

GREY IS NOT A COLOR

Gray is a neutral tone that is used to measure the varying degrees of black and white. Features of yellow once marked countryside in Western China, but now it has turned the color of smoke.

Jia Zhangke's film, *Xiao Wu*, is set here. In the stark landscape, marked by poverty and decay, one wonders how a culture can survive in such an oppressed communist state with little hope for change. Zhangke's film questions existence in his native town, and contemporary China's social, spiritual and cultural deterioration.

Color exists in places like the karaoke brothels and bars, and on TV sets that use beautiful women as a background for the lyrics of romanticized karaoke songs. Here, the hyper real lingers like a red mist that inflames desire. But what happens to desire when the spirit is broken: we become lost and empty. , when one rides on feelings that no longer have a place in a modern world that value little, human life.

Relationships of substance are replaced and filled with a simulation of empty desire. It is a death sentence for what has value. Reality becomes a confused state of existence. Nothing is tangible; nothing can be attained or reached. A sense of the real is replaced with imitation. The appearance of imitation now seems authentic and passes as truth.

The protagonist's transgression as a thief is only an act of contestation of the loss of the real. His friends have already given in to the superficial. When he meets the karaoke singer, for a moment, a sense of the real returns to him. He regains hope that all is not lost. When the karaoke singer leaves him, his dreams are shattered. He returns to his life of crime. When he is caught and handcuffed by the local police, literally hung out for display, he returns to the only reality he knows.

Zhangke traverses these emotions in a setting that he knows well. This film was very disturbing for me, even with the humorous moments. Always hanging in the air was a heavy oppression. Zhangke made a very powerful film that questions what can happen to a culture with very little hope for change.

Will the human spirit be strong enough to survive without losing human values and our relationship to each other?

My hope for tomorrow is, yes.

- Carol Gehring