

Toward a spatiotemporal consciousness in media studies: locational aesthetics and digital filmmaking in China's Special Zones[†]

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The abstraction of space in 'new' media theory, together with the preoccupation with space in Asian studies, demands a rethinking of the time–space relationship in terms of Asia and digital media. This essay explores how spatiotemporal consciousness is articulated in the locational aesthetics of contemporary Chinese digital media, specifically the thematic interest in examining everyday space; the self-reflexive and experimental aesthetic that locates the media practitioner in the social space; and the creation of the independent artistic space. To accomplish this, this paper scrutinizes the practices of two art/film groups, Big Tail Elephants and *u-thèque*, in particular a digital documentary project *Sanyuanli*, for a broader consideration of their narrative experimentations, locational styles, site-specific practices, and negotiations with the spatiotemporality of the so-called Special Economic Zones. Specifically, this paper looks at how the locational aesthetics employed in digital filmmaking confirm and contest spatiotemporal constructions the Special Zones that reinforce the pre-existing urban-rural divide, naturalize the biopolitical management of the migrant workers, and contribute to a new developmental narrative of the state that endorses linear and progressive temporality.

Introduction

On a Saturday afternoon in 2002, a small screening entitled 'Breathing Camera' was held in a bar on the second floor of a building in an industrial district in Shenzhen. This screening showcased artist/filmmaker Cao Fei's digital video shorts, such as *Imbalance 257* (1999), *Chain* (2000) and *Rabid Dogs* (2002) and ended with a Q&A session with the director. At that time, Cao was just starting her career after graduating from the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts. A decade later, Cao Fei became an artist who regularly participated in art exhibitions both at home and abroad. Her work has been exhibited in the Venice Biennial, Guggenheim Museums, and MoMA New York, venues that are drastically different from that obscure bar in Shenzhen. Still engaged in video-making, she has also expanded to multimedia installations, Internet-based interactive projects, community-based performances, and so on. In 2006, Cao won the Chinese Contemporary Art Award's Best Young Artist Award, and she is now seen as one of the key Chinese artists from the younger generation.

The Breathing Camera screening probably did not play a significant role in this particular artist's career, but it says much more about the cinematic and artistic context from which Cao emerged. This Breathing Camera screening was one of the hundreds of screening activities organized by *u-thèque*, an alternative film and art organization with which Cao was associated. Most of these small-scale screenings took place in semi-public places, such as bars, bookstores, cafes or other cultural spaces in Shenzhen and Guangzhou,

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