

**“It is Our Duty to Distribute These Films to the People”:
The Vital Cinemas of the New Wave and Sixth Generation**

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INTRODUCTION

Quickly fading in relevance, the film industries of France in the 1950s and China in the 1990s needed a jolt of energy. Characterized by languorous, staid, historical fiction and adaptations of novels, these cinemas which once seemed of a piece with the culture from which they emerged now looked hopelessly out of touch. These rapidly modernizing societies called for a new cinema, one as fleet and energetic, as confused and disillusioned, as the period itself. This call was more publicly supported in France, as seen in Pierre Billard's 1958 editorial for *Cinéma* magazine, in which he writes, "The depletion of inspiration, sterilization of subject matter, and static aesthetic conditions are hard to deny...The future of French film progress rests with young directors."¹ The more "underground" Chinese phenomena of film clubs and bootleg DVDs evinced a similar desire.²

The resulting film movements, the French "New Wave" and Chinese "Sixth Generation," are youthful, culturally specific, and formally inventive. The French New Wave, beginning three decades earlier, has exerted immeasurable influence on world cinema since, and this influence is keenly felt in the films of the Sixth Generation. These are defiant expressions of filmmaking, shirking film convention and societal convention. Rebellion and transgression color every aspect of these films, from the creation of a space that defies classical cinematic conventions to a new type of character whose disillusionment with their modern society telegraphs an unwillingness to assimilate, to become the model citizen of the globalized age. These films are at once an engagement

¹ Billard, Pierre, "40 moins de 40," 5. In Neupert, Richard. *A History of the French New Wave Cinema*.

² Zhen, Zhang, ed. *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*. 26-33.

with and a resistance to the modernizing nations from which they emerge, the conditions for their creation only possible through the developments of their societies.

Background and Influence

Closed during the Cultural Revolution, the Beijing Film Academy reopened in 1976, admitting its first class in 1978. This class would become known as the Fifth Generation of Chinese filmmakers, led by their teachers, the “Fourth Generation”, a group whose careers had been stunted by the Cultural Revolution. Featuring future international superstars like Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, and art house favorites like Tian Zhuangzhuang, the Fifth Generation elevated Chinese cinema to prominence abroad and signaled a break with the tradition of socialist realism that had been preferred by the Mao-era government. Instead, following their graduation in 1982, these directors produced expressive, unconventional films, often based on literature or history, not confined by plot structure or a need to conform to political orthodoxy.

This new mode of filmmaking was inspired by the education received at the Film Academy, influenced by the increased access to foreign films and foreign film theory under the “opening up” of Deng Xiaoping’s “Opening Up and Reform” (改革开放). Films that had been previously not allowed into the country or only allowed for use by the government, now became available for student viewing, though still under the strict “internal reference material” system which regulated the number of students who could see a film.³ Through this system, films by all manner of acclaimed foreign directors were screened, from De Sica to Bergman, Malick to Resnais. For his *Memoirs from the Beijing Film Academy*, screenwriter and professor Ni Zhen interviewed his former students about

³ Ni, *Memoirs from the Beijing Film Academy: The Genesis of China’s Fifth Generation*. 99.

their favorite films from their studies. The films and filmmakers cited are varied, but a similar sentiment colors all of their responses, best expressed by Chen Kaige: “When we were at the Academy, we all shared the desire to develop film language. That was a responsibility that our generation had to accept. Our film language had to be different from previous Chinese cinema. We had to completely eliminate falseness in film, along with emptiness and pretension. We had to use a transformed language to tell history anew.”⁴

Chen’s remarks are reminiscent of those of one of the filmmakers he and his classmates were so enamored of, François Truffaut. His landmark 1954 essay for *Cahiers du cinéma*, “A Certain Tendency in French Cinema,” decries the stale formula of the national cinema. Trafficking in a “Tradition of Quality” of respectable psychological realism, Truffaut compares these dour films to a “funeral procession.” He rails against this form of filmmaking, “which aims for realism, always destroys it at the very moment when it finally captures it, because it is more interested in imprisoning human beings in a closed world hemmed in by formulas, puns and maxims than in allowing them to reveal themselves as they are, before our eyes.”⁵ He sees it as at odds with the auteur theory, his preferred mode of filmmaking in which directors, not writers, are the creative visionaries. The new cinema that Truffaut and his contemporaries would begin just four years later was a response to France’s stodgy national cinema, a reaction to scores of films marked by, to use Chen’s words, “emptiness and pretension.” This new cinema, the “new wave”, would permanently alter not only French filmmaking, but the global film landscape as well. The influence of the French New Wave is inescapable, cited as a major influence by

⁴ Ibid, 99.

⁵ Truffaut, “A Certain Tendency in French Cinema.” 53.

the Fifth Generation in their studies two decades later. As Tian Zhuangzhuang says, “Truffaut’s *The Four Hundred Blows* is the real cinema”.⁶

The impression of French film on the new Chinese auteurs was not limited to filmic texts, however. With the 1980s came more translations of works of foreign film theory, chief among them the essays of André Bazin, cofounder of *Cahiers du cinéma* and friend and mentor to the New Wave directors. As essays like his “Montage Interdit” and Brian Henderson’s “Two Types of Film Theory” (a dichotomization of Bazin’s realism and Soviet realism) were translated into Chinese, their ideas seeped into the film theory of the time. Looking to establish a new strain of Chinese film theory, the film scholars of the 1980s wanted to at once make a break with socialist realism, but not forsake it entirely, to preserve a positive relationship with official ideology and maintain a consistent thread in Chinese film from the 1920s through the early-PRC period to the 1980s. These scholars wanted to “free cinema from its former role as an ideological conduit,” and Bazin’s realism, though likely misinterpreted in parts by these scholars, seemed to fill this role.⁷

Many of the influential Chinese essays on film theory reference Bazin, whether agreeing with his theories, explaining how they cannot be translated to Chinese film, or simply using them to illustrate the developments in Western film theory since the Second World War. Kicking off this new period in film scholarship is Bai Jingsheng’s “Throwing Away the Walking Stick of Drama,” published in 1979. In his essay, Bai distinguishes film from drama, based on the centrality of conflict to drama. For film, which takes influences from the often conflict-less media of music, literature, and painting, conflict

⁶ Ni, Zhen. *Memoirs from the Beijing Film Academy: The Genesis of China’s Fifth Generation*. 102.

⁷ Lagesse, “Bazin and the Politics of Realism in Mainland China.” 317.

need not be its primary purpose. He also writes that film must take advantage of its freedom from time and space, its ability to compress and draw out time, to have scenes “from Nanjing to Beijing, from Earth to the moon.”⁸ Bai’s short essay does not specifically mention foreign film theory (though his writing on time and space evokes Deleuze’s “time-image” from a few years later), but it begins a period of reimagining the Chinese cinema. It is an urging to look beyond socialist realism and the focus on plot and characters, to see film as more than just photographed dramas.

Working in tandem with “Throwing Away the Walking Stick of Drama,” Zhang Nuanxin and Li Tuo’s “The Modernization of Film Language” also began to establish a coherent national film theory by examining the past few decades of developments in film theory abroad. They begin by wondering, “Should we, or should we not, learn and absorb ideas from foreign art?”⁹, and then go on to discuss the two most famous postwar European cinemas, Italian neorealism and French New Wave. They call the two “important and useful”, as they “broke from the limitations of dramatic structure and made a bold attempt to structure film according to its own characteristics, bringing innovation to the narrative in film.”¹⁰ They then segue into a reflection on Bazin, whose theory of the long take shaped the films of the Italians and the French. They position his theories against Eisensteinian montage, the “limitations” of which have even been discarded by Soviet filmmakers by the 1980s.¹¹ For Zhang and Li, the point is not necessarily to mold Chinese cinema in the image of the French or the Italian, or to replicate Bazin’s theories exactly. The purpose of their essay, rather, is to explore the

⁸ Semsel, Xia, and Hou, *Chinese Film Theory: A Guide to the New Era*. 7.

⁹ Ibid, 10.

¹⁰ Ibid, 15.

¹¹ Ibid, 17.

different modes of filmmaking, ones that deviate from the dominant socialist realism, to allow for more freedom in filmic expression. Their main complaint with the current state of Chinese cinema is that, “The result is often merely canned drama instead of films that honestly, naturally, and vividly reflect real life”¹², and they see the experiments of Italian neorealism and the French New Wave, and the groundbreaking theory of Bazin, as works to learn from and to inspire Chinese directors. Depicting “real life” is held up as the ideal, a “real life” that is unique to China and represents a reality that Chinese viewers would understand as their own.

Perhaps then, this philosophy of the film scholars of the 1980s accounts for the fact that the films of the Fifth Generation rarely resemble postwar European cinema or actualize the theories of Bazin. The idea of breaking away from tradition, of creating a new cinema that felt real to them was most important, not mimicking styles. In this way the new Chinese cinema of the 1980s possessed the same spirit as the French New Wave or Italian neorealists, the same guiding principles of revolutionizing their country’s filmic language. The Fourth and Fifth Generation directors hewed to Bazin’s realism more in their methods than subject matter, utilizing long takes and on-location shooting but not the kinds of stories he felt cinema should tell.¹³ This is reflected in the Chinese terminology for Bazinian realism, which scholars translated as “writing or painting realistically” (写实主义) as opposed to the more direct translation for realism (现实主义), which formed part of the term for “socialist realism” (社会主义现实主义), and therefore could carry ideological implications. By focusing on form rather than content in theoretical language and in practice, this generation of scholars and filmmakers could de-

¹² Ibid, 19.

¹³ Lagesse, “Bazin and the Politics of Realism in Mainland China.” 318.

emphasize politics.¹⁴ The depoliticization of Chinese film, however, should be regarded as a political act, given both the extremely political nature of Chinese cinema previously and the allegorical nature of the films of the Fifth Generation, whose invented, mythical China is in itself a political statement.

Even scholars in the 1980s recognized the incomplete nature of the application of Bazin's theories in China. As Zheng Dongtian writes in 1987, "I find [the theories'] significance quite ambiguous...In our country, we lack the circumstances in which to bring such a theory into existence, nor can we fully verify it," calling Chinese filmmakers' use of realism "superficial" and "a distortion" of Bazin's concepts. He attributes this partially to the few translations of Bazin available at the time and their lack of integration into the film school curriculum. Similarly, Shao Mujun notes that Chinese filmmakers, in viewing foreign films for inspiration, noticed that plot had not been totally forsaken by European directors, and films that included an element of expressionism rather than just pure realism were the most studied.¹⁵ The idea of expressing personal ideas rather than just party ideology proved attractive to the Beijing Film Academy students. As a result, Zhu Ying believes that more so than the French New Wave or Italian neorealism, the films of the Fifth Generation resemble French poetic realism of the 1930s and 1940s. Similar to the poetic realist tradition, the work of the Fifth Generation is both humanist and naturalist, displaying none of the antagonism toward its characters or ironic bent that the French New Wave does.

However, at the turn of the 1990s, after the Tian an'men incident left a deep impression upon students and young artists, a more profound application of Bazin's

¹⁴ Ibid, 319.

¹⁵ Semsel, Xia, and Hou, *Chinese Film Theory: A Guide to the New Era*. 165.

theories would begin. As the Chinese film industry began to shift to a new, profit-driven model, and the style of the Fifth Generation, once fresh and exciting, began to ossify into the “Zhang Yimou Model”, an underground cinema emerged. At once the successors to and dissenters from the Fifth Generation, the Sixth Generation began as a marginalized cinema neglected by the government, led by a group of young filmmakers who came of age after the Cultural Revolution. These directors, included among them Jia Zhangke, Zhang Yuan, and Ning Ying, evinced a painstaking commitment to reality, to depicting the truth of the rapidly changing landscape of China. Their films were firmly planted in the present, documenting urban life in 1990s China, unfiltered, without allegory, full of ephemera tying the story to a specific time and place.

Despite the Sixth Generation’s conscious desire to break from Fifth Generation, which had come to resemble a Chinese version of the “Tradition of Quality”, their filmmaking was still informed by many of the texts the Fifth Generation studied. Their rebellion from the Fifth Generation was not only due to the “non-experimental” nature of their films of the mid-1990s like Chen’s *Farewell My Concubine*, but had its roots in the very principles of the Fifth Generation’s filmic ideology. In the Fifth Generation’s shifting of the mainstream of Chinese cinema from political/revolutionary filmmaking to their allegorical (and later commercialized) style, Chinese films were on the whole less engaged with society and its issues than they had been for decades.¹⁶ While following many of the techniques Bazin had encouraged in his writing, they ultimately rejected the philosophy at the heart of his work, the “social relevance and referentiality of cinema.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Li, *Economy, Emotion, and Ethics in Chinese Cinema: Globalization on Speed*. 176.

¹⁷ Ibid.

What the Sixth Generation hoped to do, through its understanding of Bazin (cultivated, like the filmmakers before them, at the Beijing Film Academy), was to return this social relevance back to film, to restore the connection between filmic signs and their referents in Chinese contemporary society. In this way they would preserve the idea at the core of Bazin's work, that "the objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from other picture making...we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually re-presented, set before us."¹⁸ The link between the director and the world they are capturing, then, becomes not only a concern of aesthetics but ethics as well. As Jia Zhangke puts it, directors have a "responsibility" to "capture the transformation of [their] surroundings with a kind of sensitivity,"¹⁹ a responsibility to use film as a tool to depict the real and reflect it back to the viewer. The responsibility Jia feels seems to have translated to his fans as well, as he describes finding a pirated copy of one of his films with the label, "It is our duty to distribute these films to the people."²⁰ This responsibility to the real is particularly important in postsocialist China, to use the real to cut through the spectacle, the disorientation, the noise, "[revealing] the contradictions inherent within Chinese society by laying bare its raw, underlying reality thanks to a direct, unmediated relation to the real."²¹

Through this duty the Sixth Generation prescribed to themselves, their cinema has more in common with the French New Wave than simply a shared desire to create something new, something that felt real to them as the inheritors of the filmic tradition of

¹⁸ Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* 13-14.

¹⁹ Berry, *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers*. 193.

²⁰ Holtmeier, "The Wanderings of Jia Zhangke: Pre-Hodological Space and Aimless Youths in Xiao Wu and Unknown Pleasures."

²¹ Zhang, *A Companion to Chinese Cinema*. 193.

their country. Instead, the films of the Sixth Generation more fully resemble the actual films of the French New Wave, not just the spirit behind them; they are a response to and rebellion from the societies in which they are produced. Both the Sixth Generation and the French New Wave feature films characterized by young, aimless protagonists, natural lighting, long takes, urban locations, and meandering plots. By depicting the societies in which they live in such a way, they express their dissatisfaction with the direction in which their respective countries are headed, countries seemingly betraying their values in their headlong pursuit of modernity, suffocated by spectacle.

Methods and Structure

To understand more deeply the interconnectedness of these two film movements, along with the cause for their rise, I examined two ideas. First, how the influence of the dominant style of postwar French filmmaking (the “New Wave”) on Chinese film of the 1990s (the “Sixth Generation”) is visualized in depictions of rebellion and transgression. Second, how these distinct collections of films are a response to the fundamental changes in their respective countries’ social structures, as both China and France move toward a more neo-capitalist, consumerist model. To explore these two concepts, I have selected ten films, five from the French New Wave and five from the Chinese Sixth Generation, to serve as a representation of the narratives and styles characteristic of the two movements. I chose films that featured clear instances of rebellion and transgression, but that also seemed to be pillars of the New Wave and Sixth Generation, titles that were either often mentioned in scholarship on the subject or from directors who are thought to be leaders of their schools of filmmaking. I did not want to sacrifice relevance for adherence to the topic of my thesis, and vice versa. As such, the ten films are as follows: *The 400 Blows*

(*Les quatre cents coups*, François Truffaut, 1959), *Breathless (A bout de souffle*, Jean-Luc Godard, 1960), *Cléo from 5 to 7 (Cléo de 5 à 7*, Agnès Varda, 1961), *Jules and Jim (Jules et Jim*, Truffaut, 1962), *Pierrot le Fou* (Godard, 1965), *Xiao Wu* (小武, Jia Zhangke, 1997), *So Close to Paradise* (扁担·姑娘, Wang Xiaoshuai, 1998), *Suzhou River* (苏州河, Lou Ye, 2000), *Beijing Bicycle* (十七岁的单车, Wang, 2001), *Unknown Pleasures* (任逍遥, Jia, 2002).

After viewing these films I found common themes within them that expressed sentiments of rebellion and transgression, both in form and content. While the influence of the French New Wave on the Chinese Sixth Generation is certainly present in these films, and is used as a guiding element for this thesis, it does not explicitly form the structure of the piece. A framework in which influence flows directly from French to Chinese film is, I think, rather uninteresting, not terribly accurate, and too clear-cut, as well as Eurocentric.²² The influence of the French New Wave on world cinema is undeniable, and there are plenty of shared characteristics between these two bodies of work, but I believe that not allowing influence to overwhelm the structure of this piece is better for facilitating a dialogue between Chinese and French film, to find parallels and unexpected points of similarity rather than a direct flow of impression.

The themes that form the structure of the piece, then, are Time, Space, Freedom, and Neo-capitalism. They are divided into The Rebellious Environment and The Rebellious Action, with the first two belonging to the first category and the remaining belonging to the second. As opposed to isolating specific occurrences of rebellion and

²² From Tweedie, James. *The Age of New Waves: Art Cinema and the Staging of Globalization*. 36.: “As Pheng Cheah argues, comparative work has always been contaminated by the fact that ‘in the past, the grounds of comparison were undeniably Eurocentric...’”

transgression in each of the films and write according to them, I decided to determine major shared motifs between the two groups of films which provided the context for the rebellious acts, characters, and nature of the films.

PART ONE: THE REBELLIOUS ENVIRONMENT

Time

Rebelling against the conventions of the classical cinematic “action-image” and replacing it with the time-image, as well as utilizing the long take, the two film movements signal a departure from continuity editing. The acceleration of time and the sense that it is running out in the narratives of the films also imposes restrictions on the characters, whether through heightening their anxiety or promising a false freedom. These restrictions are expressed both literally through time, as in the closing windows of opportunity the characters face, or thematically, with rapid change creating an unstable environment in which a liberated existence cannot be found. In this restricted temporal environment, the characters are disoriented and disillusioned, and are compelled, consciously and unconsciously, to break free.

The rebellious nature of the temporality of the films begins with their evocation of the Deleuzian concept of the time-image. Deleuze’s theory is based on the cinemas of postwar Europe, and was published in the early 1980s. Deleuze characterizes the classical cinematic portrayal of time as adhering to the action-image, in which the action of the plot dictated the forward momentum of the film. If an event was not important to the movement of the plot, then time would not be spent on it. The construction of time in classical film, though vastly different from the manner in which time functions in reality, thus became intuitive, as the standard way for the viewer to conceive of time. The breakdown of the action-image, after the Second World War, then represents a disruption of this seemingly rational depiction of time, in which the events of most importance are afforded the most screentime. But time post-1945, as Deleuze asserts, “is out of joint,”

with the horrors of the war upending the way people prioritize the events in their lives.²³ Time in film begins to work in unusual ways, allowed to seep and settle, to become felt as a presence. New (or newly dominant) cinematographic techniques would call attention to time, with jump cuts and long takes disrupting the seemingly effortless flow of time that used to characterize film.

The time-image is most consistently expressed in the films of the New Wave and Sixth Generation through the long take. A key tenet of realist technique, the long take is a shot that is held for a longer than conventional amount of time, with no cuts. Time is extended because of the viewer's familiarity with the continuity editing of the action-image, which is on the whole brisk and keeps the story moving forward. The long take stops time in its tracks, and this feature is used to various effect within these films.

In *Xiao Wu* for instance, there is a scene in which Xiao Wu visits his almost-girlfriend Meimei, sitting on her bed with her and talking for a full five minutes. This is framed in a medium wide shot with, again, no cuts. It is boring, and intentionally so, as Xiao Wu and Meimei talk about not much of anything and lapse into awkward pauses. It allows their interactions to play out in real time, unedited, as the viewer receives an intimate look at their relationship, almost uncomfortable in how unvarnished it is. As opposed to focusing on a conversation that reveals key plot points or consequential character traits, the details of their conversation are mostly meaningless, and in this way mimics reality far more than classical cinematic dialogue does. The framing, too, with its lack of visual devices to create a dynamic scene, would seem to emphasize the contents of the conversation in its simplicity, as though the dialogue is interesting enough on its

²³ Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time-Image*. xi.

own that it does not need adornment. But this convention too is flipped, and the stark framing instead serves to showcase a void, an absence of interest.

The long take is also featured in *The 400 Blows*, as when Antoine returns home from school for the first time in the film. In a shot that lasts a little over a minute, Antoine sets the table, brings his book bag into the dining room, and begins on his homework. It is preceded by shots that are shorter (thirty and thirty-seven seconds), but still longer than the average shot length of most Hollywood films.²⁴ While all long takes in *The 400 Blows* contribute to the documentary style desired by Truffaut, each one takes on a different meaning in the context of its respective scene. Here in this scene the viewer sees the drudgery of Antoine's daily life, each action shown in full, his loneliness at home emphasized by the quiet of these simple shots. The quietness of the soundtrack is significant, as it eliminates the last refuge where the viewer of classical cinema might find relief from the strange lack of action of the scene. There is nothing to distract the viewer from this boredom, and forces them to focus on Antoine's silent misery as opposed to allowing them to notice something like a pretty score. This also serves to heighten the documentary aspect of the film, as in reality housework is not scored by non-diegetic music. Just as Xiao Wu and Meimei's conversation plays out as it would in reality, so does Antoine's evening.

Beijing Bicycle's long takes become more apparent after Gui's bike is stolen, the major shift in the plot. Gui has many run-ins with Jian and his friends, usually as they beat Gui up for stealing his bike back from Jian. This is seen in the first instance in this pattern, in which Gui runs into a truck while speeding away from the high schoolers on

²⁴ The average Hollywood shot length in 1960 would be roughly eight seconds. Miller, "Data from a Century of Cinema Reveals How Movies Have Evolved."

the bike. He is then cornered by them, slammed against a wall, and punched repeatedly, as the camera stays still. These are stark depictions of violence, forgoing editing so as to not ramp up any excitement or drama in the scene, but rather lay bare the brutality of these high schoolers. The take also does not cut until after Jian and his friends have left, so the viewer can watch Gui process what has just happened to him, to see the despair and exhaustion on his face. As with all long takes, the objective is to show the innate character of an action or scene, to strip away artificiality and show how tension ebbs and flows in real life. Given the intense action in this scene, that objective becomes more pronounced than in the previously mentioned ones. Rather than letting a sense of boredom or restlessness build, it is the discomfort that comes with viewing violence, without the temporary release of a cut. Even after the violence has ended, the viewer is still not given relief, made instead to watch the immediate defeated reaction of Gui.

The warping of time is apparent not only in the structure of the film itself, but within the story as well. As time is lengthened in a formalistic sense, it is accelerated in a story sense, leaving the film in a gulf between form and content, a disconcerting space that mimics the uncertain conception of time of the characters. Time is not progressing intuitively in the minds of the characters, but often unexpectedly quickly. One indication of this is the rapid rate at which change occurs in the films. Change happens quickly, on both the small scale of the characters' lives and the large scale of the world around them. In general, the characters in these films lead lives of instability, their circumstances and choices subject to change in a moment. In the French films, this rapid change is more apparent on the small scale, while the Chinese films utilize the large scale as well.

Antoine Doinel's life is structured, given that he is only an adolescent and still under the supervision of his parents and the compulsory education system. But within those structures he is subject to the whims of his strict teacher and his often cruel mother (and stepfather, though to a lesser extent). His teacher, unwilling to give Antoine a fresh start, harasses him more than the other students, making him stay inside during recess and giving him extra assignments. His mother's affection waxes and wanes; one night he can hear her and his stepfather arguing about him, another night she is offering him rewards for good grades. In such an environment, Antoine does not know how each day will turn out, how he might be punished, how the authority figures around him will treat him. The film itself depicts a period of great change in Antoine's life, as amidst the small day-to-day changes he always experiences, here he also faces some uncertainty about where his physical place in the world is. The night after he tells his teacher his mother has died, which is quickly revealed to be untrue, he decides he cannot return home and attempts to start a life out on his own. He spends the night partially in an old factory, partially just wandering the streets. Later on, he is sent to a reformatory school, not only taking him out of his home but out of Paris as well. Antoine, in being unable to predict the disposition of external elements in relation to him, whether his mother's mood or the location in which he lives, has no consistent rubric upon which to base his behavior. This results in an uneven pattern of conduct from Antoine, a series of often impulsive and wrongheaded actions. It is a vicious cycle then, as Antoine's unpredictable environment provokes him to act out, and then more changes are introduced in response to that behavior.

The rapid changes in *Cléo from 5 to 7* are similar to Antoine's move to the reform school, seismic shifts in the characters' life trajectories. In *Cléo*, there are three such shifts. The first is her visit to the fortune-teller, with a reading which turns her medical test, in her eyes, into a certain death sentence. Her young, promising, pop star life now is soon to end, she thinks, and her day becomes a dirge, everything she does colored by this knowledge. The second change comes when she decides to storm out of her apartment, shirking any other commitments Angèle might have scheduled for her, and going out into the city as a different Cléo. Here Cléo makes a change by asserting her freedom, choosing to spend her day how she wants to spend it, and in the process becoming a more self-aware and happier person. The third event of this kind comes at the end of the film, when Cléo receives her cancer diagnosis. Instead of reverting to her sad, lost state from before, Cléo says she is happy, cementing the changes within her that she experienced on her walk. She makes a radical change to her disposition, and perhaps will begin to live her life with more self-possession and less anxiety. Within the span of an hour and a half, Cléo experiences profound changes, both of her own making and imposed upon her. She sinks first into despair, then is agitated into angry determination, and finally finds acceptance. Her response to the shocking revelation of her diagnosis, expressed twice in the fortune teller's premonition and the doctor's confirmation, is to become (understandably) erratic, to match her behavior to the tumult that now defines her life.

In *Jules and Jim*, the changes brought about by the characters are set against the backdrop of a turbulent time in world history. In the beginning of the film Jules and Jim have carefree, meandering lives. They do not have jobs, they change girlfriends weekly, and their daily schedule, or lack thereof, is set according to whatever they feel like doing

that day. This is amplified once Catherine comes into their lives, an impossibly impulsive character whose whims will effect changes great and small. This is fine when Catherine wants to change their already lax routine and take a trip to the seaside or go hunting for treasures in the woods. It is more disruptive as time goes on, and Catherine switches lovers as though she is unmarried, creating strained relationships between Jules, Jim, and their mutual friend Albert, or abandoning not only Jules but her young daughter as well for a six-month “vacation.” As long as these characters are in Catherine’s orbit, they do not know what their life will be from one moment to the next, best exemplified in the seemingly innocuous car ride Jim takes with Catherine that ends in them careening off a bridge to their deaths. This personal volatility is matched by the period in which the film is set, starting at the end of the Belle Époque and ending in the early 1930s as German nationalism began to rise again. The vitality and prosperity of the 1910s is interrupted by the horrors of the First World War, and much of the film takes place in the 1920s afterward, as Jules and Jim comment on the changes they have witnessed in the time since the end of the war, like the advent of shorter skirts. In one of the last scenes, they watch a newsreel showing book burning in Germany and fear what is next. The characters, then, are suited to the times in which they live, their recklessness and tragic end echoed in the destruction that that newsreel portends.

The changes seen in the films of the Sixth Generation are more along these lines, of witnessing a society in flux, though in real time as opposed to looking backward. These films were produced and take place in the late 1990s and early 2000s (with the exception of the late 1980s-set *So Close to Paradise*, which nevertheless touches on the same themes). *Beijing Bicycle*’s Beijing is the modern city seen through the eyes of a

recent migrant from the countryside. While he lives in the old hutongs, as does his antagonist Jian, his work as a courier takes him to the booming commercial centers of the city. The grey, lateral hutongs bear no resemblance to the glossy verticals of the high-rise apartments, offices, and luxury spas Gui delivers packages to. The sudden development of Beijing can be seen in this depiction of a deeply stratified city, the earthier materials of the hutongs and old building techniques contrasted with the modern glass and metal of the high-rises. As Gui rides his bicycle from his home into these areas, the viewer sees building after building constructed in the past decade or so, having abandoned all past iterations of a common Chinese architectural style for the global aesthetic of the moment. It is only in this Beijing, one of the thriving new epicenters of the market-based philosophy of “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” that Gui’s new life is possible. The old Beijing, for various reasons, would not have motivated the incredible influx of migrants that fin-de-siècle Beijing does, and this specific, post-1978 life that Gui leads is the source of many of his problems. The neglect and disdain with which migrants are treated in the city, often by other migrants themselves, makes it difficult for Gui to navigate his new home or find any type of support system. He is unfamiliar with the unspoken rules of the city, and this, coupled with his low economic status and the expendability of migrant workers in the eyes of businesses, contribute to the loss of his bicycle and job and the difficulty of reclaiming both of them. Just as soon as Gui starts to become more comfortable in the city, as he comes close to earning his bicycle, success is snatched from his grasp.

In *Xiao Wu*, Fenyang is a small city hearing the first rumblings of modernization. New stereo systems are being advertised, new fashions are becoming popular with young

women like Meimei, businessmen are being promoted by the government, old buildings are torn down to be replaced with the new, whatever that may happen to be. Fenyang is not there yet, but there are signs of it taking the steps larger cities did toward a consumerist, capitalist ethos. The changes in Xiao Wu's life are prompted by these seismic shifts in Chinese society, as his previously reliable work as a pickpocket is now endangered by the government campaign to curb crime. Even Xiao Wu's relationships change, as his former best friend Xiao Yong rises to prominence in the new economy and abandons the less-respectable Xiao Wu. Activities like demolishing old buildings are personified in Xiao Wu's friend losing his home to a vague, unidentified new project. This is in contrast to the characters in the New Wave films, whose lives are marked by rapid change that is specific to them but obliquely reference the transforming France around them. Xiao Wu and his friends are directly influenced by the reforms taking place in Chinese society, with specific policies referenced. The uncertainty with which the characters face these changes is the same across the films, even as the viewer knows they are to their detriment.

As the rapid rate of change in the films establishes the unstable temporal environment the characters find themselves in, the motif of limited time furthers the sense that time is accelerated. The idea that time is running out for the characters invokes a claustrophobic feeling that their world may cave in on them unless they take action soon. For the most part, the characters are aware of that their time is limited, whether it is their lifespan or their window of opportunity for success in life, but any of their efforts to change that ultimately fail.

With *Xiao Wu* this feeling comes from criminal activity, as Xiao Wu has broken the law and there is only so much time before it catches up with him. *Xiao Wu* begins with loudspeaker announcements of a government crackdown on crime, and Xiao Wu, a notorious pickpocket in the area, is a main target. Friends warn him repeatedly about the danger he now faces and suggest alternate professions, and occasional TV interviews of other Fenyang residents emphasize their support of stricter law enforcement. Xiao Wu never acquiesces to his friends' pleas, and seems to think that he will be able to outwit the system. He even thinks that his profession is more noble than the alternatives suggested, like black market business. Of course, Xiao Wu is caught in the end, his pager alerting the police to his activities. While the viewer could always see that this would end poorly for Xiao Wu, he could never accept the fact.

For Gui, the notion of limited time appears when his bike is stolen and his boss tells him he will allow him to return to work if he finds the bike. There is the implication that Gui will need to find his bike soon, as this job is the only way he makes a living in Beijing. Without it, he could not sustain himself in the city for very long, since as a working-class migrant youth he likely does not have much in the way of savings to fall back on. Failing to retrieve his bike and his job quickly could even mean that Gui would have to return to the countryside, his attempt to capitalize on the opportunities of city life ending in disappointment. And yet, as the film ends, with a badly beaten Gui carrying his smashed bike across the road in defiant persistence, it is unclear if he ultimately did beat the time limit imposed on him, if he will be able to continue on as a courier and as a Beijinger.

In Cléo's case, it is the looming fact of her medical test results at 6:30 that are giving her anxiety. She feels like the walking dead after the fortune-teller's reading, walking down the street in a daze, having a panic attack in a café, lashing out at her songwriters when they give her an overly tragic song. She sees that 6:30 test result as a death sentence and even after she leaves her apartment midway through the film and seems to feel better, there are intermittent reminders of her mortality, like broken glass windows and mirrors shattering her reflection. The continuous time conceit reinforces this perception, the viewer reminded of the minutes ticking by until Cléo goes to the hospital, minutes that, depending on the test result, might be more precious and numbered. Cléo does not explicitly try to change her fate, but does struggle with accepting the fact throughout most of the film, often due to those reminders.

The 400 Blows' Antoine is also running out of time to change the course of his life. Throughout the film he establishes a pattern of getting into trouble, at school and with his parents, a problem child in the eyes of society. Once one starts to receive that treatment, to be labelled as "no good" by all those around them, it can be difficult to convince those authority figures otherwise. Even the things Antoine does with good intentions, like his shrine to Balzac, turn out poorly, his efforts to be good literally going up in flames. But once he steals the typewriter and officially becomes a juvenile delinquent with a record, there is little hope for him. He is sent to reformatory school as a last-ditch attempt to set him on a good track, but it is unlikely a harsh, military-style school is going to make him into a perfect, upstanding citizen. Antoine is the one character who does not seem to recognize that his time is limited, and only the viewer can see how his characterization as a delinquent will be difficult to shake off and could define

him for life. When he runs away in the last scene and is confronted with the open ocean, it is a sign, for the viewer if not for Antoine as well, that his time to escape from a life of trouble has possibly run out.

Trapped by this sense of accelerated time, through changes that accumulate at a distressing rate and an emphasis on the finiteness of time, the characters attempt to adopt the fast movement of time for their own purposes. They hope to, somewhat ironically, break free of the uncertainty with which rapid change and limited time have imbued their lives by engaging in activities that are characterized by speed. These bursts of fast motion, mostly through the use of vehicles like bicycles, cars, and motorbikes, impart upon the characters a feeling of freedom, both real and imagined. They feel as though they are released from the anxiety of their lives due to the exhilaration and excitement of rapid movement, which is often revealed to be a fleeting emotion.

In *Jules and Jim* and *Beijing Bicycle*, bicycles are a vehicle for leisure and work, respectively. Jules and Jim and Catherine do not ride bicycles in the city but instead on their excursions outside it, like on their trip to the seaside and at the chalet. The seaside comes first, as Catherine leads them from their villa to the beach and back again. This is the three at their most carefree, before the war, before Jules and Catherine are married. The sometimes rough camera movement of the film is replaced here by a smooth, gliding motion, visualizing their unconstrained happiness. That same motion returns when the three of them plus Albert ride off from the chalet after hearing Albert and Catherine's song. Everything has changed at this point, their lives tangled and messy and committed now, but they smile and ride together like before, the camera sweeping across the broad

expanse of the road, in either a genuine evocation of the past or one that desperately hopes to mimic it.

The first scenes of *Beijing Bicycle* are reminiscent of this gliding motion. As Gui explores the city in the first month or so he is there, he speeds along, weaving seamlessly through traffic, eyes on the road ahead but occasionally turned upward to view the mammoth high rises unique, in Gui's experiences, to Beijing. The camera often shoots him in a wide shot, allowing for a full range of motion and capturing the width of Beijing's highways. It gives him a weightless feeling, as if riding on a cloud, confident in his ability to be a good courier and earn the bike. Gui's weightlessness is different from the characters in *Jules and Jim* in this way, that his work remains at the center of his enjoyment, his status as a migrant laborer always keeping him grounded in reality.

These two films, along with *The 400 Blows*, also feature sequences of running. The race in *Jules and Jim* is carefree, fun. It is freeing in a different way, as well, as Catherine, in her drag, is able to go out and spend time with Jules and Jim in a way she ordinarily would not. It stands as a perfect moment in their friendship, untainted by a bittersweet revisitation of the moment as there is with the bicycles. Running in *Beijing Bicycle* is an attempt to reach freedom as opposed to an expression of it. After his bike is stolen from him, Gui runs around the city trying to find it, then runs to deliver the package on time, which he fails to do. And once the endless game of cat-and-mouse with Jian over the bike begins, Gui always is running, running to deliver packages, running away from Jian, away from his friends. He is trying to retrieve the object that made him feel free in the first place and keep the job that keeps him free from a life in the country. In his last run, his bicycle is smashed, his hopes irrevocably destroyed.

Antoine's final run in *The 400 Blows* has a similar defeatism as Gui's. After residing at the reformatory school for a while, he escapes through a hole in a fence during a soccer game. He runs along the dirt road in the woods that heads away from the campus, the camera tracking alongside the determined Antoine. He finally reaches the end of the road, and the camera pulls back, revealing the wide plain of the beach, Antoine continuing to run across it. It is thrilling in a way, Antoine possibly free at last, until it sets in that he is not any more free than he was when he slept on the streets or stayed with his friend René. He stops when he gets to the ocean, nowhere left to go. He stands on the seemingly infinite beach, yet he is as hemmed in as ever. It is an end similar to the one Catherine and Jim meet in *Jules and Jim*, Catherine driving her car off a bridge and into the river. Catherine's act, however, is purposeful, one last impulsive, unthinking decision from her. While bicycles were a pretty, gliding way to get them from place to place, the car is an ungainly, loud nuisance, in one instance waking up Jim with Catherine's incessant honking. Obnoxious and dangerous, it is a perfect vehicle for Catherine, and it seems fitting that she goes down with it, of course taking another person with her.

The rebellion of these films, as will become a pattern throughout the thematic sections of this thesis, begins in the filmic form itself and proceeds to color the content of the film as well. In this instance, however, the two work to opposite effect, with form slowing down time and content speeding it up. Though in both areas time is allowed to become a presence, to be felt both by the viewer and by the characters. The viewer becomes conscious of the true length of time, while the characters are confronted by the sense that they may not have as much time as they thought, or that the changes they experience are arriving at a far faster rate than they anticipated. They attempt to regain a

sense of control over this instability, either ignoring their signaled fate or trying to break free of it, if only for a moment. Their efforts are futile, of course, as time cannot be manipulated. They must instead become accustomed to the reality they inhabit, in which time is always in flux and cannot be counted on as before to act in a linear, expected manner.

Space

Not only, however, is time fleeting in these films, but space is as well. The time that seems to be sprinting alongside these bewildered characters is accompanied by a space that is disappearing at their feet. The space of the films constitutes a refutation of classical conceptions of space, which values symmetry and emphasizes figures central to the plot through its framing. Here those ideals are discarded, with freed camera movement and non-hierarchical framing creating a space defined by unpredictability, which is apparent to both the viewer and the characters. Within the films themselves is a claustrophobic space marked by confinement, as well as an unexpectedly mutable space, seen in the city, which warps before the characters' eyes, sinister in one moment, exhilarating in another. This unstable environment, tilted off its axis, never static and closing in, is not concrete in the way it ought to be counted on to be. Space is ephemeral in a way it has not been before in French and Chinese films, although it must be said that in Chinese film this idea is expressed more explicitly.

The way the camera builds a space is the most significant aspect of the environment of a film; not simply the locations, but how those locations are visualized and how the viewer comes to perceive them. In these films the camera oscillates between two, equally radical modes: the realist and the experimental, the former static and

documentary-style, the latter characterized by the unrestrained movement of the handheld camera. Both styles are utilized, but by no means equally, with the films of the Sixth Generation tending to be more realist and the New Wave more experimental. Though the two seem to oppose each other, their aim is always similar, to free film from the constraints placed upon it by filmmaking tradition.

Realist camerawork is more easily defined by what it is not than what it is, given how it strips away most embellishment from its shots. It is not the classical system of seamless editing and shot-reverse shot, nor is it an expressionist, intentionally manipulated style. Rather it is characterized by static shots without cuts, often beginning before or ending after the point at which the “action” of a scene occurs, resulting in a fuller picture of a scene.

Jia's *Unknown Pleasures* often works in this mode, using an almost distractingly static style to suggest the inertia of his young characters' lives. When Xiao Ji meets Qiao Qiao on the outskirts of town after the incident in the club, the scene is framed in three distinct shots. First the camera follows Qiao Qiao to the side of the road and stops, then cuts to a two-shot of she and Xiao Ji talking once he arrives, and finally to a medium shot of the two on the bus together. The camera not only lingers on the shots for a long time, but it is entirely still once Qiao Qiao arrives at the road. Within each shot it is fixed, there is no tracking or panning. Despite Xiao Ji and Qiao Qiao being in conversation with each other for some of the scene, the shot-reverse shot model has broken down, with the cinematic logic and drama that model implies faltering as well. The camera minimally interferes in the action the way a documentary might, disregarding its categorization as a fiction film. There is ostensibly little editorializing, little use of the camera to express a

theme, besides that of creating an unvarnished depiction of a reality that is often overlooked or deliberately hidden.

The other style of camera movement in these films defies filmmaking convention as much as the realist style, but its technique begins to express content-related themes of ephemerality as well. The experimental style is a far broader category, and while this mostly refers to the innovative, freeform style allowed for by the use of handheld camera, it also includes other techniques like jump cuts and Dutch angles. The way these techniques are utilized in these two film movements is not quite expressionist or formalist; they do not dominate the films or overwhelm their realist tendencies to the point that the space resembles something otherworldly. Instead, they are used primarily to conceptualize a space beyond the two-dimensional frame, to wind through the frame or dive into it, among other types of motion. This space is ever-changing, whether through altering angles or maintaining consistent movement. As a result, space seems ungrounded and listless, a drifting world on edge.

Breathless, in addition to its much-noted use of jump cuts, is particularly adept at taking advantage of the wide range of motion allowed for by the handheld camera. Here the camera wanders, floating along with the action, objective and disinterested. One example of this type of movement is when Michel visits Patricia on her paper route. The camera starts by following them as they walk down the street, pausing when they do. Then, as they begin to walk back toward the camera, the framing on them gets tighter and tighter, until finally Michel just walks out of the shot, leaving only Patricia in this strange, low angle medium shot. She starts to run after him, and instead of continuing to track, the camera abruptly cuts to an overhead shot, which has not been used in the film

up to this point. Despite being a conversation between the two leads of the film, this scene is filmed like the camera could not care less, not bothering to re-center them in the shot, or turning to see where Michel goes when he leaves the frame. There are also a number of people walking in and out of the shot, especially at the beginning, another indication that the camera is disinterested in preserving the convention of prioritizing lead actors above all else. It is content to just continue its steady tracking backward, hovering just above the ground, no matter what passes in or out of its line of vision. The transient camera, coupled with the abrupt shifts in angle, makes for an unfixed space, unpredictable and denying the viewer a neutral state at which to rest.

Pierrot le Fou, a later Godard film, breaks with the style the director established in *Breathless*, discarding its jagged cinematography and handcam shots. Instead *Pierrot le Fou* creates its open, natural spaces through wide shots and constant gliding motion. The primary style of the cinematography is languid, wide shots that track the movements of the characters. And, as Ferdinand and Marianne are almost constantly in motion, so is the camera. Even when Ferdinand is just reading poetry from a book Marianne bought for him (“By someone with your name,” she says), he is moving. Book in hand, he jumps up onto the fallen tree he was sitting on, theatrically reading as he walks along it, running up onto a rock, then leaping off, down to Marianne, whom he walks around in circles, touching, and continuing to read. The camera follows him all the while, not attempting to mimic his movements but just floating steadily along with him. The aloof camera of *Breathless* becomes even more detached here, more objective. It glides along, unaffected by the actions of the characters, never changing its style to match their emotions or behavior. This disposition of the camera remains the same throughout the film, pragmatic

and distant. While *Breathless* was unpredictable, *Pierrot* is steady in its listlessness, drifting in a way that is just as disconcerting.

In *Suzhou River*, the movement is not as gliding as it is in the New Wave films. Rather it is fractured, a choppy kinetic cinematography of shifting shot lengths and angles, reminiscent more of the flourishes of *Breathless*. The best example is the film's first scene, which begins with the camera rushing along the surface of the Suzhou River, blurrily accelerating until swinging upward to show dilapidated buildings on the riverbank. The camera continues its journey down the river for the next four minutes, zooming in on various things it deems points of interest: construction workers, houseboats, fishermen, a dog. There are frequent cuts and sudden, sharp pans, leaving the viewer without a clear frame of reference. The tilted and low angles recall one of the film's (and the New Wave's) most apparent influences, film noir. While the New Wave films use the continuously moving camera to explore and expand the space, making it a lived, three-dimensional space, *Suzhou River* disjoins the space and leaves the viewer on uncertain ground. There are too many frames of reference cut together to form a cohesive picture. They are cycled through too quickly, the brevity of their appearance reflecting the heterogeneous space experienced by the characters in the film.

Another formal rebellion of space in these films comes with the predominance of a non-hierarchical representation of the concept. In another departure from the classical style in which characters and props would be distributed symmetrically or to draw focus to the most important subject, the camera in the New Wave and the Sixth Generation often captures subjects totally unrelated to the plot. This is a space in which nothing is prioritized, in which the camera does not only exist to serve the story in its classical

sense, but is rather naturalistic and directs the viewer's attention to things normally outside of its scope.

One way this space is achieved is through the placement of a static camera. For *Unknown Pleasures*, this technique is also used, as a longer shot is set up which diverts attention from the main characters. For instance, when Bin Bin and Xiao Ji exit the pool hall to smoke, or Xiao Ji goes to the bank to get money for Qiao Qiao, the camera stays in a long shot when ordinarily a medium shot or close-up would be used. Instead of drawing focus to the main characters, creating drama from their magnified actions, the camera remains in its previous position, implying detachment from the scene. The inclusion of other, unnecessary characters within a scene when the focus ought to be on Bin Bin, Xiao Ji, and Qiao Qiao signals their lack of importance within their environment. By conventional standards they would be considered the center of this story, but *Unknown Pleasures* subtly calls that into question.

The non-hierarchical space can also be expressed by reversing the previous technique, to instead keep the camera moving. The wandering camera of *Breathless*, which instead of concentrating on Michel and Patricia, hesitates to follow their movement or leaves them out of the frame. It is as though the camera in these examples is distracted, with a mind of its own, coasting along at its own pace regardless of the characters' walking speed. As with *Unknown Pleasures*, it creates a space where conventionally important subjects no longer monopolize the frame. It follows a pattern of separating the camera from the characters, where the camera does not serve the purpose of aiding in the development of drama in the story, but can editorialize in ways divorced from the plot.

In *Pierrot le Fou*, the displacement of the main characters from the center of the camera's focus is more deliberate. In one scene toward the end of the film, Ferdinand meets Marianne at a bowling alley. She asks him, referring to the briefcase of money in his hand, "You got it? We all meet tonight as planned?" She then bowls, and the camera follows her ball down the lane, all the way to the end as it crashes into the pins, and back. Ferdinand and Marianne are left out of the shot entirely, even as their conversation becomes more intense. Ferdinand tells Marianne that people saw him with the briefcase, and when her only response is that her real boyfriend Fred will look innocent now, he asks, "Why are you double-crossing me?" Delivered in whispers, the viewer can only hear the urgency in Ferdinand's voice, not see his expression as he speaks to Marianne. Any drama is deflated as the camera rolls along with the smooth, linear movement of the bowling ball, drawing the viewer's attention outward instead of closing in on the two characters in this heated moment. Here the camera does not direct the viewer away from a likely insignificant set of actions from the main characters, but intentionally minimizes the space given to a narratively important moment.

The non-hierarchical space in its defocalization of "important" objects symbolizes the restructuring of values within the society, the way traditional order seems to be upended. The effect of the non-hierarchical space is limited to technique, however, as only the viewer is cognizant of its application. The creation of a claustrophobic space, however, is apparent in form and in content, whether through physically small locations, obstructing objects and clutter placed in the scene, a limited range of motion, or tight framing from the camera. Livable spaces are condensed into unlivable ones, places of

refuge made uncomfortable, gestures magnified until they become disconcerting instead of reassuring.

The clearest example of the confined space is the small, typically private, settings in which these films take place. This is usually represented in the placement of characters in tiny apartments shared with others, like the apartments of *Unknown Pleasures*. In Xiao Ji's home with his father, the two share a bunk bed, the rest of the cramped room filled with dressers, a small desk, and a television. The dim lighting makes the room seem even smaller, as does the presence of other characters like Bin Bin and Xiao Ji's father's employee. Xiao Ji is rarely seen at his apartment, less so than Bin Bin, and it seems like not much of a home to him, more just a place to spend the night.

Suzhou River's small apartments are also made more claustrophobic by shrouding them in darkness. The film plays up the film noir aesthetic by barely lighting Mada's home or Meimei's dressing room, with only light from neon signs streaming in. The rest of the room unviewable, Mada, Meimei, and Mudan become isolated in these small patches of light, disconnected from the rest of the space. The rooms are often shot through doorways as well, minimizing the amount of a room that is shown, and the typical noir decor of Venetian blinds and railings often appear to fragment the frame. This shadowy, split space is not whole or cohesive, and in its disunity it becomes foreboding, personal spaces rendered in an inhospitable way.

In other cases, simply spending too much time in a location can make it stifling. The apartment in *So Close to Paradise* originally does not feel too small, with its balcony opening out onto the river. But after Gao Ping leaves and Dongzi spends more and more time inside, lying on the bed, listening to the radio, it feels more like the walls are closing

in on him, and the viewer is anxious to break out. The uncertainty surrounding his living situation and Gao Ping's return render Dongzi immobile, his anxiety making the room claustrophobic when it was not before.

And while Godard's *Pierrot* is the polar opposite of these confined spaces, depicting instead the idyllic liberation of the countryside, his *Breathless* features a few long scenes taking place in an apartment, when Michel visits his girlfriends and goes to his final hideout. While Michel spends all this time in these small apartments, the camera gets restless, moving around in the scene, cutting, changing perspective. This is most apparent in the twenty-five-minute scene in Patricia's hotel room; the camera does not linger on a single shot for long before it has switched to another angle of the scene or interspersed a close-up. The wandering camera gets antsy when confined to one space, feeling suffocated by the four limiting walls of an apartment.

Along with the spatial limitations of the rooms themselves, the objects placed within them can add to the sense of being hemmed in. In *So Close to Paradise*, shots are often busy with objects, like the table in the outdoor restaurant, or surfaces in the apartment, covered in Ruan Hong's knick knacks. By the end of the film, the landlady comes to see Dongzi, alone in the apartment, and berates him for how filthy the place has become, covered in a layer of dust. In the last scene, another tenant has moved into the apartment, filling the place with their giant JVC boxes, crowding Dongzi out quite literally. The *mise-en-scène* was always confused and complicated, but now it becomes nearly unlivable.

Lastly is how confinement manifests itself in the abundance of close-up shots in these films. While close-ups can create a sense of intimacy between the characters and

the viewer, they can also be claustrophobic, the lack of breathing room in the frame mimicking the confinement the characters feel. In *Breathless*, Michel is obsessed with his appearance, and the film frequently indulges him. In one sequence where Michel looks at a poster of Humphrey Bogart, the camera cuts between him and “Bogey”, as Michel does his “gangster” gesture of tracing his lips. It is Michel’s posturing at its most obvious, contrasting his affecting a wannabe tough guy persona with the man who actually possessed that persona, and effortlessly so. In juxtaposing the character that Michel tries to play, the impossibly cool noir hero, against the epitome of that type, it shows how laughable his aspirations are. In another scene, Michel does the same gesture in the mirror, underscoring his vanity as well as his need to convince himself of his coolness. Close-ups in *Breathless* are used to show artificiality, not lay bare genuine emotions like the technique typically does. They highlight the suffocating nature of Michel’s constructed persona.

In the close-ups in *Suzhou River*, however, the characters are aware of their restriction, as opposed to Michel, who seems oblivious to the restrictive falsity of his persona. This is most evident in a series of close-ups on Mudan as she realizes that Mada has used her in a kidnapping plot. After Mada forces her to speak on the phone with her father to prove she is still alive, the camera stays on Mudan, framing just her face. Emotions cycle through on her face, as her shock and confusion gives way to anger and sadness. She realizes her betrayal, realizes she is trapped in a situation she does not want to be a part of. As the frame stays tight on her face, it mirrors the restricted movement of Mudan, where even though she wants to leave, she cannot.

Just as the size of space is not fixed but seems as though it is contracting, depictions of the city are similarly unstable, and oscillate between exciting and threatening. Within this group of films the city is portrayed in wildly different lights, even when the same or similar cities are used as settings. This variance extends to the characters themselves, in which their relationship to the city and opinion of it is never fixed.

For Michel in *Breathless*, Paris is alternately a playground and a site of danger. Though Michel always talks of leaving Paris for Rome, Geneva, or Milan, that is more out of necessity than a genuine desire to get out of the city. Michel obviously enjoys bumming around Paris, visiting his various friends and girlfriends, speeding along the boulevards in his stolen cars. The delight he takes in Paris is reflected in the way it is photographed, like capturing the moment all of the streetlights flick on, or showing the stylish café scene at night, focusing on Patricia's face as she amusedly takes it all in. But as Michel has shot and killed a police officer on his way to Paris, it also is a hostile place for him, one where he cannot stay long before he is found. Michel knows he is in danger, confirming it to Patricia at one point, and the viewer is reminded of the manhunt for Michel throughout the film. So all the while the viewer, and Michel, are enjoying his weekend in Paris, a threatening undercurrent runs through the events and occasionally comes to the surface, finally taking over the narrative at the end.

So Close to Paradise's Wuhan is a city of both great promise and disappointment. Dongzi, Ruan Hong, and Gao Ping come to the city because of the economic prosperity they are told awaits them there, or at least relative prosperity in comparison to their lives in rural China. Ruan Hong arrives with dreams of becoming a singer, while Dongzi and

Gao Ping only have the vague goal of making money. The city is lively, filled with people and never lacking in activity, from bars to outdoor food stands. But countering the excitement of the new, modern city is trouble, mostly in the form of the gangsters that the main characters run afoul of. Wuhan is portrayed as a dark, neon-lit, noirish underworld, foreboding and dangerous. Its promises, as well, are revealed as empty. Ruan Hong certainly has not achieved her goal of becoming a singer, instead singing in a club for men who tell her they will record her music and never do. Dongzi perhaps did not have high expectations of success in Wuhan, but getting mixed up in his hometown friend's gangster dealings was probably not his ideal plan. And yet, both of them stay in the city, keenly aware that returning home would make them a failure.

The Shanghai of *Suzhou River* is another city characterized by the suggestion of attaining a better life, but ultimately fails to provide opportunities to do so. While the characters mostly exist on one side of the Suzhou River, in a threatening noir landscape similar to *So Close to Paradise's* Wuhan, there are often reminders of the "other" Shanghai, the official, glittering version of the city. The city is disjointed, stratified, the world in which the characters live seeming to belong to another city altogether. Their dingy, grey Shanghai of warehouses, spare apartments, and buildings set for demolition bears no resemblance to the contemporary Shanghai of the collective imagination nor to the remembered image of the city in the socialist period. At the end of the film, when Mada and Mudan are reunited, they sit on the bank of the river and look over at the Oriental Pearl Tower, the choice symbol for representing the new, global Shanghai. They can only view it from a distance, the prosperity and cosmopolitanism it represents out of

reach as well. Shanghai in *Suzhou River* consists of two distinct worlds, the thriving and the deteriorating, and these characters seem confined to the latter.

Datong in *Unknown Pleasures* is a city that is both of its time and lagging behind. The city is obviously changing, seen in the construction sites on the outskirts of town, the minimized role of the textile mill, and the new spaces for entertainment. For Bin Bin, Xiao Ji, and Qiao Qiao, most of their free time is spent at the clubs and public performances in the city or watching bootleg DVDs, and Bin Bin and his girlfriend usually have their dates in a motel room with a television. They are part of the new generation of Chinese youths, and their entertainment habits reflect that. There is still the sense, though, that even though Datong is modernizing, it is not booming in the way that Beijing, Shanghai, or many of the coastal cities are, that it is missing much of the development and influx of capital that other locations are experiencing. So while the city adopts many of the signifiers of contemporary, globalizing China, the actual growth and affluence they would seem to signify are still not there.

Cities are typically caught in this chasm of being at once enjoyable, promising, or modern, and at the same time not, showing just as often their dangerous, unfulfilling, or backward sides. Coupled with the confinement the characters feel, the spaces in which they live can become inhospitable, not able to be depended upon to remain in one mode for an extended period of time. While one moment their city might be a place of excitement and optimism, in another it will turn to disillusionment, a space where the walls are caving in on them. This sense of a space in flux is translated to the viewer, who sees the center of balance in the film placed off-kilter, and watches through the lens of a camera which alternately turns fiction into documentary, or becomes completely

unmoored from a logical progression of movement. Space in these films is slippery in a way, indefinable, for the viewer and for the characters. Like time, it becomes unexpectedly uncertain, and with space, which is meant to be at least marginally more fixed than time, the lack of steadiness is unnerving.

PART TWO: THE REBELLIOUS ACTION

Freedom

The uncertainty of time and space in these films makes for an environment that is rebellious in and of itself, defying any dictates of how the two concepts ought to be fixed, neutral, not operating as antagonistic forces in the lives of the characters. In doing so, the environment they create provides an impetus for certain forms of rebellion. But it is not only the physical space that is unlivable; it is mirrored by an unlivable social space as well, with the characters at odds with both others close to them and with society at-large. Attempts to achieve freedom follow, efforts for each character to “liberate” themselves in their own way from what oppresses them or makes them unhappy. This not a pursuit of the freedom to act in a certain way or be a specific type of person that is explicitly prohibited by society. Rather, it is a freedom from a constricting environment and the general misfortune caused by it that is desired.

To defy these circumstances that hem them in, the characters engage in acts of varying magnitude and directness. While in some cases, this rebellion is addressed to a particular person or institution in a deliberate way, often it is unfocused and even unknowing, just a general inclination toward this behavior without being aware of what is provoking it. The French films tend toward the former, owing at least partially to their influence by American tales of rebellion like *Rebel Without a Cause* and French films with similar themes, like *...And God Created Woman*. The Chinese characters are already “free” at first glance and perhaps even in their own imagination, with the lack of societal impediment in their lives, but this is revealed to be a false freedom of abandonment and neglect. By running away, disappearing, rejecting routines, disobeying laws and parents,

or even just carving out a distinct identity in their conformist society, the characters transgress against accepted behavior in search of a freedom that ultimately, inevitably, is denied them.

Most commonly the characters' efforts to find freedom manifest themselves in attempts to escape from the forces in their lives that constrain them. With some characters there is a sense of hope, that escape will truly lead to a freer existence, and with others they are aware that escape is only a temporary moment of relief, which will vanish soon.

In *Cléo from 5 to 7*, escape is characterized by the latter, as Cléo believes her cancer test will surely be positive. Her test throws everything in her life into sharp relief; now that her time is limited, or so she thinks, her routine seems frivolous. She cannot stand to listen to her music in a taxi, she realizes how shallow her relationship with her boyfriend is, she hates any new song Bob and Maurice play for her. She is frustrated, feeling constricted by all of these people around her and the infrastructure of her life. So she changes out of her frilly, feathered, white dressing gown, tears off her perfectly set wig, and puts on a plain black dress and black hat to go out. Not that Cléo is immediately recognizable to other people on the street like a truly famous pop star would be, but this is her way of going incognito, of escaping the glamorous persona she typically presents to the world and taking on a more unassuming one. Her unstructured walk through the city, in which Cléo meanders through streets, parks, and cafés, allows her to spend time how she sees fit, pausing when she wants to, taking digressions when something catches her eye. Of course, Cléo cannot actually escape her looming test, or her responsibilities,

or her beauty which she is so conflicted about, but this walk she takes is her one way of expressing her dissatisfaction, her one way to evade the sources of her anxieties.

In *Unknown Pleasures*, a combination of both permanent and temporary escape is invoked, as the characters desire to escape Datong or at least what Datong represents. The main characters never leave Datong, being without the means or career to do so, or are too jaded about their place in the world to try to do so. But all three realize to some extent that their opportunities are limited by staying there, that while Datong is modernizing, it is not flush with jobs the way a bigger city would be. Bin Bin's mother, a soon-to-be-laid-off textile mill worker, realizes this, encouraging Bin Bin to become a "Beijing soldier", with the escape of joining the military inextricably linked to the relocation it implies. In an effort to achieve a more temporary escape, Bin Bin and Xiao Ji decide to rob a bank with little planning of the act itself or the aftermath. It is a desperate though still somewhat apathetic attempt to break out of the holding pattern of their lives, to shake up their monotonous Datong existence through an act they have only seen in movies. To have that momentary thrill of holding up a bank successfully would free them from their boredom and allow them to imagine themselves as the cool heroes of their own gangster film, but of course, they fail.

Pierrot le Fou's Ferdinand also seeks to escape his everyday life, and does so in a more drastic, permanent way. He begins the film reading a book about Velazquez in the bath, about how Velazquez lived in a sad world amongst a court of fools, just as Ferdinand feels himself to be. Ferdinand believes in art above all else, and living in an ornate, upper class apartment, working as a soulless television director, and going to shallow dinner parties is not fulfilling for him. That dinner party is the final straw for

him, as his supposed friends, or at least people in his social circle, recite advertising slogans to each other in lieu of conversation. With that, and seeing his ex-girlfriend, someone unlike the other party guests, Ferdinand is pushed to abandon his life, his family, his job, and go live an exciting life on the run. Ferdinand's escape is of the more optimistic sort, believing that if he removes himself from the corrupt city, he can freely pursue a kind of utopian life at the seaside, creating for himself an ideal world where his only responsibility is writing. Reality has a way of encroaching upon his cultivated, Robinson Crusoe existence, however, as Marianne's presence reminds Ferdinand that it is not possible to just opt out of the system so easily.

Antoine in *The 400 Blows* attempts to run away three times, in each instance hoping to start a new life for himself. His idea of escape is oddly less naïve than Ferdinand's, as Antoine seems more conscious of the difficulty that awaits him in a life on his own and the possibility that his plans will go awry. But he still sees escape as the only solution to his problems at home and at school. The first time, he leaves home because he cannot face his mother after his lie about her death is exposed. He spends a night out on the streets, sleeping for a while in an abandoned factory but mostly wandering through the city, cold and hungry. His new life is cut short when his mother arrives at school the next day to bring him home, but he makes another attempt later, living with his friend René as a transitional situation. His third escape is more ambiguous, as Antoine runs away from the reform school he has been sent to and ends up at the beach. His intent is less clear, and it is uncertain whether he thought this act of running away would be any more successful than the others, or if he was still trying to escape his life for good at all. In fact, his running away here seems to be a realization on his part that

he can only ever achieve temporary escape, a brief freedom from his life, as opposed to a true rejection of all that troubles him.

Mudan's escape in *Suzhou River* is distinct from the others in that it is a permanent breaking away from her current life, but not one founded in optimism. While Ferdinand and Antoine believe that escape promises them something better, Mudan seems to be under no such impression. Her escape is caused by Mada's betrayal, his role in her kidnapping for ransom. She loves Mada, who seems to provide some of the only excitement in her life, taking her out of a schedule dominated by school, an oft-absent father, and visits to her aunt's. Mada, too, is dependable, always there to pick her up, even remembering her birthday and buying her a mermaid doll as a present. The idea that he would betray her, and for such a small sum of money as well, is catastrophic for Mudan. Stability pulled out from under her, feelings seemingly not reciprocated, her world comes crashing down. And to release herself from that situation of which she no longer wants to be a part, she jumps into the river, a daring vanishing act. This is a fatalistic escape, an assertion that anything is preferable to living this way, even injury or death.

The characters' desire to create a new or distinct identity for themselves is linked to the idea of escape, finding freedom through internal change as opposed to external. Their unhappiness with their life has bled into their conception of themselves, whether consciously or unconsciously, and they believe that to mitigate boredom, anxiety, or insecurity, they can alter their character.

For Michel, Xiao Ji, and Ferdinand, they want to cultivate a specific identity for themselves. Michel and Xiao Ji are inspired by specific people and characters, Humphrey

Bogart for Michel, and the gangsters of *Pulp Fiction* for Xiao Ji. Michel is obsessed with the effortlessly cool Bogart and wants to inherit the tough persona that Bogart embodied in his films. He is always tracing his lips in homage to a gesture of Bogart's, and he repeats the gesture as he stands in front of a giant poster of Bogey outside of a movie theatre, staring back at the poster and imagining some kind of kinship between the two of them. Michel is only a low-level criminal, a car thief, but if he can adopt the mannerisms of Bogart, maybe he can transcend that status and become a real, tough gangster.

Xiao Ji's identification with the characters he admires is not as strong, but he still finds the idea of adopting their demeanor and actions attractive. He and Qiao Qiao talk about *Pulp Fiction* in the diner, with him mimicking the opening scene from the film, and the two dance like Vincent Vega and Mia Wallace in the club afterward. His decision to rob a bank afterward is not necessarily directly influenced by the film, but it is clear that he takes some inspiration from the swaggering hitmen of *Pulp Fiction*, and to him, the opening robbery scene is the ultimate in detached, in-control cool. Rather than resigning himself to being a bored, aimless twenty year-old, he can pretend for a while, like Michel, to be a confident, charismatic hitman.

Ferdinand's aspirations are more career-focused. Ferdinand, a failed television director, wants to be a writer, to leave the commercialized field of television for the more purely artistic life of a novelist. It is why he clings so much to the seaside hideout he and Marianne have found, believing this isolated existence to be the most creatively stimulating for him, away as it is from all of shallow, capitalist society. He thinks his talents are wasted in television, and wants to refashion himself into a serious artist, one whose new work will break all boundaries of novel-writing.

Other characters have a more generalized individualism, a need to take control of their identities and set themselves apart. Antoine in *The 400 Blows* refuses to go along with what he is told, or submit to an authority he does not respect. He writes on the wall of the classroom, he plays hooky, he steals a typewriter from his father's workplace, all ways of pushing against societal structures that would seek to mold him into someone he is not. For Cléo, she is not attempting to forge a new identity, but simply wrest hers back into her control, especially given her probability of a cancer diagnosis that will take away even more choice from her. She wants the opportunity to take leave from everyone and everything that would define her identity for her, and so she takes her walk, alone, learning more about herself, exploring her city, and becoming more comfortable in her identity.

While the impetus for escape represents a desire for release, for characters to remove themselves from unfavorable situations, the trend of characters clashing with authority figures shows an impulse toward deeper entanglement. An arguably more destructive instinct, characters' poor relationships with the police, the government, and other entities with control over them is a more directly defiant mode of expressing dissatisfaction.

Antoine has adverse encounters with nearly every authority figure in his life. Starting at the beginning of the film, his teacher singles him out for punishment for passing around a girlie calendar in class, even though all of the boys are participating. Antoine does not accept punishment and move on, but rather continues to be disobedient, drawing on the walls of the classroom while kept inside during recess, earning himself extra homework as another penalty. He is more earnest in his attempts to get along with

his parents, but his efforts often backfire. This is mostly due to the fact that no matter how hard he tries, his parents see him as a burden. They are self-absorbed, and would rather be racing cars than caring for Antoine, and so do not spend much time encouraging Antoine or showing him any affection. So his life with them is a series of confrontations, and though he does not engage or provoke his parents directly, his mere presence seems to aggravate the situation. His final act in Paris is to steal a typewriter to sell it, and is caught when he tries to put it back. Here Antoine comes into conflict not with authorities specific to him like his teacher or his mother, but with the broad authority of the police, in a defiant act with genuine stakes.

Bin Bin and Xiao Ji are similar to Antoine, in their unhappy home lives and their eventual run-in with the law. The two do not necessarily come from hostile home environments like Antoine, but Xiao Ji's relationship with his father seems lacking, and Bin Bin's mother is often critical of her son. With Xiao Ji and his father, there is a mutual lack of interest, and on Xiao Ji's part a lack of respect, openly telling his father he should be ashamed when he tries to exchange a US dollar bill. When Bin Bin's mother finds him skipping a day of work, she tells him he is no good, saying he should join the military and "go far away." In other scenes their relationship is stilted, the two having little to say to each other, other than her reminding Bin Bin to join the military and scolding him for drinking. His mother sees him as an aimless degenerate, whose only hope is to enlist, and she does not hesitate in telling him so. Their home lives, however, are not what provoke them to break the law in the end of the film, but rather boredom and a desire to emulate the gangsters from their pop culture imaginations. When they try and fail to rob the bank, Bin Bin is immediately apprehended by the police. He is taken to the station, but the

officer does not care to inflict any harsh punishment on him. He knows that Bin Bin is not a real criminal, but just a misguided kid. Bin Bin must still make up for his transgression, however, and is made to sing “Unknown Pleasures” by Richie Ren in the station as a way to embarrass him.

While other characters disobey authority in isolated instances, the entire plot of *Breathless* is a long chase between Michel and the police. Michel begins the film by stealing a car, and then shooting and killing the police officer who follows him. When he gets back to Paris, there is a full-fledged manhunt for him, with Inspector Vital and his men tailing his movements. Of course Michel never turns himself in, always believing himself to be one step ahead of the Inspector as he prepares to leave France altogether. And he is right for the most part, evading Vital until the very end, when Patricia proves to be his undoing.

In a less direct rejection of authority to achieve freedom, the characters lead aimless lives, a repudiation both conscious and unconscious of the societal inclination toward a daily routine. While the rest of society performs its daily “métro-boulot-dodo” (and the Chinese equivalent), the characters of these films meander through their existence, accomplishing little of anything during their unstructured days.

Bin Bin and Xiao Ji in *Unknown Pleasures* spend most of their days loafing around the city, whether at the pool hall (along with many other young men in town), the massage parlor, or various performances in public spaces. Xiao Ji does not have a job, and Bin Bin has lost or quit his, which his mother berates him for. They are out of school, and have either not taken or failed the *gaokao* entrance examination, so that university is out of reach for them. Their lack of ambition is contrasted with that of Bin Bin’s

girlfriend Yuan Yuan, who hopes to go to university in Beijing to study international trade, and is accepted. Yuan Yuan is the prototypical new Chinese youth, becoming part of a new class of strivers ready to climb the economic ladder. She shows that it is possible for someone from Datong to join the new system, and that Bin Bin and Xiao Ji might be unwilling as well as unable to do so. They have no prospects and their future looks bleak, destined to remain in unexciting Datong. Their lives have no clear path, and neither does the film. The camera follows Bin Bin and Xiao Ji from place to place, wandering along with them. There is no real beginning and the ending is ambiguous, a story open at both ends.

Xiao Wu is like the kids in *Unknown Pleasures* but his lack of purpose is more unfortunate given that he is probably close to a decade older than them. While all of his friends get married, have kids, and find legitimate jobs, Xiao Wu does not grow up in the same way. He has no plans, only to wander aimlessly through Fenyang and occasionally pickpocket to make his living. He has a little gang with some younger pickpockets, and they discuss how to go about their craft, but it is nothing on an organized level. (It is interesting to compare this film to Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket*, a precursor to the New Wave, in which the main character is slavishly devoted to his craft, spends hours practicing, and always wants to learn new techniques. The carelessness of Xiao Wu stands in stark contrast.) Additionally, the one thing that gives Xiao Wu purpose, his relationship with Meimei, ends almost as soon as it began. Xiao Wu for once seems happy, has someone to spend time with, and even wants to get married. But then the rug is pulled out from under him, and his aimlessness returns.

Pierrot le Fou's Ferdinand begins the film with what seems like a structured life, with a wife, kids, and a job (albeit one he has just been fired from), but in very little time that has all been dismantled. After reuniting with Marianne, she and Ferdinand come up with a half-baked idea to run away together to the south of France, and very little plot of consequence happens subsequently. And that is what Ferdinand prefers, an unscheduled life where he can focus on his writing. The film is one long series of digressions, directing the viewer's attention from what is the ostensible plot or guiding event, Ferdinand and Marianne's trailing by the OAS. Only periodically is the viewer reminded that Marianne aids her "brother" Fred in his gun running, and that there are people out to kill her. There is little urgency or genuine attempts at evading this threat until the very end of the film. Instead there are cheery songs, meaningless conversations, amateur theatre productions, and bits of absurdist comedy.

Cléo's life also begins with quite a bit of structure and purpose. She has a successful career, a boyfriend, and plenty of people in her life who keep her on schedule, like Angèle her manager. So Cléo's life in the second half of the film is an outlier, a knowing disruption of her routine, where aimlessness can take over as a refreshing counterpoint. She walks along the streets instead of taking taxis, and over the course of a couple of hours she goes into a café, pays her friend an impromptu visit, and goes to the park. She may have a loose idea of where she is going, but has no dictated amount of time to spend or need to do anything there. She is a flâneuse, taking pleasure in the city for its own sake, exploring it and seeing where the day takes her.²⁵

²⁵ Flitterman-Lewis, *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema*. 274.

However, no matter how seriously the characters try to find some modicum of freedom within their constrained lives, their efforts always fail. As much as they try to escape, to build new identities, or act out against those that control them, their actions are futile. Though change characterizes their lived environment, they are unable to change themselves and their lives, fate dooming them to disillusionment or worse.

In Cléo's case, she may have been able to free herself from the confines of her life for an hour or so, but at the end her test results come back with a cancer diagnosis. The fortune-teller's premonition has returned, the result Cléo knew was inevitable has been confirmed. All throughout the film were signs that it would be cancer, from the black cats Cléo keeps as pets to the smashed café window and shattered mirror; her diagnosis, symbolically, assured. And given the state of medical care in that time period, her chance of survival is likely not high. But unlike some of the other characters in these films, Cléo takes this news very well. She says she is happy, almost surprised at that emotion coming to her, and it is because of her walk that she feels that way. She is at peace with herself, and at peace with her diagnosis as well.

In *Pierrot le Fou*, the characters' life on the edge catches up with them, though, in fitting with the film, neither meet their end in the way that might be expected. The viewer might suppose that the police, or the OAS, or other political actors, or even the Communist-hating Americans they run into, would be the ones to kill Marianne and Ferdinand. But given the sometimes farcical nature of *Pierrot*, it makes sense that Marianne is killed by Ferdinand, and then Ferdinand by himself, with him having a suicidal impulse, then changing his mind, then setting off the dynamite wrapped around his head anyway. In a film that often subverts expectations or uses deadpan humor, a

conventional ending for Marianne and Ferdinand would be a bit discordant. Just as it seems that the pair may have outrun their fated demise, they die anyway.

The 400 Blows' Antoine has the odds stacked against him from the start, society disposed to assuming the worst intentions on his part. He can never seem to win the favor of his teacher, who almost delights in Antoine's punishment, and his parents see him as a nuisance with little potential for good. Out of this environment, then, Antoine is destined to fail. With no support system, and a persistent feeling that he must be prepared to live on his own, he has little chance of avoiding trouble. He steals a typewriter to finance his life away from home, marking a transition from merely getting into trouble with his parents and teacher to now breaking the law, an irrevocable step toward a habit of transgression. Antoine was set up for failure by his upbringing, and the last scene, in which he tries to run away but is confronted by the ocean, is an indication that he cannot avoid fate.

Bin Bin, Xiao Ji, and Qiao Qiao in *Unknown Pleasures* are different in that it is not their behavior that necessarily affects their fate, but mostly circumstances out of their control. They are likely never going to leave Datong, as much as it may feel like a dead end to them. This is not for lack of trying, however, as Bin Bin tries to physically leave the city by joining the military or Xiao Ji comes up with the idea to rob a bank in an attempt to leave the dull reality of Datong. But both efforts fail, and their stagnant lives will remain stagnant, as they have not been born into the right circumstances to succeed in turn of the twenty-first century China. Far from the coast, they have been forgotten, and will stay that way, uncertain about their direction, opportunities for prosperity always out of reach.

Suzhou River, with its noirish overtones, has a more typical invocation of fate, with its tragic love story between Mada and Mudan. There are too many forces beyond themselves conspiring to drive them apart and into ruin; some directly, like Xiao Hong's kidnapping plot, others indirectly, like the dreary world in which they live, where everything inevitably becomes twisted and broken. There is no possibility for a sweet, uncomplicated love story on this side of the Suzhou River, which pollutes everything around it. Their love was doomed from the start, dragged down by the underworld.

Freedom, yearned for but never attained, or given but in the form of abandonment, is at the root of all rebellious action in these films. Defiance, disobedience, disregard of expectation, all are provoked by the need, not so much to be independent, but to be freed from the constraints of society. This impulse is a reaction to the environment rather than an inherent belief, "freedom from" as opposed to "freedom to." Whether it is unpredictable spatio-temporality or stifling social relations, the world around the characters of these films is a suffocating and directionless one, one characterized by a lack of dependability and thus a source of constant anxiety. And it will remain as such, given the futility of the attempt to gain freedom or to understand their "freed" state, a sign that the fate of the characters is entirely out of their hands.

Neo-capitalism

The larger forces at work, keeping the characters' fates out of their hands, manipulating their environment so it becomes an unknowably toxic one, are the forces of neo-capitalism. (The terms "capitalism" and "capitalist" will also be used for simplicity of language, but it should be understood that period of capitalism being referenced is that of neo- or late capitalism.) It is capitalism, in its commodification of time, that has caused

an accelerated temporality, and capitalism which has rendered temporary both private and public spaces in its reprioritization of the physical world. Capitalism, in particular the modern form of a consumerist, globalized capitalism, is the overlying logic of French and Chinese life starting in the second half of the twentieth century, and the success of that system takes precedence over all else.

The inability for the characters of these films to find or understand their own personal freedom, then, is a reflection of their disadvantageous placement within the capitalist system, whether that placement is a result of their own decision or circumstances out of their control. In other words, their identities place them at the margins of capitalist society. Their interactions with the more tangible aspects of capitalist society, however, are not as wholly negative as their bridling at the capitalist environment. They embrace fully the new global media landscape, and occasionally embrace consumerism. They are fixated on money and the goods that can be bought with it, engaging with only the superficial, commercial features of the complex system that now dominates their lives. The filmmakers themselves are less ambivalent about capitalism, and their disdain for the system that has decisively subsumed their countries is present in their formal rejection of the style associated with it.

Often the characters in these films have marginalized identities, identified as “other” to the mainstream of society. The marginalization of the characters is in some instances self-made, but typically an identity out of their control. They are placed into an undesirable category of society, outcast or diminished. The majority of the characters in these films fall into the lower classes of their respective societies. There is often a sense that, given the rising prosperity in China and France at the time the films are set, these are

people that have been left behind. These characters come primarily from the films of the Sixth Generation, though they are present in the New Wave as well.

Beijing Bicycle, similar to *So Close to Paradise*, features the story of poor migrants to the city. Gui migrates to Beijing to find success he believes is impossible in his rural hometown. As soon as he comes to Beijing, Gui is confronted by a city and a people that do not care about him. His boss thinks of his employees as “carrier pigeons” ferrying messages across the city. The female receptionists at his work and at the shower house, likely migrant *xiaojie* themselves, are unhelpful and not compassionate. His bike is stolen and then sold in what appears to be a black market operation. Even with Gui’s work ethic and later his dedication to retrieving his bike, he can never win, his efforts stunted at every turn. However, Gui is not the only victim of a city and a system stacked against him. The apparent thief of Gui’s bike, Jian, turns out to be a lower-class urban youth who bought the bike not knowing it was stolen. Jian may not need the bike to make a living, but it still means a lot to him, allowing him freedom of movement, an ability to join his group of friends as they ride and do tricks, and even a new girlfriend. Jian cannot afford a bike, even a secondhand one, so he steals money that his father had originally promised to him, but was now intending on using to pay for his little sister’s tuition. As the viewer learns more about Jian’s situation, it becomes easier to sympathize with him, realizing that lower-class urban youth and migrant youth share similarly difficult existences.

Datong in *Unknown Pleasures* matches its “left behind” characters to a city that feels the same way, in a narrative departure from the abandonment of characters like Gui or Mada of *Suzhou River* in otherwise booming metropolises. In Datong there are vast

expanses of empty land and rubble on the outskirts and a deterioration of the main industry, a textile mill that is an antiquated remnant of the Mao era. Despite the rapid, modernizing changes to the landscape and culture of the city, there is no sense of great career opportunity or possibility for improvement in quality of life as there exists in other cities (even if that opportunity is rarely realized in other cities). The characters of *Unknown Pleasures*, then, are relegated to either maintaining their unfulfilling, working class lives or seeing them decline further. Bin Bin's mother is laid off from the mill toward the end of the film, paid only 40,000 RMB, and the two of them live in government-provided housing at the mill. Xiao Ji and his father live in a tiny apartment, sharing a bunk bed, likely less well off than Bin Bin and his mother. One of the few interactions the viewer sees between them involves a US dollar bill Xiao Ji's father finds, which he greets with befuddlement and then, at the urging of his overexcited employee, attempts to convert it at the bank for the eight or so RMB it would be worth.²⁶ Xiao Ji is embarrassed by his father's unfamiliarity with the dollar and thinks his desperate effort to exchange the bill, worth very little, is pathetic.

Xiao Wu also lives in an even smaller northern city than Datong, his hometown a village nearby. He comes from a rural family, and though he moves to a place with supposedly more opportunities, he is not much better off, especially when compared to his older brother, who left home but now works in business. Xiao Wu still works as a pickpocket, sticking with his youthful way of making money after failed attempts at finding a steady job, even as those around him find different lines of work. Some of them, like Xiao Yong, the former friend with whom Xiao Wu is most often contrasted,

²⁶ "China Statistical Yearbook."

work in the black market, and Xiao Wu is encouraged to do something similar. These types of jobs are legitimized in late 1990s China, not directly but by the government's willingness to turn a blind eye. Generating wealth is the most important goal, with the means used to do so less scrutinized. Xiao Wu, steadfast in his belief that his "craft" is more noble than the business Xiao Yong runs, then finds his morals to be both too low (in that the government is targeting him) and too high, unable to find success in the sweet spot of corruption in the late 1990s Chinese economy.

Characters in the French films are more likely to be from the upper or middle class, from the louche bourgeois social scene Ferdinand finds himself in, to the characters of *Jules and Jim*, who are comfortable enough financially to not have steady jobs. Cléo is somewhat different, as her seemingly tenuous grasp on pop star fame could lead her to lose that career and its income, and her friends are part of the working class, with jobs as an art students' model and a film projectionist. *Breathless* emphasizes more Michel's lack of wealth, his job as a small-time car thief obviously not paying large dividends. When he gets back to Paris, he attempts to bum money off his girlfriends, one of whom does not seem any more well-off than he is, in her tiny apartment and ripped nightgown. He also spends the film waiting for a loan to fund his escape to Rome, which is ultimately his downfall. He is contrasted with Patricia, an American who is in Paris supposedly studying abroad. She tells him at one point that she needs to enroll soon in the Sorbonne or her parents will stop sending her money. She is not supporting herself, and her paper route and fling with Michel are nothing more than a fun distraction. It is unlikely she would have followed Michel to Rome, and turning him in to the police is not a terribly

fraught decision for her. With her fairly comfortable existence, she does not have as much to lose as Michel.

Antoine's family in *The 400 Blows* is a more potent example of the way the prosperity of *les trentes glorieuses* (the "thirty glorious years") in France did not reach every citizen. His is a working class family, three people living in a tiny apartment where there is not enough room for Antoine to have a bed. At one point, a classmate of Antoine's comes to the door and his parents hesitate to open it for fear it is the gas man there to collect a payment. They are not part of the growing French middle class of the 1950s; their apartment has no shiny new household appliances and there is no modernist furniture in sight. They are also not like the old bourgeois of René's family, with whom Antoine goes to stay in their huge, luxurious house. Rather they have been abandoned for the most part by the wave of postwar wealth sweeping France.

In addition to the positioning of many of the characters on the lower rungs of the social ladder, they are set apart from the mainstream of society in two other ways, the first being an engagement in criminal activity, the second being their age. For the first category, often the crimes committed are linked at a subliminal level to capitalism, usually being the theft of goods and money, or in the case of *Pierrot le Fou*, supporting political actors opposed to capitalism. The characters are almost without exception small time crooks, and in some cases their criminal activity is not their sole or defining occupation.

The one exception is Marianne of *Pierrot le Fou*, whose gun-running with Fred for communist insurgents is her only occupation, even if it is often forgotten about as a plot point. (It is also unclear how much Marianne supports these causes herself, and how

much is just helping her boyfriend.) It is arguably a more serious and dangerous form of illegal activity than that of other characters, with the heavy weaponry and warring political factions involved. Throughout the film they are chased by the OAS, a group that opposes those that Marianne aids. Not only does her criminal activity literally drive her and Ferdinand away from society and into isolation as they attempt to escape the OAS, but her support of communist groups also sets her apart from the majority of the French population, which sees Communism as a threat.

The primary occupation of Michel from *Breathless* is car thief, but he is not a very prominent one, or even one who has been at it that long, given his history as a flight attendant. He mostly steals cars, a major consumerist status symbol, and does odd jobs that take him various places in France, like the one in Marseille he is returning from at the start of the film. He is not a well-integrated member of society, given his constant movement from place to place, hotel room to hotel room, and his general lack of contribution to the public good. It seems that he mostly skates through life, ignored by the busy, industrious people of Paris, his home base. It is only when he takes a step toward becoming a more serious criminal in killing the cop on the side of the highway that he begins to attract attention, meriting a manhunt by the police department and mentions in the newspapers. Michel is still on the margins of French society, perhaps even more so now that he has committed a serious offense, but instead of drifting along in the margins, a spotlight has been trained on him, turning him from minor nuisance to public enemy.

Xiao Wu is similar, though his offenses are not nearly as grave. His thefts are a way not just to eke out a living, but a fairly conscious desire to accrue status within his

society, one of the few acts a marginalized person can use to do so. But Xiao Wu is a virtuous pickpocket, if such a thing exists, even returning the ID cards of those whose wallets he steals. He and his friends were likely public annoyances more than anything else as youthful pickpockets, misbehaving in an expected way. But Xiao Wu's continuation of his craft even as his gang aged out of it, coupled with changing attitudes in Chinese society about crime and a desire to regulate an economy plagued by corruption, contributes to his targeting by law enforcement. Somewhat different from Michel, Xiao Wu was less marginalized before the crackdown on crime, a part of the Fenyang community even if an unvalued part. But now public opinion, as seen in interviews on television, has turned against him and his ilk, shunting him more seriously to the margins, more an "other" than before, as visualized in the final scene where he is chained to a post as a crowd totally separate from him stares back.

So Close to Paradise and *Suzhou River* are more thoroughly enveloped in the underworlds of their respective cities, often spatially separating the characters from the rest of morally upstanding society. Gao Ping is like Michel in that he sits on a low rung of the ladder of criminal organization in Wuhan, and is only in serious danger once he attracts the ire of a major crime boss. Ruan Hong, goaded into prostitution, is seen as so separate from the rest of society that a group comes to rescue her from her profession at the end of the film, the bar she works at having been raided by the police. They seem to inhabit a Wuhan that is only populated with characters like them, and they are often depicted in alleyways, bars, and by the riverfront where crimes seem to take place. Mada inhabits similar locations, and his physical separation from the more well-off masses of Shanghai is made explicit by the dividing line of the river. Mada often works for or is

friends with people who engage in illegal activities. Though his only real criminal act is kidnapping Mudan, which seems out of character for him, his association with this subset of Shanghai society still marginalizes him.

The young characters in *Unknown Pleasures* and *The 400 Blows* do not begin their films as criminals, but their circumstances lead them to engage in criminal acts. Both the *Unknown Pleasures* pair and Antoine steal, the former attempting to rob a bank and the latter taking a typewriter from his father's workplace. Bin Bin and Xiao Ji are already marginalized due to their economic status, and it is this status, along with their cultural influences, which makes them decide to rob one of their local China Construction Banks, indicating a desire to alter their social status through theft in a similar way to Xiao Wu. Robbing a bank would marginalize them further, make them more of social outcasts, as Xiao Ji likely suspects, fleeing the scene on his bike. But it appears that the police officer will show mercy for Bin Bin, aware of his lack of malice and criminal record, and would rather embarrass him to teach him a lesson.

Antoine, also lacking in funds, decides to steal a typewriter (with the help of René) to finance his new life away from his parents. His action, unlike Bin Bin and Xiao Ji's, has serious consequences, resulting in an intimidating night in a holding cell at the police station, and ultimately being moved to a reform school. Here he is grouped along with other "problem children" like himself, set apart spatially from the rest of society in an even more direct way than Mada of *Suzhou River*. Now that Antoine has had a run-in with the law, there is no turning back. He has a criminal record, even if it is a minor one, and has been designated by society as different from other children.

The other marginalized identity layered atop belonging to a lower economic class and/or being involved in crime, is youth. Most of the characters err on the side of young, with the exception of the married Ferdinand and Xiao Wu, who is not necessarily old but whose arrival at the age of settling down is a major point of the film. Michel and Patricia are both young, but the prematurely curmudgeonly, contrarian Michel does not embrace that characterization, responding to a girl asking if he has anything against the youth with, "Sure I do. I prefer old people." However, for several of these characters, their youth is integral to their personality and their treatment by society, representing a group often misunderstood or at the forefront of society, or both.

Antoine in *The 400 Blows* is emblematic of a society that does not care much about children, at least in the way that has come to be expected in contemporary, especially contemporary American culture. Antoine is not coddled in any way, treated essentially as a small adult and given little leeway for typical childish behavior. The French classroom as depicted in the film is an example of this. A stifling environment without creativity, schoolwork consists mostly of reciting old poetry with little relevance to these adolescent boys' lives and even play outside the school campus is structured into a single-file jog around Paris. There is no outlet for the energy or imagination of children in this rigid societal structure they have been placed in, and it is that structure that Antoine rebels against.

The characters of *Jules and Jim* are not adolescents, but certainly young, likely in their mid-to-late twenties when the film starts. They are part of a small but influential subset of the French population during the Belle Époque, contributing to the bohemian decadence that has come to characterize the period. Jules and Jim and Catherine are

representative of, as Charles Rearick describes them in his history of Paris, the “young people, who once managed to fill days and nights with socializing and artistic pursuits, scraping by without an onerous job...”²⁷ Their youthful vitality helped to define the Belle Époque, remembered as a time when Paris was a playground of cafés, cabarets, and endless entertainment. Though the characters of *Jules and Jim* are archetypal Belle Époque figures, they are nonetheless not representative of French society as a whole at the time. The myth of the period ignores realities like dismal working conditions or dilapidated living spaces for the poor, and even among those who thrived during the time, most would be the bourgeois middle class of France, not the (relatively) affluent bohemians that the characters of the film typify.

Beijing Bicycle takes the idea of being set apart from society and adjusts it to the micro level, depicting the overwhelming pressure youth feel to fit in with their contemporaries and the lack of compassion from their parents regarding this anxiety. Jian is willing to go to incredible lengths to keep the stolen bicycle he has bought, because otherwise he will be an outcast. He will not be able to ride away after school with his friends to the arcade, or do tricks with them in parking garages, or go on dates with his new girlfriend. These activities may seem inconsequential to the adults in Jian’s life but are impossibly important to him, and his desire to remain in the in-group of his friends will eventually turn violent, especially in the end of the film as Jian attacks Da Huan, whose bicycle freestyling has attracted the attention of Jian’s girlfriend.

The culture Jian lives in is not necessarily a youth-centric culture, even as the film itself provides a glimpse into the specific activities that form youth culture in China at the time (like going to the arcade to play the incredibly popular Dance Dance Revolution

²⁷ Rearick, *Paris Dreams, Paris Memories: The City and Its Mystique*. 59.

after school). The French society that Cléo lives in, however, is beginning to become youth-obsessed, even as youths are still set apart from the rest of society as a strange group that is difficult to understand.²⁸ The post-World War II French youths are, “more imagined than understood, more represented than self-actualized,” and reflections on youth produced by adult society evinced “concerns with the activity, attitude, morality and character of the young...”²⁹ Cléo is representative of this shift in culture as a minor yé-yé pop singer, part of the explosion of French girl singers in the early 1960s like Françoise Hardy and France Gall, whose music became a signifier for the generation.³⁰ Cléo is often treated like a child by those around her, like her songwriter Bob or manager Angèle. Angèle alternately scolds and indulges Cléo, regarding her changing emotions with the dismissiveness that one would direct toward a teenager. When she sees Cléo’s anxiety in the café and chalks it up to Cléo being over-tired, it is as though Cléo is a toddler. As a symbol of this sweeping youth movement taking over France, Cléo’s infantilization indicates a larger trend of society refusing to acknowledge the independence of the growing generation of youths and respect their thoughts and emotions.

Unknown Pleasures shows pop culture-obsessed youth four decades after the youth explosion of the early 1960s. In general in their consumption of pop culture, Bin Bin and Xiao Ji draw away from society rather than engage in it further. Instead of the collective movie-going culture that had characterized Mao era China³¹, or the public

²⁸ In Jobs, *Riding the New Wave: Youth and the Rejuvenation of France after the Second World War*, 1, Françoise Giroud is quoted as writing that the youth will, “build or destroy the future, give rise to or refuse dignified or disgraceful leaders, they will transform or perpetuate society...”

²⁹ Ibid, 10.

³⁰ Ibid, 274.

³¹ Wang, “Hollywood’s Pre-WTO Crusade in China.”

performances still common in Datong, Bin Bin and Xiao Ji recede into their rooms to watch music videos, television shows like the animated Monkey King series, or bootlegged DVDs on small televisions. This is how they connect with other young people, whether it is Bin Bin watching TV as a date with his girlfriend or Xiao Ji and Qiao Qiao talking about *Pulp Fiction* as they get to know each other. Unlike the other generations in Datong, they do not care as much about the news, constantly on televisions in the background but rarely paid attention to. Even a great unifying event like the announcement of Beijing's selection as the location of the 2008 Olympics does not merit any enthusiasm from Bin Bin and Xiao Ji. While a crowd sits around a television outside, rapt, the two greet the news with a shrug.

The positioning of these characters within the margins of neo-capitalist society does not, however, preclude them from enjoying, unwittingly or not, some of the aspects of contemporary capitalism. The two that stand out the most are consumerism and love of media and pop culture, specifically in the forms that they have taken in the second half of the twentieth century. Their embrace of these two features of capitalism is perhaps the only facets of the characters' lives that can be seen as anti-rebellious. But they fit into a larger narrative of the characters' inability to process capitalism, their confusion at this new or newly entrenched system, and a lack of awareness of how their behavior either rejects or enforces its tenets.

Consumerism appears in this group of films in two ways. The first is a strict interpretation of the concept as the unnecessary or voracious consumption of goods, with an emphasis on the life-improving qualities of that good. The second is consumerism in a looser sense, in which there is an obsession with money itself, and a sense that money

represents a gateway to something better, with only a vague idea of what that something might be.

Unknown Pleasures is representative of the latter. Money is omnipresent, figuring both concretely and abstractly in the characters' lives. The previously mentioned scenes with Xiao Ji, his father, and a US one-dollar bill show a fascination with and repulsion toward money, with an added layer of significance with this particular bill's belonging to a Western, capitalist country. When Xiao Ji's father finds the money, he has no idea what it is, until his employee excitedly tells him that it is a US dollar, which makes him rich now. Xiao Ji snatches the dollar away, calling it a "damned American yuan." It is a cross-section of the differing attitudes toward money and the US, from disgust to delight to obliviousness. In a later scene, Xiao Ji's father tries to convert the dollar at the bank. Xiao Ji sees this and calls his father shameless, as though he is selling his dignity for a few RMB. His father does not see anything wrong with exchanging the bill, the cash he would receive overtaking any symbolic connotations in his mind about the provenance of the note.

Money makes other appearances scattered across the film as well, from Qiao Qiao waving around a handful of bills at the hospital, to Bin Bin's girlfriend Yuan Yuan wanting to study international trade (and Bin Bin's glib understanding of the subject) to the final scenes of Bin Bin and Xiao Ji's attempted bank robbery, a mix of desire for money, Western pop culture influence, and a hope to be more than ordinary kids from Datong. In the instances of Xiao Ji's dad, Yuan Yuan, and Bin Bin and Xiao Ji themselves at the end, there is a transportative quality associated with money. Money will take them somewhere else, whether literally, with Yuan Yuan's move to Beijing, or

figuratively, with Bin Bin and Xiao Ji escaping the doldrums of Datong or Xiao Ji's dad improving his life with the aid of a faraway place's currency.

In *Suzhou River*, money is not mentioned as often, but it forms the turning point of the narrator's story. Mada reluctantly agrees to Xiao Hong and Lao B's plan to kidnap Mudan in order to extort her father. When he completes his part of the mission, Mudan realizes what is happening, and she withdraws from Mada, hurt. After the ransom has been received, Mada goes to deliver Mudan home, and she asks how much money they asked for, the first thing she has said to Mada after being quiet for a while. "45,000," he replies, at which point Mudan's woundedness turns to fury. "I am that cheap?" she yells, before running away from Mada. He chases her until she reaches a bridge, which she jumps off of, telling him, "You lied. You don't like me at all." Mudan cannot believe that she is reducible to a price point for Mada, that the man she is in love with would treat her like an object in a transaction. She is doubly angry when he reveals her price, that not only has he put a value on her, but that that value could be so meager. The second source of her anger is the more interesting, with the idea that if the price had been higher, maybe she would have been less outraged, that maybe an extravagant price would show that he loved her. Money becomes a mode of expressing affection, where the more one spends, the more love one shows.

The notion of women as part of a transaction, a good to be used in trade, reappears in *So Close to Paradise*. Ruan Hong has come to Wuhan to be a singer but instead, she becomes a prostitute through the bar where she works. She also becomes Gao Ping's girlfriend after he tries to use her for information about the man who stole money from him and then pays her after sleeping with her one night. It is then revealed that she

is the kept woman of one of the top crime bosses in Wuhan, who Gao Ping has angered by sleeping with “his” woman. All of this adds up to the impression that Ruan Hong is a good to be paid for and consumed, to be passed around with no real consideration for her desires. In the uncontrolled, newly “capitalist” Wuhan, the accumulation and exchange of goods and services for money has filtered down to affect even the valuation of people, with Ruan Hong as one example of the emerging problem of prostitution in Wuhan and cities like it.

The other films focus more explicitly on the consumption of goods. Most of the characters are consumerist or at least indifferent to the concept. The one exception is *Pierrot*'s Ferdinand, who hates what he sees as the emptiness of consumerism. He goes from reading aloud from a book on the celebrated artist Velazquez to flipping through a magazine and landing on an advertisement for Scandale girdles. He mutters to himself, “First there was Greek civilization. Then there was the Renaissance. Now we’re entering the Age of Ass.” He then is forced to go to a dinner party by his wife and is suffocated by the vapidness of the other partygoers, who do not converse but just recite advertising slogans back to each other.

Despite his articulated dislike for consumerism, though, Ferdinand still takes part in it, mostly through his acquisition and disposal of a series of American cars. This he shares with Michel of *Breathless*, which is not a coincidence given the director of the two films, Godard, whose fondness for American cars is well-documented. Michel, even more so than Ferdinand, is constantly picking up new American cars, praising them while criticizing the other French cars around him. His habit is certainly related to the fact that the cars are “hot” and he could be caught by the police for having stolen them, but still,

Michel cycles through cars very quickly. It is as though they are disposable, that he must always have the newest, fastest, most attractive car he can find. The cars to him are not a utilitarian possession meant for transportation but an extension of personality, his choices speaking to his refined taste and his muscular, reckless persona.

In *Cléo*, consumerism is expressed in the prettiness of her life, the way the things she buys, wears, and uses to decorate her apartment define her. The most prominent example of this indulgence in consumerism is Cléo and Angèle's visit to the hat shop early on in the film, when Cléo, in a depressed mood, thinks a new hat will cheer her up. Cléo is the sole focus here, as Angèle and the saleswoman watch her try on hat after hat. The scene is photographed lovingly, the camera spinning around to frame Cléo in close-up with every hat, reveling in her deciding which to buy. She chooses the hat that makes her feel her best, even as Angèle points out that it is impractical for summer. Later on, in another instance of Cléo's possessions both dictating and expressing her emotions, she changes her appearance to leave her apartment and relax after her stressful afternoon. She tears off her perfectly curled wig, changes into a plain black dress, and puts on the fur hat she has just bought. Cléo both purchases things to enhance her mood, as well as uses the objects she has already bought to the same effect. Like Michel's cars, these objects express her personality, and they mean much to her symbolically.

There is a sense in *Beijing Bicycle* that certain goods are the gateway to happiness, in particular the bicycle. Gui takes pride in his bike, and it makes him happy, as the viewer can see in his freeing rides in Beijing early on in the film, where he glides along the streets. It comes to represent, to him, his thriving in the city, as success in his job (via his bike) will translate to a happy existence in Beijing for him. Jian's happiness

is tied even more to the bike itself, his happiness seeming to come directly from it as opposed to being a function of his occupation. Jian and his group of friends place an incredible amount of value on this one object. The bikes define their group and the activities they take part in, as they ride around the city together like a gang. And when Jian's bike is stolen from him by the original owner Gui, his friends are dead set on retrieving it for him, acting like attack dogs in their beatings of Gui. The sheer desperation of Jian to hold on to his bike is a testament to how much he believes this product is a panacea for all of his anxieties, that only this external thing can make him happy.

Xiao Wu, on the other hand, is more a witness to consumerism than a full participant in it. Consumerism seems to be a recent phenomenon in Fenyang, and it has not fully taken root. People sing along to new karaoke machines, and stereo systems blast pop music throughout the town. Xiao Wu's older brother brings imported American cigarettes back home, a total novelty for everyone else in the room. Xiao Wu shows some interest in the stereo, but he is not someone for whom spending money and accumulating things is a uniquely enjoyable experience. He does, however, buy things to facilitate his relationship with Meimei, a sign that in order to settle down and conform to the new Chinese society, he must become a consumer. He buys a pager to keep in contact with her, a new form of technology that places him on the cutting edge. And when his relationship with Meimei becomes more serious, he buys a ring to propose to her, returning to the idea that appeared in *Suzhou River* of using money to express affection. But Meimei leaves Xiao Wu, his ring now useless, and his pager ringing exposes him as a

pickpocket to the police. Consumerism does not end well for Xiao Wu, this specific facet of the new society as unsuited to him as all the others.

Along with the consumption of goods is the consumption of media, as the characters face the inescapable presence of popular culture in their everyday lives. The characters are inundated with media, whether it is film, television, news, radio, music, or advertisements. There is an accurate portrayal of the saturation of post-World War II, capitalist-dominated life by images and sounds from popular culture, whether culturally specific or globally known. The status of the media landscape as depicted in these films represents two characteristics unique to this time period, which only become more severe as the decades go on. The first is the sheer quantity of media, an extension of the symptoms of modern life as elucidated in works like Georg Simmel's 1903 essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in which he writes that one characteristic of the modern city is, "the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions."³² In the post-World War II environment, the cacophony of images is more relentless than ever before, but "images" becomes more literal as well, as the urban dweller takes in not only crowds and buildings, but omnipresent advertisements, televisions in store windows, and the like. The second is the global nature of media, in which a citizen of one state will experience pop culture from a multitude of foreign regions, though most predominantly from the United States, Western Europe, and East Asia. Media becomes a key component of the global capitalist society, as, "While globalization may be discursively situated in terms of

³² Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life." 410.

broad economic, political, and cultural trends, media consumption is perhaps the most immediate, consistent and pervasive way in which ‘globality’ is experienced.”³³

The most prevalent form of media depicted is film. *The 400 Blows* has the most positive portrayal of film, as an escape for Antoine from his otherwise miserable life. The one enjoyable time Antoine has with his parents comes when his stepfather takes the family out to the movies. Walking out of the theatre, with its bright and glitzy marquee, all three look genuinely happy, and spend the car ride home laughing about the picture they just watched. On his day of playing hooky with René, their first stop is a few movie theatres, Henri Decaë’s camera lingering on the vivid posters and “CINÉ” sign. The films Antoine watches are primarily French, produced in a French classical style similar to the Hollywood style, an indication of the global mode of filmmaking at the time. They are comedies and adventures, satisfying, unchallenging, an easily consumable narrative. Movies are tools of escape, but as opposed to Antoine’s real escapes, these are instances of society-approved escape, not society-questioning escape. The frequency with which he sees movies also ensures that they become a backdrop to his life, a constant visual presence that supersedes traditional entertainment like books or music.

The films consumed by the youths of *Unknown Pleasures* are of the independent or counter-cultural variety, the specific film most referenced being *Pulp Fiction*. Tarantino’s gangster homage is admired by Xiao Ji, who likes to emulate the tough nonchalance of its characters. The object of his affection, Qiao Qiao, even wears a wig that looks just like Uma Thurman’s hair in the film. This Western film, which riffs off of other Western movies Xiao Ji has not seen, is a floating signifier and a cultural product

³³ Murphy and Kraidy, “Towards an Ethnographic Approach to Media Studies.” 7.

that would not have been present in China a decade earlier. Western films only began to trickle into the Chinese market in the mid-1990s with the release of *The Fugitive*. Of course, Xiao Ji likes an independent, iconoclastic American film, but it is still an American film through and through, with references to diner culture, old dance crazes, and Big Macs. Xiao Ji has also likely seen the film on a bootleg DVD, another way Western films have been able to infiltrate the market. Bin Bin takes part in this new moviegoing culture by selling bootleg DVDs on the street, and though he is conspicuously lacking in acclaimed arthouse films from China, he does have *Pulp Fiction*.

And just as Xiao Ji hopes to emulate John Travolta or Samuel L. Jackson, Michel in *Breathless* is obsessed with Humphrey Bogart. Michel's infatuation with the *Maltese Falcon* star and Hollywood legend is indicative of the universality of images. Michel tries to mimic Bogart in dress, gesture, and disposition, seen especially in the moment he takes to stop in front of a giant film poster with Bogart on it. Of course, Bogey's cool is inimitable, and Michel is just left staring back at the stoic face of his role model, unable to capture his spirit. Bogart is immediately recognizable, the character he represents immediately apparent. The tough, wisecracking cynic persona of Bogart is not lost in translation. It is both due to the power of images, which cannot be altered like the words in a novel or the lyrics in a song when transported overseas, and to the mythmaking of global cultural industries like Hollywood. The image of Bogart is fixed to celluloid and exported to millions of people, all taking in the same exact picture.

The newsreels seen in *Jules and Jim* combine film with another pervasive form of media, the news. News is often present in these films, whether consumed or totally

ignored by the characters. News forms a din in the background, situating the action in a specific time and place, and sometimes alluding to current events that the characters care about. In *Cléo*, the news bulletin on the radio mentions the Algerian War, an uncomfortable topic in France at the time that nevertheless makes two additional appearances in the film, in the conversation between two men at the café and in the presence of the soldier Antoine, about to leave for Algeria. In *Pierrot* it is another war, the Vietnam War, that is reported on radio news. Marianne comments about how awful the war is and the impersonal nature of the report on it, and later the subject will be returned to when she and Ferdinand perform an impromptu play of the war for an audience of Americans. The radio in *So Close* is utilized to foreground the struggles of Dongzi and Ruan Hong as part of a problem afflicting not just Wuhan, but most of the big cities of China, as migrants flood in but are not always properly integrated into the city. The film frames these scenes in such a way as to show Dongzi hearing the news and ruminating on his and Ruan Hong's place in their new city. Instead of radio, *Xiao Wu* makes use of the public announcement system of loudspeakers scattered throughout the city. Every time a bulletin is read over the loudspeaker, it is another warning to Xiao Wu to get out of the pickpocketing business. Newspapers serve a similar function in *Breathless*, as short notices in the paper remind the viewer of the manhunt for Michel. The characters that care the least about the news are Bin Bin and Xiao Ji, who are aware of what is happening around them, but do not see how world events could possibly affect them. The television is always on at their homes, but for the most part ignored.

Bin Bin and Xiao Ji would rather use the television to watch the Monkey King animated series or Richie Ren music videos. In the Monkey King, Xiao Ji finds another

role model, whereas Bin Bin likes to watch TV as a date with Yuan Yuan. Mada and Mudan do the same, sitting in his darkened apartment in front of the bluish screen. The unique glow of TV screens appears in *So Close* as well, as the man who robbed Gao Ping stands in front of an electronics store, he and the crowd awash in the cold light. TV is also present in *Xiao Wu*, often as a bringer of bad news like the loudspeaker system. Television reporters are seen interviewing other citizens of Fenyang about the crackdown on crime, and there is a special feature on Xiao Wu's former friend Xiao Yong. Xiao Wu sees the latter piece in a restaurant after spending the whole day stewing about Xiao Yong and his wedding, and he hears his neighbors in Fenyang talk about how glad they are the infamous Xiao Wu has been caught on the TV in the police station. TV is not entertainment for Xiao Wu as much as a confrontation from things he would rather avoid.

Xiao Wu does frequent the KTV karaoke bars, however, a hugely popular new form of entertainment. He mostly goes there for the company of the *xiaojie* like Meimei, though in general KTV is for singing along to music videos. Though not an image-based form of popular culture, pop music is still an inextricable element of the media that forms the backdrop of the characters' lives. Pop music appears in *Cléo*, as the title character is a yé-yé pop star, though perhaps with less hit songs than she would like. She hears her music on the radio in a taxi and begs the driver to turn it off, embarrassed by the sound of her own voice or at least wanting to act as though she is. Ruan Hong sings at the bar where she works, but her dreams of becoming a singer full time are still unfulfilled, with no one willing to record her songs. These three films, along with the music videos on television in *Unknown Pleasures*, show the ubiquity of pop music, the way it permeates modern life not only in entertainment venues but bars, cafés, cars, and even the home.

But while the characters embrace elements of capitalism without intending to endorse the system itself, the Sixth Generation and New Wave directors reject capitalism, or at least how it manifests in their respective societies, through their films. One of the most apparent ways this is expressed is through the unifying stylistic choice of filming in a documentary mode. There is variance in the films' adherence to the style, with some using a stricter adoption of the techniques and others willing to engage in formalism and expressionism. But overall, the utilization of cinematographic and narrative techniques associated with documentaries is a refutation of the slick style of commercial cinema.

In France, the lauded commercial cinema was exemplified by the "Tradition of Quality," a term invented by the Centre national de la cinématographie after the war as a guideline for rebuilding French cinema. Looking to restore French film's prestige, and compete with the cinemas of England and America, cultural leaders in France wanted to establish a French variation on the classical style, with French ideas, history, and literature emphasized throughout.³⁴ What resulted was a house style characterized by, in the words of Truffaut, "scholarly framing, complicated lighting-effects, [and] 'polished' photography," which he sees as "sacrifices for fashion" to the detriment of story.³⁵ The "Tradition of Quality" truly became a derogatory term after Truffaut's scathing essay, but the deficiencies of the style were recognized earlier, as in Michel Dorsday's "Le cinéma est mort" from a 1952 issue of *Cahiers du cinéma*, a review of the film *Adorables créatures*. Dorsday called the film, a standard light comedy, "Dead under the weight of its impeccable, perfect quality."³⁶

³⁴ Neupert, *A History of the French New Wave Cinema*. xxii.

³⁵ Truffaut, "A Certain Tendency in French Cinema." 49.

³⁶ Neupert, *A History of the French New Wave Cinema*. 30.

To rebel against the dominant style of filmmaking, then, would require both narrative and formal innovations, as the two were inextricable in the “Tradition of Quality.” The polar opposite of the refined classical style, then, would seem to be documentary. Documentary techniques were not only ideologically in line with the films New Wave auteurs wanted to produce, but also were feasible within the budgetary constraints imposed upon them. Fleet equipment, unknown or non-professional actors, and location shooting kept costs down and enhanced the documentary feel of the films. These were relatively untrained actors, acting in settings that resembled or were their own homes, followed by a light, unrestricted camera that could capture all of their movements. As the actress Françoise Brion says, “I was part of a new generation that refused to wear the two inches of pancake base paint and hair pieces that were still standard equipment for actors. Suddenly, you saw actors who looked natural, like they had just gotten out of bed.”³⁷ Suddenly film no longer looked as artificial, with contrived or old-fashioned plots and actors with perfect diction and classically good looks (for French film, anyway). Film now followed young people through their everyday lives, unvarnished and natural.

Chinese independent film of the 1990s, in which the films of the Sixth Generation is included, would be rebelling against their own “Tradition of Quality,” the Fifth Generation of Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou. Originally a movement of formal experimentation supported by government funds, by the end of the 1980s and early 1990s, the Fifth Generation was firmly a part of the commercial film industry of China. The emergence of Zhang Yimou as the most popular and lauded director from the group came with a tonal shift in the films of the group as a whole. This begins even with Zhang’s directorial debut, with “*Red Sorghum*’s foregrounding of story over style

³⁷ Ibid, xv.

[pioneering] the Fifth Generation's transition from earnest modernism to more classical filmmaking."³⁸ The vibrant colors and staid camerawork of *Red Sorghum* and other Zhang films like *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* are essential to building these worlds of myth, fable, and melodrama. Reverting to the classical style makes them more powerful, more substantial and extravagant. And as other directors of the Fifth Generation began to tell similar stories, they co-opted that style, represented perhaps most notably in Chen Kaige's adoption of it for his incredibly successful *Farewell My Concubine*. This was motivated at least in part by the restructuring of the Chinese film industry, in which government funding dried up and directors needed to look for private investors. The Zhang Yimou style seemed to have considerable earning power, and so it became one to emulate.

By the early 1990s, then, the Fifth Generation had lost its edge, the experimentalist, convention-bending character that had brought it acclaim as the "New Wave" of Chinese cinema. Their stately historical dramas with lavish production values had become the mainstream of Chinese film, and in reacting to that indulgent style, the Sixth Generation crafted a new, stripped down movement of cinema. Like the French New Wave filmmakers, this generation of directors utilized location settings, low-tech equipment, and untrained actors, primarily as a way to make films cheaply while financing was hard to come by. Camera movement and framing also departed from the smooth, controlled cinematography of the Fifth Generation, as realist techniques of the long take and stationary camera were employed. These technical aspects, combined with the meandering, plotless narratives that they visualized, resulted in a group of films that looked like documentaries rather than epics or myths. Instead of the glossy style that was

³⁸ Zhu and Robinson, "The Cinematic Transition of the Fifth Generation Auteurs." 147.

winning the box-office every week, the Sixth Generation presented a rough, amateur aesthetic that sought to present the unglamorous realities of China at the turn of the twenty-first century.

The tension between the filmmakers' opinion of the manifestations of capitalism in their societies and the characters' indulgence in that same system is no accident. They are able to show the insidiousness of consumerist capitalism in their depiction of characters whose actions maintain a system that is working against them, usually in ways they do not realize. Its logic has affected time, space, and social relations, altered conceptions of worth and necessity, in the process creating an untenable environment that merits rebellion in all its forms. And yet the characters do not realize what they are rebelling against, and that they are rebelling at all. The chaos of capitalism, the conventions it disrupts and the swiftness with which it alters them, leaves the characters without a clear enemy to rage against, unable to see their situation for what it is because of their immersion in it.

CONCLUSION

The directors of the New Wave and the Sixth Generation, however, are not their characters, and their acute sense of the transformation of their society around them allows them to produce films that reflect their anxieties. The unique French postwar and Chinese postsocialist situations that provoke the creation of these vibrant bodies of cinema; works that express alienation, discontent, and resistance in form and content. It is the rapid change of the two periods, and the sense that the two nations are becoming something quite unlike their former selves, that engenders this reaction. Postwar France and postsocialist China share an increase in urbanization, a stratification of the social structure, and a new willingness to assimilate with the global capitalist system, all taking place at an incredible pace.

Urbanization is the most visible sign of this change, as buildings are demolished and constructed, new groups move into the city, and rural spaces empty out. Even those who do not take part in the migratory activities of urbanization still feel it, seeing their town or city transform around them at breakneck pace. French society was already more urbanized at the end of the second World War than China was in the late 1970s, with a little more than fifty percent of French citizens living in cities at the end of the 1940s.³⁹ But that proportion was only ten percent higher than it was in 1901, representing a fairly slow rate of urbanization compared to the rate of the next few decades, when by 1970 that proportion had jumped to seventy percent. Paris in particular was affected, growing at a rate of 120,000 families per year in the 1950s.⁴⁰ With this growth, Paris in the postwar period reinforces its position as the center of French life to a great extent, and

³⁹ Marceau, *Class and Status in France: Economic Change and Social Immobility 1945-1975*. 30.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 36.

sprawl and overcrowding become attendant issues to that growth. The influx of new residents and greater attention from the rest of France and the globe, which will watch and sometimes aid in the reconstruction of Paris, is a catalyst for the transformation of the physical appearance of the city.

A typical response to the changes can be found in the attitude of *Breathless's* Michel, who upon seeing a modern “eyesore” of a building tells Patricia, “Buildings like that get me down. They ruin the whole block.”⁴¹ The reshaping of Paris is dominated by this type of construction, of large buildings that serve the utilitarian purpose of accommodating new residents and proliferating white-collar businesses, and follow the global modernist aesthetic. This style of architecture, characterized by simple geometric shapes and materials like cement, steel, and glass, contrasted sharply with the often ornate, substantial buildings of France’s past. As James Tweedie writes in his study of new waves, “over the course of the 1960s the urban environment would be reinvented as something new and impermanent, as a perishable substrate like celluloid rather than a stable structure chiseled out of marble.”⁴² This need for construction is contrasted with a nostalgic impulse, however, a desire to maintain and elevate the monuments and grand structures of the old Paris. Especially now that Paris was more than ever a site for tourists, there was a movement to preserve these symbols of Frenchness.⁴³ It is a somewhat contradictory city that takes shape in the late 1950s and early 1960s, one dedicated to both the preservation and destruction of the old to make way for the new, modern, ideal France.

⁴¹ Tweedie, *The Age of New Waves: Art Cinema and the Staging of Globalization*. 105.

⁴² *Ibid*, 75.

⁴³ Kasten, “Modernization Versus Preservation in Paris During the Gaullist Era: A Tale of Two Cities.”

In China, urbanization takes place on a far larger scale. From 1979 to 2009 the urban population increased from 440 million to 622 million⁴⁴, the urbanization rate jumping nearly thirty percent.⁴⁵ The reform era marks a “change from a utopian urbanization to a developmental urbanization,” diminishing some of the negative character attributed to the city during the past century in China. The countryside would no longer encircle the city as it once had under Mao.⁴⁶ The industry and trade that characterized former treaty port cities like Shanghai became a point of pride rather than a sign of corruption⁴⁷, and that ethos would drive many rural Chinese citizens to the cities in pursuit of economic prosperity. Development began to take place in these cities, as in the urbanization of the farmland of Pudong in Shanghai and the broadening of Beijing’s borders with multiple new ring roads. Construction there adopted the dominant global contemporary style, an evolution of the aesthetic established in the postwar West, as well as engaged in spectacle in attempting to create new Chinese landmarks, like the now-recognizable Shanghai skyline with its Oriental Pearl Tower.

For spaces other than first-string cities, like the county towns (县城) of Jia Zhangke, the development is more complicated. They are places “with no clean-cut boundaries or clear distinctions, whether between rural and urban, between industrial and agricultural, between ‘state’ and ‘non-state,’ and between high culture and low culture...,” places where reforms have had an uneven application and effect.⁴⁸ Far more so than in France, urbanization is conflicted, a movement toward and development of

⁴⁴ Chan, “China: Internal Migration.”

⁴⁵ “Basic Statistics on National Population Census in 1953, 1964, 1982, 1990, 2000, and 2010.”

⁴⁶ Visser, *Cities Surround the Countryside: Urban Aesthetics in Postsocialist China*. 1.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁸ Zhang, “Market Socialism and Its Discontent: Jia Zhangke’s Cinematic Narrative of China’s Transition in the Age of Global Capital.” 142.

those vital centers of Chinese life, but in a remarkably non-uniform way, especially given the extent of state planning. All cities are changing, but some look very different from others.

These new cities are seen in the films of the Sixth Generation and the New Wave, in the rubble outside Datong in *Unknown Pleasures*, in the glossy airline lobby of *Breathless*, in the remaining hutongs of Beijing in *Beijing Bicycle*. These unstable cities, unable to commit to the modern or the traditional become visualized by the directors in both a realistic manner, capturing firsthand the veritable strangeness of these spaces in flux, and heightening the disconcerting sense that the world is shifting beneath them through disorienting or claustrophobic camera effects. The movement to and prioritization of the urban is not the lone effect of modernization, however, and the social structures of China and France are modified as well.

The instability of the urban and rural environments occurs while the social structure becomes more rigid. The seeming opportunity provided by the sprawling cities, to which businesses and people are flocking, is revealed to be false. Instead of creating a more egalitarian society, the classes of China and France become more stratified. Occupations change, but social mobility slows, with lower, middle, and upper classes becoming more rigidly defined. In France, barriers to entry into the upper classes became higher, and seemingly egalitarian institutions like education which would appear to mitigate those barriers became a less useful tool for advancement for those in the lower classes.⁴⁹ The growth of the middle class is a signature aspect of *les trente glorieuses*, though as Fridenson notes in his exploration of French society, “the middle class itself changed and became more inclusive, but only slowly and not in significant ways; and the

⁴⁹ Marceau, *Class and Status in France: Economic Change and Social Immobility 1945-1975*. 13.

newly erected bridges from blue-collar to middle-class status were used by only a limited number of people.”⁵⁰ Power becomes consolidated in the bourgeois classes rather than distributed amongst all levels of society, largely as a result of the political climate at the time. Support for the labor movement declined as the standard of living rose and anti-leftist sentiment increased, the stability of the Gaullist government and the fulfillment of consumerist gratification deemed preferable to pursuing a truly equitable society.⁵¹

Chinese society faces a similar set of issues, as power becomes more concentrated within the upper classes, mostly through the role of cadre members in charge of overseeing processes like privatization and opening trade who shape those activities to their benefit.⁵² The middle class, whose growth is favored by the government for its moderating influence, would by the start of the twenty-first century only constitute sixteen percent of the population. The classes below, comprised primarily of workers and peasants, would constitute eighty percent.⁵³ Social mobility, though increasing, is often a result of “political capital and bureaucratic allocation”⁵⁴ as opposed to the market reforms that, following the logic of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” should affect mobility more. So instead of becoming more upwardly mobile, working and peasant class members of Chinese society experience “widespread dispossession,” whether through being laid off (下岗) or seeing their land reappropriated for commercial uses.⁵⁵ The loss of land and jobs not only represents an economic hardship, however, but a total

⁵⁰ Fridenson, “Could Postwar France Become a Middle-Class Society?” 91.

⁵¹ Marceau, Jane. *Class and Status in France: Economic Change and Social Immobility 1945-1975*. Oxford University Press, 1977. 26.

⁵² Jacka, Kipnis, and Sargeson, *Contemporary China: Society and Social Change*. 203.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 207.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 205.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 211.

reorganization of one's life. The state-based framework of daily life has been wiped away so that "the individual is afforded so much autonomy that he is almost at a loss."⁵⁶

The stratified French and Chinese societies share a concentration of power at the top, a denial of mobility for the classes who could stand to benefit most, and sidelining of leftist thought in regard to social structure. The characters of the films of the Sixth Generation and New Wave differ in levels of marginalization and social status, but are never a part of the class of bureaucrats and technocrats placed in charge of government administration, nor are they upwardly mobile. They are not the ones benefitting from the supposedly more egalitarian neo-capitalist system, in which the freedom of the market should result in better access to opportunity. In the social changes taking place in France and China, as in the urbanization of the two countries, capitalism is at the root, these changes impossible without simultaneously conforming to the global hegemonic capitalist structure.

The changes to the economy of France in the 1950s and 1960s were a fulfillment of President Charles de Gaulle's charge that France needed to "marry its century."⁵⁷ In the wake of World War II, France had been left devastated and in serious need of rebuilding. "It's very simple," the editor of *L'Express* magazine would remark, "in 1946 in France there was literally nothing."⁵⁸ On the economic end, rebuilding France meant opening trade, shifting from agriculture to industry, and emphasizing large companies over family businesses, all made possible through state supervision and planning. The prosperity that resulted, in which during that period France was only second to Japan in economic growth, restored France to its prominent position on the world stage. However,

⁵⁶ Visser, *Cities Surround the Countryside: Urban Aesthetics in Postsocialist China*. 18.

⁵⁷ Conklin, Fishman, and Zaretsky, *France and Its Empire Since 1870*. 296.

⁵⁸ Tweedie, *The Age of New Waves: Art Cinema and the Staging of Globalization*. 13.

that growth would also bring about other phenomena that were deemed more problematic, especially in regard to preserving French culture. The first is the Americanization of France. De Gaulle wanted France to marry its century, but he perhaps did not realize the consequences of marrying into the American Century, beginning the “coca-colonization” of French society. The US was the center of the new world order, its staggering GDP making it the leader of the emergent neo-capitalist system. And France, now flooded with US cultural products, was looking more and more in the eyes of the French elite as a US colony.⁵⁹ It was the US, too, that would serve as “beacon” for the creation of a consumerist ethos in French society, as modern household appliances, cars, and stereos became must-have items.⁶⁰ As Richard Wolin writes, Westerners had begun “defining themselves through their purchasing capacity,” and the French were no exception.⁶¹ France had become a model neo-capitalist nation by the 1960s, with all of that system’s attendant characteristics now grafted onto French life.

While the shift in French economics is less a complete transformation and more a fuller embrace of capitalism than there had been previously, in China the change is radical. In the new government of Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s, the economy transitioned from a planned economy to operating under the ideology of “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” introducing elements of private ownership and foreign investment. By the time the directors of the Sixth Generation began producing films, the economic reforms had resulted in immense growth, with the average rate of GDP

⁵⁹ Atkin, *The Fifth French Republic*. 21.

⁶⁰ Tweedie, *The Age of New Waves: Art Cinema and the Staging of Globalization*. 13.

⁶¹ Wolin, *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s*. 11.

increase from 1995-2004 at 9.1 percent.⁶² Even in opening up to the West and adopting capitalist modes of organizing the economy, the government still asserted its commitment to socialism, to the skepticism of many Chinese intellectuals. To leftist intellectuals, the government's policies had resulted in the promotion of "bourgeois liberalism," and social problems like layoffs, corruption amongst officials, an increasing gap between upper and lower classes, and the deterioration of state-owned enterprises that had once been the backbone of Chinese industry. Perhaps even more troubling for the cultural elite was the sense that the "humanist spirit" (人文精神) of the Chinese people was diminishing under the logic of the capitalist-leaning economy, where commercialism seemed to dominate in every arena of Chinese life.⁶³ Money became an objective way to measure worth, a situation which Yuan Jin described in 1996: "the quality of life is turned into the quantity of life, the pursuit of quantity becomes the meaning of life, [and] the satisfaction of desires substitutes for the pursuit of meaning..."⁶⁴ The capitalist tendency of assigning value in terms of commercial viability was not restrained to the economy, but began to permeate all aspects of society, a sign that attempting to preserve characteristics of socialism while still interacting with the global neo-capitalist system was futile.

It is in this climate, then, of uncertainty, of growth counterbalanced by stagnation, of societies seeming to betray their values, that the films of the New Wave and Sixth Generation are produced. The Italian director Vittorio De Seta commented on the state of European society after the Second World War, writing that, "Urbanism, industrialism, consumerism, prosperity -- this entire human transformation occurred -- and was

⁶² Winters and Yusuf, *Dancing with Giants: China, India, and the Global Economy*. 6.

⁶³ McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age*. 27.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 49.

experienced -- like a *natural disaster*.”⁶⁵ This sense of modernization occurring like a natural disaster is reflected in these films, in the way the changes in Chinese and French societies are presented as incomprehensible, as occurring so quickly that finding one’s bearings is nearly impossible. The characters of the films react to this environment in inchoate ways, recognizing their disillusionment with their lives, but only having a vague impression of what causes it. Their defiance ranges from direct rebellion to merely existing at odds with the official narrative of wealth and prosperity. The films themselves, however, are knowing refutations of the new ideologies dominating French and Chinese society, produced by filmmakers who realize the need for a cinema that more accurately expresses this confusion and alienation felt by many within those countries. When the commercial cinema failed to react to a wildly different world, the New Wave and Sixth Generation emerged as an outlet for portraying life as it was now lived, the unvarnished antithesis to the gloss forming over the fractures in French and Chinese society.

⁶⁵ Tweedie, James. *The Age of New Waves: Art Cinema and the Staging of Globalization*. 19.

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