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# Between Ontology and Hauntology: Magic Realism in Contemporary Chinese Cinema

## *Entre a Ontologia e a Assombração: Realismo Mágico no Cinema Chinês Contemporâneo*

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### Abstract

In the 2010s, Chinese independent cinema witnessed the rise of young filmmakers such as Bi Gan, Yang Chao, and Cai Chengjie who have sought alternative representations of reality through an aesthetic practice best described as cinematic magic realism. By materializing ghosts, engaging with the spectral, and complicating received notions of time, space, and identity, their films adopt and reinterpret conventions of magic realism to explore personal, spiritual, and social realities beyond those that preoccupied their predecessors. Noting the prevalence of the ghostly in recent Chinese magic realist cinema, this article critically evaluates a theoretical approach that links cinematic magic realism with Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology through the analysis of two representative works, Bi Gan's *Kaili Blues* (2016) and Cai Chengjie's *The Widowed Witch* (2018). This comparative analysis will also highlight two distinctive ways magic realism is used in Chinese cinema today, namely, as an alternative form of critical realism and as a representational strategy for the previously unrepresentable. As these films are magic

realist in idiosyncratic ways, they not only illustrate the versatility and universality of the magic realist mode but also attest to the divergent creative interests of Chinese filmmakers today.

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**Keywords**

Spectrality | magic realism | chinese cinema | cinematic realism | Bi Gan | Kaili Blues

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**Resumo**

Em 2010 o Cinema Independente Chinês assistiu ao nascimento de jovens realizadores como Bi Gan, Yan Chao e Cai Chengjie que trouxeram representações alternativas da realidade através de uma prática estética que pode ser descrita como realismo mágico. Por meio de fantasmas materializados, envolvidos com a espectralidade e complicando noções de tempo, espaço e identidade existente, os seus filmes adoptam e reinterpretam convenções do realismo mágico para explorarem realidades sociais, espirituais e pessoais para além das que preocuparam os seus predecessores. Sublinhando a prevalência da assombração no cinema de realismo mágico chinês, este artigo avalia criticamente a aproximação teórica do realismo mágico cinematográfico ao conceito de assombração de Jacques Derrida através da análise de duas obras representativas, *Kaili Blues* de Bi Gan (2016) e *The Widowed Witch* de Cai Chengjie (2018), apontando este estudo comparativo para dois modos diferentes, mas idiossincráticos usados pelo cinema chinês de realismo mágico.

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**Palavras-chave**

Espectralidade | realismo mágico | cinema chinês | realismo cinematográfico | Bi Gan | Kaili Blues

**Introduction**

When Jia Zhangke spoke at the Berlinale Talents Summit in February 2020, he was asked whether he believes there will be a “Seventh Generation” of Chinese filmmakers and what might best characterize their cinematic style. Jia said that he doesn’t wish for a “Seventh Generation”; instead, he hopes for an age of individualized expression unburdened by collective memory of impactful social events that so deeply shaped the work of the Fifth and Sixth Generation Chinese filmmakers (2020, 1:11:59). Indeed, in recent years, Chinese independent cinema has seen the rise of young filmmakers whose styles are eclectic

and varied, bearing a certain degree of continuity from the works of Sixth Generation directors but also marking significant departures from previous cinematic practices.

Notably, recent works such as Bi Gan's *Kaili Blues* (*Lubian yecan*, 2016), Yang Chao's *Crosscurrent* (*Changjiang tu*, 2016), Cai Chengjie's *The Widowed Witch* (*Beifang yipian cangmang*, 2018), and Pema Tseden's *Jinpa* (*Zhuangsile yizhi yang*, 2018) have sought alternative representations of reality through an aesthetic practice best described as cinematic magic realism. By materializing ghosts, merging past and present, and emphasizing the spiritual undertones of the objective world, these films evoke the unknown and unknowable underlying the perceived solidity of our living present. In the context of Chinese independent cinema, where realism has been and still is the dominant mode, magic realism provides an opportunity for stylistic innovation and the articulation of the spectral, the subaltern, and the intangible.

This article seeks to elaborate on this argument by critically evaluating existing theories of magic realism through the analysis of two representative works, *Kaili Blues* and *The Widowed Witch*. Highly divergent in content, tone, and thematic focus, these films exemplify two distinctive tendencies in Chinese magic realist cinema today. *The Widowed Witch* uses magical elements to construct social allegory, building on the long tradition of critical realism in Chinese cinema. By contrast, *Kaili Blues* embodies a form of magic realism that is integrally linked to cinematic form, using magic realism as a representational strategy for spiritual realities, cosmic connections, and spectral presences that haunt the living present. This difference is manifested in the films' depiction of the ghostly: whereas *The Widowed Witch* uses materialized spirits to construct a discursive space for the subaltern, *Kaili Blues* explores the interlocking notions of time, memory, and dreams through the articulation of the Derridean specter. While *The Widowed Witch* exhibits traditional magic realist characteristics and, according to the director, is inspired by Latin American magic realist fiction and Chinese ghost literature (Cai 2018), the aesthetic practice of *Kaili Blues* seems altogether harder to define and has variously been labeled "poetic cinema," "plan-séquence aesthetic," or "magic realism" in Chinese film scholarship (see Cao 2016, Zhao 2020, Zhou 2017). I contend that *Kaili Blues* can be productively analyzed through the framework of magic realism and be put into conversation with other magic realist works to reveal bifurcating creative tendencies within recent Chinese independent cinema.

### Locating Cinematic Magic Realism

The notion of "magic realism," by its sheer juxtaposition of two seemingly contradictory concepts, has at once fascinated and frustrated theoreticians since its first conception by Franz Roh in 1925 to describe the emergent, Post-Expressionist paintings in the Weimar Republic. Roh (1995) argues that Post-Expressionism, in contrast to Impressionism and Expressionism, restores objectivity of the phenomenal world by evoking tactile feelings and subjective memories. His theory of magic realism stresses both the existence of worldly objects and their spiritual undertones, as he states, "For

the new art, it is a question of representing before our eyes, in an intuitive way, *the fact, the interior figure, of the exterior world* [emphasis original]” (23). By foregrounding spirituality in the depiction of real objects, challenging the ordinary conception of space, and engaging with the tension between the monumental and the miniature, Post-Expressionist depiction of reality is freed from the mimetic traditions of realism (Roh 1995). As Irene Guenther (1995) observes, “The world of painted objects Roh describes does not ‘reproduce’ nature through instinct, but ‘recreates’ it” (35).

Historically, Roh’s notion of magic realism was overshadowed by the art movement’s other name — “New Objectivity” — and only resurfaced in the 1960s when interest in the art of the Weimar Republic was renewed (Guenther 1995, 33). However, Roh’s notion of magic realism was disseminated into the field of literature through Alejo Carpentier (1995), who formulated his own theory of “the marvelous real” in 1949. In contrast to Roh, Carpentier posits that the fantastic is *inherent* in the reality of Latin America due to its wealth of mythology and folklore, varied histories and geography, and its heterogeneous group of Others (100). Instead of altering reality or “willing the marvelous,” as Carpentier accuses Roh’s magic realism of doing (85), Carpentier’s marvelous realism serves to intensify this already fantastic reality of Latin America, often in a manner that challenges the hegemony of the dominant discourse.

Contending that magic realism is an important component of postmodernism regardless of the cultural origin of the work, Wendy B. Faris’s (1995) analysis of magic realist fiction highlights the mode’s complication of received ideas about time, space, and identity. According to Faris, magic realist texts not only contain an “irreducible element of magic” that disrupts the ordinary logic of cause and effect but also emphasize the presence of the phenomenal world by employing extensive descriptive details, constructing alternative or felt history, and materializing metaphors (167-169). Furthermore, magical realist texts often involve “the closeness or near-merging of two realms, two worlds” and invite doubt between contradictory understandings of events (171-172). Therefore, in its concern with ontological questions, magic realism fits Jean-Francois Lyotard’s definition of postmodernism as “that which searches for new presentations... in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable” (185).

When we turn to theories of cinematic magic realism, one may notice that the notions of “magic” and “realism” correspond with the bifurcation between formalism and realism in film theory, two contesting schools of thought on cinematic specificity nearly as old as the film medium itself. On one hand, film is viewed as inherently a realist medium due to its photographic nature. On the other hand, formalist or constructivist theorists believe that the creative power of the film medium lies in its capacity for reorganizing, distorting and even falsifying physical reality. Aga Skrodzka (2012) suggests that cinematic magic realism is located precisely at the intersection between the realist and constructivist conceptions of film’s relationship to reality:

[Cinematic magic realism] is used to represent *simultaneously* the inevitability of the real — the ontological firmness found in the material fabric of the experiential world and captured in the photographic image — and the unceasing dissolution of that inevitability via the medium’s kinetic valence, a feature perfectly suited to explore the perpetual transformation of matter that, in time, turns any existence into a mere illusion [emphasis original]. (125)

It is true that despite the essentializing tendency within film theory, cinematic illusion is even deemed by some realist theorists as inescapable. André Bazin’s famous assertion that “the photographic image is the object itself” notwithstanding (Bazin 1967, 14), he allows that the same event in reality permits several different representations, and each representation “introduces, to didactic or aesthetic ends, more or less corrosive abstractions which do not permit the original object to subsist in its entirety” (cited in Williams 1980, 53). Seeing a parallel between this aporia within Bazinian ontology and the notion of “approaching reality” (*bizhen*) in Chinese film theory, Victor Fan (2015) suggests that “the cinematographic image in its imperfect state can be understood as a *potentiality* that can drive the spectators towards total reality, without fully actualizing it [emphasis original]” (4).

This potentiality of the cinematic image is central to the mechanism of cinematic magic realism, as it provides the opportunity for what Skrodzka (2012) characterizes as magic realism’s juxtaposition of “presence with absence, ontology with Derridean hauntology, being with becoming” (126). Jacques Derrida’s notion of haunting, first introduced in his 1993 book *Spectres of Marx*, refers to the return or persistence of elements from the past, as in the manner of a ghost. The cinematic experience, in Derrida’s view, “belongs thoroughly to spectrality” (de Baecque, Jousse, and Kamuf 2015, 26). Due to the very mechanism of the cinematographic image, what is present on screen is also already absent. As such, presence always contains the trace of its absence. Derrida’s specter, therefore, is neither living nor dead, neither hallucination nor perception (de Baucque, Jousse, and Kamuf 2015, 27). In Colin Davis’s (2005) words, it is “a deconstructive figure hovering between life and death, presence and absence, and making established certainties vacillate” (376).

As such, the Derridean specter is a magic realist figure. It embodies the superimposition of past and present, life and death, presence and absence. It is worth noting that Derrida’s specter does not have to be literal. As Fredric Jameson (1999) puts it, “Spectrality does not involve the conviction that ghosts exist or that the past (and maybe even the future they offer to prophesy) is still very much alive and at work, within the living present” (39). However, in many magic realist films, ghosts are often literal, and the past is very much alive. By materializing spectrality and embedding it in an otherwise realist aesthetic, magic realist films evokes the unknown and unknowable underlying the perceived solidity of our living present.

## Emergence of a Chinese Magic Realist Cinema

Although the use of magic realism as a representational mode only became more prevalent in Chinese independent cinema in the 2000s, the impulse to pursue alternative forms of cinematic realism can be traced back to the works of independent filmmakers in the 1990s. Along with the Reform era's policy of marketization and opening up, the gradual dismantling of the state-owned studio system in the 1980s enabled the appearance of an independent cinema in China in the 1990s (Zhang Z. 2007a, 11), with "independent" referring to "the *alternative* modes of production and circulation of their works... *independent of official ideology* [emphasis original]" (Zhang Y. 2006, 26). This cinema includes filmmakers such as Zhang Yuan, Zhang Ming, Lou Ye, and Jia Zhangke, as well as documentarists such as Wu Wenguang. This group has variously been labeled as "Sixth Generation" and "Newborn Generation" (*Xinshengdai*) to denote their age (most of them were born in the 1960s) and distinguish their cinematic identity from "Fifth Generation" filmmakers such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige (Zhang Y. 2006, 26). Here I prefer Zhang Zhen's term "Urban Generation," which highlights their thematic preoccupation with "the destruction and re-construction of social fabrics and urban identities of post-1989 China" (Zhang Z. 2007a, 2). Moving away from their predecessors' desire to construct national allegories and grand narratives, Urban Generation filmmakers champion new breeds of realism that reveal the raw, lived experiences of marginalized urban subjects amid unrelenting change. Their cinematic language incorporates both the documentary real and the hyperreal, often opting for natural settings, nondramatic or fractured plots, improvisation and nonprofessional acting to portray realities that they perceive as truthful (*zhenshi*) (Zhang Y. 2006, 29-30).

Urban Generation filmmakers' innovative approach towards cinematic realism can be seen as a precursor to the emergence of magic realist cinema in China. Towards the end of the 1990s, films such as Wang Quan'an's *Lunar Eclipse* (*Yueshi*, 1999) and Lou Ye's *Suzhou River* (*Suzhou he*, 2000) already started exhibiting a magic realist impulse. *Lunar Eclipse* tells the story of a pair of female doppelgängers inhabiting parallel universes in the city of Beijing, whereas *Suzhou River*, set in Shanghai, details a love story between a small-time gangster and his kidnap victim, who, after throwing herself into the Suzhou River, seems to have been reincarnated in the form of a lookalike. As Zhang Zhen (2007b) suggests, the trope of twins or multiples "induce our fascination as well as uneasiness with the boundaries of perception, knowledge, and identity" (353), a characteristic Faris also observes in magic realist fiction (Faris 1995, 177).

If *Lunar Eclipse* and *Suzhou River* are still concerned with urban subjects and metropolitan locales, the emergence of Jia Zhangke in the late 1990s marked a paradigmatic shift within the Urban Generation (Zhang Z. 2007a, 15). Unlike his predecessors, Jia Zhangke's work focuses on disfranchised migrants and marginalized elements of society, usually of rural origins. This focus on peripherality can still be seen in the magic

realist works under the current analysis. In surveying Jia's early works, Jason McGrath (2007) suggests that the director draws upon two distinct sources of realism, namely, the post-socialist realism that arose in the early 1990s and the aestheticized long-take realism prominent in the tradition of international art cinema (82). This combination of style is especially apparent in *Platform* (*Zhantai*, 2000). However, in Jia's subsequent works such as *The World* (*Shijie*, 2004), *Still Life* (*Sanxia haoren*, 2007), and *A Touch of Sin* (*Tianzhuding*, 2013), he also incorporated magical elements in addition to these overarching stylistic characteristics, making him an important figure in the development of magic realist cinema in China.

In his analysis of magic realism in Chinese cinema of the 2000s, Eddie Bertozzi (2012) provides a close reading of *Still Life*, which incorporates magical elements to emphasize or reinforce the unnaturalness Jia perceived within the modernizing Chinese society. In the film, a number of unusual visual elements such as workers dressed in full chemical protective gear disinfecting the urban debris, a UFO flying across the sky, and a futuristic building launching into space are seen in the near-apocalyptic landscape of Fengjie, a southern town that is soon to be submerged in water as the construction of the Three Gorges Dam progresses. Bertozzi argues that directors such as Jia Zhangke, Lou Ye, and Jiang Wen have adopted an approach to cinematic realism that privileges "the feeling of the real" over "documentary real," in effect breaking and re-tracing the borders of the "on-the-spot realism" (*jishizhuyi*) that characterizes much of Urban Generation filmmaking (153). In his analysis, Bertozzi uses the framework of post-socialism, which views the overlapping of the premodern, the modern, and the postmodern in post-socialist China as markers of postmodernity in the Chinese context. He argues that it is within this condition that the sense of reality itself might be missing and that the magic can arise (163).

I concur with Bertozzi's analysis that cinematic practices of filmmakers such as Jia Zhangke has led to "a significant stylistic redefinition of the way filmic realism is conceived in the Chinese context" (Bertozzi 2012, 167). However, China's post-socialist condition in fact complicates the discussion of magic realism in Chinese cinema, because post-socialism already implies the coexistence of different materialities and the superimposition of temporalities within lived reality, hence the popular expression "the magical is the real" (*mohuan ji xianshi*). Portraying this reality does not necessarily imply an embodiment of the magic realist mode. Overlooking this complication, Bertozzi's analysis of Jia Zhangke's *Platform* conflates magic realism with the film's aestheticized portrayal of the post-socialist condition, in which a degree of strangeness is already embedded.

While the notion of post-socialism is certainly a useful one, I suggest that a framework oriented towards aesthetics and film form will be more productive for the discussion of magic realist works under the current analysis. Whereas predecessors such as Lou Ye and Jia Zhangke use magic realist elements to portray the uncanny side of modernity

and modernization, magic realist films such as *The Widowed Witch* and *Kaili Blues* reflect the younger generation of filmmakers' contemplation of social and spiritual realities beyond the post-socialist condition. The prevalence of the ghostly in recent Chinese magic realist cinema, whether in the form of materialized spirits or as haunting of the past, signals the younger filmmakers' concern with the spectral, the subaltern, and other elements that have no place within the dominant discourse of modernization and progress. In order to give form to these ghostly elements, both *The Widowed Witch* and *Kaili Blues* use backwater locales to construct non-synchronic, or "out-of-time" cinematic spaces for ex-centric discourse. Modernization and development are mentioned, but only in passing. Guangzhou, one of the fastest-developing cities during the Reform era, is mentioned in *The Widowed Witch* as a place where local men have gone to seek better opportunities, but no one in the film shows any inclination of going, seemingly complacent in a town that has no prospect. In *Kaili Blues*, the impending demolition of buildings and gradual disappearance of old ways of life loom in the background, but this imagery serves to underscore the sense of a lost past rather than the advent of a new future. Seemingly suspended in time, these films are keen to investigate some of the fundamental questions about society and the state of human existence in locales that are both out-of-time and timeless.

In the next sections, I will undertake a comparative reading of Cai Chengjie's *The Widowed Witch* and Bi Gan's *Kaili Blues* to illustrate the films' coherent embodiment of the magic realist mode and their distinctive manifestation of the spectral. As these two films are highly divergent in content, tone, and thematic focus, characteristics of magic realism noted by theorists are also manifested in idiosyncratic ways.

### **The Magical Real in *The Widowed Witch***

Set in the wintry landscape of the rural North, *The Widowed Witch* tells the story of a three-time widow Erhao, who turns from the village outcast to a revered "fairy goddess" (*xiannü*) when she develops powers to prophesy the future and communicate with the dead. Having survived her third husband Dayong in an explosion of their illegal fireworks workshop, a paralyzed Erhao is taken in and raped by Dayong's cousin. After regaining her mobility, Erhao embarks on a search for a place to stay with Dayong's underage, deaf-mute younger brother Shitou. Through Erhao's journey, we meet an ensemble of villagers who represent the grim realities of this impoverished rural town — Dayong's friend who skips out on his debt, a power-tripping village mayor, village wives who bully the weak, a paralyzed old man Grandpa Long who lives in filth at the neglect of his family, and a failing but self-aggrandizing entrepreneur Xu Wei. When Erhao takes pity on Grandpa Long and gives him a bath, his paralysis is mysteriously cured. Believing that Erhao has magic powers, the villagers' attitude towards her takes a 180-degree turn. Erhao decides to play along in order to secure a lodging, but her magic powers become more and more real, taking her into darker territories. She encounters

a father who neglects his young daughters and abuses his wife because she hasn't given birth to a son, and she meets the ghost of a teenage girl Ruirui who committed suicide after being molested. When Erhao advises Xu Wei to live an honest life, he tears down the tourist villas he built on the village hills and accidentally discovers gold (which later turns out to be only brass). Driven by greed, the village mayor forcibly reclaims the development rights of the hills despite Erhao's warnings, and he instructs people to pour urine on Erhao to take away her magic. Erhao, seemingly having lost her powers, witnesses Shitou being blown up by explosives intended for wild animals. Although the development of the gold mine turns out to be as catastrophic as Erhao prophesied, Erhao no longer seems to care.

Weaving magic into the grim reality the film portrays, *The Widowed Witch* uses magic realism to construct a social allegory that exposes the oppressive nature of patriarchal power structures. In an already poverty-stricken and socially disadvantaged environment, the most vulnerable elements such as women, children, the elderly, and animals are multiply disempowered as instances of sexism, abuse, greed, and indulgence in vice from those in power remain pervasive. As all the characters Erhao encounters are stereotypes that stand in for specific social problems, the rural town in the film acts as a microcosm of society as a whole. As such, *The Widowed Witch* builds on Chinese cinema's tradition of constructing national or social allegory through critical realism while seeking formal innovation by incorporating the magic realist mode. As the magic realist mode questions, distorts, and complicates received ideas about our worldly existence, in this case it is used to challenge social norms and power structures entrenched in society.

The film sets up for its increasingly concrete portrayal of magic by presenting superstition as an inherent reality of life in this rural town. On the one hand, superstition can be seen as a symptom of ignorance and social backwardness. Erhao married Dayong because Grandpa Long predicted that this town is where she would settle, and after Dayong passed away, the village wives accuse Erhao of being "fated to mourn her husband's death" (*kefu*), leading to her outcast status. On the other hand, superstition is a survival strategy in a village where material well being is impossible to achieve and scientific thinking is largely unhelpful. Erhao, for one, is keen on using the superstitious beliefs of the villagers to her advantage. For example, when the village mayor makes advances towards her, she warns the mayor that ill fortune might befall him if he sleeps with her. When Erhao "magically" cures Grandpa Long's paralysis, all the villagers also readily accept her magic powers as real and begin seeking her help in solving their own problems. This corroborates Skrodza's observation that "...magic, against its popular misconception as the realm of irrational prejudice, has always been focused on pragmatic aspects of life" (2012,102). By foregrounding the central role superstition plays in village life, the film presents a reality that is already conducive to magic.

While Erhao's magic is at first presented as coincidences, accidents, and a ruse for

survival in a deeply superstitious town, magic becomes increasingly real as the film begins to present spirits in material forms. Notably, the tropes of spirits that walk among mortals are prevalent in traditional Chinese ghost/fantasy literature such as *In Search of the Supernatural* (*Soushenji*) and *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (*Liaozhai zhiyi*). The film's use of magic realism revitalizes these tropes for the screen while giving them a more concrete and realistic portrayal that is aligned with the film's overall realist aesthetic. The film takes a decidedly magic realist turn when, halfway through, Erhao meets a child dressed in white amid the snow-covered landscape. The child asks Erhao to help his mother, who turns out to be a trapped white fox. A flustered Erhao throws out her Shamanic costume and props, but the gears reappear in her van moments later, having gained genuine magic by this point in the film. Later, Erhao is able to see and communicate with the ghost of Ruirui, who despite her own tragic suicide helps Erhao find closure on her second husband's death. Finally, when Erhao visits Grandpa Long on Chinese New Year, she talks to him outside his house, only to find his dead body inside moments later. The fact that Erhao doesn't realize that she was talking to a ghost signals the merging of the realms of life and death within Erhao's reality.

In these instances, magic forms a discursive space where subaltern elements are able to communicate with each other outside the control of the patriarchal power structure, which is portrayed as silencing and paralyzing in the film. The most poignant example is when the audience witnesses a paralyzed Erhao being raped by her cousin-in-law in a long take from Erhao's point-of-view. While the audience hears Erhao crying out in a voice-over, her screams for him to stop go unheard in the scene. Even after she regains her voice and mobility, she does not speak of the sexual assault, remaining voiceless within this oppressive environment. A community of subaltern elements forms around Erhao throughout the film, beginning with Shitou, a deaf-mute teenage boy who is Erhao's only confidant. The spirit of the fox child, Ruirui and Grandpa Long's ghosts are similarly silenced, and only through Erhao's magic are they able to speak. As such, magic in this film fosters solidarity between the subaltern and offers a certain degree of catharsis for the oppressed. Notably, the inclusion of the spirit of the fox child in this mix suggests the existential equality between humans and animals, a characteristic that Skrodza (2012) also observes in magic realist cinema in Eastern Central Europe (75). In the opening image of the film, a white fox is seen eating an apple that we later find out to be loaded with explosives. This image takes on increased significance when the spirit of the fox is materialized as a child and when Shitou meets his death while trying to dispose of the explosives at the end of the film. The synonymy of these two deaths establishes a parallel between humankind's cruelty towards animals and the society's cruelty towards the Other.

The film's social critique is further enhanced when the film portrays magic as largely futile when confronted with entrenched social problems. Erhao's feat of turning the unborn child of her former sister-in-law from a girl into a boy is a case-in-point.

Originally intended as a ruse to stop the sister-in-law's husband from abusing her, Erhao's ritual nevertheless seems to work, and the sister-in-law gives birth to a son despite an earlier ultrasonic test stating that the fetus is a girl. Although this is an instance of real magic, the film is more intent on portraying the unintended consequence of Erhao's success — the couple sell their daughters in order to support their newborn son. In other words, neither magic nor science has any impact on the deeply entrenched sexism in this town. Erhao's growing magic enables her (and the audience) to witness more tragedy around her, but she is powerless to make any real change. This powerlessness peaks when Erhao tries to prevent the village mayor from developing the "gold mine" in the hills, only to have her magic forcibly taken away. This futility of magic to effect real change contributes to the film's political message by exposing exactly how deep-rooted social problems such as sexism, neglect of children, abuse of power, and the obsession with economic development are.

As such, *The Widowed Witch* uses magic realism to offer social and political commentary rather than to portray a different understanding of the existing world. Using beliefs and tropes that already exist in Chinese culture as its key magical device, the film presents a magical reality that is at once familiar and exaggerated. The ostensible instances of magic, aside from intensifying the film's social critique, also draw attention to the film's constructed nature. This constructed-ness is heightened through stylistic choices such as mixing colored and black-and-white cinematography, which emphasizes the filmmaker's presence and suggests that the magical reality presented in the film is but a cinematic construction. Due to the film's poignant social and political critique, magic realism serves as a creative strategy to work around censorship and creates a degree of distance between the narrative of the film from the actual reality we live in. Instead of presenting a different understanding of the existing world, *The Widowed Witch* uses magic realism to construct a parallel reality where it may expose and criticize the imbalance of power entrenched in society.

### **The Place That Does Not Exist in *Kaili Blues***

Whereas *The Widowed Witch* uses magic to construct a social allegory, *Kaili Blues* explores the interlocking notions of time, memory, and dreams through the magic realist mode. Set in Kaili, a subtropical town in Guizhou, *Kaili Blues* tells the story of an ex-convict doctor Chen Sheng, whose mother and wife both passed away during his prison sentence. His mother, having left him her old apartment and money to buy the local clinic, told him to take care of his nephew Weiwei, as Weiwei's father Crazy Face is an unreliable thug. Crazy Face, on the other hand, holds a grudge against Chen Sheng because he was not there as their mother was dying. As young Weiwei has a strange obsession with clocks, Crazy Face lets him go live with the brothers' former gang boss Monk, who now runs a clock repair shop in the neighboring town of Zhenyuan because his own son, who had his hand chopped off before being murdered by his creditor,

repeatedly appeared in Monk's dreams asking for a wrist watch. Determined to get Weiwei back, Chen Sheng embarks on a trip to Zhenyuan, which soon turns into a journey through memories and regrets, culminating in a 42-minute long take where the past, present and future converge in a fictional place called "Dangmai." In Dangmai, Chen Sheng hitches a ride with a teenager (who later turns out to be Weiwei) on his unreliable motorbike in search of musicians of the Miao ethnicity who play Lusheng pipes. Realizing that the musicians have left town, Chen Sheng resorts to getting the buttons of his shirt mended before resuming his trip to Zhenyuan, meeting a beautiful seamstress Yangyang, who plans to return to Kaili to be a tour guide. As he waits, he suddenly sees his wife Zhang Xi, who works as a hair stylist in Dangmai but doesn't seem to recognize him. In Dangmai, Chen Sheng finally fulfills his wish to sing his wife a children's song he learned in prison and say a proper goodbye.

Although Bi Gan never explicitly described his films as magic realist and even resisted the label on some occasions (or the label of "poetic cinema" for that matter) (Bi 2016b, 2019), he cites Juan Rulfo's magic realist novel *Pedro Páramo* (1955) as the literary work with which his film shares the most affinity (Bi 2016b). Certain comments from the filmmaker also imply that incorporating magic into the realism of *Kaili Blues* is a conscious choice. When asked if the town of Kaili is realist (*xianshi*) or magical (*mohuan*) in his eyes, Bi (2019) states, "It's all very normal (*xianshi*). ...The magic is driven by imagination. It's not like anything is already magical." This comment emphasizes the filmmaker's role in creating magic within the portrayal of reality, much like Roh's theory of magic realism that "recreates" the phenomenal world through artistic instinct. While *Kaili Blues* contains no ostensible elements of magic, I contend that the film's superimposition of temporalities, articulation of the spectral, and emphasis on the spiritual undertones of the mundane exhibit a coherent embodiment of cinematic magic realism.

First and foremost, *Kaili Blues* is a film about time. Scattered throughout the film, the motif of clocks in its various forms present time as being stopped, going forward or in reverse, calling into question the notion of time as linear and irreversible. This circular time is counterbalanced by the motif of trains, which come to represent linear time that inevitably races towards the future. However, the film's contemplation of time goes far beyond these symbols of time. From the beginning, the film establishes the past and present as superimposed upon each other in the manner described by Jacques Derrida's notion of haunting. However, rather than materializing ghosts and spirits like *The Widowed Witch*, *Kaili Blues* articulates the specter of the past through memories, dreams, and objects as we gradually piece together the characters' backstories.

Unlike their surrealist counterparts, dreams in the film represent actual memories rather than irrational, subconscious imagination. Chen Sheng and his elderly female colleague Guanglian both have dreams about the people they have lost. When Guanglian recounts a dream about her son who died in a traffic accident, she says, "I dreamed of my son. He was riding his new motorbike. That batik he went to collect from your mum

was covered in blood from his hands. If I'd known, I would have told her not to make the batik." By presenting memories through dreams, the film superimposes happenings in the past on the present instead of portraying them as disparate moments in time. When Chen Sheng dreams of musicians of the Miao ethnicity playing Lusheng pipes in an earlier scene, the dream is even visually superimposed on the shot of Chen Sheng sleeping. One not only hears the sound of Lusheng pipes but also sees, albeit vaguely, the shadow of the Miao musicians reflected on the headboard. The reflection disappears as Chen Sheng wakes up and goes out to the balcony, where he hears the sound of Lusheng pipes from the streets below. Presented this way, this scene blurs the boundary between dream and reality, making them practically indistinguishable. In addition, the film establishes a cosmic connection between dreams and the living present through the Chinese notion of "giving dreams" (*tuomeng*). The notion of "giving dreams" is itself magic realist, maintaining that those who are physically dead may still communicate with the living by appearing in one's dreams. For example, after Monk's son's death, he repeatedly appeared in Monk's dreams, asking for a wristwatch. Monk has had to open a clock repair shop in Zhenyuan to ease his mind. After dreaming about her former lover Airen, Guanglian receives a call from Airen's son, telling her that Airen is gravely ill and wants to see her one last time. Although Airen is not yet dead, he seems to have cosmically transmitted his message to Guanglian through dreams before his son reaches out to her. In other words, dreams in *Kaili Blues* not only embody the superimposition of various temporalities, but also represent a juxtaposition of realms that blurs the boundaries of space and non-space, life and death.

The past is also embodied by objects that the characters keep, emphasizing the spiritual undertones of the objective world. The only physical memento that Chen Sheng keeps is a disco ball from a night out with his wife. As an uncommon object in a home, the disco ball demands the viewer's attention as an object of magic. Although Chen Sheng doesn't dream about his wife, the disco ball is symbolic of their past; as such, it is a spectral presence that occupies a significant place in Chen Sheng's living present. Guanglian's memories are also manifested through objects, perhaps even more so than Chen Sheng's. Having decided she would not go see Airen, Guanglian entrusts Chen Sheng with bringing Airen's memorabilia to Zhenyuan. In one of the few shots in the film that focuses on objects, Guanglian carefully lays out Airen's memorabilia on a coffee table — a music tape, a photo of Airen, and a shirt she bought for him. This shot calls attention to the spiritual undertones of these common objects, which later gain a significance akin to props used in a magic ritual during Chen Sheng's adventure in Dangmai, where Chen Sheng puts on Airen's shirt and gives his wife Airen's music tape, an album called "Goodbye." This gesture can be interpreted as Chen Sheng saying goodbye to his wife as well as a past Airen saying goodbye to Guanglian, establishing the synonymy between Chen Sheng's and Guanglian's grief for their lost loves and complicating the notion of identity.

The mirroring of identities goes hand in hand with the superimposition of different

temporalities in *Kaili Blues*, as can be seen in the sequence of Chen Sheng's confrontation with Crazy Face over the latter's decision to change their mother's tombstone and erase Chen Sheng's name. As they argue, the film cuts to a flashback where we see the once hard-boiled Chen Sheng seeking out Monk's son's creditor in a Mahjong house. One can surmise that this incident weighs heavily on Chen Sheng's present, as we later learn that Chen Sheng went to prison for cutting off the creditor's hand, losing nine years of his life. As Chen Sheng confronts the creditor, the camera pans slowly to land on a table where a glass has toppled over and stays there as Chen Sheng's voice-over reads a poem. The camera then continues panning to reveal Chen Sheng and Crazy Face fighting in the present. As the flashback of past violence blends directly into the present scene of family conflict, the scene presents Chen Sheng's past and present identities coalescing in one physical space. The choice to link this particular flashback to Chen Sheng's present signifies the film's blending of identities, as Chen Sheng's past as a thug is still embodied by his brother Crazy Face, who continues to torment Chen Sheng in the present.

The superimposition of past and present and the articulation of spectrality, presented in the form of memories, dreams, and objects, established Chen Sheng's living present as being haunted and shaped by the past. Dreaming and remembering become synonymous, dream life and the waking present practically indistinguishable. Therefore, as Chen Sheng embarks on his trip to Zhenyuan to reclaim Weiwei, the film manages to take an overtly magical turn without losing its realistic aesthetic and tone. As Chen Sheng wakes up from a dream-memory of the day he left prison and learned of his wife's death, he realizes that the train, which represents linear time, has stopped before reaching Zhenyuan. While the scenery outside is that of an ordinary train station, the window of the train looks like the metal bars of a prison cell. This shot is the actual entrance to Dangmai, as the past (of prison) and the present (of the trip to Zhenyuan) have already coalesced in one physical reality through the unlikely combination of visuals. Following a group of Miao musicians, Chen Sheng heads into a tunnel that leads to Dangmai. Thus begins the film's 42-minute, hand-held long take as the camera follows Chen Sheng's travels around Dangmai, which takes on an objective existence on screen although it doesn't exist in reality.

Bazin, most famously, has applauded the strong sense of reality that a long take is capable of conveying to the audience through the establishment of real time and continuous physical space (Bazin 1967, 35-36). As we watch Chen Sheng encounter characters from various temporalities — a future Weiwei, the alcoholic truck driver before he killed Guanglian's son in a traffic accident, and most importantly, Chen Sheng's already deceased wife — a sense of magic arises from the juxtaposition between the strong sense of reality conveyed by the cinematography and Chen Sheng's encounters that simply cannot exist in time and space proper. Although the long take ostensibly eliminates film editing, the elaborate choreography exemplifies the mechanism of cinematic magic realism that utilizes what Skrodzka (2012) describes as "cinema's inherent representational duality" (125), namely, cinema's dual ability to preserve and transform.

By blurring the line between existence and illusion, the long-take sequence of Dangmai conveys indisputable magic while being rooted in a realist aesthetic, exhibiting the essential characteristic of magic realism.

The long take comes to an end when teenage Weiwei takes Chen Sheng to the riverbank where he may take a boat to Zhenyuan. Weiwei tells Chen Sheng that he is going to turn back time for Yangyang by drawing clocks on each wagon of the train, so that when the train passes Dangmai, she will see the clock hands going in reverse. Chen Sheng, shaken by the discovery that the teenager's name is Weiwei, murmurs to himself, "It's like a dream." Although one might argue that the dream-like quality of Chen Sheng's adventures in Dangmai reduces its affinity with magic realism, I suggest that several details towards the end of the film reinforce the reality of Dangmai. Searching for young Weiwei in Zhenyuan, Chen Sheng uses a binocular that he got from teenage Weiwei in Dangmai. The binocular's solid, objective existence hints at the similarly solid, objective existence of Dangmai. When Chen Sheng locates Airen's son in Zhenyuan, he also learns that Miao musicians he was searching for in Dangmai are Airen's pupils, here to play a last song for Airen at his funeral. By this time, the photo of Airen is the last of Guanglian's memorabilia that Chen Sheng has left to give to Airen's son, having given the music tape to his wife in Dangmai. The film ends with Chen Sheng drifting into sleep on the train again. As another train swooshes by, clocks drawn on each link of the train form one moving image of clock hands going in reverse. This image of turning back time not only ends the film on a poetic note but also encapsulates the mechanics of cinema, inviting one to contemplate cinema's relation with the notion of time.

Whereas magic in *The Widowed Witch* occurs on the narrative level, magic in *Kaili Blues* stems from formal manipulation. As such, *Kaili Blues* presents a form of magic realism that is intimately linked to the cinematic form. The film's portrayal of time, memories, and dreams consistently blurs the boundary between existence and illusion, fully utilizing the potentiality of the cinematic image. Throughout the first half of the film, the portrayal of dreams, memories, and objects is building up to — to borrow Skrodza's (2012) words again — "the figurative transgression dealt to [cinema's] literal 'home'" (127). This transgression, embodied by Chen Sheng's adventures in Dangmai, is in turn captured with the long take, the filmic device that arguably conveys the largest degree of realism. Whereas *The Widowed Witch*'s magic realism builds upon a variety of narrative traditions, *Kaili Blues* builds upon the very mechanism of cinema, in effect expanding the boundary of cinematic realism itself.

## Conclusion

This article has explored the theoretical approach that links cinematic magic realism to Derrida's concept of spectrality through the analysis of two distinctive magic realist works, *The Widowed Witch* and *Kaili Blues*. These films exemplify major ways magic realism is used in Chinese independent cinema today, namely, as an alternative

form of critical realism and as a representational strategy for the previously unrepresentable. While the emergence of a Chinese magic realist cinema can be traced back to independent works from the late 1990s, recent magic realist films in China have shown a stronger focus on the spectral or ghostly, which offers a rich metaphor for the past, the subaltern, and the intangible elements underlying our living present.

The comparative analysis of *The Widowed Witch* and *Kaili Blues* can give us some initial insights into this phenomenon — magic realism, a representational mode that has proven its versatility, flexibility, and broad applicability, not only offers Chinese filmmakers a discursive space to explore the hidden, silenced, or incorporeal elements of society but also enables them to do so in innovative ways. Although magic realism as a style is first theorized in Europe and Latin America, its organic affinity with Chinese folk culture, cyclic time, and conception of the spiritual world has led to idiosyncratic manifestations in Chinese filmmaking. While magic realism has served as the representational mode for the unnatural qualities of post-socialist modernity in the 1990s and 2000s, I suggest that magic realism today offers a vantage point from which Chinese filmmakers can look both to the past and future as they stand firmly in the present. As the two films discussed in this article can attest, cinematic magic realism is still developing and evolving, and it may lead to new terrains of cinematic expressions yet.

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