

***Economy, Emotion and Ethics in Chinese Cinema: Globalization on Speed* by David Leiwei Li (Routledge, 2016)**

David Li brings some heavily Marxist assumptions to the cinema, most centrally that the economic organisation of society provides the background against which artworks can most profitably be read. This has particular salience for China and the Greater China region, given the massive changes in the organisation of economic system over the past four decades. As the means of production have been so dramatically restructured, it seems only reasonable to Li that artists should be registering the mental accompaniments to these changes and giving expression to altered forms of subjectivity appropriate to them.

Li's historical analysis is painted in very broad brushstrokes, or what he calls 'capacious categorical umbrellas' (9). He argues that at the time of the Opium Wars, capitalism was exercising an irresistible power to 'remake the planet and its people after its own image' (2). Following the parenthetical moment of Maoism, Deng Xiaoping's embrace of the market economy signals the Second Coming of Capital – thereafter termed the Reagan-Thatcher-Deng Xiaoping Revolution. This is history at its most epochal. This Second Coming of capitalism is sufficient for Li's purposes, and all films referenced here are interpreted for the way they speak of this single moment. The philosophical basis of this Second Coming is neo-liberalism, and there are no important distinctions or fluctuations beyond that in the history of the region. While Li is trenchantly critically of the effects of neo-liberal thought, this social criticism is not anchored in the advocacy of any alternative system or politics.

What counts as evidence for Li's historical claims? Certainly there is nothing along the lines of empirical research here. The major form of argument and evidence is the appeal to the authority of other analysts. The book is a densely written weave of quotation and theoretical elaboration drawing profusely on a vast range of cultural theorists. In a single, typical paragraph Li can invoke the ideas of Marshall Berman, Saskia Sassen, Etienne Balibar and Mayfair Yang Mei-hui (45). We get a good indication of the author's methods when he labels the book as a dialogue between 'the film medium' and 'social and political theory on the persistent imaginary of capitalist modernity' (10).

So where is film – ontologically as a medium, or critically as a study of individual films – in all this? The large-scale film theory harks back to the Lacanian-Althusserian basis of much 1970s theory in its insistence on film as 'a vital medium of the imaginary' (9). At one point there is a reference to shot-reverse shot constructions as 'suturing a normative individual subjectivity' (98), demonstrating the author's continuing immersion in a line of film theory that would rarely be found in any film department these days. The very totalising view of the cinema (as well as Li's style of argumentation) can be seen in the following passage:

As Jonathan Beller's elaboration of Marx, Debord and Deleuze convinces us, cinema in specific and by extension virtual-visual media in general constitute the capital of the

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twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As such, virtual media ‘work to organize previous forms of discipline and control’. (51)

But this is perhaps to overstate the case. Li writes appreciatively about individual films. As a critic he is primarily interested in film as a microscope ‘lens’ (his favourite metaphor) for elucidating macroscopic forces of capitalism (10). Film scholars will note a return to a very old style of film studies here, with cinema as an instrument one looks through in order to see the real subject of interest.

There are six chapters of film analysis, each chapter dealing with one or two of the better-known international art cinema directors (Zhang Yimou, Zhang Yuan, Ang Lee, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Edward Yang, Jia Zhangke and Fruit Chan) from the PRC, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Li follows other writers such as Chris Berry in invoking a Greater Chinese cinema. The primary reason for this is not so much any industrial interactions between them, but rather the view that they are essentially similar in registering the generalised effects of the Second Coming.

Drawing heavily on the methods of Fredric Jameson, Li’s initial orientation towards this relatively select group of films is to see them as allegories of economically and ideologically driven social processes. The use of allegory as an analytical tool bears mention here. Li is selective not only in his choice of films but also in the way he analyses those films. For example, his work on *Red Sorghum* covers six pages and centres on two scenes from the film, the mini-series *River Elegy* is analysed in a little over a page with no specific scenes being put forward, but then Zhou Xiaowen’s *Ermo* takes up 22 pages of quite detailed analysis. Li’s sustained explication of this film is certainly a rich one, though it is a film that is pretty easy for him to fit within his allegorical framework. The circularity of allegorical methodology is evident here. It foregrounds those texts and those textual elements that validate its conclusions.

Those interested in the way films might be seen as figuring the tremendous changes in the Chinese economy and consequently in Chinese society will find a lot to interest them here. If we are to see the book however, as a dialogue between film and theorists, you will probably note the theorists have the loudest voices in the dialogue. Filmmakers, at best, help to elucidate the work of panoply of such theorists. Over four pages in his analysis of *Ermo*, we are told that the filmmaker has grasped ‘ever so intuitively’ the ideas of Amartya Sen (47), ‘partakes in film language’ the ideas of C.B. McPherson and Virginia Held (49) and perhaps had Guy Debord in mind (51) when making the film. To return to my initial point, there is a strong sense here of film as an element of the superstructure reflecting an economic base. Consequently, this is a book that will appeal to those immersed in the debates of cultural studies more than film scholars who might be more attuned to the idea that films reflect the economic base in the last, rather than the first instance.

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