Volume 2, Issue 2 (Autumn, 2019)

uma ficção inútil - 小說無用 - tiểu thuyết vô dụng

Cheong Kin Man

Recommended Citation:

Licensing
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License
Abstract

Confused, frustrated but encouraged, he put his whole “him” into this film. The filmmaker approached his life struggles as a dilemma between the filmed and the non-filmed, the translation and the impossibility of communication, the voice-over and the subtitles. As a fan of Kon Ichikawa and Yasunari Kawabata, and a lover of Michio Takeyama’s novel “Harp of Burma” back then, he tried to express that complexity in a series of multilayered fictive/true stories through visual, audial and, especially, textual manipulations while questioning the power structure of image quality. Mixing his banal daily life, his past, and the filmmaking process, the filmmaker raised several anthropological and essentialist questions on nature, origin, language, non-existence, identity, visual media and dominant cultures. He strived to find answers in a circle of interpreting himself in a conflict between oppressed and powerful languages, retranslating what was translated and letting others reinterpret him from both within and without the film. But would everything really become useless when one transcended boundaries inside one’s mind?
I made my humble experimental film, “uma ficção inútil - 小説無用 - tiểu thuyết vô dụng” (a useless fiction), five years ago in the framework of my MA studies in Visual and Media Anthropology at the Freie Universität Berlin. For the dear viewers who would be interested in what I had in mind when I was making that film, I wrote the following commentary for entanglements.

See HTML version for accompanying video content

“Motivation”

Motivation. It seems to me it is always taken-for-granted that there must be some well thought and well structuralized motivation, or at least a reason behind everything done. But writing this accompanying text for the film I made so long ago, I realized that my motivation behind both the making of my film and the writing about it was nothing more than a spontaneous and emotional matter. My fellow filmmaker Jae-Pyung Park said seeing a director q&a-ing is to kill the fantasy around a film: “映畵監督의 質疑應答을 보는 것은 映畫를 向向 가질 수 있는 幻想을 殺害하는 行為다.” Even the producer of my film Aïlien Reyns said only the film matters, “Alleen de film telt!” However, the film has become a sort of “distant” memory, or a chaotically made visual diary with which I do not agree much anymore - although I still consider myself to be a part of it, today. And so I do not resist the temptation to explain more about the film, even though I cannot bare to see it anymore.

In the early stage of the film, my supervisor Dr. Laurent van Lancker emailed me “je ne mentionnerai pas que ton intention était juste de finir le master, car cela dégrade un peu tout le trajet et projet du film…” (“I would not mention that your intention was just to finish the master, since it downgrades a bit the whole process and project of the film”) By then “to only finish my master” was my initial motivation. Only knowing later on from Laurent himself that he was very supportive of most of my ideas, which meant I was sure to get my master’s degree, I felt that I was given a lot of space for creativity.

Pleasure and emotion thus became the pure reasons behind this project.

Although at the end I did not mention that finishing my MA was my only intention, I insisted on mentioning in the film that it was what we call “家課” in informal Cantonese (“homework”, I translated it myself as “master project” in English in the subtitles). Looking back to that moment five years ago, it seems that it worked out very well that I did not think about the audience at all: at that time I did not intend to make a film, but rather to create an intimate and for-private-club-members-only visual diary. The fact that I
did not take any possible audience into consideration has driven many viewers into a certain feeling of the “impossibility of communication”, which I was unable to imagine. These words were said to me after the graduation screening at Berlin’s Moviemento in 2014 by one of my classmates and film critique Clara Miranda Scherffig. They were later repeated in an interview with Revista Macau by a very important person for my film, Dr. Nadine Wanono.

Nadine, who was Jean Rouch’s student and friend, said at her last class in the MA program in Berlin that there was certainly limited time for readings, yet imagination should be unlimited. After that class, I continued my journey of self-discovery in Singapore where I became a research intern in sociology. There, I turned completely to film and literature, abandoning the academic readings that I had been doing for three semesters. Singapore’s postcoloniality and interculturality reminded me of my Macao background and it was in that Southeast Asian country and only three months before the graduation screening in Berlin where I wrote the very script of my film, which was inspired by my daily life then. I was spending most of my time trying to construct the deconstructible emotional links among the textual, the aural, and the visual, and I created certain life habits that I still practice today to a certain extent (most notably, language learning). What frustrates me today, however, is the fact that I did not take smell and taste into consideration during the process of deconstructing those links.

“Emotions”

I was asked by the Macao press several times to explain the “topics” of my film. I quote myself here: “Altogether there were six topics I wanted to talk about with this film: the reflexive non-filmed process of the making of the film itself; returning to one’s own culture and way of thinking; similarities vs. differences among cultures; translation-languages-interpretation; and the reflection on making Ou Mun Ian, Macaenses (a 2009 documentary).” (From Macau Closer) But until now, if I am not forgetting any details from any Q&A or interview, I have never told anyone that I had a lot of emotions while making and even later upon seeing the film. Basically, I followed my personal emotions and intuitions during the whole process, for example, instead of making a minimal effort to try to analyze my own life, I went on writing about everything that I felt emotionally necessary. By identifying myself as someone intellectually restless, if not in exile from anthropology - I put hope in philosophical texts and language learning -, I took advantage of my own emotions and hard-sold them, in the name of a trained postcolonial victim of the dilemma between positive and negative world views on a colonial past. This is what I called an “intellectual trap”, in which I find myself happy, or even feel the need to fall into, especially now as a PhD student of a social science with colonial sin. Apart from the idea of emotion, what concerned me a lot was the so-called “usefulness” of the film: if I exclude my teachers and classmates from the MA program, the only target viewer would be myself and I even wanted (as I told Mona Ruzicka from Die Welt in 2015) to delete the whole film. I cite here how I was cited then: “Kurz vor der Abgabe habe ich überlegt, ihn zu löschen. Er kam mir so nutzlos vor. Ich war zu ehrgeizig und habe alles in den Film gepackt. Jedes Detail hat eine Bedeutung.” (“Right before I sub-
mitted my film, I wanted to delete it. It was so useless for me. I was too greedy to put everything inside the film. Every detail has its own meaning”).

However, if I try to leave my egocentric way of looking at my own film, I would still imagine that it can be seen in the eyes of many viewers as a visual diary without much emotion. So for them music, I would say, would be the only direct hint at my emotions. Five years ago, I asked Eunice Hsu who was my colleague at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore to sing “橄欖樹” (Olive Tree) for the film, which appears in the very beginning. I have no way of verifying if the lyrics by Echo Chan (1943-1991, also known as Sanmao by her pseudonym in Mandarin) was the original English one. The song always strikes me emotionally, even though the English cover by Sally Yeh released in 1980 sounds a bit unnatural. Eunice is an American with Taiwanese parents. She translated the first two couplets into English in a very natural way, even though one would argue that is not a perfect literal translation. For me Eunice’s interpretation, both by singing that song and translating the lyrics into her own English, transmits the sensation of feeling far away from one’s origin. Many viewers has seen this part as the most “attractive” part of the film, especially those who saw it on the internet. By finishing this paragraph about music, I feel here the need to reveal an explicit, if not “hidden,” emotional, or merely an intellectual point. Following two couplets of lyrics of “花だより” (Hanadayori) from Japanese fiction film “伊豆の踊子”’s (The Dancing Girl of Izu, 1963), I inserted a silenced piece of video where Sayuri Yoshinaga is singing this film’s theme song on a NHK’s Kohaku show (but with a sound recording of the typhoon “Fung-wong” landing in Macao). That Japanese film by Katsumi Nishikawa was one of the main sources of inspiration for how I approached nature in the film as a symbol of a universe of cultures that I once believed in.

Another significant point of the film, to me and some viewers, was the scene of Teledifusão de Macau’s (TDM) João Guedes reporting the “Operação Dragão” (Dragon Operation) in 1990 when the colonial government intended to grant the illegal Chinese immigrants right to reside in Macao. I was three years old at that time and until the “Operação Dragão”, I was considered by the Portuguese administration in Macao a “foreign citizen” because I was a son of illegal migrants from China. My mother was granted a permanent resident ID after the chaos during that operation and I became a legal Macao citizen. Luckily, my mother was not in the chaos of the protest, but the images from that reportage moved me a lot the first time I saw it, 11 years ago in Lisbon, when Rádio e Televisão de Portugal (RTP Internacional) broadcasted this again in a special program. I could not help but imagine how the illegal immigrants did everything to get their ID cards. In the film, the scene was deconstructed first by only sound (with a black background and few subtitles), and then with just an image (but with intertitles of statements in different languages). In that scene, the Macao police officers fired shots into the air and it only caused even more chaos.
“An experimental film”

In 2017, thanks to Taiwanese filmmaker Jia-Ling Li’s invitation, my film had its first screening in Taipei. It was there that I said for the first time that I fell into an “intellectual trap”. Basically when I look back at what we did in the MA program, I still feel very much that I was encouraged as a would-be-decolonized intellectual from a postcolonial society. So much so that I even felt I should be as rebellious and self-victimized as possible. Once the critical knowledge that I would produce was well framed and accepted to fit in the system, it would then become part of the system. Fortunately, I saw a huge amount of freedom in the MA program, a lot of experimental films, many “innovative” research cases (even if I have a particular doubt about the idea of “innovation” in general) and, ultimately, ideas of decolonization and emancipation from whatever I could imagine as oppression. In my head there were only “challenging” ideas, which influenced me a lot since the conceptualization of the film. One of my teachers, Kristian Petersen, also told me on Skype that I could do whatever I would like to do bar a film that would be too boring to watch: “Du kannst machen, was immer du willst, mach nur nicht etwas allzu langweiliges.” (“You can do everything that you want, but just don’t do something too boring.”)

This is why, every single detail in the film was made to challenge something, especially what I would judge back then as something coming from a cultural hegemony. From Hito Steyerl’s essay *In Defense of the Poor Image* (2009) to Trinh T. Minh-ha’s film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), I was inspired to fantasize an autoethnography where I would project myself as an emotional victim suffering from being lost among cultures. I imagined a series of dichotomous relationships between an oppressive one and an oppressed one. In the meantime, inspired by Buddhist essays from Mumon Yamada, I did question the validity of those dichotomies by talking about how one could transcend these kinds of dichotomies, by, very ironically, falling into the dichotomy of the dichotomous and the non-dichotomous. I find auto-victimization was a strategy that I embraced as a way to produce knowledge. Nonetheless, it felt that imagining oneself as a victim was rather an unconscious thing and an imaginary enemy was necessary if not essential to be the victim of anything. Seemingly it is like, to cite Hong Kong’s most famous comedian Stephen Chow (himself citing Mao) in the comedy *God of Gamblers III: Back to Shanghai* (1991): “We should support whatever the enemy opposes, and oppose whatever the enemy supports.” To give an example: to oppose the idea of “talking heads”, I showed only my interviewees’ faces while they were listening to my questions.

Another reason why I finally accepted to label my film as “experimental” is due to how I named the film. I radically believed that every claimed truth was fiction even though the film is 99% based on facts. Already several times in different screenings I had the chance to say that I did not regret titling my film a “fiction,” but I would do it differently now since I do not insist on that belief anymore. Here, I could say my film greedily includes too many things, but one certain common point among them is the fact that the film is full of paradoxes, if not contradictions. This was, and to a certain extent is still, very much how I am. “I saw you in the film,” was how two dear Chinese friends of mine Wang Chaofan and Yin Yiyi commented on my film when it was competing at
South Taiwan Film Festival. In fact, I aspired to see how I, myself, could be a subject of expression in either oppressed or oppressive languages. In this matter, I would like to repeat what I repeated at several screenings and conferences where I presented my film: “In whichever language I speak I feel colonized. Sometimes I feel very ironically less colonized in English, French, German or (even in) Portuguese since they are European languages. These European languages didn’t see radical changes, at least not in recent times. The now Westernized Chinese language is the one that frustrates me the most.” The frustrations of feeling colonized while using the languages that I know inspired my film, but they are no longer useful in my intellectual life. I used to believe that I could escape from all this by learning as many “oppressed” languages - and thus different ways of thinking - as possible, now I rather tend to recognize the movements present among languages as they are and I am slowly losing interest in criticizing these movements. For me, there were some utopian ways to get “out of the box” by fantasizing that one could always take new languages as philosophical refuges from being colonized or oppressed by an imaginary hegemonic way of thinking. Once I aspired to get “out of the box”, but now I am happy to stay inside.

Cheong Kin Man is a PhD student in Visual and Media Anthropology at the Freie Universität Berlin. He is on a sabbatical leave to accompany his Belgian wife for her Chinese studies at the Zhejiang University, where he audits Japanese, Korean and Russian courses. He was an EU-trained translator and interpreter in the Macau government and hold a BA in Portuguese studies. He produced and made several films, among which, his MA experimental film “a useless fiction” was presented in 40 countries. He also lived in Portugal, Belgium and Singapore and has a great passion for learning random languages. Web: https://www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/ethnologie/personen/doktorand_innen/cheong/index.html