

This is a conference paper entitled “Floodlines: Temporal Markers of Exile in Still Life (2006) and This is Not a Burial, it’s a Resurrection (2019)” given at the Cinema Studies Graduate Student Union annual conference in 2025 for the theme “Exit Signs.”

A flood comes with its poetic and brutal markers, signalling the landscape filling with water and the entailing exile, procession and loss. A planned flood, while less immediately dramatic and traumatic than a natural one, gives residents the time to prepare to leave eliciting a slower, ongoing exile and forced removal, in some cases where residents might never realistically return. These “intentional” acts of flooding come as a plan or byproduct of governance, permanent in the cases of a river is redirected or a dam constructed. While in some cases, there is a reversibility to this process, often this is a permanent solution involving new infrastructure and ways of life. The exodus is somewhat inevitable, as the planned flood becomes a looming threat, separating people from their homes, families, and physical geographic attachments.

The imagery of the flood is pervasive through literature and history, reaching back to biblical and folklore, often signifying a violent rupture, clean slate or total turnover of land in the act of the immersive natural disaster. With the planned flood, its markings and signals start before the event, with “writing on the wall” that foreshadows this exodus.

The films *Still Life* (2006, dir. Jia Zhangke) and *This Is Not a Burial, It's a Resurrection* (2019, dir. Lemohang Jeremiah Mosese) stand at different points in the timeline of a planned flood due to the construction of a dam: the first telling the story of a man searching for his wife only to find her previous address now uninhabitable under water, the second following an old woman refusing to leave her ancestral home when an impending flood will force her community out.

Both films contain signs of the flood: warnings of rising water, threats for residents to leave, and bureaucratic preparation of the land and settlements. They are physical, in the form of caution tape and painted height markers, but they are also social, in the form of incoming uniforms, hazmat suits, government official presence and the migrating residents. These signal a continuous flow of people through physical and cinematic space, tracing the forced removals and bodies through a neighbourhood soon to be or already unreachable.

Today, I'll be exploring the representation of these "exit signs" through the symbols, liquid aesthetics, and geo-political dimensions of the production in *Still Life* and *This Is Not a Burial, It's a Resurrection*. Set in China and Lesotho respectively, the films' narratives and locations tie directly and indirectly to real events and issues surrounding the politics of water, migration and cinema.

Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* (2006) tells the stories of two reunions that occur during the demolition of Fengjie, a small town effected by the rising water because of the Three Gorges Dam, a massive twenty-first century construction project built in China. In one of these two stories, a coal miner named Han Sanming returns to the city to find his wife. Arriving off a barge and driving with a motorcyclist to an address written on a paper, Han Sanming finds himself on the edge of the water.

His journey seeking out his wife's new location, over the course of which we find out he has not seen her or their daughter in over 15 years. During this time, he finds work in demolition, breaking down the buildings in the old village alongside other bare-chested men of all ages, sweating under the hot sun and rhythmically slamming their hammers across the city sequences of sledge hammering. Much of the filmmaking that follows Han in this space has him staring out into the watery expanse, the camera panning slowly across the water and landscape.

Xudong ascribes to Zhangke's films with a "poetics of vanishing" in which his documentary verite style allows for the capturing of China's urban transformation – here, pointing to the disappearance and demolition of Fengjie, a "county-city" between true rural periphery and metropolitan center at which "the most brutal battles of a historical transformation are being fought in China, silently and out of sight" (Xudong, 2010, p. 79). The film was made during this dismantling of the city, as the filmmaker retells, "I took my camera and ran into this disappearing city, watching the dismantlement, explosion and collapse" (Zeng, 2012, p. 138).

There are two explicit "writing on the wall" in a literal and physical sense. First, a sign in red reading "PHASE 3 WATER LEVEL: 156.50M" as a flood marker. This is seen twice, once on a hill as a barge passes on the river, indicating a rising of the water through the mountains; and a second in the city, as Han Sanming leaves the relocation office who have directed him to a new area his wife might now live. The camera follows him down the street but lingers on two barebacked painters standing on ladders putting the same sign on the side of a building. The street is bustling but this sign indicates a deadline – it is the first warning. Later, on a filmed monitor displaying a news, there is the announcement: "On May 1, 2006, the water level here will rise to 156.30 meters."

The second sign comes at the end – Han Sanming notices two gentlemen painting on the side of his landlord's house. This sign, in white, reads "OK FOR DEMOLITION." Following this, Han sees his neighbours pack, dismantle their houses and begin moving out, pushing him back to his own quest in finding his wife and moving on from the city.

In *Still Life*, the water is often a dominating force audio-visually, only displaced by the sounds and visuals of demolition and its ruined, dry, dusty landscape under transformation. When focusing on the water, the camera frames characters looking out into the landscape, as if

searching and passing over the depths that former residents had been exiled from. The camera pans slowly, back and forth tracing the eyes journey over the surface, or perhaps the migrants flight across it.

While the water is ever present in *Still Life*, it is only a threatening phantom in *This is Not a Burial, It is a Resurrection*, wetness visible only sparingly in the rain and mud. The film opens as Mantoa, an old woman living alone in the small village in the mountains of Lesotho, is met with tragic news: her final remaining relative, her son, has been killed in an accident working in South Africa's gold mines. During her period of mourning and her renewed emotional attachment to the graveyard where now all her family remain, it is announced by local officials that the villagers are to be relocated as the construction of a new dam would render the area in the floodplain. Mantao, refusing to leave Nazareth, rallies the community into action. Eventually after all her efforts are null, she tries to make plans for her own death and burial before the watery fate comes to pass. Written and directed by Lemohang Jeremiah Mosese, a filmmaker from Lesotho, the film has a folkloric tone, captured in colourful 16mm and told through the narration of a lesiba player, the film and its location inextricable from border politics. Lesotho is landlocked by South Africa, and many of the actors in the film, including Mary Twala who plays Mantoa, are well known in the South Africa's more robust theatre, film and television industry. Zakes Mda provides more geopolitical undercurrents of the film: "A great percentage of Lesotho citizens work in the mines, farms, and homes of South Africa, and Lesotho also relies heavily on their remittances. For its part, however, South Africa needs the water that is piped to it from Lesotho, where huge dams have been constructed." (Mda, Criterion Channel) In this way, South Africa is culpable for Mantao's tragedies: first, for her son's death in the mines, and second, more subtly for the construction of a dam that would provide water by flooding her ancestral

homeland. There is no dominant presence of water, as the warning signs come before it begins encroaching: yellow tape, officials with microphones and the deaf ears of the government office.

In step with *Still Life*, the film's cinematography is liquid: here, long takes fashion a zooming in and out of the landscape, centring Mantua in the frame as the camera foreshadows the encroaching flood on the landscape.

In *The Shape of Motion* (2022) Jordan Schonig's posits "spatial unfurling" as "an effect produced by particular ways of moving the camera that suppress the illusion of embodied movement and exploit the aesthetic potential of the flatness of the screen." (Schonig, 2022, p. 100) Schonig explores the aesthetic dimensions of the lateral camera movement (*Still Life*) and the forward/backward movement of the camera along the z-axis (*This is Not a Burial It's a resurrection*). In both, the horizon is a locating coordinate as the end, "of our perceptual field... the concept of the horizon encourages an analogy between the incompleteness that marks both human perception and the perception of the camera" (Schonig, 2022, p. 102). By tracing the camera across it or away from it, each embodies a flowing across space, a slow encroachment, mimicking the watery threat with its push and pull on these landscapes.

As the flood comes along with its unforgiving deadline, these films render the timeline of lives impacted by it, weaving in and out of the landscape in migration. Edward Said's "Reflections on Exile" details some of the representations of exile in literature and thinks through the qualities of belonging and dislocation that exiles face. Said discusses the fate of the exile to be othered outside of their home country and is linked directly to a relationship with land and the possibilities of return: "The pathos of exile is in the loss of contact with the solidity and the satisfaction of earth: homecoming is out of the question." (Said, 2021, p. 83). In the dislocation of migration, Said theorizes that new worlds are created in the refusal to belong, to

fully embrace one's new context: "The exile's new world, logically enough, is unnatural and its unreality resembles fiction" (85). Said reflects on Adorno's autobiographical work written in exile, "Adorno's reflections are informed by the belief that the only home truly available now, though fragile and vulnerable, is in writing" (87).

The planned flood allows an element of control for residents, notified ahead of time to take their belongings elsewhere rather than a momentary, unpredicted flooding that a natural disaster might entail. However, this is still a forced removal – families separated, ancestral connections potentially severed. The two films have this context of forced removal. Said's framework of an exile is helpful to both, but not complete. While the waters from the Three Gorges Dam have not risen to their highest point yet in *Still Life*, there is pre-emptive damage and dislocation. The film has its ruined buildings, serving as a counterpoint to the water: dry where the dam is wet, staccato hammering where the water's sound rushes continuously, the buildings' overblown and light in colour where the depths are dark and green.

In *This is not a Burial, it's a Resurrection*, Mantoa is separated from her family but not yet her land or community, only on the precipice of exile from her ancestral home. While initially on the outskirts of her community – staying home to mourn her son's death, visiting the cemetery alone, standing on the outskirts of the village gathering, the announcement of the flooding engages her into action. She takes the bus to the government office to speak to officials in protest and, when that does not work, rallies her community to protest and preserve their land. Although the flood has not yet arrived, there is still precursory ruin: as an act of intimidation due to her refusals, Mantoa's house and the last of her belongings are mysteriously burnt to the ground. In a scene as Mantoa returns to this home irreversibly destroyed, a long take registers the old woman in mourning black clothes, sitting on her bed in disbelief at her loss. A flock of sheep

begin pouring into the settlement around her, engulfing her until she is claustrophobically surrounded. Almost as if she is summoning these sheep around her, Mantoa has an almost otherworldly command, despite her misfortune, and the scene along with its foreboding musical narration has a folkloric tone.

In both cases, the ruin is a marker of the flood indirectly, prepping the land and the people for their exodus. Both films feature faceless figures in hazmat suits and uniforms, clinically mapping out and spraying down the area as a preparation and a sign of the threat of removal.

Barbara Mennel's discussion of ruins in film highlights their aesthetic role: as a "site of memory and contemplation" (Mennel, 2019, p. 109) bridging both a realist historical ruin and a romantic, symbolic one. Mennel writes about the role of ruins in "rubble films" in post-war Germany: they allow for the negotiation of traumatic historical events but "because the ruined city had lost its markers and has turned into an unrecognizable landscape, the rubble film also lends itself to negotiating abstract questions of morality, decay, and destruction," (111). While Mennel looks at ruins as either at the hands of human demolition or as the result of nature and time, the demolitions made in preparation for a flood present a combination: total, immersive destruction at the hands of humans using nature as a tool.

These films are not total ruin films but envision these spaces as sites of transition where demolition, preparation of the land and loss of homes are temporal markers of what is to come. In this way, the characters are also not total exiles. In *Still Life*, Han Sanming returns to the land and, although his first connection to his wife's location is underwater, he reunites with her eventually, navigating the slowly diminishing city in the process. He cannot totally return but, as with the other migrant labourers around him, is a sort of exile in community, shut out by nature

and by bureaucracy. With buildings falling all around, and some even blinking across the sky or taking off, the film has a liminal, between worlds quality, not quite science fiction but realism that gestures towards the future – markings on the walls suggesting this explicitly. In *This is not a Resurrection, it's a Burial*, Mantoa's solitude and separation from her family only hardens her resolve to refuse exile from Nazareth, ending in her attempting to bury herself alive and fleeing her community as they migrate, stripping herself bare and heading back to her ancestral home as a young child watches. To return to Said, neither of these films are explicit genre films but have eerie, otherworldly qualities to them, expressing the “out of world” quality the exile begins to experience in this dislodging.

These partial ruins, partial exiles and future floods speak to the geo-specific and transient nature of the films themselves documenting moments in history and space that gesture towards the future in their markings. The films contain warnings, writings on the wall of a disaster prompted by human decision, that speak to the people cast out within their own countries as a by-product of greater national political ambitions and relationships.

These markers suggest hard deadlines that seem unimaginable during transient times but are more representative as evidence of the eerie, unmooring effect of exile than of the permanence discontinuation of human movement. These signs threaten an end, the impossibility of true return, but have little power in discouraging attempts and attachments.

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