Jia Zhangke and the Politics of Transcendence

In a recent interview, Cathy Yan declares: 'I just love music. […] I love lifting ourselves for one moment from the reality of life, and transcending that'.[1] She is explaining the decision-making behind the deliriously camp climax of *Dead Pigs* (Cathy Yan, PRC/USA, 2018), where a woman's resignation to the fact that her house will be demolished by a large development firm segues into a KTV video-like sequence: a full-voiced chorus sing a Teresa Teng song in unison, all captured with sweeping dolly shots, high-angle cranes, and interspersed images of birds flying across a blue sky.

Yan is not the only director working in the People's Republic of China who has been drawn to this idea of "transcendence" and its relationship to song. The urban generation director Jia Zhangke, comparing the goals and spirit of the young people in two of his films, articulates that the youth in *Unknown Pleasures* (Jia Zhangke, PRC/Japan/France/South Korea, 2002) 'hope to transcend something' but ultimately are unable to do so, whereas in *Platform* (Jia Zhangke, PRC/Japan/France, 2000) the characters 'still have dreams, have a kind of music. They carry themselves well, displaying a sense of movement'.[2] While Yan's comments imply that transcendence is achieved by the mere inclusion of song, the comparison made by Jia suggests that transcendence is not guaranteed, and that the extent to which characters (and the audience in rapport) are able to reach this state is dependent on a number of contexts. In recognising this, I would suggest that across the films made in the first decade of his career, Jia explores a similar question as Richard Dyer's research on singing since his 1995 essay "The Colour of Entertainment" (as summarised by Nessa Johnston): 'for *whom* are musical numbers

[1] Grace Z Li, "Cathy Yan: 'I love pushing the boundaries of genre'," *Little White Lies*, 12 February 2021, https://lwlies.com/interviews/cathy-yan-dead-pigs-birds-of-prey/.
[2] Jia Zhangke, "Interview with Jia Zhangke," *Unknown Pleasures,* DVD, directed by Jia Zhangke, (London: Artificial Eye, 2012).

utopian?'.[3]

Considering the politics of "transcendence" in Jia's work requires a satisfactory definition for the term, grounded in the formal properties of film. Andrew Bowie argues that when approaching transcendence, we must first consider *what* it is being transcended, enabling an understanding of musical transcendence as 'the extent to which the music confronts negativity in a form of expression that temporarily liberates one from it'.[4] Suggesting that philosophy has fallen short, Bowie advocates for a turn towards a phenomenological approach when considering the topic.[5] Indeed, this seems essential when considering Dyer's assertion that 'because [songs] are vocally produced, they open out onto physical sensations'.[6] Singing is located in and understood through (in part) the body. Furthermore, 'because [songs] come out of the body, it is common to consider them expressions, even emancipations of someone'.[7] In this light, singing can potentially enable the subject, even momentarily, to experience a sense of freedom from their body and, by extension, their circumstances. This is linked to an understanding of the singer as an embodied subject related to the space they occupy. My description of the techniques deployed by Cathy Yan demonstrate how formal decisions surrounding space and the body can construct or enhance this sense of transcendence, evidencing Dyer's observation that the 'utterly blissful' in musical sequences often relates to motifs of 'expansion'.[8]

In this essay, then, I am discussing an affective, aesthetic idea of "transcendence" which acknowledges the body and considers its relationship to the spatial environment it inhabits.

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[3] Nessa Johnston, "Reviews: *In The Space Of A Song: The Uses of Song in Film*," *Popular Music* 33, No. 1 (January 2014), 182.
[4] Andrew Bowie, "Music, Transcendence, and Philosophy," in *Music and Transcendence*, ed. Férdia J. Stone-Davis, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 223.
[5] Bowie, "Music, Transcendence, and Philosophy," 213.
[6] Richard Dyer, *In The Space Of A Song: The Uses of Song in Film*, (London: Routledge, 2011), 5.
[7] Dyer, *In The Space Of A Song*, 11.
[8] Dyer, *In The Space Of A Song*, 101.

If transcendence is linked to 'bliss', it connotes, and indeed suggests as requirement, the experience of a form of pleasure on the part of the singer and the audience. Laying aside subversive pleasures (which are subject to the same aesthetic treatment in these films), for Dyer part of this pleasure 'resides in mastery'.[9] This can be 'pleasure in a song well sung' or 'the very lack of any sense of effort being what allows [the voice] to seem sublime and even transcendent'.[10] What Simon Frith – and I argue Jia also – supplements is recognition that the microphone is an instrument which also requires 'mastery' on the part of the singer.[11] Microphones figure heavily across Jia's first five features in ubiquitous karaoke bar settings and outdoor performances and, considering their consistent presentation as a flawed mediator of the voice, their technical issues (in tandem with other techniques) are utilised to limit a sense of transcendence.

In an early scene from *Unknown Pleasures*, Qiaoqiao auditions to sing with the Mongolian King Liquor company. Her otherwise confident performance is hindered by the intrusively high reverb of the microphone and the distortion of the sound through an amplifier caused by her ill-judged proximity to the input. The camera position assumes the POV of the audition panel she attempts to impress. Qiaoqiao gazes directly into the lens, serving as a reminder that, foremost, she sings from financial necessity and not for aesthetic pleasure. She then leaves the stage and goes into the audience where she clasps at the hands of tightly-packed audience members in turn. This introduces a tactility which firmly places her within her body, places her at the same level as the workers who gaze at her body more than they listen to her song, and emphasises her need to use her body to please the audience, their support increasing her chances of employment. This all limits the potential for disembodied transcendence.

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[9] Dyer, *In The Space Of A Song*, 3.
[10] Dyer, *In The Space Of A Song*, 4.
[11] Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 188.

Later in *Unknown Pleasures*, another vocally-competent performer for the liquor company sings outside with similar issues of microphone reverb and distortion from poorly-balanced loudspeakers, all compounded by the alignment of the point-of-audition with Xiao Ji as he walks alongside and around the stage. Singing is demoted as an aesthetic priority. Again, troubles with reverb and distortion are present in the sole karaoke scenes in *The World* (Jia Zhangke, PRC/Japan/France, 2004) and *Still Life* (Jia Zhangke, PRC, 2006), with a performance of "Any Empty Wine Bottles for Sale?" ("*Jiu gan tang mai wu*") in the latter also foregrounding the "grounded" body, drawing attention to the profuse sweating, tense throat, and strained vocals of the singer, who similarly shake hands with his audience. An abrupt cut mid-song to labourers in the hot sun is a juxtaposition which emphasises the corporealness of the performer. These bodies give the sense of being "trapped" within their confines.

Across these examples, transcendence is held at an arm's length, prompting the question of why Jia consistently wishes to limit the sense of transcendence which critics have associated with song. Brian Hu offers that 'ideologically, these films cast suspicion on commercial popular music and karaoke culture […] and thus aim to suppress excess meanings that thrive on audiences' knowledge of […] popular culture in favour of the on-the-ground, objective, bounded time and space capturable by the camera'.[12] Hu identifies ideological and aesthetic reasons for containing the 'nonrealist disruptions' that popular music might present, suggesting they denote both fantasy and the fantastical, which Jia resists in the film worlds he creates.[13]

In Jia's approach in these first five films, it appears that whenever a microphone or speaker is present transcendence is held at a distance or is indeed unattainable due to a missing dimension. To test Hu's idea beyond the context of microphone settings, we are prompted to

[12] Brian Hu, "Love in the Club: Karaoke Realism in Chinese and Hong Kong Cinema," in *Sampling Media*, eds. David Laderman and Laurel Westrup, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 133.
[13] Hu, "Love in the Club," 132.

turn to consideration of another form of singing prevalent in these films: the unaccompanied and unamplified.

In *Still Life*, a boy sings an unaccompanied rendition of "Mice Love Rice" ("*Laoshu Ai Dami*") in a boarding house. Despite this pop music seeming to be a source of pure aesthetic joy for the child, once again Jia's static, probing camera draws attention to the body. In contrast to the preceding open expanses, the composition is tight in this interior space with a narrow depth-of-frame, containing the body. The stationary camera accentuates the rapid breathing and trembling muscles in the topless boy's strained and pitchy performance: a clear sense of travail. Considering the Fengjie setting of the film has been described by Phillipa Lovatt as 'a desolate environment that appears to engulf the human body', highlighting corporeal limitation at this moment adds to *Still Life*'s concerns of our bodily vulnerability.[14] Indeed, Jia appears to employ music elsewhere in his exploration of frailty, as the discovery of Brother Mark crushed by rubble is underscored by the smothered sound of the ringtone which brought him such joy. Music's escapist potential is shown as cruelly limited.

Corey Kai Nelson Schultz imparts further significance to the static camera which captures the young boy singing. It assumes what he would describe as an 'observational mode' which 'does not encourage viewer identification but rather elicits sympathy. […] In this position, the audience witnesses the emotional state of the characters but […] does not share it, and thus we are invited to adopt not an empathetic view but a sympathetic one'.[15] Sympathy, as opposed to empathy, in its feeling engages in processes of distancing and "othering" which consequently limit access to the affective rapport necessary for transcendence. In the same shot,

[14] Philippa Lovatt, "The Spectral Soundscapes of Postsocialist China in the Films of Jia Zhangke," *Screen* 53, No. 4 (Winter 2012), 425.
[15] Corey Kai Nelson Schultz, *Moving Figures: Class and Feeling in the Films of Jia Zhangke*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 69.

the static camera eventually shifts into a pan which clearly delineates the space and reveals an unmoved "audience". Han Sanming is the only character who notices the child and if his inscrutable face betrays any emotion at all, it is perplexity, as his gaze follows the child leaving the room, then settles on the middle distance, as if attempting to decipher this enigmatic behaviour. The movement in this shot highlights that the point-of-audition is aligned with the position of the camera, encouraging an awareness of the recording apparatus and its material position within the acoustic space in relation to the body. The unwillingness to follow the boy demonstrates that he is not an aesthetic priority.

In addition to the singing, there is also the crying of a baby in the sound mix and, in a later scene when the boy sings on a boat, the unstable volume and pitches of his voice must compete with the sound of the boat's engine. Tracing a long discourse, with a focus on the German Romantics, of music's relation to the transcendental, Scruton considers how this relationship seems less feasible in contemporary society, where music often exists in a 'background' context, and suggests for music to be close to the transcendental it requires being 'appreciated through an act of reverential attention, which isolates it from the surrounding noise and frames it in a sound world of its own'.[16] Jia rarely seems comfortable siloing singing, and indeed this mingling with and often obscuration by other sounds can be evidenced in *all* of the scenes offered for analysis so far with the arguable exception of the excessively amplified performer of "Any Empty Wine Bottles for Sale?" in *Still Life*. However, this can be explained as a desirable effect to achieve maximum contrast with the subsequent sounds of demolition: the dampened hammering in a spacious outdoor acoustic contrasting with the excessive reverb and distortion of a tightly-packed hall.

Another unaccompanied and unamplified singer appears in *Unknown Pleasures*: a man

[16] Roger Scruton, "Music and the Transcendental," in *Music and Transcendence*, ed. Férdia J. Stone-Davis, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 76.

who, though technically unskilled, passionately sings European opera. The cracking and strained voice betrays his ambitions. There is no 'mastery'. Both times he sings, it is also with an unfavourable acoustic: a bare, cavernous hall in the first instance; a dusty alleyway in the second. In this former scene, the camera pans around the hall, initially facing away from the singer, but arriving at him to linger for a moment. A similar camera movement captures the second instance. However, in both moments, the character Binbin simply walks in front of him, disregarding the possibility that the lingering might signal a moment in which the music demands the camera pause and contemplate. It is a deprivileging. In the same way that Lu argues that Jia obscures music videos with subjects and objects or even refuses to include them in shot since 'should we actually see it, the karaoke video […] threatens to become more than just background music', so does walking in front of the opera-singing character limit the potential of his singing to be foregrounded and consequently prove a disruptive force in Jia's aesthetic world.[17] Furthermore, it indicates a lack of emotional or aesthetic engagement on Binbin's part. His friend's following comment that Binbin has only 'just noticed' this singer for the first time shows that their singing has failed to even register with Binbin. Binbin's distance, as a surrogate audience, prompts distance from the spectator.

Perhaps the closest an instance of singing without accompaniment or amplification in Jia's early features comes to enabling a sense of transcendence occurs in *Pickpocket* (Jia Zhangke, PRC, 1998). The pickpocket, Xiao Wu, sings Faye Wong's "The Sky" ("*Tian kong*") as he sits in water at an empty bathhouse. The diction Michael Berry employs when describing the moment gestures towards transcendence, with Berry noting how his 'echoing voice fills the open bathhouse', suggesting this is the first time Xiao Wu can 'open up'.[18] The camera pans upward as he sings in this favourable acoustic, an expansive movement which tracks rising

[17] Lu, "Love in the Club," 133.
[18] Michael Berry, *Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown Pleasures: Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy'*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 36.

steam suggestive of release; perhaps even some kind of emancipated "essence". Tellingly, this scene coincides with the high point of perhaps the sincerest romantic relationship in the films surveyed. Music *can* act as a route to transcendence, but it is dependent on other contextual conditions, such as the presence of love.

To further interrogate why Jia is critical or sceptical of transcendence, it is productive to consider the intertextual elements in these films. While critics have acknowledged various intertextual references in these films, little attention has been paid to the way Jia engages with Wong Kar-Wai's filmography. In *Unknown Pleasures*, Binbin's girlfriend Yuanyuan wears a red tracksuit and red dungarees, which appears to reference the ubiquitous colour of Wong's *In The Mood For Love* (Wong Kar-Wai, Hong Kong/France, 2000) when considered in tandem with another sequence in which Umebayashi's *Yumeji's Theme* (predominantly featured in Wong's film) is overheard as Binbin and Yuanyuan walk past a room, before fading out and being replaced with the exaggerated and artificial moans of pornography overheard from another. This ironic moment, equating the artifice of Wong's aesthetic with the artifice of pornography, echoes Giorgio Biancorosso's suggestion that Wong's films exist in 'a zone in which desire, fantasy, or delusion reign supreme'.[19] Acknowledging that Jia's films offer a critical commentary on Wong's films, I suggest a less obvious intertextual relationship exists between two of the directors' earlier films: Jia's *Pickpocket* and Wong's *Chungking Express* (Wong Kar-Wai, Hong Kong, 1994).

Jia parallels and ironically juxtaposes Tony Leung and Faye Wong's characters in *Chungking Express* with Xiao Wu and the prostitute at the karaoke bar, Meimei. Xiao Wu's unconvincing attempt at pretending he's a policeman in the opening scene marks him as

[19] Giorgio Biancorosso, "Songs of Delusion: Popular Music and the Aesthetics of the Self in Wong Kar-Wai's Cinema," in *Popular Music and the New Auteur: Visionary Filmmakers after MTV*, ed. Arved Ashby, (New York**:** Oxford University Press, 2013), 123.

tragically distant from the debonair nonchalance of Leung's Cop 663, while Meimei's false claim on the phone to her mother that she is acting in Beijing draws attention to Faye Wong's capital city birthplace – and consequent inter-regional success – as well as revealing aspirations towards Wong's dual success as a singer and an actor.

Meanwhile, the pop star plays a charismatic working-class character. Faye Wong's recognisability as a star is quietly underpinned by the fact that her character shares her stage name, Faye. Frequently filmed through glass and in or next to reflective surfaces, her projected image associates her more with the ephemeral and immaterial than the corporeal.

Whereas I have neglected the aesthetic content of songs in Jia's films due to the elements of his style which contain them, in *Chungking Express* the songs closely associated with Faye emphasise ideas of flight and dreaming, and appear in sequences in which they do not compete with other sounds in the mix. "California Dreaming" is full-voiced, invokes another locale, with a flute solo that goes up and up and up, emancipating. Similarly, "Dream Lover", Wong's own cover of The Cranberries' "Dreams" has upward vocalise elements, ungrounded by words. These songs draw attention to the relationship between music and travel. Indeed, Faye leaves Hong Kong for a year on an aeroplane. She has the freedom to decide where she wants to go.

In contrast, Meimei does not cross class boundaries on-camera or off-. The unprofessional actor, Hongjian Hou, does not appear in another film after playing Meimei. Anthony Fung would suggest that her circumstances immediately preclude her from following Wong's trajectory, explaining that her star persona and the fanbase who respond to it are of a middle-class entry level; from 'bourgeois families that have surplus economic power to consume'.[20] Just as the eroticism of *In The Mood For Love* is dismissed by Jia as artificial

[20] Anthony Fung, "Faye and the Fandom of a Chinese Diva," *Popular Communication* 7, No. 4 (2009), 254.

fantasy, so is Meimei's dream of transcending her circumstances. Her fate in *Pickpocket* is ambiguous, but Jia's style and our knowledge of her occupation tend towards a pessimistic imagining.

The contrast between celebrities and characters in Jia's film can also be observed in *Unknown Pleasures.* A scene between Binbin and Yuanyuan opens with a music video playing on a television, its images flouting temporal-spatial logic. Excluding glimpses in *Pickpocket*, it is the only time a music video is shown in the films surveyed. However, a pan pivots away from the video, mediated by a low-resolution screen, to the awkwardly static couple. As they begin to sing along to Richie Jen's "*Ren Xiao Yao*" (which ironically translates as "Free Of All Constraints"), Jia ensures we can always hear Jen's voice. Indeed, this appears crucial, as when Binbin and Yuanyuan's trepidatious singing is repeated underneath the credits, Jen's voice remains equally in the mix. The stark contrast of images and voices in this scene is a reminder they are *not* celebrities, that another voice possesses greater authorial authority than them.

Jia's desire to contain and expose the politics of transcendence can be observed as linked to contexts of class and circumstance. Gino Stefani has noted, salient for this survey, the associations between singing and flying, writing: 'the line of vocal melody, being continuous, flowing, relaxing and free from resistance, is similar to movements of flying. Flying and dreaming: the longing to escape, the pleasure of escaping from harsh reality'.[21] For these characters, singing is bound to a fantasy of escape, often via the fantasy of celebrity. The karaoke bar is a site to enact these fantasies. As travel journalist John Gitting's noted of Wuxuan: 'in the town's karaoke bars, every youth whom I questioned has only one ambition: to escape'. [22]

[21] Gino Stefani quoted in Dyer, *In The Space Of A Song*, 3.
[22] John Gittings, *Real China: From Cannibalism to Karaoke*, (London: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 219.

Contextual meanings also play into the effects which hold transcendental affect at bay. As Lovatt suggests of *Unknown Pleasure*'s closing scene in which Binbin sings Richie Jen once again, but in a police station: 'rather than implying some kind of "inner" freedom, the absurdity of hearing the song's lyrics within this hostile environment only serves to heighten our awareness of his vulnerability within the system'.[23]

Conversely in *The World*, the only character who sings unhampered by mechanical mediators is a white Russian woman. She is only character shown with the freedom to leave Beijing, last seen on an aeroplane, realising her dream of visiting her sister. The working-class, passportless protagonist Tao remains in the city and muses: 'I don't know anybody who has ever been on a plane'.

As can be observed then, Jia's withholding of transcendental affect can be understood as a recognition on the director's part of the near-impossibility for the alienated characters in his films to overcome their financial and environmental limitations.

In concluding, I would like to draw attention to the fact that analysis of dance in Jia's films has wielded similar conclusions, as evidenced by Michael Berry's comments that dance sequences in *Platform* 'unveil the clash between a higher cultural world that the characters aspire to and the environment they remain trapped within'.[24] However, detailed attention is afforded in several accounts of the film to the scene where Yin Ruijuan dances freestyle to Su Rui's "If It's True" ("*Shifou*") in an empty tax office. Cecilia Mello evocatively describes Ruijuan 'eventually letting herself be carried away by the music […] giving room for Ruijuan's individuality to emerge through her dance'.[25] Mello, however, concludes that this scene

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[23] Philippa Lovatt, "Sound, Music and Memory in Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy'," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Sound Design and Music in Screen Media: Integrated Soundtracks*, eds. Liz Greene and Danijela Kulezic-Wilson, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 242.
[24] Berry, *Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown Pleasures*, 66.
[25] Cecilia Mello, *The Cinema of Jia Zhangke: Realism and Memory in Chinese Film*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 97.

'encapsulates […] the tension between mobility and immobility, freedom and repression'.[26] Berry similarly concurs that 'these are portraits of people trying to use art, fashion and dance to transcend their environment, but […] when the walls are high such transcendence can be difficult to achieve'.[27] However, on an optimistic note, Mello suggests that 'the presence of pop music gives rise not only to […] an *outbound journey*, […] but also to the emergence of new subjectivities through an *inbound journey*'.[28] Whilst maybe not enabling transcendence then, the songs in these films at times allow space to dream and to emotionally engage with the self, facilitating personal forms of self-expression that refuse to be extinguished amidst adversity.

Word Count (including footnotes): 3,842

[26] Mello, *The Cinema of Jia Zhangke,* 97.
[27] Berry, *Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown Pleasures*, 66.
[28] Mello, *The Cinema of Jia Zhangke*, 98.

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Xiao Wu [*Pickpocket*]. Directed by Jia Zhangke. PRC: Hu Tong Communications, 1998.

Fa yeung nin wah [*In The Mood For Love*]. Directed by Wong Kar-Wai. Hong Kong/France: Jet Tone Production/Paradis Films, 2000.

Zhantai [*Platform*]. Directed by Jia Zhangke. PRC/Japan/France: Hu Tong Communications/Office Kitano/T-Mark, 2000.

Ren xiao yao [*Unknown Pleasures*]. Directed by Jia Zhangke. PRC/Japan/France/South Korea: Hu Tong Communications/Office Kitano/Lumen Films/T-Mark/E-Pictures, 2002.

Shijie [*The World*]. Directed by Jia Zhangke. PRC/Japan/France: Xstream Pictures/Office Kitano/Lumen Films, 2004.

Sanxia haoren [*Still Life*]. Directed by Jia Zhangke. PRC: Xstream Pictures/Shanghai Film Studio, 2006.

Yan Yuxi [*Dead Pigs*]. Directed by Cathy Yan. PRC/USA: Beijing Culture/Seesaw Productions, 2018.

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