Toward an Ethics of Postvisuality:
Some Thoughts on the
Recent Work of Zhang Yimou

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Abstract  Taking as its point of departure the unresolved problematic of ethics in poststructuralist theory, this essay approaches ethics from the perspective of mediated visuality in contemporary cultural politics. Noting how the sensitivity to otherness—be it in the form of mass culture, gender, or race—has often been accompanied by iconophobia, a fundamental distrust and rejection of images, the author offers an analysis of the contemporary Chinese film *Happy Times*, directed by Zhang Yimou, as an instance of a kind of ethical film practice in which a responsible, non-iconophobic thinking about visuality and its implications may be traced. In a culture caught between the forces of globalization and its own attempts at modernization, such as contemporary China’s, Zhang’s work contributes to an ethics of what may be called postvisuality.

Ethics as Backlash against High Theory?

The “one indispensable word in ethics,” writes literary critic Geoffrey Galt Harpham (1995: 395), is “ought.” In the realm of contemporary cultural and discursive politics, however, ethics is often construed not in terms of a positive categorical imperative but rather pejoratively, in terms of a residual humanistic presumption of universal principles (enlightenment, reason, objectivity, justice, humanity, and the like) — principles which carry the implicit moral demand of the “ought,” as Harpham indicates, but whose self-serving nature is readily exposed by groups that have been excluded in
the processes of such principles’ enactment. For instance, Fredric Jameson, reminding us of Nietzsche’s virulent criticism, suggests that ethics is simply another name for ideology: ethics has served, he (1981: 114) writes, as “the ideological vehicle and the legitimation of concrete structures of power and domination” (quoted in Harpham 1995: 387).

This problematization of ethics as a variety of hypocrisy has constituted the thrust of much contemporary theoretical thinking, including that inspired by Marxism, feminism, and poststructuralism, all of which have attempted to debunk old-fashioned ethical imperatives as mere myths of normativity and universality. The reemergence of critical interest in ethics and universal principles in recent years has therefore been seen, by some, as a backlash against theory, especially against the apparent ahistoricism and amoralism of a theoretical practice such as deconstruction, with its insistence on reading (texts on their own terms) as perhaps the only viable kind of ethics. Against this putative backlash, theoretical thinkers, in turn, feel obligated to address the question of ethics by repositioning their theoretical practices as ethical. Consequently, as every major theorist and critic, from Derrida and Habermas to Irigaray and Foucault, may now be understood in terms of a compelling set of ethical concerns, it is tempting to conclude that ethics has become an empty term. As Harpham (1995: 394) writes, we now face

the curious fact that ethics had been clearly understood in radically antithetical ways, as the agent of repression and as the repressed itself, as the essence of classical humanism and of postmodern antihumanism, as the discourse of the integrated and self-mastering subject and of the fissured or overdetermined subject, as the locus of forthright worthiness and of self-disguising power. (Emphases in the original)

Having offered these general, obviously debatable observations, implying that the ethical can be whatever someone alleges it to be, Harpham (ibid.) tries to put some order in the confusion by saying that ethics is ultimately about otherness: “The decentered center of ethics . . . [is] its concern for ‘the other.’ Ethics is the arena in which the claims of otherness—the moral law, the human other, cultural norms, the Good-in-itself, etc.—are articulated and negotiated.”

1. Harpham’s point, possibly influenced by the work of Emmanuel Levinas, is echoed and reformulated by the editors of the volume *The Turn to Ethics* in the following manner: “Ethics . . . is a process of formulation and self-questioning that continually rearticulates boundaries, norms, selves, and ‘others.’ From Aristotle and Kant to Nietzsche and Hegel to Habermas and Foucault to Derrida and Lacan and Levinas to many of the essayists collected here, the concept of ethics and the ethical has been reconceptualized, reformulated, and repositioned” (Garber et al. 2000b: viii).
In the rest of this essay, I will proceed on the assumption that the backlash against theory as unethical is a misrecognition of the point of many theoretical practices, including, in particular, poststructuralism and deconstruction. Indeed, I will go along with the idea, implicitly shared by all the authors I have named so far, that the opposition between theory and ethics is a misleading one and that theory, even in its most nihilistic guises, has never completely abandoned ethics. A question follows from this: if we accept Harpham’s suggestion that otherness is central to ethics, how does otherness constitute the ethical move of theory?

This question requires us to return to the fundamental intervention of poststructuralist theory in general, namely, its drastic rooting-out of (the belief in) any extrasystemic determinant in the production of meaning (be that determinant in the form of subject, object, consciousness, or perception). As I have indicated elsewhere, it is possible, perhaps necessary, to see this intervention as the writing of a special kind of alterity (see Chow 1998: introduction). Importantly, I would add, this alterity is not about cultural, sexual, or ethnic otherness as such; rather, it is about the process of reinscribing the difference hitherto thought to exist between (two) entities as one that is already within entities. The familiar markers of differences/identities (one can think of any number of examples here: woman, Jew, the East, the native, and so forth), while seemingly external, are for poststructuralist thinking simply markers of an internal dislocation or alienness. Accordingly, woman, Jew, the East, and the native are simply names that objectify/externalize a rupture that is immanent to the concepts of man, non-Jew, the West, and the foreigner themselves. To deconstruct in this fashion the binary oppositional modes of operation inherent to thought is not necessarily to destroy the value of such thought; rather, it is to take apart, to rewind in slow motion as it were, the process of differentiation that is already at work in constituting the binary opposition in the first place and that, nonetheless, has been suppressed in order for the binary opposition to stand (belatedly, in the more readily perceptible form of an external or spatial difference, a difference between entities). To respond to the question I raised above, then, (poststructuralist) theory’s ethical move consists in this attempt, patient and persistent, at restoring difference and otherness to the interiority of an ongoing state of affairs.

As has often been pointed out, this move tends to be parasitic since its key mechanism typically involves the reversal and displacement of what is (already) established and accepted as the norm. But there is, I believe, a more troubling supplemental complication here, one that can be clarified by introducing another term, visuality (and its related meanings of sight and blindness). The reasons for doing so are multiple, not the least of which is
the historically unprecedented explosion of visual information in the age of electronic mediatization, when processing images has become an inevitable daily routine. Because engagement with otherness almost always involves some kind of imagistic objectification (of the other), it is difficult, if not impossible, to segregate considerations of otherness from visual relations (even if such relations are only implied, passed over, or suppressed). Also of relevance here is the traditional—yet increasingly unsustainable—association of acts of visualization with knowledge, revelation, and understanding (as is evident every time we use the expression “I see” in English): such association, obviously, demands rethinking.

An Eye for an Eye: Ethics as Iconophobia

So what does reinscribing alterity from within mean in terms of visuality? It means that the ethics to which “high” theory has held itself is often inextricable from a particular, negative relation to the visual as such. This negative relation consists in the combination of an unmitigating critical vigilance (often in the form of painstaking attention to the text) and an incessantly inward-looking gaze (introducing a radical difference from the inside). Because of this ethics’ characteristic suspension of (or aversion to) physical or phenomenological vision, some critics have referred to it by the term iconophobia in order to foreground the symptoms of hesitancy, suspicion, distrust, denigration, and avoidance that are exhibited by the theoretical practices related to it. Vision and visuality, insofar as they constitute a relation with the other, seem to materialize only as an imagined activity, a metaphorical stand-in for the internal splitting and self-reflection that take place at the level of either the text or the subject.

The peculiar difficulty posed by iconophobia is that it often characterizes even the work of those who are otherwise sensitively attentive to the image—those who are highly theoretical, who have taught us about the untenability of a simplistic, mimetic attitude toward representation (whereby representation is understood only as a re-presentation of some reality out there), or who, paradoxically, rely on visuality for their own argumentative logics.

Consider a well-known text such as Roland Barthes’s essay collection *Mythologies* (1957). Written during the heyday of structuralist semiotics, this text anticipates some of the big questions that continue to be asked under the rubric of ethics and that, in particular, are subject to the apparent divide between ethics and theory. In Barthes’s text, the approach to representation

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2. The best-known work in this line is the history of modern French philosophy and theory by Martin Jay (1993).
is torn between a rational, theoretical conception of significatory displacement (through the semiotic breakdown of the sign into its components of signifier, signified, sign, ad infinitum) and a residual ideology critique (along the lines of a Marxist critique of capitalist false consciousness). If the visual image is featured in Barthes’s readings through the numerous examples he draws from mass culture—such as film, television, advertisements, travel guides, covers of popular magazines, faces of movie stars, and so on—it is also featured with a critical eye on the bourgeois ideology that manipulates viewers’ and consumers’ perceptions. It is precisely, Barthes suggests, the sign’s openness and ambiguity—its mercurial ability to deny what it appears to be and to become what it is not—that is the source of moral danger for the public. The critic of myth, he concludes, is thus ethically stranded—between a mindless immersion in the mass culture that is saturated with ideology (if the critic wants to enjoy life like his or her fellow citizens) and a state of permanent alienation from society (if the critic wants to remain on the alert against the stupefying messages that are everywhere around).

A comparably paranoid attitude toward the visual image is found in the trend of feminist film theory that began with Laura Mulvey’s well-known essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1989 [1975]). Mulvey associates the false consciousness produced by the glamorized spectacles of Hollywood melodramas with capitalist patriarchy and its debasement of women, who are turned into mere objects for the pleasure of the masculinist gaze, with no ontological, narrative, or visual agency of their own. The alternative she offered, in the mid-1970s at least, was to actively dismantle the beauty, the illusory vision projected by such spectacles through careful analysis and to reinvent a cinema that would consciously experiment with women as subjects.3

In a similar vein, we may argue that Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978), with its magisterial critique of Western imperialist representations of various colonized cultures of the past few centuries, belongs also in an iconophobic register. In this case, the West itself, with its culture producers, artists, intellectuals, novelists, and historians as well as politicians, is put in the position of a morally decrepit mythologizer and image maker whose constructs have led to the subordination and dehumanization of other peoples and their traditions. Although Said does not exactly focus on visual images, his work has given rise to a significant subfield of anti-imperialist studies of ideologically loaded visual artifacts, including art, film, photography, museum exhibits, architecture, urban geography, and other suspects.

3. For an extended discussion of the implications of Mulvey’s readings for subsequent decades of film studies, see Chow 2001.
In their semiotic-Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial modes, what these theorists and critics have collectively mobilized is a distrust of the visual image and visual representation. Against the image as such, they have popularized a kind of permanent wakefulness—as if one could combat the lure of the visual by not closing one’s (critical) eyes and as if, simply by remaining watchful, (critical) sight itself could exorcize and ward off the charms of illusion. Here, despite their considerable differences, the more politically self-conscious practices of theory (as in the three examples I just mentioned) unexpectedly join forces with the “amoral” and “ahistorical” inward-looking practices of deconstruction: the ethics of all these theoretical practices converges on a concerted negation, if not repudiation, of visuality. In its attempts to confront what meets the (physical) eye (in its erroneousness) with another kind of eye—the insomniac, undreaming, critical eye, an eye that often turns inward and metaphorical—this ethics is condemned to oscillating, forever neurotically, between the extremes of supervision (surveillance of others) and introspection (gazing at oneself).

Nowhere is this upsurge of the iconophobia of ethics, and the ethics of iconophobia, articulated with more conviction than in the contemporary study of non-Western cultures. Following the lead of Said and the many critics of Western imperialism, some scholars, whenever they encounter “images of” another culture, tend readily to be on the qui vive about exploitation, stereotyping, and deceit and make it their mission to correct the falsehood especially of visual representations. In my work on contemporary Chinese cinema, I have attempted to critique such knee-jerk antiorientalist reactions with regard to the early films of director Zhang Yimou (see Chow 1995). What continues to concern me is that a certain predictable critical attitude tends to dominate the agenda whenever works that inhabit the East-West cultural divide are discussed. Instead of enabling the critical potential embedded in such works to come to light, this kind of attitude often ends up blocking and annulling that potential in the name of political rectitude.

In the study of contemporary Chinese cinema, this trendy vigilance against orientation follows from a proclivity toward realism in modern Chinese literary studies (published in English as well as in Chinese), in which the demand for mimetic responsibility remains a hegemonic one. This intriguing context, in which orientation-critique, initiated theoretically in the West, seems to become allied, rather smoothly, with certain non-Western native traditions and their ethical demands on representation; in which ethics and visuality cannot be discussed in separation but must be understood as mutually imbricated and mutually articulated paradigms—

4. This point, which involves a discussion of the history of modern Chinese literature and its study, is obviously one that I can only mention but not substantiate here.
this I would emphasize as the specific, thorny discursive locus for my analysis of Zhang’s work. In other words, in a theoretical and ethical climate in which iconophobia seems to have become the predominant way of reading cross-culturally (even as visual images proliferate and circulate at unprecedented speeds), how might one approach any representation of the non-West as such without immediately resorting to the well-tried and secure means of attacking orientalism by nailing down the culprit, in the form of “What has he done and how”? Against the iconophobia of ethics and the ethics of iconophobia, would it be possible to conceive of an ethics of visuality—a non-iconophobic way of handling social and visual relations that would assume as its primary concern issues of collective responsibility and well-being with regard not only to the present but also to the past and the future? If so, would this ethics be in the form of an “ought”?

These questions strike me as timely because visuality itself has become such a totally open and yet totally mediated field of negotiations. Precisely because anything can instantly be transformed into an electronic virtuality and because so many of our experiences now come to us first in the form of technologically mediated images, the status of the visual as such is likely to become increasingly problematic—polysemic, unpredictable, yet unavoidable. What kinds of processes—mechanical, electronic, and digital but also cultural and narrative—stand between our “natural” acts of seeing and the object images “out there”? How to deal with the seemingly obvious or literal appeal of the visual while being mindful of the complexity of engaging with vision? Can visuality include the possibility of not having vision or not having a visual exchange in the first place, or must it be defined exclusively within the positivistic realm of the optically available/accessible?

Insofar as it consistently contemplates the materiality of visuality as a social act as well as an objectified event or spectacle, and insofar as it presents the lure of the visual in its bold, infinitely expandable possibilities (as light, color, sexuality, narrative, experiment, melodrama, and technical dazzle) with an understanding of the nationalist and communal demands for mimetic responsibility, Zhang’s work continues to impress me as occupying a unique place in contemporary cinema. Could this work take us toward a different kind of ethics altogether?

Zhang Yimou’s *Happy Times* (*Xingfu shiguang*) (2000)

Since *Red Sorghum*, the first film that established his name with the international audience, Zhang’s work has been the target of much criticism (for examples of such criticism, see Chow 1995). In recent years, notably with the films *The Story of Qiuju, Keep Cool, Not One Less, The Road Home*, and *Happy
he seems to have moved toward a recognizably realist (as opposed to visually lush, glamorous, and mythical) style whose main feature is a focus on the hard and unfortunate lives of common people. For making this stylistic change, Zhang has won the warm praise of critics and the approval of state authorities, and the previous attacks on his “orientalist” way of selling an exotic China to pander to the tastes of foreign devils have, for the time being, somewhat subsided. (His recent film *Hero*, though, released in Asia at the end of 2002, has already created in the Chinese-language media another round of controversy over orientalism and Chinese authoritarianism.)

In the midst of the attacks and compliments, few, to my knowledge, have stopped to consider the consistent manner in which Zhang has been handling the implications of the give-and-take of visuality or the critical statement that his work as a whole makes on this activity, event, object, commodity, and instrument called “vision” in postcolonial postmodernity. While the reception of his work lingers over issues of cinematographic excellence and ideology critique, and often over a rather uncritical celebration of so-called realism, what I would like to pinpoint is the original way in which one of his recent films explores the implications of vision and visuality and, in the process, produces a kind of intervention that consists not so much in an “ought” as in an aesthetic staging of the tragic-comic antagonisms embroiled in social interaction during a time of ostensible national progress and prosperity.

The story of *Happy Times* begins as Lao Zhao, a retired factory worker, is proposing to a fat divorced woman who lives with her indolent teenage son and blind stepdaughter. The woman is agreeable but only if he can come up with the 50,000 yuan for the wedding she requires. To make himself seem like a good catch, he has told the fat woman that he owns a hotel, but in reality he and his friend Li simply try to renovate an abandoned bus in an overgrown area, with the intention of renting it as a place of assignation—called “Happy Times”—for young lovers with nowhere to go. Soon, as is often the case nowadays with urban development in China, the renovated bus is abruptly removed by the authorities to make space for a commercial project. In order not to lose his bride-to-be, however, Lao Zhao must perpetuate his lies, so he offers to hire the blind young girl as a masseuse in his fantastical hotel. In the huge, darkish spaces of the deserted state factory where they used to work, he and his friends put together a makeshift massage room with corrugated metal and carpet remnants and then take turns at playing customers coming for massage sessions, paying the blind girl handsomely with blank, bill-sized pieces of brown paper. Although Lao Zhao and his friends are engaged in an ever-more elaborate series of hoaxes to fool a blind person, they are motivated by kindness, and their
clumsy, bumpkinish endeavors are often hilariously comical. Knowing that the girl’s deepest wish is to be reunited with her father, who has gone south to Shenzhen, the boomtown near Hong Kong, Lao Zhao writes a fake letter in which the father tells his daughter how much he loves her and promises to find her a cure for her eyes as soon as he has earned enough money. The film ends with Lao Zhao reading this letter aloud, the girl and their friends listening, while the factory grounds on which they have been working together as masseuse and customers—the very stage on which they have been producing their collective performances, so to speak—are being demolished by bulldozers.5

Narratively speaking, the girl’s sight deprivation provides the impediment around which much of the action of the film revolves. The blind person, as Naomi Schor (1999: 88) writes, is conventionally given a philosophical or critical function in literature: “The blind person as see sees the central figure of the literature of blindness. . . . It rests on the double, oscillating meaning of seeing, as both a physical and cognitive act” (emphasis in the original).6 Although the blind girl in Zhang’s film is a sympathetic character, it is important to note that he does not follow this literary convention of turning her into a transcendent seer. Given the fact that he does his work in an overtly visual medium, his alternative approach to sight and blindness is, as I will argue, ingenious.

Consider the scene in which Lao Zhao makes his first visit to the fat woman’s home. For the first time, we encounter the blind girl, left in the fat woman’s care by her previous husband, who has moved on. In order to impress her suitor, the fat woman, who normally treats this stepdaughter with contempt, gives her some ice cream. This gesture of kindness lasts only for the duration of Lao Zhao’s visit. As soon as he has left, the fat lady snatches the ice cream from the blind girl and, scolding her as someone not worthy of such a luxury item, puts it back in the refrigerator.

Although it is possible to draw a moral lesson from this scene (for in-

5. For readers’ information, Zhang made an alternative ending to the film, which averts attention from the big economic picture by focusing on the personal stories: After writing the fake letter to the blind girl, Lao Zhao is hit by a truck and goes into a coma. The blind girl, not knowing what has happened, decides to move on so that she will no longer be a burden. She leaves behind a tape on which she thanks him for what he has done for her, explaining that she has known all along about the lies but appreciates the intentions behind them. As Lao Zhao’s friends listen to the tape while reading aloud Lao Zhao’s letter, the final scene shows the blind girl walking down the street alone.

6. Schor’s (1999: 83) essay argues for seeing blindness (and other forms of physical deprivation) as part of a human sensorium in its full range of complexity and not simply as a negative version of a normal, healthy body: “The realm of the senses must . . . be extended to include all manner of sensual deprivation: lack of vision, lack of hearing, lack of speech, lack of taste, lack of smell, lack of touch.”
stance, by viewing it as a commentary on the lamentable condition of human cruelty and hypocrisy), what is far more interesting is the suggestive reading it offers of the semiotics and politics of seeing—indeed, of sightedness itself as a kind of material sign around which specific values are implicitly transacted.

The fat woman’s opportunistic manner of handling the ice cream indicates that sight, as what renders the world accessible, is not a natural but an artificial phenomenon, one that is, moreover, eminently manipulable. The fat woman consciously performs to Lao Zhao’s sight by creating an appearance of generosity; yet as soon as that sight is removed, there is no need for this performance to continue. Sight, in other words, is not a medium of revelation or a means of understanding, as we commonly think; rather, it is a prosthesis, a surveillance mechanism installed on (other) human bodies, which means that one must behave appropriately when someone else is watching but that there is, otherwise, no intrinsic reason to do so. What Lao Zhao “sees”—the image of a kind stepmother—is actually the opposite of what he thinks he has seen and understood. The fat woman’s behavior is disturbing, because, contrary to what most people believe, she has not internalized or naturalized the function of sight in such a way as to make it her own conscience, her automatized self-surveillance. Sight remains for her something of an arbitrary and external function, a kind of mechanical device to be exploited solely for her own benefit. As the film goes on to show, with the events that unfold around the blind girl, sight can also be a disability, an elaborate network of mendacity devised to deceive others that ends up, ironically, trapping one more and more deeply. Having sight is not necessarily the opposite of being blind but may under some circumstances become an extension of blindness, a kind of handicap that distorts or obstructs reality as much as the physical inability to see.

At the same time, director Zhang Yimou does not sentimentalize the deprivation of sight by endowing it with the lofty association of philosophical wisdom. In his hands, blindness, like poverty, remains a condition of which anyone who is afflicted would want to be free if the means could be found because, as this simple incident indicates, it is a condition that puts one at the mercy of others. Having thus diverged from the conjoined (philosophical) paths of at once privileging (the accident of most people’s “natural”) sightedness and bestowing an otherworldly value on blindness, Zhang reorganizes sight and blindness as comparable rather than opposed events on the same plane: what those with sight “see” is not necessarily clarity but often distortion and obstruction, and sightedness, too, can be a deprived sense. Unlike the ethically and theoretically vigilant critics (such as myself) who, as described above, habitually turn what meets the physical eye into
an occasion for the performance of their superior critical eye, and who want to correct (other people’s) blindness with (their own) vision, Zhang offers a radically different way of coming to terms with vision, whereby the ability to see itself does not (as is often the case in a binary opposition) become the privileged term for judging the other term, blindness, but rather stands close to it as a correlate, an approximation.

This dialectic between vision and blindness, in turn, brings into focus the entire problematic of lying, which seems to be the only kind of activity in which Lao Zhao has been engaged from beginning to end. In the scene in which she finally rejects him, the fat woman scorns him as a liar. For those who want to defend Lao Zhao, it can be said that his lying, especially in relation to the blind girl, is justifiable in terms of altruism and that the lies are morally compensated for by his good intentions. But something more is going on in this scene of rejection. Just as her sightedness does not make her a decent person, so too does the fat woman’s knowledge of the truth (that Lao Zhao lies) stop short of any personal improvement on her part. Indeed, access to the truth simply makes her more viciously self-righteous, as she uses it to attack her suitor and rid herself of him. Like a “candid camera” in the hands of the wrong people, then, her effortless ability to document and replay—and thus to expose Lao Zhao for the liar he has been—strangely does not bring about any moral illumination; it simply helps her conveniently put an end to their relationship now that she has found herself a more lucrative marriage proposition.

As the dialectic between sight and blindness, truth and lies, leads toward what becomes increasingly evident as a drama of irresolvable moral confusions, some of the prominent elements of the story paradoxically come together. The awkward marriage proposal, the oppressive conditions in the fat woman’s home, the construction first of the fantastical hotel and then of the fantastical massage room with its “clientele,” and finally the ubiquitous triumph of big corporate businesses in present-day China: all these narrative details coalesce to highlight the emergence of an economy in which money and money alone is the agent—and arbiter—of reason and power. Nowhere is this more acutely demonstrated than in the empty factory in which Lao Zhao and his friends put on their absurd acts of altruism. These unemployed factory workers, who at one time probably worked hard with their hands day in and day out and were considered the backbone of the socialist “people’s republic,” have now turned their abandoned workplace into a surreal stage on which they become at once the scriptwriters, directors, actors, and audience of a collective fantasy, replete with its (endlessly reproducible, fake) paper currency, with the sole purpose of cheating a blind person.
If workers’ labor used to be a revered source of national vitality in China’s communist ideology, what has become of such labor? In the acts composed and consumed by Lao Zhao and his friends, such labor has obviously outlived its usefulness and gone to waste. Indeed, labor itself is no longer regarded as the origin of social relations, which are now increasingly governed by money and by the expedient transactions of exchange values. The only person who still works manually is the blind girl, but her labor, as we know, merely serves a bogus currency (as she is “paid” with pieces of scrap paper) in a workplace that does not really exist.

This film thus invites one to read it as a kind of national allegory—not necessarily one that represents the familiar, inextricable entanglement between an individual’s existential struggle and a nation’s political fate, but rather one in which the seemingly lighthearted story of fraudulence and debauchery at the trivial, mundane level may be parsed as a story about the state and its domestic economy, engaged conscientiously as they are in the manufacture of altruistic fictions as a strategy of governance, even as conditions are moving by leaps and bounds in an opposite direction. The nation, the film suggests, is no more than a bunch of well-meaning, kindhearted people who collectively are putting on a show to appease the downtrodden and powerless. China’s astonishing feat of a rapid transition to market capitalism on the very site(s) of its former, state-owned national production: isn’t this the spectacle of a vastly duplicitous operation, in which those who perform physical labor will increasingly be consigned to the margins, their iron rice bowls shattered, their dreams and aspirations bulldozed into the garbage heaps of history? Yet who are the culprits? Aren’t they often “nice” people—ordinary citizens, local officials, or even party cadres—who themselves are also victims of the remorseless forces transforming Chinese society today? Michael Dutton’s (2001: 355, 358) perceptive comments on urban life in contemporary China may be borrowed for a summary of the volatile situation: “The market arrives in China in what appears to be an Adornesque moment where everything is rendered ‘for sale.’ Yet what one quickly discovers is that saleability has chiseled away the certainty of meanings on which party propaganda relied. . . . Our antiheroes [i.e., ordinary people in China] are no pristine harbingers of any future civil society, any more than the despotic state or Communist Party is the single source of their oppression. Our antiheroes are the ‘collateral damage’ suffered in the globalization processes that we [the world’s observers] have come to call economic reform.”

On the surface, then, Zhang’s film offers an apparently straightforward

7. This essay is based on arguments excerpted from Dutton 1998.
moral tale involving a simple reversal of common sense: in spite of his tendency to tell lies, Lao Zhao ends up impressing us as a more or less benevolent person who, even after his own marriage deal has fallen through, sentimentally and heroically continues to assume the role of a surrogate father to the pathetic blind girl. His kindness brings a modicum of relief in the midst of a desperate environment. This, perhaps, is the story that allows Zhang’s audiences to see him as having returned to cinematic realism and humanism and has won him approval even from some of his harshest critics. But the irony that quietly lurks in all the humanistic details, that in fact displays such details to be, politically as well as ideologically, thoroughly antagonistic to and irreconcilable with themselves, is unmistakable. With the preemptive triumph of artificial vision (the kind of seeing that is not internalized or naturalized as conscience), the ensuing capacity for deception and self-deception, and the efficacious devaluation of human physical labor, what Zhang has produced here (as he has in his other recent film Not One Less) is another stark portrayal of a migration—contemporary Chinese society’s “advancement” to a new, relentless regime of power.

An Ethics of Postvisuality?

In reviewing some of the recent writings on ethics published in North America, I am continually struck by one feature. While attempting to address the shortcomings of a Western ethos that has been inadequate in its dealings with alterity, especially cultural and ethnic alterity, the posttheory, especially postdeconstruction turn to ethics—and with it the revival of humanistic notions such as friendship, hospitality, responsibility, care, and love—seems, nonetheless, to view ethics persistently as a mode, attitude, and practice articulated from a Western cosmopolitan perspective only. As Rebecca L. Walkowitz (2000: 223) writes, “Where ‘ethics’ is invoked, cosmopolitan practices typically demand one of two scenarios: an imagined association between cosmopolitans and the culture they situate elsewhere, or a refusal to transgress, perhaps a refusal to imagine at all.” Accordingly, the current trend toward ethics may simply be an extension of a prevalent view toward culture in which cultural critique can only come from those deeply immersed in it. Since it is believed that only such immersion authorizes contest and dissent (see Ray 2001: 164), one should, otherwise, not “transgress” or “imagine.” The result is often so many forms of mea culpa, self-analysis, self-reflexivity, and self-admonition, but the emphasis remains the self, the subject, the center, and the origin that is the West. The non-West, compelled in this asymmetrical scenario to react with resistance from the depths of ressentiment—“No! You have wronged us!”—is by default
reduced to what Nietzsche (1956 [1887]: 170–71) famously terms a “slave ethics.” By contrast, what Zhang’s work to date has offered, I would contend, is a mode, attitude, and practice of ethics from the non-West—not a pristine, virginal alterity as yet untouched but simply an other place, culture, history which was historically coerced into contact with the West and which, of late, has found itself caught, like everyone else, in the sticky coils of globalization.

Ethics, the philosophical consideration of what constitutes responsible behavior, begins in this case as a practical matter. It must proceed from a given condition under which alterity is not the (much theorized, poeticized, and eulogized) open space toward which one “ought” to gesture but rather a restrictive kind of position—a position of otherness one has learned not simply to inhabit but also to consciously see oneself inhabiting, because it is a position predetermined by those who have been historically more advantaged. For those who are always already cast as the other, there is nothing ennobling or liberating about the notion of alterity per se or the ethics emanating therefrom. Rather than being the occasion for benevolent philosophizing, then, ethics in this restrictive position involves an understanding of subordination, of irresolvable social and cultural antagonisms, and of finding oneself negotiating at the limits of possibilities even as life must go on. How to transcribe such an ethics in a visual language while getting past the state censors, speak to a national audience, and perform on the international scene on which, regardless of one’s intentions, one’s work tends to be greeted in prescribed codes—by viewers who range from unabashed lovers of Far Eastern exoticism to determined liberals, eager to see everything in contemporary Chinese cinema in the light of a Western definition of human rights, as a veiled criticism of Chinese political authoritarianism?

Given that he works in a visual medium, it is remarkable that Zhang has made a film that deflates the very act of seeing/having vision—by puncturing both its age-old philosophical claim to clarity, truth, and wisdom and its contemporary media claim to documentary transparency and authenticity. Stripped of its transcendent and realist powers, seeing is now presented as part of an economy—not only in the sense of an existing financial order but also in the sense of a prevalent rationale for productivity management, a rationale that is single-mindedly driven by efficiency, surplus generation, and “growth.” In this economy, images are becoming ever more sophisti-

8. See Dutton 2001: esp. 357–58 for an argument of how the West tends to depend for its conception of human rights on a certain binary opposition—the antithesis of good and evil that is central to Western theology and philosophy. In the relations with China since the late 1980s, this conception of human rights is epitomized in the Western focus on the icon of the lone individual stopping the (despotic, authoritarian) tank in Beijing on June 4, 1989.
icated and the horizons of the visible are ever expanding; but having sight may be nothing more than being able to afford and possess a video camera: it guarantees neither reliable knowledge nor clear perception.

This imaginative willingness to sever the medium in which his work is rooted from an aspiration to a higher, purer kind of moral vision remains, to my mind, Zhang’s unparalleled contribution. He shows us not an ethics in the form of “How correctly to conduct the give-and-take of visuality?” (with the imperative of an “ought”) but an ethics in the form of a de-idealization and disabling—of visuality’s complacency and supremacy—an ethics that is, meanwhile, not at all iconophobic. In his work, ethics remains a capacity to produce an aesthetic rupture, that critical distance from within the bounds of what comes across successfully as a conventional and crowd-pleasing story. For these reasons, perhaps it is no longer sufficient to think of his work in terms of an ethics of visuality. As visuality becomes deconstructed in the process of its own making, its violence ineradicable from its positivistic obviousness and prowess, we will need to imagine a new critical language, something like an ethics of postvisuality.

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