

Duan Jinchuan on *No.16 Barkhor South Street* and *The Square*

八廓南街 16 号 (dir. Duan Jinchuan 段锦川, 1996)

广场 (dir. Duan Jinchuan and Zhang Yuan 张元, 1994)

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A new scientific truth triumphs, not by convincing its opponents and thus making them recognise it, but because its opponents finally die and a new generation that is familiar with the truth grows up. (Paul Samuelson in *Economics*, quoting Max Planck from *Scientific Autobiography, and Other Papers*)

Question: I think the film *No.16 Barkhor South Street* is very much concerned with recording the time of everyday life, and it's very well recorded. The camera can easily intervene in the course of events. Some films rely on narration, confession, and even re-enactment to ensure the integrity [of the event], which causes the time of everyday life to become more and more like a story. How do you record everyday temporality in its totality? Is this a question that you have answered before?

Answer: This is an interesting question, and I hadn't considered it from this perspective before. Your question contains these concepts:

1. The relationship between the recorder and the person being recorded;
2. The relationship between real life and film;
3. The way in which life is represented;
4. What is the rationale for this approach;

Let's start with the easy ones, which are the last two questions.

No.16 Barkhor South Street, as well as some of my other films, including *The Square* co-produced with Zhang Yuan, and even Zhang Yuan's *Crazy English* 疯狂英语 (1999), all adopt an observative approach, that is, keeping a certain distance between the camera and the subject, without intervention, preferably striving to minimise the impact of the camera on the subject, and to represent the characters and events as they are, as fully and truly as possible. First of all, from a technical aspect, it

attempts to avoid expressing the author's emotions and ethical orientation. This is the concept of the so-called 'direct film' in documentaries. This concept emerged in the 1960s and is still used by many directors today.

The rationale for this approach is extensive, and it simply relates to some of the inherent flaws in our traditional culture, the rape of our culture and art by ideology over the years, and of course the Party's control over our minds and everything, which has led people's minds towards a kind of ossification filled with falsehoods and lies. At the beginning of the so-called 'New Documentary [Movement]', some independent filmmakers wanted to make an effort in this direction. In the beginning, we made documentaries according to our enthusiasm, intuition, and belief, then gradually discovered supporting and practicable theories. Direct film is certainly a good way to resolve this issue. It rejects everything that might interfere with the audience's reception, such as narration, voice-over, music, and even interviews, the techniques applied in most documentaries. 'Direct film' is in fact a kind of epistemology based on the philosophical term 'scepticism', and it does not offer a consequence that can be easily judged. Everything is open, and the viewer must think and draw their own conclusions.

Of course, this method has its limitations, and it cannot be a panacea. Especially, it has the shortcoming in expressing the characters' inner self and emotions, and the audience can be overwhelmed by that intense sense of uncertainty in the reception process. However, for me, this method is sufficient.

When it comes to the integrity of the event, it is a question of the relationship between art and life. There are two kinds of perceptions in this regard: we all understand the complexity of life, but in the process of representation people tend to adopt a simplistic approach that merely interprets life as a certain concept. Under this premise, life itself is not important. The other kind of perception is that life should be complex. I am prone to this 'complexitivism'. Of course, it is not that I want to restore life. This is not necessary. And I do not emphasise certain concepts in my works, but the so-called themes and concepts are hidden quite deep and implicitly.

Another point is the perception of storyline or dramatic effect by people, including the creators themselves and the audience. It's not that documentaries don't consider dramatic effect at all. Real life may or may not contain dramatic effect, which depends on your luck. There is never a lack of dramatic scenes in real life, but that doesn't matter. Many creators don't understand this. They regard strong conflict as dramatic effect, while a lack of conflict is not good or even unsuccessful. What I understand by dramatic effect is a matter of structure, whether the film is well structured, whether the motivation of the events makes sense, whether the turn and the conflict are necessary, whether the relations between the characters and the timing are correct, and so on. These are the

most fundamental things that structure dramatic effect. What is important in filming is the author's choice and judgement of events, and this is when the integrity of the events becomes an important condition.

For example, during the shooting of *No.16 Barkhor South Street*, although it took a very long time, my actual time spent filming was short, and the ratio of film shot was about 4 or 4.5 to 1. That is to say, I knew exactly what I was going to shoot, how I was going to shoot it, and even how I was going to structure the film. And I did a lot of preliminary research, so I knew exactly what was going to happen in the setting, which characters were going to appear, how things were going to develop, and so on. So the rest was just a matter of making a quick judgement on the spot, if something was or wasn't what I needed. As for the approach, I had communicated with the cameraman beforehand. So the shooting process was a very easy and pleasant experience.

Question: The main reason I love documentaries is that they document things that happen in everyday life. Objective documentation has always been stigmatised and rejected in our culture. From a young age, we were told not to write things like a chronicle of events. Ideas don't mean anything to a child, and as a result, we learn to talk about other people's ideas as if they were our own. In social science research methods, the questions of 'what' and 'how' are strictly distinguished. Documentary focuses on the former, while propaganda film on the latter. It's [documentary] all about what the audience gives it. *No.16 Barkhor South Street* makes me feel able to give a lot of thought to it.

This is the first time I have heard of the idea that 'direct film' is in fact an epistemological approach based on the philosophy of 'scepticism'. Indeed, philosophical scepticism helps us to talk more about problems than theories. One of the major differences between social science and natural science is that theories in social science are difficult to verify, and many things that have never existed can become articles of faith. In this respect, we cannot avoid the situation of 'living on lies'. Since life is full of lies, can a director make a documentary using an interrogative approach?

There are two aspects to the documentary's interrogative attribute: the interrogative content and method. In developed countries where democracy is relatively well established, all kinds of interrogation are present in everyday life, and it is easy to obtain interrogative content for documentaries. In contrast, our country does not advocate ethical interrogation – 'don't talk too much,' 'don't rip your face off,' 'it's all in the words' – and there is a lack of various interrogative systems in life, including justice. The director's ability to film interrogative content depends on the state of society. My concern is whether or not a director can shoot in an interrogative way. Once the director adopts an interrogative approach to filming, it becomes an intervention. It is easier to get something real than

via observation, and it can be dramatic. For some reason, I haven't seen any documentary director questioning their subjects like a judge. It is easy to see it in some TV programmes. For example, the director of *Focus Hour* (焦点时刻) interviewed the public about their opinions on something and the leadership about their explanation of the matter, then cross-cut the two accounts. Another example is a programme on Hunan TV. The host asked a guy if his girlfriend would leave him for a better guy, and then showed a video of how his girlfriend gave her phone number to the impostor Prince Charming. The question of flirting between men and women suddenly comes true.

Answer: The kind of interrogation you mentioned can be found in some documentaries, but not very often. It's mostly seen in television programmes, especially those involving cases or investigations of events. The most typical one is the type of programme hosted by Cronkite or Dan Rather. It seems to be more closely linked to the news. *Focus Hour* and *News Probe* (新闻调查) also use this approach. I have the impression that television documentaries in North America are prone to the interrogative approach, while the European ones are less so.

I have a quite large collection of works by the Japanese director Ogawa Shinsuke and the American Wiseman. Their works are long and even a little boring, but they're undeniably masters.

Question: I think *The Square* and *No.16 Barkhor South Street* were shot with ease. I think the reason is that the events in these two films are mostly recurring, so you can observe them over and over again before shooting, and you can even choose the camera position [ahead of time], unlike the news, which just captures as much as possible of a breaking event. I felt this way when I first encountered [Joris] Ivens' *Rain* (*Regen*, 1929). The rain is a recurring event that gave the filmmaker the opportunity to find the visually appealing part in the rain and eventually edit the various rain scenes into one long, elegant, rhythmic piece, *Rain*. I think this is one of the reasons for the low ratio of *No.16 Barkhor South Street*.

Here are some questions about the technical aspects of *The Square*. How many cameras did you use to shoot?

Answer: *The Square* used one. An AFLEX 35 MM BL-3 and an MKH416 microphone, a SONY TC D-10 portable digital recorder, and a small tricycle. This was all the equipment. The vast majority of the footage was shot at short focal lengths, meaning that the distance between the camera and the subject was quite close. And most of the people being filmed were aware that the camera was running and that they were being filmed. Not many people were able to ignore [the existence of the camera]. In fact, this is an important basis for the film: *The Square* is like a huge stage where the

show has never stopped for a moment, from long ago till now.

Question: Did the people being filmed notice the camera, or did they just ignore it [since they're very familiar with it]?

Answer: This is a rather complex question. It is about the question of 'direct film' we just discussed. While 'direct film' certainly refers to an open structure and mindset, and emphasising audience participation, can we imagine what would be the consequence of excessive openness and uncertainty? Perhaps nothing at all, but just a live broadcast. The denominator of good 'direct films' is the extensive and accurate use of 'metaphor'. From the scenes they choose to shoot, the structure of the film, to the characters' activities, they are all full of metaphors.

So, what is the square? The surface of the square is like the tip of a huge iceberg peeking out of the water. All the different characters that appear on the square and the various events that take place on the square have an extremely complex relationship with the iceberg beneath the surface of the water. With such a foundation, it is possible to understand the motivations of the people performing on this stage.

You can do this experiment. Go to a square alone at any time of the day, and look carefully at different people in the square. You will find that the majority of people are in a kind of highly exhilarated mood. Even if you're there just to observe the change of light and the texture of the air, you will feel an inexplicable force there. So there is really no fundamental difference between the extensive rituals in the film and the seemingly careless wanderers. What's more, the desire to perform is stimulated by that inexplicable force. We also deliberately emphasised the connotation of such performance, the kites, the skateboards between the memorial and the monument, even the innocent children! If one is willing to think more deeply, what do these performances have to do with?

In this sense, is the subject ignoring or forgetting about the camera? My view is that either the presence or the absence of the camera is not an issue.

Question: Were most of the shots taken on a stand?

Answer: Most of the shots were done on a tripod. Technically speaking, very few people can carry a 35mm BL-3 with a 1000ft large film box on their shoulders, and even a 400ft box wouldn't last long for an ordinary person. Also, as you said, everything on the square [was filmed] so calmly because we had enough time to choose the camera positions and adjust the aperture. If you went to the square

today, you'd be surprised at how it's still the same square.

Question: Was it 'a fox exploiting a tiger's might' kind of sneak peek?

Answer: We pretended to be the powerful [state journalists] sometimes, but there were hardly any sneak peeks. I reject sneak peeks. Strictly speaking, there should be no sneak peek in documentaries. We were real 'foxes' but some people thought that we were 'tigers'. Haha, that's funny.

Question: Why did you make it in black-and-white? Was it because the images were less clear than you anticipated?

Answer: The film used was a Leica black-and-white film made in China, with an exposure index of 100 ASA. In terms of the meaning, it refers to a sense of representing the truth, a texture of history. It's also concerned with the issues of visual representation, even the image quality. I once posted an article called 'Memories of Developing' on *Qing Yun* (清韵) about the developing conditions of this film. I don't know if I can still find it. The print was finally done at a film developing place. The work was a bit shoddy, and perhaps the quality of the film was a problem too?

Question: How long did the on-site filming take? What is the film ratio?

Answer: On-site filming took two months. It was impossible to shoot during the most stressful days, so we took a week or so off. I went to shoot an MTV for an Italian singer, also in black and white, hehe. The ratio was about 3 to 1 or 4 to 1, I don't remember exactly. But it took a long time to cut the film. It took place in a basement for about five months. It was a semi-basement, and the only thing that we could see out of the windows were fat and thin, big and small feet. We were cutting it and muttering, it's a fucking underground film.

In a sense, *No.16 Barkhor South Street* is an extension of *The Square*. Personally, I think *No.16 Barkhor South Street* is more mature and better made.