



Patron: Jim Broadbent
Registered Charity No. 1156478

Friday January 11th, 2019

Mountains May Depart (12a)

dir: Jia Zhangke

Starring: Zhao Tao, Zhang Yi, Liang Jingdong, Dong Zijiang

sponsor: Paul Hancocks

This review is reproduced with the kind permission of Sight and Sound magazine



Synopsis: China, 1999 As market forces open China up, entrepreneur Zhiang competes with local coal-miner Liang for the love of Tao. Tao chooses Zhiang and bears his child. Liang is distraught and leaves town. 2014: Liang has his own family. His is seriously ill. His wife approaches Tao for financial help. She is now separated from her husband and son Daole (Dollar), who visits her with news that he, his father and stepmother are moving to Australia. 2025 - Dollar is at university in Australia. He is unsettled. He drops out of college, claims to have forgotten his mother and has fallen out with his father, who is becoming paranoid. Dollar begins a relationship with a language teacher. They think about returning to China. Tao, still living quietly there, appears to hear him but Dollar remains in Australia

The nature of change is both constant and abrupt, and this is nowhere truer today than in the People's Republic of China, whose hurtle from cloistered tradition to WeChat postmodernism writer-director Jia Zhangke has made it his imperative duty to document. One day you find with a start that years have passed and a new world has gone up around you while you have been too distracted to hear the ongoing noise of its building - a rude awakening approximated by the temporal leaps of Jia's latest, *Mountains May Depart*.

Jia has done something to this effect before, in his sprawling *Platform* (2008), though previous intrepid attempt to reconcile nostalgic ache and the acceleration of history through timeline play by Hong Kongers Stanley Kwan and Peter Chan, in *Rouge* (1987) and *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* (1996) respectively, may have led the way. *Platform* began at the tapering out of the lunatic Cultural Revolution following from there through the gradual infiltration of Western pop culture into Chinese life.

Mountains in sense picks up where *Platform* left off, at a moment when there's still some shine on imported pop, and begins with an exuberant group dance to the Pet Shop Boys song 'Go West'. From here the film's story goes on to span a period of 25 years, broken into three segments set in 1999, 2014 and 2025, the last almost entirely in Australia, Jia's address of the Chinese diaspora experience. In this space the movie touches on three generations of Chinese: the 20-somethings of 1999, Tao (Zhao Tao) and her two suitors Jinsheng (Zhang Yi) and Liangzi (Liang Jingdong): Tao's father, a veteran of at least one of China's wars, and the child she has with Jinsheng, played as a boy by Rong Zishan and in his teenage years by Dong Zijian. Each section is distinguished by its aspect ratio: 1999 is in the 1.33:1 Academy ratio; 2014 in 1.85:1; and 2025 in widescreen 2.35:1.

This formal shifting, once largely a relic of the Silent era, has begun to resurface in the digital age in films such as *Life of Pi* (2012) and *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014). There is no clear film

historical motivation, of the kind that cued those in Wes Anderson's picture, for Jia's shifts, but the ever-expanding frame may seem to underscore the movie's abiding, anxious preoccupation with freedom, also evident in Jia's scene construction - he frequently inverts the traditional 'establishing shot to close up' order, ending scenes instead with a long step back to situate characters in their (often imposingly barren) environments. He also gets jarring and sometimes exhilarating effects from placing certain scenes in unexpected proximity - the image of Tao giving birth, for example, is immediately preceded by DV footage of a coal truck losing part of its load as it struggles to free itself from a ditch, a moment with no clear narrative function. This is one of several instances where Jia has inserted documentary material that he shot with cinematographer and longtime collaborator Yu Lik Wai during the years covered in the movie. (Elsewhere, for instance, an ecstatic disco dancer captured more than a decade ago is dropped into a pivotal club scene.)

Jia and Yu have, unsurprisingly, made a movie of taciturn eloquence, always sure footed in negotiating its discursive narrative construction, even as it sometimes wobbles at the level of performance. Jia has been the proverbial fair haired boy of the International Festival circuit for the run of the 21st century, and though *Mountains May Depart* didn't exactly break this streak, its last chapter - the first extended passage of primarily English language cinema the film-maker has directed - has raised mild concerns. The difficulties here are more or less self evident. Dong acquits himself well enough in the part that calls for outpourings of emotion, but this doesn't affect one's awareness that he speaks without a trace of the appropriate accent after his character has purportedly spent a decade in Australia. The relationship between May - September lovers Dollar and Mia (Sylvia Chang) seems to spring from thematic rather than physical necessity. And in imagining a near future, Jia has been wary to avoid anything that might trouble the Chinese censors, even tossing in a couple of bits that suggest the PRC's ascendancy over old commonwealths and republics: Australia circa 2025 has repealed laws to become a gun nut's paradise, while the US dollar is said to be in free fall against the rising renminbi. (These concessions are undercut by the visual contrast between cloudless blue Oceania skies and steel grey China, but nevertheless the officials took the bait - *Mountains May Depart* got its mainland Multiplex run.)

Despite its flaws, I feel protective towards the film's maligned third chapter, where it finds Jia feeling his way into undiscovered country, and the very awkwardness of this exploration tends to add to the rising sense of poignancy, capped by a *coup de cinéma*

reunion with Tao, seen in a book ending scene dancing by herself to the song of her youth on a slag heap. However a feeling of goodwill can only go so far towards forgiving the presence of clumsy lines such as Dollar's taunt to father Jinsheng: "It's like Google Translate is your real son."

The conception of Jinsheng's character is in fact the weakest element in *Mountains May Depart*, and any buckling that occurs in the third section is predicted by the oversight that occurs while laying dramatic groundwork in the first, in which Tao must make a choice between poor but affable Liangzi and Jinsheng's capitalist carnivore. As introduced, Jinsheng is a cipher, a transparent sociopath and a stand-in for everything glib and shiny and ruthless that will emerge in the new China of the 21st Century, with precious little beyond his brand new Volkswagen to recommend him as a suitor. Zhang Yi fails to imbue his character's arrogance with even an undercurrent of the sexual danger that might go some way towards explaining Tao's eventual choice.

None of this is necessarily a demerit in a filmography like Jia's, which tends towards the austere and the oblique. But there's every evidence here that the stern student of Bresson is tapping a melodramatic vein, making a direct appeal to audience emotion - hence his key employment of pop songs, (by Sally Yeh as well as Pet Shop Boys), those vehicles of inchoate longing and nostalgia. Never developing a sense of some potential to be corrupted, the relationship between Jinsheng and Tao lacks anything like pathos, with Jinsheng verging on the ridiculous in his final scenes, wearing a pasted on moustache. (I note that the critic Jonathan Romney has independently arrived at the same Western points of comparison for Jia's love triangle melodrama that I did, *Giant* and *Written On the Wind*, and being placed in the company of James Dean and Robert Stack does Zhang Yi no favours.)

Where *Mountains May Depart* cuts cleanest and deepest, perhaps unsurprisingly, is when it's focused on Zhao Tao, Jia's partner and collaborator since they met during the casting of *Platform*. In the opening chapter of their latest, the frame at times seems eager to follow her slightest move, as though the camera is under the influence of the same magnetic attraction that has captured her two swains. In the film's central section, her raging evocation of grief at a parent's death provides the movie with its emotional core, the sense of home that you can't go back to. She finally returns for a coda that's as tender a gift as a director has ever given a favourite actress - and the other way around. It focuses on the quiet preparation of dumplings and the loud transports of song, those fragments of culture just small enough to cling onto against the currents of time.

Credits

Shen Tao	Zhao Tao
Zhang Jinsheng	Zhang Yi
Liang Jianjung (Liangzi)	Liang Jingdong
Zhang Daole (Dollar)	Dong Zijian
Mia	Sylvia Chang
Zhang Daole (as child)	Rong Zishan
Director	Jia Zhangke
Screenplay	Jia Zhangke
Director of Photography	Yu Lik Wai
Editor	Matthieu Laclau
Production Design	Qiang Liu
Original soundtrack	Yoshihiro Hanno
Sound	Yang Zhang
Costume	Li Hua

China/France/Japan 2015
126 mins

Another View

It's enervating to chart the progress of Chinese director Jia Zhangke. He has moved away from stark, politically corrosive inquiries into economic displacement and the shifting sands of the Chinese landscape, to channel similar themes into more, shall we say, broadly approachable packages. *Mountains May Depart* is an impressive triptych feature which combines a florid family melodrama with themes of tradition, technology, pride and rampant globalisation.

The film opens in gala fashion, as Jia muse Zhao Tao - delivering an astonishing performance - dances to the Pet Shop Boys' version of 'Go West' in the year 1999. Initially set in the mining town of Fengyang, the film carefully sets up a fractious love triangle between shop clerk Tao, a wheeler-dealer who wants to take her away from the squalor, Jinsheng (Zhang Yi), and a self-hating working class labourer, Liangzi (Liang Jin Dong), who sees her as his romantic equal.

The opening chapter charts the emotional push and pull between the characters while keeping one eye closely on the rotten system that drives these people to make the decisions they do. The film soon skips forward to 2014, and then later, to a futuristic rendering of Australia in 2025 which features a mighty fine broadside aimed at Google Translate. As is customary for Jia, any scintilla of initial hope is crushed and then crushed again, as his characters are put through the ringer in the name of a withering cultural critique.

Even considering the few moments that don't quite gel (the 2025 segment occasionally feels a little half-cocked), it's a unique and eccentric achievement from one of the most consistently challenging, exciting and angry filmmakers currently on the circuit. It's a shame, then, that UK audiences have had to wait two years for it, as it premiered in competition at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival.

David Jenkins: Little White Lies

Our next screening: 7.30pm, Friday January 18th, 2019. **In The Fade (Germany 2017)**

Fatih Akin's second film in this season stands in direct contrast to *Goodbye Berlin*. Where the latter was a cheerful road movie featuring the entertaining antics of a couple of teenage tearaways, *In The Fade* is a biting relevant political thriller. Diane Kruger (in a tremendous performance that earned her the Best Actress award at Cannes 2017) plays Katja, whose husband and son are killed in a bomb attack carried out by far-right extremists. Beside herself with grief, her distress is compounded when two suspects are identified, arrested, charged and acquitted and she sets out to see that some sort of justice is done.

Post film credits

Audience members are asked to remember that some people like to remain in their seats at the end of a film, reflecting on what they've seen and reading the credits. While we understand not everyone wishes to do that, we would appreciate everyone remaining in their seat for at least 30 seconds after the credits appear, to allow those who wish to do so to absorb what they have seen.

Membership survey

The Committee wishes to remind members of the survey of attitudes to the Society and its programme of activities, as we look to develop and improve what we do. You can find the survey on our website (link here - <https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/YHJMD9B>). We hope as many members as possible will take a few minutes to complete it