

Art College 1994 from China: The effort “to recreate life out of life”

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Art College 1994 is an unusual film. Directed by Liu Jian, the animated drama (with comic touches) follows a group of Chinese art students in the 1990s. The writer-director attended the Nanjing University of the Arts at the time, and the “Southern Art College” in the film is apparently a fictional version of the former.

The film features the voices of Chinese directors Jia Zhangke, Bi Gan and Zheng Dasheng, artist Xu Lei, actor Wang Hongwei, musicians Peng Lei and Ren Ke, academic Xu Zhiyuan and music producer/businessman Shen Lihui.

Art College 1994 opens with a title, a remarkable citation from Irish writer James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916): “To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life!”

To its credit, *Art College 1994* displays throughout a cosmopolitanism and sophistication, the opposite of nationalism and provincialism. The references to cultural figures, which seem unforced and flow from the situation and the characters, are extensive, from the surrealists and expressionists, other prominent figures of 19th and 20th century art—van Gogh, Gauguin, Picasso, Matisse, Marcel Duchamp, Mark Rothko, Lucian Freud, Francis Bacon—to pop stars like Michael Jackson and Nirvana’s Kurt Cobain (who committed suicide in April 1994). Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, Jean-Paul Sartre and Debussy also come in for attention.

The film focuses on several students (and hangers-on), including Xiaojun and his friend “Rabbit,” their rival Weiguo (who slashes one of their works), outsiders like Youcai and two female students, one an aspiring pianist, Lili, and the other an outgoing singer, Hong.

Much of the film is taken up by rambling, leisurely conversations about art, and about love. The dialogue has the ring of truth.

Art College 1994 essentially tries out various aesthetic notions and practices, which were very much in air at the time, not only in China. Xiaojun and Rabbit and the others observe but tend to be skeptical about conceptual and performance art. Professors urge them to remain true to traditional Chinese art. A visiting artist-lecturer (voiced by filmmaker Jia Zhangke) explains that he went abroad above all to see van Gogh’s *The Starry Night* (1889, owned by the Museum of Modern Art in

New York) in person. He is peppered with questions by the art students, including “What is beauty?”

In the course of the various discussions, one student asserts, “If you say it’s art, it’s art. Everything is art.” Another contends, “Art is a business, a huge business. We’ll be the big bosses of art.” A third insists, “Artists should be poor,” and undergo suffering. Humanity could live without many things, but not without beauty, someone argues. One of the young people asks rhetorically, “What’s the point of art?” Do masterpieces survive “because of their greatness, or are they only great because they happened to survive?”

Lili wants a musical career so she can live the way she wants, do what she likes. She and Xiaojun go out a few times. Unfortunately, under various pressures, she marries a boring but financially stable man. Hong tells her friend off: “You have no heart,” marrying such a “tacky man.” Hong finds a job singing in a bar. She says to Xiaojun: “You two weren’t meant to be.”

Xiaojun burns his old works in a small bonfire on an outdoor basketball court. An older artist appears and likes the idea, “I was thinking of doing an art piece like that.” He puts his own work in the fire, but then realizes he has forgotten a camera with which to immortalize the act, and rushes off.

Professor Feng confronts Xiaojun, opposing his destructive act. He disapproves of phrases about “progress” and “artistic freedom.” There is “a limit to everything.” Xiaojun: “I don’t want to be a traditionalist.” Feng tells him to paint the work again: “No matter what you paint, or how you paint, great works are created with a sincere heart.”

Art College 1994 doesn’t come down on any particular side. It observes, and sympathizes. Everyone has his or her reasons.

The film was inspired by the director’s days at art school. Starting out as a painter, Liu Jian turned to animation in his first film, *Piercing 1* (2010). He takes years to create one of his animated films (also *Have a Nice Day*). He explained to an interviewer from *Asian Movie Pulse* that

Regarding the technique, which is 2D, it was the logical extension of my background as a painter. That means that I basically like to ‘paint’ a film, which is

the reason I always turn to traditional drawing, instead of 3D animation. The classical animation approach has its unmistakably vintage aesthetics, which I prefer.

As for the conversations about art and aesthetics, he told interviewer Eric Kohn,

In that period you had this influx of Western thought, cultures, and this clash of the new and old. That was just the zeitgeist and as contemporary artists we debated it. The way of thinking through those debates was incorporated into our own art practices. Regardless of the differences between Eastern and Western thinking—or modern and traditional thinking—art is universal.

He also explained to *Asian Movie Pulse* that

when I was a student, it was quite normal and popular to discuss philosophy and literature on campus. The times were changing, everything was new and exciting. We spoke about the old and the new, compared, accepted or rejected. We dared to go to new places. With this animation, I am trying to re-create that period.

Liu is an intelligent and thoughtful artist, and, as the portrait of a group of artists as young people, his film is charming and amiable, occasionally moving and unsettling.

The central problem with *Art College 1994* lies in its essential intellectual amorphousness, formlessness, its non-committal character. As a reaction to Maoist Stalinism, and the traumas of China's reactionary "Cultural Revolution" (during which Shakespeare, Charlotte Brontë, Beethoven, Mozart, Debussy and countless others were banned), opposition to certainties and dogma is understandable.

But the piling up of interesting episodes does not by itself produce a significant work of art. To identify a moment in time, to render some of its characteristic features, does not necessarily provide insight into the deepest truth of the period. What was the significance of the 1949 revolution? What was going on in China more generally during the 1990s? What is the relationship of that period to our own? One senses that the filmmakers finds "general statements" frightening.

The students experiment with and test various notions of art, but no one suggests it might be a means of approaching reality, of representing life truthfully, including the truth of a social order. Although, surely, this is what Liu has attempted to do with his film, at least get closer to the period in question?

The result is something likeable, but loose, disjointed, a bit slight. Social life isn't simply a river that flows. Nor is art. They are directed toward definite ends. When art "breaks with great aims," it threatens to become trivial.

What we have written about the films of Jia Zhangke, in 2004 and 2006, seems to apply here to a certain extent:

One cannot help sensing that the difficulty in arriving at general conclusions about Chinese history and society has a bearing on the narrative approach of many of the Chinese and Taiwanese filmmakers. No doubt specific cultural traditions come into play, but the elliptical style, the deliberate fracturing of so many works into many small and apparently discrete dramatic units—cinematic *non sequiturs*, so to speak—may reflect in part this absence of an overall perspective. The filmmakers see individual fragments and moments of life in the region with astonishing clarity and even brilliance, but developing a comprehensive picture is more challenging.

And

The problem is large, the questions about the nature of the Chinese revolution and state are quite complex. Nonetheless, these great historical issues have to be approached. The artistic work suffers, even threatens to stagnate. It has been said before, but it bears repeating, that it's not possible to provide a significant picture, or even a smaller 'slice of life' in the long run, without troubling oneself with social and artistic perspectives.



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