9. IF THESE WALLS COULD SPEAK: FROM SLOWNESS TO STILLNESS IN THE CINEMA OF JIA ZHANGKE

Cecília Mello

China today exports in six hours as much as it did in the whole of 1978. During the first half of the 2000s, it climbed from the seventh to the third place on the list of the world's largest economies, and by the end of the decade it had surpassed Japan to become the world's second largest. Since the late 1970s, the country went from 20 per cent urbanisation to today's 54 per cent, with urban population growing by more than 500 million. Six thousand miles of track were built only in the past eight years, and the country has already invested in over one thousand high-speed trains. The expressway network of China is the longest in the world, and the biggest hydroelectric power plant is also Chinese. And, as it is worth mentioning, all this and a lot more happened in just over three decades.[1]

It might seem incongruent to open a chapter on *slow cinema* with a list of the fastest economic and social changes ever observed in history. Yet any discussion of Jia Zhangke's cinema and its relationship with time, be it fast or slow, cannot but start with the reality of contemporary China, a country that has been on the fast track since the transition from a planned economy to a socialist market economy, starting from Deng Xiaoping's Era of Reforms (*Gaige Kaifang*, 1978–92). And this is because his films have, since the mid 1990s, been both reflecting and reflecting *on* the new Chinese historical and social conjuncture of intense transformation. In fact, one could argue that the originality of his aesthetic contribution seems to corroborate the idea that cinema's greatest innovators tend to thrive in periods of cultural and historical transition when a new conjuncture calls for the articulation of a new

language – or new languages – better suited to address and respond to a new reality (Mello, 2006).

The articulation of an original aesthetics in Jia Zhangke's *oeuvre* springs first and foremost from a desire to film disappearance, to register and to preserve – through cinema's unique recording ability – an ephemeral cityscape. As the director has acknowledged in several interviews in the past decade (see, for instance, Berry, 2009; Fiant, 2009; Jia, 2009; Mello, 2014c), he is conscious of how memory is a spatial as much as a temporal phenomenon, and of how a disappearing space brings with it the loss of memory. From this Jia derives an urgency to film these spaces and these memories, as well as a seemingly contradictory slowness in observation that is one of the marks of his style. To begin with, this slowness has to be understood as an act of resistance in the face of the speed of transformations which the director regards as a 'form of violence' imbued with a 'destructive nature' (Mello, 2014c). In this sense, it might seem coherent to place it within the current trend of cultural movements in favour of slowness which appear as a form of reaction or resistance to capitalism and its obsession with productive time (and the lack of it). China's embracing of a socialist market economy, or state capitalism as opposed to market capitalism, has brought with it an accelerated form of economic expansion that also translates into an accelerated politics of time. Slowing down cinema through greater shot lengths, the use of the long take and by embracing a delayed narrative style (Mulvey, 2006), one that would disrupt Communism's grand narrative of progress of social realist Chinese films, would function, on one level, as an aesthetic response to the violence of speediness.

This dialectics of fastness and slowness which lies at the core of Jia's cinema, however, should not be understood as a contradiction. Quite the opposite, it derives precisely from the intimate relationship that it nurtures with the real, for the experience of being in China today means to be confronted with the everyday coexistence of contraries. Its urban spaces, for instance, are an exaggeration of a dynamic definition of space as proposed by contemporary geography (Massey, 2005), founded on the notion of an 'unequal accumulation of times', in the words of Milton Santos (2004: 9). In cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, old and/or historical buildings still persist next to the immense skyscrapers that erupted in the past decade or so, and, with them, a way of life that seems to exist out of step with the twenty-first century. This superimposition of temporalities which defines contemporary China can also be understood as a cultural trace, related to both its written and its spoken language, in which the frequent use of popular sayings, literary references and stereotypes suggests a lingering past, one that is made present through speech. This also confers a collective weight to a discourse in the first person singular (Portugal and Xiao, 2013). This coexistence of past and present, slowness and fastness, subsists despite the radical ruptures seen in China in the twentieth

century, a country that, from the Proclamation of the Republic in 1911 to the Communist Revolution of 1949 and from the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) to the Era of Reforms (1978–92), has repeatedly tried to wipe away the past and reset the counter of history.

As well as relating to China's reality of fast transformations as a form of resistance, Jia's slow cinematic style is equally achieved through his use of aesthetic resources related to cinematic realism, typically employed in post-war European cinema (especially Italian neorealism), as well as in more recent trends that both recuperate and update a preoccupation with duration and an extended notion of time. As Giuliana Bruno explains,

> Unlike early modernism, which was more interested in speed, velocity, and acceleration, the late modernism that emerged in the postwar period conceived of modernity as inhabiting different, extended temporal zones, and it set out to explore this new shape of modern times. Broadening, expanding, fragmenting, layering, exploring, rethinking time marked a new international filmic movement. (Bruno, 2007: 199)

During the post-war period, the transition from the 'movement–image' to the 'time–image' as identified by Gilles Deleuze, following André Bazin's conception of modern cinema, gained shape through the use of long takes, a slow acting style[2] and a focus on the time of non-action, which delayed the efficient narrative of cause and effect crafted and perfected by more commercial cinematic practices. In this sense, Jia Zhangke's cinema is part of a lineage of realist cinema starting from neorealist directors, such as De Sica and Rossellini, continuing through to Antonioni, Bresson, Hou Hsiao-hsien, all of whom are frequently cited by Jia as great influences on his work. More recently, it also engages with the idea of a 'return of the real' in contemporary world cinema, in tandem with a renewed interest in the notion of realism in academic studies of film and audiovisual theory (Nagib and Mello, 2009). Jia's use of the long take and the slowing down of narrative observed, albeit in different degrees, in all of his films to date, from his short *Xiao Shan Going Home* (小山回家 *Xiao Shan Hui Jia*, 1995) to his most recent *A Touch of Sin* (天注定 *Tian Zhu Ding*, 2013), can thus be regarded as part of an international trend of cinematic realism, alongside the work of Tsai Ming-liang, Carlos Reygadas, Gus Van Sant, Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Béla Tarr, all champions of the long take so cherished by Bazin (de Luca, 2014).[3]

While taking these aspects of his *oeuvre* into account, I propose to consider slowness not as the 'other' of a more efficient narrative of cause and effect that characterises American Hollywood cinema but in connection with the interbreeding of cinema and architecture. The idea here is to avoid measuring slowness in terms of the length of shots or the rhythm of bodies and camera

movements, and to shift the focus from time towards space, from slowness towards stillness. But it is not a question of the stillness of the moving image's twenty-four frames but rather the stillness of walls in the country of walls that is China. In Jia's cinema, these walls are first and foremost real structures, made of concrete or bricks, some still standing after hundreds of years, others already in ruins. In some cases, such as in *Platform* (站台 *Zhantai*, 2000), the splendid city walls of Ping Yao suggest not only immobility and entrapment but also the past and the weight of history which is the necessary 'slow' or 'still' counterpart to the fastness of the present. These city walls once again reappear in some of the most significant moments of *A Touch of Sin* which looks at the present state of violence in China and its new landscape of globalisation but never fails to invite the past into it, in the most material way possible.[4] In this chapter, though, I chose to focus on architectural structures that function as signifiers of the passage of time and as containers of individual and collective memory against the backdrop of an unstable real. As I will suggest, in *Xiao Wu* (小武 *Xiao Wu*, 1997), *The World* (世界 *Shi Jie*, 2004) and *Still Life* (三峡好人 *San Xia Hao Ren*, 2006), various walls, from the vernacular courtyard residences of northern China to the half-green walls of the public buildings and the ruins of Feng Jie in the Three Gorges, Jia promotes slow architectural journeys through mnemonic walls, marked by inscriptions and made of layers of superimposed temporalities. These walls carry the marks of the subjective memory of those who lived within them – from the traces carved by Xiao Wu and Xiao Yong to measure their heights in *Xiao Wu*, to Erguniang's deathbed note transferred to the hospital's wall in *The World*, and to the multitude of half-destroyed walls adorned with fading posters and written words in Feng Jie, still carrying the memory of a whole city. This series of inscriptions finds its counterpoint in the character 'chai' (拆 demolition), written in various buildings in Fenyang and in Feng Jie as a sign (an index) of their imminent destruction. This leads to a reflection on the archeological (Bruno, 2007) and geological (Andrew, 2013) aspects of his cinema which, while being firmly rooted in the soil of contemporary China, are nevertheless 'soaked' in elements of the past, working as a lament for, and as a source of resistance, to the loss of slowness and memory. Therefore, by focusing on the interbreeding of cinema and architecture, this analysis stresses the hybrid nature of the cinematographic art as well as the multiple temporal layers that make up Jia Zhangke's cinema, capable of containing both the China of globalisation and reform and the China of millennial traditions. It also highlights the mnemonic and affective value of the indexical trace in cinema (Rosen, 2001; Wollen, [1969] 1998), whose temporal politics is imbricated in cinema's materiality and its ability to articulate the eternal and the ephemeral.

Touching the Past with your Fingers

Jia Zhangke's first feature film, made in 1997, is titled after its main character, Xiao Wu, played by Jia's film schoolmate Wang Hongwei. Shot in 16 mm in Fenyang, Shanxi Province, the film was born out of the director's wish to capture the urban space and its transformations which so impressed him upon returning home after a long period of absence. Little Wu from the title is a charmingly gauche pickpocket who, during the course of the film, is rejected by his friends and family, being finally arrested by the police. Entirely filmed on location, the camera follows Xiao Wu as he walks through the city, criss-crossing various derelict constructions and old buildings. One such place is the house of his old friend Xiao Yong (Hao Hongjian), previously a fellow pick-pocket, now a semi-successful businessman. His forthcoming wedding is the talk of the town, and attracts the attention of the local television broadcaster. Xiao Wu finds out about the grand occasion but soon realises that he is not invited to the party. This betrayal will be the first disappointment faced by the increasingly marginalised character, and the failure of their friendship finds a parallel in the spatial instability of the city, undergoing a process of intense transformation that brings about a loss of reference. The Chinese character 拆 (chai) – which means 'demolish' – can be seen painted on various buildings and walls of the city, and an eviction warning at the start of the film reveals how Xiao Wu's cousin's shop will soon be knocked down, along with all the buildings in the street.

But if the character 'chai' can be seen in the walls of Fenyang as an index of spatial destruction, instability and ephemerality, so typical of China's contemporary era of fast transformations, the memory of Xiao Wu and Xiao Yong's friendship is also inscribed in the brick wall of Xiao Yong's house, pointing towards the permanence of a past which still insists on emerging against the speediness of change. These traces appear for the first time in a scene that shows Xiao Yong, just outside the gate to his courtyard house in front of a brick wall, speaking on his mobile phone. At the end of the conversation he stops to observe a few marks on the wall which are the marks of his height and of Xiao Wu's height through the years. For a brief moment, he pauses, touches the wall and then walks out of frame. A few moments later, a long take, which shifts from a point of view shot to one that follows Xiao Wu from behind, shows him on his way to his old friend's house. He walks by the same place then backtracks, noticing the same marks. He stops and touches the wall in a parallel gesture.

The traces on the wall function as a bond between Xiao Yong and Xiao Wu, comparable to the tattoo that both have on their arms. These are the sort of marks that resist the passage of time, either carved on the wall or engrained on the skin. Xiao Yong has tried to reinvent himself as a businessman but

he carries the past on his arm, as Xiao Wu points out to him by lifting his sleeve and showing him his tattoo. In the same vein, the character 'chai' may signal disappearance but the walls of Xiao Yong's house seem to tell a different story. Through the two separate sequences described above, Jia Zhangke thus unites Xiao Yong and Xiao Wu through a shared memory. It could be said that, by doing so, he emphasises the present nature of this past memory against the background of a transient and amnesiac urban space. Here, it is worth recalling how Bertrand Russell, in *The Analysis of Mind*, describes how the memory of a past event is in fact contained, or has a causal connection, with the present:

> Everything constituting a memory-belief is happening *now*, not in that past time to which the belief is said to refer. It is not logically necessary to the existence of a memory-belief that the event remembered should have occurred, or even that the past should have existed at all . . . Hence the occurrences which are *called* knowledge of the past are logically independent of the past. (Russell, 1924: 159–60, original emphasis)

Memory, seen here by Russell as contained in the present, independent of the existence of the past, emerges in *Xiao Wu* in the form of indexical traces left on the walls of Xiao Yong's residence, bearing an existential link between the objects (the two friends) and their representation (the traces that signal their height). In the present tense, memory's spatial dimension is thus highlighted for, as Edward Casey suggests, the embodiment as a necessary condition of remembering points towards a place: 'As embodied existence opens onto place, indeed *takes place in place* and nowhere else, so our memory of what we experience in place is likewise place-specific' (Casey, 2000: 182, original emphasis). Memory is thus a point of connection between the event remembered, the person remembering it and the place of the remembered.

This understanding of memory as an event which belongs in the present rather than in the past, and which exists in space rather than in time, can be extended, as Giuliana Bruno points out, to its relationship with architecture:

> Let us recall that the art of memory was itself a matter of mapping space and was traditionally an architectural affair. In the first century AD, more than a hundred years after Cicero's version, Quintilian formulated his architectural understanding of the way memory works, which became a cultural landmark. To remember the different parts of a discourse, one would imagine a building and implant the discourse in site as well as in sequence: that is, one would walk around the building and populate each part of the space with an image. Then one would mentally retraverse the

> building, moving around and through the space, revisiting in turn all the rooms that had been decorated with imaging. Conceived in this way, memories are motion pictures. (Bruno, 2007: 20)

Still according to Bruno, the difference between Quintilian's art of memory and, for instance, Plato's wax tablet or Freud's 'Mystic Writing Pad' is that the kind of inner writing related to the mnemonic activity in Quintilian is architectural: '*Places* are used as wax. They bear the layers of a writing that can be effaced and yet written over again in a constant redrafting. Places are the site of a mnemonic palimpsest' (Bruno, 2007: 21, original emphasis).

In *Xiao Wu*, this spatial dynamics of memory, which is akin to cinema's own spatial dynamics, frequently appears through the use of the long take associated with a handheld camera, employed to traverse the meandering corridors, side streets and patios that make up the web of courtyard residences still standing in the heart of Fenyang. Here, yet another dimension of this memory emerges, for the wall that carries the subjective memory of Xiao Wu and Xiao Yong belongs to a traditional courtyard cave dwelling, known as *guyao* (箍窑). These architectural structures, traversed like a labyrinth by Jia Zhangke in *Xiao Wu*, are today quickly disappearing, alongside the other typical Chinese vernacular dwelling called *siheyuan* (四合院), the famous courtyard houses of Beijing and the northern provinces. In Fenyang, most of the courtyard houses, be them *guyao* or *siheyuan*, have been destroyed, along with the ancient city walls. Therefore, by inscribing the traces of the characters' memories and of their old friendship on the wall of a *guyao*, Jia is able to bring together the individual and the collective, the house and the city, past and present, all within the same indexical trace, carved into the wall and into the film strip. Here, I use Peter Wollen's semiotic translation of Bazin's ontology of the photographic image, by which ontology was identified with the indexical sign, in Charles S. Peirce's terms, for stressing 'the existential bond between sign and object' (Wollen, [1969] 1998: 86).

Following this line of thought, the 16 mm celluloid could be seen as a modern wax tablet, able to produce indexical images in its surface through the photochemical reaction provoked by the incidence of light through the camera lens. And the indexical nature of the traces on the wall, charged with memory, is related with the indexical nature of the cinematographic image, equally charged with a pastness and at once a container and a producer of memories (Bruno, 2007).

This coexistence of different temporal layers, which define the city of Fenyang, is made even more evident through the gesture adopted by Xiao Wu and Xiao Yong when faced with their past. Both walk by the wall, slow down, stop, walk back, look at the traces and touch the wall, before moving forward again. The gesture – as well as the brief pause – unite them and seem to give

this memory a shape, to make it present, spatial, palpable: a memory at hand's reach.

Green Walls and Digital Effects

If, in *Xiao Wu*, the indexical and mnemonic trace is the image of the past brought to the present through architecture and cinema, in *The World* the inscription on the wall could at first glance be seen as more prosaic whereas, in fact, it is as charged with a pastness and the weight of history as the traces on the brick wall. Shot entirely in digital by Jia Zhangke's long-time collaborator Yu Lik-wai, *The World* is concerned with the lives of a group of friends who work and live in Beijing's World Park, mainly Zhao Tao (Zhao Tao), her boyfriend Chen Taisheng (Chen Taisheng) and his home-town friends Sanlai (Wang Hongwei) and Chen Zhijung, nicknamed Erguniang (Little Sister), who travel from Fenyang to Beijing to look for work. In the film, Sanlai and Erguniang are examples of China's post-1978, so-called 'floating generation', formed by millions of internal migrants who travel within the country in search of work opportunities.

Typically, the two friends from Shanxi find a job in construction; not long after, Erguniang has a serious work accident and has to be taken to hospital. Taisheng, who works in the World Park, is notified and rushes to see him. On his deathbed, Erguniang gives him a piece of paper which turns out to be a handwritten note. Next we see Taisheng leaving the room and meeting Sanlai in the corridor, both devastated by the tragedy. He hands him Erguniang's note, and the camera slowly starts to pan towards the hospital's half-green wall which will take over the whole frame. The long take ends with the contents of the note slowly appearing, through the use of a digital effect, on to the sturdy green wall, a screen made of concrete, only to disappear soon after. The note consists of a list of very small debts owed by Erguniang.

Through this brief sequence, it is possible to observe how Jia Zhangke has once again employed an architectural structure as a vehicle and a container of a character's subjectivity. In *The World*, however, it is not the case of an indexical trace because the inscription on the wall appears through a digital effect. Would this be a commentary on the crisis of indexicality brought about by digital technology which allows for the creation of images with no referent in the real world? This thought derives from the fact that, while choosing to inscribe Erguniang's note on the wall making it public and somehow more permanent, Jia is equally quick to erase it. This digital inscription is therefore ephemeral, a bit like the character himself, who dies with no further explanation, and not unlike so many others of the floating generation workers in China today. But it might not be wise, as Philip Rosen advises in *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (2001), to think of the digital as

the 'other' of analogical technology. In fact, *The World*, despite being shot in digital, and regardless of its use of flash animation, electronic music and the location itself – the park where everything is simulacra – does not support the idea of a division between 'real' and 'artifice' – something that could favour a simplistic reading of the film as a critique of the latter. Rather, it seems to point towards a confusion between both, corroborating the point made earlier in this chapter about the coexistence of contraries, so typical of the reality of China's cities.

The half-green wall of the hospital harks back to the Communist era and appears frequently in Jia Zhangke's films, in public offices, schools, waiting rooms in railway stations, cinemas, theatres, factories and hospitals. The emphasis on green, which even takes over the whole chromatic tonality of his film *24 City* (二十四城记 *Er shi si cheng ji*, 2008), is related to the director's own childhood memories of looking at green walls and connecting them with the idea of 'the system' (Mello, 2014c). Thus, the green wall, like the wall of the courtyard house before it, is at once a personal memory and a collective memory. It unites the whole country under the same pattern of green but cannot carry the digital trace of Erguniang's note for more than a few seconds. This might also be because this memory is somewhat dislocated, given that it belongs to an internal migrant, out of place in Beijing, floating, uprooted, far from his native province and from the brick walls of his home town, Fenyang, which, contrary to the green wall of the hospital, carry for years the traces of Xiao Wu and Xiao Yong.

And it is not by chance that the same green wall reappears in Jia's next feature film, *Still Life*, in a scene that quotes Hou Hsiao Hsien's *The Boys from Fengkuei* (風櫃來的人, 1983). Here, in Jia's 'slowest' film to date, also shot in digital and in which the long takes and slow camera and acting movements abound against the backdrop of a cityscape on the brink of disappearance, the half-green wall itself is almost completely destroyed. Floating on air, barely sustained by a derelict building, this wall is defined by a hole that opens towards the cityscape. It is, like most of the walls seen in *Still Life*, a broken wall, fractured, precarious, soon to disappear completely like the building that is seen collapsing in the distance thanks to the use of computer-generated imagery (CGI). Yet, however ephemeral the walls of Feng Jie might be, they still carry the traces of individual memories in the form of writings, graffiti, posters, calendars and photographs, resisting the force of 'chai' 拆. As Jia Zhangke puts it,

> Once I walked into someone's room by accident and saw dust-covered articles on the desk. Suddenly it seemed the secrets of still life fell upon me. The old furniture, the stationery on the desk, the bottles on the window sills and the decorations on the walls all took on an air of

> poetic sorrow. Still life presents a reality that has been overlooked by us. Although time has left deep marks on it, it still remains silent and holds the secrets of life. (Jia, 2006: 2)

And it is as if searching for the 'secrets of life' that Jia sets out on an archeological exploration of these silences, these 'still lives' that hide behind the chaos of demolition, for they make up the memory of a whole city of over two thousand years which refuses to be forgotten.

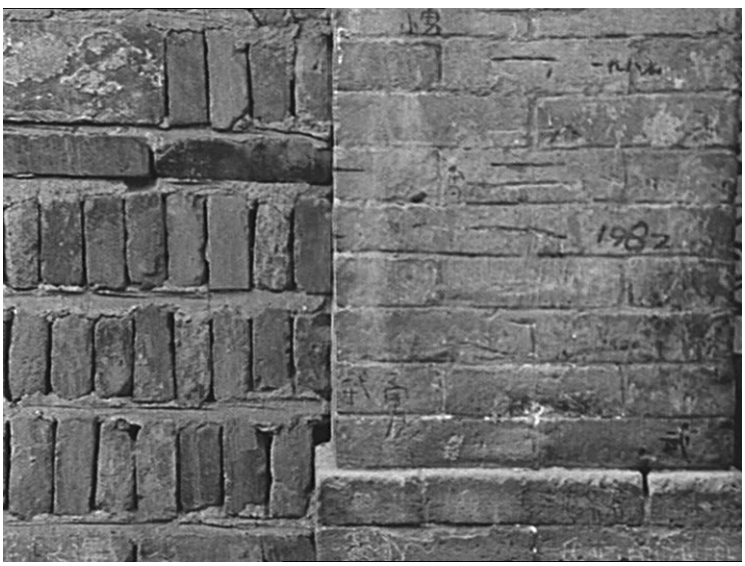

Figure 9.1 Indexical memories on the brick wall. *Xiao Wu* (1997).

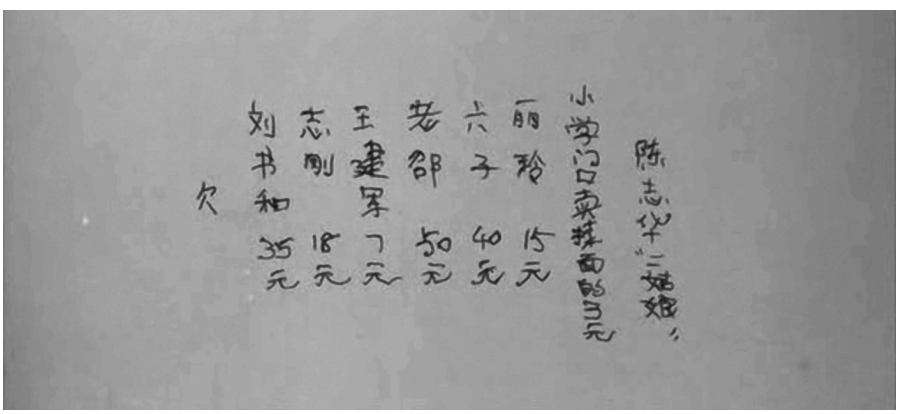

Figure 9.2 Digital memories on the green wall. *The World* (2004).

Figure 9.3 The intangible wall. *Still Life* (2006).

Conclusion

Jia's cinema's praise of slowness and stillness as a response to the intensity of spatial transformation and the loss of memory is not an isolated voice within China's contemporary artistic and cultural manifestations. As Sheldon H. Lu explains, 'chai [tearing down] is indeed the theme of much of contemporary Chinese visual culture. It points not only to the physical demolition of the old cityscape but also, more profoundly, to the symbolic and psychological destruction of the social fabric of families and neighborhoods' (Lu, 2007: 137–8). Along the same lines, Jean Ma observes that 'this obsession with memory itself paradoxically points to a sense of profound loss as it contemplates a past always on the verge of slipping away' (Ma, 2010: 11). Thus, it would be fair to say that this search for the many temporal and spatial layers shrouded behind China's globalisation process is related to the crisis of memory that affects the country of amazing economic and social indicators. In the examples discussed above, Jia Zhangke excavates these layers by allowing his cinema to interbreed with the architectural structure of walls, be they from ancient courtyard dwellings or those from the Communist era. I believe that here lies the most revealing and political aspects of his cinema of slowness, a slowness that is as spatial as it is temporal, a slowness that becomes an unstable stillness, and a slowness that ultimately transforms the search for memory – this extraordinary amalgamation of subjectivity and history – into a filmic archeological, architectural and emotional exploration.

Notes

1. Source: *The Economist*, 2014a; 2014b.
2. Jia's cousin Han Sanming, who appears in many of his films, has a distinctively slow manner of talking, reacting, walking and moving that contributes to the slowing down of the narrative. A prolific parallel could be drawn between Sanming and Xiao Kang, Tsai Ming-liang's alter ego and the epitome of 'slow acting' in cinema.
3. At the same time, if Jia's slow cinematic style has a transnational quality, it also partially derives from his cinema's interbreeding with Chinese landscape painting and the notion of 'empty space'. See Mello, Cecília, 'Space and Intermediality in Jia Zhang-ke's *Still Life*', *Aniki: Portuguese Journal of the Moving Image*, no. 2, June 2014b).
4. I discuss the importance of walls in Jia Zhangke's cinema in my forthcoming monograph *Intermediality, Aesthetics and Politics in the Cinema of Jia Zhangke*.

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