

air quality problem was put on the national agenda and entered public discourse but almost exclusively through the lens of indoor pollution. The importance of this issue was strongly related to the idea that pollution can harm the health of individuals and then weaken the nation in a period when building a strong nation was one of the main concerns.

The third chapter, titled “The Ideologization of Smoke,” covers the period 1949-1978. The willingness of the Party to develop China as rapidly as possible and more generally the overall ideological background laid the groundwork for a harsh degradation of the urban and the rural environment. Pollution has long been depicted as a problem of capitalist countries, while conversely, in socialist countries, smoke has been seen as a sign of progress. Though the leadership was well aware that pollution could damage health, it was considered a secondary concern and suppressed in public debate. Participation in the Stockholm Summit in 1972 is therefore described as a milestone in the environmental history of China. China recognised the need to be concerned with environmental problems, but pollution was perceived as an unavoidable side effect of necessary industrial development. Though some regulations were issued, there were no immediate consequences in the regulation of air pollution.

The period 1978-2008 described in the fourth chapter is associated with “an emerging scientific, political, and popular concern with air pollution” (p. 100). China’s reform and opening up period led to a dramatic increase in air pollution but also to a more scientific approach toward the issue and changes in the way the government perceived it. State media increasingly covered environmental problems, though often in vague terms, relying more on sensation than on scientific data. Petitions and protests emerged in the 1980s and increased significantly in the 1990s and 2000s. Several quite good laws were drafted to regulate air pollution and more general environmental degradation. More exchanges existed with foreign experts and policymakers. However, other economic and political factors often remained prioritised: the regulation of pollution should not hinder economic development. That’s why a big gap existed between laws and implementation. Some changes were nonetheless visible in the mid-2000s, for example, more importance being given to environmental protection in the evaluation of local cadres, and more resources allocated to air pollution control.

The last chapter, “The Popularization of Air Pollution” (2008-2017), is characterised as an “air pollution shift” (p. 126). The Chinese population, and not only the urban middle class, became highly preoccupied by air pollution. In the three villages where the authors carried out their fieldwork in Zhejiang, residents worry about the health consequences of air pollution and protests have occurred against local polluters. This wide awareness has been fostered by the extensive disclosure of air quality data measured in urban areas and by the broad coverage of this issue in traditional media and social media. Four events have been selected for the role they have played in this process: the Beijing Olympics, the “airpocalypse,” the documentary *Under the Dome*, and “APEC Blue.”¹ During this

period, air pollution has been put on the top of the political agenda, and stricter policies have been implemented at both the national and local levels. Although the beginning of the period was characterised by a high level of openness in the release of information and in social media, air pollution became more and more sensitive after 2013 under the Xi administration. After the release of *Under the Dome*, coverage of environmental issues became more positive and government-orientated.

The ability of the authors to put all this information in one small book is quite impressive. The counterpart is that the analysis devoted to the authors’ own fieldwork and new data is rather limited. Theoretical development is also scarce. For those already familiar with this topic, it could be a little disappointing in this regard. However, it is a perfect introduction for those interested in air pollution or in environmental issues more generally, and it is definitely meaningful reading for understanding the challenges that China is facing nowadays.



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With *Chinese Film: Realism and Convention from the Silent Era to the Digital Age*, Jason McGrath continues his exploration of the cinema of mainland China. After *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age* (2008), McGrath gives us seven chapters that create a dense, transversal panorama of the history of Chinese cinema through various conceptions of realism intrinsically linked to the context of creation and implicated in the dialogue between East and West. Returning to the theoretical debates in various areas of knowledge that have informed his approach, he reminds us that realism is indissociable from the narrative and cinematic

1. “APEC Blue” refers to the emission reduction campaign directed in 2014 by the Chinese government during the APEC China summit, leading to a rare blue sky.

conventions that circumscribe it at the time. In a bid to bring this shifting relationship closer to the “real” as it is embodied in the films, McGrath uses six categories that punctuate the history of Chinese cinema: ontological, perceptual, fictional, social, prescriptive, and apophatic.

Far removed from any solidified historiography, but between continuum and rupture, these types of realism burst onto the cinematographic scene, fading out when the formula, repeated too often, becomes clichéd, but then reemerging in other contexts. In this way, McGrath paints a dynamic picture, seen in its many ramifications and illuminated by numerous analyses, ranging from *Street Angel* (*Malu tianshi* 馬路天使, 1937, director: Yuan Muzhi 袁牧之), to *Wolf Warrior 2* (*Zhang lang 2* 戰狼 II, 2017, dir.: Wu Jing 吳京), and including *The Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse niangzi jun* 紅色娘子軍, 1961, dir.: Xie Jin 謝晉). The ontological realism of Bazin’s theory – the automatic recording of the real placed in front of the camera – is operative in redefining acting in silent film, in tune with the new medium and magnificently personified by Ruan Lingyu 阮玲玉 (Chapter One) but brought into question in the digital age of computer-assisted creation (Chapter Seven). This updating of acting in the time of the silent film veers, moreover, towards prescriptive realism when it is a question of bringing to the screen modern ways of being in the world that are intended to direct the behaviour of the spectators.

Whilst “realism becomes an aesthetic ideology” (p. 62) in tune with the problems of each era, the “left-wing cinema” of Shanghai in the 1930s, analysed in Chapter Two through works such as *The Goddess* (*Shennü* 神女, 1934, dir.: Wu Yonggang 吳永剛), and *Crossroads* (*Shizi jietou* 十字街頭, 1937, dir.: Shen Xiling 沈西苓), borrows many of the conventions of Hollywood cinema in a vast intertextual interplay that ranges from imitation to subversion. Although Chinese directors adopt a fictional realism that aims to create the diegetic illusion of a fictional world resembling ours, they nevertheless breach classical unity through narrative flaws, tonal shifts, or impromptu deviations. Romantic comedies, melodramas, or burlesque are at times deconstructed by a “vernacular modernism” (p. 111), and give way to critical social realism, describing the tough conditions of the lives of the people – between poverty and exploitation. This movement is reinforced in postwar cinema (Chapter Three), which traces the suffering of the Chinese under Japanese occupation (*The Spring River Flows East*, *Yi jiang chun shui xiang dong liu* 一江春水向東流, directors: Cai Chusheng 蔡楚生 and Zheng Junli 鄭君里, released in 1947), but also seeks to reflect society as a whole and the structure of the evolving urban classes (Zheng Junli’s *Crows and Sparrows*, *Wuya yu maque* 烏鴉與麻雀, 1949).

After the victory of the Communists over the Nationalists, the creation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 and the advent of the Mao era, prescriptive realism dominated revolutionary cinema (Chapter Four). Realism ran up against the mythification of History that favoured a vision directed towards events that served the political message. Under the iron rule of the Communists, proletarian realism, renamed socialist, was inflated by revolutionary romanticism. From this perspective, it was no longer a question of effectively representing reality as it was, but rather as it ought to be,

both more profound and reaching out towards a projected future. There was an abundance of stereotypes, a sublimation of emotions and progressive energy, to an extent where it engendered abstract and utopic forms. In Chapter Five, devoted to socialist formalism and the end of revolutionary cinema, McGrath demonstrates how descriptive realism became prescriptive and finally sank into repetitive and exaggeratedly stylised formulas, imposing an ideological conformity that culminated in an almost anti-historic derealisation. He returns also to the “cinematographic desert” of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), between the total break in production from 1966 to 1970 and the propaganda of the model operas placed under the control of Jiang Qing 江青, Mao’s ex-actress wife.

The author then explores postsocialist realism after the death of Mao Zedong and the turning-point of the reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping (Chapter Six), but without adopting the traditional separation between the Fifth and Sixth generations. He considers them participants, in varying degrees, in the same movement that aims to shatter ideological formatting. He detects two main strategies: the subversion of genres, clichés, and myths as in *Devils on the Doorstep* (*Guizi lai le* 鬼子來了, 2000, dir.: Jiang Wen 姜文); and the adoption of a neorealist style, exemplified in *Xiao Wu* (小武, 1997), Jia Zhangke’s 賈樟柯 first film. Inspired by the ideas of André Bazin and European modernity, the latter injects documentary into fiction to give free reign to images of another China, notably that of society’s rejects. In this slow cinema, various techniques – chiefly the long take – seek to let the “real” (which is by nature elusive) unfold in time and space, leading to what McGrath terms apophatic, already present in *Spring in a Small Town* (*Xiaocheng zhi chun* 小城之春, 1948, dir.: Fei Mu 費穆). The cinema of the ambiguity of the real – intangible – at the centre of his aesthetic demonstrates the very limits of representation, and contains all the epistemological and existential uncertainties. Lastly, the final chapter centred on the digital era offers a brilliant analysis of capitalist realism and virtual realism, underlining the maximal cleavage between the patriotic blockbusters that constitute box-office hits and experimental works that tour the foreign festival circuits, such as *Kaili Blues* (*Lu bian ye can* 路邊野餐, 2015, dir.: Bi Gan 畢赣), with its long take lasting forty minutes.

The changes affecting the plurality of the idea of realism in Chinese cinema make *Chinese Film* a fascinating work that sheds light on the tumultuous relationships between the seventh art, society, and politics, and above all, the aesthetic and philosophic relationship to the medium of film in its ability to capture the infinite diffractions of the real.

Translated by Elizabeth Guill.

References

McGRATH, Jason. 2008. *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.