Estranged Reality: on Narrative Strategies of Early Chinese Independent Film*

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Abstract—**This paper discusses a political practice of film language carried out by the emerging Chinese independent filmmakers at the end of the 20th century. After a careful reading and symptom analysis of the "estranged" narrative passages in four representative independent films in the 1990s, this paper puts forward that the early Chinese independent film relied on the estranged camera language to take anti-classical "monologue to the camera" and "anti-imaginary line" photographs, which integrated the author's own situation into the works and expressed the despair and rebellion of the individual after being suppressed by the state and the collective. On this basis, it further reveals the "reflexivity" of independent film, that is, the "estranged reality" against the "illusion reality" under the traditional film mechanism, and the restraining and dispelling effect on the visual hegemony in the consumerist society.**

Keywords—independent film; reality; estrangement

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of "independent film" first appeared in the United States in the mid-20th century when the film industry was under the monopoly of the "Big Eight" majors[1]. Thanks to application of portable camera and the winning of "Paramount Case"[2], a group of young film producers challenged "the studio system". These independent film makers wrote the script, directed the film and more importantly got funding by themselves. Different from the "standard production" made from those major studios' assembly line, a lot of films with their own style appeared, for example *Fireworks* and *Little Fugitive*. In 1960, *Film Culture*, an American magazine, referred to these filmmakers as "independent filmmakers". It can be seen that at the very beginning independent, films have had a spirit of "small figure's counterattack". It also influences and molded the

emergence of the "New Hollywood" to a large extent.

However, in post-socialist China, as a semiotic signifier, the meaning behind "independent film" is obviously different from its origin. In 1990, Chinese independent films began in the pain of embracing modernity in an all-round way. In the Post-Cold War period, with the change of economic system, the drawing of ecological landscape and the shaping of mainstream value by the national ideology also changed dramatically. In this context, the "independence" of independent films is firstly reflected in the innovation of theme and grammar.

As for its target issues, independent film focused on various social sensitive issues emerging in the course of modernization, such as environmental pollution, population migration and "cruel youth", as well as "abandoned people" in today's world, such as migrant workers, young people in small towns, left-behind children and marginal artists. In addition, influenced by Italian Neorealism and French New Wave, they touched and challenged those forbidden areas and dark corners in the mainstream discourse through rough and realistic images. These films reproduced the alienation and exile of human beings in the transformed social relations. Different from the fifth generation of directors, these film makers with their critical spirit and awareness of potential dangers became the dissolution, deviation and rebellion of the creative context surrounded by the national ideology at that time.

II. THE BREAK OF HISTORY

Compared with the western world built on the Second Industrial Revolution, the modernity of China was slower. However, in the context of the post-Cultural Revolution, China still took reflection and introspection together with a new understanding on subjectivity into the vision of humanistic spirit. Therefore, after more than 30 years of political high pressure, the first step in cultural production was to de-centralize the symbols of centralization such as "planned economy" and "cultural revolution". However, these expressions which retrieved the individual's experience from the historical break suddenly disappeared in the 1990s. At that time, China began to enter the stage of high-speed economic development during globalization and marketization. People's living standard and cultural interests changed dramatically. The change of values brought by fetishism and the popularization of popular culture also

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[1]   The "Big Eight" majors: Warner Bros., Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Paramount, Columbia, Universal, United Artists, 20th Century Fox and Walt Disney.

[2]   In May 1948, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled according to the antitrust law that the vertical monopoly of this major studio was illegal, requiring the studio to give up their film distribution and projection businesses, cutting off their main financial resources, forcing them to drastically reduce film production, which changed Hollywood's film production, distribution and projection modes.

overthrew the ideological enlightenment spirit seeking in the 1980s.

Mass culture tended to convey strong personal awareness and advocated the possibility of self-development, which was different from the "development consensus" of placing personal destiny in the limitation of social structure, i.e. emphasis the development of the whole. At the same time, the mass media also provided various choice of individual imagination, which separated the individual from the overall structure. [1] At the same time, the pursuit of "modernity" had gradually evolved into an embrace of consumerism through the simple seeking of material entertainment needs.

Under such circumstances, Chinese films began its international marketization. Since *Red Sorghum* gained praised from the Western film festivals, *Ju Dou*, *Raise the Red Lantern* and other films all chose to show the feminine consciousness oppressed by the old feudal system, providing a kind of wild life under the visual desire. The directors interpreted it as a carnival at the intersection of "ancient" and "modern" and magnificently exaggerated and transformed history and folklore. In this way, the directors transformed China's old/new scars into cultural commodity that could enter the global capital operation system.

In this period, the internal break of cultural and historical context "came from the complicated and ambiguous ideological behavior in the Post-Cold War era and the fission of the mainstream ideology in the constant central implosion; came from the process of global capitalism, the resistance of localism and nationalism, the involvement of transnational capital in the local cultural industry and the intensification of the process of cultural commercialization in the global and local cultural markets; came from the role and writing behavior of local intellectuals surrounded by post-modernist context and post-colonial situation." [2] Dai Jinhua pointed out that this situation profoundly affected the new batch of graduates from Beijing Film Academy at that time, which made them face the imbalance of shooting resources. Driven by the market interest of ticket office, the sixth generation directors gradually turned to low-cost film production. They looked for themes from daily life and projected their own experience into roles. They realized metaphorical criticism of modernity by setting up a marginal figure which was negated by the mainstream society. They examined the social phenomena and class gap extended by the modern process and recorded the sense of loss in daily life in the film. At the same time, the heterogeneity of society accelerated the mobility of the population. Instantaneous and unfamiliar life structure prompted the sixth generation of directors to turn to explore the doubts and emptiness in the characters' mind. Zhang Yuan, the first independent film director in China, once talked about the differences between himself and the fifth generation of director. "We are totally different. They have experienced the Culture Revolution, which gives them the romantic of literati. However, we target on social issues and social realism." [3] Such rebellious writing postures can be regarded as a collective strategy to move from marginal identity to central context. It can also be understood as a silent contradiction to the vanity of the "Chinese scene" in the fifth generation of films.

III. MY CAMERA DOESN'T LIE

Intentionally or unintentionally, the line "my camera doesn't lie" in the film *Suzhou River* released in Hong Kong in 2000 made a stylistic summary of the Chinese independent film in the 1990s and became a proclamation and interpretation of why these films tend to be "real". Cheng Qingsong and Huangou used the line as the title of their works and interviewed many pioneer Chinese filmmakers born in the 1960s. Professors Paul Pickowicz of the University of California and Zhang Yingjin continue to take this as their theme, proposing that the shooting of independent films is a meaningful production of political action. They hold the view that it is not only a propagation of "real", but also a mediation process between "self-orientation" and "audience"[4]. The opinions mentioned above interpret "non-lying" as a symbol of independent films against national ideology. On this basis, I believe that these words are also the inheritance and development of "real film", which is the end of the inherent deception of traditional film language from its own perspective, making the film picture become the image proof of the existence of "filmmaker" and "subject".

As a practice of "not lying", China's first independent film *Mama* shows a strong desire to break through the "fog barrier". *Mama* told the story of a mother Liang Dan, despite the opposition of her company, the school and even her husband and families, overcame constant difficulties and the heavy burden of life to raise her mentally retarded son Dongdong by herself. The film won many awards at major European film festivals, becoming a new window for the West to gaze China besides the fifth generation of film. The film was intertwined with the real interview of the prototype of the film, a mother of a retarded child. In addition to the alternating black/white and color images, two stylized camera settings are also impressive.

Scene 1: An accident happened to Dongdong and Liang Dan was anxiously waiting for the nurse. At this time, Liang Dan suddenly faced close-up and looked into the camera directly, making the audience to look at her tired eyes (see "Fig. 1").

Fig. 1. Mama.

Scene 2: Dongdong was muttered in his dream. Instead of turning her head to the direction of her son, Liang Dan looked directly at the camera for a long time and then asked:"Dongdong, did you say Mama?" (see "Fig. 2")

Fig. 2. Mama.

Unexpected turn of body and question, director Zhang Yuan intentionally broke the narrative integrity of the film by breaking the "fourth wall", and the audience became the unavoidable questioning object "outside the wall". In other words, the audience, who should have been not perceived as a ghostly "peeper", began to participate directly in the narrative as "absent attendees". As a result, the film pictures and even the screen become a mirror which is anti-realistic but still maintains the realistic dimension, a semi-closed but easily surmountable flat boundary. The performances in which the actors look at the audience and communicate directly with the audience obviously have a Verfremdungs effect like Bertolt Brecht's "direct address".

Verfremdungs effect, more commonly known by John Willett's 1964 translation as the alienation effect (earlier) or as the estrangement effect (more recently), is a performing arts concept coined by German playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956). On this basis, he created the "epic" theater to distinguish it from the "realism" theater advocated by Stanislavsky. Epic theater generally does not use a dramatic conflict event throughout the whole drama. The connection between the senses is loose. At the same time, it creates a distance or obstacle between actors, audiences, roles, and events to form an "estrangement" aesthetic effect. The purpose is to enable the audience to jump out of the pure situation illusion and emotional resonance, to review the actor on the stage with a critical mind to provoke the rational thinking and judgment of the audiences. Unlike Aristotle's "tragedy" theory, which emphasizes the audience's emotional and illusory participation, estrangement means that the audience consciously and rationally looks at the drama, thus

gaining a profound understanding of life and ultimately realizing the drama's critique of social reality. [5]

This pioneer technique of expression was used by Zhang Yuan in his next work. *Beijing Bastards* tells the life story of rock singer Cui Jian, young man Karzi and his girlfriend Mao Mao, as well as the writer Daqing in Beijing. In the film, Zhang Yuan once again set up bridge plots of "monologue to camera". Scene 1: In the subway station, Karzi was depressed after leaving Mao Mao, and his new girlfriend also left him. Karzi sat down and the camera was quickly pushed to close-up. As if receiving an interview, Karzi began to complain to the camera. "Haven't seen her (Mao Mao) for half a month. Suddenly my life is very empty, so empty..." ("Fig. 3"). The fast-moving subway in the background, the crowd and Karzi formed a sharp contrast. Scene two: Daqing, who was running from the creditors, found his home was destroyed. Having nowhere to complain, Daqing had no choice but to defend himself powerlessly against the camera: "Actually, I'm not the kind of person who do not pay his debts... I have something in common with them. We are all social outsiders."("Fig. 4") Daqing's dialogue echoed with the other characters in the film that did not know each other but shared the similar spiritual pursuit. It also echoed the reality of directors Zhang Yuan, actors Cui Jian and Liu Xiaodong.[3]

Fig. 3. Beijing Bastards.

Fig. 4. Beijing Bastards.

The sudden dialogue breaking away from the narrative plot and forcibly interrupting the audience's thoughts reveals the dilemma of the independent filmmakers and reverses the traditional closed narrative structure, so that the audience can perceive the "deceptive" realism in traditional films, which trigger their critical thinking.

In the following year, another independent director, Wang Xiaoshuai, inherited and developed the defamiliarized camera language. *The Days* told about the dull and tedious life of the young couples, Dong (winter in Chinese) and

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[3]   Cui Jian and Liu Xiaodong play the role of rock player and painter respectively in Beijing Bastards, which is their occupation in real life.

Chun (spring in Chinese). They were teachers of Academy of Fine Arts. However, this couple were getting further and further and finally torn apart in the tide of reform and opening up. Painter Dong, still played by Liu Xiaodong, was living a poor life, and could not bear the blow of his wife Chun's departure. In despair, he looked out the window aimlessly with a telescope. When he turned to the camera, he seemed to find something out of sudden and began dressed himself in front of the mirror alone and absently. Here, the camera is the mirror of Dong ("Fig. 5"). Then, the "present absentees", the voice-over who never show his face revealed the fact that Dong had lost his mind. In this scene, the role and the audience gaze at each other for several times, which undoubtedly reveal the role of "peeping" of the screen.

Fig. 5.   The Days.

Four years later, Jia Zhangke tried a more radical fracture narrative in his first film *Xiao Wu*. At the end of the film, the thief Wu was caught of stealing again. He was chained on a pole, letting the crowded to watch, just liking "exposing a cut-off head to public view as a warning" in a sense. With the crowd gathering, the camera that was shooting Wu suddenly turned 180 degrees to simulate Wu's perspective and completed the transformation of subjective and objective in a single lens. The camera recorded all the people in the crowd one by one. The blank-faced onlookers became an impromptu urban landscape painting ("Fig. 6"). This kind of mirror operation, which completely violated the general film language grammar, directly crossed the clear distinction between documentary and feature film, challenged the narrative "reality" with objective "reality", which clearly exposed the "reflexivity" of the internal mechanism of the general film. The purpose of returning the camera to the simple function of recording at this moment was to make the audience had space to retain active thinking in the process of watching the film. More importantly, it gave the audience the power of interpretation. In this way, the independent film not only destroys the integrity of "institutional movies" formally,

but also breaks through the closure of the film control consciousness of audience.

Fig. 6.   Xiao Wu.

Dispelling the mainstream ideology has become a post-modern resistance of the sixth generation of directors to the authoritarian system. It is also a way for them to try to acquire individual identity in the contemporary Chinese context. These four works mentioned above all realized the dual reference of "internal" and "external" in the film: the social outsiders who constantly seeking external recognition reflect the embarrassing creative environment of independent filmmakers. Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai and Jia Zhangke all smashed the "transparent aquarium" in the way of "monologue to the camera" of the characters in the play, showing their subjectivity as film producers. No matter it is directly questioned by the subject, like in *Mama, Beijing Bastards*, or questioned through the voices of the other, like in *The Days*, or even it is voiceless questioned like in *Xiao Wu*, all these together construct the "confession" narrative of in the early independent movies of China, the polyphonic expression of identity from questioning to silence, from self-development to self-reclusion. Independent directors'

backlash against the language of classical movies has become a solemn statement that they were in a desperate or even crazy situation. More importantly it severed as a strategy to stimulate audiences' reflection.

If to examine the early independent movies in China by examining the traditional narrative pattern with the intention of recording the authenticity and psychological subjectivity like the French New Wave, they may be similar in the spiritual core. Following Bordwell's interpretation of the French New tide's exponential meaning of deviation from classical norms, "an abnormal angle, an emphasized splicing, a forbidden camera movement, an unreal lighting or scene transformation — in short, any damage to the temporal and spatial state of a logical driven film can be interpreted as the 'author's comment'." [6] Independent filmmakers try to reveal the visual hegemony and ideological inquiry of the mainstream image mechanism with the power of "author's film". By remolding the visible or invisible individual image as the "self-reference" of the repressed subject, they make the "expressiveness" and "authenticity" of the producer and his works known to the audience in an organic and active way.

IV. THE SOUND OF SILENCE

American film scholar Tom Gunning puts forward the early film character as "the cinema of attraction". In the early stage of the film, the narrative is not mature. In order to control the audience's visual orientation, theaters often attract the audience's attention by juggling, magic, comedy and other spectacular shows that stimulate emotional excitement. They even allow actors to constantly looking directly at the camera during the performance. "From comedians laughing to the camera to magicians bowing and gesturing constantly in magic films, this kind of film reveals its visual characteristics and intention to tear apart a self-confined fictional world and to grab the attention of the audience as much as possible." [7] However, the self-narrative rules have gradually been established, and the appearance of feature films has changed the juggling nature of films. D.W. Griffith created a closed narrative structure and classical editing, forbidding actors to look directly at the camera in order to prevent the destruction of the fictional world. But Gunning believes that "the cinema of attraction" has not disappeared because of the dominance of narrative films but change as some avant-garde techniques. Gunning's re-exploration of the performance nature of the early films is to highlight the relationship between avant-garde films and audiences. "Total and direct crash, instead of immersing in the fictional world." [8]

The cinema of attraction uses visual temptation to catch the audience's concentration in the process of watching movies, which has no narrative role in itself. However, the reason why independent films tend to be approach the "reality" with "estrangement" is that they intend to break the traditional narrative structure and tell the audience: I want you to know that I'm shooting a film. Like the film *Suzhou River* under the theme "my camera doesn't lie", the audience gradually doubts the image they see with their own eyes

under the repeated "persuasion" of the narrator: how "real" will exist in the controlled visual space.

Jia Zhangke once mentioned his composition of the ending of *Xiao Wu*: "One day when we were filming, a lot of people were watching, and I suddenly got the inspiration. I wanted to shoot the crowd around him. At that time, I suddenly felt that at the end of the film, if everyone looked around him, these people might have some relationship with the audience. I was very excited at the thought of the end. Of course, I also thought of Lu Xun's "onlooker"." [9] The beginning of how "onlooker" appeared in the pioneer works of modern Chinese literature is that: At the beginning of the 19th century, Lu Xun was traveling to Japan to study medicine. When he saw the film of Chinese compatriots be headed and executed in class, he was shocked by the crowd watching torpidly. He decided to give up the study of medicine for witting. Those indifferent onlookers became the prototype of "onlookers" who watched Ah Q's execution in *The True Story of Ah Q*. Therefore, it is not difficult to find the intertextuality between *Xiao Wu* and *The True Story of Ah Q*, that is, the arrest process of Wu and Ah Q is gazed at by others, and they are meant to be the losers in the stage of China's modernization. [10]

Rey Chow, a professor at Duke University, analyzed that the driving force of Lu Xun's shock and perplexity. It came not only from the numbness of the onlookers, but also from the initial spectacular experience brought by the film through magnifying the original image, which highlighted the importance of "technical visualization". Chow, also interpreted Lu Xun's visual experience as a two-dimensional visual shock of modernism: First, how the "self-consciousness" of the audience in the "third world" was revealed in the post-colonial context of the film. That is to say, "self-consciousness" felt by Lu Xun in the process of watching the film was closely related to the onlookers at the execution scene, which made Lu Xun realize that he and his compatriots in the film were regarded as "miracles" by Japanese students. Secondly, the film showed Lu Xun a language with more direct effect than words. [11] Then, Zhou suggested that Lu Xun's film experience could still use to examine how visuality works in non-westernized culture, how to treat non-westerners who are also gazing at the subject, and how they use the visual mechanism to fantasize the connection between themselves and the real world. [12] Accordingly, the location of the "onlookers" in *Xiao Wu* is also the experiment of Jia to overturn visual dominant in studio film. When audiences realize that their perspectives overlap with those of the onlooker in the film, Jia further realizes the isomorphism between the onlookers on the spot and the audiences of the film

Unique narrative strategy, the rigid "monologue to the camera" plus the uncovered anti-imaginary line photography formed the estranged appearance and essence of the early independent films in China, which exposed the "covered/hidden" reality of the film censorship system. Even though it was impossible to experience it personally, technical visualization enabled the audience to examine the real world twice, even "trial" the real world. When independent films expose "reality" beyond "illusion" by

breaking the principles of "continuity editing" and "imaginary line" to reveal the "reality" beyond the "illusion", they also open up another dimension of visual field of contemporary Chinese films, releasing an unrestrained and flowing observation position. Meantime, independent films collapse the Utopian imagination repeatedly shaped by mainstream films and play a symphony with "the sound of silence", which used to be everywhere but heard by no one in the objective world.

V. CONCLUSION

For the mainstream domestic film audience who grew up under the influence of consumerism, "entertainment to death" is not a warning or prediction but a neglected fact, like an "absent attendee" firstly spotted by most people but unconsciously inherent in the subject itself. Audiences have become more and more keen on "real" visual wonders, forming a psychological and physiological dependence, which immediately degenerate them into a silent, passive "majority", blurring their eyes to see the reality of today's world. When "seeing" is not necessarily "believing", when the image, a mere entertainment tool, prompts people to abandon the attempt to think and criticize and become a conspiracy or grasp of the ideological expression of "reality", then "reality" becomes a rather doubtful signifier.

In this context, the interpretation standpoint beyond the socialist collective narrative embodied in independent films is particularly important. Wang Xiaoshuai once summarized the radical film movement in a talk show: "'Independence' covers too many meanings — independent existence, independent expression, and independent viewpoint. But the good thing is that we are not imbalanced by independence. All good independent films imply universal values and concerns for people, which is the most important point of the new films in the early 1990s. These films focused and cared about every individual so that the bottom-up politics can be embodied in the individual.[13]" However, in Dai Jinhua's opinion, though this political image experiment in China at the turn of the century inspired independent filmmakers to break through the traditional narrative of Chinese films, it once again became "the other" in western discourse fatefully, "just like Zhang Yimou and his movies, which provided and enriched the old Orientalism image to westerners; The selection of the sixth generation film in the West, once again as the 'other', was used to supplement the pre-existing expectations of western liberal intellectuals on the Chinese cultural landscape in the 1990s. Once again, it is used as a mirror to complete the outline of democracy, progress, resistance, civil society and marginalized people of China by western liberal intellectuals. [14]"

Viewing form today, Dai's observation is undoubtedly sensitive and accurate. The early narrative strategy of Chinese independent films is the creative consciousness of a group of filmmakers who maintain independence from the system and consciously explore the reality. At the same time, these image innovators uncover the shadows under the bright surface of the country, and overturn the authority and legitimacy of dogmatic realism to supplement folk memories on the screen. This is not only a speculative reflection of the image, but also an attempt to grasp the practice of image creativity. However, this practice path gradually changed from expressing individual despair and rebellion after collective repression to the universal and bottom narrative in the Western value system. The changes of narrative object and expression technique also reflect the shift of the filmmakers' speculative power from resisting political authoritarianism to criticizing capitalized society. But at that time, the expansion of social capital and the "independence" of movies did not run counter to each other but are closely connected. On one hand, the former constituted the critical context of independent movies. On the other hand, the great improvement and growth of financing channels and amounts provide a more flexible creative space for the independent movie. In this sense, its independence is maintained under the protection of capital, capital has become the basis for its survival and the ceiling for its development.[4] Thus, since the 21st century, the independence of Chinese independent films, together with the reality come along, has embarked on the path of blurring, disintegrating or even decaying.

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[12] Ibid., p.32.

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[14] Ibid. 2, p.407.

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[4] At that time, Chinese independent films, which were still mainly dependent on foreign investment, showed different degrees of self-otherness in order to satisfy the Western imagination of Chinese cultural landscape in the 1990s.