Breaking Down the Spectacular Simulacra:

A Comparative Analysis of Jia Zhangke's The World and Zeng Fanzhi's Mask

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With the continuous accumulation of wealth and the growing influence of politics, Chinese society is experiencing a transformative process that invites multiple levels of interpretation. China's adoption of a market economy, in particular, has formed a new type of biopolitical regime that promotes a culture of commercialism and consumerism in an era of increasing globalization. This regime has the ability to control the people through the propaganda of cultural spectacle: directors tend to make genre films that purposely promote a wealthy and aristocratic fantasy; painters create pieces that particularly cater to the aesthetic of art market. Such a spectacle was foreseen by Guy Debord, a French theorist who wrote the influential Society of the Spectacle in 1967. In Debord's terms, "the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images" (4). This succinct statement reveals that a form of politics dominates the biological body by imposing a certain perception of life and defining relationships with others. One effective political tactic, for example, involves increasingly blurring the line between reality and its representations: the formation of simulacra, imitations that do not have an original. Considering both concepts of spectacle and simulacra, this paper will examine the idea of simulacra embodied in Jia Zhangke's film The World (2004) and in Zeng Fanzhi's mask paintings. Specifically, both Jia and Zeng first establish but then subvert the spectacular simulacra in their works, demonstrating their effort against a postmodern illusion and thus regain the critical aspect of film and art.

In order to closely observe both Jia's and Zeng's works, it is important to examine the notion of spectacle and simulacra. For the perspective of spectacle, Debord emphasizes how the economic production order in modern society causes the alienation of people and leads to the domination of the masses by commodities. This alienation starts with the division between human labor and final product. As a result of this division, one's biological body tends to be separated from others'; losing the perspectives of others makes one's own sense of reality vulnerable to distortion, and often leaves a gap for the spectacle to fill in. By and large, the most prominent spectacle in modern society is that of a false sense of abundance, which invades the private lives of people in the form of commodity comfort. Such an invasion leads to the decline of social interaction, and ultimately, to commodity's total occupation of society (Debord 42).

The notion of simulacra is significant because simulacra helps to package the artificial commodities for the consumers to accept voluntarily. Contextualizing this simulacra in the postmodern age, French philosopher Jean Baudrillard points out that people experienced a precedence of simulacra: "the representation precedes and determines the real" (Felluga). Here, the border between reality and its representations collapses. Instead of approaching the real object, people embrace the meaning that the object conveys; such an approach causes the difference between reality and meaning to disappear, leaving the simulacrum — a shell of reality that has no real meaning. In a postmodern society, the combination of spectacle and simulacra – spectacular simulacra – permeates various aspects of social life. Often, it serves to neutralize people's doubts and anxieties about being manipulated by an estranged political force in China.

Situated at the center of the spectacular simulacra, contemporary Chinese society displays a unique ecosystem of biopolitical coexistence: the simultaneous operation of the socialist ideology and global capitalism after the economic reforms of 1978. Analyzing this contradicting interaction, Lu Tonglin points out that "global capitalism 'sacralizes' biopolitical power—the regulation of bodies—through the overwhelming presence of dispositifs, anything that regulates living beings by distancing them from their lives" (164). Here, spectacular simulacra serve

a similar function as the ubiquitous existence of dispositifs. Under the regime of the Communist Party and the burgeoning power of a capitalist economy, the spectacular simulacra turns its target to cultural products, an inevitable stage of commodification. Jia Zhangke and Zeng Fanzhi, representatives of the cultural producer, blend critical perspectives into cinematic apparatus and paintings to counter spectacular simulacra. Though working with different subjects and media, both Jia and Zeng seek to achieve a similar goal: to help society get in touch with reality and to rescue the alienated population from the distortions of spectacular simulacra. Both Jia and Zeng take the advantage of image, which can be used as an important device to counter the spectacles and simulacra propagated by the economic and political discourse in postmodern China – the power of imagery can also open the eyes of the viewers to the ambiguity they have been exposed to. Thus, it is essential to analyze how both artists highlight the spectacles and simulacra in their works and make them obvious to the viewers.

Jia's film, The World, marked an important transition in his film career: it was his first film produced under the official censorship of the State Administration of Radio Film and Television (SARFT). Such censorship not only revealed the control of cultural products by the Communist Party but also required Jia to convey his message with more powerful yet subtle visual representations. Compared with Jia's previous productions, this film shows deep compassion for Chinese peasants, a neglected group in the mainstream cinema. In most of his productions, Jia emphasizes an evanescent peasant root in Chinese culture. In The World, Jia places emphasis on the life of the migrant workers who live in an amusement park in a Beijing suburb, which includes miniatures of famous monumental structures and scenic spots around the globe – an artificial replication of the world. Indeed, the amusement park serves as a microcosm of Chinese society, a spectacular yet bizarre simulacra (Lu 170). Through this setting of a suburban theme park, a place that is distant from yet still close enough to China's political capital, Jia depicts the plight of the disaffected peasants in two ways: the alienation of migrant workers and the marginalization of their desire. Standing between their humble hometown and the unfamiliar metropolis, these workers exist in a limited space of urbanization, driven by the force of global capitalism. In the film, Tao and Taisheng, a dancer and a security guard in the amusement park provide performance and safety to the tourists. Faced with temptations of wealth and struggles of morals, these lovers survive a gas leak, symbolizing a sense of rebirth and reconnection.

Compared with Jia's depiction of migrant workers in Beijing, Zeng chooses the prototype of his mask paintings from the same locale but with a strong feeling of urban consumerism, mimicking a European haute culture (Shiff 12). Painting, as a medium of expression, seems to contrasts with the concealing quality of masks. But by looking at the purposes of both, one can see that painting a picture is very much similar to the action of looking through a mask: an artist produces a work, mediated by the paint and the brush; one looks through a mask, a vision mediated with the disguise of a mask. Both experiences of painting and wearing a mask avoid a direct communication between people and the world. With these parallels in mind, Zeng uses the canvas to generate an imaginary plane, which differs from the viewers' reality. Thus, the picture plane, like a mask, does not allow the viewer to approach the realm on the canvas. Such parallels between the medium itself and the mask theme allow a particular spectatorship to arise: by confronting these masked figures, viewers are forced to accept the possibility of inauthenticity and duplicity, which make viewers reflect on their own experience of wearing invisible masks during social interaction. As a result, "the social types that Zeng has represented as masked are not so different from types he depicts unmasked—unmasked in a material sense, not necessarily in a psychological sense" (Shiff 13). In order to make the simulacra clear to the viewers, Zeng does not emphasize the individual behavior but a collective one: he replicates the masked images in various scenarios to form a striking seriality, highlighting the contrast between the artificial and the natural and showing the dichotomy of unity and alienation.

Understanding how both artists provide the audience with visual access to the spectacular simulacra requires an analysis of the details in their works. More specifically, in the opening scene of The World, Tao, dressed as an Indian dancer with a green costume, walks through a crowded backstage area and tries to find a slip of Band-Aid. This sequence lasts for about two minutes, filled with hyperbolic costumes, heavily powdered makeups and dim lighting. At first glance, this scene introduces a busy preparation for a dance performance—a spectacle of precise bodily

movements and practiced actions—which actually starts in a chaotic and disordered space. Later in the performance scene, the film plays a celebrative score with audiences applauding in the background as the performers enter the stage one by one. On the stage, female performers are wearing distinct costumes that represent various countries, yet they are dancing in a same manner as if different cultures have the exact same dance steps. Here, the film applies both visual and audio devices to push for a feeling of contrast, a deliberate attempt to show the isolation between the backstage and the onstage performance as well as the alienation between the dancers and the audiences. In order to demonstrate how this repetitive pattern of spectacle works on the regulation, Jia inserts similar dancing scenes along with the same music scores three times in the film. For Debord, "the basically tautological character of the spectacle flows from the simple fact that its means are simultaneously its ends. […The light of the spectacle] covers the entire surface of The World and bathes endlessly in its own glory" (13). Instead of glorifying the performance itself, Jia inserts repetitive scenes of dancing and creates a cycle that destabilizes the tautology of the spectacle, in which similar images interrupt the order of capitalist production rather than reinforce it. By seeing this absurdity in the dancing, a clumsy imitation of dancing cultures around the world, the viewers can be separated from the spectacle.

Embodying a similar idea of cycle and repetition, Zeng's mask paintings have several common characteristics that define his series. For example, in figure 1 the man wears a light grey suit with a black coat covering his shoulder. His head tilts slightly towards the left and his hands are exposed under the draperies of the coat. His legs are crossed as if he is walking on a runway. On the right side, a spotted dog lies on the ground and looks towards the left. This painting illustrates a typical human figure in Zeng's works: the figure usually has a disproportional body and enlarged heads and hands; and the figure dresses in western style clothes, suggesting a sense of high value and wealth. The mask on the figure's head does not look distinct from an actual face. It actually clings to the face like a thin layer of coating, so the expression on the mask seems to actually have the dimensions of the face instead of just being painted on a surface. In the commodification of postmodern society, consumption no longer means consuming enough to sustain one's self and survive; it means buying or owning products that represent one's identity, "a degradation of being into having" (Debord 17). Promoted by a commercial culture, images of novelty and delicacy flood daily life, which turns the having into appearing, a constant pursuit of immediate prestige (Debord 17). Through the repetition of similar figures, Zeng comments critically on the continuous pursuit of consumption. He turns the familiar into the unfamiliar, thus creating a sense of ridicule. Such a sense separates the viewers from the identity imposed by the commercial culture and consumerism.

Beyond the visual repetition and cycle in their works, both artists also draw one's attention to communication and reflection. In The World, Jia introduces a Russian dancer, Anna, who is brought by a human trafficker to the park and later is forced to engage in prostitution. Here, the film illustrates how the biological body is traded as any other products with a price tag in postmodernity. Thus, it is safe to say that under the influence of global capitalism, the way of communication loses its diversity and only exists in the form of exchange-value, a measurement of money or capital. In order to counter such a monotonous communication, the film creates a new universal language that delivers meanings across cultural boundaries without any translation. Jia includes various scenes depicting Anna and Tao's conversation, in which they speak Russian and Chinese simultaneously yet seem to understand each other. This play on language subverts the dominant voice of exchange-value, highlighting communication through actions, eye contacts, gestures and expressions. Such a technique challenges how language shapes and defines the physical life. By adopting different kinds of languages other than speaking, the film releases viewers from the shackles of symbolic meanings and economic values.

Compared with the language adopted in The World, Zeng chooses to express communication through representations of a mirror. A mirror, a medium between reality and its reflection, serves a visual twist in arts. In figure 2, a man, wearing a red suit with blue shirt and yellow tie, is looking at his reflection in a mirror. Here, the reflection in the mirror, along with the figure who looks into the reflection, generate an interesting juxtaposition of two simulacra. With a closer observation, one sees that the actual figure outside the mirror frame does not have a thread tied over his ears, suggesting that he may not wear any mask. Such an interpretation makes the whole composition

more complicated, as if an unmasked figure discovers his masked reflection in the mirror. This man's silent communication with the reflection finds parallels in the audiences looking at this picture as a mirror, forming an interactive spectatorship between the real and the imagined. Through the mirror, Zeng forces the viewers to confront the simulacrum in a blunt yet frank way, underlining a sense of estrangement. Thus, the mirror in Zeng's painting indicates how people wish to appear to substitute one social form for another, masked from themselves, but it is ironic that the best pose which one believes in further distances the social self from the natural self (Shiff 21).

In addition to the communication with oneself or others, Jia and Zeng also use visual motifs to disrupt a continuous narrative or representation. In The World, Jia inserts short clips of animation into the film. One prominent moment is the aircraft scene, in which Taisheng tries to seduce Tao to have sex with him but Tao pulls his hand away. Here, the film cuts to a clip animation: Taisheng receives a message and flies on an airplane; meanwhile, Tao floats in the air and flies freely over different districts of the city. The animation visually breaks a linear narrative, subverting the practice of mainstream cinema. This intentional decision deconstructs the suturing effect of cinema, which requires natural transitions and seamless editing. The animation provides a rare chance for the viewers to break from their expectation of spectacle so they can follow Tao's inner imagination, a desire to have a free life in the capital city despite of all the life struggles. Animation, originally representing the realm of imagination and fantasy, helps the viewers depart from the realistic scenes, rejecting the ambiguity in spectacles.

Contrary to the animation in The World, Zeng adopts a specific representation in his paintings to create visual excess by adding animals in the whole composition, especially dogs. In figure 1, the dog is placed next the human figure, as an extra element that imbalances the whole picture plane. The dog can be read as a pet that follows the steps of its master, allegorizing how people are manipulated like animals to follow the invisible order of capitalist spectacles. Another perspective regards the dog as another animal species that visualizes a mock or irony of spectacular simulacra that people accept. Indeed, compared with Zeng's earlier works, his later works varied this motif by painting a rocking horse or toy dog (Figure 3). This variation alludes to the birth of animal simulacra in contemporary society: the actual animal or pet is obsolete; what people embrace is what the animal characteristics represent. Through the animal motif in paintings, Zeng portrays an excessive picture plane that pushes the viewers further to rethink their relationship with real and representations.

Faced with the society of integrated spectacle, where political power becomes increasingly invisible and powerful, Jia Zhangke and Zeng Fanzhi examine postmodern China with a critical eye and seek remedy with films and paintings (Lu 168). Working with different media, Jia's film echoes Zeng's canvas. Their works emphasize a sense of repetition, communication and visual diversions: the cycle of repeated scenes and images unveils the ludicrous homogeneity; the universal language in the film and the mirror in the mask painting imply a reconnection to others and to oneself, confronting the normalized alienation within late capitalist economy; and the visual break of animation and the visual excess of animal and toy in the painting break up the viewers' spectatorship with the spectacle or simulacra by providing another perspective of looking at the world. Through their artistic expression, the viewers can access the late capitalist mechanism happening in Chinese society and witness how films and paintings form a strong cultural force that can tackle the dominance of spectacular simulacra.

Figure 1 not included. Fanzi, Zheng. *Mask*, 1998.

Figure 2 not included. Fanzi, Zheng. *Mask Series,* 1998.

Figure 3 not included. Fanzi, Zheng. *Mask Series*, 2006.

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