

The Expansion of the Self:

Dividuation and Interality in Chinese Contemporary Art-house Cinema

Zhichao Zhu

Supervisors:

Prof. Dr. **Michaela Ott**

Prof. **Robert Bramkamp**

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Contents

Abstract	1
Acknowledgements	2
1.1 Independent Cinema in China	3
1.2 Chinese Experimental Cinema and Early Artist Film Practices	6
1.3 The Democratization of Moving Image Practice in the Context of Digital Technology and Reform and Opening-Up: A New Phase Since the 21st Century	8
1.4 Re-examining "Art-house cinema": issues and methodologies	11
Research Methods	14
2. Conceptions of Persons in West and East	15
2.1 Western Conceptions of the Individual	15
2.2 Conceptions of the Human/Persons in Classical Chinese Philosophy	22
2.3 Two Paths of Individuation and the Divergence of Freedom	29
3. On the Theory of Dividual	31
3.1 Deleuze and the Dividual	31
3.2 Individual and Dividual: A Compromise Perspective	35
3.3 Dividuation and Film Aesthetics	37
4. Dividuation and Interality: A Dialogue	41
4.1 What is Interality?	41
4.2 Symbiosis: Species, Bodies, and Life	43
4.3 Technology, the Self, and Practices of Subjectivation	46
4.4 Summary: Interality, Dividuation and Contemporary Chinese Cinema	50
5. The Dividual and Interological Filmic Artefacts	53
5.1 There Is A Strong Wind in Beijing	54
5.2 The Red Flag Flies	64
5.3 Zhong Su: Cinematic Painting	71
5.4 Dragonfly Eyes: The World as a Giant Film Studio	76
5.5 Liu Guangli: Engine Film, Found Footage, and Media Fusion	81
5.6 Lei Lei's Private Imagery	85
5.7 Cao Fei: Globalized Manufacturing and the Workers' Theater	87
5.8 Conclusion	92

6. Reflections on the Practice of Contemporary Chinese Artist Films	100
6.1 Dividuation, Interality and the "Expansive Self": Dynamic Subjectivity and Decentralized Aesthetic Expression in Chinese Art House Cinema	102
6.2 Artist Films as Archives of Contemporary Chinese Society	106
6.3 Concerns of Dividuation and Interality in Artistic and Cinematic Practices	108
6.4 Prospects for Dividuation and Interality in Contemporary Chinese Artist Films	110
Conclusion	112
Appendix I : Excerpt from Interview with Zhong Su	114
Appendix II: Excerpt from Interview with Hongxiang Zhou	122
Bibliography	127
Index of Films and Artworks	133

Abstract

This dissertation employs the theoretical frameworks of *dividuation* and *interality* to re-examine contemporary Chinese art-house cinema within the contexts of digital transformation and globalization. It argues that these moving-image practices should not be understood as self-contained entities, but rather as generative and open processes—at once aesthetic experiments, social archives, and relational fields.

The concept of *dividuation*, derived from Deleuze and developed by Michaela Ott, emphasizes the heterogeneity, metastability, and interpenetration of subjectivation and artistic expression. *Interality*, rooted in classical Chinese philosophy and advanced by scholars such as Shang Geling and Zhang Xianguang, designates a non-substantial reality in which existence unfolds through relations, intervals, transformation, and becoming. While emerging from distinct philosophical traditions, both concepts converge in their emphasis on relationality and processuality, offering complementary cross-cultural frameworks for the study of filmic aesthetics in the digital media age.

Methodologically, the dissertation combines textual and contextual analysis of representative Chinese artist films produced between the early 2000s and the 2020s. These works span diverse media forms—from celluloid and digital video to surveillance footage, game engines, and AI-generated imagery—and, through cross-cultural textual appropriation, multi-sourced collage, and cross-media experimental practices, they manifest modes of filmic generation and aesthetic dividuation.

The study contributes to filling a significant gap in the academic discussion of Chinese artist cinema by highlighting how such works reconfigure aesthetic forms, media ecologies, and participatory mechanisms. It further introduces the notion of the “expansive self” as a critical perspective to illuminate how artworks emerge dynamically within the relational, medial, and global-local landscape of contemporary image culture.

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1. Chinese Independent Cinema and Artist Films: 1990s–21st Century Transition

1.1 Independent Cinema in China

According to widely accepted perspectives, the emergence of Chinese independent cinema can be traced back to the late 1980s, with its gradual expansion throughout the 1990s.¹ Beginning in the late 1980s, a group of graduates from the Beijing Film Academy refused to accept the state-assigned placements at national film studios and instead opted to self-finance their own film productions. At the same time, early returnees from overseas studies, former television professionals who had resigned from various broadcasting stations, and young directors actively joined this movement, collectively fostering the rise of independent filmmaking in early 1990s China. During this period, independent filmmaking relied heavily on the personal resources and social networks of its creators and largely operated outside the official film production system. Consequently, these films were long categorized as “underground cinema.” However, entering the 21st century, the more inclusive and relatively neutral term “independent cinema” gradually replaced concepts such as “underground cinema” and the “New Documentary Movement,” which had been commonly referenced by scholars in the 1990s, and was increasingly embraced by film researchers and filmmakers.²

Hao Jian from the Beijing Film Academy has noted that in the Chinese context, the notion of “independence” encompasses aesthetic, political, and economic dimensions. While many independent filmmakers actively pursue aesthetic autonomy, they are also inevitably subjected to pressures from official ideology and the financial constraints that come with operating outside the state system.³

Since the 1990s, amid the broader context of China’s reform and opening-up, the emergence of underground cinema coincided with the rise of Western liberal

¹ Scholars in the fields of Chinese cinema and media arts study, such as Dong Bingfeng, Cao Kai, and Cheng Jian, all designate 1990 as the beginning of independent film production in China in their monographs or articles, with both *Mama*—recognized as the first independent feature film—and *Bumming in Beijing*—the first independent documentary—were released in 1990.

² Jian Cheng, *The Evolution of Contemporary Chinese Independent Film and Its Overseas Collections*, 2011

³ Jian Hao, “Mainland China’s Independent Narrative Films: Faithful Realism and Aesthetic Shortcomings,” *Dianying Yishu* [Film Art], no. 1 (2012): 59–63.

thought. However, this mode of filmmaking remained subject to the constraints of official ideological frameworks. During this period, independent films predominantly took the form of realist narrative films or independent documentaries, facing significant challenges in both production and distribution. As digital technology was not yet widespread, filmmaking remained heavily dependent on expensive professional equipment, meaning that most independent films were produced by film school graduates or those with access to television resources. Furthermore, due to strict censorship regulations, many independent films were unable to secure domestic theatrical releases, prompting directors to turn toward international film festivals in search of recognition and professionalization. However, this strategy also led to criticism and punitive measures: in 1994, China's State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television issued a ban on directors such as Tian Zhuangzhuang, Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai, and Wu Wenguang, citing their unauthorized participation in international film festivals. At the same time, Chinese independent cinema also faced criticism in international markets, with some accusing it of "commodifying China's poverty and darkness" to cater to Western political and cultural imaginaries.

Broadly speaking, the essence of Chinese independent cinema is defined by two key aspects: first, its detachment from the state-controlled film production system and reliance on self-financing; and second, its varying degrees of thematic, ideological, and aesthetic distance, or even opposition, to official narratives. In discussing the independence of Chinese independent cinema, Fan Bei cites Gu Zheng's research, emphasizing that operating "outside the system" is a defining characteristic of independent filmmaking.⁴ He further argues that censorship regulations, exemplified by incidents such as the "Seven Gentlemen Incident," forced many emerging filmmakers associated with the so-called "Sixth Generation" to navigate the peripheries of the industry. To sustain their filmmaking ambitions, they had no choice but to explore alternative production and distribution channels.

Zhang Yuan's *Mama* (1990) is widely regarded as China's first independent film. Produced without official permits or censorship approval, Zhang self-financed the film's production. It was only after completion that he purchased an official studio

⁴Fan Bei, "The Growth Space of Contemporary Chinese Independent Cinema," in *Cultural Map of China in the 21st Century*, ed. Dake Zhu (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2008), 120–135.

logo from Xian Film Studio, which then submitted the film for official distribution approval.⁵ Following *Mama*, several other remarkable independent films, including *The Days* (1993), *The Blue Kite* (1993), and *Xiao Wu* (1998), emerged. Unlike the “Fifth Generation” filmmakers who relied on the state film apparatus, directors such as Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai, Lou Ye, and Jia Zhangke⁶ came of age during China’s transitional era, seeking greater freedom in cinematic expression. This generation emphasized a critical reflection on contemporary social realities and sought to expand the expressive and aesthetic boundaries of Chinese cinema through independent film practices.

⁵ Cao Kai, *Documentary and Experiment: A Prehistory of DV Images* (Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2005), 4.

⁶ These filmmakers are also considered the sixth generation of directors

1.2 Chinese Experimental Cinema and Early Artist Film Practices

In his paper *The Virgin Era of Chinese Experimental Film*, Cao Kai traces the evolution of Chinese experimental moving image practices since 1988, categorizing this development into three distinct phases: the Enlightenment Period (1988–1996), the Germination Period (1996–2001), and the Initial Wave Period (2001–2006).⁷ He includes the video art practices emerging from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in the 1990s, along with the renowned *Phenomena–Video* exhibition in 1996, within what he defines as the trajectory of Chinese experimental cinema. He argues that video artists from the field of contemporary art constituted the mainstream of Chinese experimental cinema in the early 21st century, marking a unique phenomenon in its development. On the one hand, this is related to the eclectic origins of Chinese video art, as many video artists often extended their work into documentary and narrative filmmaking. On the other hand, with the widespread adoption of digital technology and within the context of globalization, experimental cinema and video art began to converge, leading to a blurring of boundaries that influenced the way domestic artists approached moving-image creation during this period. Li Zhenglin also incorporated the video art practices of the 1990s into the category of experimental cinema. Due to the staging of *Phenomenon/Image: Chinese Video Art Exhibition*, he considers 1996 as the founding year of Chinese experimental cinema.⁸

It is important to note that the term “experimental cinema” carries specific historical and theoretical connotations, whereas the concept of “Chinese experimental cinema,” as proposed by Cao Kai, is more of a generalized description of moving-image practices from a certain period that defy traditional classification frameworks. Although the aesthetic explorations of Chinese experimental filmmakers were influenced by the European avant-garde cinema of the 1920s and the American underground cinema of the postwar period, there is no direct lineage between them. Therefore, the “Chinese Experimental Cinema” discussed by Cao Kai and other scholars should be understood as a localized version of “experimental

⁷Cao Kai, “The Adolescent of Chinese Experimental Film”, 2006, in *The Adolescent: Traces of Chinese Experimental Film and Video* (Le Ganges Edition, 2024)

⁸ Li, Zhenglin, The development of experimental film in China *Ming Ri Feng Shang* [MING], no.23(2024): 7–9.

moving image” rather than conflated with the historically defined term “experimental cinema.” Based on this distinction, this paper prefers to use the terms *artist film* or *art-house cinema* to refer to what Cao Kai defines as “Chinese experimental cinema.” These terms not only provide a broader umbrella for various cinematic artistic practices but also help avoid an overly rigid definition of “experimentation” in the contemporary context.

The video art practices of the early 1990s were largely concerned with documenting conceptual performance art processes, with only a handful of works being discussed as media art. One such exception is Zhang Peili, whose 1988 work *30×30* is regarded as the earliest example of Chinese video art.⁹ This work, presented as a single-channel video, records Zhang smashing a mirror, then meticulously reassembling the shattered pieces with glue, restoring it to its original form. In contrast, *artist film* was almost nonexistent in China during the 1990s, only gradually emerging in the latter half of the decade. Notable examples include Yang Fudong’s *An Estranged Paradise* and *Backyard—Hey! Sun is Rising*, both shot on film and featuring carefully choreographed narratives or dramatic elements. Works like *An Estranged Paradise* and video art pieces such as *30×30* differ significantly in terms of form, text, and modes of presentation. While this paper does not advocate for a direct comparison between the two, the mutual influence between video art and cinematic practice is undeniable.

The development of modern Chinese art, which originated from the art movements of the 1980s, also influenced independent film practice. Since the late 1990s, filmmakers were no longer confined to broadcast and television professionals or graduates from film academies with formal training. Painters, sculptors, and performance artists began to actively participate in filmmaking and media art practices. A large number of films, or in some cases moving-image works, created by artists rather than traditional film directors gained recognition at major international film festivals and art exhibitions. Notable figures include Cao Fei, Yang Fudong, and Zhou Hongxiang. Cao Fei graduated from the Decorative Arts Department of the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, while Yang Fudong and Zhou Hongxiang both studied painting. As some of the earliest practitioners who adopted

⁹ Bingfeng Dong, *Cinema of Exhibition: Film in Chinese Contemporary Art*, (Taipei: A Qiao She Wen Hua Shi Ye You Xian Gong Si, 2018), 38.

film as a medium, they all identified themselves as artists rather than filmmakers. Nevertheless, their works have been consistently presented at prestigious international film festivals.

1.3 The Democratization of Moving Image Practice in the Context of Digital Technology and Reform and Opening-Up: A New Phase Since the 21st Century

If the 1990s can be considered what Cao Kai described as the "enlightenment period," then the 21st century marks a new phase of prosperity for Chinese moving image practice. Since the turn of the century, the widespread adoption of digital technology has gradually freed film production from its dependence on expensive professional equipment and industrialized production processes, significantly lowering costs and expanding the space for independent moving image practice. Traditionally a high-cost medium, film has seen its technological threshold weakened during this process, making moving image creation more open and accessible.

Yin Hong, in *The Chinese Independent Film Memoir 1999-2006*, pointed out that the emergence and widespread use of digital video cameras (DV) greatly reduced the technical barriers in the film and television industry. Compared to cinematic cameras or the large-scale video equipment used by television channels, DV cameras were compact, portable, and used cost-effective storage media, making solo film production highly feasible. The proliferation of personal computers, especially the advent of non-linear editing technology, further streamlined digital post-production, driving film production toward a more democratized and non-professionalized direction. As Wang Xiaolu noted, since 1999, the establishment of the "DV + PC +

Premiere" technical system provided the most practical technological foundation for the democratization of Chinese cinema.¹⁰ This system not only lowered the threshold for moving image creation but also enabled more non-professional creators to enter the field, thereby promoting diversity and openness in Chinese moving image culture. The significance of digital technology for Chinese moving image practice has become a widely recognized consensus in Chinese film and art studies. The emergence of DV granted every person interested in creating moving images access to what was once an exclusive "privilege." Marshall McLuhan saw media as an extension of the human body and advocated for the idea that everything is a medium. With the rise of DV in China, moving images became a new medium for ordinary persons to examine their world. DV, like a newly developed sensory organ, provided artists, filmmakers, and even the general public with more reliable and vivid ways of perception and experience, offering unprecedented possibilities for personal filmmaking.

Furthermore, since the beginning of China's reform and opening-up in the 1980s, landmark events such as the introduction of the internet in the 1990s and China's accession to the WTO in 2001 have integrated the country into the broader trends of globalization. Particularly after 2000, China rapidly became the "world's factory," embedding its economy deeply within global economic networks. The opening-up of the economy and information sector invigorated cultural and artistic practices, facilitating more frequent cultural exchanges between China and the West. Chinese artists gained easier access to international resources and a clearer understanding of global developments. At the same time, reflections on this period of rapid transformation became an unavoidable topic in contemporary cinematic practices.

A notable difference was the growing diversity of moving image aesthetics. Throughout most of the 1990s, artistic works could be distinctly categorized—narrative films, documentaries, and video art were clearly distinguishable. However, after 2000, as DV technology flourished, experimental film works began to emerge in large numbers. Independent film festivals that focused on artist films also started gaining traction during this period. Artists previously engaged in painting, sculpture, and other visual arts, as well as persons without formal film

¹⁰ Xiaolu Wang, "Observations on Twenty Years of Chinese Independent Documentary," *Film Art*, no. 6 (2010): 75.

training, began participating in filmmaking. For example, Ou Ning, who collaborated with Cao Fei on *San Yuan Li*, had a multifaceted social identity, as he was an organizer of grassroots initiatives and a graduate in communications studies. Similarly, Cao Fei, as an artist, had no formal film training. Their film practice was often unconstrained by conventional cinematic grammar and industry norms, displaying a high degree of aesthetic freedom. However, due to limitations in manpower, equipment, professional background, and production costs, artist films often required various compromises with reality or adopted more radical and low-cost approaches to structure and aesthetics. As a result, a wave of unconventional, aesthetically unclassifiable, stylistically distinct, and challenging works began to emerge, forming an ecosystem of film practice that was almost "wild" in nature. From this period onward, moving image aesthetics became increasingly difficult to define. Was *There Is A Strong Wind of Beijing* a documentary or experimental film? What about *Red Flag Flies*? An increasing number of moving image works that defied easy classification or crossed established genre boundaries began to appear. These works seemed to oscillate between two distinct aesthetic systems—*Red Flag Flies*, for instance, was featured both at the Venice Film Festival and in major contemporary art exhibitions. Similar crossovers were evident in the works of emerging artists like Zhong Su and Liu Guangli, whose films frequently screened between cinemas and art galleries.

Given these developments, I propose that film and moving image practice since the 1990s can be broadly divided into two phases: 1990-2000 and 2000 to the present. Chinese contemporary film practice has undergone significant transformations, shaped by rapid advancements in digital technology, the rise of the internet, growing awareness of personal freedoms, and the profound impacts of globalization. The early 2000s undoubtedly marked a clear turning point. With various factors interacting, the ecosystem of film and moving image practice underwent dramatic shifts. During this phase, artists felt an urgent need to respond to the rapidly evolving realities around them, and the innovations in digital and media technologies provided them with the necessary tools to do so. Simultaneously, many artists sought to engage with local cultural contexts, striving to find a national foothold amid global cultural exchanges and tensions. As a result, Western artistic traditions and ideologies, local cultural heritage, and political dynamics collectively influenced the

production and practice of Chinese artists. This interplay between cultural, political, and technological forces led to significant differences between 21st-century cinematic practices and those of the 1990s. The increased aesthetic diversity, political critique, and the blurring, merging, and fragmentation of boundaries between media and genres made it increasingly difficult for film practices in this period to be categorized and defined as neatly as in the 1990s.

1.4 Re-examining "Art-house cinema": issues and methodologies

This study focuses on the "atypical" film works within the practice of art-house cinema in mainland China since the 21st century—works that resist clear categorization within existing classifications of narrative films, experimental and video art. These films exhibit complex aesthetic characteristics and production modes, often operating in the interstices between established cinematic categories. The core objective of this study is not to redefine or reclassify these works but rather to propose diverse analytical perspectives that facilitate a more nuanced understanding of such moving image practices. Additionally, it aims to explore their significance within contemporary film culture and their interactions with social, historical, and political contexts.

Since 2000, propelled by the democratization of moving images and economic transformations following China's reform and opening-up policies, artist cinema practices in mainland China have witnessed significant growth. However, due to regulatory policies and censorship mechanisms, discussions surrounding these works remain largely confined to private art museums, foreign-funded art institutions, independent film festivals, and civilian runned screening events, with little engagement in mainstream academic research. A search for relevant keywords in Chinese authoritative academic databases such as CNKI reveals a severe paucity of

research literature. Existing studies predominantly focus on the historiography of experimental film and video art or adopt a case-study approach centered on specific artists and their works. This research paradigm has resulted in a rigid tendency to tether contemporary Chinese cinema and moving image art to an "artist-artefact" framework, thereby limiting discussions on the broader trajectory of artist cinema since 2000 and constraining the scope of scholarly inquiry.

Against this backdrop, how should we approach the study of contemporary Chinese cinematic practices, particularly artist cinema and experimental moving images in the 21st century? Traditional methods of film classification, such as narrative film, experimental film, and video art, have become increasingly inadequate in capturing the complexity of these works. Even the very boundaries of cinema as an aesthetic genre or medium have grown increasingly blurred. For instance, the meaning of the term "experimental film" has undergone significant transformations within the Chinese context since 2000. When engaging with these films or moving image artworks, it is necessary not only to interpret their audiovisual experience, emotional affect, and conveyed information but also to situate them within specific historical, spatial, and socio-political frameworks. This approach shifts the analytical focus from the artist's personal style or authorial intent to the relationship between the work and its broader environment.

To this end, I propose introducing the philosophical concept of *dividuation* as a new lens through which to examine artistic practices during this period. In contrast to the notion of the *individual*, which implies an indivisible subject, *dividual* views subjectivation as heterogeneous and metastable process, thereby challenging the applicability of the indivisible subject in contemporary society. Michaela Ott extends this concept into the realm of artistic practice, illustrating not only how artworks undergo processes of dividuation in their temporally varying expression, but also in exchange and resonance with other art works, due to their mutual reflection and interculturally divergent perspectives. One of the central arguments of this study is that incorporating this philosophical concept into the discourse on contemporary Chinese artist cinema, particularly in the context of museum cinema, can stimulate a cross-cultural dialogue between Western and Chinese philosophical-aesthetic traditions. This engagement provides an opportunity to re-examine and rethink key

case studies of museum cinema, especially artist film practices in mainland China post-2000.

First, digitalization and nonlinear editing technologies have fundamentally transformed the medium of cinema. The ability to easily duplicate, upload, and appropriate filmic materials has disrupted the traditional notion of the film as a self-contained, autonomous artwork. The interweaving of original and found footage enables new associative possibilities, breaking the conventional constraints of time and space in filmmaking. Meanwhile, the rapid proliferation of online information dissemination has, in turn, influenced cinematic aesthetics and modes of production, fostering greater diversity and fragmentation within contemporary visual culture.

Furthermore, in the context of globalization, Chinese artists have gained increased opportunities for cross-cultural exchange, leading to intensified interactions between different artistic traditions. As a result, pre-existing paradigms of film aesthetics and standardized production processes have come under scrutiny. The hybridization and reconfiguration of cultural forms within the global context have necessitated a reevaluation of fixed cinematic production standards, with new modes of storytelling, visual expression, and auditory experimentation emerging. Here, the concept of *dividuation* is particularly relevant, as it underscores the fluidity of cultural and aesthetic boundaries, challenging rigid artistic classifications and allowing for the fusion and reconfiguration of both local and global influences.

By integrating the concept of *dividuation* into this discussion, we can reconceptualize contemporary Chinese artist cinema and moving image works—not as singular, unified entities, but as fragmented, multilayered experiences that dynamically interact with the realities of digital and globalized societies. This theoretical framework enables us to move beyond conventional genre-based and formal constraints, opening up new perspectives for understanding the complexity and interwoven nature of contemporary moving image practices.

Research Methods

This study employs a combination of interviews, literature review, and case analysis as its primary research methods. Through interviews with artists, it gathers firsthand insights into their creative processes and conceptual approaches. By reviewing existing academic literature, it seeks to map the current scholarly landscape, identify research gaps, and contextualize contemporary artist cinema within broader theoretical discussions. Lastly, through case analysis, it examines representative works to uncover their distinctive aesthetic characteristics and socio-cultural significance. The integration of these methodologies aims to provide a new theoretical/artistic perspective for understanding cinematic practices of contemporary Chinese artists since 2000, thereby contributing supplementary perspectives to the existing body of research within this domain.

2. Conceptions of Persons in West and East

2.1 Western Conceptions of the Individual

Since Aristotle, the question of the essence of the individual has been central to Western philosophical inquiry. The term *individual* derives from the Greek *atomoa*¹¹, meaning the physical elements that are “indivisible”. In Aristotle’s system, it comes to acquire ontological significance and serves as the starting point for distinctions in logic and being. In the *Categories*, Aristotle distinguishes between “primary substance” and “secondary substance,” thereby establishing the foundational status of the individual:

“Substance in the truest and primary and most definite sense of the word is that which is neither predicable of a subject nor present in a subject; for example, the individual man or the individual horse. The species in which the things primarily called substances are, are called secondary substances...”¹²

Here, individuality is defined as a unit of existence that neither belongs to nor is dependent upon another. Individuals, as primary substances, constitute the most basic realities of the world. As Michael Frede explains:

“In the *Categories*, then, Aristotle seems to be relying on a notion of division according to which genera and species, in a certain respect, are one and, hence, indivisible, but, in another respect, are not one and, hence, divisible; individuals, however, turn out to be completely indivisible on this schema of division.”¹³

In this sense, individuals are “ontologically irreducible units” that function not only as logical elements but as metaphysical anchors—*tode ti*, or “this here.” Michaela Ott further observes that Aristotle “*makes the first identification of the singular undivided with human beings*”¹⁴

¹¹ Michaela Ott, *Dividuations: Theories of Participation* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 43.

¹² Aristotle, *Categories*, in *Categories and De Interpretatione*, trans. J. L. Ackrill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 5.

¹³ Michael Frede, “Individuals in Aristotle,” in *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 52–53.

¹⁴ Ott, *Dividuation*, 45

In the early modern period, René Descartes significantly reformulated the concept of the singular person by introducing a mind–body dualism that re-centered the self as a thinking subject. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes applies radical doubt to all sensory and empirical experience in order to establish an indubitable foundation for knowledge. He writes:

“But I convinced myself that there was nothing at all in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Did I therefore not also convince myself that I did not exist either? No: certainly I did exist, if I convinced myself of something.”¹⁵

Having stripped away all empirical assumptions, Descartes isolates the thinking *I* as the only certainty that remains. This is the famous *cogito ergo sum*, expressed as “I think, therefore I am,” which establishes the self as a pure thinking substance. As he continues:

“I am, I exist, this is certain. But for how long? Certainly only for as long as I am thinking”¹⁶

In this framework, thinking becomes the ontological foundation of being. The individual manifests their existence in and through the act of thought. Descartes elaborates his position in the sixth meditation by distinguishing between the thinking self and the body:

“I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am a thinking and not an extended thing, and, on the other hand, a distinct idea of the body, in so far as it is only an extended and not a thinking thing. So it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it.”¹⁷

Thus, he established the status of the "ego" as a pure thinking subject, whereby the individual no longer depends on physical existence but is constituted as a rational consciousness capable of thought and doubt, The *single person* becomes a self-sufficient “thinking thing”. Descartes’ dualism not only laid the groundwork for the

¹⁵ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Michael Moriarty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 18.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 19

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 55

mind–body divide in modern philosophy but also introduced the epistemological centrality of the *self* as a conscious, self-aware being, thus initiating a long tradition in Western thought that emphasizes internality, autonomy, and subject–object dualism.

Following Descartes, G. W. Leibniz developed a more systematic theory of individuation that placed emphasis on the internal coherence and completeness of the individual. In his early metaphysical treatise *Disputatio metaphysica de principio individui* (1663), Leibniz writes:

“omne individuum sua tota Entitate individuatur.”

“every individual is individuated by its whole entity.”¹⁸

For Leibniz, what makes an individual unique is not its external features or contingent properties, such as time, location, or relational difference, but rather the integral unity of its internal essence. The individual is not defined through negation or comparison, but through an inward fullness that resists further division.

This line of thought is further developed in Leibniz’s mature metaphysics, particularly in his theory of *monads*. McCullough explains:

“Every property of an individual is itself individual, in virtue of being self-individuated, and is thus unique to that individual.”¹⁹

In this framework, not only is the *individual* as a whole indivisible, but each of its attributes participates in a process of *self-individuation*. This view is consistent with Leibniz’s conception of *monads* as fundamental, non-composite, and indivisible centers of perception and appetition. Each monad reflects the entire universe from its own unique perspective, and its identity is constituted by the unity of its perceptions and tendencies. As McCullough puts it:

¹⁸ Laurence B. McCullough, “Leibniz’s Principle of Individuation in His *Disputatio metaphysica de principio individui* of 1663,” in *Individuation and Identity in Early Modern Philosophy: Descartes to Kant*, ed. Kenneth F. Barber and Jorge J. E. Gracia (State University of New York Press, 1994), 210.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 212

“The whole entity of a monad is its principle of individuation... [consisting of] self-individuated appetite and the seamless, inseparable ordered set of self-individuated perceptions.”²⁰

In sum, Leibniz understands *individuality* not as a relational distinction between separate entities but as the internal, dynamic coherence of a metaphysical whole. This conception of the individual as an internally differentiated yet self-contained unity forms a crucial bridge between classical metaphysical thinking and later philosophical accounts of subjectivity, prefiguring modern debates on identity, difference, and the singular.

In the twentieth century, Jean-Paul Sartre redefined the concept of the individual or person through the existentialist lens of freedom and self-becoming. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre posits that the *single person* is fundamentally a being that defines itself through its actions. Rather than possessing a fixed essence, the individual becomes what it is only through the exercise of freedom:

“I am indeed an existent who learns his freedom through his acts, but I am also an existent whose individual and unique existence temporalizes itself as freedom.”²¹

Freedom, in Sartre’s existential ontology, is not a capacity one may or may not possess, but a necessary condition of existence itself. The *individual* is not something that simply is, but something that must become. This freedom is paradoxical and burdensome, as he famously writes:

“I am condemned to exist forever beyond my essence, beyond the causes and motives of my act. I am condemned to be free.”²²

Here, freedom is not a moral privilege but an ontological condition. One cannot escape it, nor can one relinquish it. To be human, in Sartre’s terms, is to be a *pour-soi*—a being-for-itself that continually projects itself beyond its present

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (Citadel Press, 1956), 439.

²² Ibid

condition. The *individual* exists in a state of perpetual negation and transcendence, always refusing to be defined by what it already is.

In this account, *individualization* becomes a temporal and processual structure rather than a metaphysical given. Unlike the Leibnizian individual, which is self-contained and complete, the Sartrean *self* is perpetually incomplete, a site of becoming, of decision, of responsibility. One does not receive an identity but creates it, moment by moment, through acts that cannot be disowned.

Thus, Sartre's notion of the individual is radically generative: it is freedom that constitutes subjectivity, and subjectivity that reveals itself only in freedom. This existential configuration shifts the philosophical focus from ontology to practice of freedom, from what the *individual* is to what it does and must do in order to remain itself.

Among the most significant critiques of classical theories of the individual comes from Gilbert Simondon, who reconceptualized individuation as an open-ended, dynamic process rather than a completed state. He divides the philosophical traditions of individuation into the substantialist and the hylomorphic²³. In opposition to both traditions, Simondon argues that philosophy has historically prioritized the already constituted individual over the process of becoming itself:

“Such research may well prevent us from adequately representing the process of ontogenesis, and from accurately according to the individual its proper place in the actual system that results in individuation.”²⁴

In Simondon's view, the *individual* should not serve as the point of departure for analysis but rather as a phase in a broader process of *ontogenesis*, unfolding across physical, biological, psychic, and social domains. He proposes that we must “understand the individual from the perspective of the process of individuation rather than the process of individuation by means of the individual.”²⁵

²³ Simondon, Gilbert. "The Genesis of the Individual," in Jonathan Crary & Sanford Kwinter (eds.), *Incorporations* (New York: Zone Books, 1992): 297–319, 297.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 298-299.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 300

Simondon rejects the conception of the individual as a static entity or fixed form. Instead, he advances a processual ontology in which being must be understood as inherently dynamic. As he insists :

“Individuation must be grasped as the becoming of the being and not as a model of the being which would exhaust its signification.”²⁶

In this view, individuation is not the outward manifestation of a pre-constituted being but a dimension of being’s internal unfolding. It expresses the *becomingness* of existence itself—its ontogenetic vitality. Consequently, Simondon’s theory does not offer a metaphysics of substances, but rather a processual epistemology that integrates genesis, potentiality, and relationality as co-constitutive categories.

In elaborating this framework, Simondon introduces the concept of the *transindividual* as a mediating structure between psychic and collective individuation. Internal (psychic) and external (social) individuation are not discrete processes but are co-implicated within what he calls “a transindividual category that might account for the systematic unity of internal individuation (psychic) and external individuation (collective).”²⁷ The individual, therefore, is not a closed, self-contained unit, but a body within a broader problematic field—a site of co-individuation.

Central to this account is the operative notion of *transduction*, a generative process by which individuation propagates through heterogeneous domains. Simondon defines transduction as “a process... in which an activity gradually sets itself in motion, propagating within a given area, through a structuration of the different zones.”²⁸ It is neither deduction or induction, but a mode of imminent resolution through which tensions between potentials are negotiated and progressively actualized. Transduction thus describes both the logic and the energetics of becoming.

Simondon also reconfigures the classical notion of *form* by replacing it with *information* as the more fundamental category of morphogenesis. For him,

²⁶ Ibid, 311

²⁷ Ibid, 305

²⁸ Ibid, 313

information is not merely signal or code but designates a system's capacity for transformation under metastable conditions. As he writes::

“The notion of form must be replaced by that of information, which presupposes the existence of a system in a state of metastable equilibrium capable of being individuated.”²⁹

Individuation thus proceeds not through the imposition of external form, but through the resolution of tensions and potentials within a metastable system.

In sum, Simondon rejects all static or essentialist accounts of the individual. Instead, he proposes a theory of individuation as an ontogenetic process, understood as being in becoming, which foregrounds potentiality, metastability, and systemic transformation. The *individual* is no longer an object of philosophical contemplation, but a dynamic point of transduction within a field of intensities. This perspective opens the way to a more relational, processual, and non-binary understanding of subjectivation and singular person or body, laying the groundwork for contemporary theories of human participation, aesthetics and technogenesis.

²⁹ Ibid, 315

2.2 Conceptions of the Human/Persons in Classical Chinese Philosophy

In contrast to the Western philosophical tradition, which progressively constructs the individual through ontological, epistemological, and existential dimensions, Chinese philosophy, especially in the Confucian and Daoist traditions, develops a fundamentally different conception of the *single person*. From its earliest classical articulations, the human being is not conceived as an autonomous rational center but as a relational being whose identity is constituted in and through social roles, moral practice, and cosmological harmony.

2.2.1 Confucian Ethics of Zhengming and Role-Responsibility

In Confucian thought, the human self is never independent of its relational and ethical embeddedness. One of the central tenets of Confucian philosophy is the doctrine of *zhèngmíng* (正名), or “rectification of names,” which posits that social harmony depends on the alignment between titles and corresponding actions. As recorded in the *Analects*:

“*Jūn jūn, chén chén, fù fù, zǐ zǐ.*”

“Let the lord be a true lord, the ministers true ministers, the fathers true fathers, and the sons true sons..”³⁰

In this formulation, a name is not merely a label but an ethical directive. The status of a single *person* is meaningful only insofar as it is realized through performance: a ruler must *act* as a ruler; a son must fulfill the expectations of filial piety. Thus, the Confucian *individual* is not an abstract unit of agency, but a site of enacted normativity.

In another famous passage, Confucius states:

“*Míng bù zhèng, zé yán bù shùn; yán bù shùn, zé shì bù chéng...*”³¹

“If names are not correct, speech is not in accord with things; if speech is not in accord with things, then affairs cannot be carried out successfully...”

³⁰ Analects 12.11

³¹ Ibid13.3

The *single person*, in this view, becomes ethically legible only by occupying a defined place within the social order. Identity is performative and situated; individuality emerges from the successful enactment of roles within a given moral cosmology.

As *Mencius* elaborates:

“*Rén rén qīn qí qīn, zhǎng qí zhǎng, ér tiānxià píng.*”³²

“If everyone loves their relatives and respects their elders, the world will be at peace.”

The Confucian worldview thus rests on a network of duties rather than rights, and on harmonization rather than individuation. As Qiaojian Chen points out, in contrast to Western notions of atomic individualism, Confucianism does not view the *single person* as an isolated entity but as a fundamentally social and relational being.³³

This ethical relationality is also institutionalized in the classical Confucian schema of self-cultivation: *xiūshēn, qíjiā, zhìguó, píng tiānxià* (“cultivate the self, regulate the family, govern the state, bring peace to the world”). The Confucian person is not a self-legislating moral subject, but always as part of a greater relational chain, in which the *single person* becomes a practitioner of ritual order, social obligation, national harmony and moral resonance. Far from being a self-contained agent, the Confucian *individual* is both formed by and responsible for a structure of interdependent ethical positions.

2.2.2 Daoist (Taoist) Ontology of the Human: Nature, Non-Being, and the Freedom of Deindividualization

In contrast to the Confucian ethic of role-embedded identity, Daoist philosophy, as articulated in the *Tao Te Ching (Dao De Jing)* and *Zhuangzi*, offers a radically different path for understanding the human. Here, the *single person* is not a bounded ethical subject, but a porous, mutable node in the ongoing unfolding of the Dao. Rather than defining the person through moral prescriptions or metaphysical

³² Mengzi (Mencius), *Li Lou*, Book I, section 11

³³ Qiaojian Chen, “Two Kinds of Individualism: The Western and Confucian,” in *Yuandao*, vol. 14, ed. Ming Chen and Hanmin Zhu (Beijing: Capital Normal University Press, 2007), 170-182, 175

substances, Daoism situates the human in a cosmological field of transformation, where subjectivity is unbound, names are provisional, and individuation is suspended.

In Chapter 25 of the *Tao Te Ching*, Laozi introduces the Dao as the unnamed origin of all things:

*“Yǒu wù hùnchéng, xiān tiāndì shēng... wú zhī qí míng, zì zhī yuē Dào.”*³⁴

“There is a thing confusedly formed, born before heaven and earth... I do not know its name; I call it Dao.”

The Dao is neither material nor spiritual, neither substance nor creator—it is simply *zìrán* (自然), “that which is so of itself,” the spontaneous principle of generation. Humans, as one among myriad beings, are called to align themselves with the natural movement of the Dao, not to assert dominion over it. As Laozi continues:

*“Rén fǎ dì, dì fǎ tiān, tiān fǎ Dào, Dào fǎ zìrán.”*³⁵

“Man follows the earth, the earth follows heaven, heaven follows the Dao, and the Dao follows what is natural.”

As Li Cunshan notes in his commentary, the *Dao* precedes both heaven and earth and constitutes the primordial origin of all things. As the most spiritually refined among the myriad beings, the human is called to follow this ontological order—modeling itself on the earth, which follows heaven, which in turn follows the Dao. Yet the Dao itself, Li emphasizes, is characterized by its inherent spontaneity and non-action (*wú wéi*, 无为).³⁶

This conception stands in marked contrast to Western anthropocentric philosophies of subjectivity. From its earliest formulations, Daoist thought does not privilege the human as the center of meaning or agency, but situates the single person as merely one among the myriad beings (*wàn wù*, 万物) within the unfolding of the cosmos. This orientation resonates with Feng Youlan’s interpretation of the Dao as “the nameless name” (*wú míng zhī míng*, 无名之名): “since the Dao has no proper name, it resists

34 Laozi, *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 25

35 Laozi, *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 25

36 Cunshan Li, “The Dao-Unity of Heaven and Humanity: On the Daoist Understanding of the Way of Heaven and Man in the Pre-Qin Period,” *Social Sciences Digest*, no. 3 (2024): 33.

definitive articulation. And yet, humans still feel compelled to speak of it—hence we reluctantly assign it the placeholder Dao. But in truth, Dao is not a name at all.”³⁷

In Chapter 51, *Tao Te Ching* further describes the generative structure of reality:

“*Dào shēng zhī, dé chù zhī, wù xíng zhī, shì chéng zhī.*”³⁸

“The Dao gives birth to them, virtue nourishes them, matter shapes them, circumstance completes them.”

This ontological framework of Dao dismantles the centrality of human agency. The *single person* is not an originator but a participant in a vast system of unfolding. Freedom, in this view, does not lie in intentional action, but in the non-coercive, responsive alignment with the *ziran*-driven becoming of the world.

Zhuangzi further expands on this principle by emphasizing the unknowability and ungraspability of the Dao:

“*Fū Dào yǒu qíng yǒu xìn, wú wéi wú xíng; kě chuán ér bù kě shòu, kě dé ér bù kě jiàn...*”³⁹

“The Dao has feeling and trustworthiness, but does nothing and has no form; it can be passed on, but not received; attained, but not seen...”

The ideal human, in Zhuangzi’s terms, is one who effaces the boundaries of self, name, and form, achieving a mode of existence that is unconstrained by social expectation or cognitive differentiation. In *Zhuangzi-Xiaoyao You* (Carefree Wandering), this existential freedom is embodied in the figures of the *true person* (*zhēnrén* 真人), the *spirit person* (*shénrén* 神人), and the *sage* (*shèngrén* 圣人)—each of whom lives without fixed self, without striving, without name:

“*Zhìrén wú jǐ, shénrén wú gōng, shèngrén wú míng.*”⁴⁰

“The utmost person has no self, the spirit person has no achievement, the sage has no name.”

37 Youlan Feng, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, trans. Tu Youguang (Beijing: New World Press, 2004), [page number]. P142

38 Laozi, *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 51

39 *Zhuangzi*, Inner Chapters, “Da Zong Shi” (The Great Master)

40 *Zhuangzi*, Inner Chapters, “Xiao Yao You” (Carefree Wandering)

Here, the negation of identity—*no self, no merit, no name*—is not nihilistic but liberating. The *single person* becomes free not by Autonomous Agency being-for-itself, as in Sartre’s existentialism, but by *un-choosing*: by relinquishing distinction, desire, and teleology. Zhuangzi’s ethical aesthetics of *non-being* leads to a radically de-individualized understanding of subjectivation, in which the person is no longer a master of meaning but a silent companion of change.

2.2.3 Zhuangzi and Descartes: Two Dreams, Two Epistemologies

Dreams, as liminal experiences that blur the boundaries between perception and reality, have long served as crucial philosophical motifs in both Chinese and Western traditions. In Western thought, René Descartes famously mobilized the dream argument (*argumentum e somniis*) in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* to cast doubt on the reliability of sensory knowledge. He writes:

“How often my sleep at night has convinced me of all these familiar things—that I was here, wrapped in my gown, sitting by the fire—when in fact I was lying naked under the bedclothes... There are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep.”⁴¹

This leads Descartes to a radical form of epistemological skepticism: any knowledge grounded in perception may be false, and one’s entire experience could be a dream. Thus, he continues:

“Let us then suppose that we are dreaming, and that these particular things (that we have our eyes open, are moving our head, stretching out our hands) are not true; and that perhaps we do not even have hands or the rest of a body like what we see.”⁴²

Unable to distinguish dream from waking, Descartes is driven to strip away all assumptions—until he arrives at the *cogito*, the undeniable fact that if he is doubting, then he must be thinking, and therefore must exist: *cogito, ergo sum*. This insight

⁴¹ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Michael Moriarty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 19.

⁴² Ibid

grounds the Cartesian dualist metaphysics: the self is a thinking substance, ontologically distinct from the extended, physical world. As he affirms in the Sixth Meditation:

“I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am a thinking and not an extended thing... So it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it.”⁴³

In this system, the dream serves as a methodological device that suspends the external world and affirms the immanence of the rational subject and constructs a dualist subjectivity based on a determined thinking individual-indeterminate external world.

By contrast, Zhuangzi's most famous passage, known as the “butterfly dream” in *Zhuangzi · Qi Wu Lun* (齐物论), invokes the same indistinguishability between dream and waking, yet arrives at a radically different conclusion:

*“Xī zhě Zhuāng Zhōu mèng wéi húdié, xǔxǔrán húdié yě, zì yù shì zhì yǔ, bù zhī Zhōu yě. Érán jué, zé qúqúrán Zhōu yě. Bù zhī Zhōu zhī mèng wéi húdié yǔ, húdié zhī mèng wéi Zhōu yǔ? Zhōu yǔ húdié, zé bì yǒu fēn yǐ. Cǐ zhī wèi wùhuà.”*⁴⁴

“Once Zhuang Zhou dreamed he was a butterfly, fluttering and flitting about, content and unaware of being Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he awoke, and there he was, unmistakably Zhuang Zhou. But he did not know whether he was Zhuang Zhou dreaming he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuang Zhou. Between Zhuang Zhou and the butterfly there must be some distinction. This is what is called the transformation of things.”

Rather than confirming the sovereignty of the self through doubt, Zhuangzi uses the indeterminacy of dream and waking to dismantle the self as a stable center of perception. What the butterfly dream undermines is not the external world, but the very idea of a permanent, self-identical subject. As he concludes: “This is what is called the transformation of things” (cǐ zhī wéi wù huà). Zhuangzi's dream suggests

⁴³ Ibid, 78

⁴⁴ *Zhuangzi*, Inner Chapters, “*Qi Wu Lun*” (The Equalizing Assessment of Things)

that the *self* and the *thousands of things* (Wu) are not ontologically separate, but interpenetrate and transform within a shared field of becoming. In this process, the distinctions between dream and waking, self and butterfly, subject and object dissolve; all are equally immersed in the generative flow of the *Dao*.

Such a vision demonstrates the core idea of Zhuangzi's philosophy of *Qi Wu* (Equalization of Things) and *Wu Ji* (Forgetting the Self). Zhuangzi advocates for a transcendence of dualities and proposes a dissolution of the self into a state of harmony with all things. In this sense, to become "one with the Dao" is to attain *Xiaoyao*, a state of carefree wandering or ontological freedom.

While Descartes leverages the dream to isolate the *individual* as a thinking substance, Zhuangzi dissolves the *single person* into the relational flux of transformation. Zhuangzi's *freedom* does not arise through the assertion or verification of the subject, but through the removal of its boundaries. Liberation lies not in reconstructing certainty, as in Cartesian doubt, but in relinquishing the need for certainty altogether.

In short, Descartes' dream affirms the *self* through negation of the world; Zhuangzi's dream relinquishes the *self* into the world. The former grounds rational autonomy and epistemic mastery; the latter gestures toward effortlessness, resonance, and becoming-with. These two dream philosophies thus mark the fault lines between two conceptions of freedom—one predicated on willful certainty, the other on ontological openness.

2.3 Two Paths of Individuation and the Divergence of Freedom

Taken together, the preceding analyses reveal two profoundly different philosophical trajectories regarding the nature of the *single person*, the *individual*, and the conditions of freedom. In the Western tradition, from Aristotle to Descartes and from Leibniz to Sartre, the individual emerges as the site of increasing abstraction, autonomy, and metaphysical privilege. Aristotle defines individuals as indivisible substances—the basic units of reality and knowledge. Descartes then severs the self from the body to establish the cogitating subject as the indubitable center of epistemological certainty. Sartre pushed this logic further: to be human is to be condemned to freedom—to be a *pour-soi*, an existence that must perpetually project itself into the future through conscious acts.

In the European cases, *individualization* is constructed as a mode of self-grounding: through substance, through mind, through freedom. The *single person* is constituted as a self-contained ontological unit that asserts agency, makes decisions, and assumes responsibility. Freedom, accordingly, is conceptualized as intentional, volitional, and active—a burden as much as a condition.

By contrast, classical Chinese philosophy does not construct the *single person* as a self-originating center. In Confucianism, one becomes a person only through the ethical performance of relational roles—*jūn jūn*, *chén chén*, *fù fù*, *zǐ zǐ*—and through the ongoing harmonization with familial, social, and cosmic orders. The singular person is embedded within a network of names and obligations, and human flourishing is defined not as freedom from role, but as excellence within role.

Daoist thought further radicalizes this deconstruction of the self. In Laozi's cosmology, the human follows the natural flow of the Dao, which is prior to name, form, and being. In Zhuangzi, the *single person* dissolves into the ceaseless transformations of the cosmos. Freedom here is not agency but coordination, not projective will but spontaneous receptivity. The *true person* (*zhēnrén*) is one who forgets the self, merges with the Dao, and dwells in the freedom of *non-being*, a condition beyond desire, distinction, and control.

The divergence is perhaps most vividly dramatized in the figure of the dream. Descartes' dream confirms the solitary self through radical doubt; Zhuangzi's dream displaces the self into a field of ontological indeterminacy. The Cartesian *individual* emerges by negating the world; the Zhuangzian *subject* dissolves by embracing the world's flux.

Thus, we may say: European freedom is willful, generative, self-determined; Zhuangzian freedom is non-willing, non-differentiated, and resonant. The former is the weight of action; the latter, the lightness of being. These two models articulate two incommensurable yet equally profound responses to the condition of human existence.

In our present age of digital multiplicity, algorithmic saturation, mobile internet technologies, and AI-driven crises of subjectivation, revisiting these divergent paths of personhood may offer new resources for thinking the posthuman subject—not as a sovereign ego, but as a co-emergent participant in a plural and unstable world.

3. On the Theory of Dividual

3.1 Deleuze and the Dividual

In his essay *Postscript on the Societies of Control*, Gilles Deleuze articulates his perspective on the transition from disciplinary societies to societies of control, explicitly introducing the concept of the "dividual."

Disciplinary societies are regulated by watchwords. The numerical language of control is made of codes that mark access to information, or reject it. We no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair. Individuals have become "dividuals."⁴⁵

In this essay, Deleuze uses the term "dividual" to describe the fluidity and instability of the person in the society of control. He contrasts disciplinary societies, characterized by regulation through "watchwords," with control societies, which govern through informational codes that grant or deny access. This transformation of power signifies that modern society no longer depends on the binary opposition between the individual and the mass; instead, individuals are becoming dividuals.

In Deleuze's discourse, technology and corporatization processes play significant roles in this transformation. With the increasing prominence of digital technology, networks, and global economics, the power structures defined by Foucault's "disciplinary societies" have undergone profound changes, giving rise to the operational paradigm of control societies. In this new model, the stability of individual subjectivity is undermined. The individual is no longer fixed to a specific identity or role but is subjected to the flows and dynamics of various forces. Deleuze foresaw that the progress of technology would further blur and diversify modern identities, rendering the traditional individual-mass dichotomy obsolete.

Deleuze's prediction has become a reality in contemporary society. Fueled by mobile internet and big data technologies, personal identification now relies less on appearance, personality, or thought and more on digital mechanisms—such as identity codes, QR codes, or various cards (e.g., driver's licenses, membership cards, bank cards, and ID cards). Through big data technologies, society rapidly

⁴⁵ Deleuze, Gilles. "Postscript on the Societies of Control." *October* 59 (1992): 3–7. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/778828>.

identifies single persons and defines them based on behavioral patterns. These technologies can even predict and define potential criminals through surveillance systems. Within this framework of control society, the human self is no longer considered a strong and autonomous entity, but a metastable and contradictory entity which nowadays can be calculated, programmed and manipulated in an unheard way.

Clearly, for Deleuze, advancements in digital and informational technology have played an indispensable role in shifting the unit of social participation from the individual to the dividual. Similarly, in the aforementioned practices of mainland Chinese artists' cinema since the 21st century, digital technology has also been a significant influence or driving force. This period has witnessed a growing number of works that break away from established cinematic conventions, characterized by aesthetic and formal diversity, genre uncertainty, strong intertextuality, and media hybridity. Traits such as indeterminacy of meaning, textual openness, lack of plot, and absence of clear intent imbue these practices with vitality. It raises the question: Is cinema, as an art form, also moving toward dividual?

In fact, Deleuze touched upon this topic even earlier in *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*.

In Chapter Six of *The Movement-Image*, Deleuze discusses the concept of the affection-image⁴⁶, frequently employing the term dividual. Deleuze explains the affection-image by referring to close-ups or the face, using the example of a clock:

In cinema, on the one hand, the "clock" image always features a fixed clock face. On the other hand, it has (at least) one hand that expresses "micromovements," indicating a "tendency of tension" as a micromovement. Notably, these micromovements do not refer to the "displacement" of the hand but rather to the "tendency of a moment approaching."

Here, Deleuze draws on Bergson's definition of affect as a motor tendency on a sensitive nerve to explain the dual characteristics of the affection-image:

⁴⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 87.

A motor tendency on a sensitive nerve. In other words, a series of micro-movements on an immobilized plate of nerve.

Static, stable units (such as the clock face) coexist with micromovements that embody a tendency of tension. Thus, Deleuze equates the affection-image with the close-up and the face.

Affect is not individuated like people and things.

They have singularities which enter into virtual conjunctions and each time constitute a complex entity⁴⁷.

We observe that the affection-image encompasses both static and dynamic tendencies. These are not oppositional but reveal complex emotions within the scenes crafted by images and sounds. Underlying these emotions are intricate, latent forces that transcend boundaries of singular, reaching into broader realms of perception.

Deleuze also discusses the internal and external composition of close-ups:

There is thus an internal composition of the close-up, that is a genuinely affective framing, cutting [découpage] and montage. The relationship of the close-up to other shots and to other types of images might be called external composition.⁴⁸

This compositional structure demonstrates how various elements in the affection-image establish latent connections through close-ups, forming a complex, contradictory system. Affect is composed of singularities that sometimes coalesce and sometimes diverge within this system.

Such a multifaceted structure exemplifies dividual revealing how the affection-image transcends individuality to create a more fluid, dynamic image structure. The tension and fluidity generated by affection-images embody the essence of dividuality.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 103

⁴⁸ Ibid., 103

Additionally, through examples from Eisenstein and Griffith, Deleuze introduces the *dividual* as a "new reality," a unity of power and quality.⁴⁹ He notes that while Griffith's shots present a binary structure, Eisenstein surpasses the individual-collective opposition through compact, continuous sequences. With regard to the films of Eisenstein, *dividual* is used to indicate the new social constellation oscillating between the single person and the collective masses. This represents an immense collective reflection intertwined with the particular emotions of each entity, further illustrating the concept of the *dividual*.

Deleuze's concept of the *dividual* introduces a novel perspective into film studies, examining not the affect of the viewer, but of the image-sound-composition itself, being a necessarily temporal expression and therefore always modifying itself.

Film, as an artistic form and medium, is not merely a composition of images, sounds, and language; it also integrates temporal, spatial, affective, discursive, and cognitive dimensions. The internal dynamics of the movement-image extend beyond formal graphic connections to encompass contextual frames, textual references, and affective resonances. Cinema thereby unfolds as a heterogeneous assemblage in which multiple elements interact without being subsumed under a single order. Likewise, works of video art or other time-based media cannot be regarded as closed or self-contained systems. Their external dynamics are even more intricate, frequently involving cross-cultural and intermedial appropriations as well as the recontextualization of images and texts within new aesthetic and discursive environments.

Approached through the lens of the *dividual*, cinema appears less as a unified text than as a dynamic entity whose vitality lies in the interplay of heterogeneous elements. In this framework, cinematic practice is not confined to the physical motion of images but extends into the affective and cognitive domains, generating resonances between perception and thought. Images thus function as multi-relational intermediaries that traverse different registers of experience, producing both aesthetic intensity and psychological reverberation. From this perspective, cinema becomes a conduit for *dividual* aesthetics, disclosing a field in which subjectivity itself is continually shaped through processes of dispersion, relation, and renewal.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 92

3.2 Individual and Dividual: A Compromise Perspective

Maurizio Lazzarato, in his book *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*, conceptualizes individuation and "dividuation" as two facets of the capitalist production of subjectivity, which he terms "social subjection" and "machinic enslavement," respectively. The individual is characterized by social identity, defined by differentiated social categories such as gender, race, class, profession, nationality, and religion. Conversely, the dividual consists of a flow of fragments, such as intellect, emotions, and bodily functions, co-opted into the vast machinery of capital, the state, and other social institutions. Both the fragmented dividual and the complete individual ultimately serve the expansion of capital.

Lazzarato's perspective seems to strike a middle ground between the dichotomy of the individual and the collective. He acknowledges the existence of the individual while treating the dividual as a flow of fragments orbiting the individual. This approach appears moderate and more palatable. However, could we not entertain an alternative hypothesis: that the dividual, as a flowing assemblage of fragments, is the fundamental mode of existence, and that the so-called individual is merely a transient, unstable aggregation of these fragments within a specific spatiotemporal context?

Brazilian scholars Fernanda Bruno and Pablo Manolo Rodríguez, while examining these debates, identify two pathways of "dividuation": the fragmentation and recombination of the material body through biotechnology and the segmentation and reorganization of life experiences through digital technologies. They propose a perspective of co-presence rather than opposition between the individual and the dividual.

Bruno and Rodríguez emphasize the impact of digital technologies—such as digital archives (profiles), mobile applications, big data, and financial systems—on human subjectivation. These technologies illustrate the coexistence of the individual and dividual. They pointed out that trajectories contained within digital archives compile personalized profiles based on data mining and analysis, covering consumption preferences, economic value, behavioral inclinations, professional capacities, virtual

diseases, political preferences. ⁵⁰These profiles not only reflect patterns of individual behavior but also influence actions by predicting potential trends and characteristics. Furthermore, they argue that each archive represents a set of traces, expressing correlations between countless traits of numerous individuals, being more interpersonal than intraper-sonal. ⁵¹This introduces the concept of algorithmic individuality, highlighting that individuality is constructed through complex interrelations of dividual elements, rooted more in relationality than in internal characteristics.

Mobile applications further exemplify this coexistence of individual and dividual. As digital technologies increasingly mediate social activities, these activities are now shaped by technologically assisted self-management. Mobile apps, wearable devices, and sensors constitute part of “self-biotechnology,” enabling individuals to track and quantify aspects of their health, lifestyle, and physical activity.

Through their exploration of dividual practices in biotechnology, digital culture, and financial systems, Bruno and Rodríguez conclude that contemporary society is witnessing an intersection of individual and dividual practices. They reject the notion that dividual practices erase individuality and processes of subjectivation, instead proposing a nuanced coexistence of these frameworks.

⁵⁰Fernanda Bruno, Pablo Manolo Rodríguez “The Dividual: Digital Practices and Biotechnologies,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 39.3 (2022): 27–50. 27

⁵¹Ibid

3.3 Dividuation and Film Aesthetics

Michaela Ott introduces the term “dividuation” in response to contemporary conditions of participation. As she observes, “our existence is involved in variously sized dimensions of reality, implicated in major and minor processes that are only partly transparent; we are participants in a becoming-world that already appears complex enough.”⁵² From this perspective, the idea of the self-contained and unambiguously localizable individual is destabilized. Dividuation thus designates how subjectivation unfolds through heterogeneous participations while provisionally sustaining coherence.

Building on this insight, Michaela Ott considers the concept of dividual/dividuation as a critical view of the Western conception of persons and artworks as individuals. “Since we find ourselves faced with the task of considering, affirming, and moderating our possibly contradictory participations, the concept of the individual should be replaced by the term ‘dividuation’”⁵³

In the contemporary context of globalization and digitization, governments, corporations, multinational organizations, and other forces intervene in people’s daily lives through the Internet and digital technologies. These interventions employ big data, digital identities, and algorithms to influence and regulate singular persons’ behaviors, preferences, consumption patterns, ideologies, and plans. Participants in society are thus transformed into calculable data potentials, with their future trajectories quantified and forecasted. As Ott notes, every entity actively or passively becomes part of dense networks of relationships and interactions, making it increasingly difficult to consider anyone as an “autonomous actor” or a fully independent individual.

She further clarifies that the concept of dividuation involves a value judgment about how entities are conceived. She emphasizes their “passive-active constitution,” their ongoing involvement in “diverse practices,” and their “distribution of capabilities” rather than autonomous self-positing. Subjectivation, in this sense, is shaped through “interculturally diverse affections and mediatic interpassivities,” which

⁵²Michaela Ott. *Dividuations: Theories of Participation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018),6.

⁵³ Michaela Ott. Dividual Film Aesthetics. *Philos Int J* 2023, 6(2), 3

continually reconfigure its formation⁵⁴. This perspective both synthesizes the socio-technical dimensions discussed above and opens onto their aesthetic implications.

Building on the work of poet and theorist Édouard Glissant, Ott extends this perspective to the field of art, suggesting that works of art that highlight their internal tensions should no longer be named as individual expressions.⁵⁵

One significant implication of digitalized lifestyles and modes of labor is that artistic creation can no longer be viewed as a purely individual expression. The thoughts, aesthetics, and preferences of artists are often subject to unprecedented external influences. This influence is not inherently negative; artists today have unparalleled ease and convenience in referencing the works of others. Consequently, appropriation and dialogue between artworks have become commonplace.

Ott also emphasizes another critical aspect: the cultural and artistic hybridization experienced by non-Western artists. Non-Western art practices, she argues, increase their potentiality of dividuality, as they are frequently caught between local traditions and globalised standards and are thus forced into culturally composite invention.

Case : Jean Rouch and the French Nouvelle Vague⁵⁶

Ott illustrates this phenomenon with the example of Jean Rouch's *Moi, un noir* (*I, a Negro*), an ethnofiction film about young Nigerian immigrants in Abidjan seeking employment. In the film, the characters adopt names such as Edward G. Robinson, Eddie Constantine, and Tarzan, all figures from American cinema and popular culture. The film's innovative use of jump cuts and asynchronous sound—necessitated by the absence of synchronized sound recording—had a profound influence on Godard's *À bout de souffle* and the broader French New Wave movement. This case exemplifies how African cinema's aesthetic choices significantly shaped Western film practices, reinforcing the notion of dividuality within cinematic creation.

⁵⁴ Michaela Ott. *Dividualities: Theories of Participation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 39.

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Ibid, 5

Cultural Hybridization in Chinese Art Education

The cultural hybridity inherent in dividuality is evident in the evolution of China's art education system. Between 1953 and 1963, Chinese universities sent professors, scholars, and art students to the Soviet Union for advanced studies. Upon returning, these persons became key educators in Chinese art academies, integrating Soviet teaching methodologies and realism into the local context.⁵⁷

In 1990, Ernst Mitzka, a professor from the Hamburg University of Fine Arts (HFBK), visited Hangzhou to present European and American media art works. This seemingly minor event had a lasting impact. The young artists who gathered at the China Academy of Art to view Mitzka's presentations later became some of the most prominent figures in China's video and media art scene. China's first media art or experimental art department was established as a direct result of this influence.⁵⁸

Today, it is commonplace for Chinese artists to engage, either voluntarily or involuntarily, with Western artistic frameworks and methodologies. Cultural hybridization within art aesthetics has become a norm, with numerous examples that will be further explored in subsequent chapters. As Ott observes, "Our artistic elaboration has changed due to the refinements of technological devices, the increased cultural hybridization, the aesthetic modes of communication, and so on."⁵⁹

Reassessing Film through Dividuality

The concept of dividuality emphasizes the importance of examining the subjectivation of artworks and artistic processes, as well as their modes of dissemination. While it invites a reevaluation of how films absorb, recombine, and reinterpret cultural, conceptual, and aesthetic phenomena, it also foregrounds the extent to which artistic creation and circulation are co-constituted by heterogeneous agencies—social, political, historical, and institutional. Through the lens of dividuality, one can uncover the profound transformations occurring in the aesthetics and practices of art, particularly media art, in an era characterized by digitization and global diversity.

⁵⁷ Jingzhi Xi, "Soviet Art Education and Its Influence on Chinese Art Education," *China Art Daily*, 2012. Accessed May 21, 2025. https://www.cflac.org.cn/ysb/2008-11/14/content_14917308.htm.

⁵⁸ Katherine Grube, "Image and Phenomena: Video Art and Exhibition-Making in 1990s China," *Asia Art Archive in America*, August 7, 2014, <https://www.aaa-a.org/programs/image-and-phenomena-video-art-and-exhibition-making-in-1990s-china>.

⁵⁹ Michaela Ott, *Dividual Film Aesthetics*. *Philos Int J* 2023, 6(2), 4

In navigating these complex and elusive new realities, how might we redefine our understanding of cinema and media art? The framework of dividuality offers a novel perspective for exploring the fragmented, hybrid, and relational nature of contemporary artistic practices.

4. Dividuation and Interality: A Dialogue

4.1 What is Interality?

In discussions on subjectivation, contemporary Western philosophers and aestheticians have introduced the concept of the dividual to challenge the traditional dualism of subject and object, as well as the notion of the individual self as an indivisible and autonomous entity. This concept offers a theoretical response to the identity challenges posed by the rapidly evolving digital age. In recent years, scholars focusing on Eastern philosophy and cultural studies have proposed an alternative epistemological framework rooted in “Eastern philosophy,” similarly questioning Western dualism and the independence of the subject. Although this emerging theory has yet to gain widespread recognition, I argue that its conceptual underpinnings resonate significantly with the term dividual in exploring issues of identity and relationality. This concept is referred to as “interality.” (间性, Jian Xing)

Chinese artist Gao Shiqiang discusses the characteristics of traditional Chinese values from the perspective of *shanshui* (landscape painting). He states:

“Traditionally, in China, the understanding of 'self' differs fundamentally from that in Western cultures represented by Europe and the United States, where the independence of the other is emphasized. In contrast, Chinese traditional philosophy emphasizes the shared origins of culture and spirit—what we call 'commonality', the 'we'.”⁶⁰

This discussion leads to the consideration of principles of Daoist thought. In *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 42, the ancient philosopher Laozi states: *“Dao begets One, One begets Two, Two begets Three, and Three begets the myriad things.”⁶¹* Here, *Dao* is not only regarded as the key to understanding the world but also as the fundamental principle governing the natural order: *“Dao Fa Ziran” (Dao follows nature)*. This philosophical worldview profoundly influenced ancient Chinese *shanshui* art and naturalistic poetry.

⁶⁰ Shiqiang Gao, “Perspective and Distance: A Visual Inquiry into the Cosmology of Chinese Landscape,” *Journal of the National Academy of Art*, no. 2 (2018): 130.

⁶¹ Laozi, *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 42

Building upon the foundations of ancient Chinese philosophy, Chinese-American scholar Shang Geling introduced the concept of interality as a methodological approach in philosophical research. He defines interality as a non-material reality. Those elements that exist *beyond things* (fēi shí tǐ/fēi shì, 非实体/非是) or *outside of existence* (shí tǐ zhī wài/shí tǐ zhī wài, 实体之外/是之外) are nonetheless indispensable parts of reality, and these aspects can collectively be understood as interality.⁶² From Shang's perspective, interality refers to the invisible, immaterial connections, structures, or states that exist between entities.

Interality is a young and still ambiguous concept. Unlike many modern European philosophical theories, it was not initially constructed on the foundations of Western modernist philosophy but emerged from reflections on and re-theorization of ancient Chinese intellectual traditions. In Shang Geling's view, although interality is a relatively recent term, its roots extend deep into classical Chinese philosophy, where it has, for thousands of years, shaped cultural thought, often manifesting in daily life without explicit articulation ("*the common people use it every day without realizing it*" *bǎi xìng rì yòng ér bù zhī*).⁶³

Interality is not merely a philosophical issue worthy of attention; it can also be understood as a category parallel to, or even more fundamental than, substance or ontology. According to Shang, ancient Chinese thinkers frequently employed interality as a basis for exploring the nature of the world and human existence. Since all phenomena and concepts emerge between space and time, interality becomes the foundation for interpreting existence and experience. The "interological mode of thought" and the "Interology" mark a key distinction between Chinese philosophy and Western ontology. By linking all things together in a relational and processual manner, interality negates the absolutist and dogmatic tendencies of ontological essentialism.

This term "shifts focus away from entities themselves and towards what lies beyond and between them; away from being-in-itself and towards the exterior (the other) and the interstitial".⁶⁴ Rather than inquiring into the essence of things or adhering to a

⁶² Geling Shang, "Image, Clustering, and Interality: Probing New Ways of Understanding Chinese Philosophy," *Literature, History, and Philosophy* (Wenshi Zhe) 3 (2017), 6-18, 11.

⁶³ Geling Shang, "Jianxing lun cuoyao" [On Interology], *Philosophical Analysis* 6, no. 6 (Dec. 2015), 54-65, 54.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 57

dualistic framework, interality explores the *conditions of possibility for the emergence and transformation of things*. Concepts such as time-space relations, composition, transformation, and interconnectivity all fall within Shang's articulation of interality. As he argues, "Interality views the world as an ongoing process of transformation, composition, and reconstruction—a processual whole in which all things are interconnected and mutually influential. This, in itself, leads to the next proposition: the very foundation for the possibility of wholeness lies in interality."⁶⁵

4.2 Symbiosis: Species, Bodies, and Life

Compared to the emerging concept of interality, which originates from classical Chinese thought, the term *dividuation* has a more systematic theoretical background. Developed through the works of Gilles Deleuze and Gilbert Simondon and further theorized by Michaela Ott, *dividuation* is described as "reflecting the multi-directional cross-connections and subdivision of single humans based on qualitatively diverse, self-chosen and imposed participations, and their complex joining with a relatively stable, self-affecting, and self-reflecting coherence."⁶⁶

Ott examines contemporary forms of participation through the lenses of biotechnology, socio-technical logic, and artistic aesthetics. Within biotechnology, she critiques traditional species classification by drawing on research in microbiomes, taxonomy, and genetic technology, thereby demonstrating *dividuation* at the biological level. She highlights recent studies suggesting that human behavioral patterns may be more strongly influenced by genetic variations in microbiomes than by a person's own genes. Furthermore, citing biologist Donna Haraway, Ott underscores the challenges of defining organismal boundaries within

⁶⁵ Ibid, 63

⁶⁶ Michaela Ott. *Dividuations: Theories of Participation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018),32.

immunology. Haraway questions the theoretical viability of defining an organism solely by its physical boundaries, emphasizing that "besides the cellular compartment, the immune system comprises a vast array of circulating acellular products, such as antibodies, lymphokines, and complement components."⁶⁷

Furtherly, Ott extends this critique to the complexity of species concepts, arguing that the intricate interrelations and interactions at the microscopic level challenge conventional understandings of species. The notion of species becomes increasingly difficult to define when symbiotic relationships are taken into account. Additionally, the advent of genetic engineering further destabilizes traditional species classifications. As she notes, "a final very significant aspect of this blurring of species boundaries is presented by the various possibilities offered by genetic manipulation technologies."⁶⁸

Although scholars of interality did not adopt a natural science approach to biological inquiry, Shang, the originator of the concept, did address its implications for life itself. He describes interality's first dimension as space-time, emphasizing that for a "living organism, the free space inside the body is no less crucial than the physical components themselves: breath, blood, feeling, nutrition, and so forth, must circulate through tubes and paths in order to keep a body healthy."⁶⁹

Another interological scholar, Zhang Xianguang, builds on Zhuangzi's assertion that "all things are one" (万物一也), suggesting that nature inherently tends toward plurality and interality. He interprets this "oneness" (一) as an *élan vital*⁷⁰, a vital impulse that "intuitively grasps relational opportunities and vacant ecological niches within nature, spontaneously differentiating itself to establish reciprocal relationships with pre-existing or co-emerging life forms within the same environment. Life forms come into being through mutual invocation. Within these relationships, species interact, communicate, and trigger each other's emergence, leading to an increasingly rich ecosystem of life forms and interrelations."⁷¹

⁶⁷ Ibid, 149-150

⁶⁸ Ibid, 157

⁶⁹ Geling Shang, "Interality Shows Through: An Introduction to Interology," *China Media Research* 11, no. 2 (2015): 68–79,72.

⁷⁰ a term coined by Henri Bergson, see *Évolution créatrice* (1907; *Creative Evolution*)

⁷¹ Xiangguang Zhang, "Deleuze and Interology," *Philosophical Analysis* 12, no. 1 (2021): 186–195,189.

While interality theory does not explicitly engage with modern biological and species theories, its core proponents, from the perspectives of life's intrinsic nature and ecological interconnectivity, share a similar stance with Ott's critique of species and *dividuation*. Both perspectives emphasize the relational existence of life within and across species. The concepts of *dividuation* and interality, either directly or indirectly, challenge species classification, questioning both the blurred boundaries of species and the reciprocal relations of life forms. Ultimately, both point to a fundamental notion: the coexistence and interdependence of all life.

Zhang Xianguang further reinforces the importance of symbiosis and co-evolution by revisiting Deleuze's metaphor of the orchid and the wasp. He argues that we must confront the ideological nature of ontology and the empirical reality of interality, recognizing "the falsity of independence and the truth of interdependence."⁷² He critiques ontology's obsession with derivation, lineage, and genealogy while celebrating interality's affirmation of alliances, symbiosis, and co-evolution.⁷³

⁷² Ibid, 189

⁷³ Ibid

4.3 Technology, the Self, and Practices of Subjectivation

Zhang Xiangang argues that concepts such as symbiosis and co-evolution also apply to the relationship between humans and technology. Technology "helps optimize the interface of interaction between human and technology,"⁷⁴ facilitating their coordination. This is evident in fields such as ergonomics and the common correspondences between humans and technological objects—for instance, hands and handles, fingers and keyboards. Various technologies constitute an extensive and intricate ecosystem, in which they coexist interdependently. This ecosystem has been flourishing around, between, and within us for a significant period, forming an inescapable framework that shapes our emotions, inclinations, desires, and behaviors.⁷⁵

Ott's theory of dividuation also engages with discussions on co-evolution and human-technology relations. In addressing the socio-technical dimension of dividuation, she references Niklas Luhmann's concept of the "world society": due to the global intermeshing of communication, with the majority of people participating in the socio-technologies of mobile telephony and the internet, the Western society delineated by Luhmann inevitably develops in conjunction with other societies, including non-Western ones, thereby forming a "world society"⁷⁶. However, Ott critiques Luhmann's conception of world society, noting that his account, grounded in purely formal communicative interconnection, overlooks the many obstacles that condition participation. She emphasizes that factors such as the pre-structuring of information on the web, economic surveillance strategies, unequal global distribution of technological infrastructures, and politically or religiously motivated restrictions must be taken into account if one is to assess how 'world society' actually functions. In this light, world-society-becoming is far from an egalitarian process of voluntary participation, but is marked by asymmetries and enforced inclusions.⁷⁷

Moreover, Ott discusses the profound impact of information technology and smart mobile devices on human activity, particularly in blurring the boundaries between work and leisure time. In the "virtual/imaginary/real forms of life division," the heart is

⁷⁴ Ibid, 190

⁷⁵ Ibid

⁷⁶ Michaela Ott. *Dividuations: Theories of Participation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 186.

⁷⁷ Ibid

geographically or culturally active in a different place to the workforce, and is primarily generated and maintained via mobile phones⁷⁸. Within this diversified, globally interconnected digital environment, information inequality, digital divides, and the affective manipulation exerted by digital media emerge as key concerns. Through her critique of this “global digital divide,” Ott reveals the socio-technical dimensions of dividualation.

In contemporary society, under the forces of technological innovation and accelerating globalization, human participation in activities has been integrated into an unprecedentedly dense network of events. While digital technologies and mobile internet offer convenience, they also exert control over persons. Unequal power structures dictate identity verification processes, creating “digital dividual” shaped by economic and political asymmetries. In this context, technology not only limits but also manipulates human behavior and thought, making it difficult to consider “individual” persons and artworks as separate entities. Mobile phones, for example, function not merely as tools but also as identity authentication devices, consumer intermediaries, and information access facilitators. This intertwining of technology with the socio-technical notion of the individual aligns with Zhang Xianguang’s vision of a coexisting ecosystem. Ott, however, incorporates this ecosystem into a globally networked “world society” rife with imbalances and inequalities. As a result, technology dissolves various boundaries within human activity, erasing distinctions between identity, labor, and resource distribution, and thus complicating the differentiation between technology and the singular.

Digital technology has fundamentally altered our understanding of the self and has reshaped the process of subjectivation. The self is no longer a unified, enclosed entity (individual); rather, as Deleuze conceptualized, it has become a dividual. Claims of self-governance and autonomous choice are now subjected to private or state surveillance, regulated by data identification processes, thus single persons can no longer perceive themselves as “autonomous decision-makers”.⁷⁹ Ott frames this transformation of subjectivation under the “new reality” as dividualation.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 220

⁷⁹ Michaela Ott, “Dividualations—of the Film, of the Human Subject,” in *Scenographies of the Subject*, ed. Lars Friedrich, Karin Harrasser, and Céline Kaiser (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, 2019), 157–167, 162.

Zhang Xiangguang's research on interality offers a relevant perspective on this phenomenon. He argues that digital technology reshapes human existence, reconfigures our modes of consciousness, and reconstructs our collective unconscious⁸⁰, suggesting that digital technology fosters "natural" interalist⁸¹. Drawing from Flusser, Zhang highlights the intuitive experience of the self in relation to its surroundings: being is co-being. "In digital environments, particularly in cyberspace, the self exists only as a node within an interactive communication network; it is realized in recurring encounters, in successive impulses, in momentary manifestations that are temporary, emergent, and ephemeral."⁸²

Zhang also explores the relationship between humans and technological devices, such as mobile phones and keyboards. In the digital age, single persons, either actively or passively, become linked to various codes, tags, images, and data. Digital identification technologies define personal information, including driver's licenses, social security numbers, or QR codes. In both online and physical spaces, single humans are frequently required to provide such data to verify their identity. This process of subjectivation, as Ott describes, aligns with dividualation while simultaneously embodying intersubjective existence. When discussing globalization and digital technology, Zhang takes a more optimistic stance, suggesting that digital technology can bridge the gap between Eastern and Western civilizations. Written scripts and alphabets are absorbed and transcoded into digital codes, transforming them into content. In this sense, digital technology "enables capitalism to transform the entire world into a seamlessly connected space"⁸³. However, Zhang also critiques the digitalization of contemporary society, arguing that ultimately everything, including ourselves, will acquire a virtual counterpart, "a digital double in the cloud."⁸⁴ He characterizes this "double" as thoroughly dividual and points out that, in the eyes of an almost omniscient system, human beings are reduced to nothing more than dividuals.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Xiangguang Zhang, *Interological Reflections on the Digital*, trans. Du Dan and Xiangguang Zhang, *Philosophical Analysis* 10, no. 3 (June 2019): 156–169, 157.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 161

⁸² *Ibid*, 160

⁸³ *Ibid*, 162

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 166

⁸⁵ *Ibid*

Drawing from Flusser, Zhang further asserts that the brain bears significant resemblance to society⁸⁶. He aligns this notion with Deleuze's concept of the "body without organs": when people collaborate remotely or face-to-face, engaging with intersubjective temporal-spatial zones, a creative "interological mind"⁸⁷ emerges. Here, subjectivity dissipates, and the self is suspended, transcended, and discarded. More precisely, the interological mind, as a virtuality, is actualized in reality, yet its virtuality remains inexhaustible. This concept is particularly thought-provoking. The process of globalization involves complex fragmentation and regeneration—not only in biological, sociopolitical, economic, technological, or cultural domains but also within the realm of consciousness. How does dividuality manifest in mental and cognitive processes? How can it be understood?

We may also gain insight from Zhang Xianguang's elaboration on these questions. He describes the *interological mind* as existing independently of either physical co-presence or digital connectivity: "If another person—whether alive or not—exists in one's consciousness as an absent presence, an interological mind can emerge."⁸⁸ He further emphasizes that "the specificity of the digital age lies in placing us within conditions where interological minds are co-created together with numerous collaborators who are physically absent."⁸⁹

This argument extends the notion of interality beyond interpersonal interactions or engagements with tangible entities, information, or networks, situating it within the dimensions of thought, consciousness, and memory. It underscores how the absent presence of others in a person's awareness constitutes an interological relation. In this view, interality is not merely reliant on synchronous interactions in the physical world, nor is it confined to digital connectivity; rather, it is deeply embedded in human cognition, affect, and memory, making its forms of existence increasingly complex and fluid.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 164

⁸⁷ Ibid

⁸⁸ Ibid, 164-165

⁸⁹ Ibid, 165

4.4 Summary: Interality, Dividuation and Contemporary Chinese Cinema

Both dividuation and interality respond to the contemporary conditions of globalization and digitalization, critically destabilizing the notion of a unified and autonomous self, while also challenging ontology's obsession with genealogical and factional distinctions. While their genealogies differ, with dividuation emerging from Gilles Deleuze and Gilbert Simondon and interality rooted in Daoist and Confucian thought, they converge in rethinking subjectivation under technological mediation and complex social entanglements. Taken together, these perspectives offer a cross-cultural framework for analyzing how cinema and artistic practices negotiate the tension between fragmentation and relation, singularity and multiplicity, autonomy and participation, voluntary and involuntary engagement.

Deleuze's conception of cinema as *dividual* suggests that film should not be understood as a singular narrative thread or a unified emotional experience, but rather as an assemblage of heterogeneous temporal, sensory, and affective layers. Contemporary moving-image works often employ loose narrative structures, plural perspectives, open-ended and ambiguous processes of meaning-making, as well as practices of collage and appropriation. Within this dividuated structure, subjectivity does not originate from an authorial "I" but emerges through the interplay of images, sounds, editing strategies, and extra-filmic contexts.

This dividuated existence also extends beyond the screen itself: a film must be examined in relation to its surrounding environment and historical moment, while the audience's experiential and interpretive engagements constitute an integral part of its existence. Viewers are no longer passive recipients of a linear narrative but active participants in weaving connections between fragments and constructing meaning, thereby positioning the cinematic experience as a processual mode of co-creation.

Within such works, interality plays a crucial role by designating not merely a transitional gap but a generative field of relations. Zhang Xianguang conceptualizes the self as a "node" within networks of interactive information. In the context of this dissertation, such a node should not be limited to the level of the single human but extended to any singular entity—including the cinematic work itself. From an

interological perspective, a film is not an ontologically self-contained category of art but part of a world of co-presence, co-evolution, and symbiosis. It exists in generative interrelation with both its internal components, including concepts, styles, symbols, images, and sounds, and its external conditions, such as history, memory, others, and informational flows. This corresponds to what Zhang identifies as the logic of “and...and...and,” whereby existence unfolds not in exclusionary terms but as an open concatenation of relations. In this sense, interality illuminates how moving-image works articulate a process of subjectivation that is fluid and relational: cinematic practice here is not exclusively understood as redistribution, but continually re-constituted through processes of becoming-with.

Through the dialogue between interality and dividuality, we uncover numerous theoretical intersections between Eastern and Western thought. Similarly, in contemporary Chinese cinema and video art, a shift in subjectivation practice can be observed—though it has not yet been widely recognized or critically examined by many artistic practitioners. With the transformation of social structures and the profound impact of the internet and digital technologies on private experiences, many Chinese art films and video works increasingly foreground improvisational modes of production, unstable formal configurations, intermedial aesthetics, and practices of intercultural appropriation. These characteristics not only reflect the contradictions and tensions of one's consciousness amidst rapid social-political-technical changes but also serve as a unique symptomatic response to contemporary Chinese society.

Compared to Western societies, which are deeply influenced by liberal traditions, interality and dividuality may integrate more seamlessly into the Chinese artistic context. Chinese society, shaped by historical and political forces, has developed a distinct conceptualization of the self. Confucian philosophy emphasizes the collective ideal of “self-cultivation, family governance, state management, and world harmony,” while Daoist thought, with its principle of “Dao follows nature,” envisions an interconnected world in which all beings are interwoven. Meanwhile, contemporary Chinese collectivist values position the single as inseparable from the broader social fabric. The self in Chinese society is not conceived as an independent “other” but as an entity that realizes its value through social participation. This perspective has

been extensively analyzed by sociologists and anthropologists. For instance, Fei Xiaotong's "differential mode of association" (差序格局)⁹⁰ describes Chinese social structures as a dynamic and hierarchical network in which singulars define themselves through relational interactions rather than as isolated atomic entities. Within this framework, the ideas put forth by dividuality and interality resonate strongly with long-standing Chinese identity paradigms.

Since the 1980s, Chinese artists have actively engaged in liberal movements, frequently reflecting on political systems, collectivism, and their aspirations for greater autonomy. Notable events, such as the "Seven Gentlemen" case⁹¹, which involved independent filmmakers resisting censorship, and the 1989 "China Avant-Garde Art Exhibition," demonstrate the liberal inclinations of contemporary Chinese artists. Since the 2000s, the advent of non-linear editing and digital filmmaking has further expanded the aesthetic complexity and interactivity of moving-image art. Key questions emerge: How do these works navigate the interrelations between artists and collectives, power structures, and society at large? How do moving-image works integrate with the realities of social existence? As Ott has noted, contemporary artworks can no longer be understood solely as "personal" creations. Do contemporary Chinese arthouse films align with the shift described by dividuality? Moreover, how has digital technology influenced the aesthetics and processes of subjectivation in contemporary Chinese artistic practice? To explore these inquiries, I have examined a selection of Chinese artist films produced since the 2000s, conducting interviews and analysis to provide critical reflections on these evolving artistic trajectories.

⁹⁰The concept of "differential mode of association" (*cha xu ge ju*) was first articulated by Fei Xiaotong in his early work *From the Soil*, where he contrasted Chinese social structures with Western social systems.

⁹¹ In November 2003, seven Chinese independent filmmakers—including Jia Zhangke, Lou Ye, Wang Xiaoshuai, Ju Anqi, Cui Zi'en, Zhang Yaxuan, and Zhang Xianmin—jointly submitted a petition to the Film Bureau of China, calling for the establishment of a film rating system, reform of the censorship process, public criteria for censorship, and policy support for non-commercial artistic films.

5. The Dividual and Interological Filmic Artefacts

The discussions on dividual and interality both concern the profound impact of technology on the process of subjectivation. This influence has extended into the domain of artistic aesthetics, encompassing the shift from analog to digital technologies and the intervention of the internet in artistic creation. According to Deleuze, the temporal mobility of cinema continuously reconstructs its audiovisual framings, thereby permanently modifying the captured aesthetic. As a result, film is inherently dividual. Meanwhile, Interology categorizes non-physical existences within the realm of interality. When examining contemporary artist films, how should we address the deep integration of digital technology and the cultural exchanges catalyzed by China's post-reform era? Moreover, how might we construct an effective theoretical framework to engage with these transformations?

If we take the year 2000 as a dividing line in the development of contemporary Chinese cinema and moving image practices, we find that films made after this period were not only shaped by technological advancements but also underwent significant aesthetic transformations. The vast majority of pre-2000 films were narrative-driven, forming an intrinsic logic that constructed a fictional or simulated world. Within these works, dialogue, symbols, and visual information typically served clear and explicit purposes. However, the emergence of non-narrative, anti-dramatic, or non-fictional works after 2000 not only confirmed this shift but also demonstrated a heightened intention to engage in dialogue with the audience, a more diverse pursuit of aesthetic expression, and a rhetorical approach closer to contemporary art. Breaking away from the traditional narrative structures and aesthetic paradigms inherent to cinematic media has thus become an increasingly prominent tendency.

The works discussed in this chapter are primarily produced after 2000 (with *There is A Strong Wind in Beijing* filmed in 1999). I have had the opportunity to engage in direct conversations with some of the artists, whose works exhibit a highly avant-garde approach to visual language and an open-ended aesthetic intent. However, these works—especially those that traverse the boundaries between cinema and video art—have not been sufficiently discussed in academic discourse. In classical epistemology, a film is often regarded as a “plastic art in motion”

(Ricciotto Canudo), positioned the artist(film director) as the central figure in filmmaking, exercising meticulous control over all aspects of film production, from actor performance to mise-en-scène to sound design. However, in the practice of contemporary artist films, alternative creative tendencies emerge. Some works deliberately diminish the director's authoritative presence, allowing images to materialize through improvisation and contingency. Others displace the filmmaker's conceptual framework outside the visual content itself, enabling meaning to emerge through the audience's interpretation.

The selection of these films for analysis is not only informed by the temporal boundary of the year 2000 but also driven by the central concern of this study: by re-examining these works, I aim to explore how the concepts of dividuality and interality might offer new perspectives and methodologies for understanding the aesthetics and practices of contemporary Chinese cinema and filmic art.

5.1 There Is A Strong Wind in Beijing

Let us begin with a particularly distinctive work. The artist Ju Anqi, who gained widespread recognition after winning the Best Asian Film Award at the 44th International Film Festival Rotterdam for *Poet on a Business Trip*, had already ventured into experimental filmmaking by the late 1990s. In 1999, he completed the documentary *There Is a Strong Wind in Beijing*, which is regarded as an early attempt at cinéma vérité in Chinese documentary filmmaking.⁹²

The film employs a shooting technique reminiscent of the street interviews used in Jean Rouch's seminal work *Chronique d'un été (Chronicle of a Summer)*, a hallmark of the cinéma vérité tradition. In that film, Rouch introduced direct engagement

⁹² Xiantao He, "Violent Interventions and Realistic Reflection from the Perspective of Cinéma Vérité: A Case Study of *Beijing Has a Strong Wind*," *Shanxi Science and Technology News*, May 22, 2023, B06.

through interviews, asking participants, “Are you happy?”—a question that deeply moved many French viewers. Similarly, Ju Anqi roamed the streets of Beijing with his camera, posing an ostensibly absurd question to passersby: “Do you think the wind in Beijing is strong?” The camera, along with the filmmaking team, became an apparatus of intervention, disrupting the social environment in a direct and almost intrusive manner, thereby shaping the film’s content. This approach was exceedingly rare in early Chinese independent cinema.

The director structured the film around a set of recurring questions: “Do you think the wind in Beijing is strong?” “Are you happy together?” “Would you like to smoke one of my cigarettes?” These questions were posed repeatedly to different respondents across various locations in Beijing. The camera captured the diverse reactions of interviewees—some rejected the inquiry outright, some attempted to evade it, some responded with forced composure, some appeared visibly startled, while others reacted with outright anger and reprimands.⁹³

The selection of subjects and filming locations appears largely random. The director and cinematographer wandered through Tiananmen Square, meandered through narrow alleyways, ventured into construction sites and luxury hotels, and even barged into public restrooms. The film conveys a sense of urgency, as though the director was eager to maximize the scope of encounters within a limited time frame.

These seemingly haphazard and contingent sequences collectively constitute an abrupt and intrusive portrayal of everyday life on Beijing’s streets in the late 1990s. The reactions they provoke among passersby serve to assemble a mosaic of urban existence, capturing the diverse expressions and emotional states of the city’s inhabitants.

The film adheres to a strict 1:1 use of all recorded footage, meaning that post-production editing was kept to a minimum, with each segment being retained in its entirety. The entire production was carried out solely by director Ju Anqi and cinematographer Liu Yonghong. As a result, the camera work is shaky, and the image quality is rough. For most of the first forty minutes, the director persistently employs a strategy of provocation by initiating conversations and forcing interactions,

⁹³ Zhichao Zhu. “On the Social Intervention of Experimental Film.” *Art Evaluation*, no. 10 (2017): 129-30, 176,130.

while the subjects remain in a reactive position and often appear reluctant or passive. This lends the film a raw, chaotic, and absurd aesthetic.

In the final sequence, occurring after the forty-minute mark, the crew encounters a desperate couple whose child is gravely ill and in need of medical treatment they cannot afford. As they recount their plight on camera, the emotional tone of the film shifts abruptly—from lighthearted to somber, from playful to sorrowful. This moment functions as a poignant reflection on the unpredictability of life and human suffering. At this juncture, the film's mode of artistic intervention is effectively inverted—no longer does the artist impose upon social reality; instead, reality itself forcefully intervenes in the artistic process.

5.1.1 A Deliberate Cinematic Action and a Historical Archive

There Is a Strong Wind in Beijing functions as a premeditated social experiment in moving images, designed as an interventionist cinematic practice targeting the public sphere. Through large-scale yet seemingly random disruptions in the form of street interviews, the film directly engages with public space, generating an expansive and unpredictable interaction with its subjects. The work is marked by a high degree of improvisation and experimentation. A diverse range of singular figures appears on screen—pedestrians on Beijing's streets, tourists in Tiananmen Square, users of public restrooms, and a desperate couple unable to afford medical treatment for their child. However, the film does not establish a centralized protagonist; instead, it approaches each encounter with an almost detached and unembellished perspective, treating the relationship between the camera and the single figure with a certain rawness. Cinematographer Liu Yonghong referred to the project as a form of "cinematic action,"⁹⁴ emphasizing its activist nature in terms of visual production. Here, the image is no longer a passive record of reality but an active intervention into the social sphere.

The production process of *There Is a Strong Wind in Beijing* is shaped by an element of unpredictability. The director and interviewees are strangers to one another, and

⁹⁴ Xin-hong Wu, Yuan Chang, and Ming Qi, "The Idea of 'Cinéma Vérité' in China," *China Television – Documentary*, no. 8 (2014): 52–57.

the abrupt nature of the encounters places single persons in a state of uncertainty, generating an immediacy and spontaneity that fuels the visual dynamic. The film has no predetermined script or centralized narrative structure; instead, it relies on aggressive disruptions to stir up fragments of reality. In contrast to conventional films, where the director maintains narrative control, this work surrenders the stage to the public. The open space of Beijing street becomes the site of the film's unfolding, where the interaction between the camera and the masses transforms into the core cinematic event, ultimately blurring the boundaries between documentation and participation, between observer and observed.

The film's shooting style is direct, at times even bordering on the intrusive. The camera unflinchingly confronts strangers without embellishment, creating a profound sense of historical embedding. Single persons are no longer depicted as isolated beings; rather, they are inevitably enmeshed within broader social structures and historical currents. Whether they are aware of it or not, they are swept up in the tide of their era. This approach not only underscores the film's strategy of visual intervention in social reality but also positions it as a historical document—an archival fragment capturing the urban landscape, street life, and socio-political realities of Beijing on the eve of the new millennium. The interweaving of random interviews and street scenes constructs a vivid collective portrait of the city. Voices of singles are absorbed into the film, yet they do not coalesce into a linear narrative; rather, they are juxtaposed in a fragmented mosaic, collectively shaping the atmosphere of contemporary Chinese society. At this point, the film is not merely an observation of reality—it becomes part of reality itself.

5.1.2 Collective Figuration, Relationality, and Dividuation

The film *There Is a Strong Wind in Beijing* employs a pronouncedly decentralized visual strategy, effecting a structural dismantling of the conventional “individual hero” narrative model. Rather than centering on a singular protagonist as the emotional or narrative anchor, the film returns its focus to the everyday realities of ordinary people, exposing the intricate relationships between singular figures, collective formations, and the social field. While the characters remain strangers to each

other—and to the filmmaker—they nonetheless reveal a shared affective atmosphere. This emergent commonality does not result from narrative construction, but from the underlying social structures and historical conditions in which these single persons are intertwined.

In terms of its formal organization, the film assembles a multitude of anonymous figures into a shared visual field, where nonlinear sequences replace causally structured plotlines. This construction overturns the classical screenplay model in which character motivation drives narrative development, and also disrupts the functional hierarchy between “protagonist,” “supporting character,” and “background figure.” Here, every subject captured by the camera retains the potential to become a visual agent.

Rather than composing a unified tableau of the collective, the film assembles a loosely bound, heterogeneous figuration, in which singular images remain fragmentary and unmoored from narrative logic. These figures appear mutually indifferent, at times even conflicted or evasive. Their relations are not governed by continuity or causality, but by interruption, coincidence, and dispersion. It is precisely through this non-narrative and non-schematic organization that a deeper, structurally embedded tension between social relation and emotional register emerges. These figures are neither subsumed by the group nor elevated into narrative centers; instead, they occupy an indeterminate space beyond the binary of singular and collective. Following Ott’s conception, I propose to interpret this film as an instance of filmic *dividuation*. Ott defines *dividuation* as “a highly ambivalent processuality,”⁹⁵ arising from both voluntary participation and involuntary co-optation. In the case of *There Is a Strong Wind in Beijing*, the singular figure appears as a discrete visual unit, yet is constantly infiltrated, disrupted, and reorganized within a collective image field shaped by these tensions. The solo actors here are no longer a self-contained subject but a mutable node within a dynamic of segmentation, dispersion, and precarious recomposition.

For instance, the desperate couple seeking medical treatment for their child momentarily occupies an emotional focal point in the film, eliciting sympathy and resonance from the audience. Yet, the film does not elevate them into a central

⁹⁵ Michaela Ott, *Dividuations: Theories of Participation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 139.

narrative; instead, their presence is treated as equal to that of any other stranger, embedded within the broader social fabric. The single person does not become a “hero,” nor is the collective merely a background element. Instead, through the film’s fluid visual approach, singles and groups constantly intersect and collide, forming a distinct cinematic texture. In this cinematic practice, the single and the mass are no longer positioned in binary opposition; rather, they permeate, divide, and reorganize one another, ultimately constructing a visual relationship defined by a high degree of uncertainty.

As Ott writes, processes of subjectivation, including artistic production, should be conceived as forms of *participation-occasioned dividuation*, composed of intersecting cultural and semiotic elements:

“To achieve a more adequate recording of the relationship between solo and group agencies, and also of the many cultural and semiotic elements constituting a work of art or a filmic composition, it appears indispensable to reveal their character as one of participation-occasioned dividuation.”⁹⁶

This means that aesthetic unity does not stem from a centralized subject, but from a temporary convergence of diverse relational forces—cultural logics, perceptual structures, and mediated intensities.

Thus, the figures in *There Is a Strong Wind in Beijing* no longer serve as drivers of narrative. Instead, they act as affective intensities and relational nodes, participating in an emergent field of shared image production. The film offers not a static portrait of the masses, but a dispersed, unfixed, and multiply differentiated figuration. In doing so, it not only challenges existing notions of individuality-collectivity, but also critically rearticulates what it means to inhabit singularity within the relational, technologically mediated aesthetics of the contemporary..

5.1.3 Affection and Image Event: A Trigger-Based Model of Cinematic Generation

⁹⁶ Ibid, 140

Another salient feature of *There Is a Strong Wind in Beijing* lies in its experimental practice of what may be seen as an affectional mechanism within filmic reproduction. This mechanism does not simply manifest at the structural level through non-narrativity and decentralization; it also generates a logic of affective triggering that is improvisational, contingent, and disjunctive. The affective dimension in this film does not arise from character psychology or audience empathy, but from the tensions and disruptions that emerge between the camera's interventions, linguistic acts or the spatial order of the filmed environment.

The director's recurring and seemingly absurd questions—"Do you think the wind in Beijing is strong?", "Can I join your meal?", "Would you like to smoke my cigarettes?"—clearly lack informational intent and make no effort to construct a conventional narrative thread. Instead, they function as triggering mechanisms: they pull the subjects out of habitual rhythms and force them into direct confrontation with the camera and questions of the filmmaker, producing a moment of semantic suspension and perceptual discontinuity. As Michaela Ott—following Bergson and Deleuze—explains, affection opens a "*sensual and sensitive space*"—a perceptual interstice understood as "a precondition for the development of a sensual capacity interfering between perception and action."⁹⁷ It is precisely at the moment when perception and action fall out of sync that affection arises.

This perceptual rupture, triggered by the director's interventions, impacts not only the filmed subject but also the inner aesthetic logic of the image. As Ott writes in *Timing of Affect*:

"By undermining and flattening the central perspective of the film image, it presents its ever-changing aesthetic qualities and its flat and tactile character... the film receives an affective coherence and eventually produces an artistic affect which cannot be reduced to the emotion of the filmmaker, nor to that of the viewer."⁹⁸

This artistic affect arises not from a stable narrative object, but from the unstable interplay of visual and auditory elements. In *There Is a Strong Wind in Beijing*, street interviewees often do not answer the posed questions; in some cases, the shot cuts

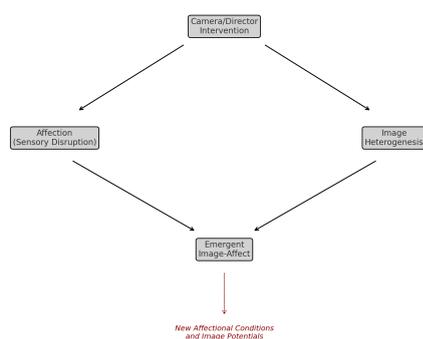
⁹⁷ Michaela Ott, "Aesthetics as Dividual Affections," *Academia.edu*, 2014, https://www.academia.edu/6208453/Aesthetics_as_dividual_affections.

⁹⁸ Michaela Ott, "Dividual Affections," in *Timing of Affect: Epistemologies, Aesthetics, Politics*, ed. Marie-Luise Angerer, Bernd Bösel, and Michaela Ott (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2014), 45.

away before they even speak. Yet their silence, hesitation, and discomfort become the true focal points of visual attention. The shaky camera movements, fragmented dialogues, semantic indeterminacy created by abrupt editing, and the awkward pauses or glances from the subjects constitute what may be termed an image event—not representations of meaning or reality, but moments where affection and image are co-constitutively triggered through sensory disruption..

From this perspective, the film becomes a paradigmatic instance of the image event. The director’s absurd questions act as external triggers that disturb existing social configurations; these disturbances, in turn, not only generate affective intensities but feed back into the structure of the cinematic image, transforming it from within. This process can be modeled as a generative sequence: trigger (Camera/Director Intervention) → Affection (Perceptual disturbance) / Image Heterogenesis → Regenerative Image-Affect (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Affective-Image Event Model in *“There Is a Strong Wind in Beijing”*



In this chain, affection does not function as emotional expression but as a sensory disturbance that displaces the image from its signifying function. It becomes a non-attributable, heterogeneously evolving field of intensity.

Thus, *There Is a Strong Wind in Beijing* not only dismantles narrative logic through a visual strategy of decentralization, but also activates a sensory mechanism of individual affection. I understand this process as a sequence of image-events, in which the image not only intervenes in and observes reality, but also performs an experimental reflection on the ontology of the image and the logic of mediation.

5.1.4 Rethinking Aesthetic Appropriation

In contemporary academic discourse, *There Is a Strong Wind in Beijing* is frequently positioned as a pioneering work in the lineage of Chinese cinéma vérité.¹ This classification largely derives from its formal resonance with the observational techniques of Jean Rouch and others, prompting critics to interpret the film as an instance of “aesthetic appropriation”, specifically through the technical adoption of interview formats and real-time reactions within documentary aesthetics.

Yet we must ask: is it truly sufficient to categorize this work merely as vérité? Such classification risks flattening the complex generative logic of its affective and sensory structure, reducing it to an imitation of Western cinematic traditions. As Michaela Ott argues, in a world shaped by globalization and postcolonial entanglements, contemporary artworks can no longer be neatly explained through national origin, aesthetic lineage, or stylistic frameworks. She writes:

“Aesthetic dividuality thus emerges as an artistically necessary strategy, and as the only process appropriate to our era for all those who live between cultures and seek to join them together in their symbolic statements.”⁹⁹

Ott further elaborates:

“What emerges as contemporary is an art of the supplement and citation, set between different archives, between and among traditions, set in its own invented traditions: colonial and postcolonial, local and global, regional and transnational, diasporic and cosmopolitan spaces.”¹⁰⁰

From this perspective, it becomes clear that *There Is a Strong Wind in Beijing* cannot be fully understood by reference to its formal appropriations alone. To define its value solely through its surface resemblance to cinéma vérité is to overlook the film’s internal logic of affective activation and its deep entanglement with urban and social realities in China.

⁹⁹ Michaela Ott. *Dividualities: Theories of Participation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 235.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid* 236

What truly renders the film compelling is not its replication of Western aesthetics, but the disruptive and performative interventions it enacts within its environment, interventions that trigger events and generate image formations. These images are not products of stylistic imitation, but of perceptual and cultural recomposition. In this sense, the film embodies what Ott defines as aesthetic dividuality: a dynamic, interstitial process that operates amid multiple cultural forces, constantly mutating, generating, and nesting within heterogeneous fields.

Thus, rather than asking “Is this a *vérité* film?” or “Does it successfully appropriate Western aesthetics?”, perhaps we should ask: In a globalized, media-saturated context, do such classificatory frameworks still help us understand contemporary works? Or should we instead approach them as dynamic, dividual, and continuously unfolding cultural events?

5.2 The Red Flag Flies

Since the early 2000s, artist Zhou Hongxiang has been utilizing moving image as a medium for artistic creation. His work *The Red Flag Flies*, completed in 2002, was selected for that year's Venice Film Festival. Critic Cao Kai has regarded this film as a defining reference point for Chinese experimental cinema.¹⁰¹ The film's aesthetic is highly distinctive, marked by a deliberate contraposition between sound and image. Throughout the film, an off-screen voice repeatedly poses questions such as "What is the collective?", "What is a pest?", "What is revolution?", "What is togetherness?", and "What is modernity?", to which a group of young people respond by shouting out political slogans widely used during China's Cultural Revolution. This disjunction between question and answer generates a strong sense of absurdity.

Visually, the film draws heavily on collectivist iconography: red flags, the *Little Red Book*, and extensive use of red backgrounds combined with yellow typographic slogans create a striking and confrontational visual atmosphere. Another key characteristic is the eclectic mixture of symbolic elements—images of the Buddha, Christ, and Mao Zedong, alongside unfinished skyscrapers, film reels, and news footage of the 9/11 attacks are all woven together into the same cinematic space. Notably, Zhou Hongxiang produced three different versions of the film, with running times of 70 minutes, 25 minutes, and 7 minutes, intended respectively for cinema screenings and gallery installations. The film concludes with two open-ended questions: "What is modern art?" and "What is cinema?"

5.2.1 It's a range viewed in face and peaks viewed from the side

In my interview with Zhou Hongxiang, although I had prepared a list of specific questions, the conversation did not unfold according to any predetermined structure. Zhou preferred to understand his creative practice as a continuum rather than a series of discrete works. He emphasized the internal connections between his projects and described his practice as "situated between the spear and the shield."

¹⁰¹ Kai Cao, "First Blood in the South and South of the South: Chinese Experimental Film and Video 2001–2006," *Contemporary Art and Investment*, July 2010, 7–13, 08.

¹⁰²For him, the distinction between “film” and “video” is one that can be flattened; viewers’ interpretations, he argued, need not follow fixed classifications, and even when diverging from his original intentions they remain valid understandings of the work.

Zhou mentioned that one of his recent works had been featured in a festival in Serbia and won an award. Interestingly, the jury statement offered an interpretation that diverged significantly from his original intent. Yet Zhou embraced this divergence, invoking the Chinese proverb “Heng kan cheng ling, ce kan cheng feng” (“It’s a range viewed in face and peaks viewed from the side”)¹⁰³ to express his expectation that a work should generate diverse responses depending on the viewer’s perspective.

In the making of *The Red Flag Flies*, Zhou walked from Shanghai Normal University to the Bund during China’s National Day in 2001, collecting political slogans from across the city. He then invited friends and students to perform these slogans on camera, ensuring that each participant appeared only once in the film—an intentional strategy to avoid the emergence of a central character or protagonist.

Initially conceived as a five-minute short, the project expanded far beyond Zhou’s expectations. As he described it, the process “snowballed”¹⁰⁴ organically, shaped by numerous unforeseen factors. He attributed this to a combination of personal experience and a generational disposition toward idealism: “People of our generation always wanted to hold up a flag, to change the status quo. It might be a kind of Don Quixote spirit—but one that can also be numb and delusional.”¹⁰⁵

This idealism, Zhou noted, gradually evolved into a sense of absurdity within the film—an absurdity not pre-planned but emerging through the montage and juxtaposition of materials. His original intention was to generate a sense of “power” through the careful arrangement of slogans and images, but audience responses often highlighted the film’s absurd quality. Over time, Zhou came to accept this reading as more faithful to the work’s affective reality.

¹⁰² See Appendix II: *Excerpt from Interview with Hongxiang Zhou*.

¹⁰³ “It’s a range viewed in face and peaks viewed from the side” (“Heng kan cheng ling, ce kan cheng feng”) is a line from Su Shi’s Song dynasty poem *On the Wall of West Forest Temple (Ti Xilin Bi)*.

¹⁰⁴ See Appendix II: *Excerpt from Interview with Hongxiang Zhou*.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*

During post-production, the editor repeatedly asked Zhou what type of film this was, but he could not offer a definitive answer. Although he declined to assign the film a fixed genre, the Venice Film Festival, where the film was selected, categorized it as a documentary. In other art contexts, it has been labeled video art. Reflecting on these shifting definitions, Zhou remarked: “Its existence is no longer something for me to define—whether it is a video, or a documentary film. Thus, the existence of a work is, as the Chinese proverb says, ‘It’s a range viewed in face and peaks viewed from the side.’” And he added, “Once a work goes out into the world, it is like a child grown up, facing the world on its own.”¹⁰⁶

In his poem *On the Wall of West Forest Temple (Ti Xilin Bi)*, Su Shi describes the changing and elusive appearance of Mount Lu with the line :

“It’s a range viewed in face and peaks viewed from the side; Assuming
different shapes viewed from far and wide..”¹⁰⁷

The poem expresses an aesthetic of ambiguity, ultimately concluding that “one fails to see the true face of the mountain because one is inside it.” Zhou’s approach echoes this sensibility: he does not impose a singular thesis on *The Red Flag Flies*, but intentionally cedes interpretive authority, allowing the work’s multiplicity to emerge through the viewer’s engagement.

Throughout his production and exhibition practice, Zhou has consistently demonstrated a stance of relinquishing authorial control. He does not attempt to lock in meaning or dictate a singular mode of reception. Instead, he embraces an Eastern epistemology of vision characterized by perspectival multiplicity, allowing diverse interpretations to proliferate. In Zhou’s work, the image is not an object to be consumed, but a resonant field in emergence. This aesthetic attitude closely parallels Peter Zhang’s theory of media ecology and “interality.”

As Zhang notes, “The meaning is not in either line but in the relation between the lines, the interval between them.” It is within this interval that the work gains its echoic depth, becoming a vibrating intermediary of perception. This structure

¹⁰⁶ Ibid

¹⁰⁷ The translation here is by Chinese translator Xu Yuanchong

encourages the artwork to remain unfinished, inviting the viewer to experience, supplement, misread, and reconstruct it anew.¹⁰⁸

Zhang further describes interality as a “generative void”¹⁰⁹—an open passage that exists not in certainty or unity, but between form and formlessness, between the known and the not-yet-known. This affirmation of the “in-between” guarantees the openness of aesthetic structure, the multidirectionality of perception, and the extensibility of cultural grammar. Interality not only provides a novel lens through which to understand practices like Zhou’s, but also serves as a potential nexus linking aesthetics, media studies, non-Western philosophy, and generative art. In an era where the global image ecology is increasingly fragmented, accelerated, and regulated, the aesthetics of interality—through its slowness, resonance, and indeterminacy—offers a quiet yet effective resistance to semantic closure. It lays a foundation for cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural artistic dialogue.

5.2.2 Transcultural Dividual Cinema

Aesthetically, Zhou Hongxiang has acknowledged the influence of Jean-Luc Godard’s *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* on *The Red Flag Flies*. Coming from a background in traditional Chinese ink painting, Zhou was initially unfamiliar with cinematic language and technique. What impressed him most in Godard’s work were its many “non-cinematic” strategies, which left a profound mark on his own early experiments. Techniques such as jump cuts, overtly political visual aesthetics, and collage became the core stylistic features of *The Red Flag Flies*. The film makes use of harsh image flashbacks, Cultural Revolution slogans, low-register voiceover, as well as internet-sourced material, staged scenes, documentary footage, still images, and text—all intercut in a hybrid style that gestures toward both homage to and appropriation of the French New Wave. Upon meeting Zhou, the Venice Film Festival jury even dubbed him “China’s Godard.”¹¹⁰

These aesthetic characteristics, which were relatively rare in early 2000s Chinese film practice, underscore a significant departure from conventional narrative cinema

¹⁰⁸ Zhang, Peter. “Of Interality and Media Ecology.” *China Media Research* 15, no. 4 (2019): 58–68,61.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 59

¹¹⁰ See Appendix II: *Excerpt from Interview with Hongxiang Zhou.*

in China at the time. Their implementation in *The Red Flag Flies* not only marks a personal experimentation with formal innovation but also gestures toward a broader transnational dialogue in moving image culture.

The film constructs its visual landscape through a strategy of inter-contextual collage. By recombining symbols from history and the present, the religious and the secular, and across different cultural registers, it creates a palimpsestic visual landscape where time and culture intertwine. This method closely resembles Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, which reconstructs history through collage and montage rather than linear chronology. In *The Red Flag Flies*, images of Mao Zedong, the Buddha, and Jesus Christ appear side by side, while footage from the 9/11 attacks collides with scenes of contemporary Chinese urban architecture. The film presents history not as a linear narrative based on facts, but as an open text subject to rearrangement and reinterpretation.

From the perspective of Michaela Ott's dividual film aesthetics, the film's collage structure and refusal of a central protagonist constitute not merely a formal disruption within Chinese moving image culture, but a dynamic process of dividual participation—a generative structure in which the film functions as a dividual artefact.

Ott has noted that in contemporary art systems, “everything is available and downloadable at all times and retransmittable,” and that “processes of repetition, appropriation, and targeted adapting to a given context”¹¹¹ have become pervasive. She further observes that “non-Western art practices of the southern hemisphere” possess “outstanding dividual potential,” as they often oscillate between “local cultural traditions and globalised standards,” and are thus compelled toward “culturally composite invention.”¹¹²

Zhou's practice resonates strongly with this diagnosis. *The Red Flag Flies* integrates aesthetic codes of Chinese collectivism, including red flags, slogans, and Cultural Revolution imagery, while actively incorporating Godardian collage, fragments of French theoretical cinema, and global event imagery. Zhou's use of collage no longer functions as a mere stylistic device but emerges from a sensuous logic shaped by the digital environment. Dividual cinema is not about unified narrative or coherent

¹¹¹ Michaela Ott. *Dividuations: Theories of Participation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 230

¹¹² Ibid

personal emotion, but rather the layering, disruption, and recombination of temporalities, signs, and visual systems. In this multidirectional structure, *The Red Flag Flies* defies integration, resisting conventional categorization through its interplay of voice and slogan, image and sound, history and present.

This dividual logic is further manifested in the film's sound design. Throughout *The Red Flag Flies*, the voiceover poses a series of abstract, ideologically saturated questions—"What is revolution?" "What is collectivity?"—which are answered not with reflective responses but through choral recitations of Cultural Revolution-era slogans. The slippage between these mismatched utterances creates not only a parody of political language but also reveals a structural gap between affective perception and ideological scripting.

As Michaela Ott observes, in the context of digital media, "texts, images, films, and musical compositions are accessible in digital archives; they are extracted, remounted, supplemented, elaborated, and rearranged."¹¹³ These processes of recombination, she suggests, generate new trajectories of meaning, "reusing and reinterpreting" the original materials. *The Red Flag Flies* does not aim to represent history in a linear or didactic sense. Rather, it constructs a generative space of aesthetic speculation, visually through collage and aurally through the deliberate disruption of synchronized audiovisual logic.

The film thus initiates what Ott calls a "coherence of heterogeneous participation,"¹¹⁴ wherein subjectivity is no longer conceived as a unified interiority, but as a fragmented, distributed node within a larger media apparatus. As Gilles Deleuze famously predicted: "Individuals become 'dividuals' and masses become samples, data, markets, or 'banks'."¹¹⁵ Zhou's formal decision to allow each performer to appear only once dismantles the protagonist-centered logic of narrative film. Each body becomes a transient mark, a fleeting node in the circulation of images. The juxtaposition of symbols and voices from multiple cultural contexts reinforces this tendency toward decentralization and de-individualization.

¹¹³ Ibid, 231

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 140

¹¹⁵ Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," trans. Martin Joughin, 59 (1992): 3–7.

In this regard, *The Red Flag Flies* also resonates with theories of interality. As Zhang Xianguang suggests, “Interality is the resonant interval between the two and their interaction.”¹¹⁶ In such a structure, meaning arises not from either image or sound alone, but from the disjunctive interaction between them. Zhang further argues that the soul of interality lies in the Chinese conjunction ‘and...and...and...’, emphasizing accumulation, adjacency, and non-closure. The gaps and discrepancies between images, sounds, history, and the present in Zhou Hongxiang’s film are not merely formal juxtapositions, but constitute an affective tension structure that the viewer must traverse and inhabit. This is the essence of interological cinema: non-integration, non-finality, and non-origin, a structure in perpetual becoming.

Zhang develops his interological theory by invoking Deleuze’s famous analogy of the wasp and the orchid—mutually shaping each other in a process of co-evolution—and connects it with the Chinese poetic form *Die Lian Hua* (“Butterfly Loves Flowers”) to critique the illusion of autonomy. He writes that interological thinking “condemns ontology’s obsession with derivation, lineage, and genealogy,” and instead “celebrates alliance, symbiosis, and co-becoming.”¹¹⁷ Zhou Hongxiang’s practice, both in its artistic method and in his statements, exemplifies such an interological filmic aesthetic. His film becomes a loosely structured, emergent field—formed not by a single authorial vision but through the interaction of visual texture, sonic experience, audience reception, and the participation of all involved identities. Its aesthetic form remains indeterminate, its artistic life continuously “activated.” The proverb “It’s a range viewed in face and peaks viewed from the side” is thus not merely poetic—it is an apt description of the film’s dividual and interological vitality.

¹¹⁶ Xianguang Zhang, “Of Interality and Media Ecology,” *China Media Research* 15, no. 4 (2019):58–68, 60.

¹¹⁷ Xianguang Zhang, “Deleuze and Interology,” *Philosophical Analysis* 12, no. 1 (2021):186–195, 188.

5.3 Zhong Su: Cinematic Painting

Since 2013, Zhong Su has continuously produced short animated films, and since 2017 his works have been screened almost annually at the Oberhausen Short Film Festival, with *8:28* winning the main award in 2021. Most of these films are created through 3D technology, maintaining a high degree of consistency in duration, cinematic technique, and aesthetic style. As curator Zhang Haitao observed, while each of these works addresses different themes, they all revolve around history, reality, and memory, and are produced without scripts or pre-planning. At the beginning of production, there are only some vague intentions, allowing the story to gradually emerge during the production process—if it emerges at all—so that each work is treated in a manner similar to documentary filmmaking.¹¹⁸

From *Animal Year* (2016) to *2022* (2022), Zhong's visual language has gradually evolved while consistently preserving allegorical and symbolic characteristics. *Animal Year* situates the twelve zodiac animals in ruins: a collapsed kindergarten, weathered Buddha statues, and abandoned amusement parks together construct a post-apocalyptic landscape. In the film, a rocket marked with "Love Science" and "Made in China," piloted by children, bombards the animals' habitat. As the animals are forced to leap off a cliff, they transform into children during their fall and board the rocket, symbolizing what the director described as the theme of "reincarnation."¹¹⁹ Subsequently, *Sky City* centers on a three-headed, six-armed giant, presenting a "city in the sky" built of chopsticks and plates, where laborers continuously work under its supervision, forming a metaphorical social panorama. Beginning with *Phoenix*, long takes became the central visual strategy, in which a dense assemblage of symbols—currency, political figures, religious motifs, landscape elements, and rabbits—are interwoven into a complex visual network. Most characters appear in rabbit form, extending the symbol of auspiciousness in Chinese culture, while being re-coded into allegorical figures of political symbolism. By *2022*, this aesthetic framework had expanded further, incorporating science-fictional

¹¹⁸ Haitao Zhang, "Experiment Is the Future: A Cross-Disciplinary Archive of Chinese Experimental Animation," *Artda.cn*, April 10, 2022, <https://www.artda.cn/yingxiangdangan-c-12002.html>.

¹¹⁹ The film's profile on Douban Movie describes it as such: "《本命年》(*Animal Year*) is a story about reincarnation." Douban Movie, accessed May 27, 2024, <https://movie.douban.com/subject/26864089/>.

elements within the context of the pandemic, and for the first time experimenting with virtual reality (VR), thereby pushing the technological boundaries of his practice.

Compared with these works, *8:28* stands out most prominently. The film begins with a blood-stained silver statue, then moves to a wall of disordered monitors broadcasting authentic surveillance footage of traffic accidents, overlaid with collaged news reports. What follows is a sequence of unsettling images: dismembered bodies, zombie-like nude figures, desecrated folk deities, and superheroes dancing in a ruined cinema. As the director admitted: “I didn’t anticipate the film would ultimately be so violent.”¹²⁰ Although completed before the pandemic, many viewers interpreted its violent imagery and depictions of bodily disintegration as allegorical premonitions of crisis and lockdown. Through constant accumulation and re-contextualization, these highly fragmented violent images generate complex metaphors of reality, rendering *8:28* one of the most representative works of Zhong’s aesthetic practice.

5.3.1 Improvised Visual Painting

Zhong’s works are almost entirely produced independently; he rejects collaboration, believing it would weaken the force of his films.¹²¹ His creative method does not follow the conventional process of filmmaking, but rather resembles a painterly form of image-making—full of contingency and unpredictability. During production, he frequently incorporates visual elements drawn from personal memory, such as the staircases in *8:28*: “There are many staircases in my hometown of Chongqing, which form a kind of memory.” On the visual level, he repeatedly uses symbols marked by historical and temporal significance: currency, zodiac signs, opera characters, carp, badges, among others. These may be everyday objects, or references drawn from cultural, geographical, religious, and historical dimensions, and sometimes carry hidden associations with contemporary political or social conditions.

Overall, Zhong’s films construct dystopian scenarios, challenges to modern civilization, cyber aesthetics, and fragmented structures, all of which generate a

¹²⁰ See Appendix I: *Excerpt from interview with Zhong Su*.

¹²¹ As mentioned by Zhong Su in Q&A *Huan Ying San Ye Tan* screening in Hangzhou, March 11, 2023

profound sense of disorder. This style was gradually consolidated from *Phoenix* to *2022*: the films intermix visual symbols rooted in Chinese culture with heterogeneous cultural elements, rigid bodily forms, and animal imagery, while being unfolded through long takes that allow scenes and characters to emerge gradually over time. Compared to traditional linear cinematic narration, his works are closer to “improvised visual paintings,” dynamic scrolls created with 3D digital technology, in which the accumulation of images refracts multiple dimensions of reality, culture, and collective experience.

In an interview with the author, he emphasized his improvisational method of creation: : “(My practice) is a very improvised way of working. For a 3D (animation) film this is somewhat strange, or even extravagant, because 3D (generally speaking) demands planning, but I do not plan at all.”¹²² He works without pre-written scripts and admits: “Before the first shot appears, I cannot possibly know what it will look like in the end.”¹²³ This means that the work continuously absorbs accidental events, everyday experiences, and social realities during its making, and its final form often exceeds the artist’s original expectations. *8:28* is a clear example: when viewers at a screening commented on the violence of the film, Zhong responded that he had never anticipated such intensity. This improvisational process ensures that every symbol and narrative trajectory is dynamically generated. His films, therefore, are less like closed stories than scroll paintings in motion, improvised through the flow of digital images.

5.3.2 Regeneration of Images: Dividuation and Interality

In the contemporary Chinese context, where mainstream narrative spaces are often dominated by official narrative, Zhong Su’s films emerge as forms of “private histories.” By perceiving both history and contemporary reality, he transforms fragmented experiences and memories into “original piece,”¹²⁴ which then serve as raw material for his images. Such a visual system not only refracts the present but also traces historical strata through fragments of sound and image.

¹²² See Appendix I: *Excerpt from interview with Zhong Su.*

¹²³ *Ibid*

¹²⁴ *Ibid*

The popularization of digital technology has made single-person filmmaking possible. At first glance, this seems to provide the filmmaker with unprecedented autonomy: without location shooting or production crews, it appears feasible to complete an entire film within virtual environments. Yet the question remains: can Zhong's films really be regarded as "independent" or "individual" works? In his creative process, image generation does not follow a pre-established script or structure, but is open to contingency and the influx of lived experience. Fragments of daily life, subconscious impressions, social realities, and political contexts are all absorbed during production, often pushing the work beyond the director's anticipation. Zhong's improvisational practice reveals that images are not the projection of a single will, but are produced through constant interaction among the director, the images themselves, and the external world of information. Their generative logic thus unfolds as a dividual dynamic: simultaneously shaped by authorial intention, the self-agency of images, and external contingencies.

Yet the creative process is not the sole stage of image generation. If improvisation demonstrates the openness of production, then the circulation, exhibition, and critical discussion of a work more clearly reveal the dividual logic of its regeneration. As Michaela Ott has argued, "the worldwide circulation of artworks at art Biennials and their advertising and multiplying by the media mean that no artistic praxis can be understood as fully independent and individual creation..."¹²⁵ Once films enter systems of exhibition and media visibility, they inevitably become re-contextualized. Zhong's works, in their circulation through film festivals, art exhibitions, and streaming platforms, are continually reinterpreted and reproduced by audiences, curators, and critics.

8:28 provides a vivid example. Although completed before the pandemic, many audiences interpreted its violent imagery and scenes of bodily collapse as allegorical foreshadowings of COVID-19 and lockdowns. Likewise, the reversed footage—unexplained even by the director—was read by some as a metaphor for social regression. Here, meaning extends beyond the artist's control, generated instead through the interplay of spectatorship, circulation, and critical discourse. The film, director, audience, and discursive environment together form a dividual network

¹²⁵ Michaela Ott. *Dividuations: Theories of Participation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 230.

of generation, in which the cinematic work is no longer a fixed object but a continuous process of regeneration.

At this point, it is again crucial to introduce the perspective of interality. Shang Geling defines interality as a “non-substantial existence,” while Zhang Xianguang extends its connotation to relations, evolution, and becoming. Zhong Su’s works precisely embody this ‘relational mode of reality’: their significance lies not only in the internal symbolic structures, but also in the new relations continuously generated through processes of screening, discussion, and critique. In other words, the “unfinishedness” of these works is precisely the manifestation of an interological aesthetics. As Zhang further notes in his discussion of interality, new media, and literature: works “can be made up of numerous fragments and the interality in between, or a single fragment and the interality around it. . . As an indispensable part of a literary work, interality holds in store unlimited virtuality.”¹²⁶ In this framework, Zhong’s films present a dual logic of generation: on the one hand, in creation, contingency and social reality, together with authorial intention and the self-agency of images, constitute the *actuality* of the work; on the other hand, in circulation, the participation of audiences and discursive contexts constantly activates the work’s virtuality, propelling the regeneration of meaning. This virtuality is not merely hypothetical but co-exists with actuality, together composing the open existence of the artwork.

Thus, from the perspective of dividuality, Zhong’s films are not autonomous, closed objects but processes shaped by multiple agencies and media conditions. From the perspective of interality, they appear as non-substantial yet real networks of relations, continually renewed through circulation and re-contextualization. His inscription of “private histories” therefore does not only concern the director’s personal memories and experiences, but also continuously regenerates itself within social circulation and plural interpretation. In this sense, Zhong’s films not only exemplify dividual and interological aesthetics, but also articulate a distinct mode of contemporary Chinese art cinema that resists closure, autonomy, and singular authorship.

¹²⁶ Peter Zhang. "New Media, New Literary Theory, and New Literature from an Interological Horizon", *Signs and Media* 2, 1-2 (2023): 1-22

5.4 Dragonfly Eyes: The World as a Giant Film Studio

The 2017 film *Dragonfly Eyes*, directed by Xu Bing, marks his debut in cinema and stands as a particularly distinctive work. The film utilizes surveillance footage collected between 1999 and 2017 from both public and private domains, as well as materials uploaded to online platforms such as short video-sharing websites. The film features no actors, no cinematographers, and contains no staged scenes. Instead, Xu and his team selected footage based on a fictional narrative thread, re-editing, reordering, and dubbing the materials to construct an entirely fabricated story. This mode of creation not only breaks the boundaries of conventional cinematic production but also provokes critical reflection on the nature of mechanically reproduced images and contemporary visual culture.

5.4.1 The Appropriation of Mechanically Generated Images and Their Vitalization

According to Xu Bing's public remarks, his team spent years downloading and archiving more than 11,000 hours of security camera footage, webcam materials, and other viral videos (such as disaster scenes involving plane crashes or car accidents). Unlike other found-footage films, *Dragonfly Eyes* primarily appropriates surveillance imagery — a type of mechanically and automatically produced visual content. These images are the "residuals" of everyday life, functioning strictly as records or data, and are typically devoid of any subjective or expressive content. Prior to their appropriation, they carry a closed, unquestionable authority derived from their technological origin. Yet, when detached from their original functional context and reinserted into a fictional narrative by an artist, this authority becomes dramatically undermined.

Professor Li Yang interprets *Dragonfly Eyes* as Xu Bing's challenge to the "mindless eye" of the surveillance apparatus.¹²⁷ He regards the appropriation of these images as a resistance to capitalist or popular aesthetic regimes — a way to conquer the lifeless gaze, to "ensoul" inert visuals, and to shatter the unassailable authority of

¹²⁷ Li Yang, "From Image Depriving to Eyes without Brain: *Dragonfly Eyes* in Moving Images Appropriation History," *Contemporary Cinema*, no. 4 (2019): 135–140.

low-resolution, low-agency imagery through narrative reinvention. Xu's artistic strategy lies in transforming these technical images from passive records into emotionally charged agents within an active narrative structure. The source footage, drawn from a wide range of surveillance contexts including roads, temples, dormitories, canteens, dashboard cameras, farms, and private residences, is highly random and lacks inherent coherence. Many clips contain no audio and depict people with no real-world connection to each other.

For instance, three different scenes labeled A, B, and C each depict a man and a woman speaking, yet all feature different persons who have likely never met. Xu's team dubbed voices over these disparate pairs and recontextualized them through editing, assigning specific identities and roles to these strangers — all potentially performing the dialogues of the fictional characters "Dragonfly" and "Kewen." In doing so, Xu redefines these machine-generated fragments, aligning them with narrative and structural needs while breathing vitality into lifeless, replicated images.

5.4.2 A Dynamic and Dialectical Dividual

In an interview with Xu Bing, critic Tang Hongfeng compares the treatment of surveillance material in *Dragonfly Eyes* to Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*, in which diverse images, including artworks, postcards, and press photographs, were arranged on large black panels to create an "iconology of the interval".¹²⁸ In this mode of visual thinking, the meaning of each image is suspended, allowing inter-image relations to come to the fore — much like the logic of cinematic montage.

Dragonfly Eyes adopts a similar approach, suspending the original function and signification of technological imagery and generating new relational meanings through narrative editing. This process places the technical image in a zone of instability and semantic ambiguity: unlike purpose-shot footage, these images lack the visual intentionality to serve narrative seamlessly. As a result, viewers can easily detect the disjunction between the image's referent and its assigned meaning, producing a pronounced sense of estrangement and perceptual dissonance.

¹²⁸ Xu Bing, Li Yang, and Tang Hongfeng, "From Surveillance Video to Film: A Conversation about *Dragonfly Eyes*," *Contemporary Cinema*, no. 4 (2019): 130–134, 131.

Xu Bing has stated that the relationship between the script and the found footage was mutually formative and constrained¹²⁹ — the narrative was altered in response to the material as much as the material was altered for narrative purposes. This recursive misalignment, reordering, and continuous redefinition generate interpretive "misreadings" and polysemous "discrepancies," resulting in a state of ongoing dividing. In this way, the images enter a dynamic process of dividualation and regeneration, forming a bidirectional and continuous intervention model. The original mechanical certainty of the footage becomes progressively destabilized.

From a broader perspective, this dynamic dividualation reveals a fundamental ontology of the artwork as a dividual medium. Especially in the context of gallery cinema, film works are often driven by expressive imperatives and aesthetic inquiry that compel them into perpetual division. The interstices between images, and between image and narrative, become integral to the work's structure, not as mere supplementary gaps but as constitutive elements. These relations form what Shang Geling defines as interality— a non-substantial, relational condition. Thus, might we suggest that the artistic practice of appropriation derives its validity precisely through activating interality? Or even further — that appropriation is in itself an interological mode of artistic expression?

Furthermore, *Dragonfly Eyes* deconstructs the binary opposition of fiction and reality. The film inverts the conventional logic of narrative cinema, where staged fictions simulate reality to gain plausibility. Instead, Xu uses images grounded in reality, the mechanically captured visuals of everyday life, to construct a fictional world. This creates a paradoxical and reversed narrative logic in which real footage generates fictional affect, resulting in a hybrid filmic experience that simultaneously denies and affirms both fictionality and realism.

Each surveillance clip represents a mechanical copy of reality, yet when edited into a narrative through montage, its authenticity is diluted and its referentiality redirected. The recorded temporality of real events becomes a scaffold for the fictional time of the narrative. Surveillance footage thus becomes both a chronicle of societal movement and a thread in a fictionalized plot. The result is an ambiguous mode of

¹²⁹ Ibid, 132

representation that is neither purely real nor entirely fictional and that collapses the boundary between narrative and non-narrative cinema.

The film also incorporates a wide range of materials beyond public surveillance: footage from private businesses, domestic spaces, crowdsourced videos, and livestreams from online influencers all converge in *Dragonfly Eyes*. Public and private domains intermingle within the visual text. As Xu himself remarked, the boundary of what constitutes "surveillance imagery" became increasingly difficult to define over the years-long production process. In fact, many phenomena in the contemporary media environment exceed our inherited conceptual frameworks. The significance of the film thus lies not only in its use of surveillance footage, but in its critical engagement with multiple dualities — reality versus fiction, public versus private, order versus disorder.

5.4.3 The World as a Giant Film Studio

In the forum of 13th Shanghai Biennale(2021), Xu Bing has reiterated the notion that "the world is a giant film studio."¹³⁰ This assertion not only exposes the expansion of public space and erosion of privacy under pervasive surveillance technology but also highlights the theatricalization of everyday life in contemporary society. As intelligent and networked surveillance systems rapidly proliferate, the private realm is increasingly transformed into visual data, available to be observed, circulated, and consumed. The boundary between private and public experience becomes blurred and unstable.

Technological apparatuses and media infrastructures co-produce a society saturated with surveillance and visibility, where daily actions are continuously recorded and observed. Single persons, whether consenting or not, become semiotic and operational units within a visually governed space. As Félix Guattari once predicted, as cited in Gilles Deleuze's "Postscript on the Societies of Control," digital technologies now function as "electronic collars," enabling computers to monitor and regulate singular persons both legally and illegally.

¹³⁰ At the "Allegory of the Contemporary Image" forum of the 13th Shanghai Biennale, Xu Bing remarked: "The world is a giant film studio." Quoted in "Xu Bing Talks *Dragonfly Eyes*: The World Is a Giant Film Set," *The Paper*, June 13, 2021, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_12621436.

That prophecy has become a lived reality. Public and private monitoring systems pervade all aspects of daily life. At the same time, privately-owned recording tools such as dashboard cameras and action cameras (e.g., GoPro) intensify the aestheticization of everyday life. Meanwhile, the rise of livestreaming platforms and influencer economies encourages ordinary persons to voluntarily display their private lives to vast audiences, seeking attention, social capital, and monetary gain. This phenomenon further destabilizes the already tenuous boundaries between the personal and the performative.

Within this social configuration, the narrative arc in *Dragonfly Eyes* wherein the female protagonist undergoes cosmetic surgery to become a livestream celebrity reflects not only a personal identity crisis, but also gestures toward the fading boundary between image and reality. The film maps a world where identity becomes performative and algorithmically curated, and where one's visibility becomes a form of existence.

Narratively, *Dragonfly Eyes* does not derive its power from conventional storytelling. The fictional relationship between the characters “Dragonfly” and “Kewen”¹³¹ is not the true core of the film. Instead, the strength of the work lies in its conceptual and formal handling of visual material. The film retains time stamps on surveillance footage and overlays these with mechanical voice prompts such as “searching” and “identifying,” along with red tracking frames — iconographic elements that foreground the procedural logic of surveillance itself. These symbols serve as a constant reminder of the regulatory presence of data systems and the machinic gaze.

This may indeed be Xu Bing's principal artistic intention: to reveal a new condition of reality, or at the very least, to voice his concern about it. As we live in an increasingly data-driven society governed by advanced digital control mechanisms, privacy becomes a scarce commodity, and data emerges as the primary currency of social organization. Our everyday lives begin to resemble an endless live broadcast — a real-world echo of *The Truman Show*. Within such a framework, the metaphor of the world as a giant film studio ceases to be figurative and becomes instead an accurate description of our time.

¹³¹ Qingting and Kefan are the key characters in the narration of the film *Dragonfly Eyes*

5.5 Liu Guangli: Engine Film, Found Footage, and Media Fusion

5.5.1 *When the Sea Sends Forth a Forest*: Fictional Histories and Virtual Production

When the Sea Sends Forth a Forest (2020) is a short animated film created by Liu Guangli during his residency in France. Distinguished by its reliance on game engine-generated 3D visuals, the film operates as a complex site where digital simulation, historical fragments, and oral testimony intersect.

The project was inspired by Liu's prolonged ethnographic research into Chinese diaspora communities in Cambodia, prompted by a serendipitous encounter with an elderly Chinese-Cambodian refugee. Through this relationship, Liu accessed a suppressed layer of collective memory: the persecution of ethnic Chinese during the Khmer Rouge regime—an event largely marginalized in both official Chinese historiography and broader Sinophone discourse. Liu spent nearly five years building trust with the subject and conducting historical investigations into the migration patterns of Chinese Cambodians, many of whom, despite their geographical displacement, retained strong cultural ties to China. In moments of crisis, however, these loyalties yielded no protection. This paradox of national belonging, expressed poignantly through the absence of state protection, led Liu to reconsider the symbolic act of burning his own passport in an earlier work (*I Am the Other*) and to explore the potential of digital media to mediate histories of displacement.

According to Henry Lowood, machinima refers to the practice of making animated movies in real-time using software developed for computer games.¹³² *When the Sea Sends Forth a Forest* fits squarely within this framework. The film was rendered entirely in Unreal Engine, with 3D assets such as architectural environments and landscapes heavily modified from iconic military simulation games, including *Battlefield*. Liu even developed a system of automated camera movements within the 3D modeling software, approximating the workflows of virtual production now common in the film industry. As defined in Epic Games' *Virtual Production Field Guide*, this technique refers to "a broad term describing a spectrum of computer-aided production and visualization filmmaking methods." While such tools are typically employed in layout design or real-time digital backdrops, as seen in *The*

¹³² Henry Lowood, "High-Performance Play: The Making of Machinima," *Journal of Media Practice* 7, no. 1 (2006): 25–42, 26.

Mandalorian, Liu's practice integrates them into an artist-driven framework, transforming virtual production into a mode of critical historiography.

The film juxtaposes archival footage sourced from the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (INA) with fully computer-generated sequences, establishing a speculative historical space that is both virtual and haunted by memory. Rather than striving for mimetic reconstruction, Liu emphasizes "indeterminacy" as an aesthetic and political condition. His stated aim is not to reproduce history but to interrogate how history is constructed and fictionalized: "I am more interested in how history is fictionalized, and how this fiction in turn shapes our perception of the real." In the film, human figures merge into their digital environments through repetitive gestures, enacting a kind of spectral presence. Their virtual dissolution parallels the effacement of individual agency in grand historical narratives, while videos projected onto jungle foliage signal the residual violence of historical rewriting.

This indeterminacy is also formal. The machinima sequences resist conventional cinematic continuity, instead presenting loosely assembled fragments that reflect the modularity of game design. Virtual camera paths are generated algorithmically, producing a narrative flow that oscillates between cinematic and ludic modalities. Found footage, including archival materials, oral testimony, and ambient sound, enters into a dialectical relationship with simulated environments, generating a layered, ambivalent temporality. These features exemplify what Michaela Ott refers to as *dividuality*: the subject (or in this case, the image) is not unitary or fixed but constituted through disaggregated, exchangeable parts. Liu's visual practice thus produces a "dividual image"—one that hovers between technological automation and artistic intervention, between history and simulation, between the archival and the algorithmic.

5.5.2 *How to Imagine the Unimaginable*: Compendia of Imagination

Co-created by Liu Guangli and Chen Zirui, *How to Imagine the Unimaginable* (2023) is a filmic inquiry into the speculative architectures of visual imagination. Taking the figure of the dinosaur as a point of departure, the artists use artificial intelligence to restore Liu's childhood drawings and to explore how this extinct species has been

visualized, reimagined, and commodified across scientific, artistic, and entertainment domains. As Liu notes in the film: “Archaeologists reconstruct the past through fragments, just as AI diffusion models require textual prompts to imagine.” The project, therefore, frames imagination itself as an epistemological problem—one mediated by technology, narrative, and image-making.

The work mobilizes AI-generated imagery to recreate ancient Chinese textual descriptions of dragons, while also appropriating found materials from American archaeological TV shows, Hollywood films such as *Jurassic Park*, and PC game recordings. This collage approach echoes Xu Bing’s *Dragonfly Eyes* in its strategy of suspending referential certainty through technological mediation. However, whereas Xu relies primarily on surveillance footage, Liu sources a polyphonic array of already-fictionalized media, thereby blurring the boundaries between origin and derivative. *How to Imagine the Unimaginable* functions as a speculative image compendium, an open-ended visual atlas in which disparate materials radiate outward from a thematic nucleus, constructing an extensible and unstable topology of interrelated images.

The film investigates how specific image types circulate across disciplines, including science, art, entertainment, and related fields, and rearticulates their cultural logics. Rather than privileging character or narrative, Liu employs a textual and archival mode of image construction. Visual fragments and audio samples coalesce under the thematic gallery of “Dinosaur”, forming an assemblage that is at once speculative and systematic. Within this context, the film as an artefact resonates with the interological imaginary: one rooted in “the co-existence and continuous becoming of all things in a dynamic flux of life processes.”¹³³

In contrast to *When the Sea Sends Forth a Forest*, which relies on real-time rendering via game engines, this work foregrounds AI image generation as a mode of critique. By juxtaposing algorithmically generated visuals with cinematic excerpts, documentary footage, and gameplay recordings, Liu maps out a visual epistemology that is fundamentally hybrid. The AI, as a co-producer, contributes to a new regime of visual meaning, wherein authorship becomes distributed, and image-making becomes a function of infrastructural entanglement. As Michaela Ott argues, “The

¹³³ Geling Shang, “Jianxing lun cuoyao” [On Interology], *Philosophical Analysis* 6, no. 6 (Dec. 2015), 54–65, 54.

term *dividuation* asks for encompassing dissections of personal and artistic processes and their ways of appropriating and recombining cultural heritages and aesthetic choices to bring about a new and partitioned entities in Glissant's sense."¹³⁴

Importantly, the dividual image in Liu's work departs from Deleuzian models of affect-laden faciality. Rather than deploying close-ups to evoke emotional resonance, the film privileges the aggregation and modulation of visual data. Each fragment functions as a placeholder, a node within a larger discursive network, rather than as an irreplaceable emotional index. The role of the close-up, once central to cinematic affect, is here subsumed into a functional schema, one that privileges taxonomic classification over expressive singularity.

Through such strategies, Liu reconceptualizes the image as a device for cultural critique and theoretical speculation. The dinosaur compendium exemplifies this mode: composed of widely recognizable icons from film and gaming, it repositions these images from their narrative contexts into a reflective framework. Their migration from entertainment to critical discourse marks a shift from representation to reflexivity—from storytelling to epistemology. This mobility underscores both the dividual logic of contemporary media and the interological structure of the image as an open, connective entity.

Where Gilles Deleuze's dividual was grounded in cinema's historical modalities, Sergei Eisenstein, D. W. Griffith, and Italian Neorealism, Liu Guangli's work reflects the contemporary condition of digital media, where hybridization, appropriation, and automation have become the default grammar of image production. In *How to Imagine the Unimaginable*, imagination itself becomes a contested terrain, a site where images no longer narrate but instead accumulate, collide, and resonate within a transmedial ecology. The film does not tell a story; it constructs a system. It does not deliver a vision; it questions the very conditions of envisioning.

¹³⁴ Michaela Ott. Dividual Film Aesthetics. *Philos Int J* 2023, 6(2), 4.

5.6 Lei Lei's Private Imagery

Lei Lei's work is notable for its intimate and personal approach to animation and mixed media. His films often explore themes of memory, history, and identity, employing techniques such as stop-motion animation, collage, and found footage.

The short film *Recycling* is a collaborative project between Lei Lei and French collector Thomas Sauvin, based on the collection and reassembly of discarded photographs. Sauvin salvaged more than 500,000 color negatives from recycling depots around Beijing, spanning from the 1950s to the mid-2000s. These photos, mostly tourist snapshots or family portraits, were scanned, organized, and animated by Lei Lei, who selected about 3,000 of them.

Begins with perforated strips of negatives, numbers, and codes, reminiscent of a train departing, the short film forms a material overture to the work. What follows is a rapid flow of damaged, blurred, and overexposed photographs crossing the screen, foregrounding their deterioration and the fragile memories they carry. As Lei Lei remarked: "Try not to alter the image too much; just create relationships within the work through editing or sound, and thus give the image a new meaning. I think that's more interesting."¹³⁵

By recombining these discarded photos, Lei Lei breathes new life into forgotten images, turning them once again into a medium of art while preserving their original appearance. The film's abundance of tourist and family photos forms a collective image set, creating a sense of a blurred collective identity. Lei Lei intentionally combines similar actions and expressions from different times and identities, linking people from various eras. The personal memories and history behind these images intertwine in this collective. In this assemblage, singular characteristics are smoothed out, merging into a more complex and chaotic collective.

Crucially, his gesture of aligning old photographs with their original sites produces an intersection of memory, history, and the present. Private fragments of memory are re-situated in public space, reactivated in the contemporary context and through the

¹³⁵Zhao Yiping and Jia Shan, "Image, Memory and Experiment: Lei Lei's Animation and Movie Image Creation," *Zhuangshi*, no. 333 (January 2021): 78.

viewer's gaze as new nodes of meaning. Past and present, private and public, memory and reality intersect dynamically.

From the perspective of dividuality, this process demonstrates how subjectivation and meaning emerge not from a stable unity but through acts of collage, re-encoding, and re-contextualization. Ott underscores that, in the digital media context, the very "reversibility of the completed form" renders artistic practices perpetually open to participation, and thus exposed to processes of dividuality.¹³⁶ In *Recycling*, such reversibility is realized through the reanimation of discarded images: once seemingly outdated, they are reopened to new associations and collective engagement.

The photographs, passively inscribed with time's traces of decay, are at the same time actively reanimated by Lei Lei's editing and contextual framing. Their dividual existence resides precisely in this oscillation between passivity and activity, between personal memory and collective history. In this sense, *Recycling* exemplifies dividuality as an aesthetic practice: singular images are decomposed into heterogeneous fragments, recomposed across layers of private memory, social history, and contemporary spectatorship, and assembled into an open constellation of relations in which both artist and audience participate.

Moreover, Lei Lei's rapid sequencing interrupts nostalgic contemplation. The overwhelming velocity of images confronts the past with the immediacy of the present. Old photographs, saturated with familiar gestures and symbols, shift attention away from private recollections toward the montage of an era. This collective assemblage exemplifies an interological image: through juxtaposition and layering, disparate faces and gestures co-exist and co-generate meaning, enabling shared participation and co-evolution between images and viewers.

Through the appropriation and re-creation of discarded photographs, *Recycling* manifests the inescapable dividual logic of contemporary film. Its production process, visual strategies, and treatment of collective identity reflect a deep meditation on the relation between the singular and the collective, extending to the very conception of the artwork as an entity. In this regard, Lei Lei's work—alongside Xu Bing's *Dragonfly*

¹³⁶Michaela Ott, *Dividualities: Theories of Participation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 231.

Eyes and Guangli Liu's engine-based films—reveals a dividual tendency that transcends the boundaries of the artistic entity.

5.7 Cao Fei: Globalized Manufacturing and the Workers' Theater

Cao Fei's short film *Whose Utopia* (2006) stands as one of her most representative works, produced during her artist residency at the Osram light bulb factory in Foshan, China. The film serves as a perceptive sampling of the assembly line of China's burgeoning manufacturing industry. Through a poetic visual language and acute socio-political awareness, the film has become a landmark piece in Chinese contemporary video art, interrogating the entanglements of globalization, identity, labor, and aspiration. Integrating elements of documentary, performance, and theater, *Whose Utopia* constructs a layered and ambivalent textual structure.

Its tripartite structure not only portrays the internal mechanisms of the factory but also initiates a form of "theatrical resistance" performed by workers under the logic of global capitalism.

The first section presents the mechanical rhythm and order of the assembly line—focusing on the processes of bulb production, packaging, inspection—where the ambient soundscape is rendered hollow and estranged, endowing the seemingly mundane labor scenes with an underlying sense of anxiety and suppression. The second section, and the aesthetic climax of the film, depicts workers donning costumes to perform, dance, and role-play as rock stars or mythical figures within the factory space. It constitutes a "theatrical transition," where the factory is temporarily transformed into a stage, and the workers are momentarily liberated from silent

labor. The final part features static portraits: the workers, now back in uniform, face the camera in silence, posing a mute inquiry: “Whose utopia is it?”

This structural progression, moving from reality to fantasy and then returning to reality, functions not only as an aesthetic device but also as a socio-political dialectic. It opens a brief space of utopian imagination amidst the tension between fiction and reality.

5.7.1 Microcosmic Sampling of “Made in China”

In 2005, Cao Fei was invited to participate in a Siemens-sponsored art program and spent six months conducting research and filming at the Osram factory in Foshan, a city in Guangdong province long considered emblematic of China’s “world factory” status since the economic reforms. This specific location was not arbitrary: it represents a localized projection of global capital into the Chinese interior. The factory simultaneously embodies the local and the global; it is both a site of German industrial extension in China and a node within the global chain of labor transfer.¹³⁷

During her residency, Cao Fei filmed both production sites and workers’ dormitories, and distributed questionnaires to investigate workers’ backgrounds and their personal aspirations. As such, *Whose Utopia* becomes more than a video art installation; it emerges as a sociological text addressing China’s reform-era transformations and the West’s labor outsourcing. In early 21st-century China, the mythos of GDP growth carried with it sharp social stratification. Behind the apparent orderliness of transnational enterprises like the Osram factory lies the silence and displacement of countless migrant youth. Cao’s work is a poignant response to this historical shift: a shift that sweeps away innumerable person’s destinies with ruthless force. Through her lens, she preserves a vivid archive of these young lives—simultaneously components of an industrial chain and sentient beings with dreams and agency.

5.7.2 From Assembly Line to Stage of Dreams

¹³⁷ Merlin, Monica. (2018). Cao Fei: Rethinking the global/local discourse. *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, 5(1), 41–60.

The second part of the film, the so-called “Factory Fairytale,” represents a conscious intervention by Cao Fei into the lived reality of the workers. Rather than merely documenting their dreams, she uses theatricality to facilitate their symbolic realization. In one scene, a young man plays the guitar between storage racks; in another, a woman dances gracefully in a peacock costume through the warehouse corridors. These performances are not refined choreographies but resemble the unfulfilled echoes of childhood aspirations.

The cinematic language adapts accordingly, shifting from fixed long takes to soft panning and close-ups, thereby rendering the space more fluid and intimate. The rigid worker-machine relationship temporarily gives way to the fluid singular-dream nexus. This re-coding of space constructs what Merlin terms a “real-topia”— “a place that exists and is reachable, grounded in the possibility of creating a deeper sense of subjectivity and identity through creativity.”¹³⁸

These clips offer more than a visual spectacle—it exposes deeper structural questions: How does one dream in a world where labor is the sole currency of value? The dance is not simply personal expression; it becomes a gentle resistance to labor alienation. Through theatrical intervention, the factory space undergoes a momentary inversion of power dynamics: the workers cease to be passive subjects of surveillance and become active performers of “self”.

The final moments of the film are particularly striking. The workers remove their costumes, return to their uniforms, and gaze silently into the camera. The imagery shifts from motion to stillness, implies fantasy to reality. Each portrait becomes a silent interrogation: “Whose utopia?” This gaze strategy destabilizes the stereotype of migrant laborers as anonymous bodies, re-embedding them into the frame as sovereign subjects. Their momentary appearance grants them a collective visibility that challenges their usual erasure. This juxtaposition of static portraits and dynamic labor completes the film’s metamorphosis from narrative cinema to interrogative image.

Curator Hou Hanru once remarked that Cao Fei “reconstructed a temporary new social order — a temporary utopia.”¹³⁹ Within this temporary space, each worker

¹³⁸ Ibid, 54

¹³⁹ Hou Hanru, “Private Politics: On Cao Fei’s Works,” *Art Literature*, no. 2 (2013): 28–31, 30.

momentarily assumes the role of an artist—this “appearance” itself becomes a strategy of visibility. Yet once the lights dim, the workers return to their roles on the assembly line, and the fleeting journey of collective dreaming quietly dissolves.

5.7.3 Dividual Theater and Social Intervention

From the theoretical framework of the dividual, the workers in *Whose Utopia* are not fully autonomous decision makers. Rather, they are persistently fragmented, shaped, and reconstructed by the structures of global capitalist industry. Their dreams do not originate from an unmediated personal will, but instead reflect aspirational gestures formulated in response to structural constraints. The title “Factory Fairytale” itself suggests this mediated, idealized coping mechanism. Although these dreams are expressed with apparent agency, they remain bound by the spatial and economic limitations of the factory, a reality that persists despite the aesthetic liberation momentarily granted through performance.

Within this context, the dream performances in *Whose Utopia* are exemplary of dividual subjectivation: a state wherein the subject emerges not as a coherent unity but as a temporary configuration formed through intersecting vectors of capital, production, and desire.

Aesthetically, the film constructs a “temporary stage” that renders the image space fluid, dynamic, and open-ended. Within this space, the binary oppositions of documentary versus fiction, labor versus dream, mechanized repetition versus personalized expression, all begin to blur. The industrial factory becomes a performative site, a backdrop for re-imagining the subject. This transformation reveals a deeply embedded dividual logic: the actual production space and the dream performance are overlaid temporarily—intertwined, yet constantly in tension.

From the perspective of interality, the film also foregrounds its hybrid mediality. *Whose Utopia* synthesizes documentary methods, ethnographic inquiry, performance art, and critical media discourse into a complex intermedial field. Though categorized as a “video,” the work employs cinematic language and theatrical construction, resulting in an interological image field that transcends any

single medium or genre. The film is not a closed entity but a dynamic, contingent site produced through overlapping media technologies and social discourses.

Whose Utopia is a parable of its time and a prime example of cinematic social intervention. Within the bounded space of the factory, Cao Fei revives poetic subjectivity and exposes the absurdities of late capitalism. It is a work of tenderness and critique, form and philosophy. Without prescribing solutions, it deploys strategies of theatricality, participation, poetics, and political aesthetics to prompt renewed reflection on the single person's place, dream, and voice in the global manufacturing order. Rather than constructing a utopia within the factory, Cao Fei builds a dividual site that is provisional yet transformative within the very fabric of reality.

5.8 Conclusion

This concluding section synthesizes the preceding case analyses in order to situate them within broader debates on aesthetics, subjectivation, and circulation. By bringing together the technical, cultural, and philosophical frameworks identified in the earlier chapters, it demonstrates how the concepts of dividuality and interality can illuminate both the internal logic of Chinese artist films and their entanglement with globalized film ecologies. The following subsections highlight four interrelated tendencies—shifts in subjectivation and authorship, strategies of appropriation and collage, asymmetrical globalization, and the emergence of dividual and interological aesthetics—before reflecting on the implications of these tendencies for the future of moving-image practice and theory.

5.8.1 From “Independent Film” to “Artist’s Film”: A Turn in Subjectivation and Aesthetics

This chapter has reviewed several exemplary cases of Chinese contemporary arthouse cinema since the turn of the millennium, through which we can discern a significant shift: the increasing involvement of visual artists in filmmaking, and the diversification of moving image aesthetics in a digital context. This signals a broader tendency toward dividuality in contemporary Chinese film practice. Alongside technological advancements, many artists are no longer reliant on the professional studio system but instead opt for solo authorship or small-scale, non-industrial collaboration. These practitioners often lack formal cinematic training and bypass traditional production pipelines, bringing instead their experience in visual or fine arts into the realm of cinema and forming a highly heterogeneous aesthetic ecology.

This is not merely a change in production methods or authorship, but a fundamental ontological reconfiguration of subjectivation within film practice. This shift is also reflected in the expanded media strategies employed: photography, painting, animation, video, documentary installation, and other non-traditional cinematic forms blur the boundary between film and other art practices. Approaching these creators not as “directors” but rather as “image-makers” invites us to rethink the aesthetic paradigms of cinema itself.

Such an aesthetic shift is evident across works that differ in form yet share key traits, ranging from Ju Anqi's *There is a Strong Wind in Beijing* to Xu Bing's *Dragonfly Eyes*, from Cao Fei's *Whose Utopia* to Liu Guangli's *When the Sea Sends Forth a Forest*. These films weaken or reorganize narrative structures, intervene in history and contemporary society, adopt cross-media languages, and deploy visual collage and intercultural appropriation. As Dong Bingfeng has noted, these film-based artistic expressions constitute a "third cinema"¹⁴⁰—not only engaging in formal experimentation but embedding themselves deeply in the realities of economic, social, and political life, functioning as unique tools of social intervention.

5.8.2 Appropriation and Collage: From Technical Image to Visual Resource Strategy

In these works, "appropriation" is not merely a stylistic device but a habitual creative mechanism. What is appropriated is not limited to images or texts, but also includes the reproduction of cultural meanings. *There is a Strong Wind in Beijing* adopts a cinéma vérité-like logic of image-based intervention; *The Red Flag Flies* draws on Godardian cinematic grammar; *Dragonfly Eyes* is entirely constructed from public and private surveillance footage; and Liu Guangli's work pushes even further by remixing video game assets, archival films, Hollywood blockbusters, and AI-generated imagery, thus expanding the boundaries of media appropriation.

This post production relayed mode of creation is made possible by digital technology and reflects artists' heightened sensitivity to the autonomy and re-codability of moving images. In an age where "accessibility" defines the generation of visual resources, any material can become a "component,"¹⁴¹ subject to manipulation, recombination, and re-contextualization. These works exemplify a post-digital aesthetic in which cinematic imagery shifts from being "photographic" to "curatorial." They abandon traditional industrial logic in favor of reassembling cultural materials and media signs through artistic methodologies, positioning cinema as a dividuated, mobile entity. In this context, appropriation gains a new aesthetic legitimacy,

¹⁴⁰Looking Through Film: Traces of Cinema and Self Constructs in Contemporary Art (New Star Press, 2010) Dong, Bingfeng, 8.

¹⁴¹Interview with Zhong Su by Zhichao Zhu, Yujue Liang, via Zoom, Hamburg, January 7, 2023.

becoming a key strategy for understanding the relation between contemporary image generation and dividual logic.

Another defining aesthetic of contemporary Chinese artist films is image collage and visual arrangement. *How to Imagine the Unimaginable* is a case in point: weaving together game assets, archival footage, cinematic fragments, and AI-generated images, it builds a dynamic database of the iconography of dinosaurs, transforming the film into a relational assemblage of images—what I propose to call an “interological image.” The work eschews linear narrative in favor of constructing conceptual associations through visual relations and dividual structures. The “functional substitution” of images is central here: meaning is no longer anchored in fixed referents but generated through ephemeral, context-dependent juxtapositions. Images become semantic “triggers” rather than vessels.

5.8.3 Globalization, Cultural Influence, and Asymmetrical Participation

At the same time, Chinese artist’s film practices are deeply entangled with the evolving relationship between local society and global cultural systems. Within the context of globalization, many works draw heavily from traditions such as the French New Wave and avant-garde. Western contemporary art education, exemplified by institutions such as Le Fresnoy, has also played a crucial role in shaping and transforming Chinese artists’ creative trajectories. Through this, artists have accessed a diverse array of aesthetic and theoretical resources, enriching the evolution of Chinese moving image practice.

However, this intercultural exchange is far from symmetrical or equitable. The global cultural economy continues to be structured around a Eurocentric knowledge system in which non-Western traditions—especially Chinese local aesthetics and epistemologies—are often marginalized or misinterpreted. Western-dominated narratives of global contemporary expression tend to frame themselves as universal while implicitly re-coding other cultural forms.

Thus, when we speak of “global film aesthetics,” we must acknowledge that the process is not one of open and egalitarian cultural fusion, but one deeply embedded

in power asymmetries, historical inequality, and resource distribution. As Ott has noted, the construction of a so-called “world society” is inherently unequal and structurally imbalanced.¹⁴² Participation in globalization does not guarantee equal visibility or discursive agency—an asymmetry that also manifests in the transnational circulation of film aesthetics.

This prompts us to ask: When Chinese artist films are exhibited on international platforms, do they risk being appropriated as displays of cultural others¹⁴³? Are these works merely consumed for their “difference”? And is it possible to construct narrative autonomy grounded in indigenous aesthetic logics without capitulating to Western paradigms? Put differently: how might we envision a form of aesthetic co-governance that fosters equality, balance, and decolonial critique within the global cultural arena?

This is precisely where the analytical value of “dividuation” and “interality” lies. These conceptual tools not only help us map the internal logic of image-making practices but also suggest possible theoretical pathways that resonate with both Eastern and Western thought. They offer a non-binary, relational framework for reimagining how moving images are produced, circulated, and understood.

5.8.4 Dividuation and a living system

One of the most prominent tendencies in contemporary Chinese artist films is a fundamental restructuring of the narrative paradigms and subjectivation practices dominant in the 1990s and earlier. This restructuring is evident not only in the diversity of visual languages but also in the ontological transformation of the relationship between image and reality. Works such as Xu Bing’s *Dragonfly Eyes*, Lei Lei’s *Recycled*, and Zhong Su’s *8:28* collectively expose what may be termed dividual image: in these films, images no longer serve narrative continuity, character development, or a unified authorial vision. Instead, they function as heterogeneous, fragmentary, and interchangeable audiovisual units. This “fragmentation” is not a

¹⁴² Ott, *Dividuations*

¹⁴³ The term comes directly from the book *Cultural Otherness* by Chinese scholar Wang Xiaode, which mainly examines the history of anti-Americanism in Europe. It is used here mainly out of concern for being alienated as “Orientalism.”

flaw but a strategic construction that reflects the form of contemporary information systems and media ecologies.

Within this context, dividuation can be understood as a critical response to the unified modern subjectivation practice. Traditional cinematic subjects are typically built upon a coherent narrative logic and psychological continuity, whereas the subjects in these artist films emerge as dynamic entities, constantly fractured and reassembled through images, contexts, backgrounds, and viewer experiences. This logic is particularly evident in *Dragonfly Eyes*, where the “characters” are assembled from anonymous faces across different times, spaces, and identities, forming “anthropomorphic fragments.” Here, the image becomes a nodal point of multiple references, with its meaning constructed by viewers within a disordered, de-centered narrative structure.

In this process, “character” is no longer the narrative core, but rather a functional component of the collage mechanism. Emotional depth, motivation, and even storylines cease to be the film’s principal content. Instead, the film constructs a conceptual field and its “real-world correlates,” which together form the body of the work through the viewer’s participatory and coordinative subjectivization.

A similar structure can be found in Lei Lei’s *Recycled*, which arranges and edits a large number of portraits of anonymous individuals into a rhythmic visual network. Without providing any contextual background, the film constructs a purely visual relational space. The encounter between these faces does not occur within a traditional narrative frame but is generated through juxtaposition and sequencing—a “potential connectivity” that is accidental and unscripted by the author, yet acquires meaning through the viewer’s cognitive engagement. This bottom-up meaning-production process exemplifies the practice of dividual aesthetics, in which subjectivity is not a stable presence but is activated, decomposed, and provisionally assembled in the image-space as a diffuse, open, and boundaryless body.

Closely linked to dividuation is the increasing salience of interality in artist films. Interality denotes a non-substantial, coexistent state of multiple relations. The concept originates from Eastern philosophical traditions that emphasize interpenetration, mutual becoming, and the unity of all things. In the context of

contemporary arthouse film, interality expresses an emergent non-substantial relation—between the aesthetic and visual composition of the work, and between the artwork, its viewers, media platforms, and cultural discourses.

Zhong Su's *8:28* provides a compelling illustration of this “interological image” mechanism. The film embeds real-life footage of traffic accidents into an artistically constructed cybernetic space, producing a visual field where reality and fiction coexist. The image ceases to be a mere indexical representation of the real and instead becomes the product of context, intention, algorithmic logic, and viewer perception. In this construction, the focus shifts from the image's intrinsic meaning to the ideas and associations generated through its relations with other audiovisual elements and cultural or real-world contexts.

Another key dimension of interality is the interaction between the work and its viewers, critics, and other “third parties.” For instance, *Dragonfly Eyes* has been screened at film festivals and art museums and uploaded to platforms like YouTube, discussed by scholars in museums, universities and in books where every act of viewing, commenting, sharing, re-editing, or quoting becomes a new contextual link. In this way, the film transforms from a closed authorial system into an open vehicle for cultural communication. These “subsequent actions” are themselves interological engagements: the viewer is no longer merely a decoder but becomes a “co-creator” in the chain of meaning production. These actions establish interological presences between the film, its audience, critics, scholars and other third parties—forming an expansive cognitive environment around the work, what Zhang Xianguang calls “the interological mind.” In other words, the open structure of artist films renders them dynamic fields of cognitive movement, whose boundaries lie not in their visual form but in the ever-expanding contextual web generated by viewing, dissemination, and discourse.

In the digital age, image production, dissemination, and reuse occur at unprecedented speeds. Any image, style, or theoretical idea can be arbitrarily retrieved and inserted into new narratives or constructions. The artist no longer acts as a sole “creator” but more as a “curator” or “dispatcher,” engaging in selection, sampling, and grafting through appropriation, collage, and reality-based interventions. This practice aligns closely with the logics of dividuation and interality:

the artwork ceases to be a unified, self-contained product and becomes a dividual and interological body composed of heterogeneous elements—an open, negotiable, and extensible “living system.”

5.8.5 Rethinking Moving Image Subjectivation and Future Perspectives

The concepts of *dividuation* and *interality*, originating from distinct philosophical traditions, have proven to be surprisingly generative when applied to contemporary Chinese artist film practices. These frameworks not only prompt us to reconsider how we understand cinematic artworks but also raise fundamental questions about how artists conceptualize the subjectivity of their work. The notion proposed by Zhou Hongxiang—“It’s a range viewed in face and peaks viewed from the side” (héng kàn chéng líng cè chéng fēng, 横看成岭侧成峰)¹⁴⁴—embodies a form of perspectival mobility that emphasizes the multiplicity of observation and the coexistence of divergent interpretations. This approach rejects the quest for singular meaning and instead affirms the necessity of navigating between multiple potentialities and coexisting perspectives.

In the context of artist film, Zhou’s idea resonates deeply with both *dividuation* and *interality*. As contemporary practitioners, what we often construct is no longer a self-contained “work,” but rather a “relational field” composed of the body of the work and its entanglements with various contexts, histories, viewpoints, and critical discourses. This field is not defined by aesthetic unity or narrative cohesion but by its capacity to accommodate multiplicity and facilitate exchange. It functions as a stage for dialogical convergence—a site where heterogeneous forms, meanings, and intentions coexist and evolve.

From this perspective, *dividuation* and *interality* are not merely interpretive frameworks but also operative strategies for artistic engagement in a globalized, technologically mediated, and socially fragmented world. These concepts foreground a shift from fixed subjectivity toward processual becoming, from aesthetic closure to epistemic openness, and from artistic autonomy to relational interdependence. They

¹⁴⁴ “Title on the Wall of the West Forest” is a poem composed by the Northern Song dynasty literati Su Shi, which depicts his observations and reflections during a visit to the Xilin Academy. This poem, characterized by Su Shi’s distinctive style, praises the beauty of natural scenery while contemplating the profound aspects of life.

offer critical tools for analyzing how images are produced, circulated, and recontextualized in the age of digital and post-digital media, and how these processes reconfigure the dynamics of authorship, meaning, and reception.

More importantly, grounded in both Eastern and Western critical traditions, this dual perspective encourages a more sensitive and reflexive response to the rapidly evolving, heterogeneous, and generative nature of contemporary image culture. Rather than seeking to resolve contradictions, it invites us to reside within them, recognizing that filmic practice today is not a singular act of creation but a constellation of negotiations across media, histories, ideologies, and publics.

Dividuation and *interality* enable a reimagination of the cinematic field—not as an enclosed space bounded by industrial cinema conventions or medium-specific constraints, but as a flowing network of contingent meanings and aesthetic configurations. In doing so, they contribute to the theoretical-artistic renewal of film and media studies and offer a forward-looking framework for navigating the future of Moving image art in a ever-changing world.

6. Reflections on the Practice of Contemporary Chinese Artist Films

“Tiāndì yǔ wǒ bìng shēng, wànwù yǔ wǒ wéi yī.”¹⁴⁵

“Heaven and earth coexist with me, and all things are one with me.”

Zhuangzi's perspective in *The Adjustment of Controversies* (*Zhuangzi: Qi Wu Lun*) illuminates the dialectical relationship between the self and the whole: human beings are not isolated entities but integral parts of heaven and earth, with subjectivity characterized by fluidity and interconnectivity. Daoist philosophy emphasizes the "interality" in between humans and nature, singles and communities, as well as objects and objects. This relationality forms the foundation of existence itself.

Since the early 2000s, the practice of Chinese art house films has emerged as a distinctive domain at the intersection of contemporary art and cinema. This hybrid field exhibits notable decentralization and openness in its use of media language, narrative strategies, and conceptual expressions. Such practices resonate deeply with the complexities of contemporary society and cultural tensions, becoming vital artistic engagements with local realities and global contexts. Adopting the perspective of "dividuality," this dissertation reexamines artist-made films created after the millennium, exploring how their modes of production and aesthetic paradigms diverge from traditional filmmaking, while revealing their current state of subjectivation and dynamic developmental trajectories.

In the course of this study, the concept of interality emerges as a compelling lens for interpreting the practice of contemporary art house films. Inspired by Chinese classical philosophy and artistic traditions, certain filmmakers integrate Daoist principles and the aesthetics of traditional Chinese landscape art into their creations. This synthesis results in a culturally resonant visual language and philosophical expression. It is worth further reflection: in the context of digital technology and media innovation, the seemingly disparate concepts of dividuality (originating from

¹⁴⁵ *Zhuangzi*, Inner Chapters, "Qi Wu Lun" (The Equalizing Assessment of Things)

Western cultural frameworks) and interality (rooted in Eastern traditions) display striking coherence and synergy in practice.

As Zhuangzi remarked, "Heaven and I were born together, and all things and I are one." At a philosophical level, art house films realign with a core proposition of Eastern thought: that all things are not indivisible and independent entities but rather crystallizations of multifaceted relationships generated within the Dao. This principle manifests in artist films through audiovisual practices that prioritize dynamic over static relationships, allowing works, creators, and audiences to co-create meaning in open interaction. Such dynamism challenges the modern notion of the "autonomous individual" while inspiring us to reconsider the multiple possibilities of subjectivity under new media and social conditions.

Through processes of differentiation and emergence, art house films extend the boundaries of moving-image life. They emphasize the generative nature of subjectivity within multilayered relationships and its co-evolution with present or absent interlocutors. This relational, interality-based artistic practice not only fosters innovation in the language of cinema but also provides new frameworks for understanding the relationships between contemporary art and film, persons and the world, and local and global contexts. This dynamic symbiosis and co-generation echo Zhuangzi's vision of interconnectedness and fluid subjectivity, opening broader intellectual and practical horizons for contemporary art house cinema.

6.1 Dividuation, Interality and the "Expansive Self": Dynamic Subjectivity and Decentralized Aesthetic Expression in Chinese Art House Cinema

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, Chinese moving-image practices have undergone profound transformations, shaped not only by technological innovation but also by shifting institutional frameworks and cultural discourses. Within this milieu, the emergence of artist-led cinema has become a distinctive field at the intersection of contemporary art and film, marked by hybrid production modes and experimental aesthetic strategies. Rather than situating themselves within the conventional paradigms of either commercial cinema or documentary, these works foreground an expanded notion of authorship and spectatorship that destabilizes traditional categories of film. In this context, the conceptual frameworks of dividuation and interality provide complementary lenses for interrogating the subjectivation and aesthetic logics of contemporary Chinese art-house cinema. While dividuation underscores the heterogeneous interplay of active and passive agencies, cultural hybridity, and metastable states, interality foregrounds the generative “in-betweenness” that arises within relations, particularly the processes of co-emergence and mutual evolution among multiple agents. In particular, it stresses the symbiotic co-evolution through which relations themselves become generative. Taken together, these perspectives allow us to reconsider how cinematic subjectivation unfolds in decentralized, non-linear, and multi-perspectival ways—thereby reframing Chinese cinema as a dynamic site of aesthetic and epistemic negotiation rather than a closed corpus of fixed works.

Works such as Xu Bing’s *Dragonfly Eyes*, which incorporates surveillance footage, Lei Lei’s *Recycled*, assembled from discarded family photographs, and Liu Guangli’s *How to Imagine the Unimaginable*, featuring appropriated and generated images of dinosaurs, exemplify this paradigmatic reorientation. In these films, the referential or intentional horizon of the image is neither erased nor simply preserved, but rather displaced into a field of latent potentialities. The image no longer functions as the bearer of a determinate meaning but as a node within a network of heterogeneous associations that can be reactivated and reconfigured in the encounter with the viewer. Consequently, the artefacts resist closure: Rather than

existing as completed works; they become “ongoing events”—dynamic entities that are continuously constructed, decomposed, and reconstituted through acts of perception, interpretation, and circulation. Such films are less stable texts than generative sites of becoming, foregrounding the indeterminacy of meaning and the participatory dynamics of spectatorship.

This dynamic nature is intrinsically bound to the logic of dividuality. Freed from the classical aesthetic paradigm that privileges the authorial intention or the stability of signification, these cinematic practices reconfigure the filmic text as an open field of relational encounters. Much like the *rhizomatic* writing approach described in *A Thousand Plateaus*, the decentralized aesthetic of dividual cinema rejects singular, linear narratives, replacing them with open-ended, non-linear networks of interconnections. Within such a framework, images, symbols, and fragments no longer secure meaning through linear succession but through contingent assemblages, constantly shifting in their associative constellations.

At the same time, the lens of interality accentuates how these assemblages are not merely fragmented but relationally sustained: significance arises less from their isolation than from the generative “in-between” that connects filmic elements with audiences, institutions, and cultural milieus. This decentralized aesthetic is particularly evident in contemporary Chinese artist film, where indeterminacy is not a byproduct but a constitutive condition of form. Here, the cinematic text operates as a heterogeneous assemblage, whose significance emerges through its entanglement with extra-filmic agencies—spectators, curators, critics, and media platforms. Meaning thus becomes co-produced across multiple subject-positions, undermining the autonomy of both the author and the text. In this sense, the dividual logic situates the film less as a completed artifact than as a relational apparatus sustained by the “in-betweenness” of interality, activating multiple interpretive trajectories.

From the perspective of dividuality, the cinematic “self” can no longer be conceptualized as a bounded, autonomous entity, but as an expansive and relational configuration— a provisional field of connections, always open to reconfiguration. This view resonates with the Buddhist doctrine of Anātman (“non-self”)¹⁴⁶, which

¹⁴⁶ The *Saṃyutta Nikāya* articulates the Buddhist doctrine of anattā (non-self), stating: “This form is neither self-made nor made by another; it arises through conditions, and when those conditions cease, it ceases as well.” This perspective posits that all phenomena in the world do not originate independently but are instead aggregates of various elements. These aggregates are

teaches that phenomena arise through the interdependence of conditions (pratītyasamutpāda). Complementing this, the concept of interality, rooted in Daoist thought, underscores a logic of co-emergence and symbiotic becoming through which persons, images, and worlds unfold together. Taken together, these frameworks do not negate subjectivity but reframe it as a dynamic process of becoming-with, pointing toward a dynamic harmony with one's milieu.

In the practice of contemporary artist films, this “non-self” logic materializes as the dismantling of author-centered narration and cinematic unity. Traditional narrative authority gives way to fragmentary assemblages of images and sounds, whose significance is not fixed but emerges contingently through shifting contexts. Similarly, the crossing of media boundaries between film, video art, installation, animation, and digital recomposition constitutes a further dissolution of categorical limits. Instead of obsessing over the precision and closure of representation, these works affirm openness, indeterminacy, and incompleteness as productive aesthetic strategies. They thereby exemplify a dividual mode of subjectivation: one in which the “self” of the film is ceaselessly fractured, reconfigured, and cultivated within a spatiotemporal field woven by relations.

For instance, Xu Bing's *Dragonfly Eyes* exemplifies this dividual mode of subjectivation. The film's use of surveillance footage—edited, reassembled, and re-dubbed—foregrounds the provisional relations among heterogeneous fragments. Its significance does not reside in any single component but arises through their contingent entanglements. In this way, the work destabilizes cinema's identity as a closed narrative text and demonstrates how subjectivity is generated through the ongoing interplay of images, media, and contexts. From the perspective of interality, moreover, the film's openness lies precisely in this generative relationality, whereby meaning emerges through its entwinement with viewers, institutions, and broader realities.

Furthermore, in the process of viewing, audiences inevitably engage with the provisional “narrative” constructed from surveillance fragments without necessarily adopting the filmmaker's perspectives or intentions. Their interpretations and

not fixed, immutable, or singular entities; rather, they are momentary manifestations arising and ceasing in dependence on specific conditions.

affective responses act as co-creative forces, amplifying the generative indeterminacy of the work. Subjectivation here unfolds as a distributed practice, continually reconfigured through the interplay of film, audience, and context. In this sense, the cinematic text becomes a living assemblage, expanding through ongoing relational encounters.

In Zhong Su's short films, traditional, political, and consumerist symbols are placed within dystopian virtual environments. Rather than serving as vehicles of causal narration, these symbols accumulate on the image surface in dense, heterogeneous constellations. As a result, the subjectivity of the image no longer rests on linear storytelling but unfolds through open combinations that resist fixed interpretation. Here, dividuality is enacted through the interpenetration and redistribution of symbolic registers, while interality appears in the contingent relations that emerge among these visual layers, audiences, and extra-filmic contexts. Such works take shape less as closed narratives than as "image installations," characterized by aesthetic decentralization and a continual play of generative possibilities across media, cultural, and social dimensions.

These images cannot be subsumed under a fixed genre or aesthetic trait. As Michaela Ott argues in her reflections on dividual aesthetics, attempts to rigidly define what counts as a "dividual work" risk reintroducing universal norms.¹⁴⁷ Rather than establishing new taxonomies, the task is to attend to shifting cultural and aesthetic intersections and to reconsider our evaluative frameworks in light of their openness and contingency.

In this light, dividuality and interality offer complementary lenses for understanding contemporary Chinese artist films. These concepts illuminate how cinematic works unfold as relational processes: fragmentary yet generative, contingent yet connective. What ultimately emerges is not a closed structure but an expansive configuration that continually extends and reshapes itself across production, circulation, and reception. From this perspective, one might cautiously describe the film as more than a static text—as a body of relations, a living constellation that grows through the interplay of its inner heterogeneities and its encounters with spectators, media and the wider world.

¹⁴⁷ Michaela Ott. *Dividual Film Aesthetics*. *Philos Int J* 2023, 6(2), 6

6.2 Artist Films as Archives of Contemporary Chinese Society

In 2011, Zhang Yaxuan wrote an article titled *Images as Evidence* for the 5th Yunnan Multicultural Festival, analyzing several documentary works and emphasizing how they collectively constructed a “visual archive” of the era, thus becoming an important form of cultural heritage. Zhang’s notion of “images as evidence” highlights how moving images can operate as repositories of historical memory, especially for realities often overlooked in official narratives. Building on this idea, contemporary Chinese artist films may also be understood as evolving archives, though they achieve this not through direct documentation but through experimental aesthetic strategies that refract reality in fragmentary and allegorical ways.

Today, however, Chinese cinema faces unprecedented challenges. The post-pandemic economic downturn, the shrinking art market, and increasingly restrictive political environments have together created an atmosphere of precarity. Financial instability combines with tightened controls over themes and dissemination, further constraining the space for independent creation. Yet precisely under these external pressures, the practices of artist filmmakers become socially significant. Their works not only articulate distinctive perspectives on contemporary society but also preserve the textures of social and cultural life in the form of visual records—what might be described as a “living archive” of the present.

Unlike independent documentaries, artist films do not focus their lenses directly on specific groups or events. Instead, they embed fragments of contemporary realities into aesthetic constructions through processes of perception, appropriation, and reconfiguration. As Hal Foster observes of contemporary art, “archival artists seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present. To this end they elaborate on the found image, object, and text”¹⁴⁸. Many artist films operate in a comparable manner: by reassembling images, symbols, and sounds, they generate archives that are at once factual and fictive, private and public, found yet constructed. In this sense, their archival dimension is inseparable from aesthetic invention.

¹⁴⁸ Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 4.

The archival function of these films can be seen in a range of practices. Ju Anqi's *There's a Strong Wind in Beijing* (1999) offers provocative urban portraits at the end of the twentieth century, capturing diverse voices and everyday struggles while preserving a snapshot of the city's shifting social atmosphere." Xu Bing's *Dragonfly Eyes* (2017) transforms surveillance footage into a meditation on technology and personal destiny, showing how the most banal visual data can become an archive of contemporary society. Zhou Hongxiang's *Red Flag Flies* (2002) employs overtly political audiovisual symbols—flags, emblems, and slogans—to reveal ideological conflicts in the early twenty-first century, reframing them through a conceptual aesthetic that highlights the tensions between collectivist discourses and liberal undercurrents. Together, these films accumulate fragments of the social field, presenting them as aesthetic constellations that simultaneously document and critique.

In contrast to conventional documentary, the archival role of artist films is often implicit and dispersed. They do not offer straightforward chronicles but fractured archives that expose gaps in historical memory, power discourses, and modernization processes. Their significance lies not in factual recording but in creating spaces of reflection and contestation. As Foster remarks, "the work in question is archival since it not only draws on informal archives but produces them as well, and does so in a way that underscores the nature of all archival materials as found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private"¹⁴⁹. Artist films thus extend beyond mere representation to become "counter-archives" that destabilize dominant narratives and aesthetic authorities.

By weaving historical memory, personal experience, and social issues into complex visual languages, artist films transcend their formal boundaries to become evolving cultural archives and points of intellectual engagement. As archives, they do not present a unified and stable whole but are composed of fragments that are continually dismantled and reconfigured through circulation and re-contextualization—an operation that resonates with *dividuation*. At the same time, their significance does not lie in a self-enclosed structure but emerges from the ongoing relations they establish with viewers, institutions, and social realities, which

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 5.

exemplifies the central feature of interality. In this way, artist films function less as autonomous artworks than as repositories of social memory and relational arenas of cultural negotiation. Their archival dimension situates aesthetic experimentation within the historical and discursive fabric of contemporary Chinese society, where images not only preserve traces of the present but also open new spaces for dialogue and critical reflection.

6.3 Concerns of Dividuation and Interality in Artistic and Cinematic Practices

While dividuation and interality provide productive frameworks for analyzing contemporary Chinese artist films, their application also raises a number of concerns that deserve critical reflection. Both concepts emphasize openness, multiplicity, and relationality, qualities that resonate with aesthetic strategies of intermediality, aesthetic appropriation, intercultural hybridity, and fragmentation. Yet if applied uncritically, these frameworks risk reducing artistic practice to a mere celebration of indeterminacy, thereby overlooking the need to sustain critical force and political articulation.

In the case of dividuation, the danger lies in an excessive valorization of strategies such as fragmentation and appropriation, when pursued as aesthetic ends in themselves. If moving images are treated merely as an endlessly interpenetrating and recombining reservoir of elements, their capacity for political critique may be diluted. The dividual image can easily slide into aesthetic relativism: everything becomes subject to reassembly without sufficient regard for structures of power or historical specificity. This risks turning formal experimentation into self-referential

effects, detached from deeper social realities. In other words, while dividuality highlights the heterogeneity of image practices, its logic—when overly formalized—can weaken the disruptive and critical potential of the fragment.

Interality faces a different but related challenge. By emphasizing relationality, co-emergence, and mutual becoming, interality powerfully articulates the non-substantial reality of aesthetic and social processes. However, when all interactions are framed as generative “in-betweenness,” the asymmetries and antagonisms that shape cultural fields may be obscured. The notion of interality risks dissolving critique into relational harmony, underestimating the weight of censorship, institutional constraints, and economic inequality in artistic production and reception. In cinematic practice, the interological dynamic must therefore remain in tension with the fact that relations are not always symmetrical and that institutional or market logics often overdetermine the space of negotiation.

Taken together, these concerns indicate that dividuality and interality are best regarded not as normative models but as heuristic frameworks—conceptual tools that illuminate certain dynamics while inevitably leaving others in shadow. Their value lies in opening new perspectives for rethinking subjectivity and aesthetics, but their limitations remind us of the need for contextual grounding and critical vigilance. For contemporary Chinese artist films, this means that any emphasis on openness and relationality must be carefully balanced with attention to the socio-political conditions under which moving-image practices unfold. Only by sustaining this balance between aesthetic multiplicity and critical sharpness can dividuality and interality continue to function as generative and relevant frameworks within film theory and practice.

6.4 Prospects for Dividuation and Interality in Contemporary Chinese Artist Films

Contemporary Chinese artist film practices are currently situated in a difficult period. In the post-pandemic era, the economic downturn and the contraction of the art market have created a survival crisis for artists; declining opportunities for financial sustainability and an increasingly restrictive creative environment have further intensified pressures on filmmakers. At the same time, stricter controls over themes, circulation, and distribution continue to narrow the space for artistic expression. The intertwining of economic constraints, consumerist aesthetic logics, and authoritarian narrative structures forms a set of external obstacles to the development of artist films. Yet it is precisely under such challenging circumstances that the practice and reflection of artist films acquire particular significance. They not only provide distinctive perspectives on contemporary society but also accumulate and preserve the complex textures of social and cultural life within moving images, thereby making artist films into a living “social archive” that mediates critically between aesthetics and reality.

Within this contemporary convergence of art and film, the role of the artist has undergone a profound transformation. The traditional model of comprehensive control and unilateral authorship has gradually given way to a greater trust in and respect for the autonomy and generative process of images. Artistic creation is no longer an act of absolute authority but approaches a mode of co-participation among images, audiences, and society. This transformation not only resonates with the logic of dividuation—where images are constituted by heterogeneous fragments and multiple agencies—but also aligns with the philosophical thinking of interality: meaning is not determined by a single authorial voice but continually generated through the relations among images, audiences, institutions, and realities. Traditional resources such as the Daoist idea of *ziran* (“the way follows nature”), the aesthetic principles of *xiangwai* (beyond form) and *liubai* (the art of emptiness), and the interal emphasis on “the in-between” provide deep cultural grounding for this openness. They guide us to reconceptualize the nature of images not as closed texts but as relational and generative processes.

In future research and practice, treating dividuation and interality as heuristic rather than prescriptive frameworks may offer more flexible interpretive pathways for contemporary Chinese artist films. Dividuation highlights how images persist in their heterogeneity and multiplicity through processes of decomposition and recombination; interality reminds us that images are not isolated entities but unfold through symbiosis and co-evolution with others and with the world. In this sense, artist films are not only repositories of social memory but also resonance fields where artists, filmmakers, and audiences collectively reflect on the meaning and social function of moving images. They may thus be understood as “relational living beings”¹⁵⁰: not static texts but dynamically generative, continually growing entities, rooted in personal memory and historical experience while expanding through the intersections of globalization and local contexts. Through the complementary application of dividuation and interality, we not only deepen our understanding of Chinese contemporary artist films but also open new possibilities for film and media studies in broader cultural and theoretical horizons.

¹⁵⁰ The phrase “relational living beings” is used here to extend earlier discussions of the “expansive self” and the “living constellation” of cinema. It emphasizes that films, under the combined frameworks of dividuation and interality, may be conceived not as static texts but as dynamic entities, continually reshaped through both their internal heterogeneities and their relational encounters with audiences, media, and the world.

Conclusion

This dissertation has re-examined the shifting practices of contemporary Chinese artist films within the transformations of digital technology and the cultural reconfigurations of globalization, drawing on the theoretical frameworks of **dividuation** and **interality**. It has argued that moving-image works should not be understood as closed entities, but as open processes of becoming—at once aesthetic experiments, social archives, and relational fields.

In the case studies, several representative works were selected: Ju Anqi's *There's a Strong Wind in Beijing*, Zhou Hongxiang's *The Red Flag Flies*, Xu Bing's *Dragonfly Eyes*, Cao Fei's *Whose Utopia*, Zhong Su's *8:28*, and Liu Guangli's *When the Sea Sends Forth a Forest / How to Imagine the Unimaginable*. Spanning more than two decades and covering diverse media forms such as film, digital video, game engines, and AI-generated imagery, these works embody the complex dimensions of Chinese artist cinema in terms of technology, narrative, and aesthetics. The analyses reveal that they collectively weaken the authority of linear narrative and the unified subject, instead generating open mechanisms of meaning through intermedial practices, aesthetic, intercultural appropriations, and fragmented structures. In this sense, films are no longer sealed artifacts but expanding events, relations, and processes. Artist films inherit the critical tradition of Chinese independent cinema while absorbing the media-experimental spirit of contemporary art. In the context of digitalization and globalization, they constitute a “third cinema” between art and film—reminding us that the study of moving images cannot be confined within a single discipline but requires a composite, cross-disciplinary methodology.

The scholarly contribution of this dissertation lies in placing dividuation, derived from Western philosophy, alongside interality, rooted in Chinese traditions, thereby constructing a cross-cultural epistemological framework and introducing it into the analysis of contemporary Chinese artist films. Dividuation highlights the generative logic of heterogeneity, cultural hybridity, and metastability, while interality emphasizes the relational reality and co-emergence that take place in-between. Their complementarity enables us to grasp both the internal structures of artist films (such

as the redistribution of symbols and the reconfiguration of narrative) and their external circulation (through audiences, institutions, and global discourses). At the same time, this dissertation has acknowledged their tensions and limits: dividuation risks dispersing meaning excessively, while interality may, if overstressed, soften the sharpness of critique. Yet it is precisely within this tension that new insights emerge: films therefore should be re-conceived as dynamic relational networks—living bodies composed of images, memories, and relations that grow through the interplay of inner heterogeneities and encounters with the external world.

This perspective opens new pathways for the study of Chinese artist films. They are not only preservers of social memory but also agents of critical intervention; not merely expressions of personal creation but generative processes co-constituted with audiences and society. Looking ahead, treating dividuation and interality as complementary frameworks offers a more flexible interpretive approach. With the integration of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality, and the renewed engagement with Daoist and Buddhist traditions, Chinese artist films will continue to operate in the tensions between the local and the global, between critique and creation. They will serve as open laboratories of aesthetic experimentation and as resonant fields of cultural negotiation.

In conclusion, by employing the dual framework of dividuation and interality, this dissertation provides a cross-cultural interpretive model for understanding contemporary Chinese artist films. It not only illuminates the generative logic and social function of moving images but also reflects on the challenges of applying theory in practice. More broadly, this research contributes new resources for film and media studies and for cross-cultural theoretical dialogue. With their unique aesthetic experiments and critical practices, Chinese artist's film practice will continue to exist as "relational living bodies"—dynamic and ever-growing, and capable of stimulating new reflections and possibilities within future cultural and academic contexts.

Appendix I : Excerpt from Interview with Zhong Su

Participants: Zhong Su, Liang Yujue, Zhu Zhichao, Mu Jin, Zhu Changquan

Format: Zoom interview

Date: January 7, 2023, Hamburg

Note: The following is an excerpt from the original Chinese transcript. Irrelevant small talk, greetings, and sections that were inaudible due to network issues have been omitted for readability.

Liang Yujue: Hello, Zhong Su. After watching *8:28*, I was struck by its powerful visual impact and immersive atmosphere. Then I looked into some of your other works. What caught my attention first was the recurring theme of sexual violence, combined with a strong sense of visual intensity, which left a deep impression on me. My second question concerns the way you construct the film's 3D elements. I found the collage and montage of these elements particularly intriguing, but I couldn't fully make out the order or sequence. Could you explain how you wove these 3D scenes together, and how their sequence was determined?

Zhong Su: That's a question I often get. My process is quite messy, with ideas constantly shifting. At the beginning, the only plan was to make a *one-take* film. I didn't know what specific elements would appear. For instance, the staircase came to mind early on, drawn from my childhood memory of growing up in Chongqing, where staircases are everywhere. From that starting point, things branched out. What surprised me most was that the final film turned out so violent—something I hadn't anticipated. Before finishing the first shot, I had no idea how the film would look in the end. Initially, it was just a vague intention and a basic 3D model. To guide the process, I gave myself two strict rules: first, the camera had to remain fixed, its angle and speed unchanging; second, the film had to be completed within one year. Within these constraints, I allowed the imagery to unfold freely.

The sequence of shots was adjusted later, since the film doesn't follow a narrative. I often compare my approach to music production. Musicians using Ableton Live, for example, might create fragments and then rearrange them live. I wanted something

similar—an improvisational method.

Of course, improvisation is unusual in 3D animation, which typically requires precise planning. But in this case, there was no plan, so everything was unexpected. Some Renaissance artworks even ended up in the film on a whim. Until the first shot was finished, I myself didn't know what it would become.

I think there are two kinds of logic: the “linguistic logic” we use in everyday discourse, and what I call “visual logic.” Visual logic asks whether the combination of images works on screen—whether it feels strange or harmonious. If it fits the visual logic, I use it, even if it doesn't follow linguistic logic.

There is also the matter of rhythm—alternating fast and slow, close-up and distant shots, indoor and outdoor scenes. But in the end, I rely on visual logic and follow my intuition to organize the material.

Liang Yujue: Thank you. Based on what you just said, you initially set a rule for yourself: the film had to be a *one-take*, with the camera fixed at a certain angle. Why did you impose such a rule on yourself?

Zhong Su: Because giving myself restrictions is the only way to reach freedom. If you had no restrictions at all—if you told yourself you could do anything, be completely free—it would actually be very difficult. So I deliberately set up unreasonable rules as a starting point. Human beings are imaginative: whatever restrictions you impose, whether social rules or visual rules, even if they're very strict, people will find ways to break through them. But I believe such rules are important. They mark the beginning of freedom, even if they are unreasonable.

Liang Yujue: I see, thank you. Another question: your images strike me as very powerful. One thing I noticed in particular is that the movements of the characters in 8:28 are rather stiff, while the scenes themselves are carefully constructed to look ruined or dilapidated. I've also seen this strong sense of ruin in several of your other works. Is this something you deliberately pursue?

Zhong Su: Yes, it's intentional. When I first started making films, the style was more mixed, but gradually I came to pursue what I call “density of information” in images. Broken or ruined things tend to carry more surface information—they appear richer and heavier. This outwardly translates into a kind of force, a sense of weight, rather

than something light and floating like typical game graphics.

As for the stiffness of the character animations, that's probably a personal trait. My own movements are somewhat stiff, so perhaps this "pathology of images," as you mentioned earlier, comes from me not being very relaxed, and that stiffness carried over into the film.

There's another reason: although technically this film can be considered an animation, I've always disliked the word "animation." People tend to immediately think of Disney, or of the kind of animation celebrated at Annecy. I dislike both. They feel like standardized answers—what animation is "supposed" to look like. My work is a small act of resistance against that. Or perhaps it's just that my technical skills can't reach that level—I can't say for sure.

Liang Yujue: That resistance is exactly what gives your images their impact.

Another question: have your films ever been shown in China? I mostly know them from Oberhausen and other international festivals.

Zhong Su: Very rarely, though it has happened. Only some of the less sensitive films have been shown. I remember once screening with Zhu Changquan at the Zhejiang Art Museum—it was quite an official setting, and we only showed a single piece.

Liang Yujue: And how does screening abroad, at a festival like Oberhausen, compare to showing your work in China?

Zhong Su: It's completely different. In China I have to be more patient with the audience, while abroad, during Q&A sessions, I sometimes speak more directly. I feel the work already says everything. If I add more, it's just decoration, gossip. And what I say isn't necessarily the "truth."

Sometimes what the film conveys and what I originally wanted to convey are not the same. Once the work is made, it becomes an independent entity, with its own life. The meaning comes from its interaction with viewers, not from me.

In China, screenings often feel more like "standing in" for something else—part of an event, a publicity effort. The film is put there like a dish on the table: maybe people taste it, maybe they don't. It's not the same as abroad.

Zhu Zhichao: I'd like to add another question. When I first obtained your films, it was quite a while ago—we screened five of them at the Hamburg Academy of Fine Arts.

They were made in different years, the earliest dating back to around 2015. Watching them together, I felt a clear difference: in the earlier works, such as *Sky City*, there was a more defined structure. They weren't narrative films, but there was still a strong sense of construction, almost like prophecy or an attempt at building something. In contrast, more recent works, like *8:28* and *2022*, feel more fragmented, deconstructive, and marked by a sense of ruins.

For me, *8:28* feels less like a film and more like a painting—a wild scroll slowly unrolling. So my first question is: when planning a new film each year, do you think about its relation to your previous works, or is it more of a spontaneous, organic process?

The second question is about symbolism. When I screened your work, a professor noted that many elements in your films were difficult for viewers from different cultural backgrounds to recognize. For instance, in *2022* there are skyscrapers, a submarine, and a lot of inscriptions on the buildings. To me, those words looked like random combinations without meaning. How do you consider this problem of recognition?

Zhong Su: Let me start with the second question. In *2022*, the text is deliberately invented—it cannot be recognized by anyone, regardless of nationality. But its structure mimics real writing systems, so at a glance one can tell what kind of script it resembles. As for the symbols, there are many, but whether or not the viewer identifies them doesn't matter. What matters is the atmosphere they create. Whether you recognize one symbol, a few, or none at all, the effect is essentially the same.

In recent years, I've also been more conscious of the cultural background of my viewers, especially in Europe. Sometimes I deliberately provoke or even offend them. For example, in *2022* there's a prison scene involving racial discrimination, and in *8:28* there are car crash sequences. Both are meant as deliberately offensive gestures—almost cruel jokes.

As for your first question, I always start with a plan, but things often develop beyond my control. Plans frequently fail to keep up with changes. Sometimes the plan succeeds, but only half the time. My interest has increasingly shifted toward improvisation, like jazz: there's a basic emotional foundation, but the variations are made spontaneously in the moment. This approach suits short films; I haven't yet attempted a feature.

If you look at my body of work, perhaps only two films have a clearly discernible narrative: the one adapted from Borges and *Sky City*. An even earlier film, *Empty City Stratagem* (2013), is more like my current works—it isn't *one-take*, but cut into fragments. Over time, I pursued the *one-take* more and more, because it's challenging. That challenge itself becomes a kind of stimulation, forcing me to find ways to make it work.

Zhu Zhichao: I'd like to follow up about the car crash sequence in 8:28. You mentioned it was partly to provoke the audience. Were there any other reasons behind this choice?

Zhong Su: Yes. I thought of it in rather cruel terms: the car crash represents the price of civilization. Driving is an integral part of modern life—people call it a “nation on wheels,” not only in the U.S. but in many countries. With cars, you inevitably need regulations to govern traffic. But when a civilization advances to the point of relying on wheels while its rules are not fully internalized, tragedies occur.

Civilization is profoundly anti-human in this sense. Humans are not born to obey traffic lights or crosswalks; by nature, we eat when hungry and sleep when tired. Civilization disciplines us into such behaviors. To borrow from Foucault, civilization imposes an “inhuman” order in the name of the humane. That's what I had in mind when I included the car crash. Of course, there were other ideas as well, but this was the most visible one, and it was something I felt compelled to realize.

Mu Jin: I'd like to add something. Listening to your earlier explanations and combining them with my own impressions, I felt that 8:28 seems to be constructing a kind of personal social history—perhaps even a national history—but interpreted very subjectively. I'm not sure if this was your intention, though the film contains many symbols, some of them strongly associated with Chinese culture. For us as Chinese viewers, these symbols are immediately recognizable. So I wonder, does the use of a *one-take* structure imply a kind of overarching historical narrative?

Zhong Su: When submitting to festivals, I'm usually asked to select categories. Almost every time, I check “History.” I also check “Experimental,” “Cultural,” and “Not Suitable for Children.”

I remember during an online discussion at Oberhausen, someone asked me why my

film's camera movement was always retreating, rather than moving forward. With a one-take, it could go either way. I don't recall exactly how I answered, but I think I said it was because the film dealt with historical material—Renaissance references, Joseph Beuys, and so on. So the camera moved backwards. Whether it was coincidence or unconscious intention, I can't be sure. But my interest in history is undeniable, and it inevitably surfaces in the work.

Mu Jin: Let me ask another question. When you spoke about VR just now, I had the impression that wearing the device was like cutting between two worlds. Personally, I've always felt that images exist on the boundary between life and death. Many images in history, or in art history, were born from something that had already disappeared—someone, something, some moment. Returning to our earlier idea of "pathology of images," one could say that images are a way of resisting or redeeming death. In *8:28*, there are many bloody, death-related scenes. So what role do images play for you? Do they commemorate life, or death? Are they, for you, a form of memory?

Zhong Su: If you're asking about my personal relation to images, I've long been clear about that. Every film I make is like a brick in my own tombstone. Except that my tomb is digital.

So far I've made around ten films—that means ten bricks. I've uploaded them to various streaming platforms. Even if one site disappears, the films remain, haunting other sites like ghosts. Perhaps before I die, I'll unlock all my passwords and gather them together—that would complete the tomb. For me, that's what images are.

Mu Jin: Almost like an epitaph.

Liang Yujue: I have another question. Zhu Changquan mentioned that 3D is a process that develops very slowly, and your films seem to be built piece by piece. During production, when you're waiting for something to come together, do you ever feel disconnected from the work? Do you seek a kind of randomness in the process? How do you handle your creative state during these long stretches?

Zhong Su: Sometimes I might spend an entire month just making a single component, which in the film might only flash by for a second. Other times, I can produce a one-minute segment in just three days. So it really depends on chance—it

requires patience and waiting.

The process is a bit like photographic development. You take the picture, send it to be developed, and then wait. The waiting is long, and the final image might not even turn out well—in which case you just throw it away. Filmmaking for me is the same. It relies on time. You never really know when the film will be finished. At most, you set a general plan, like “it should be done within a year.” Eventually it will be completed, but the process is always time-consuming.

Zhu Zhichao: Sorry, I’d like to add one more question. You mentioned randomness and waiting—like when making an “original piece,” and then at some point it gets used in the work. I’d like to ask: how does such an original piece usually come into being? To put it simply, say a model—could it be triggered by your reflection on a certain historical event, or by something in your daily life? In what situations do you usually feel the impulse to create such a piece?

And from this perspective, I also noticed that when submitting your films to festivals, you often select “History” as a category. In almost all of your films, I see a tendency to return to a certain era or to the present moment. To me, it feels like your works are always reflecting on the present, as if history and reality coexist. Would you describe this as your creative state?

Zhong Su: I remember one of my teachers once criticized the presence of “current events” in my films. But I’ve always thought about this: from a historical perspective, some of today’s events will inevitably be remembered in the future, revisited again and again, while others are destined to be forgotten. We cannot know which is which. But at least I choose to remember certain things. For me, that becomes part of my own history. When I retell that history, it resurfaces.

So I believe that history is not only about grand narratives; it also includes personal perspectives. Whether in contemporary history or art history, every singular should have their own history. What general histories provide is only a framework or raw material. Unless you give up your selfhood entirely, you need to construct your own history, rather than accept only what others have written.

As for how an original piece comes into being, I think of it like sculpting clay. You may start with an idea, or none at all. Perhaps you plan to mold an apple, but in the end it turns into a pear—and that pear is what truly belongs to you. The piece

emerges independently of your initial intentions. It's like something that falls from the sky—you just have to catch it. If nothing “falls” for a long time, then you wait; eventually it will.

Of course, there are also lucky moments. For instance, once I wanted to create an explosion effect. I searched for a long time but couldn't make it work, so I gave up. Years later, I had the same idea again and happened to come across a tutorial: just three steps to achieve the effect. I immediately used it in my film. Why I couldn't achieve it before, but could at that exact moment, I really don't know. That's how original pieces come into being.

[End of Interview]

Appendix II: Excerpt from Interview with Hongxiang Zhou

Participants: Hongxiang Zhou, Zhu Zhichao

Format: Online interview

Date: August 28, 2023, Hamburg

Note: The following is an excerpt from the original Chinese transcript. Irrelevant small talk, greetings have been omitted for readability, and discussions unrelated to *The Red Flag Flies* have also been partially removed.

Zhu Zhichao: Let's begin with the first question, about the "questioning mode" of expression. The recent work you sent me also relates to *The Red Flag Flies*. Was it made in the United States?

Hongxiang Zhou: Yes. That work simply extracted one shot of a raised hand from *The Red Flag Flies* and reassembled it into a single-channel video. At the time of the Russia–Ukraine war, I saw many images of the battlefield filmed by drones. They suggested to me a kind of war of our era: fragmented, distant, yet impossible to see clearly. I juxtaposed those impressions with the gesture of the raised hand, adding a frame that resembled both a television set and a painting.

The question raised was: can such war itself be considered a "work"? Whose work is it—Putin's, or the West's? In the face of war, what role can philosophy and aesthetics still play? In the video, there is a plume of black smoke that spreads and then disperses, suggesting the eventual vanishing of war. For the sound, I added clapping, shouting, and screaming voices. These sounds could be from those opposing war, or from those supporting it. Just like in reality, some people side with Russia, others with Ukraine. The work is not about commenting on one specific war, but about broadly questioning regimes and so-called universal values.

Zhu Zhichao: So this is a new piece, made in 2023? What exactly triggered you to make such a work again?

Hongxiang Zhou: My works are often situated *between a spear and a shield*. They are like films, but not in the conventional sense; like video, but still carry the methods of cinema. The boundary is difficult to define. In the introduction to *The Red Flag*

Flies, I wrote about “cancelling the story,” flattening the imagery. In this sense, narrative does not exist. The film resembles a “thesis film,” yet is not a film in the traditional sense.

During the pandemic I also made a one-minute short film, *April Somewhere*, assembled from mobile phone footage. It later won a prize in Serbia. The jurors’ interpretation of the work was completely different from my own intentions, almost irrelevant—but their reading was still valid. Once a work is completed, it will refract into different facets. As I often say, “*It’s a range viewed in face and peaks viewed from the side.*”

Zhu Zhichao: I think I didn’t see that piece.

Zhu Zhichao: So when you say “between spear and shield,” does it mean you do not want to set clear limits for the work? That it can accommodate different interpretations, contain multiple layers of meaning, and none of these layers dominates, but rather they develop like rhizomes? Is that what you mean?

Hongxiang Zhou: Yes. I do not want to tell a complete story, nor to provide a conclusion. I want the work to unfold in fragments, open to multiple perspectives, and leave it to viewers to interpret. As I said, “*It’s a range viewed in face and peaks viewed from the side.*” Different perspectives can all be valid.

Zhu Zhichao: Was *The Red Flag Flies* in this same state?

Hongxiang Zhou: Yes. At first it was meant to be only a five-minute short. I collected many slogans and banners... But as the material accumulated, it snowballed into a seventy-minute long work. The entire production lasted about nine months. During shooting I insisted on cancelling the distinction between protagonist and supporting roles: every performer appears only once, never to be repeated. Thus, the film contains no continuous characters, only relationships between images.

Zhu Zhichao: In the film there is a constant line of questioning. How did you decide to adopt this form?

Hongxiang Zhou: It came from Godard’s *2 or 3 Things I Know About Her*. At the beginning there is a voice muttering to itself, constantly posing questions. When I

first watched it—on VCD, with poor quality and no subtitles—I couldn't really follow the plot, but that voice left a deep impression. So in *The Red Flag Flies*, I added a parallel line of sound that does not explain the images but keeps raising questions. It came from my doubts about worldviews and aesthetic conventions.

Zhu Zhichao: So originally your idea was just a short film, right? How did it become a seventy-minute feature?

Hongxiang Zhou: Yes. At that time Xu Zhen was curating the exhibition *24 Hours* and invited me, but I didn't finish, so I couldn't participate. The work itself stretched over a long period, and only after a long process did it finally take shape as a feature-length work.

Zhu Zhichao: So nine months later it became a seventy-minute film. That is quite different from your initial idea. In this snowballing process, what factors drove it? Could it be understood as a work growing on its own? Which factors came from your own shifts in thinking, and which came from external circumstances?

Hongxiang Zhou: There were two forces. First, the ideological symbols ingrained in our generation—gestures like raising the red flag and raising a fist. As someone born in the late 1960s, I naturally tended to believe in the power of “raising the banner.” I wanted the video to present that heroic, militant energy.

But on the other hand, this “power” carried absurdity. It resembled Don Quixote: both heroic and ridiculous. Many of the absurdities were not pre-planned but emerged naturally in the juxtaposition and editing. For example, people shouting slogans and clapping—seen separately, they are signs of enthusiasm and power; juxtaposed, they become comical and absurd.

When it finally grew into what it became, I myself was not even sure. By the time the piece was completed, some people called it a documentary, though I had no idea from what perspective they thought of it that way. I recall that a professor at the China Academy of Art invited me to teach a documentary course, even phoned me and said: “Didn't you just make a documentary?” I replied, “Really?” Later I never clarified it. I thought, if you consider it a documentary, that is perfectly reasonable. The Venice Film Festival, when they first called me, also said: “Your documentary...” So I didn't avoid the issue. If you understand it as a documentary, then it is a

documentary; if in an exhibition it is regarded as a video, then it is a video. Its existence is no longer something for me to define—whether it is a film, a video, or a documentary. Thus, the existence of a work is, as the Chinese proverb says, “*It’s a range viewed in face and peaks viewed from the side.*”

Zhu Zhichao: And in this process, were there other factors? Do you think the absurdity was something you imposed as the artist, or something that grew out of the work itself?

Hongxiang Zhou: Many things grew out of the work itself. Juxtaposing symbols—Mao’s Little Red Book, Buddhist icons, Christian imagery, red flags on construction sites—they all belong to the social framework. When arranged together, they generate new contexts. What once symbolized power or belief, when placed side by side, turned into absurdity and numbness.

Zhu Zhichao: Those symbols—were they pre-planned from the start, or did you add them as you went along?

Hongxiang Zhou: I would say active. Editing is “a second creation.” Meaning is often generated at the editing table: I add symbols at certain points to create tension with other shots. This is how the work grew in the process.

Zhu Zhichao: In terms of form and structure, which artists or works influenced you?

Hongxiang Zhou: The earliest film that sparked my fascination with cinema was Wong Kar-wai’s *Ashes of Time*. But structurally, the greatest influence on *The Red Flag Flies* was Godard. His works often contained elements “not like cinema,” pushing against boundaries. That showed me that film could be experimental and probing. I only began working with video in 2000; before that I painted ink and watercolors, so I was naturally more open to such experimental approaches.

When I first arrived in Venice, the selector met me in the lobby of the cinema. He said something I couldn’t understand, so my translator explained: “He said he has finally met the Chinese Godard.” Of course, that was just a way of speaking, something he said casually. He himself was also involved in contemporary art in Rome. So the fact that *The Red Flag Flies* could go to Venice also owed a lot to luck.

The Red Flag Flies was later selected for the Venice Film Festival also because of this. It was not a typical film, but carried stronger artistic qualities. The selectors leaned toward works with an art tendency. When artistic elements took up a large share, the work had its chance. In this sense it was also luck. I later told Yang Fudong about it; he was very supportive and appreciated the film.

Zhu Zhichao: Once the work goes out, it will keep being interpreted in different ways. Do you think these interpretations and re-interpretations become part of the work itself? In this sense, the work grows independently. Do you agree?

Hongxiang Zhou: I am not too concerned, because interpretation is the viewers' right. There is no need for me to insist whether it fits my original idea or not. Once a work goes out into the world, it is like a child grown up, facing the world on its own.

Hongxiang Zhou: After release, many Chinese artists opposed it, calling it "pop." But there were also different voices. For example, Yang Fudong once said at a dinner that *The Red Flag Flies* was among the most innovative works he had seen. At the time, many videos were imitating cinema, and this work at least avoided such mimicry. Even I could not fully define it when making it. A friend who helped me with editing once asked: "*What is this exactly?*" I couldn't answer. We often just sat in front of the computer, looking at each other blankly.

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