

Essay

***The World* – A look into contemporary Chinese society to study the underlying notions of realism and national allegory**

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Article Summary

The article written by Richler, “Cinema, Realism and the World” is summarized in this essay (Richler, 2016). This summary focuses on the disturbances that lie between realism and world cinema. Many authors have represented the World Cinema as a medium of transcultural communication (Richler, 2016). As a result, it becomes important to analyze the factors which lie among realism and world cinema. All the critical studies regarding the differences between world cinema and realism would be summarized in this study.

In his essay, “Cinema, Realism and the World”, the author considers the digital functions being less as a point of rupture and more as an element that is based on its potential continuity (Richler, 2016). The processes regarding globalization and its respective impact on digital technologies have been studied to complicate the idea which bases itself on both cinema and the world. Here, the film, *The World (2004)*, also states that realism; authenticity can be aligned with the aspects which revolve around World Cinema. As a result, the World Exhibitions in the current form becomes more cinematic as well. This particular film tends to associate itself with cinematic realism, where the features like cinematography played a great role in conveying the impression of unmediated reality. However, the author argues that the Bazinian Paradigm of cinematic realism has been seen to shape the academic and the film-cultural discourse which also inflects the production, promotion, etc.

The author also argues that the relocation of the specific discussions in the cinema’s specificity from indexicality to experience is very much helpful for shedding light on the cinema in the digital age (Richler, 2016). The author also questions the reasons how the experience is mediated by the conditions in reception as well as the paratextual discourses which tend to circulate along with the text. This helps in allowing grasping the contingent and the unstable meanings which lie in the World Cinema.

Many authors have argued that virtual reality can be seen to become more pervasive and sophisticated in the East Asia, where Japan was awarded the official World Exhibition (Richler, 2016). As a result, the film *Days of Being Wild (1990)*, which revolves around the four brothels, and the *spring in a Small Town (1948)*, also can be considered as the most famous Mainland Chinese film. Here the main inclusion is based on the

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desire of Jia to experiment through multiple lenses and temporalities. In this era, some filmmakers could be seen to counter the upbeat illusion that existed regarding an instantly rebuilt and modernized city which was promoted by the government also. Here, authors have argued that the documentary was driven through a desire that was used in combatting the driving force of development. This was seen to eventually slow down the respective events resulting from *lived time* to the *spectator into an eyewitness who moves through the city and records the change as well* (Richler, 2016).

Based on that, it can also be said that fictional narratives could be understood as the film's functions in the form of visual records leading to cinematic contribution to urban preservation too. In all the films that Jia produced, the films tend to portray the whole world as a stage, where Jia can also be seen to stress the indeterminacy of the stage. In these Chinese films like *The World (2004)*, the park that was built contained mobile phones which represented a fantasy world. However, the film had none of the appeals regarding the park's attraction which was diminished in the eyes of the visitors.

World Exhibitions brought the world cinema closer to its proximity as a consumable object. Here, the author has argued that *World Exhibitions* are not referred to as the exhibition of "*the world*" but to the "*world conceived and grasped as though it were an exhibition*" (Richler, 2016)." Here, the author states that the world is arranged for the spectator in such a way that the object that is in the display can be viewed, investigated as well as experienced in the form of "*signifier of*" some "*reality beyond*". Moreover, the panorama that was created based on the industrial, technological and cultural achievements in the World Exhibitions were considered the most valuable medium at the disposal.

As a result, the cinema and the tourist gaze during the era of World Exhibition. They have also been seen to evolve since the height of the colonial era that led to the advent of the cinema in the nineteenth century. Some authors have argued that this World Exhibition can be seen to continue in running as the *key institution which can constitute the world as a sign of representation* (Richler, 2016). Based on that, some authors also argued that the cinema considered adopting the *panoramic spirit* regarding the World Exhibitions, which can help

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shape the new medium's relationship in the world. In international film festivals as well, these festivals tend to promote *cultural diversity and understanding that exists among the nations*. These help in framing the films as a kind of window, resulting in cross-cultural exchange. As a result, following some authors, it can be also argued that cinemas can also completely satisfy people's *appetite for illusion due to some means of processes based on mechanical reproduction* (Richler, 2016). This can present the world without the involvement of any apparent human intervention as well. The above article summary signifies the link between Realism and World Cinema. The next section of the essay will analyze how these concepts of Realism and globalization are reflected in the movie *The World (2004)*.

Critical Section

The World (2004), directed by Jia Zhangke, is a Chinese drama film released in 2004. The film talks about the lives and work of many young people who visit a theme park in the city coming from the countryside (Shih, 2006). The film was shot in and around the Beijing World Park that showcases smaller versions of several prominent landmarks from around the world. In the film, the tourists visiting the park try to get accustomed to new technologies such as mobile phones, binoculars, digital cameras, coin-operated telescopes, and others, to virtually travel across the world. The globalization and ease of convenience enjoyed by the tourists are depicted as a metaphor for the Chinese society where the knowledge of the common people is limited to their country, and they visit the theme park to have an experience of escaping to the outside world (Richler, 2016). The film revolves around a performer at the world park named Tao who dates Taisheng, a security guard at the park. Their relationship is troubled, but they continue to drag it on. Meanwhile, Tao befriends Anna, a Russian performer also working at the park, while Taisheng is fascinated by Qun, who seeks to be reunited with her estranged husband living in France (Lu, 2008). Thus, their tales intertwine together at several stages to bring to life the actual Chinese middle-class society and the struggles and hardships associated with the day-to-day lives of the common people.

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The World (2004) was Zhangke's fourth narrative film, and like his previous works, Zhangke employed his favourite techniques of integrating realism in cinemas – the long camera takes, deep-focussed cinematography, and location-based shooting. He argued that these techniques conveyed the impression of "verisimilitude" along with a "seemingly objective, unmediated reality" (Richler, 2016). But with this take, Zhangke deviated from his favoured style of realism based on observations to tinker with the contemporary form of conversation through instant messages that gave effect to the sense of connection and mobility through the seemingly powerful new technologies. His experiments with computer animation in the film brought out the sharp contrast between the lives of people working inside the theme park and those living outside it (Andrew, 2009). As the film progresses, the dark reality behind the park's glamorous facade becomes exposed as the workers spend their days in a false and exaggerated landscape and their nights sleeping in congested dormitories (Lu, 2008). Through the attractive miniatures of the iconic landmarks lined inside, the park is trying to showcase the entire world to everyone visiting the park - a false cover for the oppression and ignorance bestowed upon the workers in the park by the Chinese state. The lack of clear-cut boundaries between the imaginative worlds of the characters in the film and the attractions in the park provokes us to think about the differences between the global and local, simulation and reality, digital and analogue, which are contemporarily occurring phenomena (Lovatt, 2012).

In the film, the world is viewed from the eyes of migrant labourers working in China (in this case, the World Park), who even in the early 2000s did not have visas, and therefore, could not travel outside mainland China to meet with others, but had to virtually keep connection through mobile phones and satisfy their desire to know more about the western world through the global landmark attractions displayed in the park. Zhangke tried to highlight the compression of time and space phenomenon brought about by the introduction of new technologies in the means of communication and transport (Andrew, 2009). The separation of the migrant workers from the outside world and the persistence of the Chinese government to keep its people limited to within the country's borders and outlook are seemingly evident through the discourse. The film also served as a

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transparent window for the western audience to have a glance into contemporary Chinese society (Benovsky, 2017)

The film serves as an 'ideoscape' highlighting the contemporary outlook of the Chinese state through the imagery depicted using the lives of the individual characters, bringing out the freedom, rights, and welfare allowed to the common people (Appadurai, 1990). Almost half of the rural migrant labourers are young and single women, personified by Tao in the film, who seek employment in various urban cities to support their families back home as well as learn new skills and gain new experiences in life. However, through the film, the irony behind these aspirations gets exposed as the migrant workers continue to yearn for gaining freedom and prosperity while living under the bleak conditions of confinement and poverty (Shih, 2006). Although they as the park's tour guides, entertainers, and security guards provide a surreal and lively image to the local and global tourists visiting the park full of happiness, their lives, in reality, are void of the actual social and economic freedom enjoyed by the tourists.

After Mao's death, China witnessed an economic revolution and pursued heavily on its capitalist outlook, but disregard this shift, the main characters in Zhangke's films are mostly common people who watch these socialistic reforms taking place from a distance which do not bring any particular change in their lives or economic wellbeing. Through his film, *The World (2004)*, Zhangke voiced his concerns relating to the contemporary rise of digitization and globalization through formal techniques and narration. With his evolutionary take, Zhangke exposed contemporary Chinese society to the outside world, for which he won many accolades and praises.

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