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The Chronotope of Ecocinema  
Bakhtin's notions of environment and horizon as analytic tools for the study of  
film and the environment

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree Master of Arts

in

Art History Theory and Criticism

Katrin Pesch

Committee in charge:

Professor John Welchman, Chair  
Professor Lesley Stern, Co-Chair  
Professor Norman Bryson  
Professor Jean-Pierre Gorin  
Professor Amelia Glaser

2013



The Thesis of Katrin Pesch is approved and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Chronotope of Ecocinema  
Bakhtin's notions of environment and horizon as analytic tools for the study of  
film and the environment

by

Katrin Pesch

Master of Arts in Art History, Theory, and Criticism

University of California, San Diego, 2013

Professor John Welchman, Chair

This thesis presents a critical intervention in the emerging fields of ecocinema and transnational film studies. Moving beyond ecocinema studies' engagement with environmental and ecological issues, I argue for a new methodology that analyzes the complex interlacing ecologies of cinema from a transnational perspective. My reading of two films by Chinese director Ning Hao, *Mongolian Ping Pong* (2005) and *Crazy Stone* (2006), employs Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope and his concept of horizon and environment as an analytical

directory to the different perceptual horizons of director, characters/actors and audience intersecting in Ning's films.

The first chapter discusses some of the problems and limitations that the premise of ecocinema as a critical paradigm engenders. The second chapter sets out to shift the perspective as to where the ecological significance of cinematic works is located. I argue that Ning's meditation on the cultural changes and economic pressures within contemporary Chinese society represents only one aspect of his films' ecological implication. Their actual intersection with the environment happens within the institution of cinema. Where the horizon exists as both a physical entity and perceptual modality, the chronotopes of films establish a zone of direct contact between the characters and (transnational) audiences. Thus, the production, distribution, and consumption of film require scholarly attention beyond the scope of transnational or ecocritical approaches alone. Films mean and do different things in different places, contexts and times. The exchange between film and viewer carries ecological significance.



## Introduction

“The chronotope is an optic for reading texts as x-rays of the forces at work in the culture system from which they spring.”<sup>1</sup> The space created by this traveling ray of light that connects the world of the text with the reader is the environment of this essay. In his article “The Bakhtinian Road to Ecological Insight,” Michael McDowell argues that Mikhail Bakhtin’s notions of dialogism and chronotope (a term that stems from the mathematics informing Einstein’s physics) are particularly suited for a “practical ecocriticism.”<sup>2</sup> He does so by stressing their dialogic relationship to the scientific discourses of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Einstein’s relativity theory and Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. It seems fitting that the chronotope, literally “time-space,” one of Bakhtin’s famous buzzwords, has made its way into the field of ecocriticism as well. An interdisciplinary approach, ecocriticism analyzes how the underlying values of concepts such as nature, the representations of place, the relationship of people and their environment, and/or ecological issues are expressed in literature, and, most recently, cinema. Bakhtin developed the concept of the chronotope in the context of literary theory, and in particular for the analysis of

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Holquist, glossary to *The Dialogical Imagination Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 425.

<sup>2</sup> Michael McDowell, “The Bakhtinian Road to Ecological Insight,” *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 371-391.

the novel.<sup>3</sup> My analysis thus attends to the question of whether his concepts can be applied to the analysis of film in a meaningful way. More specifically, how can they contribute to the discourse of ecocriticism and the emerging field of “Ecocinema” studies?

Bakhtin’s ideas have previously been used within film studies, including two book-length studies, Robert Stam’s *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism and Film* (1989) and Martin Flanagan’s *Bakhtin and the Movies: New Ways of Understanding Hollywood Films* (2010). Both Stam and Flanagan emphasize the usefulness of Bakhtin’s concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia for film studies as they provide a more complex understanding of reception and creative interpretation than the fixed spectatorial positions assumed in structural, apparatus-oriented, or psychoanalytic models or the universal viewership suggested in cognitive film theory.<sup>4</sup> The notions of the carnivalesque and the chronotope are equally traded as strong currencies in Bakhtinian-inspired film criticism, although the theorization of disruptive elements of cinema has lately been surpassed by an analysis of spatio-temporal relationships, a shift that is mirrored by Flanagan’s preference for the chronotope over Stam’s focus on the carnivalesque.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, “Form of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” in *The Dialogical Imagination Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*. However, Bakhtin does not question the usefulness of the chronotope for pictorial and plastic arts as well as other cultural realms, see footnote 1, 84.

<sup>4</sup> See Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures Bakhtin: Cultural Criticism and Film* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1989) and Martin Flanagan, *Bakhtin and the Movies: New Ways of Understanding Hollywood Films* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Worth mentioning in the context of this paper is also Paul Willemen’s application of Bakhtin as a theory of consumption in the context of the cultural politics of Third Cinema, and lately,

Flanagan's study takes up Bakhtin's emphasis on the creative understanding of readers to construct "dialogic spectator(s),"<sup>6</sup> each equipped with unique perceptual horizons. Referring to Bakhtin's theorization of the novel as a form of textual discourse, he proposes to consider film "as a form of artistic discourse comparable to the novel."<sup>7</sup> Although I share Flanagan's interest in "novelness," the specific form of knowledge produced within the production and consumption of the novel, I disagree with his universal application of this concept to film. Arguably, transposing Bakhtin's thought from literature to film is less a question of the medium that novels or films are made from—their verbal or pictorial properties—than one of genre. Bakhtin is thinking specifically about the novel and novelistic qualities within the literary field, not literature in general.

What, then, is this "novelness" and, moreover, can it exist in films? A key characteristic of the novel that Bakhtin identifies is that "it is ever questioning, ever examining itself and subjecting itself to forms of review," by situating itself "in a zone of direct contact with developing reality."<sup>8</sup> This zone of contact provides the environment for the polyvalent dialogues between author and hero, literary works and reader/viewers, critical knowledge production and creative reasoning. In *The Novelness of Bakhtin: Perspectives and Possibilities* (2001), Jørgen Bruhn and Jan Lundquist summarize the core of novelness as an ethical

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transnational film studies. Here, Willemsen mobilizes the notions of outsideness and chronotope in an effort to analyze films as utterances in different socio-historical settings.

<sup>6</sup> Flanagan, *Bakhtin and the Movies*, 17.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>8</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel," in *The Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, 39.

position that develops through the dialogic interplay between an epistemological function that destabilizes dominant hierarchies of values and a cognitive, constructive function allowing other ways of perceiving and acting upon this world.<sup>9</sup> Less a genre than a force, “the novel is a system of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other.”<sup>10</sup> I believe that the films discussed in this paper emerge from this zone of direct contact with contemporary reality and carry novelistic qualities in the Bakhtinian sense. After taking a close look at existing ecocritical analyses of films by contemporary Chinese directors Jia Zhangke and You Le, this paper explores the chronotopic environments of Ning Hao’s films *Mongolian Ping Pong* (2004) and *Crazy Stone* (2006).

For Bakhtin, “every entry in the sphere of meaning is accomplished through the gates of the chronotope.”<sup>11</sup> In order to make sense, even abstract thought needs to enter social experience and gain a temporal-spatial expression. He uses the chronotope as a literary device to analyze the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.”<sup>12</sup> It functions as a tool of artistic visualization that enhances perception: time becomes “visible,” space becomes dynamic and

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<sup>9</sup> Jørgen Bruhn and Jan Lundquist, eds., *The Novelness of Bakhtin Perspectives and Possibilities* (Copenhagen, Museum Tusulanum Press, 2001), 44.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>11</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, “Form of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” 258.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

“responsive” to the unfolding narrative.<sup>13</sup> But the chronotope reaches beyond the pages of a book: “Out of the actual chronotopes of our world (which serve as the source of representation) emerge the reflected and *created* chronotopes of the world represented in the work (in the text).”<sup>14</sup> Although there is a clear boundary between the two worlds—which Bakhtin stresses we should never forget—there is a mutual interaction between them that he describes as an ecological one, “similar to the uninterrupted exchange of matter between living organisms and the environment that surrounds them.”<sup>15</sup> This chronotopic exchange is carried on into the different time-spaces of the readers and listeners who recreate, and thus renew the work. Bakhtin’s emphasis on the constant interaction between meanings is crucial here. This emphasis on the chronotopic exchange that a work both entails and engenders can expand ecocriticism’s horizon and help to unpack the complexity of the underlying notion of ecology tucked away in the prefix *eco-*.

While the concern with the preservation and conservation of the natural environment dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the origins of contemporary ecocriticism begins with the advent of the modern environmentalist movement beginning in the 1960s.<sup>16</sup> Its inception as an academic field, specifically the study

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 258.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>16</sup> Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, is often described as one of the founding texts of the movement. For a detailed history of environmental criticism, see Laurence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005) and Timothy Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (Leiden: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

of literature and the environment, however, did not occur until the early 1990s. In the last decade, literary ecocriticism broadened its focus from nature writing to include a broader range of literary genres. Parallel to this shift, ecocritical approaches emerged in the study of other media, such as the study of film and the environment, which is mainly referred to as ecocinema studies. This new branch of ecocriticism exploded in the last five years. This can be seen in the flood of scholarly articles, conference panels, course syllabi, and film festival programs, as well as the first three anthologies dedicated to the subject published between 2009 and 2012.<sup>17</sup> The documentation of a workshop on Ecocinema Studies held by the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment in 2011 shows immense struggle to define the term and outline the boundaries of the field.<sup>18</sup> “Ecocinema” suggests a prescriptive dimension to this branch of scholarship. What makes film qualify as “ecocinema,” and on what grounds? Similarly, how is ecocriticism different from regular criticism? What are the unique aims, methods and analytic tools for each of these systems?

In his introduction to the anthology *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, Laurence Buell explains his preference for the term environmental rather than ecocriticism, by stating, “‘environmental’ approximates better than ‘eco’ the

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<sup>17</sup> Sheldon Lu and Jiayan Mi, eds., *Chinese Ecocinema in the Age of Environmental Challenge* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press; London: Eurospan, 2009); Paula Willoquet-Maricondi, *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film* (Charlotte and London: University of Virginia Press, 2010); Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt, eds., *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> See post “Ecocinema Studies” on the ASLE 2011 Ecomedia Seminar blog, accessed December 4, 2012, <http://asle-seminar.ecomediastudies.org/>.

hybridity of the subject at issue – all environments in practice involving ‘natural’ and ‘constructed’ elements.”<sup>19</sup> Pledging allegiance to either ecology or environment as preferred critical categories is a recurring phenomenon in eco- or environmental criticism, respectively. In contrast, I believe that environment and ecology are each useful categories that lend themselves to different analytical angles of literary and film criticism. While ecology refers to interconnected systems of circulation and exchange, the notion of environment unfolds in layers. Invoking more than just physical setting, environment implicitly refers to various overlapping concepts – as the natural environment; as environs or surroundings; as social, cultural and political forces or milieu within a particular film, the institutional framework of the cinematic environment as well as the aesthetic properties of the filmic environment all the way up to textures and tonalities.<sup>20</sup>

Bakhtin’s coupling of environment with horizon adds another useful term. He sees environment as that which surrounds and forms the subject, and uses the notion of horizon as its complement to describe the way in which this environment is perceived from within the subject.<sup>21</sup> Bakhtin thinks about environment in relation to objects imagined around a literary hero. “There are two possible ways of combining the outside world with a human being: from within a

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<sup>19</sup> Buell, viii.

<sup>20</sup> See Gregory Charles Durbin, “Environment in Poto and Cabengo” (MFA thesis, University of California San Diego, 1981), 9.

<sup>21</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” in *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990). Bakhtin borrows the concept of horizon from Edmund Husserl.

human being—as his *horizon*, and from outside him—as his *environment*.”<sup>22</sup> In the case of cinema, the notion of horizon enables us to talk about the various subjectivities that interact within the filmic and cinematic environments, such as the different characters, the authorial viewpoint of the director, and the different contexts of its viewers.

Although the term “environment” did not entail the amalgam of meaning it carries today when Bakhtin began his career in the 1920s, his early writings are especially well suited for ecocriticism because many of his theoretical ideas are firmly grounded in physical reality. In “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” Bakhtin begins with the outer boundaries of his body, and describes how human beings encounter and perceive each other within a given environment. He sees situatedness and perspective as two crucial elements within the act of perception: “I am situated on the frontier of the horizon of my seeing; the visible world is disposed before me. By turning my head in all directions, I can succeed in seeing all of myself from all sides of the surrounding space in the center of which I am situated, but I shall never be able to see myself as actually surrounded by this space.”<sup>23</sup> Standing face to face with a fellow human being, “our concrete, actually experienced horizons do not coincide.”<sup>24</sup> The Russian word for horizon that Bakhtin uses is *krugozor*, meaning compass of vision. It derives from the German translation of the Greek word for horizon, *Gesichtskreis*,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 97

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 22.



which literally translates to circle of the face, or circle of vision. From my unique position, I can see the person facing me in a way in which she cannot perceive herself. Her posture, expression and the things around her are visible to me. At the same time from her particular place, she can also see my face and what is behind the silhouette of my body, resulting in an “excess of seeing”<sup>25</sup> that is mutually exclusive. “As we gaze at each other two different worlds are reflected in the pupils of our eyes.”<sup>26</sup>

Bakhtin develops his larger concepts from these acute environmental observations. Endowed with an ecological dimension, the organizational function of the chronotope connects the represented and the creating world and provides the grounds for the representation of events, while the theory of horizon and environment, and the idea of the excess of seeing, analyze how human beings relate to their environment and interact with each other in the specific time-space represented in the work. Similarly, ecocriticism departs from acute observation and examines how issues existing in the real world are answered in literary texts, or in this case, films. Building on Bakhtin’s interest in social spaces and their representations, his concepts can help develop a critical vocabulary for the analysis of environment in film and its ecological implications that allows for more complex readings in the context of ecocriticism.

In fact, the first in-depth study that focuses specifically on film and the environment describes a chronotope, or space-time, itself: *Chinese Ecocinema In*

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 23.

*the Age of Environmental Challenge*. Published in 2009, the volume edited by Sheldon H. Lu and Jianyan Mi originated from a panel on “New Chinese Ecocinema and Ethics of Environmental Imagination,” which took place at the annual convention of the Association for Asian Studies in Boston in March 2007.<sup>27</sup> “Ecocriticism,” Lu states in the introduction, “should not be limited to literature but include other art forms and media.”<sup>28</sup> In view of the grave ecological crisis China is facing, the authors propose to establish the concept of Chinese ecocinema as a “new critical paradigm ... [in order] to investigate how Chinese films “engage environmental and ecological issues in the active re-imagination of locale, place and space.”<sup>29</sup> The different aspects of the pressing environmental crisis in China are organized in four main areas: the contamination, shortage and colonization of water; the representation of nature and manufacturing of ‘natural’ landscapes; the reconfigurations of urban space and cityscapes in postsocialist China; and questions of bioethics and non-anthropocentrism emerging on a global scale. At the same time, the volume aims to lay the foundation of a genealogy of “China’s ecocinematic imagination” in Chinese films since the beginning of the 1980s.<sup>30</sup>

According to this self-description, Chinese ecocinema seeks to provide insight into how films reflect the material effects of the ecological crisis and provide new conceptualizations of space. To speak of the chronotope of Chinese

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<sup>27</sup> Lu et al., *Chinese Ecocinema: In the Age of Environmental Challenge*.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

ecocinema, as I suggest here, means that the way in which this exchange between film and environment is conceptualized and materialized within the circuits of film production, distribution and reception constructs a chronotope itself—a discourse that is “charged and responsive” to a particular space and time.<sup>31</sup> Beyond the analysis of how specific issues are presented by directors and films, an ecocritical approach thus needs to consider cinema both as discursive practice and institution. In the following, second part of this paper, I will briefly introduce two of the book’s chapters as exemplary texts to point to some of the problems and limitations that the premise of ecocinema as a critical paradigm engenders. Both chapters intersect with Bakhtinian notions that I want to explore in this paper. Hongbing Zhang’s “Ruins and Grassroots: Jia Zhangke’s Cinematic Discontent in the Age of Globalization” refers to the chronotope, whereas the psychoanalytically inflected notion of “the gaze of ecology” that Andrew Hageman develops in “Floating Consciousness: The Cinematic Confluence of Ecological Aesthetic in Suzhou River” is relevant in relation to Bakhtin’s concept of the “excess of seeing.”<sup>32</sup> Although I often agree with the formal analysis presented in these texts, my analysis of Ning Hao’s films in the third and final part of the paper sets out to shift the perspective as to where the ecological significance of cinematic works is located. Moving beyond ecocinema studies’ engagement with environmental and ecological issues, I argue for a new methodology that includes the complex interlacing ecologies of cinema itself.

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<sup>31</sup> Bakhtin, “Forms of and Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” 84.

<sup>32</sup> Bakhtin, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” 23.

## Chapter 1

In “Ruins and Grassroots” Zhang situates the films of Jia Zhangke, a leading figure of the Sixth Generation, historically in relation to what he describes as the predominant chronotope in seminal films of the Fifth Generation of New Chinese Cinema.<sup>33</sup> Analyzing Jia’s films *Xiao Wu* (1997), *Platform* (2000), *Unknown Pleasures* (2002), *The World* (2004), *Still Life* (2006) against the backdrop of China’s rapidly increasing globalization, Zhang reads Jia’s films sweepingly as a “cinematic reconstruction, a comment and an intervention toward that very historical process.”<sup>34</sup> Zhang states that whereas post-Mao modernization in China was mainly experienced as an ongoing temporal movement that spans the development from an old tradition to a new tomorrow, globalization has been widely perceived as a spatial movement through which China is integrated into the dominant global economy and world culture. He argues that Jia “approaches the issue of globalization through a particular lens of ecological consciousness and a unique cinematic use of the spatial relationship between the character and the *mise-en-scène* and, by an extension beyond the optical illusion of the cinematic world, of that between man and environment.”<sup>35</sup> This is produced through the impression of a cinematic flatness that is created through the framing of the characters, who—caught in the challenging process of

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<sup>33</sup> The so-called “Fifth Generation” were the first filmmakers to graduate from the Beijing film school in 1982, after its re-opening at the end of the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>34</sup> Hongbing Zhang, “Ruins and Grassroots: Jia Zhangke’s Cinematic Discontent in the Age of Globalization,” in *Chinese Ecocinema: In the Age of Environmental Challenge*, 129.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

globalization—are literally diminished and restrained by the environment depicted in the film and thus, by extension, the socio-historical actuality it represents.

This spatial imbalance between the characters and their surroundings Zhang interprets “as a new Bakhtinian chronotope that registers a changed sense of historical time and space experienced by the Chinese at the present moment.”<sup>36</sup> The chronotope of films by Fifth Generation filmmakers since the 1980s, he asserts, is diametrically opposed. Social reality is not represented through the staging of spatial relationships but through the dramatic interaction of the human characters and their violent acts against the environment. Although grappling with the recent past of the Cultural Revolution, many of the earlier socialist realist films of the Fifth (and Sixth) Generation as well as so-called “leitmotif” movies funded by the government inherited the tradition of representing larger-than-life subjects who command their immediate social and material environment.<sup>37</sup> “Here,” Zhang concludes, “the chronotope of space-time dynamic is constructed, more than anything else, around time, history and the human agency of historical change.”<sup>38</sup> In Jia’s films this representation of heroic characters that function as personifications of a revolutionary collective is

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>37</sup> In the introduction to the volume, Sheldon H. Lu gives a brief recapitulation of the predominant ideology in regards to the relationship between man and environment in China in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Both Chairman Mao’s voluntarism, or “subjective initiative,” as well as Deng Xiaoping’s later slogan “developmentalism is the imperative” epitomize a highly exploitative attitude toward the environment that embraces the idea that human will is indefinitely capable of subjugating nature and yielding product at the expense of the ecosystem.

<sup>38</sup> Zhang, 133.

reversed. “Dwarfed” in relation to the overpowering environment, the individuals constructed by the chronotope prevalent in Jia’s films are less heroic than humble and presumably embody universal humanity.

The chronotopes that Zhang identifies relate to two consecutive time periods in Chinese history after the Cultural Revolution: post-Mao modernization of the 1980s, which is largely perceived as a temporal movement, followed by the integration into the maelstrom of globalization of the 1990s, which is experienced spatially. Zhang sees the chronotopes reflected in the imbalanced relationships between the characters and their environment, figure and ground. Fifth Generation filmmakers, such as Zhang Yimou, and Chen Kaige, tend to represent their subjects up-close and heroic, while in the films of Jia, a leading figure of the Sixth Generation, the environment is foregrounded while the subjects are pushed into the distance and swallowed by their surroundings.

Zhang’s comparison between chronotopes of the Fifth and Sixth Generation of Chinese Cinema implicitly refers to three levels on which the chronotope operates:<sup>39</sup> First, as a marker of specific film genres (in this case the government approved socialist-realist films of the Fifth Generation compared to the oppositional post-socialist independent films of the Sixth); second, as recurrent chronotopic motifs within these genres (for instance, productive agrarian landscapes in the earlier films compared to dilapidated and drained environs in the later ones); and lastly regarding the chronotopic relationship

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<sup>39</sup> I am referring to Flanagan’s summary of three levels on which the chronotope operates here. See Flanagan, 57.

between the world represented in the film and the actual socio-historical realities in contemporary China, or in Zhang's words, "the spatial relationship between the character and the *mise-en-scène*" in relation to "that between man and environment."<sup>40</sup> In "Ruins and Grassroots," Zhang's use of the chronotope supports the endorsement of Jia's films as successful examples of Chinese Ecocinema. According to Zhang, Jia's acute ecological consciousness towards the ongoing processes of modernization and globalization in contemporary Chinese society manifests itself in the strong sense of "cinematic embeddedness and geographical locatedness" and in the truthful representation of the disenfranchised grassroots (*gao cen*) characters in the ruinous environments shaped by the forces of globalization depicted in his films.<sup>41</sup>

In order to thoroughly understand the ecological dimension of Jia's films, however, we need to take this analysis one step further and consider the chronotopic exchange between the world within and outside of the film on multiple levels. From this perspective, the ways in which Jia and his films themselves are embedded and located within domestic and international film distribution and reception require as much attention as the cinematographic accomplishments and ecological awareness of the filmmaker. The chronotopes of the Fifth and Sixth Generation that Zhang identifies in his analysis pertain to the relationship between figure and ground and evolve around the horizon line: larger-than-life subjects cast against the sky, their bodies cutting across the

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<sup>40</sup> Zhang, 132.

<sup>41</sup> Zhang, 133.

horizon line in the former, compared to small figures completely contained in the landscape in the latter. In order to flesh out the full potential of this configuration for ecocriticism, I will take a detour through social art history, for the relationship of figure, ground and horizon has been examined in depth by T. J. Clark in his seminal study of the 19<sup>th</sup> century French painter Jean Francois Millet, a cofounder of the Barbizon school.

Clark's analysis of Millet's series of paintings and drawings called *The Sower* made between 1846 and 1850 is particularly useful in this context. In a modest panel made in 1846, the *Sower* is small in relation to the surrounding environment. The whole figure is placed under the horizon line, merely his hat bulges into the sky, the brim echoing the horizon line. His muted garb and tired pose tell of his unvarying life of toil; rendered colorless, the land promises meager returns as well. Sketched around 1848, another in the series, the wicked-looking *Devil Sowing* on the other hand has a strong biblical connotation. In a painting from 1850, the *Sower* has changed again. He now commands the image, looming large against the sky. There is something violent brewing over the horizon. With his hat drawn over his eyes and his clenched fist almost leaving the picture plane, this *Sower* reeks of determination. The forceful stance and the vivid colors of his costume herald his approach. Possibly keeping in mind future governmental commissions, the version of the *Sower* that Millet eventually submitted to the 1850 Salon, the annual exhibition of the French Academy, is subtly altered and weakened. Positioned more squarely in the center, with a calm



expression on his face, the *Sower* appears constrained yet complacent. From the poise of the figure, the altered horizon line, to the muted color scheme everything in the painting is toned down. Violence has given way to a sense of doom, the *Sower's* aggression stifled by the brute necessities of basic subsistence. More than that, the *Sower* doesn't seem to inhabit the painting. "[I]n this second *Sower*," Clark concludes, "figure and ground do not answer each other."<sup>42</sup>

Following his thorough visual analysis, Clark goes on to examine this discordance between figure and ground within the context of Millet's life and work. He does so by reflection on the different horizons at play in Millet's conflicting, often contradictory political views and weighs the evolving realism of his works in relation to the fabricated self-description of his social standing. He situates both Millet's practice as well as his critical reception in front of the backdrop of a specific socio-political horizon in France in the aftermath of the revolutionary uprising of disenfranchised peasant and migrant workers in 1848. The challenge Millet faces is to juggle the intersection of two different spaces and temporalities: the existence in the countryside on the one hand, and metropolitan life on the other. To do so, he has to negotiate both the discourse of proletarian life in the rural peripheries of Paris and the metropolitan expectation of the pastoral. Although critics across the political spectrum acknowledge the "savagery of the image,"<sup>43</sup> Clark argues that critics from both the Left and Right alike read the

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<sup>42</sup> T. J. Clark, *The Absolute Bourgeois Artists and Politics in France from 1848-1851* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 94.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

figure in the tradition of the pastoral, unable to see the realist “shadow of assertion” the *Sower* casts on the ground.<sup>44</sup>

It is not my intention to draw any parallels between Jia’s and Millet’s careers, convictions, or the reception of their work. Rather my case in point is that Clark’s methodology moves beyond Millet’s visual imaginary and pays specific attention to contemporary reception of Millet’s work, further considering effects of market constraints and expectations, along with the cultural and political landscape, changing as he reworked the images. The meaning, and consequentially, impact of the work essentially springs from a combination of all of these aspects. The potential for ecocriticism becomes apparent in Clark’s analysis of multiple horizons. From a literal discussion of the physical horizon line in the paintings, his analysis segues to its figurative, metaphorical use by considering the multiple, intersecting and contradictory horizons of the political situation, artist and audience. By doing so, the conceptual horizon, or in Zhang’s words the “ecological lens,” of the artist is refracted through ecological lens of the critic and considered in relation to the perceptual horizons of the viewers. It is exactly this double meaning of horizon as both physical entity and perceptual modality that we also find in Bakhtin that is useful for an ecocritical analysis.

As a formal device, Bakhtin’s notion of the chronotope is equipped to entertain an ongoing dialogue between the represented world depicted in the text and the creating world of the author and reader. “We are presented with a text

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 93.

occupying a certain specific place in space; that is it is *localized*; our creation of it, our acquaintance with it occurs through time.”<sup>45</sup> The importance of situatedness and horizon within aesthetic interpretation that Bakhtin fleshes out in “Author and Hero” thus operates on multiple layers. In the same way that the dictum that “[w]hat I see is governed by the place from which I see it”<sup>46</sup> structures the relationships between self/other or author/hero, the relationship between reader/text not only depends on a point of view but also on the particular location of this point of view. Bakhtin refers to this exchange, which also constitutes the distinctive life of the work, as a “specific creative chronotope.”<sup>47</sup>

One way to achieve a more complex understanding of cinema and ecology that also considers the production, distribution and reception of films would be to take into account the film’s transnational implication—an aspect Zhang touches upon but does not further explore in relation to his own ecocritical agenda. Although his text sets out to analyze Jia’s films in the context of globalization, he ultimately cuts his own argument short by stressing the authenticity of Jia’s cinematic realism. Contemporaneous to the emerging discourse around film and the environment or ecocinema studies in recent years, there has been substantial scholarship calling for transnational and geopolitical perspectives within film studies. Since transnational dimensions of film production inevitably carry ecological implications, I propose to combine these two lines of

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<sup>45</sup> Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” 252. My emphasis added.

<sup>46</sup> Michael Holquist, “The Carnival of Discourse: Baxtin and Simultaneity,” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, June 1985, 225.

<sup>47</sup> Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” 254.

inquiry into a comparative approach. In order to broaden the scope of the analysis, we need to think about the audience and reception of Jia's films as well. Considering transnational horizons will add dimensionality to the chronotopes that Zhang identifies in Jia's films.

In "The Cinema of Jia Zhangke: Aestheticized Realism and Global Imaginary," Jason McGrath has analyzed the transnational aesthetic and production of Jia's films.<sup>48</sup> He describes Jia's realism as a composite of the indigenous realism in Chinese independent and documentary films of the early 1990s (exemplified in his first feature *Xiao Wu*, the story of a pickpocket which takes place in Jia's hometown Fenyang) and the transnational aesthetic of international art house cinema of the late 1990s (exemplified in his epic *Platform*, which follows the changing lives of a group of performers through the decade of the 1980s). In contrast to Zhang's emphasis on the "geographic locatedness" of the characters on screen, McGrath is careful not to read Jia's films primarily as documents of "the 'reality' they allegedly depict."<sup>49</sup> Instead, he discusses his cinematic style (such as minimal composition, or long takes in *Platform*) as characteristic of "the aestheticized realism of the transnational aesthetic"<sup>50</sup> popular in international film festivals and art house cinema of the 1990s.<sup>51</sup> He

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<sup>48</sup> Jason McGrath, "The Cinema of Jia Zhangke: From Postsocialist Realism to a Transnational Aesthetic," in *The Urban Generation Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Zhen Zhang (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>51</sup> McGrath interprets the emphasis on real time and duration of this transnational aesthetic among other things as a response to Deleuze's second book on cinema *The Time Image*, which became available in English in 1989.

traces how the outstanding success of the low-budget 16mm film *Xiao Wu* at international festivals, helped to turn Jia's feature *Platform* "into a truly globalized production,"<sup>52</sup> securing funding from international production companies and government agencies. Indeed, as McGrath concludes, the 35mm film *Platform* is a cultural commodity that can compete with international film industry standards in terms of both production value and style.

In *Cinema, Space and Polylocality in a Globalizing China*, Yingjin Zhang expands upon McGrath's analysis and reads Jia's cinematic vision in relation to the reception of his films at home and abroad. Zhang's investigation is organized around the key themes of truth, subjectivity and audience.<sup>53</sup> In his detailed analysis of the self-positioning of Chinese independent and documentary filmmakers he refers to Jia's statement that "the perception of truth may not always come from direct capturing, for it may possibly come from the subjective imagination."<sup>54</sup> This is especially pertinent, since the focus on the experiences of marginalized people—the grass roots people Zhang describes as central to Jia's oeuvre—has been a common theme in contemporary Chinese independent and documentary films. Grounded within the desire to present an unofficial account of contemporary Chinese history, this issue is further complicated by the political problem that the act of lending a voice to those silenced and powerless entails,

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>53</sup> Yingjin Zhang, *Cinema Space and Polylocality in a Globalizing China*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 108.

most famously conceptualized by Gayatri Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”<sup>55</sup>

Where, then, Zhang asks “do we situate the audience (domestic as well as international) in such a reproduction of truth and reality?”<sup>56</sup>

Deliberating on what he describes as “the dispersed-audience phenomenon,” Zhang uses Jia’s *Xiao Wu* to examine its domestic and international reception, which results in a “a pattern of drastic difference in the reception of ‘truth’ inside and outside China.”<sup>57</sup> Although the overwhelmingly positive reception of *Xiao Wu* abroad stirred the interest of Chinese intellectuals and led to a series of screenings in self-organized film clubs or art venues, the domestic reception of the film has been controversial. Although the circulation of bootleg DVDs plays an important role in making independent films available in China, the problem of reaching a domestic audience in order to establish a steady viewership at home is still an issue. On yet another level, Zhang points out, the label of “banned” or “underground” may make the film especially attractive to an international audience, for the ability to reveal “otherwise ‘hidden’ truth or realities.”<sup>58</sup>

By analyzing Jia’s films comparatively in transnational and local contexts McGrath and Zhang call attention to ecological aspects that Zhang’s analysis fails to address. The complexities of transnational modalities of production and

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<sup>55</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

<sup>56</sup> Zhang, *Cinema Space and Polylocality in a Globalizing China*, 104.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

patterns of reception make clear that the effects of globalization don't stop with the presentation of the cinematic image but traverse the screen and affect the very object of the film itself.<sup>59</sup> In this sense, the attentiveness to the complex interactions of the interlacing ecologies at work in cultural productions, or, in Bakhtin's words, the dialogue that unfolds in the "zone of direct contact with inconclusive present-day reality,"<sup>60</sup> can prove more productive for an ecocritical analysis than focusing on the ecological awareness that speaks through a work of art. To some extent, the enthusiastic critical reception of Jia's films by Western audiences affirms a dilemma regarding attitudes to global ecological crises that has recently been subject to debate. From this perspective, i.e. for an audience situated on the other side of the globe, the ecological problems addressed in Jia's films are conveniently far away.<sup>61</sup> This reinforces the common perception that the ecological crisis—just like nature—is something that is "over there," that I am not part of, responsible for or otherwise implicated in, a fact that could be seen as an ecological problem in itself.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Another recent publication that considers film in a transnational context is Nataša Ďurovičová and Kathleen Newman, eds., *World Cinema Transnational Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2010). See also Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press; London: British Film Institute, 1992).

<sup>60</sup> Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel," 39.

<sup>61</sup> See Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007). This argument is prominent in Andrew Hageman's text as well.

<sup>62</sup> This claim is supported by the self-description of the New York based company dGenerate Films, which also distributes one of Jia's documentaries. dGenerate "brings uncensored, unprecedented and visionary content from deep within mainland China's independent film scene to the U.S. market. We remain deeply committed to providing audience's with an unmediated look at life, as it's truly lived, inside the world's next superpower." February 9, 2011, dGeneratefilms, accessed August 8, 2012, <http://dgeneratefilms.com/dgf-news/dgenerate-president-karin-chien-profiled-in-the-beijinger/#more-5310>. Commenting on a screening at MOMA's Documentary Fortnight Festival in 2011, the company blog states: "For some reason, there was a huge demand

I want to come back to T. J. Clark's analysis of the relationship between figure, ground and horizon in the paintings of Jean-Francois Millet and the implications for an ecocritical approach to the film for a moment. The deprivation depicted in Millet's paintings is mainly an economic one. "There was plenty of fuel for revolution in the county side: land hunger and land shortage, usury and hopeless peasant debt, disputes over common land and forest rights, evictions, litigations in which the rich man won."<sup>63</sup> There was a lot at stake in Millet's struggle to negotiate the rift between country life and city folks. The Parisian audience, critics and potential buyers of Millet's art were at least partially responsible for the economic hardship of the peasantry. Collecting their taxes but giving nothing in return, the urban bourgeoisie helped to perpetuate a political system that kept the countries' poor disenfranchised, without property, and outside the city.<sup>64</sup> But environmental degradation was on the horizon as well. Both the effects of industrialization, such as increased logging, and the growing commercialization of the forest Fontainebleau as an attractive tourist destination were beginning to affect the life in Barbizon. In fact, Millet himself had petitioned to protect areas of the forest from clear-cutting. In 1861, due to the repeated efforts of his fellow painter Theodore Rousseau, several tracts of Fontainebleau

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to see widespread social dysfunction in urban China, depicted in found footage video." February 9, 2011, dGeneratefilms, accessed August 8, 2012, <http://dgeneratefilms.com/events/swimming-in-the-surreal-notes-from-a-disorderly-screening-of-disorder/#more-5448>.

<sup>63</sup> Clark, 15.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 11.



were designated the world's first nature preserve.<sup>65</sup> In Millet's time, the environmental impacts of industrialization first became palpable, but remained secondary to the economic hardship suffered by the peasant and migrant workers.

In Jia's films *Platform* and *Still Life*—produced roughly 150 years after Millet's *Sower* series—environmental degradation is inseparably linked to and aggravated by economic factors. The ecological problems posed in the films are inescapable, regardless of the characters economic standing: pollution and erosion caused by heavy coal mining and landscapes depleted by industrial agriculture are prominent in *Platform*; the massive destruction of the natural landscape and displacement of people at the Three Gorges Dam is the subject of *Still Life*. As the “world's factory,”<sup>66</sup> China accommodates global manufacturing processes and suffers the environmental damage that come with large scale, low-cost production. In 2006, the Beijing-based non-profit organization Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs (IPE) has launched online databases for air and water pollution “to monitor corporate environmental performance and to facilitate public participation in environmental governance.”<sup>67</sup> In order to speed up the pace of change and draw attention to the information now available online, PEI's director, the environmentalist Ma Jun, alerted Western consumers about the

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<sup>65</sup> See Greg M. Thomas, chapter 4 in *Art and Ecology in Nineteenth-Century France: The Landscapes of Théodore Rousseau* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>66</sup> Kevin E. Zhang, *China As the World Factory* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>67</sup> “About,” 2010, The Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs, accessed December 8, 2012. <http://www.ipe.org.cn/en/about/about.aspx>.

gross-polluting Chinese companies in the supply chain of 29 multinational electronics companies.<sup>68</sup> “In the wave of globalization,” one IPE report states, “Apple and other brands have implemented global production and procurement practices, outsourcing a number of highly polluting and discharging production processes to China and other developing countries.”<sup>69</sup> After successfully targeting international IT brands in 2010 and 2011, which in many cases led to the adoption of corrective measures and transparency, IPE is currently investigating the environmental performance of Chinese suppliers of international textile and apparel companies.<sup>70</sup>

This question of “ecological embeddedness” is at the center of Andrew Hageman’s text “Floating Consciousness: The Cinematic Confluence of Ecological Aesthetic in *Suzhou River*.” For Hageman, the question of ecocinema is one of ideological awareness: “How does the intersection of ecology, ideology and cinema work?”<sup>71</sup> He finds the answer in the non-anthropocentric perspective suggested in Lou Ye’s neo-noir film *Suzhou River* (2000), which drastically diverges from the “heavy-handed didactic” approach to social issues and the

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<sup>68</sup> Jason Dearen, “An Unassuming Warrior: Chinese Environmentalist Ma Jun,” November 20, 2012, Smart Planet, accessed December 8, 2012, <http://www.smartplanet.com/blog/big-story/an-unassuming-warrior-chinese-environmentalist-ma-jun/122>. The “Study of Heavy Metal Pollution by IT Brand Supply Chain” was conducted by Friends of Nature, Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs, Green Beagle and published on April 24, 2010. Available online <http://www.ipe.org.cn/Upload/Report-IT-Phase-One-EN.pdf>.

<sup>69</sup> The follow-up report “The Other Side of Apple II: Pollution Spreads Through Apple Supply Chain” was conducted by Friends of Nature, Institute of Public & Environmental Affairs, Green Beagle, Envirofriends, Green Stone Environmental Action Network and published on August 31, 2011. Available online <http://www.ipe.org.cn/Upload/Report-IT-V-Apple-II-EN.pdf>.

<sup>70</sup> For a list of all IPE reports available online, see <http://www.ipe.org.cn/En/about/report.aspx>.

<sup>71</sup> Andrew Hageman, “Floating Consciousness: The Cinematic Confluence of Ecological Aesthetic in *Suzhou River*,” in *Chinese Ecocinema: In the Age of Environmental Challenge*, 91.

“stark realism”<sup>72</sup> characteristic of the films of Lou’s Sixth Generation contemporaries.<sup>73</sup> He is less concerned with the “cinematic embeddedness and geographic locatedness” of Lou’s characters. Rather, his essay attends to the ways in which the experience of ecological embeddedness is created in *Suzhou River* through the use of perspective, camera angles and point of view.<sup>74</sup>

Hageman builds his argument through a close reading of the film’s opening sequence, in which the Suzhou river, carrying “a century worth of stories (...), and rubbish, which makes it the filthiest river,”<sup>75</sup> serves as a metaphor for both the narrative and material interconnectedness between people and their environment. The sequence begins with the decontextualized dialogue between a man and a woman set against a completely black screen, followed by the subjective point of view of the narrator/videographer floating down the Suzhou River in a boat. Through the use of erratic jump cuts and tilted angles, his camera takes on the perspective of pieces of rubbish bobbing in the water. Subjective and objective points of view are collapsed in this initial montage. The camera-eye of the videographer doesn’t drift past the rubbish but shares the same space. This camera perspective does not afford a critical distance towards the literal pollution of the river, on the contrary it takes on the point of view of the

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>73</sup> Interestingly, Jia Zhangke is named as a prime example again, only in this case a negative one.

<sup>74</sup> *Suzhou River* is narrated by voiceover from the perspective of a videographer/narrator, who—except for an occasional glimpse of his hands or smoke from his cigarette—never enters frame. The camera perspective moves fluidly between extreme subjective and omniscient point of view, as the narrator tells the intertwined story of four young people in Shanghai.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 76.

environment. “This synthesis of alternating points of view,” Hageman contends, “illuminates the structures of ecology that were heretofore formerly hidden, and as a result the notion of ‘environment’ is replaced with that of ‘ecology.’”<sup>76</sup> He argues that through the common perception of seeing environmental problems in the distance of a crisis-ridden “over there,” we fail to perceive ourselves as being part of the same ecological structures. Through the camera-eye of Lou’s videographer we can see the “gaze of ecology leveling on us”<sup>77</sup> and thus become aware of our own embeddedness in ecological structures.

For Zhang, Jia’s ecological consciousness speaks through the sophisticated portrayal of his character’s chronotopic situatedness in their socio-historical reality. For Hageman the “aesthetic illusion of critical distance”<sup>78</sup> in Jia’s films lacks the self-reflexivity of Lou’s approach. Rather than exclusively concentrating on how the relationships between man and environment are (mis)represented in film he seeks to expose the underlying notion of ecology that is assumed within this relationship. To do so, he adds a psychoanalytic perspective to his analysis and reflects the embeddedness in ideological structures back onto the filmmaker and viewer in order to emphasize that the unveiling of ecological blind spots does not end on the cinematic screen. Whereas the environment in Zhang’s text recedes into the background, in the classical sense of the setting of an event or action, Hageman dismisses his

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 78.

merely supporting role of the environment. Instead, he abolishes the term as a critical category altogether and suggests replacing the term with the notion of ecology. By enabling the viewer to see their position in the world from a different perspective, *Suzhou River* “facilitates the re-coordination of the position(s) we occupy in this disoriented epoch of ecological crisis.”<sup>79</sup> However, although the spectator is crucial in Hageman’s scenario, the actual circuit of film distribution and reception is given as little attention as in Zhang’s text. In the end, Hageman’s universal viewer remains fictive at best. Although critically acclaimed in North America and Europe, *Shuzhou River* is still banned in China. After all, the problem of disregarding ecological problems as being located “elsewhere” is still not solved. Hageman might successfully circumnavigate the ideological waters of critical distance, but by ignoring the specific place and time of the viewers of *Suhzou River*, he unwillingly duplicates the very problem of distance he set out to criticize on another level.

Like Bakhtin, Hageman is interested in ideological structures and their psychological dimensions. He describes the inability “to perceive ourselves always already inscribed within ecological structures”<sup>80</sup> as an ideological one. Bakhtin also begins with the assertion that we cannot see ourselves within our own environment. But he does not render this as an ideological dimension, rather it is a structural aspect of human vision. However, as Michael Holquist points out, “Bakhtin chooses not to emphasize the blindness inevitable in any act of

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 78.

perception but rather the insight that alterity makes available to us.”<sup>81</sup> A human being is rendered complete by the other in a reciprocal process both aesthetically and ethically: the self can only know itself from the place of the other. “The organizing power in all aesthetic forms,” Bakhtin concludes, “is the axiological category of the other.”<sup>82</sup>

Informed by recent discourses on the agency of objects, Hageman’s insistence to consider the point of view of the environment—in this case a piece of flotsam garbage—in place of the other, is a valuable addition to the Bakhtinian architectonics of self and other. But while Bakhtin is interested in multiple instances of ideological transferences, Hageman essentially creates a monologic scenario, where the filmic text is endowed with the power to unveil ideological blind spots and his notion of ecology emphasizes a unifying system. For Bakhtin, on the other hand, the excess of seeing is not reduced to one over-arching ideological structure, but embraces the idea of an environment created through intersecting social and subjective horizons that exist within the creative chronotopic exchange between the viewer and the work. Ultimately, the life of a work is refracted by various voices and actualized, or “consummated” by the viewer.<sup>83</sup> Thinking about the novel, Bakhtin writes, “that every literary work *faces*

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<sup>81</sup> Holquist, “The Carnival of Discourse: Baxtin and Simultaneity,” 225.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

*outward away from itself*, toward the listener-reader, and to a certain extent thus anticipates possible reactions to itself.”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Bakhtin, “Form of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” 257.

## Chapter 2

In the following pages, I propose a reading of two films by Chinese director Ning Hao, *Mongolian Ping Pong* and *Crazy Stone*, that employs Bakhtin's writings on horizon and environment as an analytical directory in order to explore the chronotopes of Ning's films. Rather than treating film as a repository for the director's environmental concerns or focusing on the positioning of the viewer that is implied in filmic representations of the environment, I seek to analyze Ning's films by tracing the different perceptual horizons of director, characters/actors and audience and their intrinsic interrelatedness. How do transnational and local contexts call attention to the ecological aspects of Ning's films? In what ways do the transnational modalities of film production and reception affect the environments of his films? Building on these questions, my analysis moves beyond ecocinema studies' focus on environmental and ecological issues to include the complex interlacing ecologies of cinema itself—the production, distribution and consumption of film.

Born in 1977, the filmmaker and videographer Ning Hao can be identified with Sixth Generation filmmakers, but he has also been grouped with the so-called d (for digital) or Seventh Generation of New Chinese Cinema. To date Ning has made seven films, the first five of which are available in the US. His first short *Thursday, Wednesday* was made in 2000, *Incense*, his graduation film from the Beijing Film Academy in 2003, and *Mongolian Ping Pong* in 2005. Both *Incense* and *Mongolian Ping Pong* were independently produced and made the



rounds at international film festivals and art house cinemas, but received little attention in China. *Crazy Stone*, Ning's third feature, co-produced by Warner China Film HG, Beijing-based Concord Creation International, and Andy Lau's Focus Films, proved an overnight hit at the domestic box office upon its release in 2006. The film's immense popularity spilled over to the then unknown 27-year-old director and also called attention to his previous work. In June 2007 *Time Out Beijing* listed the DVD of *Mongolian Ping Pong* as one of "the hottest in town."<sup>85</sup> Ning's fifth film, *Crazy Racer*, also called *Silver Medalist* was released in China in 2009. His feature *Western Sunshine*, also called *No Man's Land*, finished in 2010, was never cleared for theatrical release in China, or, to my knowledge, shown abroad. Ning's latest feature *Guns'n Roses* passed censorship regulations and opened in Chinese theaters in April 2012.

When I watched *Crazy Stone* for the first time, I was surprised by the dark comedy-cum-action movie. *Mongolian Ping Pong* is an endearing, beautifully shot film about growing up in the Mongolian steppe, while *Crazy Stone*, by contrast, features butt jokes, a lead character with problems urinating, an obnoxious art school graduate, and various groups of silly seeming thieves chasing a precious jade. I was even more surprised, then, when I learned that my Chinese colleagues unequivocally agreed that *Crazy Stones* was one of the best movies in recent Chinese cinema. Clearly, I may not be the primary audience for

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<sup>85</sup> See Le Mingpai Shijie (Time Out Beijing) Issue 115 (June 2007): 65. Quoted in Xiaoping Lin, "Ning Hao's Incense," in *Chinese Ecocinema: In the Age of Environmental Challenge*, 317. Warner Bros is also planning to market a Ning Hao Three Film DVD pack with *Crazy Stone*, *Incense* and *Mongolian Ping Pong*.

this film; however, as a non-Chinese speaking Westerner, I am part of the transnational art house audience intrigued by films such as *Platform*.

Although the two films belong to different genres and couldn't be more different stylistically, *Crazy Stone* and *Platform* as well as the two directors themselves actually have a lot in common. Natives of the Shanxi province in Northern China, they both graduated from the Beijing Film Academy; however, they were not accepted in the academy's prestigious film directing program: Jia studied literature, Ning majored in photography. Upon the success of their early low-budget features in international film festivals, both directors attracted investors that enabled them to produce their subsequent films with much higher production values. While Jia secured major portions of his funding for *Platform* from a French foundation, *Crazy Stone* belongs to the Hong Kong-based "Asian New Director" film project sponsored by Andy Lau, which also includes five other films by emerging directors. Just like Jia, Ning very self-consciously references international film aesthetics and has described his films as a tribute to director's such as Quentin Tarantino and Guy Ritchie, who are well-known for their fast-paced editing styles, dark humor and multiple story-lines. He also cites Emir Kusturica, notorious for his exuberant staging of Western perceptions of the "Balkan," as influential to his work.<sup>86</sup> *Crazy Stone* is essentially a reworking of

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<sup>86</sup> See Andrew Mack, "Interview: Ning Hao talks about his 'Crazy Stone'," August 11, 2006, Twitchfilm, accessed August 28, 2012, <http://twitchfilm.com/interviews/2006/08/interview-ning-hao-talks-about-his-crazy-stone.php>.

<sup>86</sup> Quoted in Zhang, *Cinema, Space and Polylocality*, 104.

<sup>86</sup> Zhang, *Cinema, Space and Polylocality*, 104.

Ritchie's film *Snatch* (2000), with blatant quotes from Hollywood action movies such as Brian de Palma's *Mission Impossible*, superimposed onto a gentrification story within the municipality of Chongqing.

With specific locations as a decisive factor in their films, both directors are famous for using local dialects rather than standard-Mandarin in their films<sup>87</sup> and provide ardent commentary on social-political realities in contemporary China. Jia has countered accusations that the use of dialect in his film is not authentic to the specific locales, claiming that he wants to "go beyond the local factor" and "create real human beings who possess universality or universal human emotions."<sup>88</sup>

"Remembering history is no longer the exclusive right (*tequan*) of the government," Jia has said about his political conviction as a filmmaker. "[A]s an ordinary intellectual, I firmly believe that our culture should be teeming with unofficial memories (*minjian de jiyi*)."<sup>89</sup> The term he uses for unofficial, *minjian*, means popular or folk, as in the term folk art (*minjian yishu*).<sup>90</sup> Commenting on *Crazy Stone*, which requires subtitles even for Chinese audiences due to its speedy mish-mash of dialect, Ning joked that "Shanghai people didn't love it,

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<sup>86</sup> "Meeting Ning Hao." N.d., Bcmagazine, accessed August 8, 2012

[http://www.bcmagazine.net/hk.bcmagazine.issues/bcmagazine\\_webissue214/16cinema.html](http://www.bcmagazine.net/hk.bcmagazine.issues/bcmagazine_webissue214/16cinema.html).

<sup>87</sup> The use of dialect in both films has been discussed thoroughly. See Jin Liu, "The Rhetoric of Local Languages as the Marginal: Chinese Underground and Independent Films by Jia Zhangke and Others," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, 18.2 (2006): 163-205; and Yi He, "Humor in Discourse: A Linguistic Study of the Chinese Dialect Film *Crazy Stone*," in *Proceedings of the 20th North American Conference on Chinese Linguistics (NACCL-20) Volume 2*, ed. Marjorie K. M. Chan and Hana Kang, 989-998 (Columbus, Ohio: The Ohio State University, 2008).

<sup>88</sup> Quoted in Jin, 179.

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Zhang, *Cinema, Space and Polylocality*, 104.

<sup>90</sup> Zhang, *Cinema, Space and Polylocality*, 104.

though. (...) They don't really like hearing other regional dialects.”<sup>91</sup> While Jia's paternalistic tendencies seep through the realist aesthetic of his films, Ning avoids this conundrum by over-exaggerating class positions and ethnic belonging through the use of costume, dialect and slang. However, addressing local rather than international audiences, Ning's film *Crazy Stone* comes closer to the idea of folk art by creating a regional cinema, both in terms of the genre and the relationship it assumes with the audience within the specific urban ecologies of Chongqing.

Located elsewhere both geographically and conceptually, his earlier film *Mongolian Ping Pong* presents a take on folk art that is entangled in questions of ethnography. “That film,” says Ning “is a mirror, a true reflection of Mongolian people.”<sup>92</sup> I want to argue, however, that it is a mirror image that reflects Bakhtin's notion of the “excess of seeing” that structures the architectonics of self and other, in which “two different worlds are reflected in the pupils of our eye.”<sup>93</sup> In *Mongolian Ping Pong* the eye of the camera, and thus the horizon of the director, is constantly reflected back to the viewer. Far from being constrained to their representation on the screen, the reflection of the Mongolian people in the mirror thus carries “axiological weight.”<sup>94</sup>

The film tells the story of Bilike and his friends Erguotou and Dawa, who live with their families in the remote grassland of Inner Mongolia. When Bilike

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<sup>91</sup> Mack, “Interview: Ning Hao talks about his ‘Crazy Stone.’”

<sup>92</sup> “Meeting Ning Hao.”

<sup>93</sup> Bakhtin, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” 23.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

finds a ping pong ball floating in the creek, nobody around him knows what this mysterious object is called or could be used for. He consults his grandmother, who suggests that the shiny blank sphere is a glowing pearl, a spirit treasure. Without the help of a flashlight, however, the three boys' nightly test soon proves, the pearl does not glow. From this point forward the excitement about the precious find begins to alternate with skeptic dispiritedness. Prayers at the local ovoo bring nothing but trouble with the neighboring kids' gang who want their share of the glowing mystery. Later, the boys seek advice a little further away in the nearest monastery, but also to no avail.

*Mongolian Ping Pong* is vaguely reminiscent of Jamie Uys' *The Gods Must be Crazy* (1980), whose plot is set in motion by a Coca-Cola bottle that is thrown out of an airplane (a recurrent reference in Ning's films). In this film the unknown object is found by a Sho, whose tribe in the Kalahari Desert is without knowledge of the consumerist world outside. However, the humor in *Mongolian Ping Pong* is far more sophisticated. Essentially, Ning mocks the basic premise of a "pre-modern" people confronting a mass-produced artifact. *Mongolian Ping Pong* is foremost a meditation about the event of growing up, not the clashing of cultures. Reading *Mongolian Ping Pong* as an "easily consumable" parable, the German film critic Martin Rosefeldt writes: "Ning's film with exact script and stage direction trusts less in the improvisational talent of his lay actors. Therefore *Mongolian Ping Pong* oftentimes has the air of peasant theater, in which the admittedly cute kids can live out their playfulness, but are many times

overwhelmed by the wishes of the director.”<sup>95</sup> Indeed, *Mongolian Ping Pong* does look like peasant theater, precisely because it is choreographed to look that way—a fact not only the director and actors know, but also the audience is aware of from the very beginning of the film.

The opening sequence shows Bilike’s father and mother, both dressed in Western style clothing, having their picture taken in front of a rippling backdrop of Tiananmen Gate. “Look natural,” the photographer’s voice can be heard from off-screen, “Are you ready?” Moving in and out of the frame of the static camera, Bilike’s family then goes through a series of motions to change back into traditional Mongolian dels to pose for a few family portraits. Through this staged change of costume the notion of theater is introduced at the outset of the film, and it is further underscored by the fact that there is no attempt to make believe that the backdrop is the real thing. Photographer, actors and audience all know that the photograph is staged, everybody is on the same page. The camera itself is acknowledged by Bilike who walks straight towards it before he leaves the frame. However, when the previously static camera follows Bilike’s grandmother as she walks out of the frame into the landscape, the effect of the “visually compelling and admittedly stunning beauty of the Mongolian steppe,” as Rosenfeld puts it, is not lessened. But through the sleight of hand of using the backdrop with an image of an iconic Chinese landmark, the iconic vastness and

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<sup>95</sup> Martin Rosefeldt, “Mongolian Ping Pong: Ein Film von Ning Hao,” December 13, 2005, Arte, accessed August 8, 2012. [http://www.arte.tv/de/film/Kino-News/kinostart/Kinostart\\_2015.\\_20Dezember\\_202005./1061470,CmC=1062284.html](http://www.arte.tv/de/film/Kino-News/kinostart/Kinostart_2015._20Dezember_202005./1061470,CmC=1062284.html). My translation.

rough beauty of the steppe is also situated and visually related to the world outside. Beijing might be far away, but the image of it is not, and for three Yuan you can have your picture taken in front of it. This play with proximity and distance mirrors the relation between the film's audience and the landscape presented in the film as an "easily consumable" image.

The representation of cinematic images and the idea of being connected to the world through film is further thematized when a traveling movie show comes to town and Bilike and his friends move a little step forward in their quest to figure out the origin of the odd white ball. After finally being introduced to the name of the thing, use and significance are lastly revealed through the live broadcast of a ping pong match on the new television set Dawa's father has won at the local fair. But the televised image gets lost in the ether, and only the sound is retrieved, clumsily, via a makeshift antenna constructed out of a herding stick, aluminum cans and metal sheets. "As we all know," the boys learn, "Ping Pong is our national sport and the Ping Pong ball is our national ball." What exactly the national sport of ping pong is and how the ball can be a sport remains unclear.<sup>96</sup> But the realization that they are in possession of the national ball brings new responsibilities with it. The last part of the film shows the boys

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<sup>96</sup> The English subtitles are somewhat misleading. The boy's confusion is due to a misunderstanding. The Chinese word 国家球 literally translates into 'national ball', but means 'national sport' in Chinese. The language spoken in the film itself is Mongolian. See Chris Waugh, "Mongolian Ping Pong," July 26, 2007, [Chriszh.over-blog](http://chriszh.over-blog.com/article-6974112.html), accessed August 8, 2012, <http://chriszh.over-blog.com/article-6974112.html>.

adventurous, but unsuccessful attempt to cross the Gobi Desert on their way to Beijing, determined to return the ball to the nation.

In summarizing the film's plot, I've presented only two of the horizons the film contains: that of Bilike and that of the director. In Bilike's case there is a clear differentiation between his environment and his horizon: the ping pong ball is not part of his environment, of the things and people that surround him. Rather, it stands as an object within the structure of his lived horizon, which is imposed on him as a task to be accomplished within the event of growing up. "Objects do not surround me (my outer body)," Bakhtin writes, "in their presently given make-up and their presently given value, but rather—stand over against me as the objects of my own cognitive-ethical directedness in living my life within the open, still risk-fraught event of being, whose unity, meaning and value are not *given* but imposed as a task *still* to be accomplished."<sup>97</sup> Bakhtin's understanding of the "object" standing over against the hero is not meant as a literal object such as Bilike's ping pong ball. In fact, he differentiates between the hero's world as the object of acts and the actual object-world that surrounds him. From within the hero, the "active, act-performing"<sup>98</sup> consciousness of his horizon encompasses the outside world. But the ping pong ball offers itself to stand as an object that projects into the hero's future. "From within my own consciousness (...) the world

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<sup>97</sup> Bakhtin, "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity," 98.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.



is the object of my acts: acts of thinking, acts of feeling, acts of speaking, acts of doing.”<sup>99</sup>

But there is another object looming on the horizon. It is highly unlikely for a six- or seven-year-old boy from Inner Mongolia to not know what a ping pong ball is. “In China, ping pong is neither an urban recreation nor an ironic diversion, but a facet of national identity. It was adored by Chairman Mao and revered by Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping. Tables perch in metropolitan railway stations and on the dusty streets of the rural hinterland, so that commuters and farmhands can indulge their obsession.”<sup>100</sup> Mao Zedong first implemented ping pong as the national game in the early 1950s as a cost-effective way to unite the newly-founded Communist nation. His policy succeeded when in 1959 Rong Guotuan won the World Championships and international success helped to boost the national self-esteem and to cast ping pong into modern Chinese consciousness. From this perspective Ning’s use of the ping pong ball as a synonym of a cultural sophistication, is revealed as a rhetorical trope. By colliding the limitations and specificities of perceptual horizons, the filmmaker is playing with the expectation of different audiences but also commenting on nationalism. It is only when Bilike starts school in the city that he finds out about sport. After the white ball has been featured excessively in the film, only the sound of ball on paddle—the rhythm that supposedly unites the nation—can be heard when Bilike opens the door to

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>100</sup> Matthew Syed, “Ping pong, China’s passion,” August 7, 2008, *The Sunday Times*, accessed August 8, 2012, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/sport/olympics/article4472923.ece>.

the gymnasium in the last shot of the film. Demystified, the ping pong ball ceases to be an object of acts within Bilike's horizon, and descends into the object-world of his new educational environment.

Another example of Ning's mobilization of colliding perceptual horizons of author, hero and viewer occurs when Bilike first reaches the city. Upon his arrival, he is confronted with a view of his former environment when he watches tourists having their picture taken in front of a painted landscape backdrop of the vast steppe grassland – the exact reversal of the film's opening sequence where the family stages a portrait with the backdrop of Tiananmen Gate. Bilike's view of his own environment as a dislocated image again brings to the fore the perception and distance of the audience. "What is realized in the novel is the process of coming to know one's own horizon with someone else's horizon," writes Bakhtin, "There takes place within the novel an ideological translation of another's language, and an overcoming of its otherness." Just like the painted backdrops, it is "an otherness that is only contingent, external, illusory."<sup>101</sup> The objects within the filmmaker's horizon, then, are the objects of image production within a cinematic environment: the staging of pictures, the creation of film images, the transfer and distribution, making and consumption of films within different contexts and locales, an aspect that becomes even more pronounced in *Crazy Stone*.

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<sup>101</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogical Imagination Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, 275.

In the first public interview with the director that was broadcast on CCTV shortly after the tremendous success of *Crazy Stone*, Ning explains his choice of the film location Chongqing as a response to the rapidly developing city's charged atmosphere. "The glaring absurdity of the story [of *Crazy Stone*] can only be found in a place with big chances and antagonistic contradictions."<sup>102</sup> In 1997 Chongqing became independent from the Sichuan province as a municipality directly under the central government and was included in the economic initiative Open up the West.<sup>103</sup> "I sensed that atmosphere directly from the city's architecture. Looking from Luohan temple (Louhansi), I saw instantly all kinds of buildings from three hundred years ago up to the present," Ning says about the mix of old dilapidated tenement buildings and modern skyscrapers encroaching on the temple around which the story unfolds. "Under such conditions, there must be people of all social strata living in those buildings, old or new. Because of this there is a possibility of contradictions and a story as well."<sup>104</sup> Chongqing's disparate economic, social and architectural environment thus becomes the bedrock of the film's narrative environment.

In *Crazy Stone* people from different strata of society chase the dream of improvement symbolized in the eponymous jade stone. For some this dream

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<sup>102</sup> Quoted in Xiaoping Lin, "Ning Hao's Incense," in *Chinese Ecocinema: In the Age of Environmental Challenge*, 235. First published in Xiaoping Lin, *Children of Marx and Coca Cola: Chinese Avant-garde Art and Independent Cinema* (Honolulu, Hawai'i Press, 2010).

<sup>103</sup> Western Development is a policy that supports the development of infrastructure, enticement of foreign investment, ecological protection, and education in an effort to boost China's less developed Western regions.

<sup>104</sup> Quoted in Lin, "Ning Hao's Incense," 235.

simply means getting back their jobs in the bankrupt state-owned factory that is part of the temple complex where the stone is found. For others the value of the stone is measured in the stories of the condominium tower planned for the site. Jumping back and forth in time, the first ten minutes of the film introduces a mesh of intersecting storylines each unfolding around a cast of characters whose relationships are slowly revealed through the course of the film. First we see the factory owner's son make an unsuccessful advance on the con artist's girlfriend in an aerial tram. Her rebuke causes him to drop his Coca-Cola can from the tram's open window. In the next scene a fight ensues between the fabric owner and a junior developer over outstanding loan payments, which then cuts to the con artists' slipping through the fingers of local law enforcement, and finally to the van of the temple's security guard as he crashes into the junior developer's BMW. This final collision is caused by the falling Coca Cola can seen in the first episode, reconnecting the chain of events spatially and temporally. "*Crazy Stone* has so many characters, that if each were not distinctive, they would become lost in the story and confusing to an audience. I wanted the faces to be like a Chinese masks – easily recognizable," Ning has said about his casting decision. In contrast to *Mongolian Ping Pong*, "*Crazy Stone* is a distorted mirror, the characters are real but enlarged and exaggerated."<sup>105</sup>

By now well known for his compressing of time and space through fast-paced cuts and montage, Ning also frequently employs deep focus to linger on

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<sup>105</sup> "Meeting Ning Hao."

filmic tableaux in which the main action is off-set with an array of activities taking place in the background. By doing so, Ning's camera is able to capture multiple layers of social interactions within contested spaces in short sequences or single shots. Through his conscious stylistic reference to mainstream cinema and classical film aesthetics, *Crazy Stone* can be seen as an intervention into a cinematic environment that is otherwise saturated by mainstream Hollywood. J. Coleen Berry has argued that an audience consisting of solely Chinese viewers appreciating the intertextual references and parody of well-known international films can still be considered a global audience.<sup>106</sup> In *Crazy Stone*, then, the transnational runs through a Chinese audience watching a film that was shot locally and produced in China.

Until the very end of the film, the skyline of Chongqing remains hidden behind wafts of fog even for the film's main character, the security guard Bao Shihong, who comes to the riverbank occasionally to gain perspective. Brimming with neon lights amidst the modern skyscrapers cramped into the old quarters of the town, the Luohan temple Bao is guarding is almost as overdrawn as the characters animating it. While the relationship of figure and ground in *Crazy Stone* can be described as regional characters and sites that are shown against the socio-political horizon of globalization, the transnational dimension of cinematic exchange plays out on different levels. Ning's meditation on the cultural changes and economic pressures within contemporary Chinese society

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<sup>106</sup> J. Coleen Berry, "Feng Xiaogang and Ning Hao: Directing China's New Film Comedies," in *Dekalog 4 On East Asian Filmmakers*, ed. Kate E. Taylor (Brighton: Wallflower Press, 2011).

represents only one aspect of the film's ecological implication. The film's actual intersection with the environment happens within the institution of cinema. *Crazy Stone* enters into a fierce dialogue with the dominant mainstream films that flood the Chinese film landscape. "China has a feeling for entertainment, as America does," Ning says. "It shows that Chinese people do want to consume Chinese culture and aren't just satisfied consuming McDonalds."<sup>107</sup> *Crazy Stone* doesn't set out to satisfy the perception of an international audience by following the art house convention of depicting China in the grip of globalization. With a nod to Hollywood's tradition of the happy ending, the competing linguistic, stylistic and cultural forces that shape the film's environment are suspended for a moment by the image of the hero and his girlfriend cast against the skyline of Chongqing. "With such an internal fusion of two points of view, two intensions and two expressions in one discourse, the parodic essence of such a discourse takes on a peculiar character," Bakhtin writes about the relationship between author and hero. "[T]he parodied language offers a living dialogic resistance to the parodying intentions of the other; an unresolved conversation begins to sound in the image itself; the image becomes an open, living mutual interaction between worlds, points of views and accents."<sup>108</sup> Subjectivities are formed and brought to bear upon by the participation in a transnational cinematic dialog of dreaming up, making, parodying, circulating, watching, critiquing and indulging in films.

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<sup>107</sup> "Meeting Ning Hao."

<sup>108</sup> Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 376.

Whether dressed up nicely to see *Platform* at the local art house cinema or the opening of *Crazy Stone* at UME Cineplex in Chongqing, streaming *Still Life* on Netflix or watching a DVD of *Mongolian Ping Pong*, transnational audiences are implicated in the environmental challenges China is facing. The production, distribution, and consumption of film require scholarly attention beyond the scope of transnational or ecocritical approaches alone. Where the horizon exists as both a physical entity and perceptual modality, the chronotopes of films establish a zone of direct contact between the characters and (transnational) audiences. Just as novels, films mean and do different things in different places, contexts and times. Playing out in an “environment full of alien words”<sup>109</sup>—and images—that merge or recoil, contradict and shape each other within the institution of cinema, the chronotopic exchange between film and viewer carries ecological significance.

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 276.

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