

Anthony Siu

Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages, Taiwan R.O.C.

Smog Signals, Dog Sirens: Jia Zhangke, Lacan, and the Anthropocene

Abstract: This study is a critique of two overlooked shorts of Jia Zhangke, a leading figure from the sixth generation of Chinese filmmakers: *Smog Journeys* (2015) and *The Condition of Dogs* (2001). Contemplating the imminent demise of human and animal lives represented, it argues that the looming ecological crises in the films stress biological finitude to such an extent that fear and pity disavow the truth about capitalist co-optation. To understand capitalism's operation behind a catastrophic Anthropocene, I put the films into dialogues with Lacan's "University Discourse" and "Hysteric's Discourse", formal structures that challenge and reshape the immediate identification of a narrative. With their attention to signifiers and affect, these formal structures enable us to understand how images and sounds focalize the viewers' experience of fear and pity while unearthing the truth about the foreclosure of capitalist ideology. But instead of performing a strictly close-reading of each film, my critique elaborates more on the very psychoanalytic logic of Lacan's two structures. My wish is that it allows us to see how complex visual and acoustic experience could be in shaping our identification beyond socio-cultural reflections and pure aesthetics.

Keywords: Jia Zhangke; Jacques Lacan; Anthropocene; psychoanalysis; capitalism.

Questions of Truth and the Anthropocene

Criticisms of Chinese cinema often savor how Jia Zhangke exposes the social ills that China frequently denies. In *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene*, Jennifer Fay studies how Jia's engagement with the Anthropocene in *Still Life* (2006) captures the desertion of habitat and imminent flooding the Three Gorges Dam faces. Against the background of Jia's noir-like cartography, Fay canvasses the pervasiveness of apocalypse through the "aquatic human on a submerged planet." Where films such as *Touch of Sin* (2013) and *Mountains May Depart* (2015) feature environmental pollution as a mere backdrop, *Still Life* gives more voice to the predicaments in the Anthropocene by using flooding to propel the film's narrative

development. It could be taken as exposure or “defamiliarization” of the nation’s failure to address impending ecological destructions.¹

Still others argue that Jia Zhangke’s films are more about stylistic innovation than an exposure of the looming destructions in the Anthropocene. Rey Chow, for example, compares Jia with Antonioni, maintaining that Jia’s use of the documentary style in some of his works does not so much concern social reality but stylistic nuances. For her, Jia’s frequent employment of the documentary-style – print, photography, newsreel images, historical reportage, popular songs, interviews, found footage, and even “storytelling” – is not about an irretrievable past but an assemblage of different media forms for “global exhibition”, or, “a discursive force field”². This exegesis shifts our focus on his role from a native informant of contemporary China to an artist working with “hypermediality” whereby a diverse array of media texts is creatively put together.³ Chow’s postcolonial take on Jia’s films hence politicizes the director’s creativity as it lifts the ethical burden to speak about China’s condition – ecological damages being one aspect – that many Western critics expect from the director.

However, two overlooked shorts, *Smog Journeys* (2015) and *The Condition of Dogs* (2001) suggest that neither a socio-cultural exposé of the state of China’s ecological damages nor a meditative aesthetics rooted in postcolonial resistance is sufficient to illustrate the truth behind a dying Anthropocene. Where the first film is an educational short addressing the fatal impacts of air pollution, the second is an experimental short embodying the violence done to animals. In focalizing on human frailty and creaturely violence as two major ecological troubles in China, *Smog Journeys* and *Condition of Dogs* nonetheless provoke more fear and pity than unveil the capitalist co-optation that engenders the environmental destructions in the first place. Attempting to unearth this truth, my critique shows not only how affects paralyze the recognition of capitalist ideology, but also how our unconscious perversely enjoys such affective obfuscation.

To demonstrate the processes of foreclosure and affective manipulation, I turn here to two of Jacques Lacan’s late teachings on the “Four Discourses”, “University

¹ Jennifer Fay, *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 161.

² Rey Chow, “China as Documentary: Some Basic Questions (Inspired by Michael Antonioni and Jia Zhangke),” in *The Poetics of Chinese Cinema*, ed. by Gary Bettinson, James Udden (New York: Palgrave MacMillan US, 2016): 199–200. Chow is obviously following a postcolonial approach to deconstruct the West’s expectation from Jia as a native informant. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

³ Criticisms that reflect social-historical conditions include Cecilia Mello, *The Cinema of Jia Zhangke: Realism and Memory in Chinese Films*, (London: Bloomsburg Publishing PLC, 2019): 3. Ting Luo, “Neither Here nor There: The Representation of Post-Socialist Space in *The World and Still Life* and Jia Zhangke’s Transcendence of Realism,” *Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies* 15, 2 (2015): 149–71. Wang Hui, “Jia Zhangke’s World and China’s Great Transformation: A Revised Version of a Speech Given at ‘The *Still Life* Symposium at Fenyang High School,” trans. Nathaniel Proctor, *positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 19, 1 (2011): 217–228. One volume that captures the range of perspective in Sinophone eco-cinema is *Ecology and Chinese-language Cinema: Reimagining a Field*, eds. Sheldon H. Liu and Haomin Gong (New York: Routledge, 2021).

Discourse” and “Hysteric’s Discourse”.⁴ Dissatisfied with Foucault’s notion of discourse,⁵ which makes messages or knowledge tools of power, Lacan develops his own idea of “Discourse” in *Seminar XVII* to understand how power fails to contain.⁶ The breakthrough in Lacan’s psychoanalytic “Discourse” is that it shows how different signifying relations reveal models of communication that are outside of one’s reception of the most affective, immediate message in a discourse. Used originally in clinical settings for unveiling the truth of one’s desire, Lacan’s “Discourses” are equally apt as a means to unpack “the other side” of the two films, offering psychosocial critiques that reveal the cobweb of relations between signifiers. They are incisive in disentangling the truth that has been constantly displaced in the contesting movements of signifiers.⁷ In my interpretation, I supplement these “Discourses” by bringing in affects of fear and pity that Lacan has yet to theorize in his seminar.⁸ Although it is commonly agreed that Aristotle’s intent in *Poetics* is to argue for tragic catharsis, I re-appropriate fear and pity to illustrate the specific affect each of Jia Zhangke’s films produces, not so much for emotional cleansing but a cinematic fascination that is at once reifying yet alluring.⁹

Structurally, this paper develops its argument by putting *Smog Journeys* and *The Condition of Dogs* into a series of exchanges with Lacan’s “University Discourse” and “Hysteric’s Discourse”. As much as it analyzes the images and sounds in each film, the analysis devotes more space to theorize, explain, and dialogue with the signification processes. Its aim is to break apart the illusionary humanism fabricated by affects as they foreclose capitalist ideology. As an educational short done for Greenpeace Asia, *Smog Journeys* will be shown as a fear-inducing tale of fatal pollution, suspending one’s indictment of capitalist values that dominate people’s lives. As an experimental *cinéma vérité* or observation cinema, *The Condition of Dogs* will be demonstrated as a pitiable tale of creaturely decimation, leaving out of sight the mercenary business of animal meat. My overall purpose here is not to dismiss the usefulness of differential vulnerability of humans and animals. It is rather to make known the truth about the larger influence of capitalism in these two films.

⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis (Book XVII)*, trans. Russel Grigg (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007). I stick to Lacan’s use of “the other side” in my article in order to make a distinction from the depth model of the repressed in Freud.

⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1994).

⁶ I capitalized “Discourse” in order to distinguish Lacan’s concept from Foucault’s.

⁷ Paul Verhaeghe explains the formulae’s formal character as “*a priori* emptiness”, “empty bags with a particular form which will determine the content that one puts into them”. See Verhaeghe, “From Impossibility to Inability: Lacan’s Theory on the Four Discourses,” *The Letter: Lacanian Perspectives on Psychoanalysis* 3 (Spring 1995): 91–108.

⁸ In *Seminar XVII*, Lacan devotes his attention to shame and guilt rather than fear and pity.

⁹ Aristotle, *Poetics*. Trans. Richard Janko (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1987).

***Smog Journeys* as “University Discourse”**

Smog Journeys is Jia’s rare film project for Greenpeace East Asia. As a public engagement that addresses environmental harms in modern China, this educational short is set in the unlivable habitat that hyper-industrialized China has turned itself into. Jia claims that the film is inspired by the inhabitants of Shijiazhang, Handan, Xingtai, all of whom are beset by the attack of deadly pollutions, regardless of their background and profession. Presented like an artsy commercial, the film is emptied of all unnecessary dialogues. It contrasts how lower-class families from Hebei Province and middle-class families from Beijing brave air pollutions in their own manner. Roughly composed of two disproportional segments, the first is a much lengthier, gloomy tale of pollution’s impacts on people’s everyday life whereas the second is an exceptionally brief closure that advocates the good life made possible by clean air.

Intended to warn people of air pollution’s fatal consequences, *Smog Journeys* presents everyone’s plight in terms of all-pervasive finitude, making fear neutralize capitalism’s contamination on the inhabitants’ consciousness. The film is most productively interlocutory when explained vis-à-vis Lacan’s “University Discourse”, given psychoanalysis’ attentiveness to foreclosure and ideological formation. For Lacan, “University” is not equivalent to actual institutes of higher education but a stand-in for any established paradigm of knowledge or categorization. It designates the conferral of knowledge to another. Education with this paradigm is nevertheless arbitrary as its function is premised on the exclusion of what lies beyond the existing significations, even if the latter is often part and parcel of the paradigm itself. In Lacan’s formal diagram or “matheme” for “University Discourse,” education is illustrated in the lower part of the formula as a master-signifier (S_1) conferring knowledge to alienated subjects whereas the arbitrariness of education is represented in the upper part as a chain of signifiers (S_2) searching for an impossible object:

$$\frac{S_2 \ a}{S_1 \ / \ \$}$$

The master-signifier (S_1) is the citadel of knowledge. It connotes credible knowledge that others need after all other significations are sieved. The receiving subjects, on the other hand, are always alienated or split (\$) in the signification process. They constantly search for a voice to give them assurance.¹⁰ On the upper level, we see another set of relations that is concurrent to the lower level’s process. There is a signifying chain (S_2) which designates symptoms or the production of knowledge. This chain is what addresses an impossible object (a) that falls outside of signification. The lower level’s relation suggests that, for education to impart meaning for another,

¹⁰ Saussure’s language theory tells us that a simpler explanation for the subject’s alienation is that, a signifier represents a subject for another signifier. As long as one speaks, one becomes a subject of language who tries to hold on to an object beyond language. This object represents the final term for desire itself that is, however, irretrievably lost.

the excessive elements in the signifying process must be kept outside of knowledge production, foreclosed and rendered impossible.

To comprehend *Smog Journeys*' assumption of "University Discourse," it is useful to begin with the ending sequence in the film. In the last few shots of the film, *Smog Journeys* suddenly switches from a polluted, dystopic China to one that looks inhabitable, idyllic, and hopeful. But before a complete reversal of the situation, the film follows a child as he roams around town aimlessly. While the child is scribbling on the excessively dusty windshield of a vehicle, the film transits to an altogether different setting with a dark image that reads, "Clean air doesn't come to those who wait." As a master-signifier (S_1) that issues an "activist" declaration, this dark image warns others that actions need to be done immediately if one were to save the dying human race from ecological carnage. As if out of nowhere, this dark image with some politically motivated jingo suddenly dispels the melancholia set up in the first segment of the film in sheer authority. Breaking narrative causation, it shifts gears from a topological space of ecological loss to ontological actions that impact the real world.¹¹

What makes *Smog Journeys* assume this "University" position is precisely this propagation since the film's major task is to educate the public about the ascension in environmental destruction. It maintains that the master signifier (S_1) acts from the space of knowledge production so that everything else in the significations can be subsumed under a didactic imperative. The didactic imperative in turn conveys an overwhelming sense of fear that hovers, as it were, over every individual in the film. The education that *Smog Journeys* delivers is nothing but that very compliance.

As we unpack this fear-inducing education more, there are at least two dimensions that surface. One dimension has to do with the fear of biological death, which appeals to the relative vulnerability of infants and young characters. In his visit to a clinic, a coal miner brings his own baby in for a consultation, only to realize that the whole room is occupied by sick babies wearing oxygen masks. This suffering generation is then juxtaposed with images of children doodling on a vehicle's windshield covered with ash and pollutants. Their innocence, while giving them the bravery and insouciance to loiter, renders them all the more vulnerable to the health risks caused by the airborne dust. The second dimension of fear, though figured less prominently, is claustrophobia. Permeating all families, claustrophobia is indifferent to people's identity and background. Many of the characters are trying to compensate for this sense of entrapment through fantasy, represented ironically by representations themselves. For instance, after being shown his lung's condition, the coal miner finds consolation in a film that occasionally features images of lush, green prairies. The middle-class painter, too, spends quality time with his family looking at projections of his own painting of fertile grassland. A final fantasy about a clean environment appears

¹¹ Enzo Traverso's *Left-wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021) studies in details, sometimes with reference to propaganda images, this move from the various parties of the political left and institutional space to political actions and movements. For a psychoanalytic study of melancholic ecology, see Renee Lertzman's *Environmental Melancholia: Psychoanalytic Dimensions of Engagement* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

in the lyrics of a song sung by a group of grade school students. As contrapunctual as it gets, the lyrics paints an absolute romantic picture of a little boat, bobbling in the water against some cool breezes when, in reality, the tall buildings in China are buried in smog.

All instances of this dying Anthropocene that come before this dark image are also parts of the signifying chain (S_2) to bolster the arbitrary education. On the one hand, the public is alienated because the capitalist cause of pollution (a) remains foreclosed from the various symptom (also S_2) presented. On the other hand, the public is also subject to the influence of the film's suspenseful music that brings together the images under a sense of doom. If we return to the film's initial allusion to Antonioni's *Red Desert*, the music that accompanies the establishing shot is both frightful and worrisome. Its strong echo and acoustic refraction render the gigantic smokestacks overbearing. The exaggerated crackling fire that keeps the family warm is more sombre than comforting. Everyone coughs loudly while standing in front of numerous electric towers. The coughing sound is then used to relate to all the babies who are coughing in the clinic. For the wealthier families, their plight is also deepened by the tremulous music. A mother and her entire team of fashion models are wearing masks during rehearsal. When the camera slowly pans across the shot's frame, all images presented are bundled together by a noir-like acoustic that makes the signifying chain correspond to the education goal for the other ($\$$): fatal impacts of air pollution.

Smog Journeys, with its airborne signals and proximity to the “politics of everyday fear,” keeps at bay the ideology behind the extremes of modernization of the dying Anthropocene, the capitalist co-optation in all walks of life.¹² Represented in Lacan's “University Discourse” as a simple letter “a,” this thought is often half-figured, if not altogether foreclosed, as “the other side” of the families in the film. During the entire journey, the critique of this ideology is “lost” to the health risks that haunt people's life when capitalist values are the hidden idea shaping or determining what they do. At the start, the poor family that burns tree branches in open space are looking toward more modern forms of fuel to warm themselves. In the case of the coal miner, entertainment offers relief to his illness, indicating that hard work can resume as usual if his fantasy for a clean future is satisfied at the movies. For the painter's family, a home theatre is what brings the family together, giving them the illusion that the comfort of art and high-end means of connoisseurship matter. The fashion show, despite it being the most environmentally damaging industry, has to continue even when smog makes outdoor activities risky. Operating as “the other side” of education, this knowledge about capitalist determination displaces what appears to be a political problem to personal responsibility. In the words of David Denny, the function of “University Discourse” allows us to notice that, “[t]o not foreground climate change as a political problem, first and foremost, enables a critique of political-economy to remain repressed or disavowed.”¹³

¹² Brian Massumi, ed., *Politics of Everyday Fear* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

¹³ David Denny, “The Documentary Form and Lacan's Four Discourses,” *Crisis and Critique* 7, 2 (July 2020): 57.

The Condition of Dogs as “Hysteric’s Discourse”

In *The Condition of Dogs*, an experimental short that documents exclusively the struggle of a puppy trapped in a cloth bag, Jai rescinds the didactic tone in *Smog Journeys* in his treatment of animal hospitality, switching its overall tone from fear to pity. Devoid of location, the film is a minimalist experiment that uses mostly medium shots and close-ups to capture this puppy’s struggle but there are no obvious clues as to what and why the dog is held captive in the first place. More particularly, beginning with an establishing shot, *The Condition of Dogs* depicts how puppies are dropped into bags and how the sizable dogs are tied up. As the camera pans across the place, we witness a few people gathering around different breeds of puppies. The relatively larger dogs are tied to bicycles, motorcycles, and trucks. They are pacing back and forth. Devoid also of interviews or voiceover, the film’s sonic feature rebounds. In this “any-space-whatever” or singular space that appears autonomous from the economic power that China has become, we hear that the diegesis is filled with all kinds of barking, woofing, and whimpering.¹⁴ Towards the end, an enigmatic long take returns our gaze to one puppy’s entanglement. We witness the puppy that sticks its head out from a bag keeps whimpering from time to time while being stuck in the hole it just bit out.

The most enigmatic thing about *The Condition of Dogs* is not only the context of the film, however. It is also the content that is brought up but not at all elaborated in the film’s story. According to Baidu Baike, China’s own Wikipedia, the film is a project that a French director’s association for directors an unnamed directors association in France invited Jia to develop in response to the topic of globalization. For Michael Berry, who specializes in Asian cinema and cultures, the film might not speak to globalization in an explicit way as expected but is clearly a modernist allegory for a struggling artist. He believes that Jia uses the film to represent the suffocation of China’s independent cinema. It is at the same time a manifesto for independent artists who are trapped like the dog, trying to get some fresh air in a cruel market. In this way, the film allegorizes an artist’s fight against a system that imposes censorship while denying infrastructural support for the arts in general.¹⁵

Despite its acknowledgment of the film’s concern for the dogs that are bought and sold in China, Berry’s reading remains silent about the market itself and the possible capitalist spinoffs, i.e., the illicit dog meat market and its constituted violence. For the environmentalists, this market, torture, and capitalist ideology are not something that awaits critical examination. *The New York Times* has been repeatedly condemning them over the last decade.¹⁶ If so, what is it in *The Condition of Dogs* that prevents one

¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 111.

¹⁵ Michael Berry, *Jia Zhangke’s Hometown Trilogy: Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown Pleasures* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).

¹⁶ The latest is the article by Amy Quin, “In Fight to Ban Dog Meat, China’s Activists Find an Ally: The Coronavirus,” *The New York Times*, June 23, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/23/world/asia/china-dog-meat.html>, acc. on June 15, 2021. The report on this event can be found as early as 2011. See Edward Wong, “After

from going deeper into the creaturely cruelty that is inflicted on the dogs and, most significantly, the capitalist venture?¹⁷

My immediate wager is that *The Condition of Dogs* relies much on pity to generate the impending finitude of the animal other. Unlike the imaginary tales that make up *Smog Journeys*, *The Condition of Dogs* turns to scenes from reality with minimal editing and human manipulation in the form of *cinéma vérité*. As a form of observational documentary that refrains from saying anything about the film's significance or people's viewing experience, *cinéma vérité* tries to ensure that one experiences most directly what is recorded. In this case, the poor puppy is just as plainly recorded as, for instance, the treatment of bird eggs in Abbas Kiarostami's short film, *Seagull Eggs* (2014). Shot in a non-interventional mode, Kiarostami documents the consecutive disappearance of three seagull eggs by tidal waves. The camera "notices" accidentally that the seagulls squelch every time an egg is washed away. The squelching only becomes "meaningful" when one is an "omniscient" listener, vigilant to the pattern of sonic vibration that makes one wonder where in the diegesis the squelching comes from.

Like *Seagull Eggs*, *The Condition of Dogs* also minimizes editing, allowing the camera to roll most of the time. But unlike the seagulls, the puppy is trapped by humans and it is reacting in such a way to seek rescue. In contrast to the invisibility of the seagulls, the puppy cannot move much because its movement is restricted by the size of the hole in the bag. Constrained as such, it appears powerless and pitiable, amplified by the incessant whimper that echoes in the background. Where Kiarostami's camera shows nature's indifference to the life of the animal other, Jia's camera shows passivity that provokes the puppy's whimper. It conveys a desire to be liberated by whoever is behind the camera. Even though the camera in both films is stationary, the acoustic and visual impact of the struggling puppy together presents a sound-image that "begs" but fails to hear from the ghostly Other if it can be freed from the cloth bag.

The puppy's unanswered whimper is undoubtedly a significant reminder of the film's "dark ecology," to borrow Morton's term for the loop in which humans and animals are eerily intertwined.¹⁸ As opposed to the invasive anthropogenic noise human activities produced in nature, the puppy's whimper registers the presence of "biophony,"

Online Campaign, Chinese Dog Meat Festival Is Canceled," *The New York Times*, Sept. 29, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/30/world/asia/dog-meat-festival-is-canceled-in-china.html>, acc. on June 15, 2021.

¹⁷ Animal studies in literature and humanities seem to have given way to more pressing concerns and topics about climate change as a whole. Debates of the creaturely, however, could reference John W. Compton IV's "Creaturely Communal Ontology in Practice: John Zizioulas in Dialogue with Ritual Theory," *Religions* 10, 9 (2019): 506. Lori Ruen, ed. *Critical Terms for Animal Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018). I rely more on an early work by Eric L. Santner's *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) for psychoanalytic-informed inspirations. See also Anthony Siu, "Review: Anat Pick's Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film, New York, Columbia University Press, 249 pp." *Film-Philosophy* 19 (2015), <https://www.euppublishing.com/doi/abs/10.3366/film.2015.0023>, acc. on February 18, 2021.

¹⁸ Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

a field of biological sounds. It looks as though a more attentive listening to the pitiable creature can make the environment a different place.¹⁹ From this active listening, we are then donned the image of a good environmentalist, just like “the masculine logic of the exception – I am a good person because I recycle.”²⁰ This pity that the whimper evokes hence turns the soundscape of *The Condition of Dogs* into the basis of an aesthetics of “acoustic ecology” that practitioners of environmental ethics will surely welcome.²¹ But once we step aside from this straightforward apprehension based on pity, the persistence of the puppy’s suffering state tells us that something is in excess of this leap to a humanist aesthetics, a false promise that gives people the illusion of redemption.

In place of humanism, Lacan’s “Hysteric’s Discourse,” with its key dissection on the unanswerable demands in social relations, is useful in accounting for the pity generated by the whimpering puppy. In older accounts of hysteria, it is believed that hysteria is associated with only women, a condition that is caused by their wandering womb. Originally “hysterika,” a Greek term meaning uterus, hysteria was thought to be caused by the womb moving freely about a woman’s body. This notion of wandering womb in fact appears in Plato’s *Timaeus*, reports from Hippocratic doctors, and Hellenistic treatment of demons before even Freud talks about it.²² Symptoms of hysteria are thought to include emotional excitability, sensory and motor disturbances, convulsions, to name just a few.²³ In Lacan’s revision, hysteria can no longer be explained in symptomatic terms but structural terms. Switching the position of the symbols in his “Discourse” formula, Lacan presents “Hysteric’s Discourse” as follows:

$$\begin{array}{c} \$ \ S_1 \\ a // \ S_2 \end{array}$$

On the upper level, the alienated subject (\$) is addressing the master-signifier. Its alienation is a result of the impossibility of hearing from the master-signifier (S_1). In the film, the whimpering puppy has come to occupy this alienated position, which addresses “the Other” that is the camera, cinematographer, and director. The educational, instructive quality of the master-signifier in “University Discourse” now

¹⁹ See Leah Barclay, “Acoustic Ecology and Ecological Sound Art: Listening to Changing Ecosystems,” in *Sound, Media, Ecology*, eds. Milena Droumeva and Randolph Jordan (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 159.

²⁰ See *Lacan and the Environment*, eds. Clint Burnham and Paul Kingsbury (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 3.

²¹ Barclay, 159.

²² For the Greek period, see Christopher A. Faraone’s “Magical and Medical Approaches to the Wandering Womb in the Ancient Greek World,” *Classical Antiquity* 30, 1 (2011): 1–32. For the feminist tradition, see Elisabeth Bronfen’s *The Knotted Subject: Hysteria and Its Discontent* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998) and, more comprehensively, Johanna Braun, ed. *Performing Hysteria: Contemporary Images and Imaginations of Hysteria* (Leuven, Belgium: Belgium University Press, 2020).

²³ Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of Salpêtrière*, trans. Alisa Hartz (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004).

undergoes a transformation. “The Other’s” silence or inaction makes the alienated subject increasingly frustrated. Viewers are also forced to wonder if rescue is possible the more the puppy whimpers. While suture disallows visible evidence of “the Other’s” presence, the absence of response makes the camerawork and the mediation strangely “palpable”, questioning what kind of truth cinema offers.

Above all, this very passivity of “the Other” is what “hystericizes” the film, as viewers feel that “alienation effect” when the long take shows zero human responses. This process of “hystericization” can be seen in the lower level of “Hysteric’s Discourse”. For the hysteric, she is always in the hope of obtaining answers for her questions but she will never be satisfied with the answers from the subject-supposed-to-know (S_2). The puppy shares this insecurity as the hysteric, making more demand with its noise while the Other remains untouched. In the words of Paul Verhaeghe, “The answer, given by the master, will always be beside the point, because the true answer concerns ‘object *a*’, the forever-lost object, which cannot be put into words. The classical reaction to this failure is to produce even more signifiers, which creates, of course, an ever-increasing distance from the lost object at the position of the truth.”²⁴ The puppy, acting from the place of the alienated subject, is constituted by the ever-receding Other that does not allow its desire to be satisfied.

Occupying the position of the presumed master, the non-responding camera recalls an inversion in Derrida’s account of naked subjectivity when he encounters the gaze of the cat in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. In a rare encounter with his cat, Derrida is confronted with his own passivity and nudity constituted by an abysmal, cryptic, wholly other that is “uninterpretable, unreadable, undecidable”. By alluding to Levinas’ notion of “the face of the Other” and deconstructing Lacan’s notion of Otherness, Derrida believes that “I am a child ready for the *apocalypse*” (emphasis mine).²⁵ The gaze of the entrapped puppy shares here with the cat in producing a certain stoppage in cognizance. The difference, however, is that the cat turns the human into an object of its gaze whereas the puppy’s gaze is directed at the Other that offers no salvation from the possible death.

In this regard, *The Condition of Dogs* thus reverses the deconstruction of border-crossing that Derrida wants to perform. Where deconstruction widens the gap between the perceiving subject and the viewed object to make the subject a passive object and the object subjective, the “Hysteric’s Discourse” makes audience to pity the master’s inability to produce some specific “knowledge” (S_2) that will adequately satisfy the puppy’s impossible demands. This is represented in the lower part of Lacan’s formula as “ $a // S_2$ ” where “ S_2 ” stands for the general knowledge that fails to reveal the truth about capitalism’s insidiousness. Just as it is with the non-represented capitalism, none of the actual creaturely atrocities, connoted by the lost object “*a*,” will be

²⁴ Originally published as Paul Verhaeghe, “From Impossibility to Inability: Lacan’s Theory on the Four Discourses,” *The Letter: Lacanian Perspectives on Psychoanalysis* 3 (Spring 1995) 91–108. The present quotation is from page 11 of the online version from <https://www.theseanticscholar.org>.

²⁵ Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Willis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 12.

shown in the film precisely because the gore and bloodshed are hidden (//) from sight the same way capitalism is kept outside of immediate identification in our damaged Anthropocene.

In closing, I want to elaborate more on the use of “Hysteric’s Discourse” in my interpretation of *The Condition of Dogs*. Some might complain that Lacan’s “Discourses” are developed for the understanding of human interlocution. In developing a dialogue between the film and a concept for human social bonds, I might have run the risk of equating humans with animals, particularly when many of the dogs in the illicit dog meat market are not domesticated, with no exposure to a home setting that allows instructional learning to take place. As a matter of fact, my hermeneutics of the film is clearly counter-intuitive to what Lacan himself says about domestic animals, which gives credits to only those that are kept and nurtured. As Žižek writes,

Lacan noted somewhere that, while animals do not speak, domestic animals nonetheless already dwell in the dimension of language (they react to their names, run to their master when they hear it called, obey orders, etc.) which is why, although they do not have access to ‘normal’ subjectivity, then can nonetheless be affected by (human) pathology: a dog can be hystericized, and so on.²⁶

But as I have shown, *The Condition of Dogs* proves that the “Hysteric’s Discourse” works productively with a young puppy. There is no name called or order issued under the camera’s gaze. The persistence of the whimper might even be argued to make capitalism surface on an even more “metaphysical” level when we understand that what makes the puppy’s desire unfulfilled is that its desire has turned back on itself. To quote the words of Verhaeghe again, “The social bond of this discourse [Hysteric’s] is what Freud describe(s) as the hysterical identification with an unsatisfied desire.”²⁷ Isn’t capitalism also premised on the same logic that desire must not be fulfilled so that there is more demand for it?

Enjoyment and Capitalism

Through Jia’s two shorts, I have tried to develop a dialogue between the cinematic texts and the two formal relations that Lacan conceptualizes. *Smog Journeys* is a more conventional way for the director to convey a message aimed at education, making the public fearful of the consequences of ecological destructions. In its dialogues with “University Discourse”, I attempt to shore up the capitalist values that are not as obvious if our focus is restricted by only biological demise. These are values that fuel the desire for a nuclear family as well as an idyllic, pastoral utopia. They are not exactly

²⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2012), 413.

²⁷ Verhaeghe, “From Impossibility to Inability,” 10.

represented in the film but figured or disavowed as mere representations – images in film and painting – for which these families desire. *The Condition of Dogs* might appear relatively simpler in terms of production. But as an experiment of *cinéma vérité*, it pushes the audience beyond the narcissism of human plight. It makes one focus on the pitiable creature that will subject to un-representable atrocities. By leveraging on “Hysteric’s Discourse”, I make the puppy’s whimper a reminder of an entire illicit market economy that is lost – unrepresented again – in the hysterical sirens.

Throughout my interpretation, Jia’s two films are criticized as works that have yet to bring to the fore the truth about capitalism’s pervasiveness in the destruction of both human and animal life, a pervasiveness that prompts Badiou to call the present a “pornographic age.”²⁸ It always comes at the cost of paranoia.²⁹ Still, we enjoy Jia’s films not because they fall short of giving a more explicit critique of the capitalist ideology, but because films by nature are capitalist, “mindless fascinations”, as Jameson rightfully warns us.³⁰ There is always a surplus enjoyment, both visual and aural, even if the politics of representation become murky and problematic, defying taxonomical constrictions that critics map onto “features” of Chinese eco-cinema.³¹ The best these films could do is to generate more discussions about our complicity in enjoyment. As much as we get fascinated by films with “creaturely poetics”, we cannot exonerate our duty to call for more explicit and critical treatment of the subject. I am, however, not asking that non-fictional films dedicate themselves to prevent another Chernobyl or Fukushima from happening. Nor am I asking that biopics encourage the next generation to become Greta Thunberg or Boyan Slat. My wish is that we make more honest depictions of ecological predicament, particularly when we are speaking to places that cultivate fiction as truth.

References

- Abbas, Ackbar. “Adorno and the Weather: Critical Theory in an Era of Climate Change.” *Radical Philosophy* 174 (July/August 2012): 7–13.
- Aristotle, *Poetics*. Translated by Richard Janko. Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1987.
- Badiou, Alain. *The Pornographic Age*. Translated by A. J. Bartlett and Justin Clemens. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.
- Barclay, Leah. “Acoustic Ecology and Ecological Sound Art: Listening to Changing Ecosystems.” In *Sound, Media, Ecology*, edited by Milena Droumeva and Randolph Jordan. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

²⁸ Alain Badiou, *The Pornographic Age*, trans. A. J. Bartlett and Justin Clemens (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

²⁹ Ackbar Abbas, “Adorno and the Weather: Critical Theory in an Era of Climate Change,” *Radical Philosophy* 174 (July/August: 2012): 13.

³⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (London: Routledge, 1992), 1.

³¹ For taxonomy of ecocinema, see Chu Kiu-wai. “Screening Environmental Challenges in China: Three Modes of Ecocinema,” *Journal of Chinese Governance* 2, 4 (2017): 437-459.

- Berry, Michael. *Jia Zhangke's Hometown Trilogy: Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown Pleasures*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006.
- Braun, Joannah, ed. *Performing Hysteria: Contemporary Images and Imaginations of Hysteria*. Leuven: Belgium University Press, 2020.
- Bronfen, Elisabeth. *The Knotted Subject: Hysteria and Its Discontent*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- Burham, Clint and Paul Kingsbury, eds. *Lacan and the Environment*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.
- Chen, Andrew. "Interview: Jia Zhangke." *Film Comment* (March/April 2009). <https://www.filmcomment.com/article/jia-zhangke-interview>. Accessed on February 18, 2021.
- Chow, Rey. "China as Documentary: Some Basic Questions (Inspired by Michael Antonioni and Jia Zhangke)." In *The Poetics of Chinese Cinema*, edited by Gary Bettinson, James Udden, 199–200. New York: Palgrave MacMillan US, 2016.
- Compton IV, John H. "Creaturely Communal Ontology in Practice: John Zizioulas in Dialogue with Ritual Theory." *Religions* 10, 9 (2019): 506. doi: 10.3390/rel10090506
- Chu, Kiu-wai. "Screening Environmental Challenges in China: Three Modes of Ecocinema." *Journal of Chinese Governance* 2, 4 (2017): 437-459. doi: 10.1080/23812346.2017.1382039.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 111.
- Denny, David. "The Documentary Form and Lacan's Four Discourses." *Crisis and Critique* 7, 2 (July 2020): 49–67.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, translated by David Willis. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008.
- Didi-Huberman, Georges. *The Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of Salpêtrière*, translated by Alisa Hartz. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004.
- Faraone, Christopher A. "Magical and Medical Approaches to the Wandering Womb in the Ancient Greek World." *Classical Antiquity* 30, 1 (2011): 1-32. doi: 10.1525/CA.2011.30.1.1
- Fay, Jennifer. *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage, 1994.
- Gruen, Lori, ed. *Critical Terms for Animal Studies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.
- Hui, Wang. "Jia Zhangke's World and China's Great Transformation: A Revised Version of a Speech Given at 'The Still Life Symposium at Fenyang High School.'" Translated by Nathaniel Proctor, *positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 19, 1 (2011): 217–28. doi: 10.1215/10679847-2010-030
- Jameson, Fredric. *Signatures of the Visible*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis (Book XVII)*, trans. Russel Grigg. New York: W.W. Norton, 2007.

- Lertzman, Renee. *Environmental Melancholia: Psychoanalytic Dimensions of Engagement*. New York: Routledge, 2016.
- Liu, Sheldon H. and Haomin Gong, eds. *Ecology and Chinese-language Cinema: Reimagining a Field*. New York: Routledge, 2021.
- Liu, Xiao. *Information Fantasies: Precarious Mediation in Postsocialist China*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2019.
- Luo, Ting. “Neither Here nor There: The Representation of Post-Socialist Space in The World and Still Life and Jia Zhangke’s Transcendence of Realism.” *Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies* 15, 2, 2015: 149–71. doi: 10.21866/esjeas.2015.15.2.001
- Massumi, Brian, ed. *The Politics of Everyday Fear*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- McGrath, Declan. “The Films of Jia Zhangke: Poetic Realist of Globalization.” *Cineaste* (Fall 2016): 36–37.
- Mello, Cecilia. *The Cinema of Jia Zhangke: Realism and Memory in Chinese Films*. London: Bloomsburg Publishing PLC, 2019.
- Morton, Timothy. *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.
- Quin, Amy. “In Fight to Ban Dog Meat, China’s Activists Find an Ally: The Coronavirus.” *The New York Times*. June 23, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/23/world/asia/china-dog-meat.html>. Accessed on June 15, 2021.
- Santner, Eric L. *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.
- Siu, Anthony. “Review: Anat Pick’s Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film. New York: Columbia University Press, 249 pp.” *Film-Philosophy* 19 (2015): 12–14. doi: 10.3366/film.2015.0023
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Traverso, Enzo. *Left-wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021.
- Verhaeghe, Paul. “From Impossibility to Inability: Lacan’s Theory of the Four Discourses.” *The Letter: Lacanian Perspectives on Psychoanalysis* 3 (Spring 1995): 91–108.
- Wong, Edward. “After Online Campaign, Chinese Dog Meat Festival Is Cancelled.” *The New York Times*, 29 Sept., 2011. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/30/world/asia/dog-meat-festival-is-canceled-in-china.html>. Accessed on June 15, 2021.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectic Materialism*. London: Verso, 2013.

Article received: April 23, 2021

Article accepted: June 21, 2021

Original scholarly paper