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# Framing dialogue through the mirror

The case of Chinese independent cinema and the self

*Cadrer le dialogue à travers le miroir : cinéma et ethnographie. Le Cinéma indépendant chinois et le Moi*

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**FRAMING DIALOGUE THROUGH THE MIRROR  
THE CASE OF CHINESE *INDEPENDENT CINEMA*  
AND THE SELF**

Sara BERETTA\*

To cut off Medusa's head without being  
turned into stone, Perseus supports himself  
on the very lightest of things, the wind and  
the clouds, and fixes his gaze upon what  
can be revealed only by indirect vision, an  
image caught in a mirror  
(Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the New  
Millennium*).

The dialogue between video production and ethnography, both in terms of methodology and practices, is casted in the current debate on artistic and anthropological research relations (Schneider & Wright, 2006; Foster, 1995; Marcus & Myers, 1995). Analyzing the short videos *Insomnia* (失眠 *shimian* I, II, III) and *The Messenger* (使者 *shizhe*) by S.J., the *Self portrait* by Z.M. and the ethnographic account from my fieldwork in China (2009-2011), I suggest to consider the image as a starting point for fieldwork, keeping in mind its social character (Marcus & Myers, *ibid.*; Gell, 1998; Schneider & Wright, *op. cit.*) and the idea of stratification

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(Deleuze & Guattari, 2003). The anthropological research can move from the image as a space where and a device with which authors and spectators act, together with matters transmitted and negotiated with representations. Precisely, I show that matters beyond the image can be investigated along with the videos and the relations that develop from them, to open towards the engaged subjectivities<sup>1</sup> (Ortner, 2005).

The research into representations of the self in contemporary China (Kleinman & Yunxiang, 2011; Liu Xin, 2002; Rofel, 2007; Schein, 2006a, 2006b; Yan Yunxiang, 2009, 2011), and in particular into urban post '80 generation self representation, has been carried on starting from the filmic practice: going beyond the video image in order to understand how it is acted in practices (and finding analogies and similarities with the digital storytelling and the video as a participatory tool). I focused on the *post '80* (八零后 *ba ling hou*) urban generation, born within 1980 and early '90s, grown up witnessing China's deep social (and relational) transformation marked by welfare, economic and technological development. Global distances have been shortened (with the Internet and mobility) while the gap with what parents experienced has got almost unbridgeable, giving rise to a sense of displacement on one side and the need to re-cognize oneself on the other. What kind of narrations (Liu Xin, *op. cit.*) authors and spectators build with and around the video image? And how are such narrations modified in and by the video circulation in different contexts? In the relation with *independent* filming, which are the technologies of

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of subjectivity here is detached from the filmic category as opposed to « objectivity », at the core of the huge debate on the representation of Chinese society by images (Zhang Yingjin, 2006; Lu Xinyu, 2005, 2010; Voci, 2010; Berry, 2007). Here subjectivity is assumed with Ortner (*op. cit.*: 31) as « [...] the ensemble of modes of perceptions, affect, thought, desire, fear and so forth that animate acting subjects. But I always mean as well the cultural and social formations that shape, organize, and provoke those modes of affect, thought and so on. [...] back and forth between the examination of such cultural formations and the inner states of acting subjects ».

the self (Foucault, 1993; Abu-Lughod, 2002) in act? The look on the images can not set aside their relation to filmed – and filming – subjects' practices: the video is not solely a research object but part of the research field. The practices and poetics acted by subjects, here young urban Chinese, unveil within the narration by hybrid (that is in between documentary and fiction)<sup>2</sup> images and their articulations in the experienced.

When I began researching on Chinese independent films<sup>3</sup> and film festivals<sup>4</sup>, I wanted to investigate the resistant and oppositional nature that apparently distinguished what had been defined as a movement<sup>5</sup>. In particular, I was interested in the need to *leave a*

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<sup>2</sup> In order to avoid ambiguities, I use here « images » or « video » defined as hybrid with Marks (2000): « A hybrid form, mixing documentary, fiction, personal and experimental genres, as well as different media [...] Hybrid cinema is in a position to do archeology, to dig up the traces that the dominant culture, and for that matter any fixed cultural identity, would just as soon as forget »; Nichols (1994) on documentary and experimental film: « much of what we have called documentary might be reconsidered as experimental and much of what we have called experimental or avant-garde might be reconsidered as documentary » (*ibid.*); and above all Voci (2006, 2010) referring to the Chinese context.

<sup>3</sup> The terminology to indicate the « video images produced out of the official sphere » is itself object of the research along with its strategic use by actors: *independent* 独立 *duli*, *underground* 地下 *dixia*, *personal/private* 个人 *geren* gets different meanings in relation to the contexts they are used in. For a broad analysis: Pickowicz & Zhang Yingjin (2006).

<sup>4</sup> Specifically: BIFF (Beijing Independent Film Festival); CIFF (China Independent Film Festival, Nanjing); YunFest (Kunming); ReelChina (Shanghai).

<sup>5</sup> For an analysis of Chinese documentary as a movement: Lu Xinyu 吕新雨, 2005, 记录中国; Berry *et al* (2010). The problematic nature of the term movement is still debated (Lu Xinyu, 2010: 15): « The definition of this contemporary film movement has not reached consensus, as the movement itself is heterogeneous. However, it is clear that the movement arose in the historical, political, and social context of the 1980s and 1990s and must be understood within that context. [...] They presented a challenge especially to the hegemonic notion of "reality" and how it should be represented in film. [...] Finally, while the content of New Documentary Movement films is diverse, they tend to focus on marginalized subjects. They highlight the experiences of marginalization within a market economy. Thus, the power

*track* (Ferraris, 2009), the tension towards writing an alternative memory opposed to the official narrative<sup>6</sup>. Yet, the more I saw videos, participated in post-screening debates in different cities and got familiar with authors and amateurs, the more I came up to the articulation between filmic practice and daily practices as experienced by post '80 generation: the image became a starting point to investigate broader changes in (self)representation and global confrontation. The works by two young Beijingers, *Insomnia* (I, II, III) and *The Messenger* by S.J. and M.Q.'s *Self Portrait*, along with their experiences, are presented here as exemplifying cases: in between amateur and professional works, they are relevant both in images and in their relation to authors' daily practices.

***Insomnia* (I, II, III) and *The Messenger*, S.J.**

The shorts *Insomnia* (失眠 *shimian* I, II, III) and *The Messenger* (使者 *shizhe*) by S.J.'s won the online DV competition *Let the Bullets Fly* (让子弹飞 *rang zidan fei*, ended in January 2011), under the guide words « gun » and « fly ». S.J. is a Beijinger in her twenties, grown up in comfort with hardworker white-collar parents: she left home when she was a teenager as she felt she « has been left alone » (field notes, Sept. 2011) and spent few years as a 流氓 *liumang*, a wanderer, experiencing road life but without giving

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of the New Documentary Movement is to reveal new, and often painful, forms of reality ». The debate is highly relevant and current, as emerged during 2011 CIFF (China Independent Film Festival): a round table aimed to bring a confrontation on the actual situation of the « movement » turned into a lively discussion among directors and intellectuals, carried on till the day after in different sets (for an exhaustive chronicle: Shelly Kraicer <http://cinema-scope.com/wordpress/cs-online/shamans-%C2%B7-animals-a-report-from-the-8th-annual-china-independent-film-festival/> (accessed December 2001). I think it is relevant to point out that no post '80 director took part to the round table, rather they participated actively and lively in the following informal debates (fieldnotes, Nanjing October 31th – November 1st 2011).

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.takeawaychina.com/#2075399/Symposium-Memory> (accessed in January 2012).

up the school. She has been interested first in photography, then in filming and she started collaborating in commercial productions:

The first mainstream production I worked in was about Lei Feng [a national hero] but I wanted to tell my stories, different ones. In China there is just one-style movie, just one voice can be listened. So I found the school [Li Xianting Film School] and this group of people similar to me, like me they want to portray this society and tell their own stories: they just want to tell their stories, no matter if there is no fund or distribution (20.10.2011).

She joined the independent crew of directors and amateurs gathered around Li Xianting Film Fund in Songzhuang (Beijing) and then participated to the LXT Film School that produced the four shorts discussed here. *Insomnia* (I, II, III) deals with a disease spread among young Chinese students and workers: in the first chapter, S.J. portrays herself in the bedroom fighting comically and intensely with a mosquito disturbing her sleep. The theme develops in parts II and III, where S.J. explains to a friend afflicted by the same problem how she found the solution:

- Think about an object [a sheep in II, a gun in III], then proceed with associations until you come back to the first object. Elaborate your thought, use your imagination to unveil things.
- How did you create this?
- I think it deals with my process to know objective reality, and acquiring knowledge. I think that the starting point is *to go beyond* (*Insomnia* III).

S.J., explains the aim that relies in producing video, as she told me in conversation:

One night I could not sleep and I shot a dialogue with myself. The teacher found it very interesting and told me to turn it into somehow more complete so I also filmed other subjects. This inspiration came when I was particularly solitary, lonely, nobody came to chat with me. Then I acted myself and let the filmed people act themselves. And it came to the core idea of the short film: why, when I cannot sleep, do I come up to think a thing and then another and so on? Because I think this is *to overcome, overcome is the origin, the first step to know*.

In the first shot of *Insomnia* III, S.J. is staring laying on the bed, then she imagines a gun and her thinking flows through associations to a hunter, wild fowls, the sky, clouds, the rain,

floods, injured people, a hospital, Chinese medicine, soya beans, tofu, *tofu houses* (豆腐家 *dou fu jia*, standing for bad structure buildings, a saying emerged after Sichuan earthquake disaster in 2008), school (referring to Sichuan *doufu jia* tragedy), Confucius, Lao Zi, « son » (a governor's son in the eye of a scandal), nephew, kindergarten, criminals (kindergarten slaughters have been a big chronicle case in 2010 China), police, residential permit (户口 *hu kou*), baby, powdered milk, to ski, mountain (covered by smokestacks), then in a climax to doctorate, psychologist, nervous breakdown, suicide, nail houses (钉子户 *dingzi hu*, residents



resisting against their houses demolition), ... up to the popular satire cartoon 草泥马 *Caonima* and 河蟹 *Hexie*, then back to the image of the gun. The video is a fast collage of

thoughts and images: despite the grotesque epilogue (in the last frame she is on a tree pointing a gun to the lens and finally to her head), the shorts series is full in irony and sarcasm, as it depicts with lightness (Voci, 2006, 2010) and introspection the subjective perception of social problems, natural catastrophes, cultural items, chronicles,...with no result in defeating insomnia but giving rise to laughs, self reflections and debates both during screenings and on the online forums.

The short *The Messenger*, the one that won the prize actually, is more controversial: two government messengers visit executed people's families to ask for five cents as bullet compensation. The same scene is repeated in 1968's Shanghai, in Beijing in 1970 and somewhere in Dongbei (North East) area in 1975: the messengers change the uniform according to the time, the families are different as the settings, but the script is the same, except for the third story, in which an old woman after paying the compensation for the lost

husband even gives two apples to the functionaries. As for its sensitive content, the video has been shortly cancelled from the Internet and S.J. received the prize for *Insomnia II*. The works demonstrate a growth in technical skill and, mainly, in investigation and expression, making use of irony to point out individually perceived (and embedded) social issues: *Insomnia* deals with her own experience and so does *The Messenger*, as S.J. got to an unprecedented form of relation with her grandparents in investigating past facts to represent the short story:

I played with the theme word *fēi* (to fly) and *fèi* (fee, to spend), along with the other theme word *zìdàn* (bullet) and here comes *The Messenger*. I looked for some archive materials and family stories from that time, and talked about these facts with my grandparents. We talked a lot about this. They do not understand independent movies, they do not watch them and they think this is not a standard and proper job because they do not get in touch with these people, they watch commercial TV and official programs, I think the gap between us is too huge. They said to me not to engage with such sensitive subjects because I could get some troubles. But I said this is just a short movie. Nevertheless I have not experienced those times and they did: they talk with me about that but they do not judge, they are used to that.

S.J. has no specialization nor degree but she works with TV and media troupe to sustain herself (« filming is a real job now »), while she still brings on her own projects « to go beyond, to overcome and to know »: she overcame in the practices, leaving home and wondering around, then she found the camera as a suitable medium to overcome facts and get in depth with them:

So my first feature film is going to tell *my own story*, I'll show my friends' story (they are going to act for me) and my generation. It's sort of having fun for us, as it is our first time. I think I have to start from myself because I do understand nothing about society, politics and government, but I'm getting to understand something about myself, I even do not know that much about myself but I can come up to an awareness through my memories. [...] I chose feature film because I agree with the idea that there are a lot of things in our memory that we have not recorded but we still want to show them, so the only way is to go through a plot.



***Self-Portrait with Three Women (Z.M.): mirroring in the field***

I want to make a piece. This is my first dance piece, and it is a piece of me. It is called Self-Portrait. Why do I want to make a piece about myself? I started thinking of this question in early 2009. I was 22 years old, just out of university, I had just lost a love, I had no idea what my future life will be like, would it be like most people's lives, or would it be what I truly want? What is the life I truly want? I think of myself. Who am I?

*Z.M. Self-Portrait with Three Women* (自画像 *zi huaxiang*, 2010).

Z.M. (1987) graduated in folk dance in Beijing and in 2009 she joined Wu Wenguang<sup>7</sup> dance and theatre group: the *Self-Portrait* is part of The Memory Project<sup>8</sup>, coordinated by Wu himself, involving several youngsters in the research of their (real or imagined) roots. Z.M. edited the conversations she had with her mother and grandmother (trying to go through their and her story) and the following dance performance inspired by this research. *Self-Portrait* here is particularly relevant because 1) exemplifies the hybridization of representation (documentary, dance, ethnography); 2) shows how the research moves in the proposed threefold direction (author – images – practices); 3) it results from the encounter between the pioneer of the so called « New Documentary Movement » and the post '80 generation.

The young woman performs her troubles in the confrontation with her mother's and her grandmother's experienced ones (« This film began with my own search, then delving into my mother and

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<sup>7</sup> Wu Wenguang is considered as the founder of the so called New Documentary Movement in late '90s (Lu Xinyu, 2005, 2010): with his research and practice (today set at Caochangdi Workstation, Beijing) he marked the further development of filming independently « [...]Maybe this is what is meant by "individual filmmaking". The result of this way of doing things is that [...] I have moved closer and closer to myself, my own inner world. [...] » (Wu Wenguang, 2010: 54 & 49-54).

<sup>8</sup> The project takes inspiration from the « great famine » (1959-61), a political rather than natural phenomenon, re-written through relatives' and people's memories and accounts:

<http://www.ccdworkstation.com/english/2011/crossingfestival%202011.html>

her mother, where blood has flowed through three generations, in these women who grew up in such different times »). The video image is part of the research process aimed to create the performance: the idea to edit a documentary emerged *in itinere* along with the unexpected directions brought by the filmic practice, the image became a *way* (field notes, October 2011). Z.M. reinterpreted the dialogues with the elder women dancing, projecting their words and faces on her body as evidence of incorporation. The authori(ali)ty of filming has raised unpredicted relational practices that go beyond the artistic research: some have not been included in the video editing and in the performance, some other are shown and even analyzed. This is the case of Z.M. intervention in a discussion between grandfather and grandmother:

Grandfather: What are you doing?

ZM: Just let me film a little bit.

Grandfather: Why film those domestic quibbles? What can you do with them? This is embarrassment.

ZM: I film it so you and Granny can see your selves later. Better than anybody trying to assuage you. I'm a grown-up. I'm entitled to saying what I want to say.

She decides to edit this dialogue, moreover she goes in depth in a sort of reflexive ethnography: « When I listen to those words now, they feel awkward. First time I spoke to my seniors this way. I wanted to solve their problem, but I didn't know what I can do. Can I solve their problems? What was I trying to prove? That I was a grown-up? ». The video is a way to discover, to narrate and to represent oneself: what is emphasized here is the process rather than the result, the relations emerging from the research along a dialogic process that shorten distances, as it happens in ethnographic research.

Author's statement at the beginning of *Self-Portrait (What is the life I truly want? I think of myself. Who am I ?)* apparently remarks and proves the critics raised by Pickowicz and Zhang Yingjin (2006: 14):

Many underground filmmakers also imagine that films on another topic – films that scream out: « Look at me! » – can attract foreign audiences and perhaps even foreign investments without violating

the filmmakers' contract with the party/state. These are films that explore the « self » and rapidly evolving notions of self-identity. The state, for its part, is clearly indicating that is no longer necessary, as it was in Mao era, for citizens to think solely in terms of a single national identity explorations. Thus, it comes as no surprise that a very high percentage of underground work deals with the topic of « Who am I? » [...] Preoccupation with self-exploration and the liberation of the ego is by no means new in Chinese cultural production [...] when urban young people sought to break away as « individuals » from the Confucian, family-centered group.

The critic can be confirmed in the strategic re-elaboration by authors in different contexts (as analyzed further), but if we overcome images to get to the practices, with an approach that looks at subjectivities, the « Look at me! » tendency is no more (just) a cinematic device<sup>9</sup> and a self-promotion strategy, rather it is a reaction to the individual urgency of knowledge and expression, the sincere quest for an answer to « Who am I? » The core point is: who is the self who is investigated and represented today? And how does it manage with the video image? As already analyzed by Lu Xinyu (2010: 16) about documentaries, the shift to individualization (个人化 *ge ren hua*) does not imply a detachment from society, rather it would be an index for different engagement and, I add, a different approach to the image and the self.

In the *Self-portrait* the image is mainly body (the author's one in her research and discovering, her mother's and her grandmother's one in the embedded experiences and in the interaction with the DV camera) and it gives back to the author the outline of her self representation. Following Renov (1993, 2008: 21), if the documentary is characterized by 1. recording, revealing,

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<sup>9</sup> A dynamic somehow similar to what Stam states referring to the « aesthetics of garbage »: « For filmmakers without great resources, row-footage minimalism reflects practical necessity as well as artistic strategy » (Stam, 2003: 35). As remarked by young authors, self-centered documentaries are both a « practical necessity » and part of their artistic and personal path. It is relevant for the analysis that most of the authors I met are not that interested in these products distribution (they have other activities and video works they can rely on) rather they find a way to talk about themselves.

preserving; 2. persuading, promoting; 3. analyzing, interrogating; and 4. expressing, what he defines as *first person film* [2004, 2008] further develops such characteristics, with hybrid forms and styles like in Z.M.'s work: the modifiable and interpretable image is deeply subjective when film matter and film maker coincide (Renov 2012). In looking at the video we can not avoid the practices that precede, accompany and follow it as they constitute it. Z.M. brought the Dv camera moved by the need for materials to outline the dance performance about herself, then she came to record her conversations and herself, finding a channel and a medium for a different way of communication, both individual and relational: looking at herself and talking about her thoughts developed unprecedented considerations, gave a new gaze onto herself and her relation with her relatives.

In the *Self-portrait* the attempt to take one's direction, to accomplish parents' and grandparents' expectations, along with the requirements of the changing society, emerges: it is a research device, a chance for reflection and discussion for spectators, as in the author's wish and as it happens after screenings, actually (field note October 2011). The filmed and viewed image, taken into account as a starting place to discover acting subjectivities, opens from a personal course of research and memory onto a shared space for debate and (self) reflection, moreover it unfolds the interaction between artistic practices and ethnographic research.

### **To overcome: the self-image and beyond**

What does it mean to look from the images? It stands for going beyond the images in order to investigate re-elaborations and interpretations, along with strategies and technologies acted with and around the videos that deal with the self. S.J.'s emphasis on the tension to *overcome* (field notes), suggested also by Z.M., is echoed in other subjects' words, such as young director W.H.:

On one side through the film you can shoot some things and let other people watch and judge, on the other side there is a sort of *overcome*, that is I record something and then I go back to it no matter when. The same as with photograph you can get different feelings and

impressions or you can give to other people a sort of sensation of time or another kind of sensation [...] I mean, for example I do not watch anymore what I film now, I watch it once or twice and then I do not watch it again for a year or two...it is a record. I think that the core point here is I want to emphasize that I understand films as a gathering of a lot of things, also a lot of things I see and understand, and I record them then I can remember them and this is to *overcome* (field notes August 2011).

Most of independent Chinese films by previous generations has been very close to a militant and activist cinema, both in intentions and contents, even in the recent trends toward individualization (个人化 *gerenhua*) (Berry, 2007, 2010; Lu Xinyu 2010; Robinson, 2010) and intimism. Nevertheless, post '80 productions show the desire to express, to narrate one's own self in a dimension defined as narcissistic (Pickowicz & Zhang Yingjin, *op. cit.*) that overcomes the cinematographic sphere, often pointing at one's personal and social past, getting closer and detached by it from time to time. The development of the so called *urban generation* (Zhang Zhen, 2007), a group of directors who portrayed the changing Chinese society in the '90s with a cinema claiming for independence from the central discourse, has been followed by various studies on film and video makers (Pickowicz & Zhang Yingjin, *op. cit.*; Chu, 2007; Zhang Zhen, *op. cit.*; Berry, 2010). Nevertheless, most of the researches focus on the images while the social context of production, distribution and exhibition remains marginally explored (Nakajima, 2006, 2010): works circulation, fruition and appropriation (Marcus & Myers, 1995) are still almost uninvestigated<sup>10</sup>. As lot of the works are recognized as weak both technically and aesthetically (Pickowicz & Zhang Yingjin, *op.*

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<sup>10</sup> Luke Robinson (*op. cit.*: 194) suggests such research line: « What I trust this argument also demonstrates is the extent to which Chinese documentary is the product of an interaction between context, theory, and practice. Academic analysis to date has tended to focus on particular aspects of the New Documentary Movement, most obviously its subject matter, mode of production and relationship to both mainstream media and political context. In doing so, it has often neglected the ways in which these issues are intimately connected to, indeed mediated through, questions of film form and practice ».

*cit.*: 19), the image is often assumed to be a pretext and not necessarily an end: videos obtain meaning during the construction process and in the debates that they raise (Yang Mayfair, 1994; Schein, 2008), along with the relations that come from them. This comes into evidence in the experience of *urban generation* followers: post '80 generation as per content do prefer the self narration, whilst in the practices they apparently look for the dialogue with the media and cinema market, both national and international. The deep linkage between filming (oneself) and daily life arises with the ethnography from the image, and such a connection engages more than the «cinema world», to paraphrase Becker (2004): a broader urban population is interested and involved in consuming and producing self-centered video. The analyzed videos on one side confirm the individual and narcissistic account trend to captivate the international audience; on the other side, as the research made evident, a sincere individual quest is represented with the images, strictly embedded in authors' and viewers' practices and not limited to the filmic space. Self narrations gain followers on the Internet and in film festivals, due to an agile problematization of social and individual controversy, but at the same time they are sincerely rooted and articulated with the experienced life. This is the case, for example, of the documentary by W.X. (1983) programmed during two film festivals and screened in some private cine clubs. The camera shoots the author's and his girlfriend's daily life in their apartment «Eating, sleeping, and making love, arguing, trancing, dreaming... day after day. I put the camera in the corner, it records the daily life. In the foreseeable future, I cannot see the hope» (synopsis, 2011). Different narrations are practiced according to contexts (field notes october 2011): the same work in author's words is a hobby, a divertissement (when he chats with friends), a technical exercise and an experiment for self reflection (when he meets viewers) and then «the representation of my generation existential trouble in urban contemporary China, allowed to be expressed just through independent film» (interviewed). Post screening debates have focused both on contents, that is in viewers' identification with

authors' account, and on documentary production and distribution matters: seemingly post '80 authors (amateurs) and viewers are intertwined to independent images with the need for self narration on one side and the desire to express and self promote with the image on the other. Such an attitude would reflect both what Lisa Rofel (*op. cit.*) defines as the *desiring self* (the result of liberal politics, neoliberal economy and the rising of new subjectivities) and the *divided self* traced by Liu Xin (*op. cit.*) and Kleinman & Yunxiang (*op. cit.*)<sup>11</sup>: produced images open to the research field investigating the engaged subjectivities.

From the analysis of videos and practices, post '80 generation distinguishes by its peculiarity in familiar and social context, that is compared to the previous independent directors generations: authors make use of « director » and « independent » status in specific relational contexts (festivals, screenings, debates) as a strategic positioning, whilst such a need of self definition apparently is felt not that urgent in filming practice (field notes 2009, 2010, 2011), the phenomenon being in most cases highly amatorial. Besides, documentaries and films by previous generations have been characterized by the interest in filming the outcasted, giving voice to the lower class population (底层 diceng): today, on the contrary, the center is filmed and authors themselves are at the core of such a center. They are included, they are privileged voices in the society they narrate, even if they do not understand it and apparently they are not understood by it, such an attitude grafts on the documentary « private » shift described by Luke Robinson (*op. cit.*).

The video, from being a collective and popular product (Clark, 1983), turns into an apparently highly personal and individual experience: the imperative is on the research path rather than on the final result, confrontation and sharing are one of

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<sup>11</sup> Precisely on young generations: « Known for their pursuit of freedom, choice, and self-interest; yet they also accept the official discourse that part of their individual identity is defined by their patriotism, namely, their loyalty to the party and the state » (Kleinman & Yunxiang, *op.cit.*: 9).

possible but not necessary developments of the filmic practices, while the urgency is given by the need for subjectivity affirmation, in acting, remembering and interpreting. Post '80 videos and practices give a new perspective on the image in between cinema and amateurial video: they hybridate documentary, fiction and animation film, circulate on specific channels (festivals, clubs, the Internet) and address a growing community.

If we acknowledge, with Pickowicz & Zhang Hingjin (*op. cit.*: 15) and Robinson (*op. cit.*: 194), that recent productions give an ethnographic description by images of the self and its relation with society (but that they still lack analysis depth), notwithstanding the acted technologies of the self unveil with an ethnography from the images that goes beyond and opens to the effective uses of such images in daily practices. The autoreferentiality of an activist and oppositional discourse, that characterized most of the debate on the about *independent Chinese cinema*, during my research appeared far from the space of experience: the investigation of images production and their relation with authors' lives opened to a different reading of video works. To address the images turned to address their subjects-objects: through the discussed cases, I show how the hybrid nature of contemporary works opens to a confrontation on the quest of the self from the images, not only for « directors » but for a broad group of young urban amateurs. The relation with authors and consumers, beyond the mediated pre-view of works, extended the reading levels of the image: the public space is just one of these projects articulations, mainly they are individual gazes on daily life. Economic changes, the emerging individuality and individualization (Yan Yunxiang, 2009) and the (re)definition of subjectivity are unavoidable factors in the analysis of post '80 works, casted in a transforming panorama that joins the transnational dimension. Chinese independent cinema has been far discussed since late '80s, analyzed in its political feature first and then with its intimistic turn, but I think the call for another lecture key to the manifold contemporary productions is needed, particularly for post '80 works, as they articulate the relation among



market consumism, filmic production and subjectivity, in a global rather than local panorama.

### **For an anthropology from the image**

To analyze the so called Chinese independent cinema (in its hybrid forms as discussed above) relying just on images and their effectiveness, that is not taking into account subjects' lives and their relations, reduces its significance, similarly to what pointed out by Livia Hinegardner (2009) in her approach to Human Rights Videos.

If we consider the stratified dimensions of the image, looking (at one self) in the (self)reflecting mirror, the dialogue turns to be multivocal among authors', viewers' (and researchers')<sup>12</sup> reflexivities and subjectivities. The video as part of the research field is both a medium and a theme (Banks & Morphy, 1997), a context and a pre-text for acting subjects. The significance of an anthropology from the image emerges along with the ethnographic and reflexive dimensions that cannot be disregarded: its circularity in positioning, engaging authors and researchers, distinguishes it from art critics and sociological enquiries (Marcus & Myers, 1995), from the ethnographic accounts by artists (Foster, *op. cit.*) and finally from film and cultural studies. As underlined by Schneider and Wright (*op. cit.*), both anthropologists and artists act with distance and intimacy, positioning themselves between the public and the world. The research doesn't aim to fix and analyze the image into definitions, but it moves in order to catch image nature as a practice for the (re)production of culture. Objects (performances, films) deepen cultural value as they are inscribed into *stories* (Marcus & Myers, 2008), and such *stories* are authors', viewers' and social actors' experienced practices. The narrative

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<sup>12</sup> « I am using it [autobiography] as a searchlight to illuminate not only the essential interiority and multiple subjectivities of film spectatorship but also its undeniable but undertheorized social and collective dimensions, especially when films cross national and cultural boundaries. To accomplish this task, I rely not only on personal accounts of film viewing but also on audience ethnography, social history, and film theory » (Naficy, 2003: 183).

dimension, both linguistic and visual, is a subject-constituting machine, it works as a medium between the self and society, like the montage it edits and organizes varied events according to individual interpretations<sup>13</sup>.

Visual anthropology looks at and looks with images: an anthropology from the images (that takes them not as a representational way neither as an end, rather as a starting point) aims to unfold the interaction among video, authors and consumers in the meaning process, to get at a reflexive and comprehensive dimension by each actor. In so doing, the research is multisited (Marcus & Myers, 1998; Hannerz, 2003) and multisided, both in spaces and media, including the Internet as a lived and experienced site (Hine, 2000): videos and authors move in transnational circuits, pursuing confrontation and dialogue to legitimize their existence, first as subjects looking for expression (« The right to speech and the right to express myself » [fieldnote, 2010]) and secondly as image producers, the image taken as a medium but not a pursue. Such a process is particularly evident when video author and subject coincide: to look at *authors* inside and outside the image, that is researching from the images to get to the practices, would bring to a comprehension of the subjective and active dimension of the video image. The hybrid forms (their hybridity showing the connection with practices in interpreting and acting) can be assumed as a starting point to be widened with ethnography in order to investigate subjectivities and their agency, as the proposed cases demonstrate.

« The mise-en-scène of ethnography is being profoundly altered by the deterritorialization of culture » (Marcus, 1995: 107), and subjects' daily mise-en-scène is mirrored in the video *mis-en-scène*: reflexive performativity (Turner, 1993) reveals in the subject/object-public relation, on different levels of identitary constructions. The video is a sort of magic mirror, like the performance (Turner, *ibid.*): it acts reflecting consciences and the

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<sup>13</sup> For an interesting account of the relation among narrative, memory and filming: Oehler (2006).

reflected images are those consciences' products, their meaning emerges from the connection among subjects, viewers and social actors. Performances and videos are not solely reflecting mirrors but they can turn into active changing agents, representing the look we give on ourselves and the look we are watched with. As explains M.J., an English language teacher who practices filming:

We need films that show how our society works: if you record or film it is not considered a problem, problems comes if you let other people watch it. But I can actively understand the society I live in, I have the right to know how it is. Anyway my videos are another matter, they do not deal with such issues because I think... in my opinion in China, and in the independent film circle, there are a lot of opportunists. For example they deliberately shoot documentaries dealing with sensitive political issues, they know foreign festivals like them. Actually I myself do not like politics, I'm not interested in politics but I cannot avoid it, as it has already affected every aspect of my life. But if I lived in a sane society, I would not care about politics but beautiful things. So I like to express myself and tell stories, because it is a form to express freedom, my freedom. Maybe there is nobody interested in watching what I film, and the ones involved in political documentary would tell me that my videos do not give any help to our society, but my fundamental idea is that we should respect persons firstly. So mine are stories of an individual (个人 *geren*), if we would respect the stories of persons our society would be better » (fieldnotes, 2011).

The intertwined study of images, their production and fruition (including the researcher positioning) opens to a knowledge circularity, where the image is taken as an articulated space for exchange and confrontation. Fieldwork doesn't loose its relevance (Murphy, 2011), on the contrary it is intensified by the research and the ethnographic account, that looks at subjects, at their relations to the image and at the practices created by and from the image.

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### Summary

Along with the visual turn experienced by society and daily life, cinema and films remain somehow apart and above the other image forms surrounding us everywhere.

The fascination and *imaginary*, here assumed as active power of (self)representation, brought by filmic experience have not been replaced by the multimedia digital representations, rather they have been transformed and amplified.

In this transforming process, within the relation between (dis)places and subjects, filming still constitutes a mediation stage where makers, matters, viewers and social scientists play.

In this article I show the dialogue in act between video production and ethnography, both in terms of methodology and practices, on the basis of ongoing fieldwork on Chinese *independent images* and their *private* shift.

**Key-words:** subjectivity, hybrid cinema, self-narrative, imaginary, China.

### Résumé

Cadrer le dialogue à travers le miroir : cinéma et ethnographie. Le *Cinéma indépendant* chinois et le Moi

Alors que la société dans son ensemble est sous l'emprise du tout visuel, le cinéma et les films relèvent toujours d'une sphère différente et se distinguent de notre environnement visuel quotidien.

La fascination et l'imaginaire considérés comme un pouvoir actif (d'auto)représentation, provoqué par l'expérience filmique n'ont pas encore été remplacés par les représentations multimédia numériques, ils ont au contraire été transformés et amplifiés.

Au cours de ce processus de transformation, à l'intérieur de la relation espace/sujet, filmer constitue une étape de médiation entre le réalisateur, le sujet, le public, les chercheurs en sciences sociales.

Dans cet article, je déploie un dialogue en action entre une production vidéo et un travail ethnographique, en explicitant la méthodologie et la pratique à partir d'un travail de terrain sur les images « indépendantes » chinoises et leur dimension privée.

**Mots-clefs :** subjectivité, formes hybrides du cinéma, auto-narration, imaginaire, Chine.

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