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Special Effects and Spectacle: Integration of CGI in Contemporary Chinese Film

https://doi.org/10.1515/jcfs-2021-0005
Published online March 12, 2021

Abstract: Film production in China, like that in Hollywood, increasingly attempts to achieve blockbuster status, through reliance on large budgets which enable the cultivation of star systems and world-class production values. More and more we see a reliance on computer-generated special effects to drive audience appeal and, thus, ticket sales. This article compares two recent films from Chinese auteurs, Zhang Yimou’s The Great Wall and Jia Zhangke’s Mountains May Depart, to examine the degree to which integration of computer-generated effects is achieved and how that translates into film art.

Keywords: attractions, CGI, Mountains May Depart, The Great Wall

It is incumbent on anyone who brings up Chinese movies these days to somehow account for the unparalleled prominence of films across many genres that rely on special effects for success—whether they are science fiction, horror, detective mysteries, action, wuxia, or shenguai. A quick look at recent top earners at the Chinese box office is a good way to assess the significance of such films in China today. For one recent span of five years, 19 of the annual top-five earners (constituting 76 percent) have been spectacular films of one genre or another thriving off of special effects.¹ A brief comparison with other markets shows similar percentages: USA (76%), UK (72%), Australia (84%), and Germany (60%). Japan is something of an outlier, here, since only twelve (48%) of the top five earners for these five years were such special-effects blockbusters, but to give some context,

¹ These numbers include films produced in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Hollywood and are drawn from the rankings found on Box Office Mojo for the years 2013–2017. One other film, Zootopia (2016) could also arguably be included in these numbers, raising to 80%. In many ways animated films also work in the realm of special effects; indeed, animation could arguably be defined as a specific kind of special effect. For simplicity’s sake, however, I have not included animated films in my considerations here. The numbers for 2018, 2019, and 2020 confirm this trend (Box Office Mojo a n.d.).

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all of the remaining 13 films were animated features (either anime or produced in Hollywood). With China as the world’s second largest cinema market, one important way filmmakers seek to find success, both commercially and artistically, is to cater to this important and growing audience (BBC 2013).

This state of affairs is no surprise. Anyone with even a cursory knowledge of Chinese film history, or world film history for that matter, knows that the ability to bring the incredible, the impossible, and the amazing into visual reality for its audience has always been at the heart of film practice. The early cinema of attractions, to use Tom Gunning’s famous term (Gunning 2006), turns on precisely this notion of displaying the unreal, the amazing, and the spectacular. And as narrative cinemas developed, stunts and special effects continued in their prominent place (just think of the fantasias of Georges Méliès). Of course, it is the combination of photographic mimesis and special effects that has made the verisimilar portrayal of unreal events and images possible. Accordingly, the medium’s consistent potential for visual productions of the marvelous has been central to cinema’s history as a technology.

The tension between realism and astoundingly unreal imagery has also provided a cultural-political-aesthetic dynamic critical to cinema’s identity, as one sees in the history of film and, now, the emergence of digital cinema. The historical narrative of Chinese cinemas is no different. Early Chinese-produced hits prominently included instances of the shenguai (spirits and monsters) genre such as *Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* (Huoshao hongliansi, 1928, dir. Zhang Shichuan) (Bao 2015, 39–90) or *Song at Midnight* (Yeban gesheng, 1937, dir. Maxu Weibang, a remake of *The Phantom of the Opera* (Wang 2013, 113–41). Indeed, with the possible exception of films based on traditional Chinese drama, wuxia shenguai (martial arts, spirits, and monsters) is certainly the earliest, most successful, and longest-lived popular film genre in Chinese cinemas (Berry and Farquhar 2006). From ghosts and monsters to the amazing bodily feats of martial arts masters, over the decades many Chinese film directors have embraced the spectacular and its box office potential. Even during the Maoist period, when supernatural events were strictly eschewed, amazing feats of daring and heroism were typical. This is most definitely true today, as the numbers I cited above indicate. What this history reveals is that Chinese film audiences—like audiences around the globe—have always maintained at least a base-level cultural interest in spectacle, as an aesthetic form which intersects a variety of genres. Of course, that cultural interest may rise or fall at any historical moment, but this ebb and flow of aesthetic/genre revivalism should not be reduced to the notion of simple repetition of the same. Instead, each re-envisioning of spectacle in Chinese film is over determined by sociological, cultural, economic, political, and technological factors, to produce fresh inventions and creative reinventions of the familiar narratives, characters,
and tropes in Chinese cinemas. And it is precisely the specificities of the interaction between special effects and spectacle in Chinese cinema in the contemporary moment that will be my focus in these pages.

For the purposes of this article, the term *special effects* includes traditional film techniques such as stunts, makeup, and certain editing practices. More to the point, however, are the increasingly pervasive instances of computer-generated imagery that drive the expectations of film audiences and, thus in turn, the practices of filmmakers. Moreover, the rise of CGI has coincided with the near ubiquity of blockbuster filmmaking in mainstream industries, to the point that the sleeper hit is an almost extinct species these days. When we consider these factors, at least two issues, which seem to me to be relevant to the question at hand, come to the fore. First is the question of genre, its plasticity and flexibility, and ultimately its vitality or exhaustion. The predominance of blockbusters affects this cycle of the rise of a genre’s popularity, its development and cross pollination with other generic modes, and ultimately its enervation. Over the past twenty-some years, we may well have seen this entire sequence play itself out in regard to the Hollywood superhero movie, on the one hand, and the Chinese wuxia film, on the other. In many ways, I see these two genres occupying parallel positions within their respective industries. Certainly, in terms of technical aspects of filmmaking—especially CGI—wuxia and superhero movies (among other generic forms) share, develop, spread, and refine new technologies and methods in a complex and overlapping network of global production personnel and companies (Curtin 2007; Kokas 2017).

The second issue, which I see as important for our consideration, is the relationship between spectacle and realism as it has developed in recent years. And it is on this second issue that I would like to focus our attention. Although he avoids the term spectacle, Tom Gunning’s notion of a cinema of attractions largely informs my understanding of what spectacle is and does. This mode of film emphasizes exhibition, including sight gags, novelties, slapstick and various performances relying on physicality, optical illusions, and other kinds of cinematic trickery, while disregarding narrative immersion, continuity, psychological character development or the rest of what came to constitute classical cinema. That is to say, the cinema of attractions is a mode of filmmaking that revels in amazing displays and seems to hail the audience (rather than immerse it in a continuous story) to acknowledge and admire the skill that has been presented in the film (Gunning 2006). Of course, as is clearly evident, since at least the 1910s and probably even earlier, attractions have not existed in isolation; instead, they have been incorporated into narrative cinema as spectacles that augment, and perhaps from time to time supplant, the main storyline.

Elsewhere, I have addressed the issue of spectacle in the context of musical film, which plays itself out in the contrast between narrative and number
For the special effects-driven films that I am interested in here, however, the tension seems to me to arise, rather, between realism and irrealism. Indeed, for a large percentage of contemporary films, computer-generated spectacle—super-human abilities, magical events, geologic or meteorological disasters, monstrous beasts, and so on—is the very ground on which the narrative is built, while the narrative simultaneously provides more opportunity for the display of spectacle (Tomasovic 2006). The attraction to be found in films that foreground new and amazing special effects is precisely the never-seen-before quality that astounds and excites viewers as well as filmmakers. And the impossible, fantastic, or unreal are sure-fire ways to present something unprecedented to filmgoers. At the same time, the danger of this approach is that the images produced will strike viewers as fake; that is, they will disrupt the narrative immersion of the audience. But by fake I do not necessarily mean unreal; rather, what is important is whether the effect calls attention to itself or whether it blends into the background and can be taken as a natural part of the diegesis. Take the Star Wars franchise for instance. Audiences know that there is no galaxy far, far away, and even if there were, human film cameras could not have travelled there and sent back the images seen in the films. But we engage Coleridge’s “willful suspension of disbelief” in order to revel in full Dolby depictions of space combat, even though we are aware that the vacuum of space cannot transmit sound.

It is precisely the tension that arises between the attraction of special effects, and especially computer-generated FX, and the full immersion of the audience in narrative flow that is my present concern. To be sure, this is not a new issue: beyond a (perhaps apocryphal) pure cinema of attractions, special effects have always created this tension in narrative film. What distinguishes contemporary cinemas is the self-reinforcing feedback loop between the cost of developing new digital techniques and capabilities and the blockbuster mode of wringing profits from films.

Before taking a closer look at my two main examples, however, it is worth our while to review at least one aspect of what distinguishes Chinese cinemas from other global industries today. What I have in mind is the extreme emphasis that historically has been placed on realism in Chinese cultural production, including film, beginning in the May Fourth period and continuing through the socialist period and into the contemporary postsocialist moment. To begin we should note that in China the value of highbrow cultural work was, until recently, only secondarily that of entertainment or profit; instead, value was to be found in a text’s social utility. And in the twentieth century, the means by which elite cultural texts were thought to achieve social efficacy was generally, though not unproblematically, considered to be realism. In Marston Anderson’s words, a realist text “refers its authority to the external world... thereby appearing not to be applying
its structures of meaning to the world, but to have discovered them there” (Anderson 1990, 16; see also Wang 1998). It is this diagnostic aspect of realism that gave it such power, in elite Chinese minds, to identify and prescribe solutions to social ills afflicting the Chinese body politic.

To be brief, this search for truth outside oneself and the concurrent discovery of the structuring role of social organization made realism a crucial tool for Chinese reformers in the May Fourth Period. The Chinese Communist Party, likewise, recognized the central role of realism in analyzing social conditions, but augmented this with an energizing mode meant to elicit volunteerist participation on the part of the audience; they called this socialist realism (or alternatively revolutionary romanticism). A certain propagandistic and top-down hegemonic control of the finished product, over time, came to dominate socialist realist texts. As Chris Berry has noted, Fifth Generation filmmakers reacted against the ideological uniformity of socialist realism by resorting to historically distant settings and allegorical aesthetics, while the new documentarians of the 1990s reacted against both by means of techniques that minimize the filmmakers’ control (Berry 2007). The influence of cinéma vérité practice, especially the observational modes of documentarians such as Ogawa Shinsuke and Fred Wiseman, was quite strong as this style developed, as critics have frequently noted (Berry 2007; Berry, Lu, and Rofel 2010; Pickowicz and Zhang 2006; Robinson 2013; Wu 2001). What is valuable to note about these two extremely important movements in recent Chinese cinema is that both preserve a realist mode of presentation in their film practice, though to be sure not a socialist realist mode.

For contemporary Chinese mainstream films, however, a different presentational mode obtains. For now, and unless I can find a better name for it, I will call it the blockbuster mode. Stephen Teo, in regards to martial arts films, has succinctly summed up the state of affairs in the following manner:

The wuxia film is now steeped in the era of the blockbuster production mode. … It attests to the near-total assimilation of the genre by the Chinese mainland film industry such that any wuxia film released over the last fourteen years or so would invariably be made in China, either partly or completely, often as co-productions in partnership with Hong Kong and Taiwan but also Japan and South Korea. Such a production would just as invariably be undertaken as an expensive blockbuster, a term that is translated into Chinese as dapian (which literally means “big film”). A concerted move by the Chinese government to drive film production along the line of Hollywood-style blockbusters has resulted in the rise of the dapian (Teo 2016, 192).

Teo highlights a number of features that are central to the idea of blockbuster that I am trying to develop here. First is the centrality of China to the film production of blockbusters. This reflects both China’s enormous market as well as the financing clout that China has developed since the turn of the century. But, at the same time,
this centrality is leavened with transnational aspirations that Teo notes in terms of coproductions and that to which I would add the drive to find markets and audiences outside of China. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the reference to the Chinese name for a blockbuster, *dapian*. The English name implies what here the Chinese name makes explicit: the bigness of all aspects of a blockbuster film. This includes the film’s production budget, which is deployed in pursuit of the most famous stars, the most thrilling (or terrifying or astounding or what have you) story, the most lavish sets, props, and costumes, the most up-to-date audio-visual effects to make the audience feel the power of the film, and therefore to attract the largest audience possible in order to generate a large return on the already large original investment.

The rise of the blockbuster mode is intricately intertwined with studio needs to minimize risk amidst changing industrial conditions (Neale 2000, 242–44). Steve Neale identifies the blockbuster as the inheritor of Hollywood spectacle in the new era (Neale 2000, 92). Both of these factors certainly also apply to China’s situation. But more to the point for our present purposes is the increased reliance on special effects to create and present cinematic spectacle for films made in the blockbuster mode. Both Michael Allen and Kristen Whissel have explicitly linked the heavy use of CGI effects with the blockbuster form (Allen 2009; Whissel 2009). Indeed, as Allen argues, “digital imaging technologies and techniques are striving to replicate what already exists: the photographic representation of reality. The success or failure of any digital image lies in the degree to which it persuades its spectator that it is not digital, but *is* photographic” (Allen 2009, 825). At the risk of stating the obvious, however, the difference between the photographic and digital representation is that the former requires a profilmic reality from which it is derived while the latter does not. Thus, as I have already begun to argue, the evolving role of CGI is centrally concerned with the creation of photorealistic portrayals of unreal objects, creatures, locales, events, or what have you.

**The Great Wall**

Zhang Yimou’s recent film *The Great Wall* (Changcheng, 2016) seems to be considered a disappointment. I would not rank *The Great Wall* with the best of Zhang’s directorial work, to be sure. And yet, for myself, I must admit to a great deal of fascination with the movie and especially with reactions to it from critics. The film reportedly had a budget of $150 million (at the time, the largest ever in China) but more than doubled that in worldwide box office receipts. Marketing expenses reportedly rose to an additional $80 million. As a result, the film was estimated to lose about $75 million, though some of this loss could be recouped from TV
licensing and other home entertainment income (McClintock and Galloway 2017). The film appears to have been most successful inside China, while in the United States it was not able to attract a large audience.\(^2\) As a Chinese-US coproduced film, some of the disappointment may be related to how box office receipts from different markets were apportioned among the various studios. Expectations, certainly, were for a much higher return on investment than the film actually produced, though as the first co-production that aimed to perform well in both of the two largest markets in the world, it seems to me that such expectations were probably unrealistic from the beginning.

Much of the blame for The Great Wall's poor performance is placed on the story. Indeed, reviews of the film—both professional and amateur, both English-language and Chinese—are mixed and seem, all in all, to come to a consensus that the film is of mediocre quality (Douban n.d.; Rotten Tomatoes n.d.). The implication in this assessment is that a narrative with broad-based appeal in both China and North America, given the stark differences in expectations, not to mention cultural outlooks, has been and will continue to be difficult to develop (McClintock and Galloway 2017). For myself, I am not so sure this is true. The reception of James Cameron's films, Titanic (1997) and Avatar (2009), are two examples of films that performed extremely well in both the North American and Chinese markets. Avatar is especially revealing in this context, since the film market in China was not yet mature in 1997, when Titanic was released. By 2010, however, when Avatar screened in China, China proved to be the single largest market for the film outside of North America (Box Office Mojo c n.d.). The Transformer franchise is another similar example. What these films have in common but distinguish them from The Great Wall, of course, is that their narratives do not center on storylines derived from Chinese mythology.

This explicit connection to Chinese culture seems to be one of the major draws that Zhang himself found alluring in this project. He has said: “for the first time, a film deeply rooted in Chinese culture, with one of the largest Chinese casts ever assembled, is being made at tent pole scale for a world audience” (McGovern 2016). The chance to present Chinese culture to the world in the blockbuster format, then, is one of the film's strong points, at least as far as the director was concerned. The film features the Great Wall itself, of course, but also centrally the Chinese invention of gun powder and, most of all, the mythical Taotie beast. It is also noteworthy that the film attributes the moral resilience derived from Chinese mythology.

\(^2\) Box Office Mojo reports $334,933,831 as the film's worldwide take and lists the film as the 8th highest earner for the year in China (Box Office Mojo b n.d.).
culture and civilization as the only firm foundation with which to handle the dangerous and explosive nature of gun powder in the correct way: namely, to combat the vicious rampage of ravenous beasts—that is, the Taotie—not to fight other humans. Taotie, on the other hand, is the name given to masks carved from jade and bone, dating back to the Neolithic period, and incorporated into bronze castings in the Shang and later dynasties. As Ladislav Kesner argues, with roots stretching so far back into China’s prehistory, it is impossible to know exactly what Taotie signified to those early Chinese, though the longevity of the icon argues for its social, political, and religious importance (Kesner 1991). The creatures the film depicts as Taotie adhere to descriptions that can be found in the classic text, the Shanhai jing, parts of which date to the Warring States period (4th century BCE). In its earliest form, the Shanhai jing reflected shamanistic practices connecting the human world with various gods and spirits, as well as knowledge of medicinal, mineral, and animal anomalies (Strassberg 2002, 3–13). The Han dynasty commentator Guo Pu first associated the description of Paoxiao in the book with the Taotie from ancient bronzes. The Shanhai jing’s description reads: “Three hundred fifty li farther north stands Mount Gouwu. On its heights is much jade, and at its feet is much copper. There is a beast dwelling here whose form resembles a goat’s body with a human’s face. Its eyes are behind its armpits, and it has tiger’s teeth and human hands. It makes a sound like a baby and is called the Paoxiao. It is a man-eater” (Strassberg 2002, 128).

If it is unremarkable for a statistically significant proportion of China’s educated, urban populace to have a passing cultural familiarity with the Bible or Greek mythology or other similar foundations of European culture and thus be able to respond to films built on that basis—as, for example, to the historical event of the sinking of the Titanic—the same, alas, is not true of foreigner’s appreciation of Chinese culture. The Great Wall’s setting in pre-industrial society and the attendant spectacle of sword, spear, and arrow fighting, and thus the implicit familiarity foreign audiences would have from The Lord of the Rings (2001–2003) or other fantasy fare, it seems, was not sufficient to overcome this cultural deficiency. Nor was the casting of Hollywood stars Willem Dafoe, Pedro Pascal, and Matt Damon. This is the purported weakness of story that doomed the film to a disappointing performance.

What I have just laid out for you is a pretty little story of ignorance and cultural chauvinism, which, though not completely false, does not, it seems to me, fully explain the film’s disappointing results from Chinese audiences and US-based viewers alike. Indeed, a monster is a monster, one need not be able to cite its extended and full cultural pedigree in order to be frightened, or at the very least,
to understand the threat it poses within the diegetic structure the film establishes. The nature and deployment of special effects within the blockbuster structure, it seems to me, is at least equally important to understanding audience responses. Let us, then, compare two climactic battle scenes that make extensive use of CGI: first, *The Great Wall*. The scene detailing the final defeat of the Taotie at the last moment after they have already overrun the Song Dynasty capital of Bianliang displays many of the characteristic uses of CGI that Zhang’s films have developed since *Hero* (Yingxiong) in 2002 (McGrath 2013; Larson 2017, 271–304, 333–47). The monsters are drawn by the computer to present a horde of ravenous creatures decimating the city. Characteristically, the MASSIVE software suite, first developed for *The Lord of the Rings* franchise and used previously in several of Zhang’s films, render the Taotie as a mass of hardly distinguishable individuals acting in concert (McGrath 2013; North 2021). The narrative justifies this by constructing the Taotie beasts with a hive society of mindless drones completely directed by the queen. Amidst this chaos, William (played by Matt Damon) and Commander Lin Mei (played by Jing Tian) make their attempts to kill the Taotie queen and thus defeat the enemy. I would argue that the two dynamic aspects of the scene (the Taotie horde versus William and Lin) are generally segregated into separate shots. The sole exception to this segregation, when Lin and William swing on a rope amidst the gaping maws of ravenous Taotie in order to make their attack on the queen, reveals superb integration of the two narrative actions of the scene. Otherwise, however, the mise-en-scenes of the sequence—humans (with vibrant costumes and intricate props) in their lushly detailed profilmic set in contrast to the Taotie’s fully computer-generated and composited bodies and environments—remain segregated. This may reflect some difficulty (and thus increased cost) in combining the various images into a unified shot on the screen. Or, it may be that the segregation serves a narrative purpose of maintaining the cooperation of individuals between Lin and William visually distinct from the mind control group-think of the Taotie. Whatever the reasoning behind this editorial and directorial decision, it remains the case that the one sequence (of about eight different shots) combining profilm with CGI is the most interesting of the entire sequence, but it lasts only a mere 15 seconds.

Compare this, then, to a scene from *Captain America: Civil War*, which was among the top earners in both China and the US in the same year *The Great Wall* was released, 2016. *Captain America: Civil War* ranked third in the US and fifth in

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3 Another defect from which the film suffers, I suspect, is the fact that the Taotie simply are not terribly frightening. The film attempts to draw from horror film tactics, notably keeping the monster’s form out of view for as long as possible, but this is not narratively sustainable. I do not have the scope in this article, however, to follow up this line of conjecture.
China in terms of box office receipts for 2016. The over $180 million the film earned in China made China the single largest overseas market for the film (Box Office Mojo d n.d.). The mid-point climax for the film, brings the entire cast of superheroes together for a set-piece battle of six versus six. We the audience are aware that neither side is wrong, and so the scene is a convenient excuse to display the spectacle of the heroes using their powers. Rather than what amounts to a straightforward digital animation technique that we saw in *The Great Wall*, we see motion capture techniques, other computer-generated imagery, as well as classic stunt work, which are then composited into a single image, including the set.

Both scenes incorporate traditional stunts, the tinkling of smashing glass, and explosions with the more strictly computer-generated imagery. Both scenes, likewise, combine computer-generated sets with profilmic sets: *The Great Wall* through cross cutting and *Captain America* through extensive compositing. But the scenes feel different. It is noteworthy that the pace of editing is significantly faster in *Captain America*, as is the amount of camera movement (whether actual or virtual). The rhythms generated through these editing and camera techniques play a significant role in the dynamism of the second clip compared to the more static feeling of the first. The key difference, however, seems to me to be the difficulty of integrating animated creatures and their actions into a comprehensive immersive experience. The motion capture technique, on the other hand, with its basis in human movement, is better able to infuse the computer imagery with a sense of reality. Of course, the “difficulty” of making animated creatures seem real need not be a fault; it can be played for “cuteness” as in the 2015 Chinese hit *Monster Hunt* (Zhuoyao ji, dir. Raman Hui). But that is not really an option for *The Great Wall*, at least as far as its narrative is concerned.

**Mountains May Depart**

Integration of spectacle with narrative, then, as with the musical film, seems to be the crux of the matter. That is, how can integration of spectacle and narrative be best achieved given narrative and technological limitations? I would like now to add a third example to our ongoing comparison: Jia Zhangke’s 2015 film *Mountains May Depart* (Shanhe guren). In many ways, this comparison is counterintuitive: rather than a blockbuster, Jia’s film is considered art film. While details on its budget are not readily available, its total worldwide gross seems to be close to $5 million (the bulk of which was earned inside China) (Box Office Mojo e n.d.). Moreover, *Mountains May Depart*’s highbrow status is solidified through global film festival screenings such as at Cannes, where it was entered into competition, and the Toronto International Film Festival. Finally,
the spectacle or attraction of the film lies not in superhuman conflict on which the fate of the world hinges, but rather the mundane events of human lives that lend meaning to those lives but otherwise have no wider effect.

Nevertheless, I still feel the comparison will be fruitful precisely because Jia is not attempting to produce spectacle but rather interest in the human lives of the characters his film describes. And yet, even though it would be quite easy to simply disregard CGI altogether in the pursuit of creating reflective responses in his audience, Jia consistently engages the capacities of digital film, including computer enhanced and created imagery. Elsewhere I have argued that there are two aspects of the digital image that Jia draws together into dynamic tension. On the one hand, the Chinese reception of DV is as more immediate, more powerfully reflective of the indexical trace, more capable of conveying the real event as it actually happened (Wang 2005). On the other hand, the ease with which the digital image can be altered simply begs for such manipulation. More than this, though, I suggest that these manipulations of the images on screen raise questions about the representative function of the film image (Stuckey 2018, 78–99). In a recent critique of an indexical understanding of realism in film, Tom Gunning has argued for a refocus on cinematic motion as the basis for realism. As he notes, this has the benefit of being flexible enough to include, rather than bracket off, animation into our conception of realistic film. Rather than digital media bringing together two distinct forms of cinema, then, we should understand their convergence (in Jia just as much as in The Great Wall or Captain America, for example) more like the natural state of cinema which has always been possible, but which current technology now makes even more seamless (Gunning 2007).

The relevance of Gunning’s theory to special effects–driven action blockbusters may seem straightforward; but what about the sedate, long-take aesthetic cultivated by Jia (and other critical realist filmmakers) that is central to the contemporary global art film style? I would point out, first, that stillness never actually reaches the zero-degree of motion, even for the most observational of cameras. There is always some motion that will draw the audience into the sort of identification that Gunning describes. Further, that identification may very well take the form of the contemplation invited by an observational, vérité cinema. In this regard, the difference between such observation and the immersion of an audience in a gut-wrenching action sequence is not a distinction of kind, but rather a distinction of the precise affect called forth by the different film images. By inserting these computer-generated images, then, Jia is able to emphasize movement, simultaneously reflecting the character’s affective economy and drawing the audience in to share in it.

Earlier in his career, notably in The World (Shijie, 2004) and Still Life (Sanxia haoren, 2006), Jia attracted attention for experimenting with the possibilities that
digital manipulation of the DV image open up. *Mountains May Depart* likewise shows some experimentation on this front, but more to the point some stark differences from his earlier practice. In those earlier films, the flash art animation in *The World* or the building blasting into space in *Still Life*, the digital manipulations called attention to themselves and, indeed, brought the narrative to an almost complete halt. While there is a remarkable airplane crash that likewise seems tangential to the main narrative line in *Mountains May Depart*, and that may have received some digital enhancement, the third section of the film, set in Australia of the future, the year 2025, integrates VFX into the narrative almost without friction. Dollar, one of the protagonists, in the course of his job as a delivery man for a restaurant, checks the map on his personal device. Later, the currently standing eight geological formations known as the 12 Apostles off Australia’s southern coast, are reduced to three through the simple process of digitally erasing five from the footage.

The future setting, rather than a science fiction extravaganza depicting the amazing spectacle of advanced technologies that change the face of the planet, instead allows Jia the speculative space to imagine new forms of technologies not so different from those we already know. So, like the blockbusters with which we were concerned earlier, Jia moves to integrate the irreality of CGI into the immersive realism of the overall narrative. However, unlike those mega-productions, which incorporate digital FX as visual and aural spectacle that fuels the narrative line, in *Mountains May Depart*, Jia thematizes the aspects of technology that increasingly color our lives. The normal misunderstandings between generations are here exacerbated by the immigrant son’s loss of Chinese language skills in favor of English while his father cannot learn the new language. The seeming panacea of instant, computer-mediated translation, however, actually intensifies the communication barriers between the two rather than alleviating them.

**Conclusion**

There are a number of assumptions that have motivated this article, and it may behoove us to bring those assumptions out into the open and make them explicit. First, the deployment of visual effects, and perhaps especially animations that are literally drawn by means of computer capacities, in narrative cinema necessitates the animation passing as photorealistic, as Michael Allen has argued. Its failure to do so marks it as fake, and at least outside of a camp reception, leads to its rejection by audiences. Second, at least insofar as these examples that I have raised here indicate, a good way to encourage the photorealistic appraisal of computer-
generated imagery in audiences is to integrate as much as possible the real and the unreal—or perhaps more accurately the performed and the digitally created—so that they are hardly distinguishable for the audience immersed in the narrative. There are at least two ways to achieve this, as shown in these examples: the incorporation of computer effects into spectacular action or horror sequences to enhance the affective amazement of audiences, or the depiction of currently nonexistent technologies as taken-for-granted, fully incorporated aspects of human life. The first approach, inasmuch as audiences around the world pay good money to watch such films, has the potential to earn tremendous profits. The second approach reveals that the ever-expanding capacities of computer-based technologies may not be able to solve the most stubborn pitfalls of human life.

This last observation brings me to one more assumption that seems to have driven the expectations and hopes for the collaborating studios behind *The Great Wall*. The casting of major stars from both Hollywood and the Chinese industry, the scripting largely in English but with significant Mandarin too, and most of all the liberal use of CGI all seem designed to tap both of the two largest film markets in the world. Feng Xiaogang’s *Big Shot’s Funeral* (Dawan 2001) is an earlier example that adopted a similar strategy. I hope that my discussion has shown that *The Great Wall*’s lackluster performance, especially in North America, is not necessarily only the fault of cultural miscommunication. More than this, though, I think when we look at the examples of films that have succeeded in both markets, especially *Titanic* and *Avatar*, we do not see such a color-by-numbers approach to drawing audiences. Instead, Cameron made good movies that made good use of CGI for visual and narrative ends.

Finally, I would like to end with a question. What is the ultimate benefit of producing a single film that will be a runaway success in both China and North America? Money seems an increasingly weak goal, as China’s market becomes the largest in the world (Associated Press 2018), and profits can safely be made here. If, on the other hand, as seems to have been important for Zhang Yimou, the presentation of Chinese culture to non-Chinese audiences is the goal, with time, that too may take care of itself. That is to say, if China, as the newly crowned biggest player on the global cinema scene, makes movies that its own people enjoy, a certain percentage of these films will also make their way abroad and build receptive audiences across the world. To my mind, it is merely a matter of time before that happens.
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