashed with the precedent set by the socialist realist gazes in films of the mimetic revolutionary realist tradition preceding the Cultural Revolution. Whereas the latter may more plausibly have convinced the viewer that the Communist hero actually *did* see the Truth of correct ideology, the *yangbanxi* hero may too plainly have been looking at nothing (Figure 28).

Mao himself embodied the fundamental contradiction between the desire to continue and further radicalize the revolution and the practical need to maintain a stable nation-state. With his call for a “continuous revolution,”⁸² Mao clearly sided *in theory* with the idea that the dialectics of revolution must continue within a Communist state even to the extent of threatening that state itself if a contradiction develops between the state bureaucracy and the revolutionary masses. In the course of the late 1950s and early 1960s, what Mao had initially identified as “contradictions among the people” in socialist society developed into a coherent theory of continuous revolution that found contradiction to be ubiquitous and permanent even in a society in socialist transformation, classes to be permanent features of society, and revolution in the form of class struggle consequently to require renewal indefinitely.⁸³ These views were based in part on the dialectical materialist conviction that reality develops through contradiction. Without contradiction, there can be no evolution or progress; reality and history itself would be in stasis.

Chapter 3 cited Paul Pickowicz’s argument that while melodrama served to introduce “basic Marxist notions of class struggle, capitalism, and imperialism” in leftist films of the Republican era, those “ideas were swallowed up by the melodramatic genre and reduced to stereotypes and caricatures” in a narrative mode based on “repetition and ritual.”⁸⁴ In that chapter, I argued that realism and melodrama are more intertwined than simply opposed to each other, and in chapter 4, I argued further that the match between melodrama and Communist art is hardly a surprising one, because melodrama’s goal of “wresting the true from the real” is of a kind with the Maoist priority of going beyond any surface-level realism to capture the inner truths of society and history as determined by the dialectical “laws” of historical materialism. Here, however, I will argue that



FIGURE 28. The socialist realist gaze as *liangxiang* in *The Red Detachment of Women* model opera film (1972).

the fundamental disjunction that occurs when melodramatic aesthetics are used to articulate Marxist dialectical theory—the disjunction identified by Pickowicz—finds a quintessential expression in the *yangbanxi* films.

In fact, the harnessing of melodrama by Marxism is not just something that was added by twentieth-century Communists. In a remarkable essay from 1948, Wylie Sypher argued that the writings of Marx and Engels themselves suffered from a mismatch between their dialectical philosophy and their sometimes melodramatic narration. Philosophically, they saw a world of complex, immanent dialectical processes without transcendent truths or final solutions; aesthetically, however, they narrated their ideas as melodrama, with its moral Manichaeism and ultimate revelations and closures.⁸⁵ *Capital*, for example, juxtaposes polarities like capital and labor as mythical oppositions, with the injustices committed against the masses set to be righted in a final, dramatic—even apocalyptic—revolutionary gesture. In a more recent study that cites Sypher, Elisabeth R. Anker reads *The Communist Manifesto* as a melodrama.⁸⁶ Jane Gaines also extended Sypher's original critique, arguing that it is the theory of contradiction,

particularly that between capital and labor, that, as she put it, “produces the ‘melos’ in *Capital*,” and that “the labor/capital dichotomy suggests characters acting out a scenario.”⁸⁷ Gaines further asserts that melodrama has long been a preferred artistic mode of revolutionary periods because of its ability to quickly dichotomize conflicts and identify enemies: “revolutionary melodrama can be depended upon to narrate intolerable historical conditions in such a way that audiences wish to see wrongs ‘righted,’ are even moved to act upon their reaffirmed convictions, to act against tyranny and for ‘the people.’”⁸⁸ Drawing also on Sergei Eisenstein’s critique of Charles Dickens and D. W. Griffith, Gaines nonetheless suggests that the dualism of melodrama is incompatible with dialectical theory, in which contradictions do not just face off and perhaps get decided by transcendent intervention but rather ceaselessly develop and transform through an immanent dynamic.

With these critiques of the relationship between Marxism and melodrama in mind, I would like to focus on one particular formal quirk of the 1970s model opera films, one repeated so often as to be considered a hallmark of their style. I am speaking of the tendency for the films to end in a frozen *tableau vivant*, which, among other things, serves as a veritable illustration of the “three prominences,” as it inevitably features the leading hero at the center, with other heroes and positive characters arrayed around him or her, all striking dramatic poses of, if not final triumph (the struggle will continue, after all), then more precisely the *absolute certainty* of final triumph. Nine of the ten revolutionary model opera films released from 1970 to 1975 employ *tableau vivant* endings, in which the actors stand motionless in a pictorial formation even as the shot goes on, sometimes combined with mobile framing during the frozen pose.⁸⁹ *Tableaux vivants* have a history in Western culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, having become both a parlor game among the Western European aristocracy, in which “living pictures” would reproduce the compositions of famous paintings, for example, and a technique used occasionally in European drama of the time, often with a pedagogical or didactic message.⁹⁰ More relevant in the case of the model opera films is the fact that the freezing of characters in *liangxiang* poses is part of the aesthetics of traditional Chinese opera, often as punctuation at the end of songs,

acrobatic routines, scenes, or plays. But whatever their dramaturgical origins, the concluding tableaux of the *yangbanxi* films drive home the message of the certainty of Communism's final victory through the cessation of all further movement among the actors, as if history itself has come to a stop in the full realization of Mao Zedong thought. The ending of *Fighting on the Plain* is typical of the model opera films. Having dispatched all the Japanese soldiers and finally shot the main villain, Kameta, when he refused to surrender, all the Communist soldiers and their civilian supporters gather in a typical frontal formation, with Zhao Yonggang in the center, and together chant the drama's last words: "Long live Chairman Mao! Long live the Chinese Communist Party!" The script's final instructions are as follows: "Together, excitedly, strike a majestic and heroic *liangxiang* pose."⁹¹ The camera zooms in on the pose, and the film ends.

It is with this in mind that I would like to return to Wylie Sypher's essay "Aesthetic of Revolution: The Marxist Melodrama" of over seventy years ago. Sypher's central argument concerns what he calls the "fallacy of melodrama," which he equates with the "fallacy of revolution." To summarize, whereas dialectical philosophy conceives of a reality of immanent contradictions driving ongoing processes of transformation and increasing complexity, melodrama instead depicts a world of stark polarities in which clear ethical choices lead to dramatic action converging upon a climax: "The tensions must concentrate toward a last overwhelming tableau, a final stasis beyond which one must not think."⁹² In its melodramatic depiction, "the culmination of the class struggle is the revolutionary stasis.... History is no longer a process; it is a gesture."⁹³ Staged this way, according to Sypher, "the revolution is a mythical act; the negation of negation is final justice."⁹⁴

If this were true, the dialectic would come to a standstill, the essence of revolutionary truth having been realized. But the actual philosophy of dialectical materialism is in line with Sartre's "existence precedes essence" dictum: human constructs have no abstract, absolute truth but emerge from and change with the material conditions of history and a physical reality always in flux. The implication of Lefort's paradox is that, with the hardening of ideological orthodoxy that especially tends to accompany the institutionalization of political and economic power structures, the

assumption increasingly is reversed: essence precedes existence; reality must be reducible to the now seemingly immutable categories and abstractions of the ruling ideology.

The theatrical stasis described by Sypher could hardly find a more literal representation than the frozen *tableaux vivants* that conclude most of the *yangbanxi* films, and it is in their conclusion with, to borrow Sypher's words, "a stasis so conclusive that it appears arbitrary" that we find a fundamental disjuncture between *yangbanxi* aesthetics and Marxist philosophy—and indeed between Maoist philosophy and Maoist political rule. Though Mao had clearly committed to the *theory* of continuous revolution, in reality, after the Cultural Revolution's early phases, what people saw depicted in cultural forms like the *yangbanxi* was on the contrary what Sypher called the revolutionary stasis, in which "the dialectic has been transvalued to a symbolic act, an apocalypse" expressed in a "theatrical stasis."⁹⁵ In her essay on the "prescriptive dramatic theory" of the Cultural Revolution, Ellen Judd, too, critiques the *yangbanxi* as in the end being more about resolution than about conflict and thus being strangely vulnerable to the "charge of portraying the end of class struggle—that being the main type of contradiction and conflict presented," which goes against Mao's very idea of continuous revolution.⁹⁶ If we recall the Shanghai left-wing films of the 1930s discussed in chapter 2, here we have something like the opposite extreme in revolutionary cinema: whereas the 1930s films lacked plot resolution or even any positive configuration of the possibility of revolution, instead just leaving openings through which such a vision might appear, the 1970s *yangbanxi* films end with reassuring and seemingly complete resolutions through spectacular frozen displays of the revolution in a state of seemingly final victory.

OVERDETERMINATION AND EXCESS

Cultural Revolution ideology and culture are widely supposed to have been characterized by the repression of human sexuality, yet it has become commonplace to point out the irony that the *yangbanxi* and the films made from them were very much able to inspire erotic fantasies. Paul Clark notes that poster stills of the heroines from the model ballets *The Red Detachment*

of Women and *The White-Haired Girl*—whether leaping with splayed legs or chained in a dungeon—adorned the walls above peasant brick beds and student bunks alike throughout China during the Cultural Revolution.⁹⁷ Wang Shuo 王朔, the infamous “hooligan literature” author of the late 1980s and after, as well as the irreverent film actor and director Jiang Wen 姜文 have both recalled that their youthful sexual feelings were aroused by *The Red Detachment of Women*.⁹⁸ In the 2006 Dutch documentary *Yang Ban Xi: The 8 Model Works* (Yan Ting Yuen), a middle-aged artist also remembers the *Red Detachment* ballet as his youthful favorite because the tight, skimpy uniforms of the dancing women soldiers exposed much of their legs: “Our first sexual feelings were aroused by *yangbanxi*. At last we’d discovered something real in the revolution.”

Why do these anecdotes attract our interest, aside from being mildly amusing? Of course, we can interpret these men’s childhood reactions as evidence of “resistance” against totalitarian control, minor acts of heroism in the struggle of the individual mind to be free even while subject to propaganda. However, framing teenage boys’ usual interests as evidence of political dissidence perhaps caters too easily to Western Cold War ideological fantasies of Mao-era China. We could more constructively view these responses as evidence for Ban Wang’s contention, in his landmark study of sublimation in Mao-era ideology and culture discussed in the last chapter, that

despite its puritanical surface, Communist culture is sexually charged in its own way. High-handed as it is, Communist culture does not—it cannot, in fact—erase sexuality out of existence. Rather, it meets sexuality halfway, caters to it, and assimilates it into its structure. Communist culture was attractive to some extent precisely because it incorporated sexuality.⁹⁹

As Rosemary Roberts puts it specifically in regard to the presentation of women’s bodies in *The Red Detachment of Women*, “the sexualisation of female costume in fact functions to heighten the appeal of the class message encoded into female characters.”¹⁰⁰ At the same time, as I suggested in chapter 4, revolutionary films aiming to sublimate the libidinal energy of certain of their elements—whether physically attractive performers or the film conventions of love stories—necessarily also made it possible for

spectators simply to enjoy those elements in their unsublimated forms. The athletic bodies in motion in the *Red Detachment of Women* model ballet film are no exception—and despite the expression of specifically male heterosexual desires in the examples mentioned earlier, no doubt we can be sure that the *yangbanxi* films inspired erotic fantasies across genders and sexualities. Chris Berry has pointed out that the dance that pairs the heroine, Qinghua, with her Communist Party savior, Changqing, functions as a pas de deux even if its narrative content is about political “guidance and inspiration” rather than “individual romantic passion.”¹⁰¹ I would add that a dance Qinghua performs as a fight with an enemy soldier much later in the film functions as well as a pas de deux, with a hint of a more deviant eroticism of gender role reversal, as Qinghua physically dominates her opponent in an intimate way through dance before finally dispatching him, eroticizing the strong women figures who were characteristic of Chinese revolutionary representation.

To conclude this discussion of Cultural Revolution cinema, however, I would like to emphasize a broader implication of these anecdotes of the consumption of *yangbanxi* films as erotic spectacle, namely, the *necessary* presence of cinematic excess even in forms of cinema that are said to be the most rigorously constructed according to ideological principles that inform every detail. Kristin Thompson defines cinematic excess as anything in a film that lacks or exceeds narrative function or motivation: “at that point where motivation fails, excess begins.”¹⁰² Classical Hollywood-based film narration draws our attention away from excess with its “struggle by the unifying structures to ‘contain’ the diverse elements that make up its whole system,” keeping the focus on the story being told.¹⁰³ The *yangbanxi* films of the Cultural Revolution would seem, on one hand, to offer an extreme example of such “unifying structures,” given what Barbara Mittler calls their “absolute monolithic quality (一元化), of perfect univalence” that, “at least in theory, allowed for one and only one interpretation.”¹⁰⁴ Such a view is reinforced by anecdotes about, for example, Jiang Qing forcing a reshoot of a model opera film because she was not satisfied with the shade of red on the heroine’s scarf.¹⁰⁵ And yet, those young viewers’ focus on patches of exposed skin on the screen show that any shot of any film, no matter how carefully and redundantly determined by political

messaging, nonetheless offers countless details that could lend themselves to what Paul Willemen and Christian Keathley have labeled “cinephiliac moments” in a film, which capture our interest in a way irreducible to intended messaging and yet lead to a powerful response in the spectator.¹⁰⁶ As John Mullarkey puts it, whether intended or not, any film offers “unseen aesthetic adventures of matter both on the surface and beneath the subject of figuration.”¹⁰⁷ The possibility of such adventures—such cinephiliac moments—in audiences’ experiences of the *yangbanxi* films testifies to the material richness of the film image as well as the imagination of the spectator. While we usually think of the *yangbanxi* as a form of cinema in which every detail is most strictly motivated by politics and ideology, they could be vehicles of rampant cinematic excess. Particularly when we consider how many times the films and the plays on which they were based were viewed by the typical PRC citizen, we can speculate that for many, they would have become almost pure examples of excess. After the political message had long since become ignored cliché, the spectacle nonetheless could retain interest; the number of notes the brigade party secretary might melismatically hit in a single syllable during an aria would hold much more attraction than the commune crop yield goals about which she might be singing. The strictest subjugation of art by politics thus paradoxically can result in art for art’s sake.

It was with that conviction that the article that was my first, tentative effort to outline some of the arguments developed in this and the preceding chapter concluded with the speculation that, despite their deserved reputation as an ultimate example of art being subjected to politics, “the lasting legacy of the *yangbanxi* [films] may well continue, somewhat ironically, to be the triumph of their formal innovation over their political agenda.”¹⁰⁸ Since then, several major studies by other scholars have reinforced this conviction. Mittler’s *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture* includes several quotations from artists and audiences who lived through the Cultural Revolution confirming that, although everybody knew that the *yangbanxi* were intended as political propaganda, it was the artistic quality that actors, artists, and musicians achieved under Jiang Qing’s high standards that made them widely enjoyable.¹⁰⁹ A guiding theme of Pang Laikwan’s *The Art of Cloning: Creative*

Production during China's Cultural Revolution is that a certain autonomy of the aesthetic and the sensorial accompanied Cultural Revolution art even at its most politicized. Chris Berry's essay "Red Poetics: The Films of the Chinese Cultural Revolution Revolutionary Model Operas" similarly concludes that it is a paradoxical autonomy of form that lends the *yangbanxi* an ongoing aesthetic appeal even in the post-Mao era.¹¹⁰ In a comprehensive study of the stage model operas, Xing Fan concludes that the exacting pursuit of aesthetic beauty characterized them in all their aspects, from acting to music to costume and set design.¹¹¹ It makes for a curious dialectical reversal—that a prescriptive mode of realism ostensibly steeped in political utilitarianism would result in a triumph of artistic form over content. However, if my argument is correct, such a development in the arts corresponds and contributes to the overall performative shift in ideological discourse after the radical grassroots political struggles of the early Cultural Revolution subsided.

At the same time, although I have discussed them as the culmination of Chinese socialist formalism, from a post-Mao historical perspective, one real value of the *yangbanxi* films may be precisely their *realism*—but in a very particular sense. Recall Rosen's distinction between the two past times represented by any historical film—the time of the performance before the camera, captured directly through cinema's ontological realism, and the time of the historical events referenced, a much more indirect signification. Quite likely, even audiences at the time appreciated the *yangbanxi* films as direct recordings of extraordinary opera and ballet performances rather than as representations of historical reality. In that sense, they enjoyed the film medium's realist capacity to record precisely the moment of *performance*. Today, still, we value them as records of those performances as well as broader indices of an extraordinary moment of revolutionary culture saturated in performativity, displaying with a kind of terrible beauty how the revolutionary impulse not only to struggle but to transcend can stall and ultimately be thwarted by its own aporias.

6

A Long Take on Post-Socialist Realism

Where should Chinese cinema go after the Cultural Revolution? This was a question that was answered in theory before it was worked out in practice. By 1979, critics in China had begun calling for a new approach to filmmaking that was self-consciously reacting against the aesthetics of the Cultural Revolution and implicitly even the entire revolutionary period. This thinking would soon be reflected in works like the 1980 film *Evening Rain* (*Bashan yeju* 巴山夜雨; Wu Yonggang 吴永刚 and Wu Yigong 吴贻弓). In terms of its story, *Evening Rain* offers a fairly standard “scar” narrative of the immediate post-Cultural Revolution period, exploring wounds suffered by individuals as a result of violence and separations during those “ten years of chaos,” as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) now officially called them.¹ Typically for scar stories, *Evening Rain* employs melodrama—including the unjust suffering of the virtuous and a wildly implausible coincidence in which a poet returning under police escort to his hometown by boat after six years of imprisonment is ultimately reunited with the young daughter he has never met, who just happens to be stowing away on the same ship. Melodramatic scar literature and cinema critiqued the excesses of the Cultural Revolution and aired the resentments of its victims, but it also served implicitly to support the political ideology of the New Era (*xin shiqi* 新时期) of “reform and opening” (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放) that was dawning. The works thus generally would explicitly blame the extremism of the Gang of Four, not the Communist Party in general or Mao Zedong himself, for the depicted abuses and gesture toward a better life to come under the Four Modernizations of the new regime.²

In the context of the preceding chapter's discussion of the *yangbanxi* or revolutionary "model theater" films of the early 1970s, *Evening Rain* is of interest in particular for a moment early in the film that reflexively positions the new period of post-Cultural Revolution filmmaking against the ideological and aesthetic formulas exemplified by the stage-based *yangbanxi*. A side character is a young man and former Red Guard who now openly challenges the ideological conformism of the Cultural Revolution. When an older passenger on the ship drops a book he is reading, the young man picks it up and, seeing that it is a print version of the model opera *Fighting on the Plain*, sarcastically says, "Ah, a model [work]! Originating in cinema, [yet] loftier than cinema!" The reference is to the fact that *Fighting on the Plain* was a revolutionary model opera adapted from the more classical-style 1955 feature fiction film *Guerrillas on the Plain*. Through his mocking comment, the young man on the boat in *Evening Rain* gave fictional voice to a broad perception among filmmakers and film critics that the aesthetic strengths proper to cinema had been hijacked during the Cultural Revolution by those proper to drama and that the overdramatization of film had severed it from its function of the truthful depiction of reality. That is, the man's youthful sarcasm implicates not only the model opera that "originated from" the 1955 film but also the 1974 opera *film* of the same story, in which the subjection of cinema to drama culminates in this double remediation—a film based on a play based on a film, all ostensibly based on historical reality (see chapter 5). The fictional former Red Guard's derisive comment suggests that in comparison with the earlier film, the opera film's stylized form, in pursuing a "loftier" truth—socialist formalism facilitating prescriptive realism—had in fact neglected cinema's capacity for a more true-to-life realism and therefore undermined its power as an art form.

This post-Cultural Revolution moment of critique in *Evening Rain* serves as an instance of the historical dialectics of realism as identified early in the twentieth century by Roman Jakobson (see the introduction).³ Prescriptive socialist realism had become so stylized—its claim to "revolutionary realism" so overwhelmed by its formulaic deployment of "revolutionary romanticism" in content and socialist formalism in style—that it no longer seemed to offer access to the real at all but, on the

contrary, was seen as betraying cinema's potential truth-revealing function by its ideological abstraction and aesthetic theatricalization. According to Jakobson, it is precisely at such moments, when an artistic style formerly viewed as realist appears increasingly as merely a set of conventions, that radically new approaches will be deployed by artists to break with those conventions and reestablish a sense of contact with the real through art.

Or, to turn to another touchstone of previous chapters, Jörg Schweinitz's study of film stereotypes ("conventionalized representational patterns shared and accepted by artists and viewers within a given period"), we come here to a moment when there is a general desire for a conscious critique of, and emancipation from, a set of cinematic conventions that were strongly felt to have become *passé* and constricting.⁴ At such a moment, according to Schweinitz, two strategies tend to be pursued: "one, the aim to renounce popular stereotyping by accessing reality as closely as possible, and, two, the (reflexive) filmic critique of such patterns."⁵ The first instance manifested in the post-Mao period through various new claims to practices of realism unsullied by politics or ideology. Often these new realisms would be rendered as either *jishi* 纪实 (recording the real) or *xieshi* 写实 (inscribing the real) rather than the officially favored *xianshi* 现实 (manifesting the real), the changed terminology itself being a marker of a transition from socialist realism to a new and quite different conception of realism. As Schweinitz puts it, such a practice of realism seeks "to regain reality through consistent renunciation of conventional forms of representation."⁶ Meanwhile, the second strategy he outlines—stereotype critique—employs tactics of defamiliarization, estrangement, or parody to consciously foreground the previous conventions in order to undermine or subvert them in various ways.

This chapter examines in detail the extended post-Cultural Revolution period in cinematic discourse and practice, beginning in 1979, sketching out the historical dynamics of style and the rejection of Mao-era film conventions as suggested earlier. Rather than following the usual practice of dividing post-Mao filmmakers into generations, with key ruptures occurring with the rise of the so-called Fifth Generation in the 1980s and the Sixth Generation in the 1990s, I argue instead for the continuity of a diverse but identifiable set of thematic interventions and

stylistic preferences that can be summarized as *post-socialist realism*, a phenomenon that takes hold in theory in 1979 and emerges fitfully in practice across films of many different “generations” of filmmakers who worked from the 1980s into the new century. Post-socialist realism sought to deform the conventions of revolutionary prescriptive realism while also employing different methods to provoke a new, ostensibly less ideologically encumbered encounter with reality through cinema. These methods include on-location shooting, natural lighting and sound, naturalistic performances that sometimes involve nonprofessional actors, long shots and long takes, handheld camerawork, episodic narratives, attention to seemingly irrelevant details, and an openness to contingency in filming, to name a few of the most important. These two aspects of post-socialist realism—genre subversion and what can be summed up as stylistic neorealism—are apparent in a wide range of films throughout the first three decades of the reform era. Some films undertake the genre deconstruction more than the neorealist aesthetic, and others have the neorealist style without necessarily engaging the Mao-era genre conventions, but a striking number of important films undertake both aspects simultaneously. Of course, in keeping with what Jakobson suggests as the historical dialectics of realism, the new set of “realist” conventions established by post-socialist realism would themselves eventually appear as formulaic, so that even some of their own practitioners began to deform them in turn.

POSTSOCIALISM, POST-SOCIALIST REALISM, AND THE MODERNIZATION DISCOURSE

The term *postsocialism*, though rarely used in China itself, has been employed frequently by scholars in the West to describe the condition of China after Mao, particularly after the 1980s. Arif Dirlik first proposed the term in 1989 to refer not to a capitalist China that had discarded socialism but rather to China still in a state of “actually existing socialism” (as opposed to an idealized form) that nonetheless sought to redefine the relation between Chinese socialism and capitalist modernity.⁷ Within a few years, the articulation of Chinese socialism to global capitalism became

so tight that a cynic might well say that the emerging “socialism with Chinese characteristics” was merely a face-saving euphemism for capitalism itself, owing to the ongoing economic boom and the accompanying marketization, if not outright privatization, of more and more sectors of the economy, including the film industry and other cultural institutions. A number of scholarly books on contemporary China have featured the term *postsocialism*, just as many works on Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have used *postsocialist*, *post-Communist*, or *post-Soviet* to describe those societies since 1989.⁸

Specifically in the realm of Chinese cinema studies, the term *postsocialism* was used as early as 1994 in an essay published by Paul Pickowicz and another coauthored by Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar, both of which focused on *Black Cannon Incident* (*Hei pao shijian* 黑炮事件; Huang Jianxin 黄建新, 1985), with Berry and Farquhar also applying the term to *Yellow Earth* (*Huang tudi* 黄土地; Chen Kaige, 1984).⁹ Berry would employ the label in discussing a set of films from even earlier in his book *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China*, which covers films made in the late 1970s to early 1980s.¹⁰ Yingjin Zhang later parsed the concept of postsocialism as a label for historical periodization, a structure of feeling, a set of aesthetic practices, and a regime of political economy, all as reflected in cinema of the “urban generation” that emerged in the 1990s.¹¹ Berry emphasizes that “postsocialism is a disaggregated phenomenon that emerges gradually in fits and starts in different parts of the socio-cultural formation in different ways and at different times.”¹² I agree with this flexible use of the term, even though elsewhere I have argued that a generalized condition of “postsocialist modernity” did not really predominate until the 1990s.¹³

I first used the specific phrase “postsocialist realism” in a discussion of the early films of Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯, in which I argued that those films are post-socialist realist in two senses: first, they are a realism of the postsocialist social and economic condition, and second, they self-consciously supplant and oppose the cinematic aesthetics of socialist realism and its successor, state-sanctioned “main melody” or “leitmotif” (*zhuxuanlü* 主旋律) cinema, as well as commercialized entertainment cinema.¹⁴ For the purposes of this chapter, I hyphenate *post-socialist* to highlight this second sense, more clearly retaining the implied “socialist

realism” against which post-socialist realism began to differentiate itself soon after the Cultural Revolution. Post-socialist realism invokes the legacy of Maoism—sometimes directly through nostalgic or parodic citation, but more generally by developing as its dialectical other in form. The decades-long phenomenon of post-socialist realism began with critical discussions in 1979 and in films of the early Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 reform era, and it eventually blended into more contemporary practices, such as independent digital video (DV) filmmaking, which is discussed in both this and the next chapter.

In their landmark 1979 essay “On the Modernization of Film Language,” filmmaker Zhang Nuanxin 张暖忻 and critic Li Tuo 李陀 in many ways anticipated the course of development of post-socialist realism in Chinese cinema over multiple decades and “generations.”¹⁵ As Yingjin Zhang has noted, although the essay was first known as a manifesto for the Fourth Generation filmmakers—most of whom began making films immediately following the Cultural Revolution, although they had been trained earlier—many of the ideas in the essay did not come fully to fruition—or result in films that gained widespread recognition, particularly internationally—until the films of the Fifth and Sixth Generation Chinese filmmakers (many of whom had studied with instructors from the Fourth Generation).¹⁶ Indeed, it is remarkable how well the essay both encapsulates the significance of its historical moment—just months after Deng Xiaoping had consolidated power and launched the reform era—and portends developments in Chinese cinema that would play out over the decades to come. The authors not only addressed and deepened points that recently had been made by others—most notably a critique of Chinese film as having become overly dramaturgical—but also began what would be a decades-long engagement with inter- and postwar Western film theory and practice, in particular, the methods advocated by French critic and theorist André Bazin and the “global neorealism” indebted to the Italian Neorealist movement that he championed.¹⁷

The polemic against the overdramatization of Chinese film had been launched earlier in the same year, when Bai Jingsheng 白景晟 urged Chinese cinema to “throw away the crutch of theater.”¹⁸ The essence of drama, according to Bai, was conflict (*chongtu* 冲突), and Chinese filmmakers

were all too apt to use dramaturgical methods of plot construction. Film, he argued, does not have to focus so exclusively on fictional characters and their conflicts but can express things through natural landscapes or objects as well as through techniques distinctive to film. In their essay that soon followed, Zhang Nuanxin and Li Tuo reiterated Bai's criticism of overdramatization, but they placed it in the context of a teleological narrative of world cinema history, the urgent overall message of which was that Chinese cinema had fallen behind and must "catch up with the development of world cinematic art."¹⁹ Even in that larger frame, drama becomes cinema's foil, with the progress of film art measured by how much it distances itself from drama. Early film is said to have been dependent on theater but to have gradually established its own cinematic aesthetic by the end of the silent era. The coming of sound prompted a temporary retrogression, in which dramatic principles again came to dominate film, but movements like Italian Neorealism and the French New Wave helped to steer cinema back to its own path and made significant advances in film aesthetics. The overarching history told by Zhang and Li is summed up by their claim that "a trend in the modern development of world film art is that the narrative mode of film language (or one could say film's structural method) has increasingly shed its theatrical influence and instead in every respect advanced toward becoming more cinematic."²⁰

Zhang and Li's teleological narrative of film history suggested that cinema had a universal history from which China had quite simply been absent. Of course, the idea that China must catch up with the world was not so subversive for the essay's historical moment, playing as it did into the overall ideology of the early Deng era; indeed, Zhang and Li explicitly cite the objective of "meeting the wider aesthetic needs of the people for cinematic art that can realize the Four Modernizations in the New Era."²¹ Such appeals to the ideology of progress implicit in the official slogan of modernization may have been in part a rhetorical strategy in that, if filmmakers and film critics wanted to see more attention paid to artistic form and less to political content, ironically, their arguments might have been most effectively framed within the political master narrative of the Four Modernizations. Similarly, the rejection of "dramatic conflict" at this moment was in part a coded, tentative way of challenging the socialist

realist orthodoxy that class struggle should be at the center both of art's function and its content. In lamenting the excessive influence of drama, with its overreliance on "conflict," these critics were obliquely critiquing not only dramaturgical film aesthetics but, more broadly, the instrumentalization of film by revolutionary politics. In the rhetoric of these essays, "drama" stands in for the aesthetics of socialist realism in general, so that the call for film to evolve from the dramatic to the properly cinematic is not simply about the intermedial relationship of film to theater but more fundamentally about a new ideology of depoliticization, calling for an increased autonomy of art from politics in the reform era. Zhang and Li repeatedly make the obligatory gesture of blaming the Gang of Four for the stalled development of cinema in China, and shortly after their first mention of the Gang of Four, they somewhat daringly go further: "What needs to be pointed out is that the trend that, in artistic creation, one can speak only of politics rather than of art, only of content rather than of form, only of the artist's worldview rather than of artistic skill, did not completely begin with the rampage of the Gang of Four."²² They go on to urge a more sophisticated view of the Marxist theory of the relation of form to content and, implicitly, the relation of art to political economy, or superstructure to base.

Zhang and Li explicitly praised French and Italian politically inflected films that "do not rely on the concept of dramatic conflicts to develop the plot" but instead "employ a 'realist' [*jishi*] method from beginning to end, imbuing the films with a very strong documentary style, making it seem as if what we see is not a fabricated story but rather is like an actual record of a real political incident."²³ The methods of cinematic realism thus are explicitly tied to a realistic representation of history, in implicit contrast to the highly formalized revolutionary myths that came to dominate filmmaking in the Mao era. The essay also credits André Bazin with leading a group of critics and filmmakers in challenging Eisenstein's montage theory and instead pursuing the "long-take theory."²⁴ Indeed, the essay launched what would become a decades-long fascination with Bazinian aesthetics among many Chinese critics and filmmakers—in terms of both the promulgation of Bazin's film theory and the championing of Italian Neorealism as a model. As Cecile Lagesse puts it, Bazin's "approach to

cinematic realism would allow filmmakers and critics to rethink cinema's relationship to reality after the Cultural Revolution and to free cinema from its former role as an ideological conduit."²⁵ Less than a year after the landmark essay on the modernization of film language, Li Tuo followed with a more specific essay titled "An Attention-Worthy School of Cinematic Aesthetics—On the Long-Take Theory," coauthored with Zhou Chuanji 周传基.²⁶ Lagesse documents a number of other significant articles that would follow over the years, and even those only scratch the surface of Bazin's penetration into the Chinese discourse on cinema and the remarkably consistent importance of his ideas for various filmmakers from the Fourth Generation through the Sixth Generation.²⁷ Jia Zhangke, a film theory concentrator in the Beijing Film Academy (BFA) literature department during the mid-1990s who would go on eventually to become the most renowned Sixth Generation filmmaker, virtually paraphrases Bazin in many of his interviews, even if he rarely mentions him by name. Bazin's influence continued into the new century; the leading film journal *Contemporary Cinema* (*Dangdai dianying* 当代电影), for example, published a special section on Bazin in 2008. A full-text search for Bazin in the Chinese Academic Journals Database turns up references to him in 601 articles published from 1979 to 1989, 799 articles published from 1990 to 2000, and an astounding 2,407 articles published between 2001 and 2011.²⁸ I will give some detailed examples of how Bazinian aesthetics manifested in post-socialist realist Chinese films later in this chapter, but first we will consider how these films subverted the genre conventions—and thereby the historical claims and political ideology—of Mao-era socialist realism.

GENRE SUBVERSION

Many films of the post-socialist era adopted genre stereotypes of the Mao era, but (to paraphrase Schweinitz) rather than adhering to the conventionalized worlds of their generic precedents, they instead reflexively conduct a critical discourse on them.²⁹ Their undermining of prescriptive realism relies partly on an unmasking gesture that claims a truer sense of realism: "In its systematically organized references to the mythological world of the genre, the film seems to wish to express: Look, this is the

abject reality hidden behind by the mythical world of appearances.”³⁰ I have written previously about one example, *Black Cannon Incident*, which cued and then systematically subverted the genre conventions of the Mao-era spy thriller.³¹ In that film, a black cannon Chinese chess piece comes to embody the entire mythical world of antiforeign suspicion that the counterespionage genre upheld, which eventually is revealed to be an ideological fantasy empty of any connection to reality in the context of China during the Four Modernizations.

In the films examined in chapters 4 and 5 of this book, the main legitimating story of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) told by cinema was the master narrative of Communist victories in the civil war against the Nationalists as well as the war of resistance against occupying Japan, so first we will focus on post-socialist realist films dealing with war and the military. The undermining of the myth of Communist military prowess began in particular with some early films of the so-called Fifth Generation—the first generation of filmmakers to enter (in 1978) and later graduate (1982) from the Beijing Film Academy, the nation’s primary film school.³²

One of the earliest feature films made by the Fifth Generation, *The One and the Eight* (*Yi ge he ba ge* 一个和八个; Zhang Junzhao 张军钊, 1983), follows a group of Eighth Route Army soldiers as well as nine Chinese prisoners they are escorting as they all retreat from the advancing enemy during the early stages of the Japanese occupation. Controversial and only released later after more editing, the stunningly shot film is the first for which Zhang Yimou worked as the primary cinematographer. It begins with an authoritative-sounding voice-over narration setting the historical stage with rhetoric about the Communist Party uniting the people in patriotic resistance to the Japanese, thus cueing the genre expectations for anti-Japanese war films set by countless films of the Mao era featuring heroic resistance led by the Communist Party. The genre is quickly defamiliarized, however, as the retreating troops are unsure even about whether their Chinese prisoners are good guys or bad guys, and often mutual mistrust as well as the barren wasteland through which they retreat—featured in extreme long shots that make the human figures seem tiny and vulnerable—appear to be as much of a threat as the Japanese

enemy. All the main characters were played by actors who looked like the desperate and in some cases outlaw characters they were supposed to play. In his insider memoir, Ni Zhen tells of how the actors shaved their heads and suntanned their bodies in preparation, to the point that they scared some locals while passing through train stations to reach the shooting location. Such a lifelike depiction of bandits, writes Ni Zhen, contrasted starkly with the “caricatured villains” of the earlier Chinese war movies, “who were as stereotyped as Chinese opera masks.”³³ Other markers of authenticity—like on-location shooting in the rugged and sweltering Hebei desert and elaborately weathered uniforms worn by the soldiers—gave the film a very different look from the studio sets and crisp costumes of the earlier films.³⁴ In the end, rather than sharing much DNA with patriotic war films like *Guerrillas on the Plain*, *The One and the Eight* turns out to be more in the lineage of Western philosophical antiwar films like *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Lewis Milestone, 1930), *The Grand Illusion* (Jean Renoir, 1937), and *A Walk in the Sun* (Lewis Milestone, 1945), with undercurrents of absurdism and existential bleakness and an art film mode of narration. In a typical bit of dialogue, the question “We’ve been running for a day—are the [Japanese] devils chasing us, or are we chasing them?” is answered with “It’s war: you chase me, and I chase you.” Instead of inevitable triumph under Communist leadership, the film conveys war as a redundant cycle of pointless exhaustion.

Later, Zhang Yimou would serve again as chief cinematographer for *The Big Parade* (*Da yuebing* 大阅兵), made by a BFA classmate, Chen Kaige. Although also a military film, in this case, the setting is contemporary rather than historical, and there is no enemy with which to contend, just preparations for the upcoming National Day military parade in Tiananmen Square. Often read as an ambiguous allegory about individualism versus collectivism,³⁵ *The Big Parade* features voice-over narration by multiple characters with quite different voices and viewpoints and a drill sergeant who expresses doubt about whether he even understands his own soldiers. The film’s release was delayed until 1986 partly because the Guangxi Film Studio, the military, and the Ministry of Culture Film Bureau insisted that it should end with the titular big parade on National Day—whereas Chen had planned to end it with footage of an empty

parade ground.³⁶ Even in its compromised final cut, the film is striking for its depiction of a People's Liberation Army without any requisite heroism (though with humanity) and for its attention to the vast differences in personality and motivation among the soldiers. Paul Clark observes that the film's "profound ambivalence" regarding military service matched the filmmakers' own ambivalent feelings about China, and the lack of any obvious patriotism itself marks the great distance of the emerging post-socialist realism from the univocal nationalism of Mao-era war films.³⁷

Whereas *The One and the Eight* and *The Big Parade* undermine the myth of Communist military victory largely through their ponderous art film style and relative lack of heroic action, a much later post-socialist realist film, Jiang Wen's 姜文 *Devils on the Doorstep* (*Guizi laile* 鬼子来了; 2000), represents a more thorough dismantling of revolutionary-era war film conventions through black comedy and parody. The film's Chinese title, "the devils are coming," immediately cues the expectations of the historical master narrative of resistance against Japanese aggression. Using the common slur against the Japanese occupiers, that exact line of dialogue had appeared in battle scenes of multiple classic Mao-era war films.³⁸ As Gary Xu has detailed, the director's own memory of watching such films while growing up molded his imagination of the war, and it is those mediated prosthetic memories that he playfully explores in *Devils on the Doorstep*, beginning with the fact that it is filmed almost entirely in black and white, in keeping with most of its Mao-era precedents.³⁹ As *Devils on the Doorstep* begins, the setup appears to confirm such genre expectations. A Communist guerrilla fighter knocks on the door of a local peasant's hut to seek assistance for the underground resistance in a Japanese-occupied area. A similar scene had appeared near the beginning of *Railway Guerrillas*, for example, in which guerrilla fighters knock at a village hut, a voice from inside asks, "Who is it?" and the guerrillas reply, "Me. Hurry and open the door!" In *Devils on the Doorstep*, the peasant inside the hut is the hapless protagonist, Ma Dasan, and the situation is immediately made comical by the fact that Dasan is having sex with his girlfriend inside when the knock occurs. While his girlfriend scurries to hide, Dasan has the same brief exchange with his unseen visitor not once but three times: "Who is it?" "Me." In *Railway Guerrillas*, the villager

opens the door, and a warm reunion ensues, the conventions of socialist realism dictating that the Communist cadre must be handsome, courageous, and in solidarity with the peasants on whose behalf he fights to liberate the country, while the peasants whose help is enlisted would in turn be inspired to revolutionary consciousness by the brave cadre. But in *Devils on the Doorstep*, the lone Communist character is hardly seen, except as a handgun and then a sword extended into the frame from off-screen—weapons that are used to threaten the fearful peasant Dasan into compliance with the guerrilla's demands: to keep watch over a kidnapped Japanese soldier and his translator until the Communists return. Neither the unseen guerrilla nor the scared and confused Ma Dasan appears to be particularly admirable, and the entire film is in fact devoid of heroism. The Chinese people under occupation are depicted hardly more favorably than either their brutal Japanese occupiers or the dim-witted American soldiers who appear at the end of the film, after the Japanese have at last been defeated. Even the casting of the film mocks its Mao-era generic precedents. Attentive viewers would have recognized the actor playing the would-be executioner “One-Stroke Liu,” an ostensibly legendary swordsman who turns out to be merely a crazy old man, as the eighty-plus-year-old Chen Qiang 陈强, the “villain star” who had portrayed evil landlords in the Mao-era classics *The White-Haired Girl* and the original *Red Detachment of Women*—his menacing performances in those films now being reduced to ridiculous parody. Stylistically, much of *Devils on the Doorstep* employs aspects of neorealism, with mostly handheld cameras shooting often in claustrophobic interior spaces lit by a single light source, plunging much of the frame into darkness, and many minor characters being played by nonprofessional actors, some of whom also served as crew members.

Still other classics of post-socialist realism perform similar generic subversions, not of war films but of the party-promoted master narrative of China’s liberation from poverty and feudal oppression and its subsequent economic development under Communism. The later stage of the Cultural Revolution, for example, had featured not only revised versions of war films like *Guerrillas on the Plain* but also films like *The Fiery Years* (*Huohong de niandai* 火红的年代; Fu Chaowu 傅超武, Sun Yongping

孙永平, and Yu Zhongying 俞仲英, 1973), about improved methods of steel production, and *Hongyu* (红雨; Cui Wei 崔嵬, 1975), about expanding rural health care through training “barefoot doctors.” Both films had included obligatory villains—class enemies who tried to sabotage the progress in socialist construction—so that the “drama” of class conflict still was depicted, but mainly they convey an image of ever-improving national wealth and well-being through socialist development. These types of narratives also came under the critique of the post-socialist realist films beginning in the 1980s.

One example is *Yellow Earth*, the definitive early Fifth Generation tour de force featuring the team of Chen Kaige as director and Zhang Yimou, soon to become a globally famous director himself, as cinematographer. The film is set on the remote Loess (or “yellow earth”) Plateau along the Yellow River in north China during the civil war period. Gu Qing, a handsome visiting cadre from the Communist base area in Shaanxi, is idolized by Cuiqiao, a young woman oppressed by the feudal patriarchal traditions of her poverty-stricken region. For the Chinese spectator of the immediate post-Mao period, this would quickly bring to mind the structure of apprenticeship found in such red classics as *The Song of Youth* and *The Red Detachment of Women*, in which a spunky young woman with instinctive revolutionary tendencies is mentored by an attractive, young, male Communist Party member. In those cases, as we saw in chapter 4, a romantic bond between heroine and cadre is suggested through the visual conventions of Hollywood romance, even if it is absent in explicit form in the script. In *Yellow Earth*, however, Cuiqiao is a girl of fourteen, complicating the audience’s perception of any implicit romance, even though clearly something like a teenage crush is happening (Figure 29). To make matters worse, the cadre utterly fails to save her from the awful fate bestowed on her by local traditions. Cuiqiao is married off against her will to a much older man, and she eventually dies trying to flee across the Yellow River to search for the Communist base after Gu Qing neglected to return to her village before her forced marriage to give her a chance to fulfill her dream of joining the revolution. The thwarting of the norms of Chinese socialist realism, both artistic and ideological, was quite conscious and intentional. As Chen Kaige himself has said, “from the perspective of



FIGURE 29. Cuiqiao and Gu Qing in *Yellow Earth* (1984) (cf. Figure 22d).

art, and even politics, we had a very strong desire to reject the entire age that had come before us. The films made before and during the Cultural Revolution were simply outrageous.... It was a very conscious thrust pushing us to negate everything that had come before.”⁴⁰

The brilliance of *Yellow Earth*—aside from the stark beauty of Zhang Yimou’s cinematography—is the way in which the crux of the story, including its deep subversiveness, is told in the image track while being largely absent from the film script itself. The film is an excellent illustration of John Mullarkey’s point (already mentioned in chapter 4) that “the art of cinema involves a fabulation of images, a narrative of images that may well (indeed, will) ‘thwart’ the textual narrative, interrupting it, contradicting it.”⁴¹ The filmmakers take full advantage of this potential of cinema and use it to undermine the familiar character stereotypes and narrative scenarios of Chinese revolutionary cinema and its master narrative of liberation and progress under Communist revolution and rule. In fact, if one is not familiar with the conventions of Mao-era revolutionary cinema, it is impossible to grasp *Yellow Earth*’s subtle subversiveness—as is evident from a clueless review published in the *New York Times* when the film was screened belatedly in New York City in 1986 (the same reviewer would be equally befuddled by *The Big Parade*, interpreting both essentially

as Communist propaganda).⁴² Evgeny Dobrenko has observed that “the word yields to censorship more easily than the visual image,” giving the example of Eisenstein’s *Ivan the Terrible*, which visualized a screenplay approved by Stalin “in such a way that the ideological task of the film was completely subverted.”⁴³ Much the same was the case with *Yellow Earth*, through the details of its images and even its pacing.

Sometimes the slightest of hesitations in performances or editing rhythms can undercut the anchoring status of the socialist realist hero. One example of the image track’s subtle sabotage of socialist realist conventions is its defamiliarization of the “socialist realist gaze,” which Stephanie Donald first defined in a discussion of *Yellow Earth*. Her close reading of one moment in the film—precisely when Gu Qing is making his eventually broken promise to Cuiqiao—shows how that customary authoritative look toward an off-screen horizon, indicating the sure ideological vision of the Communist hero, is devastatingly hollowed out through a combination of performance cues and editing.⁴⁴ To that example I would add a minor moment early in the film, when Gu Qing has just arrived at the village and is invited to join a wedding feast in progress. The locals, played by nonactors who lived where the on-location filming took place, appear very believable as hardworking peasants suffering from extreme scarcity. There is a peculiar moment when Gu is led to sit at a table with some local men, who are told he is a soldier from the Communist base area in Yan’an who is visiting the farming village to collect folk songs (following the Maoist cultural practice of drawing on local folk arts and repurposing their forms with revolutionary content). The men all nod and just say “Oh” together in acknowledgment, staring at him as a strange outsider. When Gu invites them to sit and begins to sit down himself, all the men remain standing. Gu catches himself and straightens back up to a stand, whereupon the peasants all sit down, out of sync with him. The film then cuts to a medium close-up of Gu looking around at the men in puzzlement, as if he does not understand how to relate to them. It is a small moment in which the images speak much louder than the words. At formal meal gatherings in China, it is customary for the highest-ranking person to sit first, so the momentary confusion about the timing of sitting down indicates a lack of shared sociality between the visiting soldier and the locals, who first wait

while he begins to sit, then go ahead and sit down themselves while he remains standing. As was the case with *Devils on the Doorstep*, the mutual estrangement between soldier and peasant undermines the message—sent in countless ways in previous revolutionary films—of Mao’s ideal of “the soldiers and people as close as fish and water” (*junmin yu-shuiqing* 軍民魚水情). The rift here is established clearly at the beginning of the film but through images rather than dialogue (which is remarkably sparse in the film); as Jerome Silbergeld notes in his illuminating reading of *Yellow Earth*, with such a bare-bones script, “unspoken gesture, even reticence itself . . . become all the more poignant and revealing.”⁴⁵ The inexpressible, unbridgeable gaps in understanding between the revolutionary party members and the people for whom they claim to speak call into question the cadre’s very mission: to connect with the rural masses by collecting and repurposing folk song melodies.

I will add two more examples of the genre subterfuge in the film. I have noted elsewhere that one of the central messages of Mao-era cinema can be summed up as “Communists have more fun!”⁴⁶ In historical films of the 1950s and 1960s, regions controlled by the Nationalists are usually depicted as literally darkened areas in which the common people weep, their oppressors frown or sneer, and nobody seems truly happy. In contrast, the Communist base areas are invariably depicted as bathed in bright light and filled with lighthearted, unalienated laborers at work—people laughing and playfully splashing each other as they wash clothes in *Red Detachment of Women*, for example. Often the people and soldiers in the Communist-held territories break into joyful and energetic song or dance. The message that “Communists have more fun” is severely problematized (possibly even lampooned) by the famous waist-drum dance sequence in *Yellow Earth*. The film cuts temporarily to the Communist base in Yan’an, from which the Communist cadre had come to the girl’s village and to which he had returned after falsely promising that he would come back to fetch her before the date of her forced marriage. True to generic precedent, the waist-drum dance sequence depicts vigorous Communist soldiers performing an energetic, joyous dance in the bright sunlight, enjoying the blessings of living in a liberated area. However, the entire sequence is undermined by the shot that immediately precedes it—a subtly

horrifying shot of Cuiqiao's bridal veil being raised by the dark, grizzled old hand of the husband who essentially is about to rape her. The joy of the liberated area is put directly in the context of the fate of the helpless girl for whom Communism held only a false promise, undermining the dance's vivacious joy and energy.

A related key moment occurs at the very end of the film, when Gu Qing at last returns to the village, too late to rescue Cuiqiao but perhaps still in time to help her silent little brother, Hanhan, who also had grown attached to Gu Qing during his earlier visit. At the end, Hanhan sees Gu approach over a hill on the horizon in extreme long shot and struggles to run to him through a throng of local men engaged in a ritual rain prayer to help their drought-ravaged local farming community—a rite symbolic of the feudal squalor and superstition of the preliberation village. Repeated cuts from shots of Hanhan running through the crowd to Gu Qing arriving on the horizon, in the exact same shot repeated three times, end with a final shot of the suddenly now empty horizon. As the soundtrack plays a song that ends with the line “It’s the Communists who save the people,” the last shot of the film shows only the barren yellow earth with a now empty horizon, the Communist savior having apparently disappeared. At this point, the film has become more of an abstract allegory than a realistic story, but the image’s undermining of the message in the script could not be more clear.

The leading critic Li Tuo, coauthor of the “Modernization of Film Language” essay, compared watching *Yellow Earth* to answering the door at a party in expectation of welcoming an old friend, only to be confronted by a complete stranger, resulting in an awkward silence and even possible hostility.⁴⁷ One of the film’s most controversial aspects was its “depiction of the poverty of the land and its people.”⁴⁸ This would not have been as awkward for viewers—the film being set in the 1930s, depicting people who are *supposed* to have been suffering from the deprivation of preliberation feudalism—except that the filmmakers used mostly local farmers to play roles other than the four main characters. This neorealist technique provoked the unsettling realization that local farmers of the early 1980s, more than three decades after liberation, continued to live under great hardship, thus subverting the narrative of progress under Communism.

That is, the documentary technique of using local nonprofessionals as extras in the film severely disrupts the historical master narrative of socialist realism, insofar as it places the visible poverty of peasants in the Communist *present*, not just in the feudalist past, thus undermining the entire master narrative of the Mao era as bringing liberation from oppression and hardship. The implication is that the party thus far had failed the people, just as Gu Qing had failed Cuiqiao.

Of course, the critiques of the Mao era found in Fourth and Fifth Generation films of the 1980s arguably helped to legitimate the policies of the new reform-minded Communist leadership. However, later waves of post-socialist realism would extend the critique of the myth of progress to the reform era itself. While the generation that emerged in the 1980s could be seen as subtly undermining the legitimacy of the previous party leadership while implicitly endorsing the new order, by the 1990s, a successive generation of post-socialist realist filmmakers would challenge the myth of progress during the post-Mao era as well. The early films of the pioneering independent directors Zhang Yuan 张元 and Wu Wenguang 吴文光, for example, often focused on disillusioned youths who had lost the idealism of the 1980s, while many slightly later independent films, particularly those following in the footsteps of Jia Zhangke's early films, such as *Xiao Wu* (小武; 1997), reinforced the critique of the reform-era economy by featuring its losers—pickpockets, prostitutes, migrant laborers, coal miners, small-time hustlers—again, often played by nonprofessional actors. The latter trend continues well into the new millennium, including in the form of low-budget, “underground” fictional films and documentaries shot on digital video. In their very choice of human subjects and experiences to highlight, such films both call into question the myth of historical progress and firmly reject socialist realism’s tropes of heroism. Jia himself expresses an utter lack of interest in creating heroes and notes that his film-school understanding of how to build drama enabled him precisely to undercut it. Even in scenes with plenty of potential tension and conflict, instead of following the “rules of drama,” Jia says he would ask himself, “What would the logic of realism dictate for a scene like this?”⁴⁹ In this and many other ways, Jia and similar post-socialist realist directors echo the “Modernization of Film Language” essay’s

disparagement of drama and follow in the footsteps of the Italian Neorealist filmmakers admired by Bazin, who praised “the pride of place they all give to the representation of reality at the expense of dramatic structures.”⁵⁰ We now turn to the specific neorealist techniques that provoke such an impression of reality rather than artificial drama.

STYLISTIC NEOREALISM

Italian Neorealism was a reaction against both Hollywood’s dream factory and the prewar Italian “white telephone” films that largely imitated Hollywood.⁵¹ Chinese post-socialist realist films similarly were a reaction against socialist realism and the Hollywood-based classical style on which socialist realist as well as reform-era mainstream Chinese entertainment films drew. Here I will consider several methods that they emphasized instead, including on-location shooting, the use of nonprofessional actors, an emphasis on contingency, and the interrelated deployment of detail, ambiguity, and elliptical editing, before moving on to a lengthier discussion of one of their stylistic mainstays: long-take/long-shot cinematography.

We already have seen how *Yellow Earth* used on-location shooting and nonprofessional actors drawn from local residents to lend a powerful sense of realism to its depiction of place and social setting. Not just the exterior landscape scenes but even interior scenes, such as those set in Cuiqiao’s family’s cramped and dimly lit hovel, give a strong feeling of authenticity to the rural poverty depicted. Insofar as any on-location shot serves as a documentary image of a real place, even in a fiction film, on-location shooting is generally taken as better than studio sets in building cinematic realism. The rigorous dedication to on-location shooting for *Yellow Earth* contrasts, for example, with the socialist realist Plains films discussed in chapter 5, including the original 1955 *Guerrillas on the Plain*, the 1974 remake, and the 1974 opera film *Fighting on the Plain*. While the model opera film quite obviously was shot entirely on artificial sets, the two more “classical” versions also often alternated—even within the same scene—between on-location exterior longer shots that established the setting and closer shots of characters talking that almost certainly were shot at a different time on a studio sound stage. Viewers would likely have

taken little conscious note of the discrepancy owing to careful continuity editing that guided their engagement with narrative developments rather than details of background setting, but the cuts between on-location and studio shots, combined with the use of more editing rather than longer takes (see later), nonetheless would have lessened those films' impression of realism. The strong preference for on-location shooting in the post-Mao era resulted in the practice of small teams of collaborators—the director, cinematographer, production designer, and sound designer, for example—extensively scouting the locations where the early Fifth Generation films would be shot. This was the case for *Yellow Earth*, *The One and the Eight*, and an even earlier Fifth Generation film to be discussed shortly, *The Red Elephant* (*Hong xiang* 红象; Zhang Jianye 张建亚, Xie Xiaojing 谢小晶, and Tian Zhuangzhuang 田壮壮, 1982).⁵² During shooting, the use of natural lighting even for many interior scenes resulted in images that could be unusually dark, sometimes to the dismay of studio executives reviewing the rushes.⁵³

Later post-socialist realist filmmakers, such as Jia Zhangke, took on-location shooting and, especially, nonprofessional actors to an even stronger level of commitment. His groundbreaking *Xiao Wu* ends with a title that informs the viewer, “The entire film is interpreted by non-professional actors,” and in several exterior scenes, unwitting “extras” look directly at the camera, so that he sacrifices a bit of the fictional realism that calls for the camera to be an invisible observer in favor of the documentary realism gained from shooting on location with crowds of real people on city streets.⁵⁴ Such a reliance on documentary techniques was common among China’s first generation of independent filmmakers (a group that mostly overlaps with the Sixth Generation label, at least at the beginning of their careers) who emerged in the 1990s and in many ways continued and intensified neorealist trends begun by their predecessors in the 1980s but also inched closer to documentary-style realism. China’s pioneering independent fiction film director Zhang Yuan used a raw, verité documentary style in his films that shared a close affinity with the videos of then emerging independent documentary filmmaker Wu Wenguang and his peers. In fact, Zhang’s first feature film, *Mama* (妈妈; 1990), about a mother’s struggles to raise her disabled child, intercut the fictional story

with actual documentary interviews with mothers of disabled children in Beijing. The same filmmaker later made documentaries of his own as well as a string of underground films focusing on marginalized figures, such as rock musicians and closeted gay lovers. Soon a handful of other film directors—including Jia Zhangke—were making low-budget, independent films in a similar style that emphasized the values of documentary or “on-the-spot” realism (*jishizhuyi* 纪实主义) imbued with a strong sense of live shooting on location (*xianchang* 现场).⁵⁵ Still later, independent DV filmmakers continued the trend well into the new millennium, with directors like Liu Jiayin 刘伽茵 and Song Fang 宋方 shooting fiction films that feel like documentaries because they are shot in the filmmakers’ actual family homes and feature their own family members playing versions of themselves and generally appearing unscripted (although in fact they are acting out prewritten scenarios).

One result of the post-socialist realist preference for on-location shooting and nonprofessional actors is an opening up to, and valuing of, contingency entering the frame. In his classic work of realist film theory, Siegfried Kracauer asserted that film “gravitates toward unstaged reality” because of the ability of photographic media to capture “actual physical existence” beyond human intentions.⁵⁶ Whereas prescriptive realism, in its effort to depict a world conforming to an officially sanctioned ideal, would seek to minimize unscripted, contingent elements that may distract from the intended film message, the neorealist countermovement in cinema welcomed the unpredictability that comes with shooting either in nature or in the streets with nonprofessional actors. The small accidents that might result represent unforeseen intrusions of the real into the fictional world, which, no matter how minor or subtle they may be, contribute to the sense of realism in the film through their very lack of human intentionality. For a small example, we can turn to the very first feature film directed by the Fifth Generation, the children’s film *The Red Elephant*, about three ethnic minority children in southern Yunnan who go on an adventure together in the tropical rainforest, trying to track a legendary red elephant. When, early in their journey, the children come to a river that is too big to swim across safely, they turn a floating log into a makeshift ferry, with one boy push-poling the log into the middle of the river while the other boy and

girl, along with the girl's pet German shepherd, sit or squat on the log. The first shot of the whole procession comes as a series of minor revelations for the viewer, beginning with just the surface of the river, then the log entering the frame from off-screen right, mostly submerged, but with the older boy wielding the pole standing on it, so that he almost seems to be standing on the water itself. As the log floats through the frame, the other boy, the girl's dog, and the girl with her basket enter the frame in succession. About sixteen seconds into the twenty-six-second shot, the camera begins panning left to follow the figures on the improvised ferry. At the exact moment that the camera starts moving, one of the dog's paws slips briefly off the log into the river, almost as if the camera movement was momentarily destabilizing to the precarious vessel. Of course, the dog's brief slip and its timing were entirely coincidental, but the chance moment indicates a poetics of openness in the film, in which the children, the various animals (elephants, monkeys, birds, and even a leopard, in addition to the dog), and the jungle itself have some agency in shaping the film's impressions due to their unpredictability (much like the wave in the Lumière brothers' 1895 actuality *Boat Leaving the Port*, as discussed in chapter 1). A small detail like a paw slip during a leisurely, entertaining long take can feel like a cinematic event in itself to a viewer attuned to the revelations of small details or "cinephiliac moments."⁵⁷ As Mullarkey points out, both animals and child actors in a film potentially interrupt the intended performance of a fiction by introducing the "randomness of the Real," and the same can be said of on-location shooting and nonprofessional acting.⁵⁸ This openness to contingency is one way that many post-socialist realist films tend toward apophtic realism (see the introduction), in that they implicitly acknowledge that cinema confronts a reality that includes much that is unknown and unanticipated.

Bazin wrote that "neo-realist filmmakers . . . endow their films with a sense of the ambiguity of reality."⁵⁹ Techniques for doing so include not just on-location shooting, unpredictable humans or animals in the mise-en-scène, long shot distances, deep staging, and long takes (to be discussed shortly) but also narratives that are themselves discontinuous, inconclusive, or open ended. In this specific sense, in addition to other reasons (their critical realism, for example), many post-socialist realist

films echo the masterpieces of the Left-Wing Film Movement during the golden age of Shanghai cinema in the 1930s (chapter 2).⁶⁰ Several films of the late 1970s and early 1980s, for example, were noted for having the kinds of ambiguous endings that would have been unthinkable in socialist realist cinema. The banned film *Bitter Love* (*Ku lian* 苦恋, aka *Taiyang he ren* 太阳和人; Peng Ning 彭宁, 1980) infamously ended with an overhead shot of the body of its dying protagonist graphically tracing a question mark in the snow in which he lies. The next year, *Narrow Street* (*Xiao jie* 小街; Yang Yanjin 杨延晋, 1981)—so metacinematic and unconventional that Chris Berry has called it “self-conscious and possibly Godardian”—offered three different possible plot endings and left its audience to weigh them.⁶¹ A little later, *Yellow Earth* ended with the previously mentioned ambiguous images of the now-empty horizon, leaving viewers suspended in doubt. The trend of ambiguity and inconclusiveness only grew stronger when the independent film movement of the 1990s and beyond took over the post-socialist realist tendency. For example, in Jia Zhangke’s coming-of-age epic *Platform* (*Zhantai* 站台; 2000), the ending seemingly skips years ahead in time and shows a couple we thought had long since broken up seemingly now with an infant sharing a domestic space. With no dialogue, we are left to interpret the scene despite the gaps in our knowledge.

Another key feature of post-socialist realism, mentioned from the earliest critical writings of the reform era, was the importance of incidental detail. In their seminal essay on the modernization of film language, Zhang and Li approvingly noted that “in Italian Neorealist cinema, life is generally depicted through ordinary details,” in contrast to films that follow “theatrical rules,” with their “complicated twists, outlandish plots, and exaggerated, violent conflicts.”⁶² In a later critical essay published in 1984, Yang Ni 杨妮 continues and deepens the critique of overly dramatic film and, like Zhang and Li, points to Italian Neorealism as the model for making films less dramatic.⁶³ For her, this does not mean that a film should lack a plot or conflict but that the plot should be relatively loose and possibly have multiple strands and that any conflicts should be realistic rather than overly dramatized. Film narratives, Yang argued, should not necessarily have “dramatic plots in which closely related events,

cause-and-effect relationships, and step-by-step developments lead to a climax” but rather should have “parallel plots,” “few or no dramatic climaxes created out of intensified contradictions,” and—most important—narrative lines that are frequently interrupted by minor details.⁶⁴ Also like Zhang and Li, Yang invokes Bazin as she argues for film as a fundamentally documentary medium that depends most crucially on the indexicality of photography: “Between the recorded image on film and the object there should be a relationship like that of fingerprint to finger.”⁶⁵ In keeping with the idea of film as what Kracauer called “the redemption of physical reality”—a phrase quoted in Yang’s essay—the natural development of the art, according to Yang, involves “discarding theatricality and absorbing documentary devices.”⁶⁶

The minor detail not only functions as a marker of realism in the Bazinian or Italian Neorealist sense; it also participates directly in the process of the subversion of socialist realism. Take, for example, one instance of the irruption of detail in a moment from the climax of *Devils on the Doorstep*. The antihero protagonist Ma Dasan has gone on a vengeful rampage in which he tried to hack to death Japanese prisoners of war after their surrender to Chinese troops. He is sentenced to death, and the Chinese commander assigns the task of execution to none other than the now-imprisoned Japanese soldier whom Ma Dasan previously had been hiding at the behest of the anonymous Communist guerrilla. In terms of its revolutionary film precedents, this would be the most dramatic moment in the film, when the main protagonist is to be executed by the Japanese enemy, but of course, it is undermined by the facts that the war is over and the protagonist did nothing particularly heroic to lead to his martyrdom. Moreover, at the very moment when the Japanese prisoner is poised to behead the kneeling Ma Dasan with his samurai sword, an ant suddenly appears on Ma’s neck just where the sword is to cleave his flesh. Distracted, in a moment of bizarre dark humor, the executioner stops what he is doing to flick the ant off the condemned man’s skin. Given the conventions of heroism in countless Chinese revolutionary films, the interruption of this crucial dramatic moment by a mere ant crystallizes the intervention of post-socialist realism as a whole, serving simultaneously as the sort of true-to-life detail celebrated in Bazin’s writings on Italian Neorealism.

and also as itself a disruption of the codes of socialist realism, in which executions have a very specific form of dramatized representation that viewers would have internalized (as chapters 4 and 5 discussed).

In her discussion of Mao-era socialist realist fiction writer Li Zhun, Krista Van Fleit notes that while details are “used frequently to give texts a feeling of authenticity,” they nonetheless had to be “closely monitored,” in keeping with the official (prescriptive) doctrine of realism.⁶⁷ As Georg Lukács argued in championing nineteenth-century realism over naturalism as a model for socialist literature, the point of a detail in a work of art is not simply that it “corresponds photographically to life” in a way that might be “purely accidental, arbitrary and subjective”; instead, the detail must be chosen or imagined in a way that makes it “a necessary aspect of the accurate reflection of the total process of objective reality.”⁶⁸ Details must not be autonomous but must be part of the “correct reflection of the totality” as envisioned by a prescriptive notion of realism.⁶⁹ The alternative “danger of details becoming important in themselves” risks “a disintegration of the composition into disconnected and autonomous details.”⁷⁰ Post-socialist realism is less certain about the totality to be represented and instead embraces the risks of autonomous details. As Bazin writes in one of his classic essays on Italian Neorealism, a study of Vittorio De Sica’s *Umberto D.* (1952), “the narrative unit is not the episode, the event, the sudden turn of events, or the character of its protagonists; it is the succession of concrete instants of life, no one of which can be said to be more important than another, for their ontological equality destroys drama at its very basis.”⁷¹ In other words, to the extent that a film narrative becomes a series of closely observed moments, each equal in its accumulation of details, the film serves the antidramaturgical agenda of post-socialist realism. Of course, this is a matter of degree, as these films still maintain narrative structures. On first viewing, *Xiao Wu* seems to be a series of random events in the life of a small-time thief whose life is spiraling downward, but, as Michael Berry has shown, the seemingly random series of events is in fact organized into three discrete sections of the film, centering sequentially on his relationships with his former best friend, his fleeting girlfriend, and his estranged family.⁷² More generally, despite his focus on the small details of lives at the margins of society, Jia

Zhangke arguably engages in a form of critical realism that Lukács would recognize for its implicit critique of how neoliberal capitalism has played out in China. Some later post-socialist filmmakers of the DV generation (who will be considered at more length in the next chapter) who pursue an almost “mumblecore” style of mundane realism,⁷³ such as Li Hongqi 李红旗 and Liu Jiayin, take the idea of a film that is a succession of concrete details and ordinary events of everyday life, all of seemingly equal importance, well beyond even what Sixth Generation filmmakers like Jia Zhangke had done.

If the detail is a realist technique that defies cinematic convention by leaving in what would normally be taken out as irrelevant, its seeming opposite—the ellipsis—achieves its realist effect by cutting out what would conventionally be kept in as highly relevant. Of course, virtually all films have a variety of “minor” ellipses that simply skip ahead to the next significant event in the plot’s causal chain.⁷⁴ In such cases, for reasons of economy, story content is left out owing to its insignificance. It is the elision of *significant* events that helps to make a film’s neorealist style. Gilberto Perez describes such ellipses as central to both cinematic modernism and realism—the latter “because reality always exceeds its representation, so any representation necessarily leaves out much of reality.”⁷⁵ As chapter 3 already noted, Bazin praised ellipses for being realistic insofar as in our real lives as well, “we do not know everything that happens to others.”⁷⁶ Apophatic realism, consequently, is verisimilar in its own way, insofar as it depicts a reality that is always partly unknowable. This is part of the radicality of a film like *Yellow Earth* in comparison to the certainties of socialist realism. Its director explained that “the quintessence of our style can be summed up in a single word: ‘concealment.’”⁷⁷ Even the apparent death by drowning of the film’s young protagonist, Cuiqiao, is indicated so indirectly that some viewers take as an open question whether she escaped to join the revolution or died trying. The ambiguity of the final scene of *Platform*, mentioned earlier, also is due to the ellipsis that precedes it, seemingly skipping over crucial story events, including a rekindling of a romance and a subsequent marriage and childbirth. Michael Berry has described how, in the process of editing *Platform* down from its much longer original version, Jia intentionally chose to leave key narrative events

out of the final cut, thus forcing the audience to deduce their nature in a way that challenges the usual conventions of cinematic narration but more closely mirrors our actual experience of change.⁷⁸

THE LONG TAKE

In her “Formal Look at Realism,” Kristin Thompson observes that in film history, realism conventionally presents itself as “departures from the prevailing classical norms.”⁷⁹ In the case of early post-socialist realism, of course, the classical norm is not Hollywood itself but rather the form of classical-style cinema taken by mainstream Mao-era popular cinema. In the post-Mao era, the long take became one of the techniques that post-socialist realist films would foreground as a break with Mao-era cinema’s prescriptive mode of classical fictional realism. Zhang and Li’s 1979 “Modernization” essay praised the “long-take theory” of the Bazinian school as having raised a challenge to “montage theory” in the West decades earlier, and it suggested that, at the least, long-take techniques should be combined with montage to allow for more artistic possibilities.⁸⁰ Bazin had advocated long takes—combined with longer shot distances, deep focus, and deep-field staging, putting more information from the fictional world on the screen in each shot—as intrinsic to a realist style, owing to their preservation of objects and events in their actual duration within their broader surroundings. In this view, rather than simply *showing* an event, montages of closer shots *construct* the event through analytical editing, cutting it up into parts so that the editing determines what parts of the event are important to pay attention to at each moment as it proceeds, thus leading the spectator to particular meanings. In contrast, long-take/long-shot cinema was said to preserve the continuity of space and time, the ambiguity of the image, and the freedom of the spectator to choose what details are most meaningful.⁸¹ For post-socialist realist critics and filmmakers, the fact that montage was tied to Soviet film theory only reinforced its association with conflict-based revolutionary cinema, and a long-take aesthetic—combined with longer shot distances—would seem consistent with the desire to wrest more autonomy for art from politics, presenting viewers with an objective “reality” without rigorously

guiding their reaction to it through a finer carving of time and space. As Thompson notes, such ostensibly realist techniques often have their strongest effect when a new realist trend is beginning, “with the effect of realism diminishing as more extreme uses of the same approach appear in other films. . . . The repetition of the same realistic traits gradually makes their conventional nature apparent, and the early films that seemed strikingly realistic appear mannered upon re-viewing.”⁸² It is not surprising, then, that while long-take cinematography was used selectively in the 1980s to great effect, it only became a rigorously pursued distinctive style with later filmmakers of the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century, and eventually it would appear as its own type of formalism when applied in a “parametric” fashion—meaning the narration of the story becomes secondary to its stylistic patterning—in extreme forms of “slow cinema” in China.

One way to measure historical changes in the aesthetics of shot length is simply to calculate the average shot length (ASL) of films from different eras. The ASL of classical Hollywood films between 1930 and 1960 ranged from eight to eleven seconds, but it decreased to five to eight seconds by the 1970s and has become even shorter since, to the point that many Hollywood films today have ASLs as short as two seconds or less.⁸³ As we might expect, Mao-era revolutionary cinema in the classical mode had ASLs similar to Hollywood at the time. Taking some of the films examined most closely in chapters 4 and 5 as examples, the original 1961 *Red Detachment of Women* had an ASL of 8.7 seconds, while the 1955 and 1974 versions of *Guerrillas on the Plain* had ASLs of 8.3 and 7.7 seconds, respectively. *Dong Cunrui*, the 1955 revolutionary film mentioned earlier as context for *Devils on the Doorstep*'s post-Mao parody, also comes in at 8.3 seconds. Interestingly, the *yangbanxi* films of the Cultural Revolution had much longer ASLs than classical-style fiction films of the time. The 1974 model opera film *Fighting on the Plain* (discussed in the preceding chapter), for example, averaged nearly sixteen seconds per shot, with a couple of shots—both during arias—lasting well over two minutes. This suggests a potential contradiction between the post-Mao film critics' condemnation of an excessively dramaturgical cinema, on one hand, and their preference for long takes, on the other, because the best example

of long-take cinema in 1970s China appears to have been precisely the model opera films.

Yangbanxi films aside, in the immediate aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, just after Zhang and Li's "Modernization" essay appeared, not much change in shot length was yet evident. *Evening Rain*, the 1980 film mentioned at the start of this chapter, had an ASL of 7.1 seconds, for example. Soon, however, shot lengths began to expand. *Narrow Street* had an ASL of 9.5 seconds. The mid-1980s films of the Fourth Generation filmmaker Wu Tianming 吴天明—*River without Buoys* (*Meiyou hangbiao de heliu* 没有航标的河流; 1983), *Life* (*Rensheng* 人生; 1984), and *Old Well* (*Lao jing* 老井; 1987)—had ASLs of 9, 12.1, and 11 seconds, respectively, on average about 30 percent longer than the films of the Mao era mentioned previously. Another prominent Fourth Generation film, *Wild Mountains* (*Ye shan* 野山; Yan Xueshu 颜学恕, 1986), had an even longer ASL of 12.7 seconds. As for the early Fifth Generation films of the same period, *The One and the Eight* had an ASL of 11.6 seconds, and Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Horse Thief* (*Dao ma zei* 盗马贼; 1986) had an ASL of 11.8; on the other hand, *Yellow Earth* averaged less than 10 seconds per shot, so there is no apparent tendency toward longer shot lengths among the early films of the Fifth Generation in comparison to the contemporaneous films of their Fourth Generation elders—further evidence that the "generation" labels may be of less use in predicting film style than the particular historical moment in question.⁸⁴ In any case, these statistics show a common preference in the mid-1980s for a significantly longer-take style than in either Mao-era or contemporary Hollywood cinema.

In fact, some of the more experimental films of the early 1980s—including *Evening Rain*, *Narrow Street*, and *Life*—would have had longer ASLs had it not been for the tendency to indulge in the occasional very rapid montage sequence, often to represent memories or fantasies of the protagonists, which itself came off as the kind of subjective modernist (as opposed to socialist realist) technique *also* recommended by critics like Bai Jingsheng, Zhang Nuanxin, and Li Tuo. This hints at the possible flattening effect of ASL as a measure of long-take aesthetics, because an average says nothing about the effects of shots on either extreme away from the average. Median shot length (MSL)—though much more tedious

to calculate—would be a slightly better measure of the viewer's experience through most of the film, but that, too, fails to capture the unique aesthetics of either a brief, impressionistic rapid-fire montage sequence or a slow and contemplative long take. The latter's aesthetic of lingering, even when inserted into a film with otherwise normal shot lengths, exposes many more details of the shot's content and form while also almost inevitably increasing the ambiguity of the shot's meaning, simply because the viewer has time to reflect in multiple ways on the shot before it ends. As Bazin theorized, "the very nature of editing's analysis of reality confers a sole meaning upon the dramatic event"; long shots and long takes with depth of field build "ambiguity into the structure of the image, if not as a necessity," then "at least as a possibility."⁸⁵

For example, about two-thirds of the way through *The Red Elephant*—the early Fifth Generation children's film set in the rainforest of southern Yunnan—on the morning after the children's second night in the jungle, a spectacular forty-seven-second tracking shot stands out precisely because it is more than six times longer than the film's ASL of 7.4 seconds. Beginning as a relatively tightly composed long shot of the three kids sprawled asleep on the thick trunks and branches of a giant tree, the shot then tracks far, far back on a slight slope through the jungle canopy above, until the children's figures are just tiny details that, had the shot not started with them, would not even have been noticed amid the grandeur of the enormous tree in which they rest and the wider rainforest that surrounds them. The effect would have been much more easily approximated with a zoom, but the bravura track imparts a corporeal sense of movement that makes the shot more thrilling, and the length of the take gives the viewer time to shift attention from the children at the center of the tale to the natural ecosystem they have entered, which now seems to engulf the viewer as well. At moments like this, the film hints at the potential of its makers at the beginning of their careers, including assistant cinematographer Zhang Yimou.

For the new film aesthetics of the 1980s, among filmmakers, there was perhaps no more central figure than Wu Tianming, director of several films, producer of some of the most celebrated early films of the Fifth Generation filmmakers, and, perhaps most important, head of the Xi'an

Film Studio during the key years of 1983–89, when he provided a protective environment for talented film artists to take chances with experimental or “exploratory” films (*tansuo pian* 探索片), defending them when necessary from higher-level cultural bureaucrats. Wu arguably presided over a new high point of Chinese socialist art, when artists were encouraged to innovate without needing to prioritize an official political or ideological agenda, yet continued government ownership of the film studios still provided them with insulation against market forces and the profit motive, with all the different sorts of restrictions and censorship those entail.

As with *The Red Elephant*, the key films Wu himself directed in the 1980s were notable for their selective use of the long take. In *River without Buoys*, one extraordinary 114-second shot (more than a dozen times longer than the film’s average), of a drinking session that will not end well, uses multiple camera movements to alternate its shot distance between extreme close-up, close-up, medium shots, and long shots, all while using tracks and pans in combination to navigate the surface area of the ramshackle river raft that is the setting for most of the film. *Old Well* features a 158-second shot (more than fourteen times the film’s average) at one of the film’s most dramatic moments. The protagonist, Sun Wangquan (played by Zhang Yimou, also the film’s co-cinematographer), and his former girlfriend, Zhao Qiaoying, have been trapped underground by a disastrous collapse while digging a well. For more than a minute and a half, the dimly lit shot has no dialogue, just Sun painstakingly dragging Zhao from where they both had been searching for a companion buried in the accident to a higher place where they could lean against a wall. The lingering take, with no soundtrack other than the occasional gasp of the characters and the sound of rocks shuffled by their movement, exemplifies how what Bazin (following Henri Bergson) called the “cinema of duration”⁸⁶ can become a cinema of endurance for a spectator expecting a shot to be mainly a delivery vehicle for narrative information, as the shot forces us to endure the painstaking silent crawl across the rocks with the characters. Such a shot would have been unthinkable in the context of Mao-era socialist realism, which both moves the plot along much more efficiently and emphasizes clear acts of heroism or villainy, not brute struggles for existence in the face of random fate. Finally, in the shot’s

second half, we find Sun and Zhao tearfully collapsing into each other's arms, preparing to confess their ongoing love for each other (Sun is now married to someone else) before they presumably will die together underground (though they do not). These examples show how, in the 1980s, both the Fourth and Fifth Generation filmmakers employed a similar style that used somewhat longer average takes than previous Chinese cinema, punctuated by occasional extreme long takes. At the same time, they show that a long take can have very different effects, depending on all the other elements that affect the viewer's sense of pacing, including mobile framing, dialogue, character movement, and plot developments. The long take in *River without Buoys* is a virtuoso display of cinematographic technique, but it does not feel the least bit "slow," because the camera moves five times to provide very different framings, the shot distance changes accordingly, and character dialogue proceeds throughout the shot, so that narrative information is passed along both by the image and by what is revealed by the characters' speech. The long take in *Old Well*, in contrast, particularly in its first minute and a half, when not a word of dialogue is spoken, feels slow to the viewer.

Despite the increase in shot length in Fourth and Fifth Generation post-socialist realism in the 1980s, it really was not until the Sixth Generation in the 1990s and early 2000s that an extreme long-take aesthetic became more of a rule throughout some films, no doubt owing not only to the continuing relevance of Bazin in Chinese cinematic discourse but also to the influence of such globally recognized long-take auteurs as Taiwan's Hou Hsiao-hsien 侯孝贤 and Tsai Ming-liang 蔡明亮, as well as others, such as the Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami and the Hungarian Béla Tarr. Jia Zhangke's first feature, *Xiao Wu*, had an ASL of over three times the average of the 1980s films mentioned earlier, and several of his later works would extend it much further to well over one minute in films such as *Platform*, *Unknown Pleasures* (*Ren xiaoyao* 任逍遙; 2002), and *Still Life* (*Sanxia haoren* 三峡好人; 2006). In interviews, Jia makes clear that his preference for the style has a strongly Bazinian, liberal humanist basis: "In my long shots and long takes, my goal is to respect the viewer's agency, and even to give my films a sense of democracy. I want audiences to be able to freely choose how they want to interact with what's on screen."⁸⁷

At the same time, because Jia's extra-long takes often linger on characters and spaces without offering obvious new narrative information, they have much more of a tendency to distend time than was the case in the Fourth and Fifth Generation films of the 1980s, and this very slowness represents a particular view on the postsocialist condition in China. In a reading of *Xiao Wu*—which would become almost a template for later independent filmmakers exploring the drudgeries of life for marginalized figures in contemporary Chinese society—Chris Berry has shown how Jia's long takes offer a particular experience of postsocialist time, as lived by the losers rather than the winners of reform-era China's pseudocapitalist modernization project. As a low-class migrant from the countryside who now survives as a small-time thief in a county-level city (Jia's own hometown of Fenyang), the protagonist Xiao Wu experiences neither the progressive revolutionary time of earlier socialist realism nor the equally progressive postsocialist time of rapid economic modernization but rather seems to stand still as an “onlooker” while time passes him by.⁸⁸ This insight into the implications of the long take in post-socialist realist cinema applies to a great many films made in the two plus decades since *Xiao Wu* set a new standard for Chinese neorealist independent cinema. Indeed, a very similar argument might be made about time and the long take in the more recent and even more devastatingly bleak masterpiece of Chinese slow-cinema realism *An Elephant Sitting Still* (*Da xiang xidi er zuo* 大象席地而坐; Hu Bo 胡波, 2018), which is nearly four hours long, with an ASL of more than two and a half minutes.

In 2016 Moira Weigel observed that “over the past two decades, . . . ‘art’ cinema and ‘slow’ cinema have become increasingly synonymous.”⁸⁹ The “slow wave” that “has swept the festival circuit” has featured films with narratives that “are nondramatic or nonexistent,” scripts that “are minimal and repetitive, with little dialogue,” and extra-long takes in which often neither the camera nor the figures in the frame move much. The slow art cinema phenomenon has been global, but its most notable practitioners have tended to come from Eastern Europe, Iran, and East and Southeast Asia, including Taiwan and Thailand in addition to mainland China and South Korea. In China itself, within the broader post-socialist realist trend, slow cinema has overlapped with the trend of independent cinema

focused on subaltern subjects, and it has embraced DV technology, not least because DV allows for unlimited shot lengths (whereas traditional cinema was at least limited by the length of a film reel, generally about eleven minutes). Independent filmmaker Liu Jiayin, with her *Oxhide* (*Niupi* 牛皮; 2005) and *Oxhide II* (*Niupi er* 牛皮貳; 2009), exemplifies how the emerging digital generation has pushed long-take slow cinema to new extremes. *Oxhide II*, for example, has no overarching narrative beyond the simple event of a family (Liu and her own parents, playing themselves) making and consuming a meal of Chinese dumplings together. Lasting over two hours, the film has only nine shots, each one photographed at a forty-five-degree angle from the previous one, so that the camera gradually circles the table around which the family chats, cooks, and eats. The rigorous formal structure, combined with the extraordinary ASL of nearly fifteen minutes per shot, means that while the film has many of the standard markers of neorealism—on-location shooting, nonprofessional actors playing ordinary people, and so on—it also falls under the mode of “style-based” or “parametric” narration, in which a stylistic “system” (the camera revolves 360 degrees around the table clockwise at forty-five-degree increments through extraordinarily long takes) is as important to the experience of the film as its plot.⁹⁰ This example shows that, when taken to an extreme and repeated over many films, the long-take style begins to appear less as a type of realism and more as its own kind of formalism, if the latter is defined as form or technique calling attention to itself rather than to the narrative content or “reality” the film conveys.

PREScriptive CAPITALIST REALISM AND POST-SOCIALIST REALISM

Insofar as there remains a nonmainstream neorealist alternative to mainstream cinema in China, it has increasingly morphed from a realist style defined against socialist realism into simply a realism of the postsocialist condition that continues to employ techniques of Bazinian and documentary realism. Such a style extends aspects of the preceding post-socialist realism, and it will continue to be explored in the next chapter in the context of the digital revolution in filmmaking. With Liu Jiayin’s

Oxhide films, for example, what lingers as a backdrop for the film's style or story is no longer the legacy of the Mao era so much as the legacy of postsocialism itself. While the stylistic explorations go beyond the then-established conventions of neorealism (to the extent of reaching a parametric formalism in *Oxhide II*, as just described), the only real drama is the struggle of Liu's father to support the family as a skilled craftsman (doing leather work—hence the films' titles), trying to keep a small shop afloat in a competitive economy of global markets and rising rents. The films' context is contemporary capitalism, with the socialist legacy fading far into the background.

With the massive social and economic transformations that only accelerated in China after its formal entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001, as post-socialist *realism* became postsocialist *realism* (a realist depiction of the postsocialist condition rather than a self-conscious challenge to the bygone conventions of socialist realism), its other—the types of prescriptive cinemas against which it defined itself—also transformed. Initially, that had been Mao-era socialist realism, which in the reform era was reinvented in the more or less subtly propagandistic “main melody” or “leitmotif” films of the current era—government-sponsored big-budget films that continue to promote patriotism by retelling the foundational myths of the PRC, the CCP, and modern China in general.⁹¹ Insofar as those films reinforce heroic legitimating narratives of the party and state, they constitute an updated version of the prescriptive realism of the Mao era, and low-budget neorealist independent films obviously remain an oppositional alternative cinema. However, other forms of prescriptive film storytelling also are implicitly opposed by the ongoing neorealist trend.

Some of those will be discussed in the next chapter, but here it is particularly noteworthy that the overidealized and artificial cinematic world that was once constructed by *socialist* realism gave way in part to a new, prescriptive *capitalist* realism. This new form of prescriptive realism legitimates not just the party or government but the broader mode of production of post-Mao China, namely, the articulation of neoliberal capitalism to Chinese state socialism, leading to an economic system that requires ordinary people to adapt themselves to the global capitalist economy.

In recent years, the phrase “capitalist realism” has been used to describe the sense in the post-Soviet age that there is no alternative to capitalism in the world today.⁹² Although that idea certainly is relevant to China today, I refer more specifically to the concept of capitalist realism as proposed by journalism and sociology scholar Michael Schudson, who, in a direct play-off of “socialist realism,” used the term to refer to the capacity of advertising in capitalist societies to simplify, typify, and abstract everyday life to “its own plane of reality” that “celebrates” and “promotes” the values of capitalism in the same way that socialist realism does those of Communism.⁹³ Just like socialist realism, capitalist realism “does not claim to picture reality as it is but reality as it should be—life and lives worth emulating.”⁹⁴ Xiaobing Tang has used this concept of capitalist realism to analyze the visions presented by consumer advertising in post-New Era China, arguing that “both socialist realism and capitalist realism are utopian art forms designed to alleviate the anxiety of everyday life and to help their respective viewers cope with the secular condition of modernity.”⁹⁵

Go Lala Go (*Du Lala shengzhiji* 杜拉拉升职记; Xu Jinglei 徐静蕾, 2010) exemplifies capitalist realism as a form of prescriptive cinema. The film was based on a popular novel and both stars and was directed by one of China’s most famous celebrities at the time, Xu Jinglei. It tells the story of how a young Chinese woman joins an international corporation and finds career success by gradually mastering the politics and methods of survival and advancement in such a competitive environment. She essentially is represented as a model worker under capitalism, an example for audiences to emulate in the same way that they were supposed to emulate the heroes of socialist realist films in the Mao era.⁹⁶ The slickness, commercial sex appeal, rapid pacing, and high production values of *Go Lala Go* could not contrast more with the relentlessly down-to-earth realist aesthetic and plodding pace of *Oxhide II*, released during the same year, and the struggles of Liu Jiayin’s family to survive under current economic conditions—grasped only through the conversation as they make their dumplings—contrast more directly with Du Lala’s fantasy world of corporate success than with the utopian visions of socialist realism.

This chapter began by saying that the question of where Chinese cinema should go after the Cultural Revolution was answered in theory—in the “Modernization of Film Language” article, in particular—before it was worked out in practice. While various techniques were advocated for overcoming the formalization of film language under Mao-era cinema, many of which were explored in detail in the course of the chapter, the fact that they were laid out first in a theoretical essay should alert us to the realization that they, too, were potentially prescriptive, in that their repetition could lead to the same sort of formalization and even ossification that we saw in the case of Mao-era revolutionary cinema.

Echoing the points about the vicissitudes of realism by Roman Jakobson and Kristin Thompson cited earlier, John Mullarkey has observed that “the one sure thing about each new realism is that it affects us precisely when new, only in order to become *passé* subsequently, an obvious *style* refracted through time to emerge as an imitable artefact.”⁹⁷ As reform-era China progressed from the shadow of the Cultural Revolution to the center of the twenty-first-century capitalist world economy, post-socialist realist aesthetics inevitably transformed from a progressive tendency seeking to counter and replace Mao-era socialist realism into an arguably “conservative tendency” (following Jakobson’s dichotomy)⁹⁸ that has sustained itself as a niche style favored by the international art film and festival circuit. If the Fifth Generation’s early “exploratory” films, such as *The One and the Eight*, *Yellow Earth*, *Black Cannon Incident*, *The Horse Thief*, and *The Big Parade*, had reopened questions of identity and cultural roots, their follow-ups in the next decade—such as *Raise the Red Lantern* (*Da hong denglong gaogao gua* 大红灯笼高高挂; Zhang Yimou, 1991) and *Farewell My Concubine* (*Bawang bie ji* 霸王别姬; Chen Kaige, 1993)—began to feel like ponderous national allegories calculated to win their makers prizes at international film festivals as dissident Chinese artists. Similarly, gritty urban Sixth Generation films like *Xiao Wu* felt entirely fresh upon release, but, following the growing worldwide fame of Jia Zhangke, it seemed that many of the cinematic techniques that produced such a strong impression of realism in Chinese independent cinema of the 1990s (on-location shooting; use of nonprofessional actors; long-shot and long-take

cinematography; and a focus on the daily lives of marginal characters, such as prostitutes, thieves, and migrant workers) by the very early 2000s had become conventions reproduced for consumption by the global festival audiences that had made such films successful commodities in the first place. However accomplished such independent films as *The Orphan of Anyang* (*Anyang de gu'er* 安阳的孤儿; Wang Chao 王超, 2001) and *Blind Shaft* (*Mang jing* 盲井; Li Yang 李杨, 2003) might have been, one could not help but notice their similarity in look and theme to earlier Chinese art house hits, particularly *Xiao Wu*, and many other films tried to achieve the same effect without the skill displayed by those. The gritty realist Chinese indie film had become a product designed for a particular elite consumer. By the end of the 2000s, Shelley Kracier noted that although Jia Zhangke himself had struck out in “new directions,” “Jia-ist cinema, through its profound effect on most younger independent Chinese directors, seems lately more restrictive than liberating in its influence. Film language in ‘mainstream’ indie Chinese films (both docs and features) seems to have temporarily congealed into something like formulaic liturgies: fetishization of the long take, the distant camera, the objective tone, the unedited minutiae of daily life.”⁹⁹

Italian Neorealism is generally thought to have played itself out by the early 1950s, due to the dynamic described earlier, in which techniques that seemed fresh, provocative, and revelatory became, upon repetition, conventionalized. Nonetheless, the style—which had drawn on other precedents in world cinema from 1930s French Poetic Realism all the way back to Robert J. Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922)—traveled globally and is still evident in trends around the world today. The editors of the volume *Global Neorealism* “contend that this film style relinquished its exclusive Italian nationality soon after World War II” and “acquired many nationalities and became a citizen of the world.”¹⁰⁰ The anthology *Opening Bazin* similarly shows how the French critic of the mid-twentieth century had a global legacy that stretched up to and beyond the end of the century. The Chinese post-Mao neorealist trend that I call post-socialist realism may, too, have become conventionalized in many critics’ eyes, just like its Italian precedent, but the ongoing attraction of many of its

techniques, perhaps deployed in increasingly radical or inventive ways to avoid seeming formulaic, suggests that their power goes beyond mere novelty. Insofar as they invoke a reality that is as rich, complex, ambiguous, and often boring but occasionally exhilarating as everyday life, they retain their attraction and power for some Chinese filmmakers seeking to resist the prescriptive strictures of both officially sanctioned mythologies and commercial entertainment conventions.

7

Chinese Cinematic Realism(s) in the Digital Age

At the centenary of Chinese filmmaking in 2005,¹ the top-grossing film in Chinese theaters was Chen Kaige's martial arts historical melodrama *The Promise* (*Wuji* 无极), widely taken as his less-than-successful attempt to top the artistry and popularity of Zhang Yimou's 2002 martial arts epic *Hero* (*Yingxiong* 英雄), which had set a record for Chinese ticket sales and enjoyed great international success.² That these former collaborators—the director (Chen) and cinematographer (Zhang) of the early, defining Fifth Generation art films *The Yellow Earth* and *The Big Parade* a couple of decades earlier—would now be competing with each other in making expensive mainstream blockbusters is a clear indicator of how the cultural scene of China had been transformed by the overwhelming trend of marketization after the 1980s. Equally telling is the contrast between the earlier films' combination of documentary-style realism and contemplative, stationary long-shot cinematography and the later films' reliance on computer-generated imagery (CGI) to construct their fantasy worlds, in keeping with a trend that had become the rule for the most popular films in Chinese theaters. For example, the top-grossing films of the years both before and after *The Promise*—*Kung Fu Hustle* (*Gongfu* 功夫; Stephen Chow 周星驰, 2004) and *The Curse of the Golden Flower* (*Mancheng jindai huangjinjia* 满城尽带黄金甲; Zhang Yimou, 2006)—also were CGI-heavy martial arts films, the first a comedy and the second another historical costume drama. A century after the birth of Chinese cinema, the digital revolution was in full swing, in the service of culturally specific stories that drew, however loosely, on Chinese history, literature, and martial arts, even if they still freely adopted from the West in terms of both story

and technology (*The Curse of the Golden Flower*, for example, borrowed from Shakespeare's *King Lear* and employed the London-based Motion Picture Company [MPC] for many of its effects).

Without question the most consequential global event to be reckoned with in the field of cinema studies over roughly the turn of the millennium was the much ballyhooed and lamented "death of [photochemical] film"—the throes of which already were in process just as the medium itself was reaching its centenary in the 1990s. From the time that *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) revolutionized the integration of CGI with live-action photography and *Toy Story* (John Lasseter, 1995) became the first fully computer-animated feature movie, it seemed that it was just a matter of time before celluloid-based photographic film became as irrelevant as vinyl records—remaining only as a niche market for nostalgic buffs. Several leading film theorists wrote books considering anew the very nature of the film medium, delivering eulogies in the form of theoretical reevaluations.³ Meanwhile, many others, particularly younger audiences raised on television and video games, barely noticed film's passing and instead embraced the more flexible "expanded" digital cinema, enjoying the ever more stunning visual experiences that CGI could conjure, especially when combined with other cutting-edge cinematic technologies like IMAX and 3-D but also when reduced to a computer, tablet, or mobile phone screen. If *Jurassic Park* and *Toy Story* helped to launch the digital revolution in mainstream cinema, *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009), which dominated the Chinese box office in 2010, surely marked how successful it had become, both financially and, in some ways at least, artistically.

At the other end of the spectrum from big-budget special-effects blockbusters, but an equally significant part of the digital revolution in moving image culture, has been the rise of amateur or low-budget digital video (DV) filmmaking. In China as in the West, there has been an unprecedented democratization of the means of cinematic production enabled by the low cost of high-definition DV cameras, fast home computers, and user-friendly editing software as well as the growth of the internet as a venue for distributing homemade films without the necessity of any kind of corporate or government backing. Owing to the unprecedently wide availability of digital technology to almost anyone with access to a

computer or even just a mobile phone, a film is no longer something only experienced by a spectator in a movie theater but available for different sorts of screening and even manipulation by any user or viewer. A quick internet search for “avatar spoof” will show examples of the fusing of these two extremes of the digital revolution—the massive film industry CGI blockbuster and the empowered consumers who can create their own content and even subvert the corporate entertainment they are fed. In China during the first decade of the new century, this partly took the culturally specific form of *egao* 恶搞 (literally “evil doings”), the name given to homemade internet video parodies. The most notorious early case of this was Hu Ge’s 胡戈 spoof of *The Promise*, in which he spliced footage from that film to create his own hilariously narrated story, *The Bloody Case of a Steamed Bun* (*Yi ge mantou yinfa de xue'an* 一个馒头引发的血案), and was even sued by the famous film director as a result.⁴

An investigation of the history of cinematic realism in China would not be complete without a careful consideration of the specific ways in which new digital media are changing the nature of cinema, and in particular the ostensible realism of the medium, and how those changes play out specifically in the Chinese context. As the previous chapters have traced in detail, since the Left-Wing Film Movement of the 1930s, mainland Chinese cinema has often, though not exclusively, been dominated by various discourses of realism—from the critical realism of progressive Republican-era films to the prescriptive socialist realism of the Mao era to what I have called the post-socialist realism of the reform era. How does the transition from celluloid to digital technology affect the realism(s) of Chinese cinema, in terms of both the intrinsic ontology of the cinematic image and the actual practice of cinema and the varied roles it plays in the public sphere?

VIRTUAL REALISM

In 2001 Chinese film critic and scholar Chen Xihe 陈犀禾 published an article in a leading Chinese film studies journal that celebrated the “post-filmic” world of digital cinematography.⁵ In that essay, which would soon be canonized by its addition to the two-volume anthology *Selected Works*

of *One Hundred Years of Chinese Film Theory*, Chen praised computer imagery for providing filmmakers with a new “genuine freedom” in which cinema no longer rests on a foundation of ontological realism: “Digital imagery leads to the collapse of Bazin’s ontological theory of the image. As the digital image seizes the primary role in production, in fact any image at all becomes possible.”⁶ Thus “verisimilitude is no longer the goal,”⁷ and instead of photographic ontological realism, postfilmic cinema will be based on what Chen called the “virtual realism” of the artificial image. Similarly giddy pronouncements of the radically new world of digital media were made in the West around the turn of the millennium, particularly from theorists of new media rather than film, in what Philip Rosen calls “the discourse of the digital utopia.”⁸ As Lev Manovich put it in his seminal book *The Language of New Media* (published in the same year as Chen Xihe’s essay),

once live-action footage is digitized (or directly recorded in a digital format), it loses its privileged indexical relationship to prefilmic reality. The computer does not distinguish between an image obtained through a photographic lens, an image created in a paint program, or an image synthesized in a 3-D graphics package, since they are all made from the same material—pixels. And pixels, regardless of their origin, can be easily altered, substituted for one another, and so on. Live-action footage is thus reduced to just another graphic, no different than images created manually.⁹

Consequently, according to Manovich, “cinema can no longer be clearly distinguished from animation. It is no longer an indexical media technology but, rather, a subgenre of painting.”¹⁰

To quickly review what is at stake here, like many others, Manovich is drawing on the distinction first made by the pioneering semiotician Charles Sanders Pierce between symbolic, iconic, and indexical signs. In symbolic signs, such as human languages, the relationship between sign and referent is arbitrary; different languages thus use entirely different sounds to refer to the same thing. In iconic signs, such as a representational painting, the relationship between sign and referent is not arbitrary but rather one of physical resemblance; a portrait painting signifies its subject because it looks like that person. Finally, in indexical

signs, the sign represents the referent through some sort of physical or causal relationship, as in the relationship of smoke to fire, a footprint to a recent presence, a thermometer to a certain air temperature, or a pointed (index) finger to the thing it points to. As the introduction and chapter 1 discussed, photography and film—which of course traditionally was made up of twenty-four still photos projected per second—have long been thought to have a particularly powerful effect of realism because the photographic image not only looks like its referent but is actually a direct imprint of light that has reflected off its referent at a past point in time; it is not only iconic but also indexical. What Manovich is arguing, then, is that with digital photography, the indexical nature of cinema is lost, and it becomes principally an iconic art again, like painting. The reduction of the image to digital code subject to infinite possibilities of manipulation by a computer compromises its cause–effect relationship with the external world and therefore makes even live-action photography potentially a mere tool of animation.

We can see the loss of photographic realism to which Manovich refers most clearly in films that make abundant use of CGI. Beginning in the early 1990s, not just *Jurassic Park* but also other films, such as *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994), were able to combine CGI with live-action cinematography in a way that made it difficult, if not impossible, to tell where one ended and the other began. This of course progressed to the point that a film like *Avatar* can begin with the so-called performance-capture of actors on spare, artificial sets and then manipulate the image so that the film as a whole appears as an incredibly elaborate and intricate cartoon fantasy world that nonetheless has a great deal of “real” photography seamlessly integrated into it.

Many examples also can be cited in Chinese cinema. We can turn to a scene from the blockbuster *Red Cliff* (*Chi bi* 赤壁; John Woo 吴宇森, 2008) to show that it is not just the objects in the image that might now be computer created but also some of the basic techniques of cinematography, such as camera movement. In one of the film’s most spectacular shots, the “camera” follows a released carrier pigeon flying from one military encampment to another across the Yangzi River, passing in the process a giant armada of ancient warships. If attempted with old-fashioned

photographic film, this would be an aerial tracking shot of inconceivable technical difficulty, but of course it is nothing of the sort, as most of what we see in the image is computer generated. The multitude of ships is an illusion; there were only a few boats of different sizes actually built, and all the others were created digitally out of the visual information from those models.¹¹ What seems to be camera movement might be more accurately described as image movement; algorithms applied to the digital scenery cause it to float to the edges of the screen in a manner that imitates a tracking camera, though no real aerial camera flew across the river as depicted. As realistic as the image looks, it is a computer-generated fantasy that took live-action photography as a starting point and manipulated it far beyond any event that ever appeared before the camera. Digital compositing is used to create the illusion of movement as captured by a virtual camera, with actual photographic images from a mechanical camera becoming mere elements to be agglomerated into the virtual image.¹²

In the context of this book, particularly the discussion of the long take in the preceding chapter, one conundrum raised by the pigeon-tracking shot in *Red Cliff*—as by other famous long takes in contemporary cinema, such as the seventeen-minute shot that begins *Gravity* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2013)—is whether such analytical categories as “camera movement” (or the more precise “mobile framing”) and “long take” (or just shot length in general) should be defined in terms of an event (or not) of actual shooting by a camera or the experience of viewing the shot as a spectator. If a camera movement is virtual, is it still a camera movement? A camera did not record its actual movement through space, but the spectator experiences a realistic sensation of movement. Similarly, a virtual long take does not require a camera really to shoot for a certain duration, but the viewer experiences the shot as continuous even if it is in fact composited.¹³

The answer to the question of the realism of the virtual camera movement or virtual long take depends on whether one’s measure is ontological realism from the time of shooting or perceptual realism as experienced while viewing. One theorist of visual effects, Stephen Prince, has argued strongly for the latter, insisting that film theory has put too much emphasis on film’s ontological realism and thus “construed realism solely as a matter of reference rather than as a matter of perception as well.”¹⁴ He argues that

favoring perceptual realism over ontological realism (indexicality) better enables us to theoretically understand “some of the fundamental ways in which cinema works and is judged credible by viewers.”¹⁵ In his view, the overriding of “referential artifice” by perceptual realism is not new to digital filmmaking—because “the creative manipulation of photographic images is, of course, as old as the medium of photography”—but digital imaging nonetheless is revolutionary, because “it increases to an extraordinary degree a film-maker’s control over the informational cues that establish perceptual realism.”¹⁶ If a moving image gives perceptual cues that provide a convincing illusion of things existing in three-dimensional space, then neither a real camera nor an actual profilmic event is necessary to achieve an effect of realism.

This idea of viewing the moving image as *constructed* with the aim of perceptual realism rather than *captured* through the magic of photography’s ontological realism seems to have become widely accepted by filmmakers who now shoot digitally, even when they are not aiming at creating the imaginary worlds of fantasy or science fiction. For example, Ethan Coen has said that whereas shooting on traditional film forces the filmmaker to more or less commit to how a shot is going to look at the moment of shooting, shooting digitally is less like taking a picture than capturing information that subsequently will be turned into a picture: “when you’re capturing it on film, it’s actually in the grain of the negative, . . . and when you’re capturing it digitally, you’re just sort of recording pixels, all of which are negotiable later.”¹⁷

DIGITAL LIBERATION AND CHINESE TRADITION

The more constructed the digital film image becomes, the more its perceptual realism overlaps with what Chen Xihe celebrated as “virtual realism,” where “any image at all becomes possible.” Such a conception of cinema liberated from ontological realism compels us to revisit some of the basic questions of medium specificity and cultural adaptation raised at the beginning of this book’s historical journey. Chapter 1 showed that early Chinese filmmakers and critics felt an imperative to adopt an aesthetic of realism despite the anxiety that Chinese society and culture, with its

traditional preference for expressionism rather than realism in art, was not well suited to a medium that seemed to rest upon modern, Western notions of mimesis and objectivity. We saw, for example, how the early Chinese film theorist Gu Kenfu emphasized that cinema's realism demanded that actors be able to ride a horse, paddle a boat, drive a car, or even fly an airplane, in contrast to the actors in traditional Chinese opera, who had only to suppositionally signify such activities through pantomime, simple props, and stylized gestures and postures. Obviously, a shift to the virtual realism of the new CGI-enhanced story world means that actors *do not* need to ride, say, a Pandoran banshee in *Avatar*, since that action will be constructed by digital graphics animators after filming.¹⁸

Does the digital revolution in cinema raise the possibility of a rethinking of Chinese film aesthetics, in which matching the West (or "catching up with the development of world cinematic art," as chapter 6 noted was an obsession for Chinese critical discourse on film in the immediate post-Mao period)¹⁹ is no longer a central concern? In one sense, in terms of the global competitiveness of the Chinese film industry, there is still a priority of developing the capacity to compete on equal technical and artistic footing with Hollywood blockbusters. As Yomi Braester has summarized,

The commercial mainstream regards the blockbuster as a standard toward which Chinese films should strive. Supporters of the blockbuster model have invoked a discourse of urgency, seeing a pressing need for overhauling the film industry to comport with Hollywood's technological skills and achieving comparable levels of revenue. In the name of a viable domestic market, they established a strong link between digital special effects and box-office success.²⁰

The drive to match Hollywood's resources in creating CGI-filled blockbusters was reflected in the creation of the Animation School in the central government-funded Beijing Film Academy in 2000 and its subsequent rapid expansion, to the point that it became "one of the largest and most profitable" departments in the academy, with twenty-one faculty members and 358 students at the time of this writing.²¹ The training at the Animation School focuses in part on learning the most advanced techniques being used in Hollywood and elsewhere. When I toured the facilities in 2007,

for example, one laboratory room was mostly given over to the making of models based on Tim Burton's recent stop-motion animation feature *Corpse Bride* (2005), the animation and digital effects of which had been created by firms based in London (including MPC, mentioned earlier for its work on *The Curse of the Golden Flower*). It appeared that the students were learning exactly how it was done by painstaking imitation.

However, the investments in animation in China are not simply about being able to do top-quality imitations of cutting-edge techniques developed elsewhere, nor is the goal only to have Chinese animation workers or firms in demand as outsourced collaborators for popular Hollywood films, in the manner of some animation studios in India, the Philippines, and South Korea. The drive to make China a leader in the perceptual realism of digital animation and compositing aims to bolster the effort to increase China's cultural "soft power" and even up what Michael Raine has called the long-standing "geopolitical incline" constituted by the global imbalance of film industry influence in favor of Hollywood, ultimately backed by U.S. political, economic, and military power.²² As the differences in animation aesthetics mentioned earlier show, the Chinese film industry seeks not simply to match Hollywood's technological capabilities but to contest the artistic and cultural values it promotes by offering equally advanced cinematic expressions of Chinese aesthetics and values—reviving in the process Chinese cultural debates over Westernization versus the preservation of Chinese identity (or rather its modern construction through a selective mining of cultural history) that go back at least to the late Qing dynasty and never have a simple answer. Through an analysis of several key CGI-heavy Chinese martial arts films from the first decade of the 2000s, for example, Vivian Lee has theorized that they evince a new "digital imaginary" that achieves global appeal partly by transposing the exoticism of the Chinese cultural tradition into the international aesthetics of digital effects, thus transforming "the visual language of the martial arts film from a local cultural phenomenon to a transnational one."²³ The domestic and international successes of CGI-laden martial arts blockbusters like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (*Wohu canglong*; Ang Lee 李安, 2000), *Hero*, *House of Flying Daggers*, *Kung Fu Hustle*, and *The Grandmaster* (*Yidai zongshi* 一代宗师; Wong Kar-wai

王家卫, 2013) show that the Chinese martial arts digital imaginary became a significant part of the global cinema scene in the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

A more recent example of the successful (financially as well as artistically) deployment of digital imaging in the service of reenvisioning the Chinese narrative tradition is *Monkey King: Hero Is Back*—the 2015 adaptation of *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji* 西游记), the fantastical Ming dynasty vernacular novel—which set a new earnings record for an animated film in China. Ying Zhu notes that the film’s competitiveness with Hollywood at the box office revives a sense of patriotic cultural self-assertion that harkens back to the 1920s, “when Chinese filmmakers cultivated kungfu films in pursuit of a ‘new heroism’ to compete with Hollywood for a slice of the domestic market,” and that the film’s “success has resurrected hope for the emergence of a unique Chinese style of animation” that is “rooted in the Chinese fine arts tradition.”²⁴ Indeed, insofar as the new digital “virtual realism” extends beyond composited CGI elements in live-action cinema to pure animation, it renews a concern with developing a “national style” of animation that goes back to the mid-twentieth century.²⁵

Here, however, I will focus not on animation films per se but on films that incorporate CGI and thus blur the boundary between live-action film (with its ontological *and* perceptual realism) and animation (with its perceptual but *not* ontological realism). According to Julie Turnock, films that feature a composited mise-en-scène, whether using CGI or predigital special effects, can be divided into two contrasting trends: a photorealist aesthetic, on one hand, and an obviously animated look, on the other.²⁶ The former constructs images that emulate the look of live-action photography, giving the illusion that what is seen actually was photographed in the real world, whereas the latter creates an obviously fantastical, even cartoonish world that does not pretend to have been photographed in the traditional live-action sense. Some Chinese CGI blockbusters go more for the photorealist aesthetic—the virtual long take tracking shot flying over Cao Cao’s armada in *Red Cliff* being one example. On the whole, however, it seems that more Chinese filmmakers prefer the animation aesthetic rather than photorealist aesthetic in their use of CGI. Zhang Yimou’s visual style, for example, always has been

readily described as “painterly,” and the CGI in films like *Hero* aims as well for expressionistic beauty more than the illusion of reality. Meanwhile, Stephen Chow’s effects added to live-action footage—in films from *Shaolin Soccer* (*Shaolin zuqiu* 少林足球; 2001) and *Kung Fu Hustle* to *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons* (*Xiyou: jiangmopian* 西遊·降魔篇; 2013) and *The Mermaid* (*Meirenwu* 美人鱼; 2016)—intentionally look cartoonish, taking the animation aesthetic to a humorous extreme. Tsui Hark’s (Xu Ke 徐克) *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* (*Zhiqu Weihu Shan* 智取威虎山; 2014)—a coproduction of Hong Kong and mainland Chinese studios (as are Stephen Chow’s later-career films and many other contemporary Chinese blockbusters)—similarly embodies what Turnock identifies as the animation aesthetic, but in this case, with such contemporary digital tricks as obviously virtual camera movements, “impossible” camera positions, and changes in speed that freeze or extend dramatic moments through the kinds of “speed ramps” used in *The Matrix* (Lana and Lilly Wachowski, 1999) or *300* (Zack Snyder, 2006). The styles of these three directors—Zhang, Chow, and Tsui—are all quite different, but all three directors share a disregard for making the perceptual realism of their films’ CGI look like unembellished photographed images.

PREScriptive REALISM REDUX

The types of cinema that tend to rely most on CGI effects—such as contemporary martial arts films, action/adventure films, and science fiction films—also constitute current examples of *prescriptive* realism in Chinese cinema. In this book, prescriptive realism has referred mainly to the idealized visions of Chinese socialist realism, with its “combination of revolutionary realism with revolutionary romanticism” (chapters 4 and 5), but the last chapter also described a more recent trend of “capitalist realism” that is also in a prescriptive mode.

As Ying Zhu’s point about the “new heroism” cited earlier indicates, a key feature of prescriptive realism in its many different forms is the figure of the hero, who embodies and models ideal behavior. Chapter 5 traced how Communist heroes became so superhuman by the time of the revolutionary model opera and ballet films that they amounted to

superheroes. Indeed, Hollywood superhero movies—in offering a stark moral universe, a clear grid for action, and even a provisional, if fantastical, metaphysics—are examples of contemporary prescriptive realism on a global scale. The contrast with the post-socialist realist mode examined in the last chapter is clear from Jia Zhangke's 贾樟柯 statement that “I have never had any interest in making films about heroes or icons of any kind. This is something I feel quite strongly about. So you never see heroes in my films, and I have no interest in shooting any films about those idols most people look up to.”²⁷ While largely absent from post-socialist neorealism, the Chinese cinematic hero survives and proliferates in the current forms of prescriptive realism.

The Chinese films of the reform era that most resemble the propaganda vehicles of the Mao era are the so-called main melody films, which themselves have increasingly taken the form of CGI-filled action movies. “Main melody” is the translation of the Chinese *zhuxuanlü* 主旋律, which could also be translated as “central theme” or “leitmotif.” These are films made on lavish budgets in government-owned studios with well-established stars and directors. Like their predecessors during the Mao era, they often focus on mythologizing key revolutionary moments in modern Chinese history. For example, *The Founding of a Republic* (*Jianguo da ye* 建国大业), released in 2009 to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, was a sprawling, star-studded epic directed by Huang Jianxin, who, in the 1980s, had been considered one of the leading figures of the Fifth Generation of filmmakers, known then for their subversive and experimental art films. *The Founding of a Republic* is on the contrary a hymn to the Communist victory in the civil war against the Nationalist Party (or Guomindang) and the birth of China as a Communist state. It took third place in the Chinese box office that year (just behind a Transformers movie), and its gigantic cast included a good portion of the top movie stars from both mainland China and Hong Kong (including some who are well known even in the West, such as Jackie Chan 成龙, Jet Li 李连杰, Tony Leung Ka-fai 梁家辉, and Zhang Ziyi 章子怡), although many appeared only in brief cameos. Many other Chinese “main melody” films similarly have been big-budget, highly patriotic narratives of key events in modern Chinese history, such

as *The Opium War* (*Yapian zhanzheng* 鸦片战争; Xie Jin, 1997) and *The Founding of an Army* (*Jianjun da ye* 建军大业; Andrew Lau 刘伟强, 2017), which chronicles the origins of the People's Liberation Army.

More recently, some of the most successful “main melody” films have focused on celebrating China’s growing military might in the Xi Jinping 习近平 era, when the country is increasingly flexing its muscles abroad, for example, by asserting its claim to the maritime territory of the South China Sea and investing in infrastructure throughout the Global South in what some critique as a new age of Chinese economic imperialism. The most notable recent examples have been *Operation Mekong* (*Meigong He xingdong* 湄公河行动; Dante Lam 林超贤, 2016), *Wolf Warrior 2* (*Zhan lang* 战狼 2; Wu Jing 吴京, 2017), and *Operation Red Sea* (*Hong Hai xing-dong* 红海行动; Dante Lam, 2018), featuring fictionalized Chinese military operations in Southeast Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Arabian Peninsula, respectively.

Wolf Warrior 2 is notable because it combined its patriotic message with action melodrama so effectively that it became the highest-grossing Chinese film up to that time. Set in a fictional sub-Saharan African country, *Wolf Warrior 2* depicts the powerful and apparently entirely benevolent Chinese presence in Africa, first through the characterization of its hero, a former elite special operations officer in the Chinese military named Leng Feng (played by action star and director Wu Jing), and second by the Chinese Navy, which comes to the rescue at Leng Feng’s urging when a group of mercenaries threaten to take over the country and kill countless innocent Africans as well as many expatriate Chinese in the process. As if to drive home the message of China as an effective force for good in a dangerous world (in contrast to the United States, whose military proves to be entirely ineffective as the fictional crisis worsens), several scenes feature Africans showing boundless gratitude to Leng Feng in particular and the Chinese in general. Indeed, the extremity of Leng Feng’s heroism recalls the romanticist exaggerations of the revolutionary-era films discussed in chapters 4 and 5 and helps to establish *Wolf Warrior 2* and its kind as a successor to and extension of the sort of prescriptive realism found in the socialist realist classics of the Mao era.

Of particular interest is the way that *Wolf Warrior 2* continues the

deployment of melodrama in the service of prescriptive realism. The particular style of melodrama that gives the film its affective power is very similar to that of Hollywood's Rambo film series that began with *First Blood* (Ted Kotcheff, 1982). In her essay "Melodrama Revised," Linda Williams has shown how those "male action melodramas," along with several other Vietnam-themed Hollywood films of the late 1970s and 1980s, served to purge American audiences of their guilt over the immoral Vietnam War and instead portray their American protagonists as innocent victims in melodramatic fashion.²⁸ Like John Rambo in *First Blood* and its initial sequel, *Rambo: First Blood II* (George P. Cosmatos, 1985), Leng Feng in *Wolf Warrior 2* has left the military, which had honed him into an almost invincible war machine, and tearfully nurses his grievances. Just as Rambo mourns the death of his friend and former comrade from cancer due to exposure to Agent Orange during the Vietnam War and more broadly laments that the war was ostensibly lost only because he and his brethren did not receive adequate support from the American government, Leng Feng likewise mourns the death of a dear comrade (killed in the first *Wolf Warrior* film) and goes to Africa partly to escape his painful memories of that loss and his own subsequent abuse by the corrupt head of a real estate company and the police who backed him. He works out his grief through masculine pursuits like drinking games and soccer matches on the beach in Africa. Like Rambo, he is portrayed "as a virtuous victim whose only motive is a melodramatic desire to return to the innocence of an unproblematic love of country and the simple demand for that love's return."²⁹ The pathos of Leng Feng's situation increases the audience's strong identification with him when the film's spectacular action sequences play out, particularly when he faces off directly with the film's chief villain, an American mercenary leader called Big Daddy, an embodiment of evil and greed who kills indiscriminately. Near the film's end, when Leng Feng finally prevails at the end of a seemingly interminable fight sequence, the geopolitical subtext comes to the fore when Big Daddy tells Leng Feng, "People like me will always be better than people like you," and Leng Feng replies "That's fucking history!" before proceeding to bash Big Daddy to death. Thus any potential moral reservation about China's economic imperialism in Africa is swept away by the assurance that, after

all, China is only finally reasserting itself as a great nation after nearly two centuries of humiliation and subjugation by Western imperialist powers, going back to the First Opium War of 1839–42. The implausibility of much of the action and dialogue of *Wolf Warrior 2* in the end is obscured by the spectacle of its Hollywood-quality, CGI-enhanced action sequences; the emotional force of its melodramatic characterizations; and the familiarity of its prescriptive realist mode, which encourages identification with heroic ideals rather than recognition of ordinary reality.

Similarly prescriptive—and, in its contemporary form, prone to abundant use of CGI—is martial arts cinema, identified by Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar as belonging to the “operatic mode” of Chinese filmmaking, which they oppose to the sometimes more dominant “realist mode” more similar to foreign cinemas, such as Hollywood.³⁰ Berry and Farquhar point out that the operatic mode goes back to the origins of Chinese cinema. In fact, opera films account for many of the landmarks of Chinese film history, including the first Chinese film, the first Chinese sound film, and the first Chinese color film. The rhythms of Beijing opera, including the alternation of spectacular acrobatic action with moments of stillness, also have long been characteristic of Chinese martial arts cinema. In short, anyone prone to cultural essentialism, in China or abroad, would have no problem identifying kung fu (*gongfu* 功夫) and martial arts (*wuxia* 武侠) cinemas as emblems of Chineseness, so that international blockbuster hits like *Hero* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* can be seen as raising China’s “soft power” via global film spectatorship. Around the same time those films were achieving global box-office success, many Western films began to incorporate elements of the Hong Kong martial arts style into Hollywood action cinema, particularly after the success of *The Matrix*, which employed veteran Hong Kong martial arts choreographer Yuen Woo-ping (Yuan Heping 袁和平) to design its fight sequences.

But why call martial arts cinema—or, for that matter, related contemporary genres, such as comic book superhero films—forms of prescriptive realism, thus putting them in the same category as socialist realist (or “revolutionary romanticist”) films? In fact, the genres share many characteristics. During the Cultural Revolution, one formula that was supposed to guide revolutionary narratives was the “three prominences,” which

meant that the positive characters should stand out from the characters in general, a small group of heroic characters should stand out among the positive characters, and a singular hero should stand out as the most noteworthy model character of all. This formula applies equally well to most martial arts films: opposed to the irredeemably evil villain(s) are, first, the decent people in general, including ordinary people in need of help; second, a smaller group of highly skilled martial artists who either fight on the same side or, in some cases, fight honorably against each other if unavoidable circumstances require; and third, generally one supreme hero, a martial artist whose fighting prowess as well as moral character—displaying traits like courage, loyalty, and sympathy—is superior to all the other characters, reaching almost superhuman status. The same was precisely the case for the most heroic characters in the model opera films of the Cultural Revolution; recall, for example, Zhao Yonggang's dispatching of twenty-five opponents in just a minute and a half of hand-to-hand combat in the revolutionary model opera film *Fighting on the Plain*, as described in chapter 5. Like the model opera films, the martial arts genre serves as a form of prescriptive realism that entertains mass audiences while reinforcing conventionalized and affectively charged collective values regarding morality and community belonging.

More genres lately also have exemplified the prescriptive realist label as used here. *The Wandering Earth* (*Liulang diqiu* 流浪地球; Guo Fan 郭帆, 2019) became the first mainland Chinese science fiction film to receive a great deal of international attention. Based on a story by China's leading contemporary science fiction author, Liu Cixin 刘慈欣, it tells how a pending catastrophic explosion of the sun forces earthlings to come together to turn the whole planet into a spaceship in order to travel to another solar system and escape global incineration. The future Earth is imagined to be led by China just as effortlessly as Hollywood disaster films have long imagined Americans as habitual planetary saviors. The film contains clear echoes of previous forms of prescriptive realism. For example, it has a scene of grandiose self-sacrifice and martyrdom that seems to borrow from similar films from the height of Mao-era socialist realism, such as *Dong Cunrui*. In that film, a patriotic young soldier turns himself into a suicide bomber to protect his comrades from an enemy machine gun

nest. Similarly, in *The Wandering Earth*, at a key moment when it looks like the entire planet will be destroyed, one of the main characters saves the day by turning the small spaceship he is flying into a missile, causing an explosion in Jupiter's atmosphere that saves Earth but kills the pilot. In fact, this example resonates not only with Mao-era military films but also with the contemporary versions: the character who thus sacrifices himself is played by none other than Wu Jing, the director and star of *Wolf Warrior 2* from two years earlier.

Aside from showing how science fiction can serve as a new vehicle for Chinese prescriptive realism, *The Wandering Earth* offers a case study in the differences in CGI aesthetics identified by Turnock, particularly when compared with the similarly themed 2014 international sci-fi hit from Hollywood *Interstellar*, directed by Christopher Nolan. CGI in the latter film follows the photorealist aesthetic favored in classic Hollywood sci-fi films like *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968) and the original *Star Wars* trilogy (George Lukas, 1977, 1980, 1983).

One example of this aesthetic that is noticeable in Nolan's *Interstellar* is the way that the CGI frequently incorporates fake lens flare (sometimes called camera glare) into the image. In conventional photography, lens flare occurs when a bright point of light strikes the camera lens, whether its source is in the image being photographed or out of the frame and hitting the lens from an angle, and the light is then scattered, or flared, within the lens system to create artifacts in the resulting photograph, from scattered glares that make part of the image look washed out to bright, semitransparent circles that occur across the image in straight lines. Obviously, no lens was involved in the creation of a computer-generated image, but such effects might be added in postproduction to reinforce the illusion of the image having been photographed in a real world. Berys Gaut identifies fake lens flare as one of the techniques of "photorealist" animation as opposed to just the "perceptual illusionism" of animation in general—a contrast that roughly coincides with Turnock's distinction.³¹

Similar to this effect, and sometimes combined with it in *Interstellar*, is the very close attention paid to recreating the patterns of light and shadow when a continuously rotating object—such as the mother spaceship in the film—is hit from one side by a bright light, such as the sun. These moving



FIGURE 30. Photorealist CGI aesthetic in *Interstellar* (2014): fake lens flare and imaginary GoPro effect.

images are meticulously designed to imitate the rapidly shifting patterns of shadow and bright light reflected off the surfaces of the illuminated spinning object. Such images occur repeatedly in the film.

Another aspect of *Interstellar* that illustrates the photorealist aesthetic is a kind of “imaginary GoPro effect,” referring to the miniature portable cameras that can be attached to moving objects, such as bicycle helmets, surfboards, cars, boats, or airplanes, to capture exciting action shots. Despite the fact that the camera is in fact virtual rather than real, the exterior space shots in *Interstellar* strive to give the illusion that the camera is somehow anchored to a physical object in the fictional world. In many of them, it appears that the camera is attached to the side of a moving spaceship. The point is to create the illusion that a camera captured the image from a physical position where it would in principle have been possible for a camera to be (Figure 30).

As China’s answer to Hollywood’s big-budget science fiction blockbusters, *The Wandering Earth* shares several plot points and motifs with *Interstellar*. Both are built on the premise of a dying planet Earth necessitating humanity’s relocation to another solar system; both share an obsession with fatherhood and with repairing an estrangement between father and child; both feature a spaceship with circular rotating parts; and both climax with breathtaking acts of self-sacrifice in which the main hero intentionally plummets to his apparent death—being sucked into a black hole in *Interstellar* and being consumed in a fiery crash into Jupiter



FIGURE 31. Animated CGI aesthetic in *The Wandering Earth* (2019).

in *The Wandering Earth*—to save others.³² Both, of course, also feature impressive CGI, but in *The Wandering Earth*, the aesthetic of the CGI shifts decisively from photorealism to animation.

In general, spectacular CGI-constructed exterior shots of spaceships, celestial bodies, and otherworldly planetary surfaces in *The Wandering Earth* mostly lack fake lens flare and, even when featuring similarly rotating spaceship designs, put less focus on realistically shifting patterns of light and shadow and more on the intricacies of the detailed illustrations of the fantastical images. Rather than constructing the illusion that its world was captured by a mechanical camera—eliciting a reaction of “It looks so real!” from the audience—the animation aesthetic aims more for a reaction of “Cool graphics!” of the type that one might have to a video game (Figure 31).

In particular, *The Wandering Earth* not only accepts but embraces the possibilities opened up by the presumption that, as Tobey Crockett has argued, “the mechanical camera is now effectively dead, and in its place the virtual camera rewrites both cinema and the world around us.”³³ Its most spectacular shots do not seek to maintain the illusion that the “camera” exists physically in a real world but rather embrace the limitless possibilities of virtuality. As Roger Cook writes of such digital imaging, “there is rather a constant flux of unanchored positions, a dynamic flow in which space itself moves, bends, and morphs into various forms.”³⁴

One shot begins with a close-up of the underside of a truck in motion (Figure 32a), but rather than appearing to be anchored to it in the

imaginary GoPro mode, the virtual camera soars to the side and then up, within seconds turning the shot into an extreme long shot, and then keeps tracking impossibly back to reveal a vast mining operation on the surface of now-frozen Earth (Figure 32b). The virtual camera continues speeding back, soon showing one of the enormous thrusters now built into the planet's surface to turn it into a giant spaceship, then follows the rocket exhaust beam up until the imaginary camera leaves what is left of the atmosphere (Figure 32c). Hardly finished, the “camera” continues tracking back through space until the entire Earth is a small sphere that is propelling itself away from the sun behind it, while the virtual camera flies along the side of the international space station that is escorting the planet to another solar system, until finally the focal perspective makes a cosmically scaled revolving track to the left until the space station, Earth, and the sun are three receding spheres arranged in a line in the vastness of space in the shot’s final seconds, when a title graphic also appears (Figure 32d). Thus concludes a virtual tracking shot that began as a close-up of the underside of a truck. The shot lasts fifty-five seconds in total, but within the first few seconds, it abandons any illusion that it has been photographed by a “real” camera accomplishing an ontologically “real” long take.

Another spectacular long take in *The Wandering Earth* is, during its first forty-seven seconds, a live-action virtuoso tracking shot filmed by an actual mechanical camera to show all the characters in the cab of the massive futuristic truck in which they are traveling (Figure 33a). However, for the rest of the one-minute shot, compositing allows the now-virtual camera to pass through the back of the vehicle—including its cargo, a “Lighter Core” (Figure 33b) to be carried to another of the planet’s “Earth Engines”—and exit the back of the vehicle (Figure 33c), which drives on into the distance, now in extreme long shot. Not only does the movement of the “camera” though multiple solid walls in the truck flagrantly display its own virtual

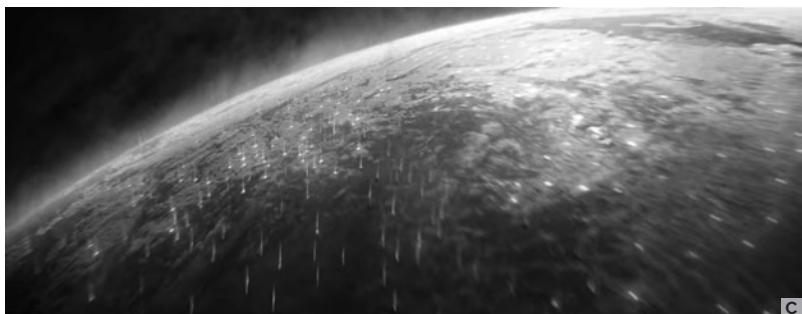
FIGURE 32. Stills from a single virtual long take in *The Wandering Earth* (2019), beginning with, *a*, the underside of a truck and tracking back to show, *b*, a vast terrestrial mine, *c*, Earth from outside the atmosphere, and finally, *d*, the space station, Earth, and sun receding from right to left.



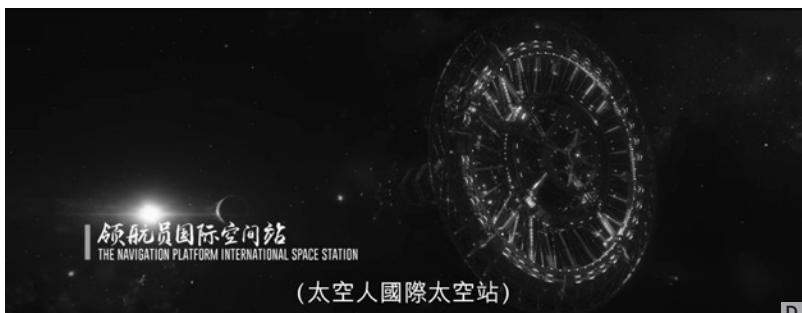
A



B



C



D

status but the shot ends by adding a graphic display in the sky showing a map of the truck's intended path from Hangzhou to Sulawesi, lessening further the shot's photographic quality with an illustrated transmission of information to the viewer (Figure 33d).

Thus, in comparison to *Interstellar*, *The Wandering Earth* supports the thesis that CGI in Chinese cinema tends toward an obviously animated rather than photorealist aesthetic. In Turnock's words, with an intentional twist on Bazin, such filmmakers put their "faith in animation" rather than putting their "faith in the optical."³⁵ In the animation style of CGI, "effects objects are presented from camera angles with no possible human perspective, and 'cameras' move through impossible spaces," as we have just seen in the two virtual long takes in *The Wandering Earth*.³⁶ Other effects in the film include manipulations of time, such as speeding up, slowing down, or freezing actions, sometimes combined with cameras that move while the action itself is slowed or frozen—the sort of speed-ramp effects mentioned earlier in the case of *The Taking of Tiger Mountain*. These are especially evident in a very late sequence in which characters plunge to the ground amid flying debris due to a shock wave hitting Earth.

Any discrepancies in CGI aesthetics between Chinese and Hollywood blockbusters may soon become blurred not only by the ability of Chinese filmmakers to imitate Hollywood but by Hollywood's own efforts to court the Chinese audience. As the Chinese box office grows into the world's largest—soon dwarfing that of the United States—the rest of the world is likely to become more familiar with China's new forms of prescriptive realism, the aesthetics of which both borrow from and increasingly may be imitated by Hollywood itself, as the latter seeks increasingly to meet market demand in China to maintain its global status and profitability while coping with the sensitivities of Sino-U.S. political tensions.³⁷

FIGURE 33. Stills from a single virtual long take in *The Wandering Earth* (2019), tracking virtually from, *a*, the interior of the truck's cabin through a wall to, *b*, the Lighter Core in another compartment, then through another wall to, *c*, the exterior of the truck, which then, *d*, recedes into the distance and is superimposed by a graphic.



THE ONTOLOGICAL REALISM OF THE DIGITAL IMAGE

We began our discussion of CGI and its related forms of prescriptive cinema in China with the claims many have made that the change from photochemical film to digital cinema represents a fundamental break from cinema's ontological realism in favor of perceptual or virtual realism. Are Chen Xihe and Lev Manovich correct in saying that, with digital photography, cinema loses its ontological tie to the real world? Many film theorists, such as D. N. Rodowick in his book *The Virtual Life of Film*, agree that the so-called indexicality of the image as been compromised, if not completely lost, with the rise of digital cinema. As Rodowick puts it, "in digital capture, the indexical link to physical reality is weakened, because light must be converted into an abstract symbolic structure independent of and discontinuous with physical space and time."³⁸ This conversion of visual (and audio) information into chains of digital ones and zeroes contrasts with reality inscribing itself directly "in the grain of the negative" (in the words of Ethan Coen cited earlier). Others, however, have questioned this logic, arguing that the switch from analog to digital photography does *not* necessarily mean a loss of the indexical link between image and world.

Tom Gunning, for instance, decries digital media's alleged loss of indexicality as "nonsense" that falsely equates the indexical with the analog.³⁹ He points out, for example, that medical devices have long converted information detected directly—which is to say, indexically—from the material world into numbers (such as a reading of someone's pulse rate, temperature, or heart rate), and such a conversion does not suddenly destroy our faith in their reliability as measures of real physical states.⁴⁰ Scott Curtis similarly observes that the difference in medical imaging between, say, an analog X-ray film image and digital images from a CAT or MRI scan does not lessen the reliability of the latter: "Even though the information gathered by the machines travels to the computer in the form of binary oppositions, ones and zeros, that information is nonetheless 'indexical' in the sense that there is a necessary physical connection—even if only at the molecular level—between the object and its representation. It must be so; otherwise, the images would have no informational value."⁴¹

Philip Rosen likewise notes that contemporary military satellites used for digital surveillance generate data that are very much taken as recording material realities on the planet: “without referential entities or events preexisting the data itself, that data would have no informational value as surveillance.”⁴² Indeed, the modern Chinese domestic surveillance state—quite possibly the world’s most sophisticated—would be impossible if digital data were incapable of ontological realism, accurately recording things in the real world.

It takes only a little consideration of how digital imaging works in our daily lives to realize that the *possibility* of an image that looks photographic but is entirely computer generated—such as a computer-animated film in a photorealist style—hardly means that we should take all digital images as having no existential tie with the real world. When we take mobile phone snapshots, or even launch mass social protests based on a violent injustice that was caught on video by a bystander, we are taking as a given that at least some digital images are accurate records of something in reality, just as was the case with the analog photography used in the past. Berys Gaut concludes that while it is true that “digital imaging software makes available painting techniques that break the essential causal link between a photograph and its subject” as argued by Manovich, “the mere possibility of using such techniques does not show that, if they are not employed, the resulting image is like a painting, any more than the possibility of overpainting a traditional photograph shows that traditional photographs are like paintings.”⁴³

All these examples show that what Rosen calls “digital indexicality” is not the oxymoron that so many film and media theorists implied in their turn-of-the-century anxiety (or jubilation) over the replacement of analog photographic images with digital ones and the ostensible ontological rupture that entails.⁴⁴ Whether in the case of a military analyst inspecting a digital satellite image, a police detective viewing security camera footage, or the rest of us looking at photographs from our friends’ holiday trips on social media, the faith we put in the image’s connection to reality is based not specifically on whether it was generated photochemically or digitally but rather more generally on our assumptions about how and why the image was produced. Just as we expect to see computer-generated visual

effects when we watch a special-effects blockbuster like *The Wandering Earth*, when we watch the latest gritty neorealist fiction film or cinema vérité-style documentary from China, we expect to see some true vision of Chinese reality today, even if the footage was shot digitally.

Although documentary cinema lies outside the scope of this book, it is worth noting that it is precisely the digital revolution that has enabled the explosion of independent documentary filmmaking in China during the early decades of the twenty-first century. In his book on Chinese independent documentary, Luke Robinson notes that upon its arrival, digital video “was seen as unparalleled in its capacity to capture experiential reality,” amounting not to a loss of ontological realism but, on the contrary, to a “hyper-indexicality.”⁴⁵ Similarly, in the introduction to their coedited anthology on the new Chinese documentary film movement, Chris Berry and Lisa Rofel argue that when digital video began to proliferate in China around the turn of the century, the discourse around the “DV aesthetic” emphasized its “on-the-spot realism” (*jishizhuyi* 纪实主义), so that the “Chinese understanding of the essence of DV stands in stark contrast to the common understanding in the United States and elsewhere in the West” as influenced by theorists like Manovich.⁴⁶ This difference, they continue, “should alert us to the fact that DV has no single essence,” in contrast to Manovich’s medium essentialism that divides photochemical film from digital video or cinema.⁴⁷ Gunning argues more broadly that we should view cinema in general “as a braid made of various aspects rather than a unified essence with firm boundaries” because it always has been “a point of intersection, a braiding together of diverse strands,” overlapping with many other technologies, from the phonograph in the early sound era to the computer in the current age of media convergence.⁴⁸

In this light, the “digital indexicality” allowed by DV cameras—the opposite pole on the digital continuum from CGI’s “virtual realism”—has intertwined with the rise not only of the new documentary movement in China but more broadly of the independent film movement that, as the last chapter detailed, became the dominant form of post-socialist realism beginning in the 1990s. China’s independent filmmakers adapted quickly to the possibilities of new digital formats. Jia Zhangke, in the process of becoming the most internationally renowned director of the “Sixth

Generation,” switched from Betacam video to 16mm film to 35mm film to DV just from his student films to his third feature film. He would not make a feature 35mm film after *Platform* (*Zhantai* 站台; 2000) until 2018’s *Ash Is Purest White* (*Jianghu ernü* 江湖儿女), so he has worked in digital formats for most of his career, even as he became known as a preeminent realist filmmaker. At the same time that he was entering his DV stage at the beginning of the 2000s, countless other filmmakers and, more accurately, videographers throughout China were answering a call-to-arms Jia had made in an essay published in the newspaper *Southern Weekly* (*Nanfang zhoubao* 南方周末) in 1999, in which he had called for the rise of an “amateur cinema” to contest the domination of industry professionals and official state film studios. Here Jia was not only referring to the genuine practice of amateur hobbyists but also using “amateur” more metaphorically to describe the new independent cinema of the 1990s of which he was a part. In fact, while working in the new “underground” sector of filmmaking, Jia as well as several of his fellow independent directors, such as Lou Ye, Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai 王小帅, and He Jianjun 何建军, all were professionals who had been trained in the Beijing Film Academy. Over the following decade, however, Jia’s vision of the rise of “amateur” filmmaking would occur in a quite literal sense owing to the democratizing effects of the DV revolution. The resulting explosion of independent cinema has been far too rich, varied, and complex than it would be possible to detail here. Already mentioned was the prolific blossoming of independent documentary cinema. Alongside that, as was examined in part in the preceding chapter, in the 1990s and the first decade of the new century, many feature films were made in a gritty neorealist style that appropriated the same type of verité on-location videography as many of the documentaries. Corresponding to the independent film and DV craze was the rise of local film clubs and (for a time at least, although the authorities eventually cracked down on them) independent film festivals from Beijing to Shanxi to Yunnan.

Given the close link between the new documentary movement and the independent fiction film scene (Jia Zhangke himself has made a handful of documentaries, for example), it was no surprise to see an expansion of extremely low-budget feature filmmaking that blurs the boundaries

between documentary and fiction. DV filmmakers would often forgo obvious postproduction possibilities to preserve mistakes or poor quality as a badge of authenticity, leaving visible such things as autofocus mistakes or temporary over- or underexposure problems when a DV camera automatically adjusts as it moves between bright and dimly lit spaces. For filmmakers shooting with nonprofessional actors, DV arguably allows for more realism because the director can shoot continually and potentially capture a larger number of “authentic” moments without having to worry about the imposing bulk of 35mm cameras, the expense of film stock, or the distractions of changing out film cartridges while shooting.

Here I will briefly cite just a few examples of this phenomenon. The film *Good Cats* (*Hao mao* 好猫), directed by Ying Liang 应亮 in 2008, is a fictional account of local corruption and greed. It has an almost journalistic approach and does not disguise the markers of its amateur aesthetic, including occasionally poor acting and noticeably amateurish lighting and autofocus in the DV photography. While hardly a major artistic achievement, the film’s unflinching look at local greed and corruption earned it attention first in the independent film scene in China and then among international festival programmers and distributors. Other examples include films by the independent filmmakers Liu Jiayin 刘伽茵 and Song Fang 宋方, cited in the preceding chapter, both of whom made fiction films that seemed like documentaries because they were shot at the filmmakers’ family homes, with their own family members playing themselves in scenarios that seemed improvised, even though they were in fact substantially scripted. These two directors also exemplify a crucial consequence of the leveling effect that came with the drastic lowering of barriers to entry into the filmmaking profession brought by the relative affordability of the means of cinematic production: the DV revolution has done much to bypass the traditional sexism of the film industry (in China as elsewhere) and allow the cluster of talented young directors receiving attention in the domestic and international independent and art film scenes to include a higher proportion of women than at any previous time in Chinese film history.

Not only is the idea of a rupture in the essence of the medium with the coming of digital cinema overly simplistic, but even the more careful

division I made between the CGI's virtual perceptual realism and DV's ontological realism implies a fissure that might easily be bridged in a particular film. The typical big-budget commercial film today, whether in Hollywood, China, or elsewhere, is likely to feature live-action footage composited—whether subtly and unnoticeably or grandly and spectacularly—with digital effects created on computer. At the same time, the worlds of the imagination conjured by virtual environments are also *real* parts of ordinary people's lives, so that a film in a verisimilar critical realist mode might depict them as part of a quotidian reality it wishes to capture.

HYPERMEDIATION, ANIMATION, AND DIGITAL EFFECTS IN THE FILMS OF JIA ZHANGKE

Jia Zhangke's films are exemplary in this regard. From his first feature, *Xiao Wu*, despite the almost documentary style of on-the-spot realism he used to depict the lives of disadvantaged losers in a nondescript contemporary city in the Chinese interior, he and his sound designer, Zhang Yang 张阳, with whom he has continued to work throughout his career, were careful to depict various sorts of media—local news reports, overheard snatches of soundtracks from Hong Kong new wave films of the 1980s, off-tune karaoke singing blasting from distant speakers, and so on—as ubiquitous in the urban landscape, or, more important, soundscape. This kind of hypermediacy—the depiction of one medium within another—would become a hallmark of Jia's particular brand of post-socialist realism.⁴⁹ His second film, *Platform*, which traces a local performance troupe from the late 1970s to the end of the 1980s, realistically showed the degree to which popular music was incorporated into young people's changing identities, including how pop music from far away (a love song broadcast from Taiwan via shortwave radio, a cassette tape of rock music brought back to Shanxi from the much more rapidly developing coastal province of Guangdong) could take on a utopian function in the imaginations of the youths. His third film and first shot on DV, *Unknown Pleasures* (*Ren xiaoyao* 任逍遥; 2002), featured several shots of a well-known cartoon adaptation of the Ming dynasty adventure novel *Journey to the West*, which one of the

teenage protagonists of *Unknown Pleasures* habitually watches. This fantasy world provides a contrast to the bleak setting of the Shanxi mining city Datong, where *Unknown Pleasures* is set. While the characters' real lives are severely constrained by limited opportunities, it is suggested, they can still yearn for a realm of freedom symbolized by the wild adventures of the Monkey King, liberated from reality by animation.

Such juxtapositions amount to the *depiction of prescriptive realism within verisimilar social realism*, so that the latter's critique includes as its object not only the material lives of ordinary people under the conditions of postsocialist development but also the forms of media they consume that offer a romantic, even utopian vision of escape from those very conditions. As Jia himself put it,

the younger generation are faced with a new kind of cultural oppression. This is in part due to the lifestyles they hear and learn about through the media—especially the internet and cable television—which exists on a completely different plane from their everyday reality. It is this radical contrast between the reality of their environment and the picture of the world they get through the media that creates an enormous pressure in their lives.⁵⁰

This contrast comes through even more starkly in Jia's next film, *The World* (*Shijie* 世界; 2004), in which animation reappears, but in a way that is much more ambiguous in its relation to the world of the film in general. While the animation in *Unknown Pleasures* was clearly contained within the TV screen of a character's apartment, that in *The World* enters in the form of cuts to animated fantasy sequences that take up the entire film screen rather than a diegetic screen depicted within the screen. All five of the animation sequences in the film are motivated by digital technology, specifically text messages received by the characters on their mobile phones. The Flash animations show hands holding the phones with the text messages on them, as if from the point of view of the real characters, but they also feature more oneiric images that seem to be flights of fancy or dreams of freedom or escape. In the first, for example, the main protagonist, Tao, is passing by Tiananmen on a public bus when we hear the tinkle of her ringtone. She lifts her flip phone to look at the screen,



FIGURE 34. First animation/mobile phone sequence in *The World* (2004).

after which the whole screen switches to an animated virtual tracking shot of the bus from the front, then to a close-up of her phone (Figure 34) showing a text from her boyfriend (with whom she has recently fought) saying, “Where are you going to run to?” The scene then cuts to another virtual tracking shot, this time of the passing streetlights as if from the perspective of the bus itself. The sense of movement combines with the text message to convey both the attraction and the futility of finding a line of flight out of Tao’s fate as a migrant from a distant province working as an entertainer at a theme park in Beijing. The phones themselves, with their ability to collapse space and connect people across a distance, take on a romantic, idealizing function. As Sumanth Gopinath observes, “linked to the mobility of the cell phone and moments of transit that ultimately lead nowhere, Tao’s ringtone is arguably a little sonic lie about freedom in the face of the deadening routine that the park’s performers must endure in order to produce its dream-factory spectacles; that lie, however, is inseparable from the utopian horizon of an outside (and better, less alienated) world which the mobile phone seems to offer.”⁵¹ Later animated sequences in the film combine the cell phone interactions with, for example, a vision of Tao floating high in the air over the Beijing cityscape. Jia has related these fantasy-style representations of digital interactivity to the emergence of a diversifying internet culture in China at the time: “Suddenly young people found themselves living amid two worlds—the virtual world and the real world.”⁵² Just as the “world” theme park presented an ersatz

fantasy world for its visitors, the internet offers an alternative virtual space that nonetheless becomes a real part of young people's lives.

The undercutting of realism by the animation sequences in *The World* was a little shocking to fans of Jia Zhangke insofar as he had been taken to represent a relatively pure form of the neorealist aesthetic. However, as the preceding chapter detailed, by the early 2000s, that aesthetic was becoming conventionalized to the point of losing its power to provide a jolt of the real, instead seeming itself formulaic, and the use of animation to help construct the world of *The World* indicated a shift in Jia Zhangke's style. While still concerned with revealing to the audience real social conditions elided in more commercialized films, he began to reflexively complicate his own apparent claims to realism, the first major example being the shifting of representation from the ontological realism of live-action film to animation in those five sequences in *The World*. The problematizing of his own style of realism continued in several ways in his following works from 2006, the fiction film *Still Life* (*Sanxia haoren* 三峡好人) and the documentary *Dong* 东, filmed at the same time. In *Still Life*, rather than animation sequences, Jia inserts isolated instances of obvious CGI in a film that otherwise appears to follow the usual markers of Jia's neorealist style—on-location shooting, use of nonprofessional actors, long shots and long takes, and so on. In one shot that appears photographically realist in every other way, an otherworldly UFO suddenly streaks across the sky. In another shot, probably the most striking in the entire film, what looks like a half-constructed building in the background—actually a tower in the shape of 華 (*hua*, or China) built by a local government—suddenly ignites and takes off like a rocket ship headed for outer space (Figure 35). (As Jia Zhangke's first foray into obvious CGI effects and second film to gain official distribution within China rather than being independent, *Still Life* nonetheless was sidelined at the Chinese box office by two of the CGI-filled blockbusters mentioned at the beginning of this chapter: Chen Kaige's *The Promise* and Zhang Yimou's *Curse of the Golden Flower*.)⁵³

What are we to make of *Still Life*'s unexpected CGI inserts in terms of the practice of cinematic realism? First, the CGI effects obviously compromise the ontological realism of the photographic image in the manner suggested by Manovich. We know that there was not an actual profilmic



FIGURE 35. CGI effect of a building taking off in *Still Life* (2006).

event of the tower taking off in front of the camera but that instead the effect was achieved in postproduction through computer manipulation of data from the original photographic image of the building. Second, the perceptual realism of the tower's movement nonetheless demands our "participation" or "immediate involvement in the image"; although the building in the real world did not move, in terms of the phenomenology of the viewer's perception, there is a "real presence of motion."⁵⁴ Third, the verisimilar social realism of the film is of course compromised by the implausible visual effect. Buildings don't suddenly take off like rocket ships, so such a depiction lessens the film's otherwise strong sense of coinciding with contemporary reality—in this case, that of China in the settlements along the Yangzi River that were being demolished and flooded during the construction of the Three Gorges Dam project. Finally, the fictional realism of the film also appears to be severely challenged by this image, insofar as it potentially undermines the "worldhood" of the film as a whole. Even if we can attribute an allegorical meaning to the shot (China's economy "taking off" or, alternatively, China losing its "grounding," and so on), the fantastical nature of the CGI effects seems so out of place in comparison with the rather melancholy drudgery of the film as a whole that it almost appears to come out of a different movie altogether, rupturing the internal consistency of the film's fictional world.

At the least, the moments of sudden CGI surrealism would provoke the viewer's engagement to switch from fiction emotions to artifact emotions (see chapter 5), shifting attention at least partly from the film as a fictional world to a constructed artifact,⁵⁵ insofar as the first-time viewer's immediate reaction was likely to be "What is an obvious CGI effect doing in a neorealist Jia Zhangke film?"

Jia himself counters that surrealism is a form of realism if the reality on which it focuses is itself surreal. In an interview cited and translated by Tonglin Lu, he insists that "a surrealist atmosphere prevails in China today" under the condition of modernization at breakneck speed, so that "the surrealistic elements . . . are part of reality."⁵⁶ In a later interview, he elaborated on the surrealist moments in *Still Life*, including the unexplained presence of a tightrope walker in one scene and the appearance of Sichuanese opera actors in full costume and makeup playing handheld video games in another scene, in addition to the CGI flying saucer and the building launching like a rocket ship:

My rationale for placing these surrealistic elements into a film that was otherwise rooted in realism was because the dramatic pace of China's development during that time often felt as if it was somehow not real—it all felt surreal. Actually, what I most wanted to capture at the time was this surreal feeling that people living in that environment must have been experiencing. . . . Just because we were telling a story about the real world in contemporary China doesn't mean we can't employ surrealistic methods. As long as you are free, you can employ whatever techniques you like. And even when you do utilize these methods, lurking behind them there is still a clear realist intention.⁵⁷

The scenes of massive demolition required for the construction of the Three Gorges Project, when entire buildings disappeared in an instant, made the idea of the building suddenly taking off into the sky seem only slightly more surreal than what Jia was in fact seeing around him on location every day during the shooting of the film.

Another way in which Jia complicated his previous realism was through the mixing of fiction and documentary in both *Still Life* and the related documentary *Dong*. In fact, neither film is either fully fictional or

fully documentary. *Still Life* includes actual scenes of demolition in the Three Gorges area within its fictional world, with real demolition workers serving as extras in the film, for example. The documentary *Dong*, on the other hand, ostensibly a record of the painter Liu Xiaodong composing massive oil paintings from life in the Three Gorges area as well as in Thailand, has footage of a demolition worker who, as we would only know from watching *Still Life*, is in fact a semiprofessional actor (actually Jia's cousin, who had acted before in *Platform*) who portrays a character in the fiction film. Consequently, the documentary *Dong* includes elements of fiction, while the fiction film *Still Life* contains documentary footage.⁵⁸ Jia's next feature film after those, *24 City* (*Ershisi Cheng ji* 二十四城记), an apparent documentary which in fact seamlessly mixes scripted interviews with actors along with unscripted interviews with real subjects, carried Jia's problematization of realist representation to a new level with its free mixing of fiction and documentary.

One thing Jia seemed to be doing—no doubt in part in reaction to the way the neorealist aesthetic of his early films had become so widely imitated and thus conventionalized—was to question his own role as a realist artist. Whereas his early films seemed suffused with the confidence that a filmmaker with sufficient courage and vision could go out in the streets of China and document in fiction films those realities that seemed to be omitted from mass media representations in general, with these films, Jia seems to interrogate his own subject position as a relayer of such images. Just as the documentary *Dong* in part calls into question the relationship between the elite painter Liu Xiaodong and the proletarian subjects of his paintings, Jia himself seems to acknowledge that his status as an internationally renowned film auteur inevitably puts him at a remove from the ordinary, underprivileged workers whom his films are generally about. The contradictions of ontological, perceptual, social, fictional, and prescriptive realist representation presented in *The World*, *Still Life*, *Dong*, and *24 City* thus serve as acknowledgments that an art filmmaker representing the “real” China on the global scene cannot be a simple or transparent process.

MIXING MEDIUMS, GENRES, AND STYLES

As this and the preceding chapter have made clear, the mixing of fiction and documentary has been a consistent tendency of Chinese independent and art cinema, beginning with Zhang Yuan's *Mama* (妈妈) in 1990 and continuing with a number of the most inventive filmmakers of the DV generation. Cutaways to actual documentary footage within fiction films go back to the classics of 1930s Shanghai cinema, as we saw in the case of *Street Angel* in chapter 2. In recent years, even Stephen Chow's comedy blockbuster *The Mermaid* included documentary images of dolphins being slaughtered, which were combined in somewhat shocking fashion with the fantastical CGI that filled much of the film. Rather than seeing the former as ontological realism and the latter as formalist animation with no connection to reality, we might broaden the idea of the indexical and consider the film as a whole, including its CGI animation, as an index of the rising anxiety of those facing the ecological disasters caused by capitalist development and climate change.

Many other recent films have also mixed mediums, genres, and styles in inventive ways that call into question easy dichotomies, including documentary versus fiction, realism versus fantasy, photography versus animation, and even modern versus traditional. *Emperor Visits the Hell* (*Tanghuang you difu* 唐皇游地府; Li Luo 李珞, 2013) depicts the famous episode from chapters 9–11 of *Journey to the West*, but instead of animation or the usual elaborate costumes, prosthetics, props, and special effects of the countless previous film and television adaptations of the fantastical Ming dynasty novel, it is instead reimagined as a deadpan low-budget satire set in contemporary times. In keeping with the pseudo-documentary neorealist aesthetic of earlier Chinese independent cinema, the roles were all played by “friends and friends of friends” of the director, including punk rock musicians, artists, and so on—the lack of professional actors being one thing that kept the cost “very low.”⁵⁹ Shot off and on over little more than a month, the film’s effect of having figures like a *yaksha*, the Dragon King, and the King of Hell played by ordinary people in China today is humorous, and the contrast between the fantastical events and the completely prosaic settings, costumes, and delivery is what gives the film

its charm and originality. The final sequence switches into a casual home-video mode and has the actor who plays the main role out of character and drunk at a meal, ranting about avant-garde artists, university professors, and vaguely identified effeminate poseurs, not to mention putting down China as a whole. The rather strange experiment shows how traditional Chinese fantastic tales can lend themselves not only to digital wizardry but to the most stripped-down kind of DV “on-the-spot” realist aesthetic.

Several other contemporaneous Chinese independent films combine neorealist techniques with surreal fantasy. *My Dear Friend* (*Haoyou* 好友; Yang Pingdao 杨平道, 2018) mixes rural drudgery with magical realism. Bi Gan’s 毕赣 *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (*Diju zuihou de yewan* 地球最后的夜晚; 2017) complicates its indie neorealist aesthetic with a spectacular and surreal 3-D long take of nearly an hour that concludes the film. The *Oxhide* films of Liu Jiayin, as described in the preceding chapter, merge an extreme neorealism (on-location shooting, nonprofessional actors, almost plotless ordinary life) with an extremely formalistic stylistic patterning (moving the camera position by forty-five-degree increments in a rigid pattern).

Another radical formal experiment forged out of the most ordinary, even ugly, video footage is *Dragonfly Eyes* (*Qingting zhi yan* 蜻蜓之眼; 2017), by the globally renowned visual artist Xu Bing 徐冰, who assembles a mystery story told entirely through actual found footage from video surveillance cameras, with dubbed dialogue. Security or surveillance videos provide a kind of limit case of the idea of digital indexicality. As Ling Zhang argues in an insightful essay on *Dragonfly Eyes*, digital surveillance camera footage is an ultimate case of what André Bazin celebrated as photography’s absence of human agency in creating an image: “an image of the outside world takes shape automatically, without creative human intervention, following a strict determinism.”⁶⁰ As Ling Zhang elaborates, “on the ontological level . . . footage generated by surveillance cameras might be regarded as totally self-generating and autonomous, a kind of ultra-realism, since it is devoid of *any* human intervention” beyond the original installation of the camera.⁶¹ Given the utter lack of interest or artistic intent in most surveillance footage—which, Zhang points out, paradoxically is made *not* to be viewed, as long as nothing abnormal

occurs—Xu Bing's transformation of it into narrative and film art is especially audacious, creating the first ever feature fiction film consisting entirely of such footage.

As is evident even from the limited set of examples described in the last few pages, the transition from celluloid film to digital video, rather than constituting any sort of simple dualistic rupture, instead involves a diffusion of new possibilities that do not so much negate cinema's ostensible ontological realism as incorporate it into the threaded possibilities that constitute cinema in the digital age. The “indexicality” of cinema is not just a simple matter of whether a camera “automatically” records a profilmic event but rather asks a far more complex question of whether a film indexes an engagement with the actual, interconnected conditions of sociality, mediality, and ecology faced both by the people who made it and the audiences that view it.

Conclusion

Bi Gan's extraordinary film-poem *Kaili Blues* (*Lubian yecan* 路边野餐; 2015) was made on such a low budget that the director ran out of money and had to reduce the crew to four people, including himself, with 30 percent of the project remaining to be filmed.¹ It nonetheless creates an entirely distinctive oneiric atmosphere, with mysterious shots that sometimes present riddles. The title card, for instance, does not appear until twenty-nine minutes into the film, and it occurs seemingly in the middle of a long take, interrupting a moment when the frame goes entirely dark while panning across a heavily shadowed wall within a narrow corridor. After the title is inscribed in both Chinese and English against the dark background for a full ten seconds, the long take continues and the pan resumes, eventually to reveal the other direction down the corridor.

Another shot in *Kaili Blues* presents a more challenging puzzle. The film's main character, Chen Sheng, is arguing with his half brother, Crazy Face, about family affairs, which were affected by Chen having gone to prison for unspecified gang violence years earlier. The scene suddenly cuts to a shot of Chen and another small-time gangster disturbing a group of people gambling and demanding to know which of them reportedly chopped off the hand of the young son of one of Chen's gang leaders, Monk. We know from hints elsewhere in the film that this new shot should be read as a flashback to the event that sent Chen to prison in the first place. Instead of showing us a violent eruption, however, the camera drifts to the left away from the human figures as they begin their confrontation and instead leaves them off-screen and focuses on a wooden table, on top of which water continuously drips and a drinking glass has been overturned. At first, we still hear the voices of the escalating argument, but then those

voices fade, and a poetry recitation takes their place on the soundtrack—a repeated motif in the film, in which the director’s own poetry is read by Chen’s voice in nondiegetic voice-over. Finally, the camera starts moving again, and diegetic voices reemerge on the soundtrack about thirty seconds after they had faded away. We hear the sounds of a scuffle, but when the camera pans farther left and tilts to reveal the people making the sounds, they are on the opposite side of the table from where the shot had left them, and in fact, they are a different set of people. They include Chen and his gangster friend, but now they are wearing different clothes, and instead of fighting the people from the beginning of the shot, the friend and two others are holding Chen back from lunging at his half brother, with whom he’d been arguing in the previous shot set in the film’s present. We realize we have flashed-forward again, returning to the postprison acrimonious relations between the brothers.

With this shot lasting nearly two minutes, Bi Gan creates a microcosm of the film’s theme of time travel and its epigraph intertitle shot (the second shot of the film) quoting the Diamond Sutra of Mahayana Buddhism. There is no sign of any hidden cut within the shot (as could have been the case in the title shot described earlier), so it must have been accomplished by the actors playing Chen and his friend literally changing clothes and moving from off-screen right to off-screen left while the camera lingered on the close-up of the wet table. The story, however, has traversed several years of time within seconds *inside* of one continuous take.² Here, as in the film as a whole, the sorts of sci-fi mysteries that other films spend hundreds of millions of dollars to explore—including the nature of time, memory, and karma—are inventively raised just through the unorthodox use of the basic tools of editing and cinematography in a film that combines elements of the post-socialist neorealism of chapter 6 with occasionally surrealist images, a haunting soundtrack by Lim Giong 林强, and a dream-like poetics of motif rhyming largely replacing logical cause-and-effect narration.³ The Diamond Sutra epigraph ends with the lines

过去心不可得	The past mind cannot be attained
现在心不可得	The present mind cannot be attained
未来心不可得	The future mind cannot be attained. ⁴

The elusiveness of past, present, and future is encapsulated by this one time-traversing shot, first jumping from the previous shot's present to the past, then skirting free of quite grasping the past event to which it has flashed back, then transitioning in the same shot to the future (*Crazy Face* is wearing different clothes at the end of the shot than he wore in the previous shot, indicating that we have not only come back to the film's previous present but likely jumped ahead a little, in a way we can't quite grasp). The shot's middle simply shows the water dripping onto the wooden table surface while an impressionistic poem is recited on the soundtrack. Now oblivious to any dramatic action, the shot momentarily suspends us in *our* elusive present, as film viewers who experience cinema itself as something that moves on even as our thoughts try to catch up. The shot's indifference to the actual drama unfolding off-screen and out of soundtrack, guiding us instead to the drip of water and the sound of a poem detached from the story, is simultaneously a radically apophatic gesture—a refusal to show us the film's obvious, narratively motivated reality—and a transporting of the spectator not only from past to future but also from a social reality depicted in neorealist style to, temporarily at least, a profound pause in any dramatic development in favor of a fleetingly pure present awareness of the drip of the water and the words of the poem: "Mountains, are the shadows of mountains / Dogs, are too lazy to evolve / Summer, human enzymes are stubborn / The enzymes of the soul are like water lilies." Plot coherence is sacrificed in favor of the specificity of detail, from the grain of the wooden table to the particular images of the recited poem.

This book began with an anecdote about Jia Zhangke's life being redirected by a chance encounter with *Yellow Earth*, which changed how he thought about movies and inspired him to learn how to make them. Bi Gan has described a similar encounter with Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979) when he was a college student focusing on writing and directing for television. At first he hated the film and found it hard to watch, but "when I finished the film I was completely in awe. I felt very, very touched and moved by this particular film, and it really changed the way I think about films."⁵ As with Jia Zhangke, it seems to have been a moment when a film intersected with a mind at just the right time and changed what

seemed important or possible. The contingency of such an encounter is highlighted by the fact that Bi says he would have stopped watching the movie early on, except that he had to write an assignment about it.

Kaili Blues itself can provide a similarly revelatory experience, giving the viewer an altered sense of what cinema can be. The film disrupts any easy dichotomies between digital indexicality-based realism and surreal virtuality. It seems disinterested in either the heroisms of prescriptive realism or the critical verisimilitude of social realism. It is a tribute to the rich, ever-renewable resources of the cinematic medium that a twenty-five-year-old Miao (Hmong) minority person from the relatively remote, underdeveloped province of Guizhou could create, on a budget consisting mostly of a nonreturnable donation from his former college teacher,⁶ something so spectacularly original that Oscar-winning director Guillermo del Toro called it an “astonishing first film about a geography of the soul.”⁷

The film’s most remarkable stylistic feat is a forty-one-minute continuous take, shot with Steadicam on a cheap digital camera (a Canon 5D Mark III), that traverses much of the geography of a fictional village called Dangmai (played by a real village not too far from Kaili).⁸ Here Bi demolishes most of the clichés about “Asian slow cinema” even as he takes one of them—the long take—to an extreme. Rather than being contemplative, distanced, and objective, the shot is a visceral thrill ride, an embodied experience in which the camera sometimes approaches the myriad of characters so obtrusively that it almost seems to be a ghost trying to exist in their world, the story world, rather than just providing the audience’s disembodied window into it. And rather than offering up a slice of unvarnished real life, the shot functions more like the mysterious black box of *Mulholland Drive* (2001) by David Lynch (whom Bi credits as having had a “huge impact” on him).⁹ It is where the film goes from a seemingly straightforward though slow-moving narration into a dream logic of tangents and mysterious doublings: Chen’s dead wife reappears as a hairdresser who gives him a haircut while he tells her the story of the events that landed him in prison; his child nephew Weiwei has morphed into a teenager who makes a living giving taxi rides on his motorcycle to people, including Chen himself. Almost without warning, Chen finds

himself performing with a local pop band giving a street performance, singing horribly off-key in public, even though we had learned earlier that he never sings, even in karaoke bars with friends. He has left Kaili for Zhenyuan on an errand but been so hopelessly sidelined in the mysterious village of Dangmai that the audience is likely to have lost track of what he was looking for, even as he finds all kinds of other things that connect to his memories and dreams in oblique ways. Shooting on location with a DV camera and nonprofessional actors, Bi uses the techniques of neorealism to create his own kind of virtual realism—a world that feels powerfully real and phantasmagoric at the same time. Clearly the possibilities of digital cinema go far beyond just the creation of purely imaginary worlds or the recording of actualities.

The spectacular long take in *Kaili Blues* shows how falsely limiting it is to ascribe consistent meanings to stylistic choices that may vary widely in their motivations and functions, including the ways they may or may not produce an impression of realism. In his study of the long take in contemporary global cinema and moving image art, Lutz Koepnick makes such an argument for the long take, showing in particular how Asian filmmakers should not be seen as simply repeating the gestures of Western art cinema when in fact they may be up to something quite different. By extending a view beyond the time necessary to register narrative information, the long take displays a “relative indifference toward meaning and interpretation,” observes Koepnick, and in the case of twentieth-century European art film directors like Michelangelo Antonioni, that effect served “to allegorize the existential void, alienation, and disenchantment of postwar capitalism” and “the utter poverty of presentness in the modern world.”¹⁰ However, it is a mistake, argues Koepnick, to assume that the long take has served a similar function in recent decades in the works of filmmakers—most of them from Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe—who have made it essential to their style and taken it to ever greater extremes, including Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Jia Zhangke, Abbas Kiarostami, Kim Ki-Duk, Béla Tarr, Tsai Ming-liang, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, and Edward Yang. “Nothing could be more mistaken than to construct the formal rigor of their extended shot durations in terms of postwar auteurism,” asserts Koepnick, and “rather than merely repeating how

postwar cinema relied on long takes to represent existential alienation, ambiguity, disillusion, and emotional exhaustion, long take photography today, in its very effort to reconstruct spaces for the possibility of *wonder*, often appeals to the dreamlike and surreal, the indeterminate, playful, and open.”¹¹ While the assertion might require partial qualification (alienation and disillusion arguably do constitute important themes of some of these directors), the point could not be made more emphatically than in Bi Gan’s wondrous forty-one-minute-long take in *Kaili Blues*. Rather than experiencing boredom or alienation, as viewers, we probe “the durational as an aesthetic laboratory to reconstruct our sense for experiencing things at first sight,” finding surprises at the camera’s every turn down a new alley, encountering people, things, and events that continually reconfigure the film’s previous themes and meanings.¹² The extremity of the technique pulls us sensorially into the film as a process more than a text, an experience rather than a message.

Indeed, a film viewing is an experience that is only theoretically reducible to the encounter of a sovereign subject and a preexisting film text. It is in reality a process, one that is imbricated in all the countless other processes that serve to make up the “subject,” the “text,” and the entire context of the event of viewing. Realism thus cannot be conceived adequately if it is limited to the question of whether a film corresponds with reality according to the judgment of a viewer, because all these things—the film, reality, the viewer—are really abstractions from that processual reality of the experience of film viewing. When we speak of the realism of cinema of a certain era, we must think not so much about whether films offered verisimilar representations of social reality, reinforced by the photographic realism of the medium, as whether and how they *moved* spectators in terms of the real experiences they offered, particularly in ways that engaged or shaped their sense of their own broader reality.

Studying film history allows us to imaginatively reconstruct the process of viewing to understand how the effect of realism might have been achieved when specific historical audiences watched particular films. Spectators of silent film in China would have viewed films as emblems of modernity, finding not only verisimilar reflections of modern life but

an entire imaginary of how actually to become modern, including all the contradictions of that condition. The Left-Wing Film Movement of late silent and early sound cinema further foregrounded those contradictions, stretching classical film conventions in some cases to the point of breaking and opening up fissures through which the promise of a new reality could be glimpsed. The cinema of the Communist revolution posited that new reality through its prescriptive models, to the point where form began to reveal its own emptiness, prompting new efforts to explore reality's contingency and openness in post-socialist neorealism. Chinese audiences today can seek out radical experiments in "digital indexicality" or be transported by the "virtual realism" of alternate realities enhanced by digital animation. In every case, an effect of realism depends on the situatedness of the viewing experience as much as on its objective content or techniques.

As Tom Gunning succinctly put it, "in the cinema, we are dealing with realism, not 'reality.'"¹³ Whether we are speaking of slice-of-life realism or science fiction fantasy, although the goal may be for the viewer to experience a sense of immediacy—which is to say, the sensation of witnessing story events directly rather than a story mediated by the camera, editing, film conventions, and so on—that immediacy still remains an agreed-upon illusion. The audience knows realism is an effect achieved within what remains a "kingdom of shadows," as Maxim Gorky famously called cinema upon his first viewing in 1896: "This is not life but the shadow of life, and this is not movement but the soundless shadow of movement."¹⁴

Gunning argues that cinematic movement is, in fact, real, but with the proviso that it is a real "impression of reality, not its materiality."¹⁵ This is in keeping with Gilberto Perez's assertion that "film offers us representations of perceptions," which, however convincing as fiction they may be, are not mistaken for actual perceptions of reality itself, as Lacanian-Althusserian apparatus theory had seemed to assume.¹⁶ Gunning suggests that instead of thinking of film's ontological realism as being the essence of the medium—a position that marginalizes the rich history of animated films even well before the arrival of CGI and its related theoretical problems—we might take *movement* itself as fundamental to cinematic realism, whether speaking of analog photochemical film, digital video, or

animation, and whether a particular film aims for realism, fantasy, or even avant-garde abstraction.¹⁷

Drawing on Henri Bergson, John Mullarkey argues that movement is central to the act of *fabulation*, meaning not just to tell a story but more broadly “to carve out events from the ‘continuity of the real.’”¹⁸ He cites the experiments of the psychologist Albert Michotte, who found that even when watching very simple animations of moving dots and squares, viewers tend to anthropomorphize them and imbue them with intentionality, causality, and narrative progression. Movement is central to such fabulation, and Mullarkey speculates that in this sense, “we might even say that *all* films are *animations*,” meaning that it is their movement that gives them life and prompts our “‘willing suspension of disbelief’ in fictitious events and our empathy for fictional characters.”¹⁹

In the analytical terms used in this book, the proposal to consider movement rather than indexicality as fundamental to the cinematic medium amounts to saying that perceptual realism is more universal to the experience of cinema than ontological realism, an assertion that gains credibility with the proliferation of computer effects and makes them less problematic in terms of forcing a reevaluation of what cinema is. At the same time, to say movement is the intrinsic element of realism in cinema is to make an even more universal claim than that of ontological realism, insofar as it means virtually every film ever made is, in that sense at least, a realist film. With the more limited categories of claims to cinematic realism delineated in this book, we can differentiate better how some films can be more realist than others, or rather at least the ways they can be considered so.

The history of Chinese cinema would support the idea that ontological realism has been an essential aspect of the power of certain modes of cinema, from the ostensibly scientific recording of material reality in early silent cinema explored in chapter 1 to the somewhat more deviant imprinting of historical films on the prosthetic memories of audiences examined in chapter 5 to the “on-the-spot” documentation of contemporary Chinese reality in the post-socialist realism of chapter 6. In this book, I have resisted prioritizing one category of claims to realism over another as a general rule, emphasizing instead how certain films or

historical moments have foregrounded one over the others. Any claim of one universal realism only reinforces its own theoretical priorities. Aside from the centrality of the perceptual realism of movement, for example, one could equally claim universality for apophasic realism, insofar as every film—indeed, every representation—necessarily excludes an infinity of aspects and details of the real, even as it makes certain ones visible or legible; every film is haunted by what it doesn’t show.

In this book, aside from dividing claims to cinematic realism into six categories—ontological, perceptual, fictional, social, prescriptive, and apophasic—I have been guided throughout by my reading of Roman Jakobson’s initial division of realism into two kinds, the conventional and the experimental, as a historical dialectic. To take the conventional wisdom of what techniques achieve realism at a given time and produce a work through those means may well appear realistic to audiences at that moment, but over time, the processes Jörg Schweinitz identifies as derealization and secondary semantization may make the same work feel conventionalized or even clichéd to a later audience. This can be true for the critical realism of the Republican era, the socialist realism of the Mao era, or even the neorealism of the post-socialist era after its initially radical approaches have become conventionalized. The artist wishing to provoke a fresh view of the world will then try to experiment to give her audience the kind of wondrous jolt that *Yellow Earth* provided to Jia Zhangke or *Kaili Blues* gave me (and many others) upon its release, when it felt like something genuinely new and strange, but also something that gave authentic expression to a region, a community, and an environment in a way that could be experienced as revelatory. This is the experience people seek when they are tired of seeing the same conventions, including those of “realism” at any given time, over and over.

Cinematic realism in this sense occurs when the real finds expression in film, whether the real is Fredric Jameson’s History (that which simultaneously drives but ultimately eludes historical narrative); Jacques Lacan’s Real (that which escapes the symbolic and haunts the imaginary); or the increasingly urgent “environmental uncanny,” with its “nonhuman interlocutors,” that Amitav Ghosh argues is shaking us free from our deadly, centuries-long obsession with ourselves as subjects and

the world as our object.²⁰ It was arguably just this environmental uncanny that Dai Vaughan recognized in the Lumière brothers' 1895 actuality *Boat Leaving the Port* (as discussed in chapter 1): the ocean inscribes its own agency onto the film, not only in terms of the ontological realism of the image but in actually "writing" the film's "plot." Cinema, with its ongoing power of indexicality, undoubtedly continues to be a powerful medium through which the real presses in on us, a medium for conveying the forces of history, materiality, and vitality. But if indexicality is at the heart of realism, it is an indexicality that extends beyond the ontological realism of photography to allow much more broadly for how the real asserts itself through the entire process of both making and viewing a film. In the digital age, cinema continues to be a medium for such a broadly interpreted indexical mediation. As fundamental transformation, for better or for worse, of the planet and society looms, cinema, as a conduit to the real, can help fulfill what Ghosh calls "a new task: that of finding other ways in which to imagine the unthinkable beings and events of this era."²¹

We never know for sure, at least not for long. We think alongside the real, along with the real, and we try to arrest it both in thought and in artistic representation. As an art whose medium arguably is time itself, cinema has the ability to convey the movement of reality in a particularly powerful way. Still, it is precisely that movement that makes every thought, theory, or representation—including cinematic representation as well as academic studies thereof—necessarily tentative. The real always moves on, and so do we. But the movies do too.

Notes

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

- 1 Marston Anderson, *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 4.
- 2 Anderson.

INTRODUCTION

- 1 *Yule xinwen* [Entertainment news], “Jia Zhangke: wo kan Chen Kaige leiliu-manmian” [Jia Zhangke: I watched Chen Kaige and tears streamed down my face], November 30, 2008, <http://news.yule.com.cn/html/200811/27204.html>. Jia has described this encounter in numerous interviews. For an account translated into English, see “Jia Zhangke: Capturing a Transforming Reality,” in Michael Berry, *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 184–85.
- 2 Jia Zhangke, *Jia xiang 1996–2008: Jia Zhangke dianying shouji* [Jia thinks 1996–2008: Jia Zhangke’s film notebooks] (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2009), 50.
- 3 Jia.
- 4 *Yule xinwen*, “Jia Zhangke.”
- 5 My language here may evoke Jacques Lacan’s concept of the Real, but it is not my intention to fit my argument into his system. I do, however, see a homology between his distinction between *reality* and the *real* and those of other modern thinkers—for example, Alain Badiou’s contrast between *knowledge* and *truth*—and I consider such distinctions, like cinema itself, to be characteristic of modernity, with its urge to assimilate all into a reasoned totality, on one hand, and its acknowledgment of the contingency of knowledge and the limits of knowability, on the other.
- 6 Walter Goodman, “China’s ‘Yellow Earth,’” *New York Times*, April 11,

1986. For one example of Jia's later criticism of Chen Kaige and his generation of filmmakers, see Berry, *Speaking in Images*, 192.
- 7 Li Tuo, "Huang tudi gei women dailaile shenme?" [What has *The Yellow Earth* brought us?], *Dangdai dianying* [Contemporary cinema], no. 2 (March 1985): 48–51. The paragraph with the "stranger at a party" analogy is excerpted and translated into English in Geremie Barmé and John Minford, eds., *Seeds of Fire: Chinese Voices of Conscience* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1988), 253.
- 8 "Fifth Generation" refers to the first group of filmmakers to graduate from the Beijing Film Academy after it reopened following the Cultural Revolution.
- 9 See chapter 6 for a more detailed consideration of *Yellow Earth*. On a personal note, it was the shock of viewing this film in an undergraduate course taught by Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang in the early 1990s that, as much as any other single event (though Hou Hsiao-hsien's 侯孝贤 *Dust in the Wind* [*Lianlian fengchen* 恋恋风尘, 1986] from the same course also comes to mind), instilled in me a lasting fascination with Chinese cinema.
- 10 For reasons that will become apparent, I favor the term *xieshizhuyi* 写实主义 as a generic translation for *realism*. In fact, the more official forms of modern Chinese realism, particularly those associated with Communist aesthetics, tended to use the alternative term for realism *xianshizhuyi* 现实主义, a modern neologism imported from Japan. More recently, *jishizhuyi* 纪实主义 ("recording the real-ism" or "on-the-spot realism") often has been used to indicate a documentary-style cinematic realism. *Xieshi* 写实 (inscribing the real) itself dates at least to Liu Xie 刘勰 (*aka* Yanhe 彦和), a fifth-century literary aesthetician, but it was not revived as a key term until the modern era.
- 11 For an explanation of these distinctions in painting, see Eugene Y. Wang, "Sketch Conceptualism as Modernist Contingency," in *Chinese Art: Modern Expressions*, ed. Maxwell K. Hearn and Judith G. Smith, 102–61 (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001).
- 12 As Vera Schwarcz puts it, in the Daoist tradition, *zhen* "is used as a synonym for authenticity, or more accurately for the person who strives to align his gaze in a way that the inner and outer correspond to each other." Schwarcz, *Colors of Veracity: A Quest for Truth in China, and Beyond* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014), 27.
- 13 The character also had spiritual connotations; for example, a description of Buddhist practitioners in the popular Ming dynasty vernacular novel *Journey to the West* includes the line 习静归真 *xi jing gui zhen*, which the

- authoritative English translation renders as “They practice silence to return to the Real.” Wu Ch’eng-en, *The Journey to the West*, vol. 1, trans. Anthony C. Yu (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 182.
- 14 Awareness of the potential gap between reality and description is hardly a new issue in Chinese thought. Debates about the relationship between 实 (reality) and 名 (name) go back well over two thousand years, to the pre-Qin and Han eras. For a discussion of 实 in ancient philosophy, see Alexus McLeod, “Pluralism about Truth in Early Chinese Philosophy: A Reflection on Wang Chong’s Approach,” *Comparative Philosophy* 2, no. 1 (2011): 38–60.
- 15 Roman Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 22.
- 16 Jakobson, 22–23.
- 17 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
- 18 Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, 23–24.
- 19 Jakobson, 24.
- 20 I limit this book to fiction film on the rationale that documentary presents a distinct (though obviously related) set of issues. With an already dauntingly broad scope in considering the history of feature-length fiction film in mainland China, I leave to others the consideration of Chinese documentary cinema (which lately has been getting much scholarly attention) as well as Chinese short and avant-garde films (which largely have not). Likewise, the current work does not attempt to cover the related yet distinct cases of Sinophone cinema in Hong Kong or Taiwan.
- 21 Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (1916; repr., New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
- 22 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781; repr., New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
- 23 The evidence simply does not support such a view of pictorial representation in general. As Paul Messaris has put it, “unlike the conventions of written language or, for that matter, speech, pictorial conventions for the representation of objects and events are based on information-processing skills that a viewer can be assumed to possess even in the absence of any previous experience with pictures.” Conducting a comprehensive review of cross-cultural psychological and anthropological studies of human (and even animal) perceptions of optical illusions and pictures, J. B. Deregowski concluded that, although many aspects of pictorial comprehension are learned, “pictures are clearly not arbitrary

- conventional signs” but rather have a great deal of cross-cultural transferability. If pictorial representation in general is not purely arbitrary and culturally contingent, even less *purely* conventional would be a moving image resulting from live-action photography. Paul Messaris, *Visual Literacy: Image, Mind, and Reality* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1994), 4; J. B. Deregowski, *Illusions, Patterns and Pictures: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (London: Academic Press, 1980), 123.
- 24 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), 34–35.
- 25 Catherine Belsey, *Culture and the Real: Theorizing Cultural Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2005), 10.
- 26 Quoted from a 1974 lecture by Jacques Lacan in Bruce Fink, *Lacan on Love: An Exploration of Lacan's Seminar VIII, Transference* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 93.
- 27 André Bazin, “Ontology of the Photographic Image,” in *What Is Cinema?*, 3–12 (Montreal: Caboose, 2009). In this book, I quote this translation from the French by Timothy Barnard rather than the looser one by Hugh Gray that is more readily available in the United States in Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 1:9–16. However, in the notes, I give page references for both translations for the convenience of readers who have access only to the latter (here cited simply as “Gray” after the first mention). For more on the question of the “indexicality” of film, see the special issue of *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 18, no. 1 (2007), edited by Mary Ann Doane, which is devoted to the topic.
- 28 Bazin, “Ontology of the Photographic Image,” 8. (Gray, 14.)
- 29 Dudley Andrew, *What Cinema Is!* (West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981); Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979); Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002); Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion, 2006); D. N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007); Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).
- 30 As Stephen Prince puts it in his *Digital Effects in Cinema: The Seduction of Reality* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2012), through careful design of visual cues, a moving image can be “perceptually

- realistic” even while being entirely “referentially false” (32). Prince proposes the term *perceptual realism* in his earlier article “True Lies: Perceptual Realism, Digital Images, and Film Theory,” *Film Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (1996): 27–37.
- 31 Tom Gunning, “An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In) Credulous Spectator,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, 5th ed., ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 821.
- 32 Tom Gunning, “Moving Away from the Index: Cinema and the Impression of Reality,” in *The Film Theory Reader: Debates and Arguments*, ed. Marc Furstenau, 255–69 (New York: Routledge, 2010).
- 33 Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 30.
- 34 André Bazin, “The Myth of Total Cinema,” in *What Is Cinema?*, 17, 15. (Gray translates it as “integral realism” rather than “complete realism.” Gray, 1:21, 20.)
- 35 Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 177.
- 36 The most comprehensive account of “classical” cinema remains David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). See also the chapter “Classical Narration: The Hollywood Example” in David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 156–204 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).
- 37 The convention of human flight in martial arts films goes back to the 1920s. See the chapter “The Anarchic Body Language of the Martial Arts Film” in Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937*, 199–243 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
- 38 This is equivalent to what Roland Barthes called the “reality effect” of realist fiction. Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” in *The Rustle of Language*, 141–48 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).
- 39 V. F. Perkins, “Where Is the World? The Horizon of Events in Movie Fiction,” in *Style and Meaning: Studies in the Detailed Analysis of Film*, ed. John Gibbs and Douglas Pye (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 2005), 26.
- 40 Perkins, 24.
- 41 Perkins, 17, 31.
- 42 Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 159.
- 43 Perkins, “Where Is the World?,” 38.

- 44 Miriam Bratu Hansen, “Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Film as Vernacular Modernism,” *Film Quarterly* 54 (2000): 10–22.
- 45 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 90.
- 46 Eco, 18.
- 47 Lee Baxandall and Stefan Morawski, eds., *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art: A Selection of Writings* (St. Louis, Mo.: Telos Press, 1973), 105. Marx explicitly singled out Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Charlotte Brontë, and Elizabeth Gaskell in his praise.
- 48 Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, 125.
- 49 Eco, *Open Work*, 7–9.
- 50 Perkins, “Where Is the World?,” 23, 20.
- 51 Francesco Casetti, *Eye of the Century: Film, Experience, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 46.
- 52 For a discussion of apophysis as a mode of discourse and its relevance to modern thought and art, see the preface and introduction to William Franke, ed., *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*, vol. 2, *Modern and Contemporary Transformations* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 1–49.
- 53 Franke, 3–4.
- 54 See the two volumes of Franke for a rich sample of the Western lineage. As for apophatic thought in the Chinese tradition, *emptiness* plays a central role in many schools of Buddhist thought, as expressed, for example, in the Heart Sutra, which insists on the inseparability of emptiness (*kong* 空) and form (*se* 色). Within Daoism, the famous opening lines of the *Dao De Jing*, “The way [*dao*] that can be spoken of is not the abiding way / The name that can be named is not the abiding name” (道可道非常道, 名可名非常名), offer, in just twelve syllables/characters, perhaps the most concise expression of apophatic philosophy in any tradition.
- 55 Edgar Morin, *The Cinema; or, The Imaginary Man* (1956; repr., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 8.
- 56 André Bazin, “De Sica: Metteur en Scène,” in *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Gray, 2:66. (This essay is not available in the newer collection translated by Barnard.)
- 57 For precise definitions of these terms, see David Bordwell, “Classical Hollywood Cinema: Narrational Principles and Procedures,” in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 18.

- 58 Kristin Thompson, "The Concept of Cinematic Excess," collected in Rosen, *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, 130–42; Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 142.
- 59 Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, "Space and Narrative in the Films of Ozu," *Screen* 17, no. 2 (1976): 41–73.
- 60 Of course, any claims for a distinctively "Chinese" style of cinema must be approached with great caution, and Fei Mu should be appreciated more for his unique vision than for some ethnically essentialist aesthetic his films supposedly embody. See James Udden, "In Search of Chinese Film Style(s) and Technique(s)," in *A Companion to Chinese Cinema*, ed. Yingjin Zhang, 256–83 (West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).
- 61 For example, a study that included forms of avant-garde cinema displaying, say, abstract plays of light and shadow on the screen or scratches made directly on the emulsion of a filmstrip might invoke a category like *material realism*, in which realism means, as Linda Nochlin has put it, "truth to the nature of the material," "which is indeed one of the, if not the chief, foundation stones of Modernism." Nochlin, *Realism* (London: Penguin, 1971), 230. One could also distinguish a category of *transmedial realism(s)*, involving the mimetic remediation of one medium in another; for example, in his own typology of cinematic realisms, Berys Gaut uses the term *photorealism* to name CGI techniques that are designed to cause a computer-generated image to resemble not so much a real object as, more specifically, that object as photographed in traditional cinematography—including artifacts like imitated motion blur, film grain, or lens flares. Gaut, *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 66–67.
- 62 Bazin, "Ontology of the Photographic Image," 10. Gray's translation renders the sentence as "On the other hand, of course, the cinema is also a language" (16).
- 63 Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meanings in the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), 120ff. For closely related arguments, see Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), and Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981). For convincing arguments that Bazin's claims for the ontology of the photographic image cannot be adequately explained using the "index argument," see Tom Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index? or, Faking Photographs," *Nordicom Review* 25, no. 1–2 (2004): 39–49, and Daniel Morgan, "Rethinking Bazin: Ontology and Realist Aesthetics," *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Spring 2006): 443–81.

- 64 Thomas Elsaesser, “A Bazinian Half-Century,” in *Opening Bazin: Post-war Film Theory and Its Afterlife*, ed. Dudley Andrew (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 10.
- 65 Quoted in Elsaesser, 10. Barnard renders the passage as “In art, realism can obviously be created only out of artifice,” while Gray translates it as “But realism in art can only be achieved in one way—through artifice.” Bazin, “Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of the Liberation,” 227. (Gray, 26.)
- 66 Cavell, *World Viewed*, 23; Bazin, “Ontology of the Photographic Image,” 7. (Gray, 13.)
- 67 Cavell, xiii, 105.
- 68 Cavell, 104–5.
- 69 Cavell, 104.
- 70 Cavell, 105.
- 71 Rodowick, *Virtual Life of Film*, 42.
- 72 Cavell, *World Viewed*, 7.
- 73 Rodowick, *Virtual Life of Film*, 42, 43.
- 74 Rodowick, 43.
- 75 The limitations of the language metaphor are evident from film theory’s dalliance with and then retreat from a linguistics-based film semiotics during the 1960s–70s, exemplified by Wollen’s chapter “The Semiology of the Cinema” in *Signs and Meanings*, and Christian Metz’s *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974). Even Wollen sought to use a broader semiotics to distance cinema from the “exaggerated” analogy with verbal language (140).
- 76 Jörg Schweinitz, *Film and Stereotype: A Challenge for Cinema and Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 22.
- 77 Schweinitz, 33, xiv.
- 78 Schweinitz, 50.
- 79 Schweinitz, 35.
- 80 John Hill makes a very similar point about British realist cinema: “Films which were accepted as ‘realistic’ by one generation often appear ‘false’ or ‘dated’ to the next. Thus, the working-class films of the British ‘new wave,’ which initially appeared so striking in their ‘realism,’ now appear ‘melodramatic’ and ‘even hysterical’ to at least one modern critic.” Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956–1963* (London: British Film Institute, 1986), 58. The same could be said for some of the more noted 1950s Hollywood films featuring realist “method actors” (*On the Waterfront*, *Rebel without a Cause*, etc.): they may have seemed strikingly real to their initial audiences, but later generations may even be tempted

- to giggle at performances and situations that now appear artificial.
- 81 Schweinitz, *Film and Stereotype*, 38–39.
- 82 Schweinitz, 40.
- 83 Andrew quotes Serge Daney: “The *Cahiers* axiom is this: that the cinema has a fundamental rapport with reality and that the real is not what is represented—and that’s final.” Andrew, *What Cinema Is!*, 5.

1. ACTING REAL IN CHINESE SILENT CINEMA

- 1 John Yu Zou, “Travel and Translation: An Aspect of China’s Cultural Modernity, 1862–1926,” in *China in a Polycentric World: Essays in Chinese Comparative Literature*, ed. Yingjin Zhang (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 140.
- 2 Zou, 141.
- 3 Zou, 142.
- 4 Zou.
- 5 Zou, 139.
- 6 For a discussion of these multinational claims for cinema as a universal language, including citations of a variety of relevant sources, see Mattias Frey, “Cultural Problems of Classical Film Theory: Béla Balázs, ‘Universal Language’ and the Birth of National Cinema,” *Screen* 51, no. 4 (2010): 324–40, esp. 324–25. See also Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 76–80.
- 7 Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1960), 286–87, 298, 309.
- 8 Béla Balázs, *Béla Balázs: Early Film Theory*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (1924; repr., New York: Berghan Books, 2010), 14. Emphasis original.
- 9 Balázs, 14–15.
- 10 Mattias Frey, “Cultural Problems of Classical Film Theory,” 335.
- 11 The actual photo was by Yao Guorong 姚国荣 of the C. H. Wang Photo Studio 王开照相馆, which specialized in publicity stills for established and aspiring actors, among other things. According to his granddaughter, Yao selected and enlarged the photo himself when an unnamed person involved with organizing the funeral requested an image of the star for that purpose. See Zhang Yi, “Wang Kai zhaoxiangguan sheyingshi Yao Guorong houren tan lao zhaopian beihou de gushi” [C. H. Wang Photo Studio photographer Yao Guorong’s descendant tells the stories behind old photos], *Xinmin wanbao* [Xinmin evening newspaper], January 19, 2007.

- ¹² In fact, the character Wei Ming was loosely based on a real woman who committed suicide, the screenwriter and film actor Ai Xia 艾霞, adding to the uncanny hall-of-mirrors effect: actor Maggie Cheung plays the actor Ruan Lingyu, whose actual suicide echoed the screen suicide of her character Wei Ming, whose fictional suicide was based on that of the actual person Ai Xia, herself an actor and writer of fiction.
- ¹³ See Kristine Harris, “The New Woman Incident: Cinema, Scandal, and Spectacle in 1935 Shanghai,” in *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender*, ed. Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, 277–302 (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1997); Laikwan Pang, *Building a New China in Cinema: The Chinese Left-Wing Cinema Movement, 1932–1937* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 113–37; Guo-Juin Hong, “Framing Time: New Women and the Cinematic Representation of Colonial Modernity in 1930s Shanghai,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 15, no. 3 (2007): 553–79; and Katherine Hui-ling Chou, “New Woman, The Art and Life of Ruan Lingyu,” in “Staging Revolution: Actresses, Realism and the New Woman Movement in Chinese Spoken Drama and Film, 1919–1949,” PhD diss., New York University, 1997. The latter is also available in revised, Chinese form in Zhou Huiling, *Biaoyan Zhongguo: Nǚ mingxing, biaoyan wenhua, shijue zhengzhi, 1910–1945* [Performing China: Actresses, performance culture, visual politics, 1910–1945] (Taipei: Maitian chuban, 2004). See also Richard J. Meyer’s mini-biography *Ruan Ling-Yu: The Goddess of Shanghai* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005).
- ¹⁴ *New Women* uses a separately recorded soundtrack with sound effects, music, and some dialogue, but the film as a whole still plays mostly as a silent film, with intertitles.
- ¹⁵ Jay Leyda, *Dianying: Electric Shadows, an Account of Films and the Film Audience in China* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1972), 87.
- ¹⁶ Michael G. Chang, “The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Movie Actresses and Public Discourse in Shanghai, 1920s–1930s,” in *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922–1943*, ed. Yingjin Zhang (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 132.
- ¹⁷ Chang.
- ¹⁸ John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (London: Routledge, 1982), 91.
- ¹⁹ Ellis, 58.
- ²⁰ During her prime years at the Lianhua film studio from 1930 to 1934, Ruan Lingyu appeared in an average of 3.4 films per year.
- ²¹ Ellis, *Visible Fictions*, 99.

- 22 Gilberto Perez, *The Material Ghost: Films and Their Medium* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 37. This famous Godard quote is often cited, but, it seems, never with the original source documented, including by Perez.
- 23 Robert Warshow, quoted in Perez, 29.
- 24 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 1935–38 (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 117.
- 25 Perez, *Material Ghost*, 33.
- 26 Miriam Hansen, “Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: ‘The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology,’” *New German Critique*, no. 40 (Winter 1987): 179–224; Hansen, “Benjamin’s Aura,” *Critical Inquiry* 34, no. 2 (2008): 236–75.
- 27 Bazin, “Ontology of the Photographic Image,” 9. (Gray, 15.) As in the introduction, where available, I use Barnard’s translations of Bazin rather than the looser ones by Hugh Gray that are more readily available in the United States, but I cite Gray’s translations of the same passages in parentheses in the notes.
- 28 For a fuller discussion of the film and the intervention it makes into broader debates on society and culture, see Kristine Harris, “*The Goddess: Fallen Woman of Shanghai*,” in *Chinese Films in Focus II*, ed. Chris Berry, 128–36 (London: British Film Institute, 2008).
- 29 Ellis, *Visible Fictions*, 98.
- 30 Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18.
- 31 Yingjin Zhang makes this argument about *The Goddess*, which is seen as an essentially sadistic narrative that enacts the removal of the threat of women’s sexuality as represented in the figure of the prostitute. Kristine Harris in part counters this view through an analysis of the film’s visual rhetoric and the director’s stated motivations for making the film. See Yingjin Zhang, “Prostitution and the Urban Imagination: Negotiating the Public and the Private in Chinese Films of the 1930s,” in Zhang, *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai*, 160–80, and Harris, “*The Goddess*.”
- 32 Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde,” in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser, 56–62 (London: British Film Institute, 1990).
- 33 Hansen, “Benjamin, Cinema and Experience,” 181.
- 34 In general, I find the Greta Garbo comparison to be a stretch. Ruan seems

- to have more in common with Hollywood silent stars like Lillian Gish and Janet Gaynor—her acting tending toward understatement and her sexuality wrapped up with a sort of vulnerable innocence—than with the flamboyant performance style and take-charge eroticism of Garbo.
- 35 Yingjin Zhang has a similar reading of a slightly later scene, in which Ruan's smiling visage is superimposed on an extreme long shot of the neon cityscape at night. Zhang observes that here, "Shanghai is fantasized as an alluring prostitute smiling directly at the audience against a background of skyscrapers and flashing neon lights." However, because the shot in question clearly is set up as a point-of-view shot from the perspective of Ruan's future pimp, representing his fantasy and the beginning of his designs on the protagonist, in my view, the audience is more likely to experience dread than erotic pleasure in viewing it, having already been cued to sympathize with the heroine and to despise the thug. Zhang, "Prostitution and the Urban Imagination," 169.
- 36 Gu Kenfu, "Yingxi zazhi fakanci" [Introducing *Shadowplay Magazine*], in *20 Shiji Zhongguo dianying lilun wenxuan* [Selected works of twentieth-century Chinese film theory], ed. Luo Yijun (1921; repr., Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 2003), 1:4–5. Hongwei Thorn Chen has completed a draft translation of the essay, and I largely borrow his English renditions in this chapter. Victor Fan points out that a more literal translation of *bizhen* would be "approaching reality," which introduces a set of complications not unlike those I find in "inscribing the real" (*xieshi* 写实) in the introduction. See Fan, *Cinema Approaching Reality: Locating Chinese Film Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).
- 37 Gu, "Yingxi zazhi fakanci," 6.
- 38 Gu.
- 39 Balázs, *Béla Balázs*, 14. Emphasis original.
- 40 Gu, "Yingxi zazhi fakanci," 6.
- 41 Gu, 5–6.
- 42 Xinyu Dong notes that by the early 1920s, Harold Lloyd's fame in China "was on a par with [Charlie] Chaplin," and she documents in detail how Lloyd's trademark horned-rim glasses became an iconic modern fashion accessory in Shanghai. Dong, "The Laborer at Play: Laborer's Love, the Operational Aesthetic, and the Comedy of Inventions," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 20, no. 2 (2008): 25. Gu Kenfu himself wears Harold Lloyd-style glasses in most surviving photographs of him from the 1920s.
- 43 Yu Handong, ed., *Zhongguo xiqu biaoyan yishu cidian* [Chinese opera performance art dictionary] (Taipei: Guojia, 2001).

- 44 For an analysis of mimesis and semiosis as intertwined aspects of literary realism, see Armine Kotin Mortimer, *Writing Realism: Representations in French Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000). The question of the status of mimesis in traditional Chinese aesthetics is a thorny one, and the answer depends largely on how one defines the term, as well as whether it is considered to be *the* function of art or simply one aspect of artistic representation. In a study of Chinese literary thought, for example, Ming Dong Gu argues that “expressionism” was “the mainstream,” but that “mimetic representation” nonetheless was long present as “an undercurrent.” Gu points out that in addition to “primary imitation”—or art directly imitating nature or “reality”—traditional Chinese aesthetics certainly put a high value on “secondary imitation,” in which previous works of art, rather than reality itself, are imitated. Indeed, such a conception of mimesis would collapse “convention” into “realism” insofar as conventions themselves can be the object of mimesis. Gu, “Is Mimetic Theory in Literature and Art Universal?,” *Poetics Today* 26, no. 3 (2005): 475, 477.
- 45 Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meanings in the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), 146–47. I thus disagree, as argued in the introduction, with any view that entirely discounts the claims of the ontological realism of film and argues instead that in cinema, the effect of mimesis is produced solely *through* semiosis, as Mortimer has argued is the case in realist literary fiction (see the previous note).
- 46 The one notable exception was the 1913 film *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife* (*Zhuangzi shi qi* 莊子試妻), in which director Li Minwei 黎民偉 had his own wife, Yan Shanshan 嚴珊珊, play the minor role of a maid—though the main female role, that of Zhuangzi’s wife, was still played by a male actor.
- 47 Quoted in Chang, “The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful,” 128–29.
- 48 For a more thorough discussion of these developments, see Chou, “Staging Revolution.”
- 49 Zheng Zhengqiu, “Xinjujia bu neng yanxi ma?” [Can *xinju* actors not act in film?], in *Zhongguo wusheng dianying* [Chinese silent film], ed. Dai Xiaolan (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1996), 906–7 (including following quotations in this paragraph). My translations are adapted from a draft translation by Jessica Ka Yee Chan.
- 50 Feng Xizui, “Tan neixin biaoyan” [On interior performance], originally published in *Mingxing gongsi tekan* “Feng da xiaoye” [Mingxing company special issue on “Master Fung”] (1925); reprinted in *Chinese Silent Film*, 914–15.
- 51 Wan Laitian, “Tan neixin biaoyan” [On interior performance], originally

- published in *Mingxing gongsi tekan* “*Feng da xiaoye*”; reprinted in *Chinese Silent Film*, 916.
- 52 Zheng Junli, “Zai lun yanji” [Another discussion about acting], originally published in *Lianhua huabao* [Lianhua pictorial] 5, no. 9–6, no. 5 (1935); reprinted in *Selected Works of Twentieth-Century Chinese Film Theory*, 1:181.
- 53 For an English translation, see Li-li Ch'en, *Master Tung's Western Chamber Romance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 14–19.
- 54 Even this detail is well within the norms of classical Hollywood continuity. For example, in *To Have and Have Not* (Howard Hawks, 1944), an early shot/reverse-shot exchange between the Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall characters is mediated by an inserted shot of the club owner Frenchy, who stands in the doorway between them and amusingly traces with his own gaze their smoldering first looks.
- 55 The first quote comes from his *Visible Man* (1924) and the second from *The Spirit of Film* (1930), both of which are in Béla Balázs, 38, 109.
- 56 Benjamin, “Work of Art,” 117.
- 57 Balázs, *Béla Balázs*, 33–37. The section ends with a contrast between theater, in which “even the most important face is never more than one element in the play,” and film, in which “face becomes ‘the whole thing’ that contains the entire drama for minutes on end” (37).
- 58 Johannes Riis, “Naturalist and Classical Styles in Early Sound Film Acting,” *Cinema Journal* 43, no. 3 (2004): 3–17.
- 59 Roberta A. Pearson, *Eloquent Gestures: The Transformation of Performance Style in the Griffith Biograph Films* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
- 60 By the 1920s–30s, many film critics in both China and the West were crediting Griffith with having “invented” the close-up. This clearly is not accurate, because filmmakers like George Albert Smith had begun experimenting with the technique as early as the end of the 1890s. Nonetheless, Griffith’s reliance on closer shots of actors during his Biograph years, and in particular the correspondence between shot distance and performance—with closer shots employed to capture significant emotions—was unprecedented and became a building block of the classical Hollywood style.
- 61 Pearson, *Eloquent Gestures*, 92–95.
- 62 Zheng Junli, “Ruan Lingyu he ta de biaoyan yishu” [Ruan Lingyu and her performing art], originally published in *Zhongguo dianying* [Chinese film], no. 2 (1957); reprinted in He Keren, *Ruan Lingyu zhi si* [The death of Ruan Lingyu] (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 1986), 160.
- 63 Balázs, *Béla Balázs*, 35. James Naremore also has analyzed in detail

- Gish's ability to convey a rapid series of mixed emotions using examples from *True Heart Susie* (D. W. Griffith, 1919), in Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 99–113.
- 64 Balázs, *Béla Balázs*, 104. Emphasis original.
- 65 Gish set the template for any female character in silent film who wishes to convey forced cheerfulness in the face of patriarchal oppression. One of her most famous moments, remembered simply as “the smile,” occurs in *Broken Blossoms* (D. W. Griffith, 1919), when her character’s overbearing father orders her to smile despite her inner sadness. She consequently pushes the corners of her mouth up with her fingers to manufacture a fake grin for her father’s benefit. The fake smile also was a key theme in the Li Lili star vehicle *Daybreak* (*Tianming* 天明; Sun Yu 孙瑜, 1933). Li’s character, Ling Ling, upon arriving in Shanghai from the countryside, disapprovingly remarks to her friends about her puzzlement over the smiles of some streetwalking prostitutes she sees: how can such defiled women act so happy? Much later, after Ling Ling has met with catastrophe and been forced into prostitution herself, she learns firsthand that the smiles are merely coerced performances of cheerfulness. By the over-the-top ending, in which Ling Ling smiles sweetly in the face of a firing squad about to execute her for aiding a revolutionary, the full irony of her performance is clear.
- 66 Wu Yonggang, “Ruan Lingyu Remembered,” *Griffithiana* 60/61 (October 1997): 141. Originally published in Wu Yonggang, *Wode tansuo he zhuiqi* [My quest and search] (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1986).
- 67 Chou, “Staging Revolution,” 194–95.
- 68 Anne-Britt Gran, “The Fall of Theatricality in the Age of Modernity,” *SubStance* 31, no. 2–3 (2002): 252–53.
- 69 Gran, 251.
- 70 For definitive book-length studies of realism in modern Chinese literature, see Marston Anderson, *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), and David Der-wei Wang, *Fictional Realism in Twentieth-Century China: Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992). For examples of explorations of possible Chinese literary modernities other than realism, see Perry Link, *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies: Popular Fiction in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Cities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), and David Der-Wei Wang, *Fin-de-Siècle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849–1911* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997).
- 71 *Jin Ping Mei*, literally “gold vase plum,” a detailed and complex novel

- by an anonymous author centering on the household of a merchant, circulated in manuscript form in the late 1500s and was first published in 1610. The authoritative five-volume translation by David Tod Roy renders the title as *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997–2015).
- 72 For translations of many of the primary documents in these movements, from the late Qing through the May Fourth Movement and beyond, see Kirk A. Denton, ed., *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893–1945* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996).
- 73 Eugene Y. Wang, “Sketch Conceptualism as Modernist Contingency,” in *Chinese Art: Modern Expressions*, ed. Maxwell K. Hearn and Judith G. Smith (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001), 133. In this indispensable essay, Wang notes the irony that Xu Beihong was most vociferously advocating Western-style realism as the path to modernity in Chinese art at precisely the time when cutting-edge European art was abandoning “mimetic illusionism” during the height of the 1920s modernist avant-garde (103).
- 74 David Der-wei Wang, “In the Name of the Real,” in Hearn and Smith, *Chinese Art: Modern Expressions*, 29–30.
- 75 “Sketch conceptualism” is Wang’s translation of *xieyi* in “Sketch Conceptualism as Modernist Contingency.” Here I favor the more general translations as just “conceptualism” or “expressionism” mainly to extend the concept from drawing and painting to performance aesthetics, making a parallel between the dichotomy of *xieshi/xieyi* (realism/expressionism) and that of mimesis/semiosis.
- 76 Wang, “In the Name of the Real,” 34.
- 77 *Xin qingnian* [New youth] 5, no. 4 (1918).
- 78 The most famous of the latter is of course Beijing opera, but it should be noted, first, that Beijing opera was in fact a relatively modern development in the history of Chinese drama (having emerged only in the eighteenth century and become widespread only in the nineteenth) and, second, that it only was elevated to the status of a “national” art form in the twentieth century, before which it was just one regional style among many—though one with growing popularity.
- 79 Mei Lanfang and Xu Jichuan, *Wutai shenghuo shishi nian* [Forty years of stage life] (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju, 1987), 149–55.
- 80 Li Yu, “From *Li Liweng on Theater*,” in *Chinese Theories of Theater and Performance*, ed. and trans. Faye Chunfang Fei (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 83.

- 81 Ji Yun, “Actor and Character,” in Fei, *Chinese Theories of Theater and Performance*, 89–90.
- 82 Ji, 90.
- 83 It should be noted that China did have relevant precursors to the new model of scientific objectivity in its own intellectual history, most notably in the *kaozheng* 考证 or “evidential” school of textual scholarship that had been ascendant at the height of the Qing dynasty in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
- 84 Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917–1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 85.
- 85 Shih. Emphasis original.
- 86 See Wang Hui, “The Fate of ‘Mr. Science’ in China,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, Spring 1995, 1–68, and Wang, “Discursive Community and the Genealogy of Scientific Categories,” in *Everyday Modernity in China*, ed. Madeleine Yue Dong and Joshua L. Goldstein, 80–120 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006).
- 87 Chen Duxiu, “Jinri zhi jiaoyu fangzhen” [Today’s educational policy], *Xin qingnian* [New youth] 1, no. 2 (1915): 4.
- 88 Chen, 3.
- 89 Wang, “Fate of ‘Mr. Science’ in China,” 33.
- 90 Wang, 38.
- 91 Wang, “Discursive Community,” 106.
- 92 Gu, “Yingxi zazhi fakanci,” 6–7. What I have translated here as “show” is actually *xiechulai* 写出来, or literally “to write out”—using the same character for “write” or “inscribe” as in the term for *realism*, “inscribing the real,” mentioned earlier.
- 93 Gu, 5.
- 94 Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007).
- 95 Daston and Galison, 60.
- 96 Daston and Galison, 63. Daston and Galison present, for example, the case of Arthur Worthington, who, for two decades, attempted to sketch the exact geometrical patterns made by the splashes of droplets hitting a liquid surface by observing the phenomenon with a quick flash of light and then drawing what he thought he had seen—beautiful, perfectly symmetrical splash shapes. Only when he finally photographed the same phenomenon in 1894 did he discover to his horror that the “real” splashes captured by the camera looked nothing like his drawings but were instead always significantly marred by unpredictable asymmetries and irregularities (11–16, 154–63).

- 97 Daston and Galison, 130–31.
- 98 Daston and Galison, 187.
- 99 Bazin, “Ontology of the Photographic Image”; Cavell, *World Viewed*; Rodowick, *Virtual Life of Film*. See my discussion of these ideas in the introduction.
- 100 Dai Vaughan, “Let There Be Lumière,” in Elsaesser, *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, 65.
- 101 Vaughan, 65, 66.
- 102 Vaughan, 66–67.
- 103 Vaughan, 65.
- 104 Gu, “*Yingxi zazhi* fakancı,” 7.
- 105 See Tom Gunning, “Moving Away from the Index: Cinema and the Impression of Reality,” in *The Film Theory Reader: Debates and Arguments*, ed. Marc Furstenau, 255–69 (New York: Routledge, 2010). On the distinction between ontological and perceptual realism, see the introduction.
- 106 Gu, “*Yingxi zazhi* fakancı,” 4–5.
- 107 Miriam Bratu Hansen, “Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Films as Vernacular Modernism,” *Film Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (2000): 10.
- 108 Chou, “Staging Revolution,” 175.
- 109 Chou, 78.
- 110 Quoted in Chou, 79.
- 111 Chou, 85–86.

2. SHANGHAIING HOLLYWOOD IN THE 1930S

- 1 “Zhongguo dianying bainian: lao Shanghai de huangjin shidai” [One hundred years of Chinese cinema: Old Shanghai’s golden age], *Ouzhou shibao* [European times], June 6, 2014, <http://www.oushinet.com/news/europe/britain/20140606/134418.html>.
- 2 “Ping Chulu (Gentlemen Are Born)” [Review of *Gentlemen Are Born*], *Diansheng* 4, no. 24 (1935): 486–87.
- 3 Cavell, *World Viewed*, 104; Rodowick, *Virtual Life of Film*, 42–43.
- 4 For insightful discussions of the hard film versus soft film debate of the early to mid-1930s, see Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 244–97, and Victor Fan, “The Cinema of Sun Yu: Ice Cream for the Eye . . . but with a *Homo Sacer*,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 5, no. 3 (2011): 219–51.

- 5 Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, 22–23. See the introduction for a fuller discussion of Jakobson.
- 6 Miriam Bratu Hansen first proposed this idea in her essay “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism,” in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, 332–50 (London: Arnold, 2000). She applied it specifically to Shanghai cinema of the 1930s in “Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Film as Vernacular Modernism,” *Film Quarterly* 54 (2000): 10–22; and she revisited it a decade later with a longer discussion of both Chinese and Japanese cinema in “Vernacular Modernism: Tracking Cinema on a Global Scale,” in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Nataša Duroviová and Kathleen Newman, 287–315 (New York: Routledge, 2010).
- 7 Michael Raine, “Adaptation as ‘Transcultural Mimesis’ in Japanese Cinema,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Cinema*, ed. Daisuke Miyao (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 102.
- 8 See Xinyu Dong, “The Laborer at Play: Laborer’s Love, the Operational Aesthetic, and the Comedy of Inventions,” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 20, no. 2 (2008): 1–39.
- 9 My thanks to Jonah Horwitz and (indirectly) Ben Singer for directing me to this earlier precedent.
- 10 See Yiman Wang’s chapter “*The Goddess*: Tracking the ‘Unknown Woman’ from Hollywood through Shanghai to Hong Kong” in her *Remaking Chinese Cinema: Through the Prism of Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Hollywood*, 18–47 (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2013). For a classic essay on the maternal melodrama genre that focuses on the 1937 remake of *Stella Dallas* by King Vidor, see Linda Williams, “‘Something Else Besides a Mother’: *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama,” in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill, 299–325 (London: British Film Institute, 1987).
- 11 It is beyond the scope of this chapter to address the broader issues raised by applying the term *melodrama* to the Chinese context, but it raises fascinating questions concerning translational practice and the transcultural application of theoretical concepts to categorize works of art. The distinction between melodrama as a historical film genre and a transhistorical narrative mode is meant partly to address such questions. See, for example, Christine Gledhill, “Rethinking Genre,” in Gledhill and Williams, *Reinventing Film Studies*, 221–43. For a view of melodrama as both an indigenous and a translated aesthetic in Chinese

Republican-era cinema, see Zhang Zhen, “Transplanting Melodrama: Observations on the Emergence of Early Chinese Narrative Film,” in *A Companion to Chinese Cinema*, ed. Yingjin Zhang, 25–41 (West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012). For a discussion that chooses to avoid the term *melodrama* altogether in favor of its ostensible Chinese equivalent, see Emilie Yueh-Yu Yeh, “A Small History of *Wenyi*,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinemas*, ed. Carlos Rojas and Eileen Cheng-Yin Chow, 223–49 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). For a general discussion of melodrama in Chinese cinemas, see Stephen Teo, “Chinese Melodrama: The *Wenyi* Genre,” in *Traditions in World Cinema*, ed. Linda Badley, R. Barton Palmer, and Steven Jay Schneider, 203–13 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), and Zhen Zhang, “Transnational Melodrama, *Wenyi*, and the Orphan Imagination,” in *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, 83–97 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

- 12 This film adaptation played at the Carlton Theatre in Shanghai and received a short notice in *Shenbao* 申报 on October 26, 1923.
- 13 Cheng Jihua, ed., *History of the Development of Chinese Film [Zhongguo dianying fazhan shi]* (1963; repr., Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1997).
- 14 Chris Berry, “Chinese Left Cinema in the 1930s: Poisonous Weeds or National Treasures,” *Jump Cut*, no. 34 (March 1989): 87–94.
- 15 Paul Pickowicz, “Melodramatic Representation and the ‘May Fourth’ Tradition of Chinese Cinema,” in *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in Twentieth-Century China*, ed. Ellen Widmer and David Wang, 295–326 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).
- 16 Zhang, *Amorous History*.
- 17 Zhiwei Xiao, “The Myth about Chinese Leftist Cinema,” in *Visualizing Modern China: Image, History, and Memory, 1750–Present*, ed. James A. Cook, Joshua Goldstein, Matthew D. Johnson, and Sigrid Schmalzer, 145–64 (New York: Lexington Books, 2014).
- 18 Siegfried Kracauer, “Photography,” *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 3 (1993): 436.
- 19 Zhang, *Amorous History*, 35.
- 20 Cheng, *History of the Development of Chinese Film*, 439–42.
- 21 Carl Plantinga, *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator’s Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 80.
- 22 A similar plot twist—the arranged marriage partner turns out to have been the actual love interest all along—occurs in the 1927 Soviet film *Women of Ryazan* (Olga Preobrazhenskaya and Ivan Pravov).

- 23 A 1962 interview with Fejos, reprinted in the booklet accompanying the Criterion Collection Blu-ray release of the film, includes this quote: “There was, by the way, the O. Henry twist in *Lonesome*, that at the very end, it was found out that the boy and girl lived side by side in the same rooming house, but they never knew about each other. It sounds corny, but let’s say that it was high corn.”
- 24 Hansen, “Vernacular Modernism,” 291. Paul Fonoroff also cites *Lonesome* as a Hollywood precedent for the plot of *Crossroads* in his review of the DVD release of the latter in the *South China Morning Post*, April 11, 2010, <http://www.scmp.com/article/711066/film-1937>.
- 25 Shen goes on to say that he preferred to turn the characters into “a pure and naïve young couple.” Shen Xiling, “Zenyang zhizuo Shizi jietou” [How did I make *Crossroads*?], originally published in *Mingxing banyuekan* [Mingxing bimonthly] 8, no. 3 (1937); reprinted in Chen Bo, ed., *Zhongguo zuoyi dianying yundong* [The Chinese left-wing film movement], 395–97 (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1993). Translation drafted by Jessica Ka Yee Chan.
- 26 A French version (*À moi le jour, à toi la nuit*) by the same director and featuring the same female lead actor (Käthe von Nagy) was released at the same time, still set in Paris but with all dialogue in French. See Nataša Durovicová, “Vector, Flow, Zone: Towards a History of Cinematic Translatio,” in Durovicová and Newman, *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, 99. I have not been able to determine which version was more likely to have been seen by either Shen Xiling or his friend who suggested the plot idea.
- 27 For the fascinating story of *La dame aux camélias* in China, see Hu Ying, *Tales of Translation: Composing the New Woman in China, 1899–1918* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), 67–105. For a discussion of how the story helped to constitute a new, individualist ideology of romantic love as part of an “enlightenment structure of feeling” in early twentieth-century China, see Haiyan Lee, *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China, 1900–1950* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007), 97–105.
- 28 Cheng, *History of the Development of Chinese Film*, 441.
- 29 Zhao Dan, the actor who played Lao Zhao, stated that he borrowed an acting technique for a specific scene in *Crossroads* from Greta Garbo in Cukor’s *Camille*. See Ni Zhenliang, *Zhao Dan zhuan* [Zhao Dan biography] (Beijing: Chuanjie chubanshe, 2007), 79. Another possibly key cinematic precedent was a French adaptation of *La dame aux camélias* directed by Fernand Rivers and Abel Gance in 1934 and starring Yvonne

Printemps. The film appears to be no longer extant, and I have not been able to determine exactly when or if it was screened in Shanghai, but stills and movie posters from the film show Printemps wearing a black dress that is similar to the one Zhiying wears in her dream, suggesting that it could also have been a source for Shen Xiling's imagination and an object of his parody. The Chinese adaptations included two called *New Camellia* (*Xin chahua* 新茶花; Zhang Shichuan 张石川, 1913) and Li Pingqian 李萍倩, 1927) and one titled *Women of Easy Virtue* (*Yecao xianhua* 野草闲花; Sun Yu, 1930).

- 30 See Panpan Yang, "Repositioning Excess: Romantic Melodrama's Journey from Hollywood to China," in Gledhill and Williams, *Melodrama Unbound*, 225–26.
- 31 In this sense, the satire in this scene resembles the *kuso* aesthetic of parody videos in contemporary Taiwan and mainland China. As Nishant Shah has shown in the case of the BackDorm Boys videos, the objects of humor in the videos are not so much the "original" Backstreet Boys or the "real" Chinese college boys as "the projected selves or desired selves that they are expected to either appropriate or aspire to. The *kuso* exaggerates the differences between these two, celebrates the obvious flaws in them and makes them available as a public spectacle." Shah, "Now Streaming on Your Nearest Screen: Contextualizing New Digital Cinema through Kuso," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 3, no. 1 (2009): 26.
- 32 For a much more comprehensive discussion of *Love and Duty*, see Kristine Harris, "Ombres Chinoises: Split Screens and Parallel Lives in *Love and Duty*," in Rojas and Chow, *Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinemas*, 39–61.
- 33 For a discussion of this, see Fan, *Cinema Approaching Reality*, 25–26.
- 34 Lu Xun, "Yizhe fuji" [Translator's notes], *Mengya yuekan* [Sprout monthly] 1, no. 3 (1930): 27–33.
- 35 Xi Naifang [Zheng Boqi], "Meiguo pian de yingxiang" [The influence of American film], originally published in *Chenbao*, September 6, 1932, reprinted in *Zhongguo wusheng dianying* [Chinese silent cinema], ed. Dai Xiaolan, 1207–8 (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1996).
- 36 Xia Yan, "Ruanxing de ying lun!" [A hard critique of softness!], in *Xia Yan dianying wenji* [Xia Yan collected writings on cinema] (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 2000), 1:28.
- 37 Xi Naifang [Zheng Boqi], "Dianying zuiyan—bianxiang de dianying shiping" [A critique of cinema—or, a criticism of contemporary cinema, 1933], *Mingxing* 1, no. 1 (1933): 1–4.

- 38 Xia Yan, “Zai Shizi jietou zuotanhui shang de fayan” [Talk at the forum on *Crossroads*], in *Xia Yan dianying wenji*, 1:88.
- 39 Schweinitz, *Film and Stereotype*, 22.
- 40 Schweinitz, 30.
- 41 Plantinga, *Moving Viewers*, 79–80, 152–53.
- 42 Plantinga, 96–97.
- 43 Plantinga, 96.
- 44 Another Hollywood precedent for the shot is Buster Keaton’s *The Cameraman* (codirected by Edward Sedgwick, 1928), which had used a similar technique, though with fewer floors than *7th Heaven*.
- 45 Wen-hsin Yeh, *Shanghai Splendor: Economic Sentiments and the Making of Modern China, 1843–1949* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 137.
- 46 Yeh, 150, 250n35.
- 47 David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 159.
- 48 David R. Shumway, “Screwball Comedies: Constructing Romance, Mystifying Marriage,” in *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 399, 400.
- 49 It might be argued that the ending of Yuan Muzhi’s *Street Angel* in fact fits one of the templates of classical Hollywood, namely, what Linda Williams categorizes as “sad-ending melodramas,” which include the “‘social problem’ films without optimistic endings.” However, such a convention more accurately describes, for example, the melodrama *Spring River Flows East* (*Yi jiang chun shui xiang dong liu* 一江春水向东流; Cai Chusheng 蔡楚生 and Zheng Junli, 1947), discussed in the next chapter, which ends with the suicide of its main protagonist. *Street Angel* is much odder, in that much of it is not a melodrama at all but a romantic comedy, and the ending features not the tragic finality of the death of its main character but rather the seemingly random death of a side character with no resolution of the fates of the main protagonists. Williams, “Melodrama Revised,” in *Refiguring American Film Genres*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 59.
- 50 See Xinyu Dong’s forthcoming book *The Comic Avant-Garde: A Forgotten History of Chinese Cinema and Transnational Modernism* for a thorough study of this film and its avant-garde intervention in the comedy genre. Another detailed discussion is in Weihong Bao, *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915–1945* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), esp. 233–60. The literal question

- mark at the end of the film would be used again in *Eight Thousand Li of Clouds and Moon* (*Baqian li lu yun he yue* 八千里路云和月; Shi Dongshan 史东山, 1947) and in *Bitter Love* (*Kulian* 苦恋; Peng Ning 彭宁, 1980).
- 51 This particular film trope—the rising of the dead, sometimes through double exposure—itself has several precedents in Western cinema, including *The Three Musketeers*, *J'accuse* (Abel Gance, 1919), and *Der müde Tod* (*Destiny*; Fritz Lang, 1921).
- 52 Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism*, 54–55.
- 53 Hill, 55.
- 54 Hill.
- 55 Hill.
- 56 Hill, 55–56.
- 57 Examples of these include *Twin Sisters* (*Zimeihua* 姊妹花; Zheng Zhengqiu 郑正秋, 1933) and, to some extent, *The Goddess*. See also Laikwan Pang's discussion of the "bright tail" ending in Shanghai left-wing films. I should note that she includes in her list of "bright tail" endings some films that I on the contrary am labeling as lacking resolution. My rationales are that some of those, such as *The Big Road* (or *The Highway* as she translates it) and *Crossroads*, hardly have endings that could be described as "blissful," even if they do encourage persistence in struggle, and that Pang herself argues that the "bright tail" does not provide unity through closure but rather gives the narrative "a new beginning" at its end. Pang, *Building a New China in Cinema: The Chinese Left-Wing Cinema Movement, 1932–37* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 207–8.
- 58 Fan, *Cinema Approaching Reality*, 63.
- 59 Hugo Münsterberg, "From *The Film: A Psychological Study*—the Means of the Photoplay," in Braudy and Cohen, *Film Theory and Criticism*, 407.
- 60 Bordwell et al., *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 29.
- 61 Xia, "Zai Shizi jietou zuotanhui shang de fayan," 87–91. (Zheng Boqi's remarks are included in the same source.)
- 62 Pang, *Building a New China in Cinema*, 205–6.
- 63 Pang, 206.
- 64 Andrew H. Plaks, "Towards a Critical Theory of Chinese Narrative," in *Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical Essays*, ed. Andrew H. Plaks (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), 341.
- 65 Plaks.
- 66 Plaks, 343.
- 67 Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies fiction (*yuanyang-hudie xiaoshuo* 鸳鸯蝴蝶小说) refers to popular middle-brow entertainment fiction of the 1910s–20s that drew on both the Chinese cultural tradition and Western

- sources and was embraced by contemporary “petty urbanite” readers but scorned by intellectuals of the New Culture Movement that began around 1915. For a brief introduction to the genre, see Jianhua Chen, “Zhou Shoujuan’s Love Stories and Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies Fiction,” in *The Columbia Companion to Modern Chinese Literature*, ed. Kirk A. Denton, 111–20 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016). For a book-length study, see E. Perry Link Jr., *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies: Popular Fiction in Early Twentieth Century Chinese Cities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).
- 68 Jessica Ka Yee Chan, “Translating ‘Montage’: The Discreet Attractions of Soviet Montage for Chinese Revolutionary Cinema,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 5, no. 3 (2011): 203–4.
- 69 Eisenstein also emphasized that he thought montage was a tool of realistic narration, but in a different sense than I ultimately will take it here, as he referred not to the ability of montage to create fissures but to its capacity for helping to present a unified theme. See Sergei Eisenstein, *The Film Sense* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969), 10–11. My thanks to Tara Coleman for pointing out this connection.
- 70 For information on the “singing hostess” phenomenon in Shanghai of this period, see Andrew D. Field, “Selling Souls in Sin City: Shanghai Singing and Dancing Hostesses in Print, Film, and Politics, 1920–49,” in *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922–1943*, ed. Yingjin Zhang, 99–127 (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999).
- 71 On the similar newsreel documentary-style inserts during a song sequence in *Big Road*, see Chris Berry, “The Sublimative Text: Sex and Revolution in *Big Road* (The Highway),” *East-West Film Journal* 2, no. 2 (June): 66–86.
- 72 Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, 51.
- 73 Eco, *Open Work*.
- 74 The fissures in these films thus recall the Brechtian technique of “interruption” analyzed by Walter Benjamin, a method of narration that “works against creating an illusion among the audience” and “compels the spectator to take up a position towards the action.” Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht* (London: Verso, 1998), 99–100.
- 75 Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 18–19.
- 76 Fan, “Cinema of Sun Yu,” 221.
- 77 Hansen, “Mass Production of the Senses,” 335, 340.
- 78 Hansen, “Fallen Women, Rising Stars,” and Hansen, “Vernacular Modernism.”

- 79 Daniel Morgan, “‘Play with Danger’: Vernacular Modernism and the Problem of Criticism,” *New German Critique*, no. 122 (Summer 2014): 70.
- 80 Morgan, 69.
- 81 Hansen, “Vernacular Modernism,” 301.
- 82 Hansen, 295.
- 83 Hansen, 305, 301.
- 84 Hansen, 301.

3. REALISM AND EVENT IN POSTWAR CHINESE CINEMA

- 1 Yao Zhuobo, “You *Yi jiang chun shui xiang dong liu, Songhua Jiang shang kan yishu de zhenshi*” [Seeing art’s truth through *Spring River Flows East* and *Along the Sungari River*], *Wen tan* [Literary field] 8, no. 4 (1948): 1.
- 2 Yao, 4.
- 3 Paul G. Pickowicz, *China on Film: A Century of Exploration, Confrontation, and Controversy* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012), 150, 154.
- 4 Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), 202.
- 5 Thompson.
- 6 Cheng Jihua, ed., *Zhongguo dianying fazhan shi* [History of the development of Chinese film] (1963; repr., Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1997).
- 7 Pickowicz, *China on Film*, 80.
- 8 David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 205, 206.
- 9 Pickowicz, *China on Film*, 150–51.
- 10 Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995).
- 11 Panpan Yang, “Repositioning Excess: Romantic Melodrama’s Journey from Hollywood to China,” in Gledhill and Williams, *Melodrama Unbound*, 234.
- 12 Yang.
- 13 Williams, “Melodrama Revised,” 58, 62.
- 14 Williams, 65.
- 15 Williams, 58.
- 16 Williams, 59.
- 17 The one exception is an interlude of slightly over twenty seconds in

- which Sufen is briefly waylaid by a police officer when she flees home from the mansion after curfew.
- 18 In the Guangzhou periodical's essay on the film cited at the beginning of this chapter, for example, the author complains that Sufen's death would only have been necessary in pre-May Fourth China and that in the post-May Fourth reality, permanently breaking off with her husband and soldiering on with her life as a single mother should have been the option pursued rather than suicide. Yao, "You *Yi jiang chun shui xiang dong liu, Songhua Jiang shang kan yishu de zhenshi*," 4.
- 19 Williams, "Melodrama Revised," 69.
- 20 Christine Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation," in Gledhill, *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, 16.
- 21 Steve Neale, "Melodrama and Tears," *Screen* 27, no. 6 (1986): 8, 22.
- 22 Jane M. Gaines, "Even More Tears: The *Historical Time* Theory of Melodrama," in Gledhill and Williams, *Melodrama Unbound*, 333.
- 23 Pickowicz, *China on Film*, 86–87.
- 24 Pickowicz, 78.
- 25 Gilberto Perez, *The Eloquent Screen: A Rhetoric of Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 203.
- 26 Williams, "Melodrama Revised," 67.
- 27 John Mullarkey, *Philosophy and the Moving Image: Refractions of Reality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 155.
- 28 For more on its reception and citations of typical reviews at the time, see Carolyn Fitzgerald, *Fragmenting Modernisms: Chinese Wartime Literature, Art, and Film, 1937–1949* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 172–73.
- 29 See esp. Zhang, "Transplanting Melodrama"; Yeh, "A Small History of *Wenyl*"; Teo, "Chinese Melodrama"; and Zhang, "Transnational Melodrama."
- 30 James Udden, "Poetics of Two Springs: Fei Mu versus Tian Zhuangzhuang," in *The Poetics of Chinese Cinema*, ed. Gary Bettinson and James Udden (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 80, 94. Emphasis original.
- 31 David Bordwell, "The Omnivore's Dilemma," *Observations on Film Art: David Bordwell's Website on Cinema* (blog), April 10, 2010, <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2010/04/10/the-omnivore-s-dilemma>.
- 32 In the English scholarship, see esp. Susan Daruvala, "The Aesthetics and Moral Politics of Fei Mu's *Spring in a Small Town*," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 1, no. 3 (2007): 171–88; Carolyn Fitzgerald, "Spring in a Small Town: Gazing at Ruins," in *Chinese Films in Focus II*, ed. Chris Berry, 205–11 (London: Palgrave, 2008); a greatly expanded version of the

- latter as a chapter in Fitzgerald, *Fragmenting Modernisms*, 169–216; David Der-wei Wang, *The Lyrical in Epic Time: Modern Chinese Intellectuals and Artists through the 1949 Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 271–310; and Fan, *Cinema Approaching Reality*, 109–52.
- 33 Ba Jin, *Cold Nights* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978). For a thorough analysis of how tuberculosis serves to structure Wang Wenzuan’s identity in the novel, see Xiaobing Tang’s chapter “The Last Tubercular in Modern Chinese Literature: On Ba Jin’s *Cold Nights*,” in *Chinese Modern: The Heroic and the Quotidian*, 131–60 (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000).
- 34 The former is used in the British Film Institute DVD edition published in 2015 and the latter in the Cinema Epoch DVD edition published in 2007.
- 35 Technically, one might say that ellipses cannot occur *within* a scene because temporal continuity is one of the defining characteristics of a scene (as opposed to a sequence). However, that is precisely what makes these ellipses so remarkable: that they happen as if within an otherwise continuous scene (though not necessarily within a continuous shot, as would be the case with a briefer jump cut).
- 36 Linda Williams, *Screening Sex* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008), esp. 33–53.
- 37 The only exceptions would be those few experimental feature films that unfold in “real time,” for example, Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rope* (1948), Mike Figgis’s *Timecode* (2000), or Alexander Sokurov’s *Russian Ark* (2002).
- 38 This would be the sort of “striptease” argument made, for example, by Slavoj Žižek: the idea that sex is most powerful in cinema when suggested or indicated indirectly in various ways, whereas when shown explicitly, it becomes merely a mechanical, prosaic, or ugly display that fails to capture the desiring subject’s *jouissance*. Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), 171–91.
- 39 David Der-wei Wang also associates the ellipses within this scene with uncertainty, observing that they function “to intimate the passage of time and the pressure of prolonged uncertainty of the conversation.” Wang, *Lyrical in Epic Time*, 294.
- 40 Haiyan Lee, *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China, 1900–1950* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007), 95.
- 41 Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (London: Verso, 2000), 94.
- 42 Lee, *Revolution of the Heart*, 138.
- 43 Zhang Ailing (Eileen Chang), “Sealed Off,” in *The Columbia Anthology of Chinese Women’s Writing*

- Modern Chinese Literature*, ed. Joseph S. M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt, 188–97 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).
- 44 Fitzgerald, *Fragmenting Modernisms*, 169, 210–16.
- 45 The Zhang Ailing essay in question has been translated by Wendy Larson as “My Writing” in Kirk A. Denton, ed., *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893–1945*, 436–42 (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), and by Andrew F. Jones as “Writing of One’s Own” in Eileen Chang, ed., *Written on Water*, 15–22 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). The former uses the translation “uneven contrasts,” whereas the latter uses “equivocal contrasts.” The original Chinese essay, “Ziji de wenzhang” 自己的文章, can be found at <https://www.douban.com/group/topic/10694390>.
- 46 Fan, *Cinema Approaching Reality*, 134.
- 47 Zhang, “My Writing,” 439.
- 48 Fitzgerald, *Fragmenting Modernisms*, 174–214.
- 49 This fact is driven home by a comparison of the film with its 2002 remake by Tian Zhuangzhuang (which has the same Chinese title but is usually cited in English as *Springtime in a Small Town*), which largely repeats the plot of the original but drops Yuwen’s voice-over narration, resulting in her character coming much closer to the stereotype of a villainous femme fatale.
- 50 In *Obsession*, there is an equivalent scene in which the adulterous couple have this conversation: “I’ll stay here. I’ll put up with it [pause] until [pause].” “Until what?” “Until I don’t know when.” The fantasizing of the husband’s death in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* is more blunt. Frank vocalizes a wish that Cora’s husband would die in a car crash, and she replies, “You didn’t mean that. You were joking!” In *Double Indemnity*, when Walter Neff, insurance salesman and soon-to-be lover of femme fatale Phyllis Dietrichson, teases her about anticipating—or possibly planning—her husband’s death when she asks about taking out a life insurance policy for him, she protests with “Please don’t talk like that,” “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” “Are you crazy?” and “That’s a horrible thing to say.” Later, of course, they carry out the murder together.
- 51 Dudley Andrew, *Mists of Regret: Culture and Sensibility in Classic French Film* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 6.
- 52 Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 265.
- 53 André Bazin, *Jean Renoir* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 38, 30.
- 54 See esp. André Bazin’s essays “Cinematic Realism and the Italian School

- of the Liberation” and “The Evolution of Film Language” in Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, 87–106, 215–49. (Hugh Gray translates the essays as Bazin, “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema,” 1:23–40, and “An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism,” 2:16–40.)
- 55 ASL figures for these and many other films are available at the Cinemetrics Database, <http://www.cinemetrics.lv/database.php>.
- 56 Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, 2:66. (This essay is not available in the newer collection translated by Timothy Barnard.)
- 57 Andrew, *Mists of Regret*, 198.
- 58 Eco, *Open Work*.
- 59 See, e.g., Ying Xiong, “Xiaocheng zhi chun yu ‘donfang dianying’” [Spring in a Small Town and “Eastern cinema”], *Dianying yishu*, no. 1 (1993): 11–18 and no. 2 (1993): 46–51.
- 60 Jing Yingrui, “Wo kan *Xiao cheng zhi chun*” [My view of Spring in a Small Town], in *Xiao cheng zhi chun de dianying meixue: xiang Fei Mu zhi jing* [The cinematic aesthetics of *Spring in a Small Town*: An homage to Fei Mu] (Taipei: Taiwan Film Institute, 1996), 12.
- 61 Daruvala, “Aesthetics and Moral Politics,” 175.
- 62 Fan, *Cinema Approaching Reality*, 111.
- 63 The ambiguous status of Yuwen’s voice-over narration is discussed by both Daruvala, “Aesthetics and Moral Politics,” 176, and Fitzgerald, *Fragmenting Modernisms*, 192–96.
- 64 Pickowicz, *China on Film*, 192.
- 65 Chen Baichen 陈白尘 was the lead writer, though the film’s opening credits list five more cowriters, including the director Zheng Junli and the actor Zhao Dan. See Cheng, *Zhongguo dianying fazhan shi*, 244.
- 66 Cheng, 243.
- 67 Leo Ou-fan Lee, “The Tradition of Modern Chinese Cinema: Some Preliminary Explorations and Hypotheses,” in *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema*, ed. Chris Berry (London: British Film Institute, 1993), 7–8.
- 68 Yiman Wang, “Crows and Sparrows: Allegory on a Historical Threshold,” in Berry, *Chinese Films in Focus II*, 83.
- 69 The film never directly mentions Xu’s status as a concubine rather than Hou’s first wife, but it makes clear that his main residence and family are in Nanjing.
- 70 Wang, “Crows and Sparrows,” 83.
- 71 Zhou Yang, “Thoughts on Realism,” in *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893–1945*, ed. Kirk A. Denton (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), 342.
- 72 Georg Lukács, “Art and Objective Truth,” in *Writer and Critic and Other Essays* (Lincoln, Neb.: iUniverse, 2005), 35.

- 73 Lukács, 38.
- 74 Lukács.
- 75 Wang, "Crows and Sparrows," 86.
- 76 Cheng acknowledges that the film includes "acidic political satire," and Wang describes the sequence introducing Hou Yibo as "couched in satiric terms." Cheng, *Zhongguo dianying fazhan shi*, 248; Wang, "Crows and Sparrows," 86.
- 77 Leyda, *Dianying*, 165, 177; Lee, "Tradition of Modern Chinese Cinema," 11.
- 78 Leyda, *Dianying*, 174.
- 79 Bordwell et al., *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 61.
- 80 Bordwell et al., 45.
- 81 Bordwell et al.
- 82 Bordwell et al., 29.
- 83 Bordwell et al.
- 84 Bordwell et al., 57.
- 85 Bordwell et al., 58.
- 86 George V. Kachkovski, Daniil Vasilyev, Michael Kuk, Alan Kingstone, and Chris N. H. Street, "Exploring the Effects of Violating the 180-Degree Rule on Film Viewing Preferences," *Communication Research* 46, no. 7 (2019): 948–64.
- 87 Barbara Foley, "The Politics of Poetics: Ideology and Narrative Form in *An American Tragedy* and *Native Son*," in *Narrative Poetics: Innovation, Limits, Challenges*, ed. James Phelan, 55–67 (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987).

4. PRESCRIPTIVE REALISM IN REVOLUTIONARY CINEMA OF THE SEVENTEEN YEARS

- 1 Barbara Foley, "The Politics of Poetics: Ideology and Narrative Form in *An American Tragedy* and *Native Son*," in *Narrative Poetics: Innovation, Limits, Challenges*, ed. James Phelan (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987), 66.
- 2 Gilberto Perez, *The Eloquent Screen: A Rhetoric of Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 29.
- 3 Ban Wang, "Desire and Pleasure in Revolutionary Cinema," in *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), 124, 126; Jessica Ka Yee Chan, *Chinese Revolutionary Cinema: Propaganda, Aesthetics and Internationalism, 1949–1966* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2019), 2–4.
- 4 I by no means intend to say that Hollywood films are unsaturated with

- political and ideological messages, only that Mao-era revolutionary films are much more up front about the political arguments they are making.
- 5 While I independently employed the label “prescriptive” in classifying different sorts of claims to cinematic realism as explained in the introduction, in the course of my research, I found that at least two scholars much earlier already had applied the label specifically to drama of the Cultural Revolution (a discussion for the next chapter). See Hua-yuan Li Mowry, *Yang-pan hsi: New Theater in China*, Studies in Chinese Communist Terminology 15 (Berkeley: Center for Chinese Studies, University of California, 1973), and Ellen R. Judd, “Prescriptive Dramatic Theory of the Cultural Revolution,” in *Drama in the People’s Republic of China*, ed. Constantine Tung and Colin MacKerras, 94–118 (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987).
- 6 Lee Baxandall and Stefan Morawski, eds., *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art: A Selection of Writings* (St. Louis, Mo.: Telos Press, 1973), 105.
- 7 Mao Zedong, “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art,” in *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893–1945*, ed. Kirk A. Denton (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), 459–60.
- 8 Mao.
- 9 Maurice Meisner, *Marxism, Maoism, and Utopianism: Eight Essays* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 4.
- 10 Chris Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China: The Cultural Revolution after the Cultural Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 65–66.
- 11 Berry, 28.
- 12 Francesco Casetti, *Inside the Gaze: The Fiction Film and Its Spectator* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 124.
- 13 Schweinitz, *Film and Stereotype*, 22.
- 14 Schweinitz, 33, xiv.
- 15 Originally quoted in print in 1925; archived at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1922/jan/17.htm>.
- 16 Daniel Vukovich, *China and Orientalism: Western Knowledge Production and the PRC* (London: Routledge, 2012).
- 17 Schweinitz, *Film and Stereotype*, 194.
- 18 Schweinitz.
- 19 Schweinitz, 262–76. Schweinitz analyzes Jennifer Jason Leigh’s performance in *The Hudsucker Proxy* (Joel Coen, 1994) as such a citation.
- 20 Qu Qiubai, “The Question of Popular Literature and Art,” trans. Paul G. Pickowicz, in *Revolutionary Literature in China: An Anthology*, ed. John

- Berninghausen and T. D. Huters (White Plains, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1976), 48.
- 21 Qu, 49.
- 22 Mao, “Talks at the Yan’an Forum,” 469.
- 23 Zhou Yang, “Thoughts on Realism,” in Denton, *Modern Chinese Literary Thought*, 338.
- 24 Zhou, 337. Zhou Yang’s formulations serve as an example of how aesthetic debates among Chinese Marxists were connected with those among Western Marxists. His warning regarding penetrating reality’s outer layer is similar to Georg Lukács’s exhortation just two years later that a genuine realism should grasp objective reality “as it truly is,” rather than merely confining “itself to reproducing whatever manifests itself immediately and on the surface.” Lukács, “Realism in the Balance,” in Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, and Georg Lukács, *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1977), 33.
- 25 Zhou, “Thoughts on Realism,” 339.
- 26 Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, *Public Secrets, Public Spaces: Cinema and Civility in China* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 62.
- 27 Donald.
- 28 Régine Robin, *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992), 14.
- 29 Zhou Qiying [aka Zhou Yang], “Guanyu ‘shehuizhuyi de xianshizhuyi yu geming de langmanzhuyi’” [On “socialist realism and revolutionary romanticism”], *Xiandai [Les contemporains]* 4, no. 1 (1933): 21–31.
- 30 Andrei Zhdanov, “Speech to the Congress of Soviet Writers,” in *The Soviet Writers Congress, 1934: The Debate on Socialist Realism and Modernism in the Soviet Union*, ed. H. G. Scott (London: Laurence and Wishart, 1977), 428.
- 31 Quoted in Robert H. Stacy, *Russian Literary Criticism: A Short History* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1974), 188.
- 32 Yizhong Gu, “The Myth of Voluntary Death: The Representation of Sacrifice and Martyrdom in the Maoist Films (1949–1976),” PhD diss., University of Washington, 2017, 60.
- 33 Zhou, “Thoughts on Realism,” 336.
- 34 Zhou, 343.
- 35 Mao, “Talks at the Yan’an Forum,” 470.
- 36 Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 2.
- 37 Brooks, 5.
- 38 Katerina Clark, “Socialist Realism *with* Shores: The Conventions for the

Positive Hero,” in *Socialist Realism without Shores*, ed. Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko, 27–50 (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997). In the Soviet literature examined by Clark, the protagonist/apprentice is usually a young man, but in the Chinese films we will consider, it is more often a woman.

- 39 Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema*, 56–57.
- 40 Berry, 61.
- 41 Berry, 29.
- 42 Plantinga, *Moving Viewers*, 96–97.
- 43 Plantinga, 96.
- 44 Chan, *Chinese Revolutionary Cinema*, 143.
- 45 Donald, *Public Secrets, Public Spaces*, 59–60.
- 46 Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema*, 56.
- 47 The nondiegetic quality of the flag is eased somewhat by a cut to a close-ups of waving red flags that begins the following scene—and the film’s final sequence—but they clearly are different flags that lack the hammer-and-sickle icon of the flag shown in the previous scene’s cutaway.
- 48 Slavoj Žižek, “The Fetish of the Party,” in *Lacan, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. Willy Apolon and Richard Feldstein, 3–29 (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996).
- 49 Donald, *Public Secrets, Public Spaces*, 62, 59.
- 50 Berry, “Sublimative Text,” 79.
- 51 Wang, *Sublime Figure of History*, 123.
- 52 Wang, 124, 127.
- 53 The contrast between Daojing’s desolate individualism at the beginning of the film and her fulfillment through collective belonging at the end was first analyzed by Dai Jinhua and discussed further by Ban Wang. See Dai Jinhua, *Dianying lilun yu piping shouce* [A manual of film theory and criticism] (Beijing: Kexue jishu chubanshe, 1993), 175–76, and Wang, *Sublime Figure of History*, 136.
- 54 Available in English as Yang Mo, *Song of Youth* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1978).
- 55 This exact romantic scenario—a couple in a rowboat surrounded by weeping willows—can be found, for example, in *Bardleys the Magnificent*, a John Gilbert vehicle directed by King Vidor in 1926, and the more general trope of young lovers meeting in a park is deployed in classics of 1930s Shanghai cinema, such as *Love and Duty*, *Spring in the South* (*Nanguo zhi chun* 南國之春; Cai Chusheng 蔡楚生, 1932), and *Crossroads*.
- 56 I have personally tested this in classes in which I show the scene out of

- context without English subtitles and ask random non-Chinese-speaking students to guess what happened.
- 57 John Mullarkey, *Philosophy and the Moving Image: Refractions of Reality* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 157.
- 58 See, e.g., Stephanie Hemelryk Donald's analysis of the way *Yellow Earth* subverts the "socialist realist gaze" in *Public Secrets, Public Spaces*, 60–62.
- 59 Xiaomei Chen, *Acting the Right Part: Political Theater and Popular Drama in Contemporary China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 84.
- 60 Williams, *Screening Sex*, esp. 33–53.
- 61 Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), 29.
- 62 Williams, "Melodrama Revised," 54.
- 63 Such a display occurs in *The Cheat* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1915), *The Loves of Carmen* (Raoul Walsh, 1927), *Wild Girl* (Raoul Walsh, 1932), *Toni* (Jean Renoir, 1935), *Criss Cross* (Robert Siodmak, 1949), and *Human Desire* (Fritz Lang, 1954), to name only a few examples by leading directors covering five decades before *Red Detachment of Women* was made.
- 64 Yizhong Gu counts no fewer than seventy "films representing onscreen martyrdom in a direct and orthodox way" among a sample of more than three hundred Mao-era films. Gu, "Myth of Voluntary Death," 43.
- 65 At the time of this writing, the scene in question can be accessed as "Sands of Iwo Jima Flag Raising" at <https://youtu.be/-2Ym1rmWr3s>.
- 66 Emily Wilcox has made a similar, perhaps on first glance surprising comparison between Chinese comic dance performances of the Seventeen Years and American television of the 1950s, both of which are instances of "a broader pattern of international post-WWII mass entertainment culture" that "reinforced the basic stories—typically fantasies—upon which an idealized form of national identity was constructed." Emily Wilcox, "Joking after Rebellion: Performing Tibetan-Han Relations in the Chinese Military Dance 'Laundry Song' (1964)," in *Maoist Laughter*, ed. Ping Zhu, Zhuoyi Wang, and Jason McGrath (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019), 57.
- 67 Chenshu Zhou, *Cinema Off Screen: Moviegoing in Socialist China* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021).
- 68 Mullarkey, *Philosophy and the Moving Image*, 172, 173. Emphasis original.

5. SOCIALIST FORMALISM AND THE END(S) OF REVOLUTIONARY CINEMA

- 1 For the political and conceptual context of Mao's thinking at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, see Rebecca Karl, *Mao Zedong and China in the Twentieth Century World: A Concise History* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 117–38; Nick Knight, *Rethinking Mao: Explorations in Mao Zedong's Thought* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2007), 236–40; and Maurice Meisner, *Mao's China and After: A History of the People's Republic*, 3rd ed. (New York: Free Press, 1999), 291–311.
- 2 This, for example, is the explanation promulgated by the best-selling but widely discredited biography *Mao: The Unknown Story*, by Jung Chang and Jon Holliday (New York: Random House, 2005).
- 3 For details on Mao's lack of control of the early stage of the Cultural Revolution, see Knight, *Rethinking Mao*, 249–50; Meisner, *Mao's China and After*, 315–33; and Yiching Wu, *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins: Chinese Socialism in Crisis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), 1–189.
- 4 Knight, *Rethinking Mao*, 249–65.
- 5 Zhang Chunqiao 张春桥, Yao Wenyuan 姚文元, and Wang Hongwen 王洪文.
- 6 In what is widely considered the founding work of “scar” fiction, the short story “Class Counsellor” (“Ban zhuren” 班主任 by Liu Xinwu 刘心武, 1977), for example, a conscientious educator tries to “save the children who suffered at the hands of the Gang of Four” (167). The story refers to Jiang Qing as the “white-boned demon” (157), a villain from the Ming dynasty classic novel *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji* 西游记). The story appears in the English anthology *The Wounded: New Stories of the Cultural Revolution*, 77–78, trans. Geremie Barmé and Bennett Lee, 147–78 (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 1979).
- 7 As chapter 4 details, the *socialist realist gaze* was coined by Donald in her book *Public Secrets, Public Spaces*.
- 8 See the introduction for discussions of these categories of cinematic realism.
- 9 Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 2.
- 10 Landsberg.
- 11 Landsberg.
- 12 Landsberg, 17.

- 13 Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 172.
- 14 Rosen, 19.
- 15 Rosen, 172.
- 16 Rosen, 170.
- 17 Rosen, 182.
- 18 Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 151, 154, 263.
- 19 Rosen, *Change Mummified*, 183.
- 20 Gunning, “Moving Away from the Index,” 33.
- 21 For an account of this practice in early Chinese newspapers, see Rudolf G. Wagner, “Joining the Global Imaginaire: The Shanghai Illustrated Newspaper *Dianshizhai Huabao*,” in *Joining the Global Public: Word, Image, and City in Early Chinese Newspapers, 1870–1910*, ed. Rudolf G. Wagner (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 106.
- 22 The former of these is discussed in David Bordwell, “Ninotchka’s Mistake: Inside Stalin’s Film Industry,” *Observations on Film Art: David Bordwell’s Website on Cinema* (blog), January 22, 2018, <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2018/01/22/ninotchkas-mistake-inside-stalins-film-industry>; the latter appears in Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 271.
- 23 Schweinitz, *Film and Stereotype*, 40.
- 24 Schweinitz, 51.
- 25 Krista Van Fleet Hang, *Literature the People Love: Reading Chinese Texts from the Early Maoist Period (1949–1966)* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 47–48.
- 26 Xiaoning Lu, “Villain Stardom in Socialist China: Chen Qiang and the Cultural Politics of Affect,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 9, no. 3 (2015): 223–38.
- 27 Rosemary A. Roberts, *Maoist Model Theatre: The Semiotics of Gender and Sexuality in the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976)* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 238, 240–41.
- 28 Zou Rong, who published a call to arms titled *The Revolutionary Army* (*Geming jun* 革命军) in 1903, died in prison at age twenty in 1905. Two years later, pioneering feminist and revolutionary Qiu Jin was arrested and beheaded in her hometown for her writings and for helping to plot an uprising. Accounts of those cultural icons as well as Perovskaya’s influence in China can be found in Jonathan Spence, *The Gate of Heavenly Peace: The Chinese and Their Revolution, 1895–1980* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 77–93.

- 29 The *Daybreak* scene was in part a remake of Greta Garbo's execution scene in *Dishonoured* (Josef von Sternberg, 1931), as is detailed in Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Film as Vernacular Modernism," *Film Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (2000): 19.
- 30 The previous chapter provided a list of examples in its "Sublimation: Genre, Sex, and Death" section. Yizhong Gu counts no fewer than seventy "films representing onscreen martyrdom in a direct and orthodox way" among a sample of more than three hundred Mao-era films. Gu, "The Myth of Voluntary Death: The Representation of Sacrifice and Martyrdom in the Maoist Films (1949–1976)," PhD diss., University of Washington, 2017, 43.
- 31 Plantinga, *Moving Viewers*, 69.
- 32 Mikhail Iampolski, *The Memory of Tiresias: Intertextuality and Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 30.
- 33 Rosen, *Change Mummified*, 185.
- 34 The 1974 color remake is available on DVD with English subtitles under the alternative title *Guerrillas Sweep the Plain*.
- 35 The term *suppositional* (*jiading* 假定) tends to be used to describe the mise-en-scène of the play as a whole, whereas *subjunctive* (*xuni* 虚拟) tends to refer to the type of gestural pantomime used by the performers. For a fuller discussion of suppositionality, see Jason McGrath, "Suppositionality, Virtuality, and Chinese Cinema," *Boundary 2* 49, no. 1 (2022): 263–92.
- 36 Such an aesthetic of suppositionality and standardized poses rather than realism was precisely what early Chinese film theorist Gu Kenfu condemned as inferior in Chinese drama compared to the new, more intrinsically realist medium of film, as discussed in chapter 1.
- 37 Pang Laikwan documents that in 1970, the same year that the first film spinoffs of *yangbanxi* were released, a stunning 245, or 62 percent, of the 393 book titles in arts and literature published in China were connected to *yangbanxi*, including scripts, music scores, and photo collections. Pang, *The Art of Cloning: Creative Production during China's Cultural Revolution* (London: Verso, 2017), 91.
- 38 Tom Gunning distinguishes a "cinema of attractions" that focuses on presenting spectacles to an audience from the classical "cinema of narrative integration," in which the telling of a story takes priority, in his "Cinema of Attractions." Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar argue that Chinese opera films and martial arts films, including those of the *yangbanxi*, constitute a cinema of attractions that extends throughout

- Chinese film history. Berry and Farquhar, *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 49–54.
- 39 Berry and Farquhar, *China on Screen*, 47–74.
- 40 In the film as a whole, 57 percent of the shots have mobile framing.
- 41 My analysis of this scene supports Chris Berry’s argument that while there is “a consistent cinematic poetics for the film versions of the models,” nonetheless, in comparison to the initial ones, the later model opera films showed a “more evolved” and “more dynamic” style, including an ability to “use the camerawork to move the audience more directly into the mise-en-scène, creating a more 3D and less flat experience.” Chris Berry, “Red Poetics: The Films of the Chinese Cultural Revolution Revolutionary Model Operas,” in *The Poetics of Chinese Cinema*, ed. Gary Bettinson and James Udden (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 44, 45.
- 42 Jiang Qing, “On the Revolution in Peking Opera,” trans. Jessica Ka Yee Chan, *Opera Quarterly* 16, no. 2–3 (2010): 456, originally a speech from the Plenary Discussion with Performers after the Modern Peking Opera Trial Performance Convention in Beijing, July 1964; published in 1967 simultaneously in *Red Flag (Hongqi)*, *People’s Daily (Renmin ribao)*, and *People’s Liberation Army Daily (Jiefangjun bao)*.
- 43 The rejected modes included alternative socialist ideas like the “truthful writing” (*xie zhenshi* 写真实) advocated by censured writer and literary theorist Hu Feng 胡风; the antidogmatic idea of a “broad path of realism” (*xianshizhuyi—guangkuo de dao lu* 现实主义—广阔的道路) suggested by Qin Zhaoyang 秦兆阳; the “deepening of realism” (*xianshizhuyi shenhua* 现实主义深化) and use of believable “middle characters” (*zhongjian renwu* 中间人物) promoted by the author, critic, and cultural official Shao Quanlin 邵荃麟; and the criticism of the emphasis on narratives of war (“the smell of gunpowder”) by playwright, screenwriter, and former deputy minister of culture Xia Yan 夏衍—all of which Jiang Qing and her allies grouped together and dubbed as a “black anti-Party and anti-socialist line.” All this is laid out in “Summary of the Forum on the Work in Literature and Art of the Armed Forces with Which Comrade Lin Biao Entrusted Comrade Chiang Ching,” *Peking Review*, no. 23 (June 1967): 11. While the “Summary,” widely believed to have been authored by Jiang Qing herself, was published in June 1967, the forum itself had taken place in February 1966. An excellent discussion of it can be found in Richard King, “Great Changes in Critical Reception: ‘Red Classic’ Authenticity and the ‘Eight Black Theories,’” in *The Making and Remaking of China’s “Red Classics”: Politics, Aesthetics,*

- and Mass Culture*, ed. Rosemary Roberts and Li Li, 22–41 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2017).
- 44 For an early study of these Cultural Revolution critical denunciations of other modes of realism, see Mowry, *Yang-pan hsi*, 42–59.
- 45 Qing, “Summary,” 457, 456.
- 46 Pang, *Art of Cloning*, 92.
- 47 Pearson, *Eloquent Gestures*.
- 48 Pearson, 25.
- 49 Xing Ye, “*Pingyuan youji dui xiugai ji*” [Account of revision of *Guerrillas on the Plain*], *Bai nian chao* [Hundred year tide], no. 5 (1999): 74–77.
- 50 Xing, 76.
- 51 Xing, 75.
- 52 Pang, *Art of Cloning*, 92.
- 53 Xing, “*Pingyuan youji dui xiugai ji*,” 76.
- 54 André Bazin, “The Myth of Stalin in the Soviet Cinema,” in *Bazin at Work: Major Essays and Reviews from the Forties and Fifties*, ed. Bert Cardullo (London: Routledge, 1997), 26.
- 55 Bazin, 33–34.
- 56 Xing, “*Pingyuan youji dui xiugai ji*,” 76.
- 57 In the opera version, the Japanese commander’s name has been changed to Kameta, and of course he is played not by Fang Hua but by an opera performer.
- 58 Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China*, 65–66.
- 59 Pang, *Art of Cloning*, 102.
- 60 Pang, 103. On the temporality of the Cultural Revolution, see also Barbara Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2016), 380–84. Mittler complicates the view of the later years of the Cultural Revolution as only monotonous repetition by pointing out that many artists felt there was a significant artistic opening up beginning in the early 1970s, when, for example, more artistic exchanges with other nations resumed.
- 61 The “three prominences” is the Cultural Revolution artistic formula requiring that, in a fictional drama, the positive characters stand out from among all the characters, a group of heroic characters stand out from among the positive characters, and a single great hero stands out from among the heroic characters. For an analysis of how this played out in the poetics of the *yangbanxi* films, see Berry, “Red Poetics,” 36–39.
- 62 Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 257–58.
- 63 Clark, 57.

- 64 Barbara Mittler shows that although it was coined in November 1966, before the number of model works expanded, the label “eight model works” was not commonly used until after the fall of the Gang of Four, in a way that falsely compressed the number of works that were consumed to reinforce the new official narrative of artistic constriction and stagnation during the Cultural Revolution. Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution*, 47.
- 65 Clark, *Chinese Cultural Revolution*, 56. The next chapter discusses a 1983 film set in the Cultural Revolution, *River without Buoys* (*Meiyou hangbiao de heliu* 没有航标的河流; Wu Tianming 吴天明), which has a scene in which the protagonists plead to be excused from a required public viewing of a *yangbanxi* film on the grounds that they have already seen it so many times.
- 66 Clark, “Model Theatrical Works,” 185.
- 67 Clark, *Chinese Cultural Revolution*, 259.
- 68 Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), 26.
- 69 Yurchak, 25.
- 70 Yurchak, 10.
- 71 Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarinism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986), 205.
- 72 Lefort, 211.
- 73 Wang Hui, *China’s Twentieth Century: Revolution, Retreat and the Road to Equality* (London: Verso, 2016), 155.
- 74 Claude Lefort, *Complications: Communism and the Dilemmas of Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 116.
- 75 Lefort, 137.
- 76 Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, 10.
- 77 Bazin, “Myth of Stalin in the Soviet Cinema,” 34.
- 78 Maurice Meisner, *Marxism, Maoism, and Utopianism: Eight Essays* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 156, 163, 164.
- 79 Meisner, 156, 168–69.
- 80 Meisner, 170.
- 81 Meisner, 183.
- 82 The term used during the Cultural Revolution was *jixu geming* 继续革命, though it obviously relates to the earlier Trotskyist concept of “permanent revolution,” which had been translated as *buduan geming* 不断革命.
- 83 John Bryan Starr, “Conceptual Foundations of Mao Tse-Tung’s Theory of Continuous Revolution,” *Asian Survey* 11, no. 6 (1971): 610–28. These themes are summarized on p. 611.

- 84 Pickowicz, *China on Film*, 86–87.
- 85 Wylie Sypher, “The Aesthetic of Revolution: The Marxist Melodrama,” *Kenyon Review* 10, no. 3 (1948); reprinted in *Tragedy: Vision and Form*, ed. Robert Corrigan (San Francisco: Chandler, 1965), 258–67.
- 86 Elisabeth R. Anker, *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014), 211–15.
- 87 Jane Gaines, “The Melos in Marxist Theory,” in *The Hidden Foundation: Cinema and the Question of Class*, ed. David E. James and Rick Berg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 58–59.
- 88 Gaines, 59–60.
- 89 The only model opera film that does *not* end with a *tableau vivant* is *Raid on the White Tiger Regiment* (*Qixi baihu tuan* 奇袭白虎团; Su Li 苏里, 1972). Of the other nine model opera films, five use a track-in during the shot, one has a track-out, two have no mobile framing, and one (*Fighting on the Plain*) uses a zoom-in. Note that the model *ballet* films are not included here, because they do not tend to end in *tableaux vivants*. Note also that one video version of *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* that is now available substitutes freeze-frames edited together with what feel like jump cuts for the *tableau vivant* plus track-in of the original film. These freeze-frames are made from the original shot, and I have not been able to determine when this version was created and circulated.
- 90 For a history of this practice, see Kirsten Gram Holmström, *Monodrama, Attitudes, Tableaux Vivants: Studies on Some Trends of Theatrical Fashion, 1770–1815* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1967), 209–33.
- 91 The entire script of the *Fighting on the Plains yangbanxi* is available at <http://www.360doc.com/>.
- 92 Sypher, “Aesthetic of Revolution,” 261.
- 93 Sypher, 262.
- 94 Sypher, 266.
- 95 Sypher, 267.
- 96 Ellen R. Judd, “Prescriptive Dramatic Theory of the Cultural Revolution,” in *Drama in the People’s Republic of China*, ed. Constantine Tung and Colin MacKerras (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 110.
- 97 Clark, “Model Theatrical Works,” 184.
- 98 Pang, *Art of Cloning*, 180; Jerome Silbergeld, *Body in Question: Image and Illusion in Two Chinese Films by Director Jiang Wen* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press/Kinmay W. Tang Center for East Asian Art, 2008), 32–33.
- 99 Ban Wang, *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in*

- Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), 134.
- 100 Roberts, *Maoist Model Theatre*, 72.
- 101 Berry, “Red Poetics,” 36.
- 102 Kristin Thompson, “The Concept of Cinematic Excess,” collected in Philip Rosen, ed., *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 135.
- 103 Thompson, 135.
- 104 Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution*, 30.
- 105 Clark, *Chinese Cultural Revolution*, 127–28.
- 106 Keathley defines the “cinephiliac moment” as “the fetishizing of fragments of a film, either individual shots or marginal (often unintentional) details in the image, especially those that appear only for a moment.” Keathley, *Cinephilia and History; or, The Wind in the Trees* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 7.
- 107 Mullarkey, *Philosophy and the Moving Image*, 158.
- 108 Jason McGrath, “Cultural Revolution Model Opera Films and the Realist Tradition in Chinese Cinema,” *Opera Quarterly: Performance + Theory + History* 26, no. 2–3 (2010): 374.
- 109 See, e.g., a musician’s comments in Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution*, 22.
- 110 Berry, “Red Poetics,” 48–49.
- 111 Xing Fan, *Staging Revolution: Artistry and Aesthetics in Model Beijing Opera during the Cultural Revolution* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2018), esp. 239–58.

6. A LONG TAKE ON POST-SOCIALIST REALISM

- 1 “Scar literature” or “literature of the wounded” (*shanghen wenxue* 伤痕文学) was one of the first new movements in literature following the Cultural Revolution, appearing first in 1977 and continuing into the early 1980s in various forms, including in a number of “scar” films. It allowed for public expression of the traumas and dislocations of the Cultural Revolution and introduced elements of humanism and individualism that distanced it from the revolutionary cultural forms of the Mao era.
- 2 The Four Modernizations—of agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology—were advocated by Zhou Enlai as early as the 1960s but became undisputed national policy only after Deng Xiaoping came to power in 1978. The initial “scar” stories of 1977–78 would speak not of the Four Modernizations but of the better days to

- come under the tenure of Hua Guofeng 华国锋, who briefly led China immediately after the Cultural Revolution.
- 3 Roman Jakobson, “On Realism in Art,” in Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy, 19–27 (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 19–27.
 - 4 Schweinitz, *Film and Stereotype*, 22.
 - 5 Schweinitz, 110.
 - 6 Schweinitz, 115.
 - 7 Arif Dirlik, “Postsocialism? Reflections on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics,” in *Marxism and the Chinese Experience: Issues in Contemporary Chinese Socialism*, ed. Arif Dirlik and Maurice Meisner, 361–84 (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1989).
 - 8 Just a few examples in the China field include my own *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008); Xudong Zhang, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics: China in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008); Robin Visser, *Cities Surround the Countryside: Urban Aesthetics in Postsocialist China* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010); Deborah S. Davis and Wang Feng, eds., *Creating Wealth and Poverty in Postsocialist China* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008); Judith Farquhar, *Appetites: Food and Sex in Post-Socialist China* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002); and Haomin Gong, *Uneven Modernity: Literature, Film, and Intellectual Discourse in Postsocialist China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2012). Those covering Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union are too numerous to mention, but one notable work that covers those areas as well as China is Aleš Erjavec, ed., *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art under Late Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
 - 9 Paul Pickowicz, “Huang Jianxin and the Notion of Postsocialism,” in *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics*, ed. Nick Browne, Paul Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack, and Esther Yau, 57–87 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Chris Berry and Mary Ann Farquhar, “Post-Socialist Strategies: An Analysis of *Yellow Earth* and *Black Cannon Incident*,” in *Cinematic Landscapes: Observations on the Visual Arts and Cinema of China and Japan*, ed. Linda Erlich and David Desser, 81–116 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).
 - 10 Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China*.
 - 11 Yingjin Zhang, “Rebel without a Cause? China’s New Urban Generation and Postsocialist Filmmaking,” in *The Urban Generation: Chinese*

- Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Zhang Zhen, 49–80 (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007).
- 12 Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema*, 5.
 - 13 McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*.
 - 14 McGrath, 129–64. An earlier version of the same chapter appears in Zhang, *Urban Generation*, 81–114. I should acknowledge that Yaohua Shi used the closely related term *postsocialist hyperrealism* to describe the style of certain films of the second half of the 1990s, but my use of *post-socialist realism* asserts a much wider application. Shi, “Maintaining Law and Order in the City: New Tales of the People’s Police,” in Zhang, *Urban Generation*, 316–43.
 - 15 Zhang Nuanxin and Li Tuo, “Tan dianying yuyan de xiandaihua” [On the modernization of film language], *Dianying yishu*, no. 3 (1979): 40–52. Translations are my own, but an existing translation in English is Zhang Nuanxin and Li Tuo, “The Modernization of Film Language,” trans. Hou Jianping, in *Chinese Film Theory: A Guide to the New Era*, ed. George S. Semsel, Xia Hong, and Hou Jianping, 10–20 (New York: Praeger, 1990).
 - 16 Yingjin Zhang, “Directors, Aesthetics, Genres: Chinese Postsocialist Cinema, 1979–2010,” in *A Companion to Chinese Cinema*, ed. Yingjin Zhang (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 62–64.
 - 17 Saverio Giovacchini and Robert Sklar, *Global Neorealism: The Trans-national History of a Film Style* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012).
 - 18 Bai Jingsheng, “Diudiao xiju de guaizhang” [Throwing away the crutch of theater], *Dianying yishu cankao ziliao* [Film art reference materials], no. 1 (1979). English translation available as Bai Jingsheng, “Throwing Away the Walking Stick of Drama,” trans. Hou Jianping, in Semsel et al., *Chinese Film Theory*, 5–9.
 - 19 Zhang and Li, “Tan dianying yuyan de xiandaihua,” 40.
 - 20 Zhang and Li, 44.
 - 21 Zhang and Li, 44.
 - 22 Zhang and Li, 40–41.
 - 23 Zhang and Li, 45.
 - 24 Zhang and Li, 46.
 - 25 Cecile Lagesse, “Bazin and the Politics of Realism in Mainland China,” in *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and Its Afterlife*, ed. Dudley Andrew (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 316.
 - 26 Zhou Chuanji and Li Tuo, “Yi ge zhide zhongshi de dianying meixue xuepai: Guanyu chang jingtou lilun” [An attention-worthy school of

- cinematic aesthetics: On the long-take theory], in *Dianying wenhua congkan* [Film culture anthology] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1980), 1:148–60.
- 27 A graduate of the Beijing Film Academy who attended in the early 1990s once told me that Bazin was more foundational in the curriculum than any other single film theorist.
- 28 These figures do not take into account the variable coverage of certain journals in the database over the decades, but the point remains that interest in Bazin certainly appears not to have diminished in the twenty-first century compared with earlier years.
- 29 Schweinitz, *Film and Stereotype*, 238.
- 30 Schweinitz, 247.
- 31 Jason McGrath, “*Black Cannon Incident*: Countering the Counter-espionage Fantasy,” in Berry, *Chinese Films in Focus II*, 25–31.
- 32 My aversion to using “generation” as the primary way to categorize Post-Mao Chinese films comes partly from the immense variability of the Fifth Generation’s films over time. Taking as examples its three most prominent directors—Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, and Tian Zhuangzhuang—their early films had much more in common with contemporaneous films of the Fourth Generation than with the melodramas of the Cultural Revolution aimed at Western festival audiences that the same directors would make in the 1990s—*Farewell My Concubine*, *To Live*, and *The Blue Kite*, respectively—or the martial arts epics they would make another decade or so later, that is, *The Promise* (*Wuji* 无极; 2005), *Hero* (*Yingxiong* 英雄; 2002), and *The Warrior and the Wolf* (*Lang zai ji* 狼灾记; 2009), respectively.
- 33 Ni Zhen, *Memoirs from the Beijing Film Academy: The Genesis of China’s Fifth Generation*, trans. Chris Berry (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), 164.
- 34 Ni, 166.
- 35 See, e.g., Zhang Jia-Xuan, “The Big Parade” (review), *Film Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (1989): 57–59.
- 36 Jerome Silbergeld, *China into Film: Frames of Reference in Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 259.
- 37 Paul Clark, *Reinventing China: A Generation and Its Films* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2005), 150.
- 38 These included *Dong Cunrui* 董存瑞 (Guo Wei 郭维, 1955), *Railway Guerrillas* (*Tiedao youjidui* 铁道游击队; Zhao Ming 赵明, 1956), and *Land Mine Warfare* (*Dilei zhan* 地雷战; Tang Yingqi 唐英奇, Xu Da 徐达, and Wu Jianhai 吴健海, 1962). I have written more about the link to *Dong Cunrui* in Jason McGrath, “Post-socialist Realism in Chinese

- Cinema,” in *Red Legacies in China: The Afterlives of the Communist Revolution*, ed. Enhua Zhang and Jie Li, 214–41 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016), while Julian Ward cites the latter two films as sources of the phrase in Ward, “Filming the Anti-Japanese War: The Devils and Buffoons of Jiang Wen’s *Guizi laile*,” *New Cinemas* 2, no. 2 (2004): 108.
- 39 Gary G. Xu, *Sinascape: Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 56. Jie Li argues that Jiang Wen’s black-and-white cinematography is not intended to achieve an unmediated *realist* effect but rather that he “is far more interested in reproducing and subverting the *mediated* collective memories of the period,” particularly through “the cinema of the Cold War.” Li, “Discoloured Vestiges of History: Black and White in the Age of Colour Cinema,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 6, no. 3 (2012): 250, 252.
- 40 Berry, *Speaking in Images*, 87.
- 41 Mullarkey, *Philosophy and the Moving Image*, 157.
- 42 Walter Goodman, “China’s ‘Yellow Earth,’” *New York Times*, April 11, 1986; Goodman, “‘Big Parade,’ Celebration by the Chinese Military,” *New York Times*, March 15, 1988. Goodman, for example, does not even grasp *Yellow Earth*’s basic message about Cuiqiao’s fate and the irony of the line “It’s the Communists who save the people” in the song she sings.
- 43 Evgeny Dobrenko, *Stalinist Cinema and the Production of History: Museum of the Revolution* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008), 5.
- 44 Donald, *Public Secrets, Public Spaces*, 59–62.
- 45 Silbergeld, *China into Film*, 20.
- 46 Jason McGrath, “Communists Have More Fun! The Dialectics of Fulfillment in Cinema of the People’s Republic of China,” *World Picture* 3 (Summer 2009), http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP_3/McGrath.html.
- 47 Geremie Barmé and John Minford, eds., *Seeds of Fire: Chinese Voices of Conscience* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1988), 253.
- 48 Bonnie McDougall, *The Yellow Earth* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1991), 6.
- 49 Michael Berry, *Jia Zhangke on Jia Zhangke* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2022), 178.
- 50 André Bazin, “*Cabiria*: The Voyage to the End of Neorealism,” in Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Gray, 87.
- 51 “White telephone” is a metonym deriving from the lavish interiors that were the frequent settings for these films.
- 52 Ni, *Memoirs from the Beijing Film Academy*, 134–35, 159–62, 176–80.

- 53 Ni, 168.
- 54 For more discussion of this, see McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, 136–47.
- 55 Chris Berry has elaborated on the concept of “on-the-spot realism” (*jishizhuyi* 纪实主义) in “Facing Reality: Chinese Documentary, Chinese Postsocialism,” in *The First Guangzhou Triennial: Reinterpretation—a Decade of Experimental Chinese Art (1990–2000)*, ed. Wu Hung et al. (Guangzhou: Guangzhou Museum of Art, 2002), 121–31, and “Getting Real: Chinese Documentary, Chinese Postsocialism,” in Zhang, *Urban Generation*, 115–34. On the importance of *xianchang* to China’s vibrant postsocialist independent documentary scene, see J. P. Sniadecki, “The Cruelty of the Social: *Xianchang*, Intersubjectivity, and Interobjectivity,” in *DV-Made China: Digital Subjects and Social Transformations after Independent Film*, ed. Zhang Zhen and Angela Zito, 57–75 (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2015), and Luke Robinson, “From ‘Public’ to ‘Private’: Chinese Documentary and the Logic of *Xianchang*,” in *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record*, ed. Chris Berry, Lu Xinyu, and Lisa Rofel, 177–94 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010).
- 56 Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 60.
- 57 Keathley, *Cinephilia and History*.
- 58 Mullarkey, *Philosophy and the Moving Image*, 202.
- 59 André Bazin, “The Evolution of Film Language,” in Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, 102–3. Emphasis mine. (Gray, 37.) As in earlier chapters, where available, I use Barnard’s translations of Bazin rather than the looser ones by Hugh Gray that are more readily available in the United States, but I cite Gray’s translations of the same passages in parentheses in the notes.
- 60 This comparison is pursued through close readings of films from the two eras in Augusta Palmer, “Scaling the Skyscraper: Images of Cosmopolitan Consumption in *Street Angel* (1937) and *Beautiful New World* (1998),” in Zhang, *Urban Generation*, 181–204.
- 61 Chris Berry, “Seeking Truth from Fiction: Feature Films as Historiography in Deng’s China,” *Film History* 7, no. 1 (1995): 94.
- 62 Zhang and Li, “Tan dianying yuyan de xiandaihua,” 45, 15.
- 63 Yang Ni, “Lun jishixing gushi yingpian de xushi jiegou: Jian yu Tan Peisheng tongzhi shangque” [On the narrative structure of documentary-style fiction films: A response to Comrade Tan Peisheng], *Dianying yishu* [Film art], no. 7 (1984): 17–30. Published in English as Yang Ni, “Film Is Film: A Response to Tan Peisheng,” trans. Hou Jianping, in

- Semsel et al., *Chinese Film Theory*, 59–75. Following notes provide page numbers for the original and the translation, in that order.
- 64 Yang, 19–20; 63.
- 65 Yang, 26; 69.
- 66 Yang, 26; 72; Kracauer, *Theory of Film*.
- 67 Hang, *Literature the People Love*, 75.
- 68 Lukács, *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, 43.
- 69 Lukács.
- 70 Lukács, 132.
- 71 André Bazin, “Umberto D: A Great Work,” in Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, 2:81.
- 72 Michael Berry, *Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown Pleasures: Jia Zhangke’s “Hometown Trilogy”* (London: British Film Institute, 2009), 30–31.
- 73 Wikipedia defines *mumblecore* as “a subgenre of independent film characterized by naturalistic acting and dialogue (sometimes improvised), low-budget film production, an emphasis on dialogue over plot, and a focus on the personal relationships of people in their 20s and 30s.” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mumblecore>.
- 74 I take the term “minor” ellipses—in which relatively unimportant plot points are skipped over and left for the audience to deduce as they follow the larger story—from David Desser’s analysis of ellipses in the films of Yasujiro Ozu. Desser, “A Filmmaker for All Seasons,” in *Asian Cinemas: A Reader and Guide*, ed. Dimitris Eleftheriotis and Gary Needham (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2006), 20–21.
- 75 Gilberto Perez, *The Eloquent Screen: A Rhetoric of Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 194.
- 76 André Bazin, “De Sica: Metteur en Scène,” in Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, 2:66.
- 77 Barmé and Minford, *Seeds of Fire*, 259.
- 78 Berry, *Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown Pleasures*, 55–56.
- 79 Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), 201.
- 80 Zhang and Li, “Tan dianying yuyan de xiandaihua,” 46.
- 81 See esp. Bazin’s essays “Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of the Liberation” and “The Evolution of Film Language” in Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, 87–106, 215–49. (Gray, 1:23–40, 2:16–40.)
- 82 Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor*, 202.
- 83 David Bordwell, “Intensified Continuity: Visual Style in Contemporary American Film,” *Film Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (2002): 16, and Bordwell,

- The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 122.
- 84 For example, two of Zhang Yimou's most well-known earlier films—*Red Sorghum* (*Hong gaoliang* 红高粱; 1987) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (*Da hong denglong gaogao gua* 大红灯笼高高挂; 1991)—both had ASLs of around ten seconds, while two of his most famous later films—*Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers* (*Shimian maifu* 十面埋伏; 2004)—had much lower ASLs of around four seconds. (Statistics taken from the Cinemetrics Database, <https://cinemetrics.uchicago.edu/database.php>.)
- 85 André Bazin, “The Evolution of Film Language,” 101. (Gray, 36.)
- 86 André Bazin, “De Sica: Metteur en Scène,” 76.
- 87 Andrew Chan, “Interview: Jia Zhangke,” *Film Comment* (March–April 2009), <https://www.filmcomment.com/article/jia-zhangke-interview>.
- 88 Chris Berry, “Xiao Wu: Watching Time Go By,” in *Chinese Films in Focus II*, 250–57.
- 89 Moira Weigel, “Slow Wars: Is This How Cinema Transcends Itself?,” *n+1*, no. 25 (Spring 2016), <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-25/essays/slow-wars>.
- 90 See David Bordwell’s definitive chapter on “parametric narration” in Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 274–310.
- 91 Notable examples include *The Opium War* (*Yapian zhazheng* 鸦片战争; Xie Jin 谢晋, 1997), *The Founding of a Republic* (*Jianguo daye* 建国大业; Huang Jianxin 黄建新 and Han Sanping 韩三平, 2009), *The Founding of an Army* (*Jianjun daye* 建军大业; Andrew Lau 刘伟强, 2017), and *Operation Red Sea* (*Hong Hai xingdong* 红海行动; Dante Lam 林超贤, 2018).
- 92 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, U.K.: Zero Books, 2009).
- 93 Michael Schudson, *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 214.
- 94 Schudson, 215.
- 95 Xiaobing Tang, *Chinese Modern: The Heroic and the Quotidian* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000), 292. For a more recent study of these kinds of advertising images and their dubious utopianism (although it does not use the term “capitalist realism”), see Meiqin Wang, “Advertising the Chinese Dream: Urban Billboards and Ni Wei-hua’s Documentary Photography,” *China Information* 29, no. 2 (2015): 176–201.
- 96 For an extensive reading of the character of Du Lala as an “exemplary model” for the market age, reminiscent of those of the Mao era, see Marco Fumian, “Chronicle of Du Lala’s Promotion: Exemplary Literature,

the Middle Class, and the Socialist Market,” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 28, no. 1 (2016): 78–128. For a critique of the film’s “neoliberal feminist ideology,” see Su-lin Yu, “The Rise of the Neoliberal Chinese Female Subject in Go Lala Go,” *Comparative Literature and Culture* 20, no. 6 (2018), <https://docs.lib.psu.edu/clcweb/vol20/iss6/3/>.

97 Mullarkey, *Philosophy and the Moving Image*, 201.

98 Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, 22.

99 Shelley Kraicer, “Finding Ways to Fit: Mainland Chinese Films at Toronto and Vancouver,” dGenerate Films, November 18, 2009, <http://dgeneratefilms.com/tag/shelly-kraicer/>.

100 Giovacchini and Sklar, *Global Neorealism*, 11.

7. CHINESE CINEMATIC REALISM(S) IN THE DIGITAL AGE

- 1 The earliest known film produced in China was the silent opera film *Dingjun Mountain* (*Dingjun Shan* 定军山; Ren Qingtai 任慶泰, 1905), no copies of which remain today.
- 2 For extensive discussion of *Hero*, see Gary D. Rawnsley and Ming-Yeh T. Rawnsley, eds., *Global Chinese Cinema: The Culture and Politics of “Hero”* (London: Routledge, 2010).
- 3 Doane, *Emergence of Cinematic Time*; Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*; Rodowick, *Virtual Life of Film*.
- 4 For detailed studies of this parody video, see Xiao Liu, “Small Videos, Hu Ge Impact: Parody Videos in Post-Socialist China,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 4, no. 3 (2010): 229–44, and Haomin Gong and Xin Yang, “Digitized Parody: The Politics of Egao in Contemporary China,” *China Information* 24, no. 1 (2010): 3–26.
- 5 Chen Xihe, “Xuni xianshizhui he houdianying lilun” [Virtual realism and post-filmic theory], originally published in *Dangdai dianying* [Contemporary cinema], no. 2 (2001): 84–88. The essay is collected as the final entry in the authoritative *Bainian Zhongguo dianying lilun wenxuan* [Selected works of one hundred years of Chinese film theory], ed. Ding Yaping (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 2002), 2:720–36. Here I will cite the original article. Translations are my own.
- 6 Chen, 86.
- 7 Chen, 87.
- 8 Rosen, *Change Mummified*, 303.
- 9 Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), 300.
- 10 Manovich, 295.

- ¹¹ In an interview included as a special feature on the film's international DVD release (Magnolia Home Entertainment, 2010), director John Woo confirms that for most of the shot, the bird, the ships, and the river are all "CG'd." According to Wu, his producer warned him that it may be the most expensive shot in film history, helping to make *Red Cliff* the highest-budget film ever produced in Asia up to that time.
- ¹² See Tobey Crockett, "The 'Camera as Camera': How CGI Changes the World as We Know It," in *Cinephilia in the Age of Digital Reproduction: Film, Pleasure and Digital Culture*, ed. Scott Balcerzak and Jason Sperb, 1:117–39 (London: Wallflower Press, 2009).
- ¹³ For an enlightening contribution to this debate, see Lisa Purse, "Working Space: *Gravity* (Alfonso Cuarón 2013) and the Digital Long Take," in *The Long Take: Critical Approaches*, ed. John Gibbs and Douglas Pye, 221–37 (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).
- ¹⁴ Stephen Prince, "True Lies: Perceptual Realism, Digital Images, and Film Theory," *Film Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (1996): 28. See also Prince, *Digital Visual Effects in Cinema: The Seduction of Reality* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2012).
- ¹⁵ Prince, "True Lies," 28.
- ¹⁶ Prince, 34.
- ¹⁷ Terry Gross, "Filmmakers Joel and Ethan Coen on Singing Cowboys and Working with Oxen," *Fresh Air* (podcast), November 19, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/programs/fresh-air/2018/11/19/669152874>.
- ¹⁸ It should be noted that Gu Kenfu's claim is questionable in the first place, because even in classical cinema, it was always possible to use stunt doubles, editing, or compositing techniques like rear projection to depict characters doing things that the actors playing them were not actually doing themselves.
- ¹⁹ Zhang Nuanxin and Li Tuo, "Tan dianying yuyan de xiandaihua" [On the modernization of film language], *Dianying yishu* [Film art], no. 3 (1979): 40.
- ²⁰ Yomi Braester, "The Spectral Return of Cinema: Globalization and Cinephilia in Contemporary Chinese Film," *Cinema Journal* 55, no. 1 (2015): 31.
- ²¹ Paola Voci, *China on Video: Smaller-Screen Realities* (London: Routledge, 2010), 39; <http://animation.bfa.edu.cn/>.
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CONCLUSION

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