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On Aphasia: Indices of things we would rather not know

Angela Zito

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Li Chen opens her powerful digital photo/video piece, *Aphasia*, on black screen, with two silent

texts: "This might not be a documentary film." And then: "But not a single frame is staged." We don't know yet what *Aphasia* will show us, what it is going to be "about", but the gauntlet is down on a challenge. What relation will my screen experience of her sight and sounds have to do with our human world, my world, the world I sit in right now, as a smelling and feeling body? Will it only plunder it for metaphors (the next words we see/and hear in voiceover are "This is just a story."), creating a world apart, or will it have other connections and plant itself more firmly as a touching portion? ("In this story we were in the plaza downtown.") Will it claim that difficult relationship with truth, or evidence or authenticity that documentary makes? If so, how? If it might not be a documentary, **might it** just as easily **be** one after all?

Her complicated work combines still photo, slide-show movement, moving image, and words in several registers: English text in the mise-en-scene, intertitles, subtitles; along with sounds recorded on the scene and in the voiceover. Every possible trick of non-linear editing is displayed

(short of obvious special effects) in just over ten minutes, without leaving us feeling rushed or overwhelmed. Apathia is beautiful and chilling, teetering on the edge of too beautiful for the heavy, brutal "story" it is charged with telling and showing to our ears and eyes, the shattering violence of the Occupy Movement of 2012 in California, in the Bay Area. And its offhanded, possible claim to "documentary" status casts its kaleidoscopic digital sophistication directly at a current lamentation and debate.



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Cast out of the darkroom

The lament goes like this: Photography once presented us with an image of the real because light from that reality photochemically transcribed the iconic representation of what the lens saw right there, on the film. But access to that real world is slipping away as fast as Kodak can close factories. Digital cameras transform light quite differently, as Hadjoannou puts it: "From this perspective, one can recognize a movement from a light-based, indexical and analogical medium, to a code-based, non-indexical and digital medium. The important difference between the two forms is how they treat the physical world in the creation of their images."(1)

The indexical function emerges as the key problem: an index is a kind of signifier in the system of meaningful human signs that has *an intrinsic and not arbitrary* connection to the thing it refers to. Intrinsic: smoke and fire, footprints and feet, the ring and the phone, the bell and the church, the limp and its injured leg... the photo and its object. (2) Art theorists have been discussing the indexical relationship of the photo and its recorded object since the seventies. Although emphasis has been placed on the index's marking of that intrinsic, ontological relationship between itself

and its referent (Where there is smoke....), I think that aspect is less important to the anxiety over loss of the real than the fact that the index is not arbitrary, that is, not artifactual.

I don't mean that it's not "man-made" (a telephone is manufactured to ring, after all), just that its appearance in the world of meaning is not controlled by a person. It appears, as it were, on its own, beyond agency and individual agenda. If you call, the phone is going to ring and I cannot stop it by a sheer act of will, just as I cannot stop myself from leaving footprints (CSI exists as a kind of paean to the inability of people to control the proliferation of indices to their crimes.) More than its ontological function, I think it is the sense of the index's transcendence of human will that gives it its power of seeming truthful. It feels uncontrollable. If an analog photo indexes the world—and produces a sense of authenticity—it is because no one can do without the light on the emulsion. And we fear that the digital cannot truly document "the real," being fatally compromised, as many would have, by its detour through the artifice of computation in its treatment of the physical world.

Isn't it strange that, in a post-Kantian, post-modern world, we have developed this fascination with indexicality treated like a holdover for objectivity in representation? Surely, an object-obsessed, ontological approach to the problem of documentary (a problem that Li Chen invites with her opening) gets us only so far. Let us turn from emphasizing the intrinsic to a closer examination of the arbitrary nature of the indexical function.



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Onto the stage, live

Both film and digital images are, above all, indices of the event of their making/taking. But as important as the event of natural light capture for images as documentary is how they exceed,

and include, the agency of the photographer who makes them. If we shift focus to the photographer's process, then the analog vs digital difference fades. Li Chen's *Aphasia* is a perfect example of how the body of the photographer acts as the index...and insofar as we are put in "direct" touch with her presence on the scene of the photographic crime, we are gifted with a sense of being there, (*xianchang* in Chinese) **alongside** her as a person and not simply **because of** her skill as a photographer.

This sense of transportation into another "real" world depends not only upon the material possibilities of the medium but also and crucially on performance--on the fact that a medium is shaped by another sensuous human being who affects us and draws us to their world. We feel them. Li Chen's *Aphasia* is bodycentric: bodies in motion, asleep, massed together and alone. Bodies in parts: hands that hold, feet that march. Bodies that she and the police shoot. Most effectively, her own body in the hand held loopy motion of the moving image section, and especially in the intimacy of her voice.

Ordinarily, it is diegetic sound, recorded and synched with the image that provides the sort of anchor to the real that indexicality promises. In *Aphasia*, diegetic sounds of chanting, church bells, sirens, gunning motorcycles, taser guns firing, and finally singing, are instead wrapped as a soundtrack around still images that pop in varying speed between black fades. Occasionally they synch almost perfectly with the images in exquisite cutting (the black man screaming...the helicopter hovering), but mostly they do not. They supplement, they compete, they herd us along, but, like bad Foley, the indexical anchor to the putative real is not to be found there. Li brilliantly thwarts our expectations and fulfills that longing elsewhere. *Aphasia* is an unabashed work of digital art whose power, for me, lay in its complex feinting weave of sound and sight. Li Chen connects and disconnects from the unfolding story—there is indeed a narrative arc—by connecting and disconnecting our own ears and eyes from each other.



To dance together

The "real" point of this work places us with Li Chen "on the scene" (*xianchang*), to immerse us in her experience. She does this with her voice in Chinese which breathes her presence into the film. For the English-speaking audience of this project, it must always be accompanied by subtitles so we simultaneously see and hear her speak. Here our ears and eyes unfailingly link. The bilingual will also appreciate a level of subtlety in the not-quite-perfect fit of the crucial personal pronouns of "I" and "we" between the Chinese and English.⁽³⁾ She is fully in the plaza (English: "In this story we were in a plaza downtown." Chinese: "*Gushli, women zai shi zhongxin do yige guangchang.*" 故事里我□在市里中心的一个广□。) She ignores police warnings in both languages along with everyone else. She risks herself completely as "In this story, **we**, were run over by them." But she is not arrested in Chinese, even as the English refers to "us". And as the battle begins to rage in the moving image section, she crucially tells us in the English subtitles "This is just a story, but a story that cannot be told." while her Chinese voice says, sorrowfully, "*Zhei jiushi yige gushi, yige wo buneng jiangde gushi.* □就是一个故事, 一个我不能□的故事— This is just a story, a story that I cannot tell."

Is this a story that cannot be told in general or one that **she** cannot tell? But **she has** told it—and "not a single frame was staged". She herself indexes her documentary claim; we can rest assured she was there. She makes this work out of things, violent and terrible things, that happened without and despite her and that exist far beyond the reach of all the digital capacity for artifice and lies in the world. Trusting her presence, we can sadly be assured they are real.

Footnotes

1. Markos Hadjioannou, "How does the digital matter? Envisioning corporeality through Christian Volckman's *Renaissance* " *Studies in French Cinema* 2008 (8.2:)
2. McMullan, John. 2011. "The Digital Moving Image: Revising Indexicality and Transparency." *Interactive Media, E-Journal* 7, Proceedings of Diegetic Life Forms II: Creative Arts Practice and New Media Scholarship . http://wwwmcc.murdoch.edu.au/nass/nass_previous_issue_no7.htm
3. The cosmopolitan in-betweeness that this project, *Love of Sun*, celebrates has its rewards. Seriously.

About Angela Zito:

In 1979, just as the Cultural Revolution was ending, I spent three years in Beijing doing historical research on the social and political importance of rituals performed by the emperor. During that time, I also worked as dayside copy editor for *The China Daily*, China's English-language newspaper, and then as a "newstaster" for the Reuter's bureau. Having received a PhD from the University of Chicago, I now teach anthropology and history of Chinese culture and religions at NYU, where I have directed the Religious Studies Program for the past five years, and co-founded and co-direct with Faye Ginsburg the Center for Religion and Media. At NYU I teach both graduate and undergraduate courses. My documentary *Writing in Water* (2012), about cultural expression in a public place, was shot and edited in Beijing.

angelazito.com