



# A Study of "Reality" and "Virtual" in Jia Zhangke's Films from the Perspective of Deconstruction

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**Abstract.** Derrida, with the strategy of deconstruction, rebelled against the traditional logocentrism, and proposed that the seemingly fixed binary opposition is actually a complementary and interactive development relationship. Based on the theory of "differance" and "addition" in his deconstructive strategy, combined with a number of films directed and produced by Jia Zhangke, this paper studies the seemingly rigid and contradictory concepts of reality and fiction. By explaining the documentary features of Jia Zhangke's films and the means of supplementing "reality" with non-realistic elements, this paper demonstrates that Jia Zhangke's films break through the binary opposition between reality and fiction, and achieve the effect of supplementing reality with fiction and blending them with each other.

**Keywords:** Derrida; Jia Zhangke; Reality; Differance; Supplement

## 1 Introduction

Deconstruction as a critical strategy was developed by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, who defined deconstruction as a force that disturbs the entire established order, calling it a great earthquake <sup>[1]</sup>. One of Derrida's deconstruction strategies is to oppose logocentrism, which is followed intentionally or unintentionally in the whole western metaphysical tradition, emphasizing one center and grasping the world with a paradigm of "binary opposition". Derrida, the theorist of deconstruction, used the strategy of deconstruction to rebel against the traditional logocentrism, and proposed that the seemingly fixed binary opposition is actually a complementary and interactive development relationship. Logocentrism is Derrida's general verdict on western philosophy, which is the rebellion and inheritance of structuralism. The core of traditional logocentrism lies in the principle of binary opposition with strict hierarchy. To oppose logocentrism is to rebel against authority and binary opposition.

In film works, the seemingly opposite elements of reality and fiction have also been studied by many scholars, especially in realistic films, "reality" has become the standard of film quality evaluation, while "fiction" has been abandoned by directors. However, from the perspective of deconstruction, the two seemingly fixed and opposite nouns of "reality" and "fiction" can also be deconstructed. As the leader of Chi

nese realistic directors, Jia Zhangke's films challenge the authority of "reality" from the perspective of deconstruction, rebel against the abandonment of fiction in traditional realistic films, break through the binary opposition group of "reality" and "fiction", and integrate the two, make up for the shortcomings of documentary with fictional elements, so as to make his films more realistic. Especially since the film *The World*, magic realism elements have frequently appeared in his films.

## 2 Feature films with documentary characteristics

Realistic films should indeed pursue authenticity, but it is not a documentary, it is still essentially a fictional feature film, the director only uses various means to make it produce real effects. Jia Zhangke is recognized as a realistic film director. He clearly states that he has been working hard all his life to reflect the social reality under the great changes of the times. Therefore, the films directed by Jia Zhangke are often called "documentary" films by the audience. However, Jia Zhangke himself also shows that although the way of "documentary" films is effective, it also has congenital deficiencies. Then this deficiency needs to be remedied by the fictional elements of feature films. Then how to make the feature film have authenticity has research value.

### 2.1 The Treatment of "Delay" in Feature Film

"Differance" is one of the key theories in Derrida's deconstruction strategy. "Differance" is divided into two parts, creating difference and delay of time. Jia Zhangke deals with the delay of time in feature films. In order to rebel against logocentrism and disintegrate the principle of binary opposition, Derrida put forward the theory of "differance". In Saussure's structuralism, the signifier of a symbol corresponds to the signified of a concept, that is, the sound represents a complete concept. We only need to hear the pronunciation of "chair" to form the concept of "chair" in our minds, while the chair in reality does not need to be present <sup>[2]</sup>. Derrida believes that the use of symbols substitutes for objects, thus postponing the phenomenon of meaning and the presence of objects, which leads to the emergence of differences and other derived meanings.

In the creation of drama films, Jia Zhangke changed the linear time narrative of the film and delayed the time after the end of each event. The narrative of the film itself is composed of multiple events, each individual event can not express the whole story, only through the editing of many events according to the logical arrangement, in order to form a complete narrative of the story, usually the plot film will use the editing to quickly turn to the narrative of the next event after the end of an event. However, Jia Zhangke continued the time unrelated to the transmission of information after the completion of the expression of the information that the event should convey, which also promoted the emergence of new meanings. In the film *Still Life*, Han Sanming came to Fengjie from Shanxi to look for his wife. After he communicated with his wife's brother, the incident was over, but the film did not directly relay the next inci-

dent, but extended the time, showing the ruins outside the ship and the scene of medical personnel disinfecting the ruins. In *Ash Is Purest White*, Qiaoqiao was arrested and imprisoned for using a pistol. Between showing that she fought for Bin and that Bin did not come to visit him after he was released from prison, the director also delayed the time in prison, adding scenes of Qiaoqiao delivering thermos pots in prison and prisoners doing exercises in the prison playground. [3] These delays have no effect on the plot and characterization, but this period of time is the film time pursued by director Jia Zhangke, which is in line with the real life time. The removal of these times does not affect the integrity of the story, but the addition plays a vital role in the documentary creation of fictional drama films.

## 2.2 The Overlap of Fiction and Real Space

Jia Zhangke overlaps the film space with the real life space, and tells the story by integrating the fictional story into the real life space, so that the audience can use the memory of real life to perceive the complete space. Film, as the seventh art, has a unique expressive function, and space modeling also plays an important role in the expressive force of the film. Although many films with realistic themes reflect a certain sense of reality in the expression of connotation and characterization, the overall perception is far less than the strong sense of documentary that Jia Zhangke's films bring to the audience, because Jia Zhangke's films overlap the narrative space of the film with the real life space. In the film *Xiaowu*, through the real living space of Fenyang Town in Shanxi Province, the audience can feel the place where the story takes place; *The Good Man in the Three Gorges* comes from the inspiration of the documentary *East*. Although the plot and characters of the film are fictional, the real living space of all living beings in the demolition of the Three Gorges area makes the film have a strong sense of reality. The film "*Mountains May Depart*" adds the imagination of future time and space. Jia Zhangke skillfully uses Australian living space and the strangeness of foreign real living space to create a sense of future. He combines the unfamiliar space of most audiences with the strangeness and distance of future space. Even the prediction of future time and space reveals a strong sense of documentary. Living space seems simple, but in fact it is an all-inclusive concept. Space not only includes the location of events, but also includes people's clothing, food, housing and transportation, and even life and language habits. Therefore, Jia Zhangke overlaps the real living space with the film space, so that the fictional feature film has documentary characteristics.

## 2.3 To detach the plot and establish reality

In the film, the real interview fragments outside the plot are added to produce the effect of alienation, which separates the audience from the plot of the story and makes them examine the connotation of the film from an objective and calm point of view. [4] Director Jia Zhangke innovatively adds real interview clips to the plot film. On the one hand, he uses real interview videos to inform the audience that the topic of the film comes from real social events, and arouses the audience's concern and thinking

about social hot spots. On the other hand, it takes the audience out of the narrative and enhances the documentary sense of the fictional drama through documentary fragments. *A Tale of 24 Cities* is a controversial film by Jia Zhangke. Some scholars believe that it is a documentary, and criticize Jia Zhangke's use of professional actors to interpret the form of interviewees, believing that it is a "pseudo-documentary". However, director Jia Zhangke clearly positioned "*a Tale of 24 Cities*" as a drama film. He took real workers and factory demolition as the background, added fictional characters and plots, and once again realized the deconstruction of the binary concept of reality and fiction. Jia Zhangke himself said in the interview that when he made the film, he actually interviewed dozens of workers. These characters were told at this moment, but they were told in 50 years. He was fascinated by the complexity of time. This span made him feel illusory, so he used the performances of actors to blur these stories. On the other hand, in these interviews, some of the parties are no longer there, and some stories are rumors handed down from generation to generation. Director Jia Zhangke wants to express not the story of a character, but the memory of a group, or the feeling of a group image, so he can put the real memory of many people together through fictional processing. It's the best choice.

"*The Best Is Yet to Come*" is a film produced by Jia Zhangke, in which interviews with hepatitis B virus carriers are interspersed many times. On the one hand, it shows that the film is based on real social events, triggering the audience's memories of an era. On the other hand, the audience will be separated from the plot, "*Dying to Survive*" is a film about chronic myeloid leukemia, the two films are similar in theme and material selection, but in contrast, "*Dying to Survive*" is more to immerse the audience in the plot, to move the audience by characterization, and "*The Best Is Yet to Come*" is to give the audience a chance to break away from the narrative. The use of documentary clips enables the audience to rise to the commanding heights of speculation and calm objectivity.

### 3 The "supplement" of unrealistic elements

"Supplement" also comes from Derrida's deconstructionist thought. If we explain the concept of "addition" in one sentence, addition is something added to things to enrich the content of the added, and it is only an additional thing. Addition is like a virus that infects the world, and Derrida believes that it is impossible for us to "stop it, educate it, tame it." [5] Supplementation is both a state of excess and a state of integrity. The strange nature of Derrida's explanation of the addition is that it has no essential properties, and that it probably never happened. From the literal sense, it seems that the addition has never happened, because it is not "present", if it is present, it can not be called an addition, but from the impact of the addition, its role is always there, so the addition is not present, nor absent, from the ontological perspective, there is no way to explain how the addition operates.

Derrida often uses addition in conjunction with other concepts, such as text, trace, writing, medicine, etc. Addition invades and breaks through these seemingly fixed concepts and introduces a boundless generalization. At the same time, all of Derrida's

works can be summarized as a kind of substitute and alternative teaching of ideas, a supplementary teaching process, the source itself has been supplemented, so there is no thing or concept that can not be supplemented, which also shows the universality of the supplement, all things can be supplemented, even if it is not present, it will appear one day in the future. Even the supplement itself will be supplemented.<sup>[6]</sup>

### 3.1 Magic realism "supplements" reality

It is a debatable question whether the "reality" concerned by modern movies is "fact" or "reality". In fact, "fact" is not necessarily equal to "truth", German director Herzog uses "fact" and "truth" to distinguish these two concepts, direct film and real film explore the "fact", while Herzog believes that the "truth" asked by his film is "truth", he calls "truth" "ecstatic truth". It is believed that this is a reality beyond simple facts, and that the reality it records is not the reality of the real world, but the reality of our dream world.<sup>[7]</sup> This also shows that realistic movies do not necessarily only narrate social facts. The reality in our dreams and imaginary world can also be called "truth", which is also the expression of realism, not pure surrealism, not the kind of rebellion against the real world.

Jia Zhangke also believes that unreality can be used as long as it can serve to tell the story of the contemporary real world, but it must have a realistic intention behind its use.<sup>[8]</sup> We can regard the fictional unreality described by Jia Zhangke as a supplement to the reality. Jia Zhangke's use of non-realistic elements is not surrealism, but more accurately magic realism. Surrealism is the main film tendency pursued by the French avant-garde in the 1920s. It mainly explores imagination and ideas, and is a kind of exploration of human subconscious and irrationality. Surrealist films try to express "inner life" and human spiritual state through art. Magical realism is the sudden appearance of too strange things in a highly realistic scene, which is hard to believe and creates a daily magical scene.<sup>[9]</sup>

Director Jia Zhangke adds magic realism elements to realistic films, and uses this fictional element to supplement reality. On the one hand, this supplement is to use unrealistic elements to express the surrealism in real social life. In the film *The World*, Jia Zhangke first included magical realism elements, adding an animated short after the scene in which the protagonist uses his mobile phone to communicate. The film *The World* actually tells the story of a group of actors living in a world park. They can go to famous scenic spots in any country without leaving home. It seems to be free, but the reality is that these people are trapped. They can not escape this small park, they are grounded by the virtual prosperity, their lives seem to be full, in fact, the world they live in is only a "virtual world" created in the context of the digital age and globalization, which is derailed from the real world. Just like the Chinese society at that time, it was full of capitalist culture everywhere, and the buildings named by various international names created a false prosperous city. Although China developed rapidly, it inevitably fell into the quagmire of cosmopolitanism and homogenization. At the same time, electronic devices and the Internet have also developed rapidly. The Internet has changed the way of life of young people in reality, giving them two layers of real and virtual space. Jia Zhangke inserts special effects animation

when using mobile phones, which is also to express the reality of people using communication devices to enter the virtual network world in the real society. Magic realism elements such as UFO, building take-off and high-rise tightrope walking also appeared in the film "Three Gorges Good Man". Director Jia Zhangke said that when he came to the Three Gorges area, he found that it was like being attacked by aliens, a ruin, everything was very magical and had a strong sense of unreality. Therefore, he will directly choose the elements of magic reality to present the feeling of the demolished Three Gorges in reality.

### **3.2 Unreality leads to real thinking**

In addition to adding reality to non-realistic elements, Jia Zhangke's use of magic realism is also to expose the theme of the film, to express his subjective thoughts, to draw the audience away from the plot and to arouse the audience's thinking. Inspired by Jia Zhangke, director Wang Jing added magic realism elements twice in the film "More than More" produced by Jia Zhangke. First, when Han Dong saw Yang Liwei's news, he put a pen in the air, which seemed to be in weightless space, floating through the whole newspaper office. The second time, at the end, a man in a spacesuit was handing out newspapers, and then Han Dong's newspaper floated and rolled in the crowd. These two uses of magic realism are related to space, revealing a potential connotation of the film, that is, the persistence of dreams. What Yang Liwei, the first Chinese astronaut, did carries a dream of collectivism. The story told in the film is also a story about dreams, but it is an individual dream. But behind this individual dream is a kind of fraternity, a group dream of hepatitis B carriers, and this pen and newspaper are the connection between these two dreams. At the same time, these two magic realism also take the audience out of the plot, triggering the audience to think about how to choose under the conflict of personal interests and group interests.

## **4 Conclusion**

From the perspective of Derrida's deconstruction, according to the theory of anti-logocentrism, the "real" and "virtual" in Jia Zhangke's films are dispelled, and the two seemingly opposite concepts are fused and reconstructed. Documentaries and feature films seem to be synonymous with reality and fiction. Jia Zhangke delays the film time in the film, overlaps the film space with the real space, and makes the audience out of the plot with the addition of real interviews, and finally presents the documentary feature film to the audience. At the same time, it uses magic realism elements to supplement the real effect of the film, so that the reality and fiction in Jia Zhangke's film can interact, and the purpose of pursuing "truth" can be achieved by supplementing reality with fiction. Thus it can be seen that Derrida's deconstruction theory still has great methodological significance in film studies, and can be used as a new perspective for future film studies.

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