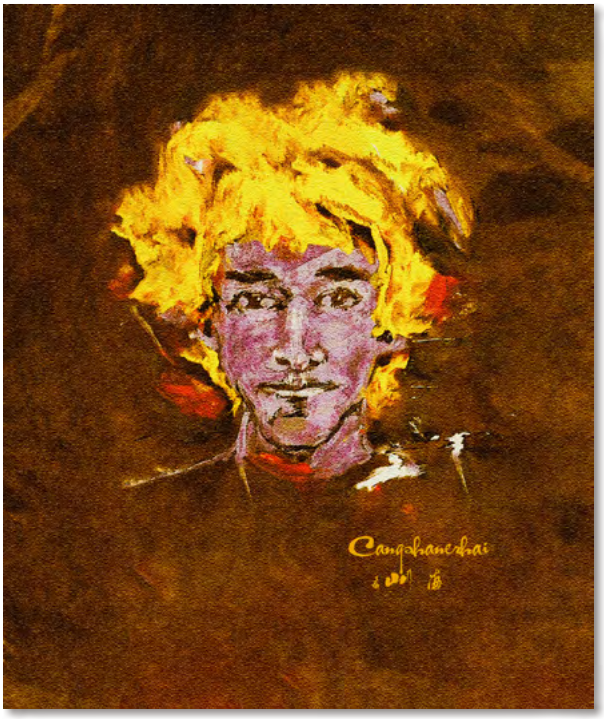
Cinema As an Absolutely Impure Art and the Neglected Impurity and Beyond: A Pessimist's Observations and Reflections on Contemporary Art

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Abstract

Human beings go through a challenging but blissful journey to meet themselves through self-questioning and discovering. Throughout the human history of the production of art and the expression and transmission of thoughts, numerous genres and forms have been born or faded under persistent changes. Although born in almost the same period in China, contemporary art and direct cinema are in different forms. They have degenerated very different social effects and practical values in their own developing paths. Which direction are they moving toward? How will they develop? What kind of reality and fate do the creators and their artistic creations (works)? Based on my subjective vision, the term 'direct cinema' in this essay will be used in conjunction with the existing terms such as 'independent cinema', 'independent documentary', and 'independent film' in the specific context in China.



The author's self-portrait

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> Art is a mirror shining into the complicated recesses of the human psyche. Art spans human history, from prelinguistic cave dweller to postmodern city dweller, and stands as witness to an ongoing creative process, an evolution of worldviews, a historic unfolding vision of nature, humanity, cosmos, and consciousness itself. (Alex Grey)
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> Nowadays, we find it difficult to refer to art and spirituality in the same sentence. (Rosalind E. Krauss)
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> No one can deny the temporality of things, and it is futile to rebel against it or to try to find a reason to be bored. (Sylviane Agacinski)

Everything has a destiny. I believe that everything in the universe came into being by some chance - like 'God said, "Let there be light," and then there light comes'. Or, one day, we start to think about the meaning of life, and from that, we choose to question and discover it or refuse to believe that it will happen.

One lives only in search of what one wants, what is unknown and what is lost because of it, and then in the process of searching, losing what one already owns again. And then, again, the search continues. This is the old, simple, and inevitable truth of human destiny.

My 'personal history of independent film' began with my fascination with still photography, my disappointment at the insurmountable technical obstructions in post-production, and my encounter with the DVDs of foreign masterpieces. It is difficult to trace precisely how I encountered contemporary art in my life. It was, of course, caused by one chance after another. And I see it as the mystery and inevitable destiny of my life. Throughout our lives, many factors may become our 'destiny'. At the same time, we are fated to be busy with two things throughout our lives: resisting and fulfilling our destiny. And we are often at a crossroads.

The intersection and intermingling of philosophy, religion, literature, painting, cinema, and other disciplines have provided us with the approaches to perceive human destiny and the world. However, without the camera that captures images in front of me and the 'mirror image of destiny' created by others' gazes, how would I have been able to build up an 'a priori' perception of my destiny? Would I have had the courage to confront the depressing reality if a camera had not separated me from the real world? If the camera had not effectively extended my horizon and prompted me to think about my existence, the present and the ultimate, and to look within and affirm myself, how long would I have been stuck in the same wasteland of reality? And, how would I encounter myself?

Many years ago, during winter, fate or some chance brought me from the outskirts of a small town to the province's capital city. From the naive vision of a migrant and intruder, I discovered an incredible city and an amazing group of people. Among them was a middle-aged man who no longer knew his surname. The cracked skin on his face and hands resembled the old persimmon tree bark after the rain that I remembered from my childhood, except as a smaller version. When asked where he was from, he replied that he had been away from home for so long that he couldn't remember where it was. What struck me was, in contrast to his bark-like skin, his neatly set teeth as he spoke presented an unexpected beauty. In a more profound memory, it was the long-ago allegorical answer that I will never forget. The busy city, the skyscrapers, and the thousands of houses had nothing to do with them. Who are they? Why are they homeless? Or, where do they end up? These questions strongly led me to record the images. I didn't expect this action to lead me directly to a fate further away.

What is cinema? André Bazin, Alain Badiou, Ingmar Bergman, and Andrei Tarkovsky have had eloquent arguments. So, what else can cinema be? When we enter the cinema, we enter the story and the interior of the illusion. We can empathise with any of the characters and revise our views on the good and the evil, the right and the wrong; alternatively, we must follow a faction or a party determinedly and devote our hearts and minds to it. Until the end of the play, everyone can be whatever they want to be—a hermit, an emperor, a judge, or a vagabond.

A screen is a window into the archetypes of human nature and the desire of the self and the other. We meet ourselves in the stories of others, and we can complete our moral confessions in the fate of others. Before the lights come on in the cinema, we may have forgotten entirely the fact that cinema is an illusion. In an age when spiritual beliefs and realistic ideals no longer have sufficient power, people have

the reason to believe in myths. The myth of the screen and the method of spiritual victory can be used to defend against the emptiness and harm of reality. In one of the breaks between consecutive screenings, I asked random viewers what cinema meant to them, and one young viewer, who was studying cinema, said: 'Watching films is to peep into other people's lives. It's about getting a virtual life experience from someone else.' A media-worker-turned educator said, 'Living is meaningless, so we need films.' Indeed, in films, we often find the 'pure land' that is not otherwise available in this world.

However, a truly spiritually rewarding film begins with its 'end'. Usually, with the end of the music or the credits, the screen falls into silence as it did before the film began, followed by the lights of the theatre coming back on, the applause and the whispers of the audience. But the most meaningful part is the moment when, after the screen has fallen into darkness, we enter into real life again—just as one's life does not begin until they have finally completed their life journey and plunged into the eternal emptiness. The meaning of a person, of a film, though in different forms, is revealed to us only after they have gone into their own 'darkness'—after they have completed their 'farewell'.

As people who think and express themselves through films, most of us have strived to meet our 'destined' stories or protagonists when in fact, what we are looking for is ourselves. The difference is that some people find the story and also meet themselves. Others simply meet the story and live with it for a lifetime. To find oneself and to 'become oneself' is, by definition, a blessing. Like Hollywood's world-conquering 'happy narratives', almost everyone expects a 'happy ending' deep in their hearts. All human creativity and progress, before and into the future, should be accomplished by the courage to face the unknown and retain the full meaning of the words, such as truth and inquiry, curiosity and passion, pure scepticism, courage, talent, perseverance, kindness and awe … However, even if by virtue of our endeavour, the goodness of fate, and certainly greater mysterious force, we can become people who create and discover for a living, it is still tough to use them correctly throughout our lives.

The French philosopher Alain Badiou once wrote in *Cinema*:

> Cinema is an absolutely impure art and is so right from its conception, because the system of its conditions of possibility is an impure material system. This impurity is reflected in a well-known fact: cinema requires money, a lot of money. Money is what unites things that are totally different from one another … The way money unites everything is of interest to me as regards one point in particular, which is that there is no cinematic purity. We may know why cinema is a mass art, but we must nonetheless ask ourselves what the price to be paid for it is, because there is indeed a price to be paid … it is impossible for cinema to attain the same degree of purity as the other arts. There is always a remnant of impurity that remains.

In the human world, artificial intelligence and virtual reality are moving from fantasy to realisation and overwhelming 'invading' the real world; people seem to live in a state of optimism and excitement as if a new world will always open up to us, or AI paintings and NFT art are being auctioned off at sky-high prices. However, I am still pondering how to accept the 'neglected impurity' of cinema. I wonder if the birth of cinema as the 'seventh art' is counted as the 'swan song' in the history of human art production, as cinema has achieved a rapid and successful impact on public life in a way that no other form of art can. People often use it as a conversational capital; if there is an end to the human world one day, many

people would probably choose their favourite film as part of their burial. But the 'completion' of cinema requires the support and 'fulfilment' of almost every art form. At the same time, this form of art demonstrates the great ambition and achievement of human spirituality and creation (a single film can perfectly, subtly combine the theories, methods and achievements of many arts to forge its own everlasting 'soul' and 'body'). Meanwhile, to some extent, it also reveals that the human capacity for independent art creation has perhaps been 'exhausted'—in the creation of film art, the supposedly purely spiritual, emotional presentation, and even the narrative and technical completion are no longer independent and pure. The spiritual direction and emotions in all art, or love in real life, are supposed to be unique (exclusive) and pure (truthful) but cannot be 'transferred' to another instantly, nor can they be 'harmonised' with another in terms of virtue, talent, and appearance to appeal to the 'love of God'. However, by default, almost all films are produced in a 'collective' way and obtain legitimacy in the industry and the public's perception. Even the 'leader' of the collective (the director) is the only one who is being worshipped. It is troublesome that, in times when great films are scarce, there are always those who deliberately contribute to this myth, while others' works, even including those 'genius contributions', remain unseen. Only by going on set can you get a glimpse of the truth and the 'archetypes' behind the scene. Portuguese filmmaker, writer, director, cinematographer, and producer Pedro Costa confessed: 'The film industry wasted a lot of talent.' Admittedly, with the development of modern technology, not all films are impossible to make independently. But it is also true that even direct cinema, which is far from industrialisation and collective production, is becoming less and less genuinely independent. Remember the great filmmaker Ingmar Bergman once said in his later years: 'Everyone lacks talent.'

The soul of a film is usually constructed by several elements, including 'montage'. However, real-life practitioners with the logic of grabbism are more adept at using screen myths and all derivative effects and by-products to achieve quick fame and recreate a more effective 'human-inflicted myth' in the real world. However, more often, such purposes and complicity may be realised by a group of 'like-minded' people who wishfully fulfil a 'contract'. But if, in the end, everyone chooses this beneficial shortcut, the outcome will be inevitable: there will be no place for purity and dignity.

Fortunately, some forms of art, such as painting, music, and literature, can still preserve the independence and pure dignity of the work and of its creators to fulfil their purpose of expression. The neglected impurity of cinema has always been the natural enemy of the ideal of pure cinema, but the many impurities of reality do allow cinema to 'flourish' in the mass cultural market. The neglected impurity of cinema and other arts does not lie in the way of production but in the impurity of the consequences it provokes and creates. Or, fundamentally, the eternal impurity of human desire creates all the ' remnant of impurity'.

In an 'age of globalisation', almost everything is no longer just about its own or its homeland but is rapidly being 'globalised'. Since the beginning of the last century, a male urinal named Fountain signed 'R. Mutt 1917' was sent to the Society of Independent Artists in New York and rejected. Its creator, the Frenchman Marcel Duchamp, is credited with defining and opening up the possibilities of the future of art with his 'staggering' and 'deviant' work. His 'enlightening' and 'revolutionary' methodology was quickly passed on and 'carried forward' by the artists of various countries, and Marcel Duchamp himself was rightly labelled as the 'godfather of modern art'. But the history of the creation and expression of the human spirit cannot be stopped by any existing myth. In turn, the beliefs of contemporary art proliferated all over the world, of course, including in China.

For the past decades, contemporary art has undergone a long period of transition and exploration, as well as in the golden age of capital competition and cultural convergence. Today it has already occupied major art museums, contemporary art fairs, auction houses, galleries, and art collection institutions. Contemporary art 'collection' has become synonymous with high-end financial investment. But what is really going on beneath the veil of the heyday? If the reality of our domestic cultural context is not enough to give a full picture, then we can look across the ocean to New York, the global centre of contemporary art, and see the situation there.

Roger Kimball, an American critic whose critical horizons span the fields of art, philosophy, politics and education, writes in his essay *Calamities of Art*:

> Consider: is it not odd that, in many quarters, 'art' has degenerated into a kind of honorific that is bestowed or withheld for reasons that have nothing to do with aesthetic quality or achievement? What does it mean—to take a few contemporary examples—that someone can package his own faeces and distribute the result as works of art? ... Such examples can be multiplied indefinitely, as anyone who has visited a gallery or museum devoted to contemporary art well knows … There are more artists per square inch in our society today than ever before. Museums and galleries of contemporary art have sprouted like so many mushrooms across the country. Everywhere one turns there are appeals to 'support the arts'.

HBO's 2018 documentary *The Price of Everything* shows us the true nature of the contemporary art market. The real ecology and situation of contemporary art are like a Rashomon-style debate between art historians, critics, collectors, art dealers, sellers, and artists, and also a game of money and frivolity between the rich and the powerful.

Curator Paul Schimmel says,

> Great art changes artists and helps them recognise their mission … There is no golden age without gold. If there aren't more than a hundred times as many collectors as there were in the 1970s, there aren't more than a thousand times as many artists making art. Sure, it's a bubble. But bubbles can create beautiful things.

Art collector Stephen Ellis says, 'To be a veteran collector. You have to be superficial at heart … People understand the price of all the objects but have no idea of their value.' Art dealer Gavin Brown says,

> Money and art are like Siamese twins. You can't separate the two. So the purpose of art has become deformed. I think it's hard for art itself to get out of that dilemma … So I'm not criticising. I'm just looking at the environment I find myself in. As we all know, we are heading towards a certain edge or a certain end.

Art critic Jerry Saltz says,

> It is upset that we talk too much about money. The glitz and glamour is the easiest thing to talk about. But no one thinks deeply about it ... Like religion, art is probably not a necessity. You need to

> eat to prevent yourself from starving to death. You need a certain amount of freedom. I'm not here to tell you that art is more important than freedom. But I am saying here that art is as much a part of life as Mozart.

Jeff Koons, a resounding name, is a devoted 'convert' to Marcel Duchamp. He was born in Yorkshire, Pennsylvania, in the United States. His father was an interior designer and furniture shop owner. Jeff Koons quit his job at a Wall Street investment bank and became a membership sale at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York in the 1980s, and during the two years he worked there, he doubled the number of MoMA members. At the age of twenty-three years old, he was offered the position of Senior Representative of MoMA. In his autobiography, he declared: 'I am the most successful salesman the museum has ever had.' After his 'success', given his boldness and the prevailing principle of 'market demand', Jeff Koons was quickly elevated to the top of the contemporary art world and became the most expensive producer and artist. He still sits comfortably in an aura of glory. He is also one of the most high-profile protagonists in the film *The Price of Everything*. Art dealer Mary Boone spoke highly of him as such:

> He's a terrific guy, very terrific … During the promotion of cereal, they didn't change the cereal formula but just put the word 'new' on the packaging, which means that it was the new one … This foreshadowed many subsequent cases of branding. People attribute this to Andy Warhol! Jeff Koons spotted it all by instinct.

In the film, in Jeff Koons' large, bright studio, several assistants are at their boards copying the Renaissance masterpieces for his work *Gazing Ball*. The filmmaker asks, 'So it doesn't matter that you don't physically touched the canvas with a brush?' Jeff Koons replied after a moment's reflection,

> I am in a way physically doing it, but it's physically through all these systems. It's like articulating your fingers and you know that your mind is telling your fingers to do this ..... If I would do this, the only thing I would be able to accomplish next year is just creating this painting. I won't be able to do anything else.

And Larry Poons, at the age of thirty-two, was defined as the heir to the heroic era of American painting. He still wants to be the Beethoven of painting decades later and has submitted to loneliness and marginalisation. 'Yes, I know. They think I'm dead. A lot of people have thought I was dead of a long time. That's not my fault. My only defence against fate is paint …' When the artist Poons uttered these words, his Don Giocode-like spiritual image probably earned respect from many people. However, what we can never stop is that there are and will always be more people who just want to be another Jeff Koons, the beneficiary of the snowball effect of the 'Jeff Koons phenomenon', manipulated and driven by capital.

The stark contrast between the two artists, Larry Poons and Jeff Koons, reveals the rational yet absurd reality of 'success' and 'failure', which is ultimately defined and sustained by the 'market system'. At the same time, it enables us to feel the disparity of fates between the pure 'spiritual warrior' and the 'cultural star', which provokes further thoughts and consolations.

In one interview, Jeff Koons said: 'I like Marcel Duchamp very much, who has had a greater influence on me than any other artist ...' 'In a society where capital is rife, art inevitably has to become a commodity.

Let's stop beating about the bush and produce art as if it were a commodity right from the start.'

Perhaps all human 'myths' are always caused by the coalescence of the infinitely variable desires, power, and the blindness of the masses. Power creates the myth, and the blindness of the masses creates the totem they use to worship. Perhaps all the good starts are formed by the gift of God and human participation; the end is the result of ordinary human activity.

I believe and practise that the ultimate mission of all art is to look deeply into the real situation and destiny of human beings in the past, present, and future, and at the same time to fulfil the call from spirituality and the soul to meet 'oneself'. As a human being, the capability of thinking should determine human beings' superiority over all species, which is the most sound capital. However, it is thinking and its results that lead to divisions and hostility between us and others, and even become a source of 'self-divisiveness'. Perhaps, then, art practice and spiritual creation are a more compelling act of repairing the rift between self and world, a journey of self-awakening, and the construction of inner vision and perception, or more precisely, the construction of the land on which the soul rests. Who am I? Where am I going? This process will become increasingly clear as reflection, creation and practice, introspection, and self-observation continue and develop. In the theory of the philosopher Martin Heidegger, 'being' is presented and confirmed by inquires.

One of my films is linked to a major environmental catastrophe of recent years. It happened in the spring when the production of my last film was not fully completed. In the next two days, although the earthquake has happened hundreds of kilometres away, it was still so real and tangible, as a flood of tragic images came to me via the internet. I still cannot understand why a picture of a neatly arranged sleeping infant instantly brought tears to my eyes … On the third day, for the first time in my life, I took a coach over the rolling hills and returned home to see my parents. Outside the window, everything looked peaceful and beautiful, and in the sunshine, there came the animated trees and fields. The modern highways, surrounded by the mountains and rivers, seemed to show off the glory of modern technology and construction techniques and the fact that ultimately humans will finally conquer nature. A few days later, the ground transportation to the destination was still blocked. With some twists and turns, a group of volunteers and I took a flight. Finally, we arrived at the tragic place, after which we were confronted with the interplay and conflict between the natural catastrophe, the power, the mediocrity derived from collective wills, the evil of the 'innocent', and the kindness of the vulnerable and the instinct of survival. Sometimes you have to believe that 'life is a tragedy' and you have no choice but to choose this truth that everyone resists—the vulnerable avoid the truth because they cannot afford it; the mediocre not only resist it but always 'defend' the dubiously optimistic, accepting falsehoods as truth as their instinct and being hostile to the truth as their foolish loyalty; the wicked directly 'create' the truth. Moreover, turning lies into 'truths' is their most proficient technique—this universal attribute of human nature constitutes the long-standing and 'lamentable' human world. In everyday reality, the driving force behind the 'curiosity' and inquiry into the unknown perhaps could be explained by the 'instinctive sense' of the human spirit and consciousness to seek the truth, but very often, in front of certain truths, it completely reveals the fact of human cowardice—and so far, human has not yet fully developed the spirit to face all truths and the courage to 'decide' them effectively and ethically. During those periods of life, I was prompted not only to think about the human species as a whole but to understand the individuals. No matter how strong the individual is, even with a lifelong passion and an inner strength to confront the absurdity of intransigent mecha-

nisms, they would still process the sadness of the physical limits of the human body and their inability to transcend the boundaries of the time and circumstances.

There have been many debates on the origin and the definition of Chinese independent cinema. It is beyond my own will and power to examine. Film scholar and critic Dr Wang Xiaolu once remarked: 'There are pioneers in our time. The participants of the Star Art Exhibition, with the same spirit and demands, had the impulse to make free cinema. The independent film movement 'should' have begun ...' I certainly agree with his arguments! Moreover, I am inclined to the idea that Chinese independent cinema originated from the spiritual awakening and self-expression of the filmmakers and that this was the period when contemporary art flourished in our country. I believe that the relationship between the real pioneers of independent cinema and contemporary art practitioners may not be coincidental or 'echoing' but spiritually 'homogeneous'. As for the construction of the meaning of 'independence', the official censorship and production restrictions and the 'technological boost' (the pervasive use of DV cameras) should only be counted as equally necessary external conditions. In other words, while contemporary art and independent cinema have 'distinct' external characteristics due to their different forms and media, there is a hidden commonality in their spiritual origins. Historically, it is not uncommon for 'brilliant minds' to appear at certain times of human civilisation. Or why today when digital filming tools (such as high-definition mobile phones and portable cameras) have become excessively prevalent in ordinary life, the number of 'video artists' and 'masters' has not increased significantly? The masses, after all, can only be the masses. This is the reason and the meaning of this article, which juxtaposes contemporary art and independent cinema.

Today, the popularity of documentaries with 'popular narratives' and 'the aesthetics of success' seems to be forming a 'sophisticated' aspect in popular culture. After all, not everyone has the ability and stamina to interpret a more profound feature film or greater literature. Even documentary production, distribution, and promotion have fed into an industrial chain. With the intermingling of capital and team collaboration, the 'standard model' of the quick-fire output and multi-dimensional marketing has been perfectly formed, aiming directly at achievable rewards and box office revenues. Moreover, at a time when 'shadow writing' for film criticism can be a public profession, we probably have to admit that we are facing a new era. At the same time, the historical mission of Chinese independent cinema for spiritual enlightenment has finally been completed.

The 'domination' of Hollywood cinema for the world's mainstream film narrative is not an unreasonable success. I once encountered a project team member of one of the largest investment platforms at a documentary conference in China. I was so delighted to introduce myself and present the process and concept of one of my works. The person calmly listened and said, 'To be honest, I felt dispassionate after hearing what you just presented, as your work still needs the audience to think … !' Was it a surprise that this turned out to be the case? No! Of course, it shouldn't have been a surprise. On the contrary, my over-expected encounter and conversation led me directly to the fact that I had grossly overlooked, that is, severe thought-provoking work cannot be popular everywhere. Not thinking is becoming the new standard of liberal spirit and fashionable lifestyle in the ultimate entertainment paradigm of the 'post-human era'. In a similar vein of sadness, a 'literary art youth' whom I had known for a long time, when others complimented about the 'apocalyptic' succession of some truly astonishing and tremendous articles written by a woman whom he also knew quite well, immediately and contemptuously responded, 'She is over-thinking.' It seems that thinking is not only unwelcome, it is to be hated?

Although it is true that the combination of the internet and the elite navigators of popular culture has made too many audio-visual works well-known and helped some people to become famous and rich first, I still believe that the pan-cultural phenomenon and the cheap spiritual self-sufficiency created by its powerful force and illusion, as well as the immoderate pretext of 'cultural charity', are the greatest harm to all serious thinking and works. Today, the new myths are generated by the internet and the 'technological civilisation' which human beings depend on so much for their lives. It fuels the 'rapid growth of all things', imposing the perhaps too romanticised expectations and nostalgia of the origin of the human spirit and its divinity and sublimity. It is destroying them without a trace.

The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer once wrote:

> In all literature, art, and philosophy there can be dabblers … who, at best, reproduce what is external, accidental and random in the works of others and give them their own name. They get the skin, not the essence ... The work of art or poetry or philosophy produced by the genius is simply the result, but for the dabblers, these are merely the means. The latter seek their own interests by these means and generally know how to benefit themselves, as they follow the mass closely and are ready to serve their capricious and fickle needs. So, these people are generally well off, but genius often suffers misery because genius achieves objective goals at the expense of his comfort.

Not all independent films have established aesthetics and spirits in this country where our vision and physical body grow, let alone on a par with contemporary art which flourishes under the constraints. However, they are a 'species' on the same land, perhaps of the same origin, with some similarities. So, what is or will be the reality of our independent films?

One day, I phoned a friend who used to work in an institution that has made a significant contribution to the history of Chinese independent cinema. When I asked him about his views and thoughts on the current situation of independent cinema, he immediately broke down and sobbed for several minutes, and later said:

> I think everything will become corrupt when it reaches a certain peak … I now realise that I was too naive before. People are selfish, and very few people really do independent cinema. I even wonder what I would do with the rest of my life, and what I am worried about is certainly not about survival on a material level.

Apparently, I was really astonished by that conversation! It was more about spirit than the material or the physical and a real case of too much emotion being used to its detriment. We have all been naive in believing in the positiveness of everything and the kindness of human nature. But when I look back at how far I have come, I am very grateful for the naivety and curiosity I have had along the way. They are the natural, mysterious, hidden 'inner drives' of all discovery and creativity. Otherwise, I probably would not be the way I am. As for loss, hurt, and despair, that is the inevitable sacrifice to obtain the good things. Like a sacrificial object, it is both the sacrifice to the deity and the mysterious force that prompts some people to go forward. I understand the possible situation of that friend and often recall it. But after that conversation, the question for me to this day or for the rest of my life is: what caused such genuine pain to an adult who had experienced how the authority abuses their power? I will not explore this inquiry in the future—

maybe I am not supposed to know the answer.

When these fragmented thoughts were about to be put into words, I was pleased to encounter film scholar Dr Wang Xiaolu's (王小鲁) book *The Will of the Cinema* (电影意志), which is not a large volume but contains his recent works on the historical development of Chinese independent cinema. It presents a brief poetic history of Chinese independent cinema, including its pre-history, current status, and the end of its spirit and activities. His words are erudite, calm, positive, reflective, and caring. I was delighted to read his discussion of the theory of 'witnessing', as it coincides with my concept of 'passive thinking' based on my situation.

The arguments in this article may form a sort of intertextuality with Dr Wang Xiaolu's writings, but of course, I absolutely do not have the capability or intention to pursue the same narrative. More importantly, it was his writings that encouraged me to say what I wanted to say. Undeniably, his accounts prompted me to gain respect amid delight and peace, and his film analysis elaborates on the special meaning of life, conscience and dignity. I eagerly hope for him to become China's André Bazin, if history is going in the right direction. This should be the public expectation in this big-cinema-consuming country.

> I remembered ten years ago, we curated a youth exhibition, and I wrote this in the foreword of the exhibition to express my understanding of a group of independent documentary filmmakers: 'We see an enduring power ... this group had not existed before ...There aren't that many. But they bring a kind of social paradigm. When independent cinema and middle-aged life (from thrity to over fifty) are incorporated, it represents a kind of deep dive into the spirit and a new way of being that are profoundly pioneered in our inherent mode of existence and working system.' I felt at the time that they had, in fact, discovered a new way of being, which opened up more spaces and possibilities to (distinguish from) a homogenous Chinese way of being. As revolutionaries, they certainly wanted the path they exemplified to get wider and wider, with a lot of followers, but recently the situation has taken an unexpected turn ...This is the process of generating the idea and spirit of contemporary Chinese documentaries. The time determines its emergence and its obstruction. Everything stemmed because of the time, and the concept of the Chinese independent documentary movement determines its own fate, as well as the fate of the filmmakers ... It brings not only a depression of the field, but also a destruction of the belief and general melancholia.

As I quoted and edited these words from Wang Xiaolu's article 'Recounting the Chinese Independent Documentary Movement' (中国独立纪录片运动再叙述) in issue 131 of *Today* (今天), I unconsciously became misty-eyed. I am grateful for these words, which bring a sad message but with kindness. This is the truth spoken by the brave! It feels like a pair of kind eyes looking at your fate and mine from afar. It is a silent encouragement.

That night, I lost sleep again. When I woke up, what came to my mind most clearly were the two lines: 'The time determines its emergence and its obstruction. Everything stemmed because of the time, and the concept of the Chinese independent documentary movement determines its fate, as well as the fate of the filmmakers'. This echoes the strong sense of fatalism that I felt when I saw a clip from Greek director Theo Angelopoulos' film *Ulysses' Gaze* (1995) at a friend's place in the midst of confusion and anxiety: in the film, the protagonist, A, encounters the premiere of his film for a personal matter. As three of them

sneak out of the movie theatre surrounded by protestors, he has to pull his collar over his head to avoid the journalists waiting for interviews. After they go into the street, he says goodbye to his company. He is about to get into a taxi when a beautiful, elegant woman, who seems familiar to him, enters the picture from the side and into the front of his view. He immediately abandons the taxi and follows her along. In the rainy street, the faster he tries to catch up, the faster she picks up the pace. In the distance, the protesters are lining up with lit candles. Suddenly a parade of police overtakes them and stretches along the street. A crowd of people instantly separated the two … Doesn't it sadly refer to the paradox existing in human life between the expectation of good things, the endeavour to pursue them, and the power apparatus? At that time, I was not yet a qualified film viewer. But that was my real enlightenment based on cinematic thinking. What is the universal destiny of humankind? And what are the borders of nations?

Perhaps (the socio-cultural heritage of) the land is only one of the external factors, but certainly a very powerful one. Affected by the interplay of many factors, some works will inevitably give rise to corresponding 'myths' and 'power'. However, not all creative acts can be powerful, and only by challenging and confronting the authority do they become powerful. Otherwise, it is just an illusion. Artworks should be achieved to enlighten and invoke the soul and conscience. Certainty, the land does not have the divine power to make every seed grow into a giant tree. Art and spirituality are like religion, and to practise them is a journey of 'martyrdom'—and it should be. Not all the beautiful flowers on the earth are destined to bear fruit. However, it is true that in history, there have been a lot of cowards and speculators who have always been able to 'succeed' more efficiently by sharing the same machinations and stratagems.

With regard to the power apparatus, the causes of power in reality and in myth are always homogeneous—the ruler is not fully formed in him/herself but prompted by a larger voluntarily servile 'community' or 'environment'. The catastrophe and evilness of power also lie in the fact that when one acquires enough power, they not only rightly assume themselves as the 'empire', but also they are more likely to forget that they are still 'human' quickly.

The most prominent incident and catastrophe in the world these days is the Russian 'invasion' of Ukraine. Instigated by the most powerful 'war giant' of the century and the persistent political ambitions and hegemonic will of his 'ally of interests', Vladimir Putin, as one of the iron-fisted politicians of the world, is becoming the real 'war maniac' by launching a 'special military operation' in a fit of rage.

I do not intend to predict his victory or defeat or take any position on it. War is clearly the most stupid, cruel, and tragic 'invention' of humankind. Sometimes the war is about stupidity and cruelty; sometimes, it is used to end stupidity and greater tragedy and cruelty. Modern war is by far the most tragic and efficient way of causing hell on earth; humankind is the only species that brings massive destruction through unnecessary, and perhaps avoidable, enmity and hatred. War also directly reveals the extent of human civilisation, morality, and hypocrisy. Caused by the interplay of the 'disciplines' between the self and the world, human cognition, knowledge, virtue, and self-education are still really weak, far from being able to have the courage and consciousness to face the truth or to bear the inevitable consequences. In the face of war and significant interests, 'human civilisation' is just a fancy name. Too much 'justice' and 'order' becomes a slogan simply based on self-interest. If we look at human behaviour through the lens of war, all the reasonable expectations we have had so far may look too optimistic and 'absurd'. The important thing is that humankind does not learn to 'do evil' only through war.

And yet, my thoughts don't just stop there! Instead, whenever thinking of the paratroopers plunging into the city from high up in the sky, I feel a great emptiness and pain—maybe all we can do in our lifetime is to do some work with the camera in our hands. Moreover, as the mode of art creation (filmmaking) is born to be 'prescribed' (when Direct Cinema, the most passive form among all cinema categories, produces any great works, they must be the outcomes of profound mind, remarkable talent and the (courage of) confronting the many impossibilities of reality, and some luck), we mostly set out at a time when all the future is not clear. Are we not like the soldiers who, when they jump off, encounter the unknown and the emptiness of life, even if there is no way back? They are serving the will of their country and their regime (a more powerful but empty 'machine of destiny' that determines different classes of people), and we are also risking our own spiritual will or, in the same way, leaping into the unknown?

Jeff Koons, the cultural businessman and the mythmaker of contemporary art, is to art is like Volodymyr Oleksandrovych Zelenskyy, the Ukrainian president and former 'comedian' is to politics. They are all people who could shake the world under certain conditions, but they might have been better remembered on another (career) path. Yet, they did not. The difference is that the former has been made famous by it; the latter has led to the destruction of his own country ... Of course, it is not the fault of the time but the necessity of the time. It is just like history happened to need the Dutchman Vincent Willem van Gogh to become famous only after his death. These are just a part of the predestination of humankind that has not yet been able to figure out. The American philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum once said, 'It is always difficult to separate one catastrophe from another, for as long as the human species remains, we do not know what we can avoid.'

Over the years, my life has become a reality dominated, tied up and influenced by films. Fate has its secrets and decisive conditions, which are probably inescapable. I always start shooting a new film before finishing the previous one. When the first cut of the second film, on which I had great expectations, was completed, I could feel clearly that my thinking and narrative judgement were on hold. Under the intense pressure of survival, I could not stop and 'get into life', so I just started cutting the last film which I had not started. After about three months or so, the editing was almost 'successfully' completed, and it was shortlisted for awards at two film festivals in China, but it was still only a break in thinking. Then, at the festival, I surprisingly met the protagonist of my new film, whose sadness, sentimentality, and natural charm in cinematic expression prompted me to be fully committed to the new shooting. It was, of course, unanticipated and certainly is a greater opportunity. The commitment would last for years, and there is no turning back. Life has never changed, yet it is always changing as if driven by a powerful machine or an undercurrent. (I) never want to stop for a moment. Life can never go back to the past. Fate takes shape in the continuous convergence of unnoticeable people, events and things until the hometown is deserted and the loved ones pass away ...This is the trajectory and formation of destiny.

All works of great inner strength have the quality of restraint and patience. Should not life be like that? What kind of day do the people who cry in the long night live?

Another opportunity is that there is finally an unavoidable reason for me to re-edit my first hastily 'finished' film. The film presents a sad spectacle of a city which was loved by some and hated by others due to misinterpretation and prejudice ... In the utilitarian cultural environment, re-editing a film after a few years is too nostalgic and pedantic! Generally speaking, this is not respectable but rather stubborn. However, once

the decision was made, it was a pleasure to see how smoothly it went. If the judgements made years ago were correct, they would still be correct and become more powerful with time. As I once blamed myself for compromising with 'environmental forces' and effective dissemination, the guilt of being a coward was relieved by re-editing the film. More importantly, this persistence has led to the formation of a trilogy based on my narrative aesthetics and view of life. These works and narratives are constructed from the life experiences of the people in this country and wider 'human destiny'. What I do is simply observe and collect footage. Every time I think about it, I am deeply grateful to all the people I have encountered based on these films (and, of course, those who have helped me with them!). Whether my films have led to misunderstandings and hostility naturally or accidentally, they have allowed me to see the similarities and truths of the universal destiny of humanity more accurately and earlier. Perhaps, no matter how hard we try or justify it, we cannot change the Nietzschean 'prophecy' that human is destined for a more difficult life. However, I am more courageous and determined to continue with the rest of my life … And all the misinterpretations and hostility cannot dissolve the deep kindness and compassion for human beings, the 'difficulty (or deep sorrow) of being human', and the reality of suffering that has always been present in my work. At the same time, my films give the dignity of a 'human being' to the vulnerable and the innocent amid tragedy—and I am one of them. All of these represent the meaning of my efforts, even though they are just a small, fragile, and almost useless consolation in the face of the inevitable termination of human life. But the meaning is still undeniable. No one willingly and unconditionally enters their inevitable end. All the effort, struggles, sorrows, despair, and expectations of humans prove this fact beyond doubt. It is impossible for human beings to find or create a direct and quick path to 'absolute happiness' in the material and physical world of existence, to this day or in the future.

There is no need to go further afield to find the masters. Beyond the limelight, there are two filmmakers that I feel close to and respect: Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa and Russian filmmaker Alexander Sokurov. Although growing up in different countries and cultures, their films are similar in their kindness and concern for human beings, and in their deeper narrative visions. What makes the former's films so powerful is not only that in his films he established a universal ethical foundation based on the kindness of human nature, but also that he offered his audience a broader vision of 'moral inquiry' and a more sincere and courageous 'anatomy of humanity'. Alexander Sokurov is still living in Russia, a country with a more integrated artistic tradition. He is more like a melancholy prophet and watchman sent by God who knows the nature and spiritual direction of humankind, which constitutes the more potent strength in some of his works. Such a human does not need to gain much of a reputation loud enough in the money-driven era today. He once said:

> I think cinema is now at a stage where it is like an irrational teenager who doesn't know what to do and, most importantly, doesn't know what to do with themselves. This is because the art of cinema has not yet been firmly established. It has not built up a set of artistic norms of its own. It's because the development of cinema is too hastily, going forward non-stop.

He added: 'Film and art shoulder a very noble and serious mission. On a macro level, I think the primary mission of art is as follows: art can make people prepare for death and accept death. Art always tells us how to get out of the gloom of death.' I am certainly convinced of this. I had already been practising it before I met with these words. However, this will only be the fate and secret of the minority of the human race. Or perhaps they are predetermined—after all, 'being towards death' (Martin Heidegger's words)

is not a ‘drudgery’ that everyone is willing to endure. Not even the interest of the most refined may be enough to arouse it—death is human’s lifelong hostility and relentless resistance, but the inevitable end.

Recently, the internet has continued to be filled with articles and news about Ukraine, which seems to be righteously disseminated to each according to their need. The mobile phone screen lights up with the notifications of the ‘impressive outcomes’ of Ukrainian athletics at the Beijing Paralympic Winter Games and of ‘condemnation’ of the war. Valeriy Sushkevych, the president of the Ukrainian Paralympic committee, said at the Beijing Paralympic Winter Games: ‘War is a great motivation. This is the situation. Bombs are going off, and missiles are going off ... Everyone understands that if Ukraine does not participate in the Paralympics, Ukraine does not exist.’ I understand his point of view well enough, but with sadness! At the same time, my thoughts continue to be led to another dimension: no matter how high the spirit of sport and the Olympics has been elevated, I believe that it is related to the eternal ‘fighting spirit’ of humankind, which is essential ‘competition’. What would our reality be like if humans were not ruled by their ‘instinct of competition’, or if they were to establish and adhere to ethical rules based on conscience and kindness rather than ‘by any means necessary’? Consider, what else this similar ‘innocent’ evilness might be used for by human beings?

Perhaps in the history of human art, no other form of art has achieved as much success in the realm of popular culture as cinema, forming the most sought-after spectacle. However, the reality we are experiencing today is that we have to live in an era overwhelmed by commercialised film culture, a shallow and mediocre spiritual flow, and a cheap sense of happiness and identity. Today, the prosperity of the Chinese documentary is not strong enough to conceal its lack of spirit. Looking back at the history of independent cinema, it is easy to see that the pioneers and the stalwarts who came after were clearly more ‘independent’. They were either idealists and liberal-thinkers or spiritually courageous people, most of whom had the talent to pursue liberal literary and ideal art. The techniques and knowledge of cinema were mostly acquired through ‘self-education’. However, history has changed …

Generally speaking, today’s younger generation (of filmmakers) are clear, precise, and pragmatic in their goals. Taking risks seems reckless and unreliable to them. They are team players seeking quick success and are more interested in mutual benefit and ‘win-win’. It is clear that the nostalgic and respectful days when one could travel alone and create works for the spirit and soul with a naive and idealistic passion are coming to an end. They are being replaced by a new mode of production constructed through budgets, quotes, and profit-sharing agreements. As a result, new rules have been tacitly generated to produce ‘independent cinema’. Indeed, the then independent film scene was not as large as it is today. However, the new generation of filmmakers may not be entirely homogeneous with the spiritually conscious ‘actors’ of the past.

Everything is always interconnected in a certain way. People’s experiences are always similar. Today, as the critic Roger Kimball has said about the current state of contemporary art, the call to ‘support arts’ and ‘promote documentary film’ is evident in many cities across the country, even on mobile phone screens. In fact, they all have their own agenda. In an age where profits and own interests more and more drive everyone, what does humanity mean drowning in the abyss of fame and fortune? Maybe the only good thing is that the emperors no longer have to wear the new, outdated clothes? In such a new era—when ‘everything’ can be turned into a business opportunity, and when the spirit is declining, and propaganda songs are ad-

vocated—it seems that all spiritual practices and products will die prematurely. The new tactic 'interpretation' and multi-dimensional marketing remain the only thing that remains.

Is what we 'care' really presented via what the camera captures? I am afraid that people who can use (the subjects') trust and kindness to visualise cruelty with their phallic camera are more likely to produce more 'hardcore' stories and 'issues', becoming 'hot topics'. In the present and for the foreseeable future, hot topics are the 'gravity' of the new liberal economy. In this 'post-truth era', strong attention and high (online) followers create money and value, and nobility and compassion have been eliminated. If not, how could cultural business become so popular by labelling the dubious morality of (the filmmakers) themselves and consuming the misfortunes of others through films? The dissolution of 'original sin' is the disappearance of awe. Of course, no one would readily admit to being the driving force behind this inevitably pessimistic truth and consequence. Whether behind the camera or in front of the screen, the cultural businessmen are no less capable of producing lies than politicians and liars … In the face of the unquestionable truth, no one, for the sake of own good, will readily admit that themselves and others are cowards. Perhaps this is also one of the 'symbiotic catastrophes' that people are meant to suffer under the discipline and indoctrination of modern 'civilisation'.

And yet, the 'future' is still coming at us non-stop. And it reminds me that when a fact, a state of affairs, or even a time, is tilting towards a crisis, there is always someone conscious—not everyone is blinded. Of course, honesty and sobriety cannot control everything. If we are honest enough, we should be able to see further ahead? 'Ask not for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee,' said John Donne. What makes some of Akira Kurosawa's and Werner Herzog's films more respectable is the compassion, honesty, and courage with which they present the 'natural truth' that everyone should pay for their mistakes. However, some truths probably can only be told in a film.

Let us now learn to look into the people in human spiritual and intellectual history who have looked affectionately and melancholy into their own time and ours. The light of faith and hope still exists in their eyes! And let us learn to accept the fate that is bound to come. In the end, no matter how we define ourselves, we will eventually become who we are and who we will only become. As independent filmmaker Ji Dan (季丹) said in a conversation with Wang Xiaolu: 'I feel like I have finally become a person.' What a delightful certainty that is!

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe once said: 'The biggest problem of any art is to cause by appearance the illusion of a higher reality.' I think art is more likely to grow out of our perception of the never-ending prejudice, ignorance, division, misunderstanding, hostility between people, and our search for the meaning of life in loneliness, happiness, pain, or nothingness, as well as the eternal unknown that we have to face, and the powerlessness of knowing all tragedies, will still happen. These are also the starting point for thinking about 'what makes us human' and the inevitable recurrence of what human often encounters. And moreover, they are the strength of film narrative and the greatest secret of the eternity of film. But render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, unto capital the things that are capital's, and unto cinema the things that are cinema's.

Art cannot end. Otherwise, humans will.

In the history and destiny of humans, we are always looking for new creations and possibilities and refus-

ing to repeat ourselves in a monotonous way. Therefore, as Heraclitus says, 'one cannot step into the same river twice'; no river that has already flowed will ever flow back to the same bank again. However, if possible, my future work will still be a visual exploration of the eternal plight of human beings and the ordinary 'secrets' and hardships that have been overlooked, which will be the most challenging jobs. Consider, in our lives, we have far more prejudice, misunderstanding, and unnecessary hostility imposed on us by reality than hypocrisy and understanding. If this is our fate, we have no choice but to act. Nor do we have the right to give up.

At the invitation of independent filmmaker Li Xiaofeng (黎小锋) , this article is written for *the Chinese Independent Cinema Observer.* I did not have much interaction with him, only the thoughts and memories of 'poetry and reality' from his relevant films and *Worms in the Cement* (水门汀里的蚯蚓) . Previously, I had heard that he organised a forum in Shanghai to facilitate the communication and exhibition of the filmmakers' works, but otherwise, we did not know much about each other. Recently, when I looked into some archives, I realised how little I had known him and how embarrassing and shameful it is to practise my approach of 'standing aside and understanding the world from my own narrow view' in today's super-social age. It turns out that the Shanghai Youth Film Festival (海上影展暨论坛) was launched in November 2010 and has been taken care of by its founders, Li Xiaofeng and his partner Jia Kai (贾恺) , since then. In the early years, there were many couples in the Chinese contemporary art world, and they all made a lot of achievements together. However, it is relatively rare among independent filmmakers. They are certainly one of the rare ones, and they teach at the same university in the same major. Their works are probably the pure outcome and evidence of their love and spirit. But I still wonder if it is self-sacrifice for the spiritually motivated filmmakers to settle into the teaching profession. I am even more curious to know, in 2010, when three major Chinese (independent) film festivals still existed, why this film festival was launched? I heard some of their friends advised them to stop the festival and concentrate on filmmaking, but it did not work. Now it seems more like an act of God. There is always someone with more ambition. Besides, the progress of human beings and their creation has probably never been driven by the 'common mind'.

In the foreword to *Shanghai Images: Shanghai Youth Film Festival 2010-2016* (海上影: 2010 ～ 2016 海上纪录片论坛实录) , Li Xiaofeng writes:

> In a quaint inn by the Yangtze River (扬子江), I was talking to a filmmaker friend about the difficulties of disseminating *minjian* (民间) film works. I suddenly had a fun idea of doing a film festival: rent a boat on the Yangtze River, choose several cities, for example, starting with Chongqing, invite a group of filmmakers and 'ideal audiences', and then announce the launch of the festival. Then as we go down the river, we show films, exchange ideas, and make friends between filmmakers and audiences along the way, in the cabin during the day and on deck at night (or on the sky if the sky is dark enough, or on the river if it's calm enough). We watch good films, enjoying the scenery and life.

When I read the words today, it brings me tears of laughter. Although we all observe reality with our eyes like everyone else, we are better at thinking based on images. At the same time, we are also more sensitive to translating texts into images. To what extent do the texts-converted images convey the tone of the 'post-apocalyptic carnival' and the post-modernist performance art? His article also says that the amusing

idea of a ‘sky projecting’ did not come to fruition. I’ve always wondered what kind of boat it would have been. Was it ever built?

Perhaps that boat does exist. It is the last resort and ‘ark of the last days’ for the idealists, the fantasists and the depressed of the ultimate entertainment age since the invincible machine of power in this ‘peaceful’. Still, long-suffering land has destroyed, crushed, and exiled their spiritual destiny. In a land where no lasting reverence and spiritual dwelling place can be established, probably nothing can last. The consequences of all the rebellions and perversions of humankind in the cultural, spiritual, and intellectual spheres ultimately point to the same point of origin. I would like to say that since Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, in the language of insanity, announced that ‘God is dead’ with his ‘superhuman will’, in other words, the dissolution of an untenable sublime and divine was accelerated in the midst of a mass celebration and absolute misinterpretation, the Pandora’s box of human nature has finally been unlocked. However, it seems that the world has not become better today; rather, people even more eagerly need a more ‘omnipotent’ ‘Messiah’ who is no longer silent and invisible.

The bell has been tolled, though the sound is still too distant. But, look! There is a light calling from the far sky. A flood of emptiness and loss is sweeping over the land, and will that boat perhaps carry all the genuine spiritual warriors to the new and uncharted world? Let us hope!

This article is dedicated to my mother.

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