

**Hitting the West and Sounding the East:
Xu Bing's *Dragonfly Eyes* and A Deconstructive Trip of Film Viewing**
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When the film finished and the credits started rolling on the screen, I immediately felt that this could hardly be called a good film. A few friends of mine and I quickly reached an agreement that the surveillance camera footage has been terribly downplayed and made only subordinate to the main narrative the director/artist fabricated. What's the point of using such footage then? While the topic of surveillance is rarely touched upon in the film, the main narrative is equally unsatisfactory, a somewhat clichéd legendary romance.

However, Xu Bing, a contemporary artist who is known for his seminal work on abstract concepts, really isn't that naïve and simple. My opinion toward the film was totally changed after listening to what he said during the 1.5hr long Q&A session. I soon realized that I might have been terribly wrong about the film and the whole event that took place at Whitney Humanities Center at Yale last night. When I entered the theater with the expectation to watch a film that was made entirely of surveillance camera footage, I already fell into the trap set up by Xu Bing. This is not at all a film, but an art installation, an installation that includes the audience and theater as its most crucial parts. The film, made up of surveillance footage and unfolds a clichéd romantic legend, is actually a joke. It is so ironic that we always feel the impression of reality when seeing Hollywood blockbusters that consists of fictional performances and settings, while we find this film that consists purely of real footage of everyday life extremely lacking in the quality of reality. Besides its sarcasm, *Dragonfly Eyes* delves into a bigger issue that has to be viewed and understood in terms of the context of Xu Bing's artistic oeuvre.

Xu Bing's work has always attempted to invoke the experience of being deceived. To use his own words (in reference to an old Chinese expression), his works always try to hit the west while sound the east (*Shengdong Jixi* 声东击西). That is, what we see at the first sight is always what it is not. To give a most prominent example, his extremely famous *Book of Heaven* consists of scrolls of calligraphic art and piles of books bounded and printed in the early modern fashion. The installation, if viewed from afar, gives the audience an immediate impression of an exhibition of ancient Chinese books, printings, and calligraphic art. The audience is led to believe that what they see is Xu Bing's revival of a certain traditional art of writing and printing. But this impression is soon debunked. When the audiences (particularly who are native Chinese or who know Chinese well enough) come close enough to the books and scrolls, they suddenly realize that they were deceived by the mere appearance; what they see on the books and the scrolls are mere nonsense. Although they look extremely like characters used in Chinese, all of them are actually made up by Xu Bing during his three-year research and type making. The content of *Book of Heaven* is therefore empty; there is nothing there to be understood in the words. The

appearance, or the expression-form is mere sham, while the artwork relies on such an experience of being deceived by the seemingly most familiar form. The conventional connection between the expression-form of Chinese characters and the meaning is thus disrupted.

Ferdinand de Saussure discovered that the signifier (expression-form) is always, though arbitrarily, linked with the corresponding signified (content-form). The connection is unreasonable, yet, once entrenched as customary, it is so automatic that we rarely realize its conventionality. The expression of "apple" (the signifier) always immediately arouses the conceptual content of the round and tasty fruit (the signified). What Xu Bing does is a post-structuralist game that is intended to deconstruct the connection between the signifier and the signified, and to dispose the conventionality that always never comes to our mind when using the signs. This has been almost the most prominent motif throughout Xu Bing's career.

Dragonfly Eyes is exactly one of them. This art installation (instead of merely a film) does not focus on the content. Xu Bing is not exactly interested in telling a good story; nor is he interested in making a traditional experimental film with the footage. These are what people do from inside the film circle, while Xu Bing, as an outsider, does not even intend to participate in the insider's game. On the contrary, he is trying to debunk the method most frequently used by the insiders of filmmakers and experimental imagists. Just like what he said during the Q&A session, whenever we talk about surveillance camera, we always think of doing an experimental film, a multi-screen or multi-channel installation of moving images. We've seen too much of them already. These have become themselves a new convention. Xu Bing has an incisive understanding of what people are doing in the contemporary art. He notices the art practices around surveillance camera footage have become a convention so that the content of surveillance camera is immediately connected with the expression-form of experimental moving images and installation. Once he realized such a newly formed convention, it becomes possible for a deconstructive act. We were told before the event through promotional posters and introductions that Xu Bing, instead of producing printmaking and installations, made a film this time and the film is made up purely of surveillance camera footage. Such promotion and publicity built up the expectation among the audiences and such expectation is carried along with them into the theater. Most of the audiences are informed about contemporary art and experimental filmmaking, they expect something similar to happen. But the reality is that the audience enters a giant installation by Xu Bing. The theater, the event, the people are all part of this installation. However, what they see is totally unexpected. The use of surveillance camera in the work does not point to an examination of the topic of a surveillance society or of power relations, but instead, the expression-form tries to link up with a clichéd story. The audiences are disappointed. Yet, such a disappointment is exactly what Xu Bing is expecting. It reflects the deep-rooted conventions in the art practices of experimental films.

The film not only features a legendary and linear story that goes the opposite direction from most experimental films, it also points towards a thematic topic that is contradictory to the topics of control and management—the failure of surveillance. If we recall the details from the images, most of them are chaotic, blurring, and out of context, while some of them are spectacular, showing disastrous moments. This is something that surveillance camera is not designed for. The logic of surveillance stipulates the cameras to serve for the purpose of more efficient management and more productive monitoring, while the proliferation of both the surveillance footage and technology among the ordinary population (especially with the help of the Internet) disrupted the proper functioning of such technology. Inundated by the vast volumes of footage, the police officers in the film cannot but give up searching for the clues about the missing heroine. Similarly, the artificial intelligence is shown as producing some nonsensical results; it has become completely unproductive. In a similar way Michel de Certeau understands the disruptive power of the everyday practices (or tactics), contemporary uses (bottom-up) of the surveillance system are so various and even absurd that they almost sabotage the attempt of using the system to govern and discipline (top-down). Designers can no longer know how their products will be used; instruction manuals pale beside the incredibly diverse and innovative uses.

Xu Bing includes the theater and the audience into his art installation around the film *Dragonfly Eyes*. Through the audiences' initial reaction, their reflection and secondary reaction, this work successfully continues Xu Bing's theme of hitting the West while sounding the East and it further questions the conventionality of art practices both within and without filmmaking. It is successful perhaps exactly because the conventions in experimental filmmaking and artistic discourses (that a certain content has to be connected with a certain expression-form) is so entrenched that it takes a long time for the audience to reflect upon their own initial responses. Once the reaction arc is completed, the awakening shatter is extremely powerful.

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