



# Exploring Chinese Urban Culture Through “Things” and “Thought”: A Case Study of Jia Zhangke’s Film “Ash Is Purest White”

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**Abstract.** Film analysis, or cinema critique, is a significant area of research within the subject of humanities. Its main objective is to offer insights and recommendations to film producers by analyzing outstanding films. Therefore, the utilization of analytical methodologies deserves the attention of academics. In regards to these fundamental logical inquiries, the author discovers that cultural studies, aesthetic studies, and communications studies do not offer a flawless and self-explanatory solution. In his book "The Quotation of Film Phenomena," Wang explores both the content of the movie and offers a framework for comprehending the aforementioned question, namely through the examination of film phenomenology.

**Keywords:** Film criticism, Phenomenological realism, Film phenomenology, Chinese urban culture, Jia Zhangke

## 1 Introduction

Realist films are highly popular and a significant area of study in the field of art and humanities[1]. One of the main objectives of this research is to offer filmmakers and scholars valuable insights and suggestions by analyzing exceptional films. Therefore, scholars should focus on identifying the most worthwhile method of analysis. The current analysis of film texts primarily involves cultural analysis, examining the historical and social context as well as relevant theories to draw conclusions[2]. Additionally, narrative and contextual analysis focuses on dissecting the director's plot design and storytelling techniques, falling under the framework of the director's ideas. Visual language analysis, or style analysis, delves into the visual and auditory aesthetic elements employed by the director, serving as another component of the director's ideas framework and aiming to explore the director's discourse [3].

However, when considering the perspective of the audience, who is experiencing the visual and auditory delights presented by the film, they also contemplate the enigma posed by the movie: why am I undergoing such a process of enjoyment? What is the purpose of stimulating my cognitive processes and enhancing my ability to connect ideas? What causes fluctuations in my emotions? In regards to these fundamental

logical inquiries, the author discovers that cultural studies, aesthetic studies, and communications studies do not offer a flawless and self-explanatory solution. In his book "The Quotation of Film Phenomena," Wang explores both the content of the movie and offers a framework for comprehending the aforementioned question, namely through the examination of film phenomenology[2]. The primary research questions of this paper are: what are the relationships between realistic film and phenomenology pertains to the connection and interaction? What are the precise methodologies? The author will address the aforementioned questions by examining the relevant ideas and analyzing the film directed by Jia Zhangke through a study of specific cases "Ash is Purest White".

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 The Reality of the Film**

The concept of realism in literature, art, music, and film involves the portrayal of reality in a way that goes beyond mere imitation, instead presenting a dynamic and meaningful interpretation with both cognitive and aesthetic significance[4]. Defining characteristics of realism in cultural research are the emphasis on the truthfulness of the stories being communicated, recounted, and mapped as occurrences, rather than the truthfulness of the text itself[5]. This perspective emphasizes that when a film is seen as a photographic documentation, it accurately represents the story that is constructed from it, rather than simply depicting the filmed elements such as actors, sets, and performances[6].

### **2.2 Film Phenomenology**

Phenomenological realism posits that the connection between realistic movies and phenomena is a manifestation of the fundamental nature of both material and spiritual realities [7]. Scholars proposed the notion of phenomenological realism after observing a strong correlation between neo-realism and phenomena. Italian neo-realism stands itself from earlier genres such as realism and Soviet genres by refusing to impose a predetermined perspective on reality [8]. Instead, it can only deduce the essence of truth from its outward appearance and the authentic portrayal of individuals and the world. Phenomenological realism, in essence, prioritizes the faithful and precise representation of objects, enabling the observer to apprehend their actuality and experience them[2]. This aligns with the core principle of phenomenology, which posits that entities that are not consciously presented have no existence whatsoever.

To address the subject of phenomenological realism and its application in realistic films, it is necessary to first delve into the core of phenomenological realism. The term "phenomenological realism" has a dual theoretical significance:

(1)It is focused on the object itself. To clarify, the concept of "facing things themselves" entails scrutinizing unverifiable logical concepts, manufactured preconceptions, and similar notions in order to perceive things as they truly are, which is referred to as "being before the essence"[2].

(2)The core is accurate. Phenomenology is the investigation of the fundamental nature of things, and under phenomenology, the primary focus is on identifying the essential qualities of phenomena[2].

This includes understanding the essence of perception and the characteristics of consciousness (Sinnerbrink, 2024). In the context of filmmaking, "object-oriented" refers to the approach of acknowledging and valuing the natural and pre-logical aspects of life. This approach considers these aspects as the sole foundation for the film, with the aim of capturing the profound enigma of "the complete reality" through the camera lens[2]. In addition to depicting the tangible reality of documentaries, films can also portray the subjective spiritual reality that is experienced and perceived in consciousness. Regardless of the type of reality being portrayed, it is essential for the film to capture the fundamental nature of the subject. In the early stages of the development of phenomenological realism, there was opposition to the use of dramatic presentation methods, visual and auditory aesthetics, and the director's "discourse"[9].

However, Professor Wang argues in his book that the idea of "film as an emotional machine" can only be achieved if it accurately represents the overall reality and effectively captures the essence of the object through narrative and rhetorical methods[2]. In other words, the director must employ appropriate narrative skills and visual language skills to effectively convey the intended message. Whether it is reproduction or manifestation, "essence" is central to phenomenological realism and phenomena-realistic film. These approaches highlight that films possess both material and spiritual realities, and that realism in film also conveys philosophical ideas or perspectives by depicting the essence of reality through storytelling. This, in turn, stimulates the audience to engage in contemplation. Film phenomena refers to the theoretical genre that examines film texts using phenomenological perspectives and methods. It focuses on how a film or director captures and presents the essence of material reality, enabling the audience to perceive the nature of this reality. Additionally, it explores how films or directors stimulate viewers to contemplate spiritual reality. It is important to highlight that although the audience is the primary focus of this analytical approach, the perspectives of the director and other filmmakers also warrant consideration. To summarize, both realistic film and phenomenological realism involve the observation, reproduction, and portrayal of the fundamental nature of reality.

According to Wang's analysis of phenomenological realism and film experience, he suggests a method for examining film phenomena. This method involves two steps: first, carefully observing the details of the film to determine the reality that the director is trying to reproduce. Second, the essence that is being portrayed. In other words, it aims to identify what the audience perceives as the "thing" being depicted.

### **3 Methodology**

#### **3.1 Data**

The film "Ash is Purest White" primarily focuses on the Eastern cultural concept of "Jianghu", as described by director Jia. Jianghu can be categorized into distinct aspects, namely "perilous circumstances, the existence within a vast world, intricate human

connections, and the pursuit of everlasting preservation"[10]. The "things" can be categorized into three main groups based on the director's perspective: environment (including built and natural environments), culture (including cultural symbols and practices, such as the Jianghu's rule), and people (including occurrences between individuals).

### 3.2 Analysis and Findings

#### 3.2.1 Landscape and Environment.

In the film, the protagonists Binbin and Chuchu embarked on a journey to the prominent cities of China. According to the director Jia, these cities represent the concept of Jianghu, symbolizing a vast and interconnected world.

*City.* The city's structure plays a crucial role in the director's portrayal of the image. The bird's-eye view provides an overall view of the city's layout, which mainly consists of flat rooms and small houses. The focal point is the old town, with high buildings and industrial chimneys visible in the background. By understanding the general layout, the audience can imagine the town's characteristics, particularly its economic development, which heavily relies on the mining industry. However, this does not alter the city's overall modernization process. From a cultural perspective, the northern part of Datong is known for its traditional cityscape.

*Chess room.* The overall scene design and art direction of the chess room is characterized by simplicity, with the exception of the copper statue of "Guan Erye" which stands out prominently. The director's arrangement of the chess rooms provides the audience with a clear understanding that the chess hall is a significant location for the two main characters, as it represents their journey from meeting, parting, reuniting, and separating once again. This symbolism not only prompts contemplation on the concepts of "arrival" and "home," but also encourages the audience to reflect on the deeper meaning of Chinese culture.

*Volcano.* Just like the chess room, the volcano in the film also emerges during the moments when Binbin and Chuchu become acquainted or reunite. However, merely replicating the volcano's natural landscape does not evoke any emotions or thoughts in the viewers, except for the director Jia's personal memories of his hometown. The author argues that it is essential to establish a connection between the characters through a contrasting design, achieved by employing narrative techniques in the film. During their initial conversation in the volcano, they said, "the ashes appear to be exceptionally pristine." The rationale behind this is that the volcanic ash is incinerated by hot stones. Firstly, this association horizontally evokes the English title of the movie, "Ash Is Purest White," in the minds of the audience. Secondly, the ashes also carry a symbolic significance by vertically connecting the audience to the volcanic ash and linking it to the human experience of suffering, represented by the stone. It prompts contemplation on the possibility that through enduring hardship and engaging in disciplined effort, individuals can attain a state of utmost purity in their character - exemplifying goodness. The second encounter of the two individuals prior to the volcanic eruption marked the phase of their reunion, which the director intended to showcase the

profound love and emotional connection between them through a skillfully crafted motion design.

### 3.2.2 Culture.

Throughout the director's entire filmography, "culture" and "art" have consistently been prominent themes. In the film "Ash is Purest White," culture may be categorized into two distinct types: "visible cultural symbols" that serve as a representation of the historical memory, and the unspoken Jianghu culture - a set of unwritten norms.

"Visible cultural symbols" refer to tangible representations of a specific location, nation, or era, such as clothing, dancing, architecture, painting, and product design. In the film "Ash is Purest White", the director depicted the Chinese pop culture from the early 20th century using various cultural symbols. This evoked nostalgic feelings and memories in certain viewers, since certain cultural elements served as bearers of these emotions. The unique dance performances of Chuchu and Binbin in venues like the discos are reminiscent of dance styles from the late 20th century. These dance acts are also influenced by iconic American rock characters. The films feature synchronous sound and background music, including the song "Zuiqian Yisheng" by Ye Qianwen, which serves as the theme music for a Hong Kong movie from the early 1900s.

The film, titled "Jianghu Ernv" in Chinese, explores the culture of the Eastern Jianghu. According to the director Jia, Jianghu refers to individuals who adhere to their own ideas and laws, aligning with the old tradition of the Jianghu. Initially, Binbin intervened in the resolution of the dispute between Lao Jia and Lao Sun. Lao Jia was unwilling to admit that he had borrowed money from Lao Sun. To establish the truth, Binbin presented "Guan Erye" as a witness. The presence of "Guan Erye" compelled Lao Jia to finally acknowledge his debt. In the Jianghu, "Guan Erye" symbolizes "justice" and "righteousness" and holds the highest authority. It is a rule in the Jianghu that lying is strictly prohibited. Furthermore, when Binbin and his siblings engage in communal drinking, they combine a total of 9 distinct varieties of white wine in a single basin, creating a mixture that resembles the amalgamation of five lakes and four oceans. Binbin, as a character, symbolizes the archetype of the "Jianghu Big Brother". When they watching a Hong Kong movies, the crowd wearing black vests and ties, while Binbin, as the "big brother", sits in the center wearing a black vest and black short sleeves. Additionally, someone smokes on behalf of Binbin, further emphasizing his status and influence within the Jianghu community. The aforementioned events and elements serve as representations, allowing the spectator to envision other novels and films, and get fully immersed in the distinctive Eastern culture.

### 3.2.3 People.

Heidegger contended that the concept of "existence" cannot be directly accessed as a supreme theoretical idea, but rather can only be indirectly understood through the concept of "being" [11]. The "thought of existence" in "Sanxia Haoren" is a profound contemplation on the fundamental philosophical question regarding the state of human being throughout the metamorphosis of the Sanxia. The film "Ash is Purest White"

aims to delve into the intricate dynamics of interpersonal relationships, examining the emotive and rational aspects that bind or link various personalities together.

The film primarily centers its portrayal of the affair on the two protagonists, with particular emphasis on Chuchu. She may face imprisonment on behalf of the Binbin. To meet Binbin, she traveled to his city. Despite the discomfort caused by Binbin's downfall, she supported him and facilitated his recuperation. However, by this point, her feelings had shifted from the incumbent to a romantic involvement in Jianghu.

The "Yi" holds paramount significance in Chinese culture, particularly in the Jianghu system of East Asian culture. It underscores the notion of "shared happiness and adversity." However, it is important to note that the concept discussed in this article does not precisely align with the "Yi" in Confucianism. The text's meaning frequently pertains to interpersonal relationships. In the film, the concept of Yi is exemplified via Binbin's interactions with others. Specifically, his relationship with Chuchu, demonstrates that she and Binbin can coexist harmoniously and that taking care of Binbin is not an act of pity, but rather an expression of Yi. On the other hand, Binbin's relationship with the other brothers of Datong. It appears that most of them, particularly Lao Jia, do not have the same appreciation for the Jianghu attitude of camaraderie and support in times of both happiness and difficulty. The audience's perception of the relationship between Binbin and others in the film may consider the novel, the film, and the filmmaking process to be excessively romanticized. However, in reality, morality does not necessarily prevail over time, desire, and self-interest.

## 4 Conclusion

Similar to Wang's interpretation of Jia's phenomenological realism film, "Ash is Purest White" effectively captures the essence of material reality, prompting viewers to contemplate spiritual reality. Throughout the film's narrative and cinematography, the director avoids excessive use of strong language or overly dramatic speech, instead opting for a more composed approach to convey the message. Wang appreciates Jia's ability to create a sense of depth, as the film explores the various sorrows in people's lives without intending to excessively emphasize or amplify this sadness. The director's intention is to present these emotions in a calm and measured manner.

Aside from cultural analysis, narrative text analysis, and aesthetic form analysis, film phenomenology analysis is equally deserving of scholarly consideration, particularly when examining phenomena-realistic films like those made by Jia. In addition, author suggests that this methodology can be integrated with other analytical techniques to generate an optimal system for evaluating films, such as the "Director's idea" framework.

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