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Haunting China: Ecopoetics of Zhao Liang's *Behemoth*

Abstract: Taking a close look at Zhao Liang's 2015 documentary *Behemoth*, this article argues that the film employs the aesthetic of slow cinema and combines it with Marxist critique in order to generate an ecological awareness that pushes the boundaries of ecocinema. By suturing the slow aesthetic to the environmental destruction of Inner Mongolia's landscape and the exploitation of China's migrant workers, *Behemoth* reorients the viewing gaze from the spectacular and the exotic towards the self-aware and the introspective. The article argues that Zhao's film, which featured in the main competition for the Golden Lion at the 72nd Venice International Film Festival, self-consciously manoeuvres between a critique of China's environmental devastation and the western audience's expectation of viewing such a catastrophe as a sign of self-expression and self-critique.

Keywords: Zhao Liang, *Behemoth*, slow cinema, ecocinema, auteurism, Chinese independent cinema, festival film

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Haunting China: Ecopoetics of Zhao Liang's *Behemoth* (2015)

Zhao Liang's 2015 documentary *Behemoth* is a visual treat. The stunning images of spectacular landscapes being ravaged by industrial machinery provoke outrage as well as a sense of wonder at the earth's beauty and the human desire to exploit and destroy it. The contrast between the cinematic slowness of grazing sheep and the hurried movements of colossal excavators reads like a poetic exercise in social and environmental critique as well as an experimentation with the slow filmic form. In this article, I argue that Zhao's film employs the slow aesthetic and combines it with Marxist critique in order to generate an ecological awareness that feeds into and further expands what Narine calls 'eco-trauma cinema'. This is a cinema that illustrates the paradox that characterizes our contemporary anxiety towards the natural world: '[w]e *know* our ecosystem is imperilled, but we respond in contradictory ways', observes Narine (2015: 2, original emphasis). He notes:

On the one hand, we want to take action to protect the natural world [...] On the other hand, it is also undeniable that we disavow our knowledge of climate change and dwindling natural resources in order to function more happily in a global economic context replete with unsustainable practices.

(Narine 2015: 2).

Here, ecological harm is being treated as a trauma, that is, something that is actively repressed as a way of avoiding its painful effects. In Zhao's film, Inner Mongolia's landscape is being ravished by coal mining, where trucks, conveyor belts, miners and iron smelters become ghostly figures, toiling away in a hellish landscape only to make building materials for the construction of empty apartments in the 'ghost city' of Ordos. If being traumatized is 'to be possessed by an image or

event' (Caruth 1995: 4), the haunting images in *Behemoth* represent a kind of viewing experience that amalgamates spectrality with the slow aesthetic, pushing the boundaries of both slow cinema and ecocinema. In the second part of the article, I argue that Zhao, as an internationally recognized auteur of Chinese documentary cinema, performs a balancing act between self-exoticization and self-critique. Manoeuvring between critiques of China's environmental disaster and the western audience's expectations of viewing such a spectacle, Zhao employs the figure of the worker to create a space between self-orientalism and global auteurism of world cinema.

'The job of an ecocinema', notes Scott MacDonald, 'is to provide *new kinds of film experience* that demonstrate an alternative to conventional media-spectatorship and help to nurture a more environmentally progressive mindset' (2013: 20, original emphasis). Emphasizing the aesthetics of the long take typically found in arthouse cinema, MacDonald argues that its extended duration may help viewers become 'patient not only in their engagements with the environment, but in their efforts to guide inevitable environmental change in directions that nurture a more healthy planet' (2013: 41).¹ In order to (re)present and communicate timescales that are out of bounds of human perception (e.g. the processes of environmental and climate change that are imperceptible to the human experience), MacDonald argues that particular strands of ecocinema offer a depiction of the natural world that requires and promotes patience and mindfulness. These films, notes MacDonald, are 'the inverse of the fundamentally hysterical approach of commercial media [...] where consumption of the maximum number of images per minute models unbridled consumption of products' (2013: 19). David Ingram, on the other hand, whilst recognizing the potential of alternative film aesthetics to promote ecological contemplation, is dismissive of the distinction between popular and art film, advocating instead a more 'pluralistic eco-aesthetic which can find value – cognitive, emotional, and affective – in a wide range of films' (2013: 58). Both MacDonald and Ingram note that retraining the viewer's perception of time allows for a more contemplative

observation of the material world, one that follows a considerably slower timescale. If ‘cinematic time bears some relationship to ecological time [...] [because ecology is] about the enfoldment of objects or processes within other processes, all of which unfold according to their own durations’ (Ivakhiv 2013: 304–05), then such a cinema would allow time and space for an unfolding of natural processes that could promote a more meditative as well as cognitive learning about environmental issues.

Within the last decade, we have witnessed a growing body of work on the concept of slow cinema. Matthew Flanagan’s influential essay identifies the genre by its extensive use of ‘long takes, de-centred and understated modes of storytelling, and a pronounced emphasis on quietude and the everyday’ (2008). Ira Jaffe’s study (2014) looks at the ‘slow films’ of Abbas Kiarostami (Iran), Jia Zhangke (China) and Béla Tarr (Hungary), whilst Song Hwee Lim’s notable monograph focuses on the cinematic slowness in the work of the Taiwanese auteur Tsai Ming-liang (2014). Lim situates the genre within the wider framework of the slow movement which

can be seen as an attempt not only to counter the compression of time and space brought about by technological and other changes, but also to bridge the widening gap between the global and the local under the intense speed of globalization. (2014:5)

Yet, as De Luca and Jorge note, ‘the term “slow” has noticeably become a convenient prefix for a number of grass-roots movements such as “slow media”, “slow travel” and “slow food”’ (2016: 3), all of which draw parallels with slow cinema.² Moreover, the descriptor ‘slow’ could be said to be too encompassing and vague. Does it refer to camera movement or specific editing or narrative techniques? Indeed, a temporal unfolding of action and duration awareness are ultimately subjective experiences. As Lim notes, ‘long takes alone do not a slow cinema make’. The sense of stillness

within the shot is impacted by other factors such as ‘camera movement’, ‘direction of actors and setting’ and ‘camera angle and camera distance’ (2014: 79). As a critical response to the pervasiveness of the term, and as a reaction to some of the critiques of the style (James 2010), De Luca and Jorge argue that a more ‘nuanced and localised understandings of cinematic slowness’ has the ability to open up ‘a space for theoretical reconsiderations on underexplored aspects of filmic temporality and beyond’ (2016: 4). I argue that *Behemoth* sutures the slow aesthetic to the environmental destruction of Inner Mongolia’s landscape as well as to the exploitation of China’s migrant workers. In other words, Zhao’s visual aesthetics amalgamates slow cinema and ecocinema as a way of going beyond ‘the slow’ and ‘the environmental’.

Haunting Marxism

Behemoth opens with a sixteen-second still shot of a mining quarry, the stillness of which is suddenly interrupted by a colossal explosion. What follows are two more scenes of rock craters being ruptured by detonations that send blackand-red dust billowing into the air, where the minuscule size of the trucks and cranes in the background reflects the sheer magnitude of the site. Suddenly, the view changes to a slow-motion scene of debris flying towards the camera over the haunting sounds of Tuvan throat singing, an indigenous Inner Asian nomadic sound practice. Here, Zhao intersects the spatial with the temporal. He introduces a complex contemplative viewing structure where the aesthetic of slow cinema (long takes, ‘dead time’) is instilled and broken up by moving elements that connect the present time and place of action with their past incarnations. Significantly, by introducing the film with the sounds of throat singing, Zhao frames the rest of the documentary as a haunting reminder of the region’s past that is in the process of being obliterated. Haunted by these spectral apparitions, Zhao’s film employs ecological trauma as a social critique of

both Mao Zedong's failed egalitarian economic system and the current capitalist structure that promises to override the former's socialist regime.

In the PRC, environmental issues and concerns regarding destruction and preservation of the natural environment have been taking place for more than half a century. 'There has been a tug of war between development-driven policy orientations, often attributed to aggressive modernizers like Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, and the socialist agenda, which attended more to community, human relations, all-round prosperity, and nature', notes Ban Wang (2009: 158). Traces of the latter's community-based sensibility and its efforts to promote 'common ownership of productive means' can be found in Mainland cinema of the 1950s to the 1970s, which depicts 'collective endeavors for mastering nature and building a livable socialist countryside' (Wang 2009: 160). Significantly, this is an example of an environmental philosophy that advocates not an antagonistic but rather an interdependent relationship between humans and nature. What is 'problematic' in these films is not the fact of appropriation of the environment but rather the notion that labour and land are commodities that can be exploited for profit. In other words, the films highlight the change in the relationship between nature and humans from collective ownership of natural resources to a disproportionate possession built on profit-driven exploitation of both the workers and the natural environment. Seen in this light, the recent ecocritical documentary films such as Wang Juiliang's *Beijing Besieged by Waste* (2012) and *Plastic China* (2016) as well as Chai Jing's *Under the Dome* (2015) are more than merely about the environmental issues in contemporary China. They bring just as much attention to the corruption, incompetence and complicity of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the drive towards a market economy and global capitalism that leave human casualties and natural destruction in their wake. In Wang Bing's seminal film *West of the Tracks*, for instance, around the deserted factories 'human figures in the frame move around like tiny, ghostly scraps. The landscape lies in ruins and waste' (Wang 2009: 162). Displayed are not the proud socialist

working classes. Instead, the film ‘tells a tragic story of how uneven development in global capitalism erodes the national industry base, which gives way to capital-intensive, trade-oriented, information-related economic trends’ (Wang 2009: 162). What is significant here is not the ‘protection’ or the ‘preservation’ of nature but rather the closeness of human life and the environment. *Behemoth*, I argue, feeds into the tradition of fusing environmentalism with social justice discourses, a tradition that uses socialism to bridge the gap between industry and agriculture, rural and urban space. By showcasing the destruction of the natural landscape and the people who inhabit it, Zhao’s film portrays human beings as both victims and perpetrators of the destruction of their natural environment.

If, as Carlos Rojas argues, ‘a spectre [...] is haunting China’ (2016: 1), this spectral image consists of various structural contradictions in China’s rapid growth from being a predominantly poor and rural nation in the 1970s, to becoming the world’s second largest economy in 2011. Rojas notes:

China has one of the world’s largest and fastest-growing markets for high-end luxury products, but it also has one of the world’s largest pools of cheap labor. It has many of the world’s largest and fastest-growing metropolises, yet as many as a third of the residents of its largest cities are migrant laborers with little legal standing.

(2016: 8)

The co-presence of competing economic and political systems opens up a new space of structural possibilities ‘within the interstices between these two nominally antithetical political-economic regimes’ (2016: 8). This space is built on a ‘spirit of resistance and critique consonant with the underlying principles of Marxist theory’ that, when seen in conjunction with the overlapping

capitalist and socialist regimes in contemporary China, suggests that the country is ‘haunted by [...] the ghosts of capital, shades of Mao, and specters of Marx’ (2016: 4). In *Behemoth*, the juxtaposition of luscious green scenery and the ravaged landscapes of Inner Mongolia serves a twofold function. First, it acts as a reflection of the relationship between labour and capital. The numerous migrant workers who have left their hometowns and whose cheap labour serves as a foundation for the nation’s economic growth are all left without rights or privileges. Second, it points to the devastating ecological ramifications of the country’s economic development that is built on this exploitation of labour.

Slow Horror with Chinese Characteristics

As the mining trucks and excavators visually expound the environmental destruction of the landscape, we are introduced to the workers in a cacophony of noise coming from the drills, vans and conveyor belts. Wearing a breathing mask, a coal miner cuts a minuscule figure sitting in a cabin of a massive drill. His face covered and ears filled, the miner is alienated from the means of production. In other words, what is highlighted is the worker’s lack of control over the labour process. As the scenes change from a steady camera to a handheld, we are suddenly brought into the intimate and grimy workers’ quarters, where they eat, sleep and rest.³ It is during this time off – where the miners are stripped of their gear – that Zhao employs the slow aesthetic to rehumanize them. The 50-second long take during which one of the miners eats his lunch not only emphasizes the physical and the psychological effects of the gruelling work. The haunting slow aesthetic brings forth the spectres of Marx as Zhou draws on Marx’s critique of capitalism and the four types of alienation of workers: from the means of production, the products of labour, from other workers and, finally, from humanity itself. However, in *Behemoth*, the critique extends beyond capitalism to socialism with Chinese characteristics. ‘Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by



Figure 1: Lunch time is 'dead time'. Zhao Liang (dir.), Behemoth, 2015.

sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks', notes Marx ([1867] 1990: 342) in his analysis of capitalism as it expands by appropriating unpaid labour of the workers. Utilizing a discourse of monstrosity in his descriptions of the workings of capitalism – 'the capitalist [...] transforms value, i.e. past labour in its objectified and lifeless form, into capital, value which can perform its own valorization process, an animated *monster* which begins to "work"' ([1867] 1990: 302, emphasis added) – Marx's depictions of the horrors brought on by capitalism are more than rhetorical devices used to further his particular point of view. His references to the popular imagery of the vampire in the classical literary history of Greek and Roman mythology are a means of positioning capitalism as a contemporary horror story that exudes obscurity and reads like a mystery novel. By feeding into the (grotesque) Marxist critique in its depictions of hellish landscapes both above and below ground in which workers' bodies are poisoned and their humanity smothered, Zhao's film intersects the socialist structures of Maoist China with the ideology of



Figure 2: An extreme close-up of a miner looking directly at the camera. Zhao Liang (dir.), *Behemoth*, 2015.

global capitalism, suturing ‘China’s future to its past and present and also help[ing] to negotiate the nation’s relationship with the rest of the world’ (Rojas 2016: 10).

‘The secret of capitalism resides in [...] [the] fragmentation of the labouring self, in the way that wage-labourers turn over their *bodies of value* to capital in incremental bits over a lifetime’ (McNally 2011: 147, original emphasis). If Marx emphasizes the labouring body in his analysis of capitalism’s structures, Zhou’s long takes depicting the dead time during which the workers rest, eat and wash likewise focus on the toll that the backbreaking work in the mines has on the workers’ bodies. As the second of the off-work long takes features a couple washing up after a day in the mines, Zhao’s camera zeroes in on their sinewy bodies that are covered in soot and grime. In addition to zooming in on their hands as they pull and twist iron rods, Zhao offers close-ups of sweaty and dirty faces looking directly in the camera whilst he narrates in a voice-over: ‘I stare at his features, baked as if by molten iron. And soaked in sweat’. The narrator’s and the workers’ self-



Figure 3: A miner picks blisters on his calloused hands. Zhao Liang (dir.), Behemoth, 2015.

awareness brings forth an eerie lyricism to the images, whilst a sense of complicity on the side of the viewer as they are made aware of their watching the film – begins to emerge. ‘Where wealth accumulates, and men are uprooted, all is decreed by the monster, who conceals himself, like this tempter of all desires’, notes the narrator. The wealth here is symbolized by the empty town of Ordos, one of China’s ‘ghost cities’ where booming property development has led to a massive unoccupancy and a city devoid of people. As we are watching a 46-second take of a mine worker washing his body, the scene changes to a 30-second take of the same man picking blisters on his calloused hands. During this dead time, Zhao heightens the intensity of the moment by emphasizing the sounds made by the chafing of the skin as a way of physically and mentally unsettling the viewer. Because the worker does not talk, the picking serves as a substitute for speech, a haunting language that is both audible and visible. Here, Zhao’s own words during his voice-over – ‘[h]e does not know how to write poetry. Yet, the eloquence his heart exhales is no less powerful than the Divine Comedy’ – reverberate through the scene. By emphasizing the lyricism of the worker’s

labour, Zhao underlines his own role as a poet and a storyteller. In other words, Zhao takes upon himself to narrate the worker's story, to humanize him, to speak for the subaltern and to turn the mirror towards humanity itself. Thus, the ghostly pastoral images of herdsmen in grasslands and open fields of Inner Mongolia are contrasted with the slithering movements of mining trucks as they slowly erode the landscape, leading to the unused streets and buildings in Kangbashi. At the same time, the slow aesthetic of dead time eerily emphasizes the loss of humanity in the exploitation of the worker that made this possible. Here, Zhao's haunting neo-Marxist critique of Maoism and neo-liberalism appears in the form of a traumatic ecological devastation of Inner Mongolia's landscape where Zhao positions himself as an artist who is tasked with continuing the poetic and literary tradition of Dante Alighieri.

Modern Nostalgia and the Contemplative Gaze

The opening slow-motion scene presents us with a quote translated from Chinese into English, which informs us that 'God created the beast Behemoth on the 5th day. It was the largest monster on earth. A thousand mountains yielded food for him.' Significantly, the origin of the quote is not the Book of Job from the Old Testament but the Second Book of Ezra of the Hebrew Bible.⁴ Here, Zhao begins the film not with the Holy Bible as a sacred text but with the 'origins' of the entire Christian biblical canon, positioning his film as a starting point and a continuation of this canonical tradition. As the scene changes to shots of smoke billowing out of the mountains of rock and sand, we are presented with a nude figure of a man lying on his side in a foetal position whilst a voice-over recites a first-person narrative that appears to be a dream sequence with the narrator arriving at the *Inferno*. The first lines of the narration – '[m]idway on our life's journey I seem to have had a dream' is an explicit reference to Dante Alighieri's fourteenth-century long narrative poem 'Divine Comedy', which itself begins '[m]idway upon the journey of our life / I found myself within a

forest dark / For the straightforward pathway had been lost' (Alighieri 1996: 1). In the poem, Dante goes on a life journey to salvation having 'lost his way'. Here, he meets the spirit of Virgil who takes on the task of leading him through Hell so that he may be able to enter Paradise. Significantly, whilst Dante the character is reverential towards Virgil, regarding him as one of the greatest poets of antiquity, Dante the poet, by refusing Virgil a place in Paradise due to the latter being born before the birth of Christ, uses the *Inferno* to position himself as a specifically *Christian* poet who incorporates and advances the classical tradition. In *Behemoth*, Zhao substitutes the figure of Virgil with that of Dante; only in his film the guide, who symbolically carries a mirror on his back, 'does not know how to write poetry'. Here, Zhou not only places himself as a successor to Dante's poetic tradition – he acknowledges, subsumes and further builds on Dante, setting himself up as a Chinese artist/auteur who does not have the advantage of being guided by an artist and therefore must himself create art out of the mine worker's 'heart'.

'Guide shows me the way to his mountain, a purgatory of a place. Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey', notes the narrator in the film's third act, as the camera zooms in on a worker suffering from pneumoconiosis, a mechanical respirator aiding his breathing. The second sentence of the quote is a direct reference to Oliver Goldsmith's eighteenth-century pastoral poem 'The Deserted Village' whose third stanza begins with: 'Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey / Where wealth accumulates, and men decay' ([1770] 1997: 51). The piece could be defined as a nostalgia poem – 'poems that take nostalgia as their central concern and represent it through set rules and tropes' (Santesso 2006: 12) – and Goldsmith employs it as a response to contemporary 'economic evils such as the decline of smallholders and the rise of luxury and pleasure grounds' (Santesso 2006: 134). The idealization of people and landscapes is a familiar trope of the genre, and in *Behemoth*, Zhao draws on this genre to convey a sentiment of personal connection and familiarity with the mine worker. Whilst Goldsmith uses 'intentionally inaccurate idealization [...] to portray a

political situation accurately' (Santesso 2006: 135), Zhao's long takes with the heavy-breathing miners looking directly into the camera are similar means of speaking to the viewer's rejection of materialism and alienation from the urban environment. Citing Goldsmith's poem, Zhao notes on his official website: '[t]hrough the contemplative gaze of this film, I investigate the living conditions of industrial workers as well as the short-sighted urban development. It is my critique and meditation on the modern civilization'. Goldsmith's elegiac tone in 'The Deserted Village' is echoed in Zhao's ecocritical sensibility of the contrasting images of pastures and mining trucks. The haunting images of the miners' graves enveloped in the smoke emanating from the mining plants create a sense of horror as well as nostalgia, as the elegiac tones of the reverb-laden guitar seem to mourn the miner/worker as an idealized figure who is forever lost. Simultaneously, the images of the ravaged landscapes serve a similar aim of lamenting the loss of the prelapsarian world of yesteryear: '[m]odern nostalgia depends on its audience feeling that they "know" the characters and world that are now "gone", even as they recognize that they never did' (Santesso 2006: 139).⁵

In his neo-Marxist critique of Maoism and neo-liberalism, conveyed through the lens of nostalgic mourning for the past, Zhao sutures the slow aesthetic and environmental destruction of Inner Mongolia as he pushes the boundaries of both slow cinema and ecocinema. Yet, his status as a renowned Chinese auteur filmmaker whose work has been championed as a 'highwater mark in the politicised content of independent documentaries in China' (Edwards 2015: 152) exposes Zhao to the risk of self-exoticism and autoorientalism, as his critique of the Chinese state is screened and praised across various international film festivals (Zhao 2019). In the following, I argue that whilst the film's neo-Marxist critique of socialism with Chinese characteristics feeds into the notion of the *Capitalocene* as a fossil fuel economy that undergirds capitalist development, its visual imagery reorients the viewing gaze from the spectacular and the exotic towards the self-aware and the introspective.⁶

Self-effacing auteurism

On the significance of the author vis-à-vis auteur in contemporary film criticism and film theory, Thomas Elsaesser argues:

‘Rather than a guarantor of authenticity, or the last autonomous subject in an alienated and reified world, the contemporary filmmaker is an auteur only to the extent that he/she accepts the inherent anachronism of the label, as and when conferred by international film festivals’ (2016: 34).

The recent developments in popular media, where the personality cult surrounding the director (as an auteur) is a necessary fixture in the efforts to brand and market his/her film, has led to the resurgence of the author as an ‘(imaginary or real) anchor for presumed, perceived, or projected coherence’ (Elsaesser 2016: 22). As a result, the author now performs double duty: as an author-function and as a person. However, the numerous ways that films are made, marketed and distributed globally reflect the different ways in which political, financial, institutional and intellectual control is exercised over a film. As a consequence, Elsaesser contends that the author in a global context ‘is both a *construct* and a *person(ality)*’ (2016: 23, original emphasis), a figure caught at the interstices between control and access, a contradiction and a concept that is simultaneously impossible and indispensable. If cinema is ‘the most vulnerably attentive, yet active respondent to global capitalism and digital convergence’ (Jeong and Szaniawski 2016: 6), what role does the figure of the auteur play in this configuration of eco(art)cinema and the politics of international film festivals? Whilst film festivals ‘pride themselves on their internationalism, of transcending the boundaries of national cinema by providing an open forum for the world’s films and filmmakers’, this international stage of openness and liberty ‘can also be a trap: it is an open

invitation to self-conscious ethnicity and re-tribalization’ (Elsaesser 2016: 25). In other words, world cinema’s affinity with ‘first world’ cultural tourism conceals and effaces the neo-liberal quest for optimization and outsourcing of labour in which cinema itself is complicit. This inevitably exposes it to the processes of self-orientalism/self-exoticism exemplified by the ‘tendency to present to the world (of the festivals) a picture of the self, a narrative of one’s nation or community, that reproduces or anticipates what one believes the other expects to see’ (Elsaesser 2016: 26).

Taking a cue from Elsaesser, I argue that in *Behemoth*, Zhao ‘performs’ self-orientalism as a means of circumventing the condition of ‘serving two masters’. In other words, if performing ‘double occupancy’ means trying to satisfy the expectations of both the home state/nation and the international film festival that expects the filmmaker to show resistance towards the former, then Zhao’s film takes advantage of this double bind and reworks the already established power configuration. Dan Edwards notes that

‘If the official public sphere functions as the arena via which certain ideas and viewpoints sanctioned by the state are structured, disseminated and publicized to the widest possible audience, then [Chinese] independent documentary culture provides a realm where texts representing alternative ideas and viewpoints can be circulated and publicly discussed’

(2015: 24).

Due to the lack of an established mass distribution channel for investigative documentary films in the PRC, independent/underground documentary filmmakers who engage with the issues of misuse of political power, corruption and suppression of minorities are almost certain to be exposed to censorship and harassment. In the current sociopolitical climate of increased control and repression,

which saw the shutting down of the Beijing Independent Film Festival and the Yunfest in Kunming, the production of these ‘alternative’ films is even more pertinent for making accessible those elements that are rendered invisible or unconventional by the state apparatus.⁷ Whilst Chinese independent cinema, ever since its emergence in the early 1990s, has occupied a position of ‘abjection’ where it is seen ‘by the political community (or authority) as a position that is unwanted, detestable, and subject to surveillance, disavowal, and containment’ (Fan 2019: 148), it has also been dependent on this power dynamic with the political authority as a way of sustaining its *raison d’être*. Furthermore, the state apparatus’ obsession with ‘externalizing it, desubjectivizing it, and containing it’, according to Fan, speaks to the independent cinema’s ‘constant need to reincorporate the abject in order to maintain the community’s own ontological consistency – and subjectivity’ (2019: 148).

The popularity of Chinese (independent) films on the international film festival circuit also points to the long-standing dilemma of wilful self-exoticization, where the local/national ‘exposes’ itself to the gaze of the world audience in the name of ‘liberation’ and self-expression (Lu 1997). As Cindy Hing-yuk Wong notes, ‘film festivals often find films from non-Western countries sociologically more interesting because they are perceived to be made under difficult situations, while the enlightened festivals provide a free space for these creative ideas to thrive’ (2011: 121). One such example is the funding provided by the Eurimages Program of the Council of Europe and the MEDIA Program of the EU to the Turkish filmmaker Yeşim Ustaoğlu. Her 1999 film, *Yolculuk* (*Journey to the Sun*), for instance, depicts the suppression of the Kurdish population in Turkey in the 1980s. Yet, as Randall Halle notes, ‘the critical films of Ustaoğlu, funded by transnational sources, speak to an international audience as Turkish films, while nationalist propaganda proves more popular with domestic audiences’ (2010: 314). Halle argues that the European funding of the film represents a new form of transnational interaction that ‘takes place through a masquerade of

national appearance [...] [marking] a gentler form of neocolonial activity in the transnational era' (2010: 314). Building on the orientalist dynamic in the film, Halle contends that what is significant here is that the funding of the film supports the 'production of stories about other peoples and places that it, the funding source, wants to hear' (2010: 314). If the financial dependency of non-European filmmakers on transnational cultural and economic cooperations and co-productions such as Eurimages runs the risk of creating a 'set of cultural texts that speak the truth of the other on behalf of that other', a similar dynamic appears at the prestigious European film festivals such as Cannes, Berlin and Venice. Whilst the festivals include marketing and production forums, they also 'help provide funds, either from the festivals, or other agencies that use the festival to distribute these funds' for filmmakers whose films the festivals then screen and distribute to the rest of the world (Wong 2011: 148). Thus, these asymmetrical relationships appear to support the circular orientalist notion of speaking about the other on behalf of the other; that is, presenting oneself to the other as one expects the other to see.

Behemoth begins with the logo for the 72nd Venice International Film Festival, where the film featured in the main competition for the Golden Lion. This stamp of approval of being selected at one of the three most prestigious film festivals in the world places *Behemoth* in the context of a 'festival film', a type of film that, according to Wong, has a 'serious demeanor' and 'is often embodied by an austerity of sight and sound as well as a sobriety of themes and actions' (2011: 75). Yet, as Falicov notes, amongst the many definitions of the term festival film, the figure of the auteur plays an important role in both its definition and makeup: '[a]uteur cinema festival films are made by celebrated directors that oftentimes are selected for inclusion (and many times for premieres) due to the value-added prestige factor these filmmakers [...] bring to these festivals (2016: 214–15).⁸ In the case of *Behemoth*, what appears to be a 'Chinese' film is, in fact, a film produced in France.⁹ Its premiere in China is still wanting, as the selection for the Biennale and the

film's subsequent success on the European film festival circuit have effectively closed down any avenues for a public screening in the country. The power dynamics of screening a film produced in France at a European film festival (Venice) – which offers a critique of local culture (China) where such critique is impossible and is immediately shut down – would, at first glance, follow Halle's argument about the pitfalls of transnational co-production strategies. In other words, in order to satisfy the European and North American viewers, co-produced films must offer stories that appeal to these very target audiences. These stories are, more often than not, orientalizing strategies that appropriate cultures and produce cultural and ideological differences as a way of sustaining the very same power relation. In Zhao's film, however, what is being presented are not narratives of suppression, violence or censorship. Instead, we are witness to a critique of the destruction of both people and the environment in the form of capitalist exploitation that begins not in the present times in a particular territory but is a human condition that goes back to the beginning of civilization.

One instance of Zhao's complex manoeuvring between critiques of both China's environmental disaster and the western audience's expectation of viewing such a catastrophe is the portrayal of the inevitable dispersal of the local Inner Mongolian family. Whilst the nostalgic overtones of the rapidly disappearing 'traditional' ways of living (sustainably) are juxtaposed with the images of the voracious excavators digging through the pristine lands, the family is seen walking single-file with their most valuable possessions in hand. These include a wooden chest, a television set and a motorcycle. The carefully staged procession of the dispersal of an ethnic minority due to the encroachment of excavators (development, urbanization) on their land (sustainable farming) is undercut by the scenes' choreography as well as the realization that the Mongolian family themselves utilize and desire the very same objects of modernity – faster and more convenient travel (a motorcycle) and worldwide image consumption (a television set). In his analysis of Wang Bing's *Fengming: A Chinese Memoir*, a 2007 documentary about the persecution

of He Fengming and her family during the cultural revolution, Robinson notes that ‘ordinary people are, on some level, actors, and performance becomes a way of articulating hidden histories’ (2013: 155). Similarly, in Jia Zhangke’s *Still Life*, ‘the interface between the real and the imagined, the documented and the represented, is constantly mined for cinematic effect’ (2013: 155). Whilst both filmmakers are widely recognized for their observationalist aesthetic (Wang) and their minimalism (Jia Zhangke), the blurring between reality and fiction ‘points to an alternative genealogy of independent Chinese documentary, one in which the subjective and objective, spontaneous and staged, fictional and non-fictional are closely intertwined’ (Robinson 2013: 155).

The complete lack of dialogue in *Behemoth* does little to establish a personal connection between the viewer and the subject at hand. Instead, all human beings are shown to be complicit in the destruction of their own environment. In the film’s final scenes in the ghost city of Ordos in Inner Mongolia, the guide carries a mirror on his back, much like Paul Klee’s ‘Angel of Death’ who looks on towards the catastrophic past whilst a storm is blowing from Paradise propelling him into the future. ‘This storm’, notes Benjamin, ‘is what we call progress’ (1968: 258). Similarly, Zhao’s worker is the angel who is pushed towards the empty Paradise, whilst the mirror reflects the destruction that has brought humanity to its present state.¹⁰ Thus, what is being critiqued here is not *only Chinese* modernity nor *only Chinese* developmental policies. Rather, by explicitly referencing the canonical works of western literary traditions as a way of shifting the emphasis away from China – despite being highly local Zhao’s film reflects the interconnectedness between the local and the global, the fictional and the non-fictional. In short, it complicates the ‘particularities’ of local conditions: ‘Chinese independent documentary in China grew out of, and is still located in, a network of ideas and practices that circulated between people and events in different countries, on different continents’ (Robinson 2013: 156).



Figure 1: An Inner Mongolian family walking single-file with their possessions. Zhao Liang (dir.), *Behemoth*, 2015.

The delicate balancing act between self-exoticization and self-critique as a means of carving out a path out of double occupancy feeds into the strategy of *performative self-contradiction* – that is, using the approach where one ‘makes a claim that contradicts the validity of the means that are used to make it, i.e. which contradicts your performance of the claim’ (Elsaesser 2016: 36). This way, a filmmaker is able to retroactively create ‘a space for oneself (where there is none) by putting oneself as the enunciator under erasure, i.e. negatively securing an enunciative presence’ (Elsaesser 2016: 36). In other words, if the auteur is only an auteur as long as he/she is an active participant in the star-system of world cinema, performative self-contradiction becomes a means of navigating ‘auteur’s dependency and weakness both vis-à-vis the market (of reputation and revenue), and vis-à-vis the auteur’s chief benefactor (the film festival circuit)’ (Elsaesser 2016: 38–39, original emphasis).¹¹ In *Behemoth*, Zhao enacts performative self-contradiction by invoking and reflecting critically on not only his audience’s consumption of film but also on his own status as an internationally recognized auteur of Chinese documentary cinema. By employing the figure of the

worker as a way of critiquing capitalist exploitation of labour and the subsequent destruction of the natural environment, whilst simultaneously using the format of the ‘festival film’ to disseminate such critique – a format that relies on the consumption and the perpetuation of images that display ‘gritty realism’ under the name of self-expression – Zhao performs self-contradiction by invoking the very elements that are at the centre of his critique.

Conclusion

In Godfrey Reggio’s *Koyaanisqatsi: Life Out of Balance* (1982), the only word that is spoken is the film’s title, a Hopi Indian word meaning ‘life out of balance’. The rest of the film consists of contrasting images of natural beauty and humanity’s destruction of the environment, feeding into the ecological trauma of the Anthropocene as a devastating force that points towards a dystopian future of inequality and unbalanced resource allocation. Whilst the juxtaposition of images in *Behemoth* is reminiscent of Reggio’s seminal work, Zhao eschews the former’s valorization of nature and, instead, employs the said disparity as a way of reflecting and deflecting the viewer’s gaze away from the ‘suffering’ mother nature and towards self-awareness and self-reflection. The highly stylized and choreographed images of miners ‘wearing’ dusty make-up, the shots of broken pane glass-like images fragmenting clear views of the scenery, and the silent yet eloquent expressions of human suffering and death, all work as a reflection of the very constructedness of exotic imagery. Employing exoticism in order to critique it, yet simultaneously bringing forward an environmental awareness in the form an avant-garde festival film that itself relies on expressions of dissidence and national self-critique, Zhao performs self-contradiction in order to create a space in-between self-orientalism and global auteurism of world (art) cinema. Significantly, Zhao’s references to western literary classics such as the (Hebrew) Bible, Dante Alighieri and Oliver Goldsmith, along with his artistic nods to other recent filmic and photographic works, such as

Sebastiao Salgado's Serra Pelada images, Michael Glawogger's *Workingman's Death* (2005) and Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel's *Leviathan* (2012), position the film within a broader framework of critical works that deal with the exploitation of both humans and the environment. Its depiction of barren landscapes, for instance, is similarly reminiscent of Chen Kaige's seminal *Yellow Earth* (1984), whilst *West of the Tracks* works as a contemporary counterpart to the neorealist elements in Zhao's film. Recognizing the impact of western canonical works whilst being cognizant of his national cinematic lineage, Zhao's performative self-contradiction creates a space between a critique of the CCP (and the subsequent censorship) and the auto-orientalist tendencies on the festival circuit that reproduce self-conscious ethnicity in the name of social critique. Using the Chinese migrant worker as a victim and a perpetrator of the vicious cycle of exploitation and death of human and natural resources, Zhao rehumanizes and de-orientalizes China and Chinese cinema whilst remaining critical of capitalism's devastating effects on the environment and people who inhabit it.

Despite the opaqueness of byzantine film censorship regulations in China, the 'passability of a film in the eyes of the party-state, to a certain degree, depends on two factors: (1) whether the film has crossed the line from *huigu* (introspection) to *fankang* (protest); (2) whether the film can be considered having artistic values'

(Fan 2019: 152, emphasis in original).

Using the Tibetan auteur Pema Tseden's 2015 film *Tharlo* as an example, Fan argues that the film can 'potentially generate many political readings. However, its breathtaking black-and-white cinematography with lyrical one-scene-onetakes, its introspective narrative tone, and its seemingly personal subject matter enabled the film to obtain SAPPRFT's approval' (2019: 152).

Similarly, I argue, Zhao's highly stylized and formally complex film creates a space between the politically confrontational and 'purely artistic'. If independent documentary filmmaking in China is characterized by tight state control, confiscation of film archives and legal persecution, the contemplative and highly stylized films such as *Behemoth*, which amalgamate various cinematic and literary genres, appear to be finding an in-between space between the politically sensitive and the introspective. The film's disruption of the viewing experience and its repositioning of critique towards traumatic human and environmental suffering allow it to push slow cinema and the (eco)documentary genre into new territories that are simultaneously expressive and socially critical.

Notes

¹ MacDonald contrasts the long take with the 'conventional, commercial film' where the viewers 'are implicitly trained to see the beauties of landscape and place as ephemeral and comparatively insignificant, not something deserving of sustained attention or commitment' (2013: 21).

² This is not to say that slow cinema is directly engaged with other slow movements. Rather, as De Luca and Jorge note, 'slow films would seem to share narrative and aesthetic features that lend themselves to a prevailing discourse of slowness' (2016: 3).

³ Significantly, there is no communication between the workers as they never engage in conversation. In fact, the film is devoid of any dialogue or speech.

⁴ In the Book of Ezra of the Hebrew Bible, which forms part of the Christian Old Testament, it is stated that: 'On the fifth day you commanded the seventh part, where the water had been gathered together, to bring forth living creatures, birds, and fishes; and so it was done. The dumb and lifeless water produced living creatures, as it was commanded, so that therefore the nations might declare your wondrous works. Then you kept in existence two living creatures; the one you called Behemoth and the name of the other Leviathan. And you separated one from the other, for the seventh part where the water had been gathered together could not hold them both. And you gave Behemoth one of the parts that had been dried up on the third day, to live in it, where there are a thousand mountains'. (2 Esdras 6: 47–52, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*)

⁵ Whilst the lack of dialogue prevents us from 'identifying' with the miners themselves, one can nonetheless discern the nostalgic sensibility of 'The Deserted Village' in the figure of the (dying) worker who serves as synecdoche for capitalism itself.

⁶ Capitalocene serves as a critique of the overarching idea of the Anthropocene, which suggests that 'humanity' as a whole is responsible for the devastation of the natural environment (e.g. resource depletion and climate change). For more, see Malm (2016) and Moore (2017). In addition, Donna Haraway proposes the *Chthulucene* as a multispecies assemblage that could include people, whilst the *Plantationocene* points to the ecological consequences of plantation agriculture (2015).

⁷ The New Film Law of 2017 – which makes 'any production, distribution, and viewing of films and other moving images unlicensed by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) illegal' (Fan 2019: 149) – is one of the ways the central government attempts to take tighter control of what is screened domestically and/or exported abroad.

⁸ Given the many attempts to define what a festival film is, Falicov argues that it is perhaps more fitting attempting to define what it is not: [Festival films] are generally not fast-paced action genre films with large budgets, high production values, and familiar narratives. These genre films are made with a much larger swath of (younger, male) moviegoers in mind and are, theoretically, purely for entertainment. These fast-paced thrillers, spectacles and the like are not usually what filmmakers are trying to achieve for the art house theater (or film festival) setting. (2016: 213)

⁹ The film was co-produced by INA (Institut national de l'audiovisuel) and ARTE France. The film aired on the ARTE network in November 2015 and has been distributed to film festivals around the world.

¹⁰ Interestingly, one never catches a glimpse of Zhao or his camera in the mirror.

¹¹ By world cinema, I mean the international festival circuit market where a filmmaker's brand value is reflected in the various competitions, selections and scheduling schemes organized by the festivals themselves.

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