

Keyword: Pixelation

Author: LI Xiaofeng 黎小锋 Translator: Michelle DEETER

Abstract

Pixelation might represent the weathering or deterioration of independent documentary films. Or, it might mean something more.

1. A beehive of time

When watching films from a hundred years ago, viewers see that the blacks and whites have lost their gradation. The image might be blurry or damaged. When watching a reused tape from several decades ago, a magenta mist may float across the image. Even a film that was taped a mere six years ago might be marred by disappointing amounts of pixelation.

The people that I had observed from behind the camera might become a series of splotchy forms after a few years, as if they were captured on a security camera. They overlap and are impossible to distinguish, like a beehive of time. These films are the repositories of faces both lively and uninteresting, of fragments that happen unexpectedly and are unclear. However, the audience can no longer decipher any of the secrets.

2. Who thinks documentaries are meaningful?

It's not the people being filmed. The documentaries do not bring them anything helpful—on the contrary, they can often cause trouble. Those being filmed might think that the pixelation of documentary materials is an ideal fate for the film. Then the evidence of their personal pain and sorrow will no longer exist.

It's not the audience, either. They are only interested in going on a journey for an hour or two, to feel someone else's happiness and pain. At the end they stand up and stretch and finally leave.

My own experience tells me that documentaries are only meaningful to the filmmaker. Making a documentary is similar to writing or drawing—it is a personal activity. Before the work is completed, the artist is tortured to the point of being unable to eat or sleep, and yet after it is completed, the artist still feels deep psychological effects.

3. Making documentaries is a struggle against time

We filmed *My Last Secret* 我最后的秘密 (dir. Li Xiaofeng and Jia Kai 贾恺, 2007), *The Shoeshiner's Journey* 昨日狂想曲 (dir. Li Xiaofeng and Jia Kai, 2016), *Ballad of Roaming Spirits* 游神考 (dir. Li Xiaofeng and Jia Kai, 2019) and indeed all of our documentaries over a period of years. They lasted three years, five years, eight years, or even longer. I must admit that I try to extend the time I spend making each film and accumulate as much material as possible.



My Last Secret

I have a simple desire to work on one film for my entire life. The film should never be finished and never have a final edit. I should always feel that there are more things I can do to surprise the viewer, or that the film could be more reflective of reality.

I believe that while filmmakers can become more technically competent, they should have the attitude of an amateur. This is the only way that they will not begrudge the time and energy spent on a film and will actually enjoy the process of making a documentary. It's not possible to expect much more out of filmmaking. Surely, it is best to have the following attitude:

No matter what happens to the film, eventually it will become pixelated.

4. Pixelation as evidence

I went into the mines three times in order to film the mine scenes for *Gold Underground* 遍地乌金 (dir. Li Xiaofeng and Jia Kai, 2011). On the second time, my camera was taken away by the security

guard of the private mine as soon as I came back up. To make matters worse, it was formatted right before my eyes. After much heartache, I asked a data recovery company in Xi'an to help me recover the materials. Every second of the mining footage was hard-won. Although the company had superb skills (it was even said that they had successfully restored the core data of a precious artifact), after ten hours of work, the material had been restored, but the quality was blurry. The heads did not line up with the bodies and the colours were mixed together as if pixelated.

You can probably appreciate my frustration. I had no choice but to go through the effort of finding another mine and filming everything again.



Poster for *Gold Underground*

Curiously, I opened the pixelated version and scrubbed backwards and forwards, watching the footage again and again. The more I watched, the more I believed that this pixelated version had a unique meaning. I wouldn't edit it into my documentary, of course—at that time I didn't have the courage to do that. But what if it were placed in an art gallery? That might be a good idea.

This reminded me that our documentaries are not simply made up of intact film materials but also damaged film materials. Pixelation is a reminder and a form of evidence. What if we changed our perspective? Isn't it possible to say that the pixelated version is closer to reality, or closer to truth?

5. Pixelation as part of the scenery

It goes without saying that in film, pixelation has another meaning. On television, legal commentary shows often use pixelation. Typically the aim is to protect the identity of the person being filmed, and there is nothing wrong with that. The problem is that the pixelation is so sloppy, those familiar with the person would still be able to identify them.

Documentaries that are shown in cinemas will self-censor. The film will not need to use pixelation

because anything sensitive would have already been removed.

Pixel eyes.

Pixel bodies.

Pixel personalities.

Pixelation has already become an inescapable part of a film's scenery.

We might as well go straight to pixelating these objects:

Flowers

Trees

Wooden boats

Cut pears

Rivers flowing into seas

Skyscrapers

Perfume bottles

Toothbrushes

Guns

6. Turning into pixels

In the next five or ten years, or perhaps longer than that, I will work hard to continue making the films that I want to make. I might disseminate them and distribute them, but it is still OK if I do not disseminate or distribute them. If I show them to my friends, or only share them with family, that still has meaning for me. The seasons turn, and lights and shadows move. What harm is there in projecting a film on the wall of one's home? Everything is alive ... how do we know that the chairs, tables, and cups are not watching my film? When the refrigerator rumbles, how can I be sure that it is not expressing its opinion?

Let me be guzzled by time, willing to sink down, willing to be alone, willing to be with all of the things that are indisputable and indestructible—

Let's all turn into pixels.