

Fragmenting to Recompose: The Pieces of The Past in *Breathless Animals* (2019)

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Abstract

After the 1980s, what Lyotard calls the grand narratives came to an end; progress, history, science, and political ideologies lost credibility, giving way to local, subjective and often contradictory micro-narratives. This paper focuses on a textual analysis of *Breathless Animals* 动物方言 (2019) by director Lei Lei 雷磊 (b.1985), taking as its starting point of a reflection on how new digital technologies applied to cinema affect the narrative and viewer experience. Archival material and found footage reshaped, reiterated, and reimagined by the director triggers a meta-reflection on both the audiovisual medium and the traumas of the past which, far from being processed, hide in the interstices of old photographs and old film.

Keywords: found footage, archival material, personal documentary, Chinese contemporary documentary.

Introduction

The evolution of digital technologies for documenting reality, its elaboration and the preservation of footage, has changed the methods of filmmaking, but it has also implied a theoretical-methodological reflection regarding the reuse of pre-existing images for the creation of new visual narratives drawn from different media archives. The term ‘found footage’ refers both to the physical medium (the film or a part thereof) and to the retrieval process; material can be found either accidentally (old second-hand markets are often a valuable source for old films) or in media and digital archives officially established for the cataloguing, preservation and fruition of audiovisual material (Bertozzi 2012, p. 13). The extensive use of found footage and visual narratives created entirely from re-cycled material have often been considered to belong exclusively to experimental or avant-garde cinema (Wees 1999). But nowadays, many documentary filmmakers use archival material (old photographs, family footage, newsreels) juxtaposed with other audiovisual languages closely related to the profound transformations of technological apparatuses, without necessarily being labeled as directors of experimental cinema.

The interaction of this plurality of languages and the manipulation of the processes of signification of images leads the viewer to experience a past and a present explorable through an intertextual narrative formula, allowing the viewer to entertain ‘new aesthetic, social and psychic relationships with images’ (Catanese & Ravesi 2021, p. 11). Building on these insights, this paper, the result of a series of meetings and exchanges with the director, will focus on the narrative strategies, particularly the repetition of the frame and sequences, looping, and the use of black frame, enacted by the director Lei Lei in his documentary *Breathless Animals* (2019), where all the images featured are audiovisual fragments recovered from different types of archives and re-edited by the director according to his personal and poetic intention. The origin of the materials and techniques employed, and thus the practice of retrieval and reproduction, also determine the experience of these works as well as the viewer’s understanding of the archive, investigating and lifting the different layers of which it is composed (Habib 2014, p. 102). What are the peculiarities and potentials of cinema composed of archival material? What relationship does the filmmaker have with the material he uses? How does the ar-

chival material act on the viewer? These questions are particularly significant in a context such as contemporary China, where the grand official narrative relegates personal and private stories to the margins, and where the culture of remembrance also survives thanks to the strenuous work of independent cultural practitioners.

Breathless Animals: 6 Parts, 1 Epilogue and Thousands of Fragments.

A black-and-white photograph: in the centre, a little girl plays with a small toy phone, behind her a cathode ray tube television. Two other photographs overlay mingled bodies of young people doing gymnastics against a backdrop of architectural forms. Vehicles pass, delay, and then speed up. Bicycles, buses, traffic circles, and busy streets. Brightly-coloured images: red and green chairs frame a small brown table in a garden, and then reiterate details of the chair: red back, red seat, and metal frame. Recurring images of suitcases, giant bonsai trees and pirouetting young women with raised fists are part of the same scene, thanks to the compositing technique. The split screen marks the roof and chimney of an anonymous grey apartment building. Lastly, prolonged black frames, with and without a soundtrack in the background. These are just a few examples of visual motifs and narrative techniques that Lei Lei employs in his documentary *Breathless Animals*.



Figure 1. Furniture product catalogue found by Lei Lei and screenshots from the official documentary, printed on A4 paper and then scanned.

Lei Lei, born in 1985, trained in Fine Arts at Tsinghua University in Beijing and taught at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in Los Angeles. He is a multifaceted artist who employs animation techniques, collage, use of found footage and disparate archival material, creating a visual language that challenges the temporal linearity of traditional narrative and acting. In the incipit of his biography, he first emphasizes that his works ‘are based on the organization and research of ready-made and found images, combined with digital shooting and parody, weaving together abandoned images, oral histories, fragmented online videos, official documentaries, commercial product catalogs, myths or legends, etc., to create visual poetry and prose.’ Lei Lei’s visual research provides material transcend the taxonomy between fictional cinema, documentary and animated film and project us into a craft-work that reveals theoretical-philosophical horizons that seem to abandon the presumed representability of the real.

His documentaries explore the theme of individual and collective memory, the evolution of contemporary society and the role of the individual in the midst of complex changes. Lei Lei’s films have screened at prestigious international film festivals, including Berlinale Film Festival, Rotterdam Film Festival, Hong Kong International Film Festival, and the First International Film Festival in Xining, China. Among his documentaries, it is worth mentioning *Silver Bird and Rainbow Fish* 第二个和第三个妈妈 (2022) in which the story

of his family between the 1950s and the late 1970s is elaborated by a complex layering of archival material and the use of stop-motion animation with plasticine, and *A Bright Summer Diary* 公园日记 (2020), in which the simple photo of his family's trip to Lushan Mountain juxtaposed with various archival material, is a pretext for a narrative of society in the early 1980s.

Breathless Animals also operates through a process of juxtaposition and remodulation conducted by careful editing and compositing that aim to fragment, break down, and excise different visual elements of reality drawn from China of the recent past. It is divided into seven parts, each marked expressly by a title. The first four are devoted to four animals: White Horse, The Cat, Sparrow, The Red Rooster, while the fifth part is entitled The Other Things, and the sixth, People From The Real Life. The conclusion is given in the Epilogue. Despite specific references to different wildlife species, the visual narrative proceeds by non-narrative matching shots typical of discontinuous editing, paired with the voice-over dialogue between mother and son (the son being Lei Lei). Their conversation will takes us back to specific historical moments, which, however, have nothing to do with grand history, but rather with the small events of family micro-history in the dark decades of the 1960s and 1970s. The events of historiography are relegated to the background, composed of audiovisual fragments that a sensitive eye manages to intercept and freeze. Instead, in the foreground, through the director's questions to the mother, the woman's personal account emerges, consisting of details: her nightmares, the family's separations, and the vicissitudes of the filmmaker's uncle, a young *xiao liumang* 小流氓 (little hoodlum) from the 1970s. In the foreground we have the figurative motifs that constitute everyday life, so common that it so often goes unnoticed, but which more than anything else characterizes our identity in a specific time: photographs of different furniture, beds, closets, chairs, suitcases, bicycles and means of locomotion. Thus, fragments of a recent past emerge, transcending pure historical facts and unfolding through personal experience, tending toward the universal.

Lei Lei's visual sources range from furniture magazine clippings to Chinese art catalogues from the early 1980s to newsreels from the 1950s and late 1970s.¹ Even the repeated use of the black screen seems to become a *medium* of the narrative and signifier, since it accompanies the vision of the entire documentary from the beginning until the end. Black is entrusted with the theoretical and practical principle of subtraction, often in relation to facts about death (Cecchi, 2016, p. 191). Despite being a purely extra-diegetic manifestation of a latent presence that becomes visible on certain occasions, it manages to have a multiple structural function: it separates, unites and connects simultaneously (Misek, 2016). But it is not only the quantity and heterogeneity of the components of the audiovisual text as much as the creative reuse of the aforementioned material that makes Lei Lei an exception in the landscape of art documentary cinema in contemporary China. With the rise of the auteur documentary of the 1990s, the observational approach of *jishizhuyi* 纪实主义 'a specific brand of film realism that has widely informed the independent film scene of mainland China' (Bertozzi 2014, p. 79), pursued the utopian search for objectivity: the camera did not intervene and the filmmaker did not explain what was happening on the scene. Filmmakers were engaged in shifting their own point of view and relating to social actors in an ontologically new way: the filmmaker, no longer omniscient, was becoming an operator of audiovisual culture and questioning him/herself by placing himself/herself on the same level as the social actor, recording a complex, marginal, and subjective reality of contemporary China. Thus, the non-mainstream documentary cinema of the time was bringing to light the fragments of what was now being dismantled – socialism - by focusing on the different types of marginality in post-socialist society.² The social and political context of post-1990s China brought the professionally trained auteur and the film amateur (with

no or little training) closer together, both driven by the desire to empathetically narrate their views of reality (Wang 2005, p. 18). Amateurism becomes an aesthetic, personal, and subversive choice by providing a micro-view of contemporary China that unravels in family histories, moves from below, and is recorded and preserved in the testimonies of those who, until then, had not had the opportunity to have their voices heard (Yu 2019, p.65). New digital tools (handheld video cameras, mobile editing stations, direct and sync sound) contributed to the creation of works outside the official system, but although the same tools provided great opportunity for creative experimentation from a formal point of view, independent documentary filmmakers at the time seem not to have followed this direction.

Although this is not the place to analyze in detail the aesthetic influences on contemporary independent Chinese documentary filmmaking, we note that Flora Lichaa argues that the greatest innovation at the time was being able to manage shooting time differently: ‘By favoring long periods of observation, many filmmakers feel that they get as close as possible to the subjects of the footage. According to them, this closeness is a prerequisite for the accuracy of the captured realities’ (Lichaa 2017, p. 305). Lei Lei, in his documentary films, weaves the threads of the past and reconnects with the present. He retrieves old newsreels, home movies and family photographs from various physical and medial archives. From a formal point of view, he reframes the concept of time. He delays, superimposes, recomposes or freezes the time flowing through the frames of archival footage, excluding, in the documentary we will detail shortly, live shooting footage and intervening exclusively in the timeline of the editing station—in short, challenging the predominant theoretical and practical tradition of post-90’s documentary style: ‘on-the-spot’ realism.

Fragmenting the Imagery of The Audiovisual Text

Lei Lei’s visual research propels us into a craftwork that reveals theoretical-philosophical horizons that seem to abandon the assumed representability of reality. In one of the foundational texts on found-footage practices, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films*, Wees points out how the art of montage in the reuse practice of collage has the greatest potential to critique and challenge the power of produced images:

Unlike postmodernist appropriations of found footage, in which the media as the source of images are taken for granted (indeed are more or less explicitly celebrated for their image producing powers), the collage film subjects its fragments of media-reality to some form of deconstruction, or at the very least to a recontextualizing that prevents an unreflective reception of representations as reality (as presumed by the compilation film), as well as an indifferent or cynical reception encouraged by postmodernist appropriation (Wees 1993, p. 47).

The fragmentation of reality, heightened by techniques of alternate and/or discontinuous montage, stop-motion animation, and digital collage, as employed by Lei Lei, acts as a catalyst for reflection on the nature of the medium and its intertextuality. This cinematic language allow us to explore the past through bold associations and daring leaps, where the order of narration is subverted and the rules governing linear time can be altered. Jaimie Baron, a scholar of Film and Media Studies and an expert on the signification of archival images, clarifies the connection between the practices of creative reuse of archival material from different sources and New Historicism and deconstruction. On the one hand, the search for eccentric and enigmatic figurative anecdotes opens up plural meanings, overturning the grand narrative of history; on the other hand,

the very reflection on the audiovisual text questions the constituent elements of cinematic language. To paraphrase the scholar, each fragment offers a ‘point of entry’ into an experience of the inscrutability of history through something that is ‘out of place’, altering a pre-established and univocal interpretation of grand history (Baron 2014, p. 162).

We will now analyze in detail sequences from *Breathless Animals* located in the first part of the documentary (at 14’ and 26’), in the central part, and the film’s epilogue, which operate through delay and the re-presentation of the same frame. At the beginning of the documentary some black-and-white photographs portray young men and women posing and smiling in parks or in front of monuments. The extradiegetic sound recalls the click of slides or an analog camera. Through alternate montage, the film cuts from their poses to a total black screen lasting several seconds, which advances with an inconsistent rhythm, returning us to a sonic dimension rather than figurative imaginary. The spectator has time to wonder who these faces are, to whom these smiles belong. Then, the footage converges into a single concluding moment in which the reproduction of the previous archival material enhances the movement of men and women, dressed in white, riding bicycles (the association is immediate with the title *Baima* 白马 - White Horse - in which the sequence is embedded; cf. previous paragraph) as they cycle in a roundabout. The process of repetition and return to the same frame manages to extend the photographic image, generating additional time for the spectator to reflect on induced associations, via visual or sonic references, but also on individual interpretations and fantasies drawn from their own private and personal experience.

Cinema and photography have always had a privileged relationship with time; the recording of an image that allows for its preservation can be compared to the unconscious memory belonging to a lost event, argues Laura Mulvey, Professor of Film and Media Studies at the University of London. The tool through which the spectator finds a space for processing is entrusted, the scholar emphasizes, to the ‘aesthetic of delay’, where the image is frozen or subjected to repetition or return (Mulvey 2006, p. 144). This also occurs in the second long sequence (26’), included in the section titled ‘The Cat’ 猫. There, the obsession with the movement of vehicles, buses and bicycles, continuously re-presented, takes on a disturbing dimension that merges with the director’s mother’s account of a nightmare: a voice-over recounts that a cat suddenly ran out from alley and collides with her bicycle; its spine is broken, and it moves convulsively without being able to die. In this case, the technique used by the director to create the back-and-forth movement of the men and women on bicycles was achieved by applying a mathematical formula of two frames forward and one backward, following this pattern: 1-2-1, 1-2-3-4-3-2, 2-3-4-5-6-5-4-3, 3-4-5-6-7-8-7-6-5-4... This method ensures the effect of convulsive back-and-forth movement.



Figure 2. Archival material (source unknown)

The process of deconstructing and reassembling images into different frames and their re-presentation signifies for Mulvey the locus of metonymy (Mulvey 2006, p. 81), where hidden meanings can be found, opening up infinite possibilities for the poetic, dreamlike, and imaginative dimension that breaks free from reality. The emphasis placed on the fragment is present from the beginning to the end of the film. In another sequence, while we listen to the mother's joyful account of successfully entering university in 1978, we see a full-screen image of a giant bonsai, where a combination of digital collage and stop-motion animation integrates repeated figurative elements of different sizes (figures of women pirouetting, suitcases rotating, large buses perched on enormous rocks). These images move slowly, like the gradual unfolding of a Chinese scroll painting, before closing the sequence with a black and white photograph of a woman next to an enormous bonsai. In conclusion, the director primarily works with techniques of discontinuous montage, stop-motion animation, and digital collage, associating shapes and colors with visual and sonic suggestions that chase each other throughout the film's duration.



Figure 3. Digital collage



Figure 4. Archival material (source unknown)

Finally, Lei Lei is not afraid to courageously challenge the didactic dynamic between sound and image. In the epilogue of *Breathless Animals*, the mother's sonic narrative touches upon memories of her as a child, with her tired but happy father taking the children on bicycle rides, while the black and white photographic material re-presents the exact same image: happy young people cycling on a large meadow.

Conclusion: The Recomposition of Fragments

Following Lei Lei's work is a complex journey. One often fears getting lost in the nooks and crannies or the entry points that he proposes. The figurative and sonic elements mentioned in this brief article do not do justice to the multifaceted nature of the techniques employed by the director;³ however, it can be understood as a preliminary study that could be expanded through specific research on the archival material used and the methods of its collection and cataloging. The etymology of the term 'archive', as stated by Pan Lu 潘律 in the introduction to the essay 'The (Im)possibility of Art Archives: Theories and Experience in/from Asia' (2024), speaks both to the necessity for order and the idea of commencing a new experience. It is therefore evident that the archive is not a neutral and discrete instrument in which knowledge is preserved, but rather, from a Foucauldian perspective, a *dispositif* in which dynamics of power and hierarchy are at play (Foucault [1969] 2013), a place where hypothetical realities can be reconstructed, a space imbued with plurality and discursive potential.

In the landscape of documentary cinema, Lei Lei departs from the search for a truth associated with *xian-*

chang and delves into the culture of personal memory, modulating practices drawn from analog cinema to new media, working with the time and rhythm of the narrative. It is no coincidence that the French New Wave, especially Varda's short film *Ulysses* (1982) and Jia Zhangke's 贾樟柯 *Pickpocket* 小武 (1997), had a significant impact on the director's formation, as did various directors, including Edward Yang 杨德昌, Hou Hsiao-hsien 侯孝贤, and Tsai Ming-liang 蔡明亮. However, that same process of opening up the epistemological space that engages the viewer is the cornerstone of personal documentary cinema from the early 1990s. In these narrative spaces, directors chose to abandon screenwriting, favoring narrative through images, the recording of ambient sound, and the use of digital video cameras. But above all, they acted by exercising their critical, subjective, personal, and creative thinking. Qi Wang points out that

Personal documentary not only aims at presenting a different interpretation of the past or an alternative aspect of the present, but also exercises critical thinking on representation itself [...] reminding us of the epistemological and ethical consequences that documentary, as a mode of representation specifically launched from the present, has on how the past might be remembered and how the future might be envisioned (Wang 2014, p. 135).

Within this grand tour through time and space, yesterday and today, the personal and the collective, how are the different fragments that the author arranges on the timeline recomposed? On the one hand, reiteration, slowing down, and re-presentation of images, as Mulvey suggests, act upon the spectator by expanding the space for reflection; on the other hand, it is characteristic of found footage itself to operate across multiple temporalities, triggering an additional interpretive space in which the viewer navigates. Roger Odin, a French semiologist who proposed the semi-pragmatic model of communication, defines the communicative space as the locus where the actants (Emitter and Receiver) engage in processes of discursive communication. The text and its meaning do not always remain the same in the passage between Emitter and Receiver. In conclusion to this article, it seems useful to refer to Odin in relation to the communication space of familial memory, where the intimate mode of internal discourse acts through the operators of memory, which, on the one hand, nourish the memory of the past, while on the other hand lead, through a chain reaction, to a textual production that can sometimes deviate entirely from the original (Odin 2011, p. 97). Borrowing two terms from Odin, Lei Lei's documentary film appears to be a *tale of surfacing*, where archival materials are not so much vehicles of memory as they are its stimulators.

Notes

1 The primary sources from which the film's archival materials are taken are located in the credits; I reproduce them in footnotes for the reader's interest and convenience: Photographic reference: *1700 Poses of Human Gesture*, Jilin Fine Arts Press, 1988; *1500 Postures in Movement*, Hong Kong Deli Bookstore, 1985; *Furniture Products Exhibition Album*, Privately Owned, 1988; *Potted Landscape Art Exhibition*, Bonsai Art Exhibition Office, 1979; *Tianjin Furniture*, China National Arts and Crafts Imp. Exp. Corp Tientsin Branch, 1979. Film reference: *Forever Young*, 1955 Central Newsreel and Documentary Film Studio; *An inch of time, an inch of gold*, 1959 Central Newsreel and Documentary Film Studio; *New look of the motherland and members of a new home*, 1978.

2 The topic has been widely covered by many scholars including Chris Berry (2004), Zhang Zhen (2007), Paul G. Pickowicz (2012), and Qi Wang (2014).

3 Lei Lei's artworks are many and include animated films, installations and documentary films: *Break no. 1 & Break no. 2* 休息一下 (2024), *That Day, On the River* 发光的河 (2023), *Silver Bird and Rainbow Fish* 第二个和第三个妈

妈 (2022), *A Bright Summer Diary* 公园日记 (2020), *Breathless Animals* 动物方言 (2019); *Installations: From Fragment to Fragment* 从片段, 到片段 (2023), *Romance in Lushan Cinema* 庐山恋影院 (2019); *Weekend* 周末 (2018), *Hand-Colored* 手工上色照片 (2015), *Books on Books* 书上的书 (2013—2016), *Recycled* 照片回收 (2012), *One-person Animation Film Studio* 一个人的美术电影制片厂 (2009—2016); *Animation: I Don't Like the Comics You Drew* 不喜欢你画的漫画 (2017), *Missing One Player* 三缺一 (2015), *This is Not Time to Lie* 这不是一个可以说谎的时刻 (2014), *Animafest Zagreb Festival Trailer* (2014), *Big hands oh big hands, Let it be bigger and bigger* 大手啊大手, 越大越好 (2013), *My...My...* 我的, 我的 (2011), *This is LOVE* 这个念头是爱 (2010), *Hululu Honglonglong Hualala* 呼噜噜, 轰隆隆, 哗啦啦 (2010), *Magic Cube and Ping-Pong* 彩色魔方与乒乓球 (2009), *Pears or Aliens* 鸭梨还是外星人 (2008).

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