

## **Jia's Got the World in his Hands**

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The Columbia University Arts Initiative, the only element of President Bollinger's tenure that I unhesitatingly adore, gave me another reason to swoon this past weekend. Though I do not know the attendance figures for the festival of independent Chinese film that CUArts cosponsored this past weekend, the decision to screen some of the films on campus was an exciting one.

But this column is not a recap of the screenings. Due to a mix of prior engagements and overall lameness, I did not get to attend the festival, so any effort at summary would be disingenuous. Instead, this is a column for other people who did not attend the screenings, but who may have seen a stray flier in Lerner last night and said to themselves, "Hmmm. Perhaps I should not have gone to sleep at five in the afternoon on Saturday."

I hope to catch up with four of the five movies later on, but I am already well-acquainted with one of the films, Jia Zhang-Ke's *The World*. Though the screenings have passed, I urge you to go to Kim's and seek out this film. If this is too much of an effort, just e-mail me at [mk2455@columbia.edu](mailto:mk2455@columbia.edu), and I will be happy to lend you my copy (of course, I will want it back after a week-there are some films that I like to have near me, even if I am not watching them).

The Tribeca Film Festival, which starts next week, will be presenting Jia's newest film, *Still Life*, which won the Golden Lion at last year's Venice Film Festival. Set in the aftermath (and, um, beforemath) of the flooding caused by China's massive Three Gorges Dam project, *Still Life* promises to be even more compelling than Jia's previous film, but there is no better way to feel comfortable about making such a groundless claim than to actually watch Jia's previous film.

*The World* is a film about a few people that work in World Park, an actual theme park outside of Beijing that houses intricate replicas of major world landmarks, such as the Eiffel Tower and Red Square. Under Jia's gaze, the park looks less like a cultural attraction and more like a monument graveyard, like the ones that still dot the landscape of post-Soviet Eastern Europe. One is never awed by this odd, confused space, since Jia focuses on the humans in front of the monuments, and recognizes that their normal interactions do not suddenly acquire grandeur or resonance because of a new environment.

In an early scene, Tao, the film's heroine, is dressed in a bright, elaborate costume as she sits on the monorail train that connects the World's many regions. With the enormous replica of the Eiffel Tower behind her, she calls home and asks about the night's grocery shopping and says that today, she is

"going to India." Jia treats this absurd cultural convergence-spectacle, real life, China, India, and France-as a banality, since a change in the background does nothing to affect the foreground.

The power of *The World* lies in its ability to contemplate and explore globalization and cultural upheaval without the patronizing inevitability of Thomas Friedman (were Thomas Friedman to make a film about globalization) or the hopeless desperation of Michael Haneke's *Code Unknown*. The latter approach certainly has its place, but Jia is far more interested in the ramifications of change than in direct condemnation. Of course, the challenges that accompany rapid urbanization pervade the film, and *The World*'s one tragic moment is especially devastating, since it feels like an awful incursion of reality into a difficult, but seemingly tolerable situation.

Every scene from the film is simply stunning. The contrast between personal interactions and a global background (like the slapping fight in front of the Great Pyramids) is beautifully illustrated, as is Jia's consistent framing of the theme park in terms of its suburban, residential surroundings. *The World* succeeds at humanizing and contextualizing major political forces without cheapening necessary cinematic elements.

And I, for one, cannot wait to see what Jia Zhang-Ke does with the Three Gorges Dam.

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