

SM4134 Visual Ethnography and creative intervention: Final project
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Critical analysis of my animated video collage “Copy & Paste”

Hong Kong animation has a very short history, it was started around 1970s. In the first state, the influence of US Disney animations and Japanese anime strongly dominate the content and style of local animation industry. Many local animators like Dick Wong and Neco Lo imitated those overseas animations a lot during the 80s and 90s. However, a younger generation of animators started to change this phenomenon, they return to focus on local culture for inspiration and slowly develop an alternative visual style. I will talk more on the topic about how young local animator using cartoon to represent Hong Kong, and Stella So and her works would be the main focus in my study and research.

For a brief introduction, Stella So’s works are always about pre-war architectures and antiquities in Hong Kong. Her animations *Very fantastic* 好鬼棧 is about a female ghost repeating her before-life job: 倒夜香 and I-City series 龍門大電車 *Lonely moon* is a night tram wandering around old districts in a mysterious night. Her illustrations are published in different magazines and newspaper like *Milk* and *Ming Po*.

At first I was quite frustrated about applying the frame of animation to my ethnographic research; this is because animation has always been misunderstood as reckless. More importantly, it is purely visual representation, and images are totally artifact when compared to video form or photography form (although we cannot deny that those two forms also have a quality of fabrication). Animation is more likely to be regarded as art creation rather than reliable historical evidence. But here in this case, I found that animation is quite useful for ethnographic research. First, animation can be also viewed as moving pictures like movies or still image like photographs; it is a combination of both mediums and it still preserves the importance of the camera’s eye. Second, as all the visions are created by animators, the motion of line/ vector can be interpreted as a kind of analogy. Third, we can actually ignore the debate of realness and fact, but to think of animation as a reflection of an animator’s world view, and how s/he produces such image, it is obvious that animator is utilizing visual elements to represent the reality, but not to present the visual thing as reality. Therefore, the process of transformation of fact to fabrication is somehow meaningful, it is all about ‘how’ rather than ‘what’. Fourth, I always think that animation has a stronger power to project human’s subjective feelings than video or photo; and since visual-making limitation is almost zero (despite technical limitation), an animator is more free to express his/her personal perspective through moving-image. And more than that, it gave me an ambiguous sense of in-between simulation and signified world. When I came to these points, I relieved my worries about researching with a frame of animation.

In her animation works, Stella So’s style is quite unique among contemporary Hong Kong local animators. She used a hand-drawn style and traditional Chinese calligraphy paper 九宮格紙 to enhance the texture of animation. Here I am not going to discuss her animation technique in this essay, but to call attention to her animated world and the process she created it. It is obvious that in her illusive world, she is especially addicted to Hong Kong old buildings and architectures, the so called ‘Tong Building 唐

樓’, there is one benefit of creating a world in animation because it seems that people do not really presuppose a logical sense in this medium. It allows something ‘fake’/fabricated things in the animated world. Stella So did not have a burden to re-create the structure of the old buildings except she is conscious to re-create a similar impression of the place. Also, there is not much narrativity in her animations but some fragmented plots, the protagonist is not the girl ghost nor the ghost tram but the places and objects of old districts. The characters are just someone to link these things together. Moreover, there is element of time-image in the animation as she condensed different period of time into her animations and turn it into her recollection image. It is a mixture of her imagination of old legends, memories of her childhood, observation from daily life and some other research references.

Stella So used a word ‘collage’ to describe her works. In the interview she said, “every space of each buildings are unique, because residents who lived there designed different structure for their ways of living, some added one more floor inside the house because the ceiling is high enough, some added an attic...these are very interesting for me.” Although the structure may seem chaotic, it somehow reflects folk wisdom and its organic arrangement of space which is livelier than those modern skyscrapers. During the process, she did not entirely copy the whole visual image which she has collected; she would alter some of the elements to fit for her desire. For instance, change the perspectives, angle or the space of environment. Sometimes such decision is based on an aesthetic consideration. But mostly she will reconstruct a whole new building by combining small elements from different old buildings. She said that every small elements has its own historical stories which are interconnected with each other and to form a macro view of Hong Kong History, like the story of 林鎮顯醫館 in Wan Chai’s Blue House is originated by a disciple of Master Wong Fai Hung 黃飛鴻 and then slowly turned to nowadays 東華三院. The concept of collage can also be seen in Hong Kong lower class culture, in the relationship of the neighborhood. it always provides surprises and new discoveries.

The data Stella So collected are first-hand, she would drift around regions like Wan Chai, Yau Ma Tai to discover hidden obscure buildings which are worth recording. And she always uses a Kodak V705 digital camera to take panorama shot. And then she would post them on her blog as a form of archive, the categories are followed by locations where she shoot the pictures. She comments that the recording and collecting actions are like a competition with government which is to record as much as possible before these buildings are being torn down.

With a series of events like Lee Tong Street, Star pier and Queen’s pier, there is a sudden out burst of request to preserve historical buildings in old district. Stella’s works really give me a strike of how people think about Hong Kong history, why we are suddenly in love with nostalgia. (Although I would also like to do a research on how people consume Stella’s paintings of old buildings in *Milk* magazine, I lack the time to do this topic.) So what is nostalgia, what kind of nostalgic thing we can remember becomes the frame of my questions. We all know that Hong Kong only has few hundred years of history, when compared to other cities, what we lack the most is [preserved and organized?] historical memories. For a long time, in many local cultural studies, Hong Kong is identified as marginalized, our colonial background and a weak nationalism provide a highly hybridized environment for us, which in some way strengthens our sense

of localization. However, do we really lack nationalism? Or is it just a stereotypic [do you mean “take-for-granted”?] opinion on Hong Kong people? When I interviewed Stella So, I was surprised for her deep appreciation of Chinese culture, which can be shown in every detail and designs in pre-war architectures, they are ‘delicate and gracefully crafted’. Does that suggest our sense of nationalism is growing? Or actually nationalism and localism is not contradicted, can they be compatible? These questions remain unanswered.

Despite the question of nationalism and localism, we still have a problem of identification. In the recent period, with the stress of destroyed old districts, the government policy endangers our cultural identity. The buildings which were served to be symbols or representations of our localized memories are destroyed; such things may be the last cultural capital we have. Therefore, in *Very fantastic*, we can glance Stella So’s perspective towards urban development: modern buildings and urban development is portrayed as monsters which threat the peaceful harmonic old society. Apart from Stella So, many young animators more or less depict such idea in their animations. But this is a parody because every city is changing by urban development everyday, so what artists are left to do is to record every single detail as much as possible before it disappeared. For Stella So, to produce such images mainly come from a pure desire to record these disappearing and beautiful objects, and as an artist, she seriously take the responsibility to reserve images and to pass this record to the next generation. Moreover, the action is to identify ourselves that we are not just a passive consumer of history, because when all the memorial architectures are being torn down by the government, we can actively decide what history to keep alive (in the form of animation, illustration, photo, video, text, etc).

Image processing in animation is not about historicity because most of the images are fabricated by animators. But some level of historical elements we can find is hinted in the narratives of the animations. In Stella So’s *Very fantastic* and *Lonely Moon*, we see a female ghost passing along the old alley and corridors, a haunting night tram drift around Wan Chai is mainly a fascination of the animator. In this case, it somehow matches with what Andre Breton says about everyday life as ‘haunting’ and ‘ghostly’. In the frame of fabricated image, the fascinated historical world of Hong Kong is a ‘fantastic’, dream-like fairy land. In fact, many local young animators have shown quite a similar attitude towards nostalgia and memories. They are mainly born in 70s or 80s who never experienced tough time in earlier time, like shortage of water, insurrections, etc. their memories of the past is the period of childhood or based on legend of ‘old’ Hong Kong from their ancestors. Although I cannot generalize all the younger animators that they are lack of a historical experience, their memories of the history are very different from the older generations.

Actually, in the experience of visiting Stella So’s home, I have an unfamiliar feeling towards those antiques that she collected. Some are like museum objects which have a distant relationship with me, the history of those objects are surely not my memories as I do not use them any more in my everyday life. And then I realized that, for people who born in different period of time would have their own sense/feeling of history.

Talking about objects, there are a lot of found objects in Stella's home. They are mainly objects that were being eliminated from modern society like old oil lantern, boat bell, typewriter; or something that is disappearing like old fashion hair-cut chair, a street platform scale, a gramophone etc. She can spend almost a \$1000 dollars just to move the item to her home. We can see this fetish habit is dominant in her animations, as I said before, the images of old objects are the protagonists. Although they are combined as collages, each moment for audience would be different; they can find something to focus on each moment or in each part of the shots. It has a poetic power of juxtaposition and as an animator, Stella So can take the full advantage of tendency of disparate objects to take a new meaning, within this new relationship, numerous symbolic form and meaning of objects can be generated, and individual context of each items can be changed from isolation to wholeness and totality. In reality, Stella So's strategy towards objects is very similar in her animation. She would D.I.Y some of those objects like adding light bulb to be a wall lamp, or re-cycle other old stuffs to be a new furniture and turn it to be part of her everyday life. Nevertheless, objects still remain their permanent identities of the period they represent, so we would not cut off from the historical context too far in re-telling history. It somehow keeps all objects alive, and as Lewis Klahr said, "The transience of the materials, their permeability to time and shifts of cultural value render them strangely eternal in the end. It is as if time were discovered to be infinitely malleable because every object in the world has a clip-art equivalent, so nothing ever really disappears."

Of course, I have to admit that my cultural sensitivity is not mature when I am writing this critical analysis; also a limit of time diminishes the quality of the essay. I still enjoy the research process as a chance to explore what I am truly interested in, although what I researched on may not solve my question; I find more possibilities to answer it and to use these data to re-create another series of art works.

Lilian,

It's great pleasure to read this essay. It is informative (-- I now learn more about Stella So's back stories and would like to revisit her works). It also shows an active, inquisitive mind raising questions and seeking ways to address them. There is a strong presence of you – the curious, sincere researcher – throughout this essay. I also congratulate you for your ability to integrated many issues we have raised and covered in this semester and they are rather integrated in your discussion. The best part I like is the session on objects, which you have argued well and substantiated with a good quote by Vishmidt.

The 4-point argument on how animation may actually function the same way as the photographic media (including video) can be more succinct. I am also a bit concerned with the use of the term "fabricate" when it is not clearly defined (and this is tied to the contrast between animation and photography). If all we want to say is that fabrication is in all acts of creation, how useful is the term then? I believe there is a difference to mark when highlighting the act of fabrication. Give it a context: is it used in the context of representational practices, cultural politics, subversion, the assertion of individual creativity, a performative act, or...? In Stella So's case, the notion of collage is closely tied to fabrication. You have got a good

description of her collage method – the shift of emphasis from characters to visual objects etc. Perhaps there can be more integration.

On the whole, given the limited time, you've done a very good job. Your essay-writing skill is strong – you've got a promising writerly sense.

Looking forward to seeing your final creative piece. And yes, you could have ended your essay by discussing how you responded to the questions you've raised and your findings via creative treatment.

Linda

Referneces:

Marina Vishmidt (2004), '[Lewis Klahr--Marina Vishmidt on the film collages of Lewis Klahr.](http://www.lux.org.uk/featured/klahr.htm)' c2004
<http://www.lux.org.uk/featured/klahr.htm>

Stella's blog: <http://stellaso.blogspot.com/>