

Keyword: On-the-Spot

Luke ROBINSON

Abstract

This commentary discusses the Chinese term *xianchang* (现场) and its significance to independent documentary. Initially reflecting on my first encounter with the term in Beijing as a graduate student, I then consider how we might frame *xianchang* as an aesthetic of precarity, and why that might explain its continued attraction for filmmakers working today.

I did not encounter *xianchang* (现场) until I came to Beijing as a doctoral student in January 2005. I had started a Film and Media Studies PhD programme in London eighteen months earlier. My initial interest was in the independent feature film of the Sixth Generation; quickly, though, my focus shifted to non-fiction filmmaking. Prior to moving back to the UK I had been living in China, and what I had glimpsed of the independent documentary and experimental film scene was more compelling than its fictional counterpart. I still remember one weekend accompanying an acquaintance to watch a performance piece in an abandoned Beijing factory; some years later, viewing Wu Wenguang (吴文光) and Wen Hui's (文慧) *Dancing with Farmworkers* 和民工跳舞 (2001) for the first time, I was shocked to recognise first the space, and then the back of my head, captured on video as I wandered, slightly bemused, amidst the performers. But there was very little academic writing on this material, and even less in the way of easily accessible recordings. I spent my first year-and-a-half begging and borrowing from friends and colleagues, slowly building up a catalogue of material. And then I applied to spend six months as a visiting student at the Beijing Film Academy.

Although my time at the academy was officially spent auditing classes, my primary reason to visit was research. I wanted to interview filmmakers, watch more films, and understand what distinguished independent documentary from the non-fiction production that had come before it. While in the UK I had become interested in these films' relationship to the idea of 'publicness' *gonggongxing* (公共性). Related to, yet distinct from, the Habermasian 'public sphere', the various senses of making visible, and audible, and of shared experience or understanding associated with this concept appeared to me to haunt these documentaries. But in conversation with filmmakers, publicness was not something in which they displayed much interest. They did not see it as a defining feature of

their work. Instead, an implicit yet recurring theme in what I heard and read was contingency: the uncontrollable, the unpredictable, the unexpected. Once, while interviewing a critic and curator, I asked whether she thought this quality separated independent documentary from state-produced non-fiction TV in particular. She stared at me blankly, said ‘of course’, and carried on talking. I went home and resolved to think harder about the implications of that statement.

This was ultimately how I came to *xianchang*. Initially, I encountered the term in Wu Wenguang’s writings on his own filmmaking, as well as his art journal of the same name. Glossing the term in English as ‘liveness’ captures its significance as both practice and aesthetic: the consequence of shooting ‘on the scene’, in Zhang Zhen’s (2007, p. 18) formulation, but also the conscious attempt to document the ‘here and now’ of location filming through editing and cinematography. But my initial point of entry also sought to link this back to question of publicness. If *xianchang* entailed an acceptance of the uncontrollable, then how could we understand this semiotically in terms of the acceptance of the uninterpretable—one way in which film theory has framed the contingent. The anthropologist Liu Xin (2000, 2002), writing about turn-of-the-century China, discusses how particular social actors lose the power to determine the agreed meaning of specific signs. If publicness suggested a degree of shared interpretative experience, then what was the relationship between *xianchang* and the rise of ‘individual’, ‘personal’, or ‘private’, filmmaking? These were terms that I also heard quite frequently in Beijing, and which implied the collapse of overarching political master narratives, precisely as much of the literature I had read on post-socialism proposed.

In exploring these connections I was attempting to understand independent documentary as both a product of, and a witness to, China’s post-socialist transition. But I was also trying to articulate a relationship between *xianchang* and a condition for which I did not yet have the language. That condition was precarity: the various modes of socio-economic abandonment and instability that are central to contemporary capitalism. In describing *xianchang* as an aesthetic of precarity I am trying to formulate the relationship between cultural form, content, and conditions of production; to suggest an association between the precariousness of this documentary style and its broader context. This formulation helps explain the increasing focus of certain independent documentary filmmakers on socially and economically marginal groups, but also the parallel emphasis by others on the ‘I’ as the subject of documentation and the agent of filmmaking. It invokes the cruelty that scholars such as J.P. Sniadecki (2015) and Wang Yiman (2005) have identified, in different ways, as central to independent documentary practice during this period, and which we could understand as an affective dimension of precarity. And it also underlines how these films were increasingly made and circulated in China. Even at its height, the unofficial infrastructure for the domestic distribution and exhibition of independent cinema was at best fragmented and unstable. Furthermore, despite the comparative

success of certain directors, independent filmmaking remains an economic unstable and for some politically marginal activity from which few can exclusively make a living. To call *xianchang* a precarious aesthetic suggests its semantic connection to the contingent. But it also opens up the practice's relationship to the many other ways insecurity has manifested in contemporary China, often with devastating results.

Margaret Hillenbrand makes this clear in a recent article on Chinese 'suicide shows', or *tiaolou xiu* (跳楼秀). This term refers to public displays of protest by Chinese labourers, mostly in the construction industry, in which they threaten to jump from tall buildings unless wages owed are paid them in full by their foreman or boss (Hillenbrand 2020, p. 149). These protests are in turn often filmed and circulated online via social media platforms, in the process acquiring their own generic conventions particularly focused round the bodies of those participating. Part performance, part video art, suicide shows are thus self-conscious interventions aimed at raising public awareness of the workers' plight. One way they seek to do so is through visual disruption of the contemporary Chinese urban skyline, in all its bland homogeneity. But another, Hillenbrand suggests, is via a specific aesthetic that combines the choreographed, the uncontrolled, and the embodied. From this form,

derives the power of the show's deployment of the mediatized body-as-weapon: the tension between script and shock, contingency and planning, shoddy production values and a savvy media awareness that the precarious body at high altitude has a rawness that can never quite be attenuated by familiarity (Hillenbrand 2020, p. 161).

Suicides shows are distinct from the earliest full-length independent documentaries in that they are amateur productions made possible by the ubiquity of digital media. Their very existence as non-professional, self-made media products reflects the changes that independent documentary has undergone following the proliferation of digital culture, in which traditional boundaries of form (a film vs. a video) and process (the filmmaker vs. the filmed, for example) are blurred. The precarious labourers are now behind the camera; their work explicitly addresses, but is also a product, of precarity, and, as Hillenbrand (2020, p. 166) points out, thus foregrounds the clash of class interests that underpin the videos—in ways that professionally produced documentaries on similar subjects may not. But, the aesthetic deployed to convey the sense of precarity is very much one derived from *xianchang*. Through an emphasis on the staged and the unexpected, on physical danger in the here and now, the precarious status of the labourers is conveyed here as an affect (or, as Hillenbrand says, an 'atmospheric condition' [166]). It does not simply seek to draw attention to the labourers' condition; it tries to get the audience to *feel it*, too. This is a *xianchang* recalibrated for the digital era, for amateur production and online circulation, but it is still recognisably a *xianchang* that speaks

directly—more directly, perhaps, than in the past—to the issue of social inequality, and how to film it, that has always been a concern of filmmaking outside the mainstream.

Over a decade has passed since I was a PhD student in Beijing. In many ways the situation is now very different. Politically, independent production is clearly much harder. Formally, documentary has diversified, a situation accelerated by media convergence and the democratization of image production. But inequality remains, and with it the need for a language that can register its continued presence. From the purist vision still favoured by certain professionals, to the documentary footage underpinning artists' moving image work, to the self-made videos circulated online by migrant workers, the 'here and now' retains a critical power to articulate the persistence of socio-economic divisions. Perhaps this helps explain the endurance of *xianchang* in the current moment.

Bibliography

Hillenbrand, M., (2020). The cliffhangers: suicide shows and the aesthetics of protest in China. *Cultural Politics*. 16(2), 147-170.

Liu, X., (2000). *In one's own shadow: an ethnographic account of the condition of post-reform rural China*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

-- (2002). *The otherness of self: a genealogy of the self in contemporary China*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Sniadecki, J., (2015). The cruelty of the social: *xianchang*, intersubjectivity, and interobjectivity. In: A. Zito, and Z. Zhang, eds. *DV-made China: digital subjects and social transformations after independent film*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. pp. 57-75.

Wang, Y., (2005). The amateur's lighting rod: DV documentary in postsocialist China. *Film Quarterly*. 58(4), 16–26.

Zhang, Z., (2007). Introduction: bearing witness: Chinese urban cinema in the era of "transformation" (*zhuanxing*). In: Z. Zhang, ed. *The urban generation: Chinese cinema and society at the turn of the twenty-first century*. Durham NC: Duke University Press. pp. 1-46.