Documentary power: Women documentary filmmakers and new subjectivities in contemporary Taiwan

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This essay discusses how documentary filmmaking opens up a space for women to intervene in contemporary debates on the question of subjectivity in Taiwan. The argument is fleshed out with two case studies: a film by an indigenous woman documentary filmmaker and the other by a middle-class young mother trying to establish herself as a professional artist/scholar in the age of media technology. With its focus on the ethical response to the marginalized other in the indigenous community as the thematic concern, Si-Manirei's *And Deliver Us from the Evil* (2001) intervenes in contemporary indigenous movement in Taiwan by breaking new ground in thinking about the constitution of indigenous subjectivity. *Somewhere Over the Cloud* (2008), on the other hand, addresses the ambiguous impact of media technology on the constitution of subjectivity in a world of transnational image/labour flows. Though very different in their concerns and narrative styles, the two films by Taiwanese women filmmakers not only open up new dimensions in thinking about the gender politics in documentary filmmaking but also illustrates the impact of media technology on the everyday life as well as the professional space of women from different ethnic backgrounds.

This essay discusses how documentary filmmaking opens up a space for women to intervene in contemporary debates on the question of subjectivity in Taiwan. The argument is fleshed out with two case studies: a film by an indigenous woman documentary filmmaker and the other by a middle-class young mother trying to establish herself as a professional artist/scholar in the Internet age. Si-Manirei's *And Deliver Us from the Evil* (2001) portrays how documentary technology helps the director, a nurse of a public health clinic on Orchid Island, gather a group of indigenous women to provide nursing care for sick, old people, which is a taboo in indigenous Tau tradition. The film intervenes in contemporary indigenous movement by breaking new ground in thinking about the constitution of indigenous subjectivity. In mainstream indigenous discourse, the subjective indigenous 'I' usually takes the centre stage as a site of strategic resistance against the traditional objectification of indigenous people in history. With its shift from the focus on 'I' to the ethical concern for 'the Other', the documentary points to a new way of conceiving indigenous subjectivity. No longer addressing the indigenous question in terms of self-identity, consciousness, or the reclaiming of lost rights, the documentary suggests a concept of indigenous subjectivity as constituted by its ethical response to the Other. It points to a Levinassian horizon where the central question is 'being for the other'

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rather than that of being or beingness (Levinas 1998, 8–9; Peperzak 1993, 131; Davis 1996, 78).

Somewhere over the Cloud (2008), on the other hand, addresses the ambiguous impact of media technology on the constitution of subjectivity in a world of transnational image/labour flows. The film demonstrates that as modern technology becomes increasingly indispensable to the construction of human subjectivity, humans are turning into 'cyborgs', in the terms of Haraway (1991, 149). Posing disturbing questions about 'human nature' and inter-personal relationships in the age of globalized media production and consumption, the film sheds light on the high stakes of ethics in making what Michael Renov calls 'domestic ethnography' (2004, 218–9).

The two documentary films discussed in this essay give us a glimpse of women's vibrant documentary filmmaking activities in Taiwan. *Somewhere over the Cloud* won 'Special Mention Award' at the high-profile Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival in 2007, and 'Jury Special Mention' award in 2008 Taiwan International Documentary Film Festival. The director Mei-ling Hsiao is now recognized as one of the most promising young Taiwanese documentary filmmakers. Si-Manirei is one of the very few indigenous documentary filmmakers in Taiwan. *And Deliver Us from the Evil* was chosen as the closing film for the first Taiwan International Ethnographic Film Festival in 2001. Though very different in their concerns and narrative styles, the two films demonstrate how women in Taiwan use documentaries to pursue their dreams and intervene in public debates on the issue of subjectivity. At the same time, the directors also reflect critically on their own film-making activities and the impacts of documentary filmmaking on their lives and communities. For women in Taiwan, documentary power delivers mixed blessings.

Documentary and the formation of subjectivity in contemporary Taiwan

One of the prominent features of documentary filmmaking in Taiwan is that women directors make up a large proportion of the documentarist population. This is a marked contrast to feature film industry in which almost all celebrated directors are men – e.g. Ang Lee, Hsiao-hsien Ho, Edward Yang and Ming-liang Tsai, to name just a few. When it comes to contemporary documentary filmmaking in Taiwan, women directors are often in the spotlight. The advancement of media technology, such as the invention of light-weight camera and the increasing low cost of computer facilities, certainly exerts a subtle impact on the gender politics of documentary filmmaking. Documentary filmmaking appears more accessible to women, for it requires much lower budget than traditional feature films. In addition, numerous film festivals began to proliferate in Taiwan since the 1990s and helped further create a congenial environment for women documentary filmmakers. The festivals provide screening venues other than theatres, which demand complicated business dealings often beyond the power of individual filmmakers.

The emergence of prominent women documentary filmmakers has significant implications for the formation of civil subject in contemporary Taiwan. If, as many critics have pointed out, documentary filmmaking in Taiwan since the mid-1980s has been deeply involved with various social movements and public debates on what constitutes a civil subject (Chiu 2007; Lee 1994; Jin 2005), the active participation of women in documentary filmmaking opens up a space for women to intervene in the debates. Some women documentary filmmakers, e.g. Wei-ssu Chien, Hsiang-hsiu Li and Liang-yin Kuo, delve into the historical past in their attempts to re-vision the constitution of a Taiwanese subject, whereas the others – e.g. Tai-li Hu and Mei-ling Zhou – address issues such as the

indigenous question or queer politics that have gradually come to light after the lifting of martial law in 1987. Documentary filmmaking by women is gaining momentum in contemporary Taiwan. What is particularly striking about this specific phenomenon is that in a lot of the documentaries by women, 'subjectivity' is not treated as 'given' but something that is disturbingly problematic. This is very much in line with contemporary theoretical views on subjectivity as 'non-static', or, in the words of Judith Butler, 'performative' (Butler 1991, 18; Juhasz 1999, 208). In the following, I analyze Si-Manirei's *And Deliver Us from the Evil* and Mei-ling Hsiao's *Somewhere over the Cloud* to demonstrate how women from different ethnic backgrounds in Taiwan use documentary filmmaking to negotiate with mainstream discourse of subjectivity and, in the process, reflect critically on the mixed blessings of media technology in the creation of new subjectivities.

Negotiating with indigenous cultural tradition

Si-Manirei's *And Deliver Us from the Evil* is a film shot on Orchid Island – an island off the southeastern coast of Taiwan with a small population of about three thousand indigenous Tau people. Si-Manirei is a nurse working at a public health clinic. The film shows how she uses documentary films to promote nursing care for the elderly and the sick that live separately from their families in compliance with traditional indigenous taboo. Indigenous people believe that diseases are caused by what they call 'anito' – spirits or lower gods. It is believed that they would inflict misfortune on those who come close to them. Before the housing of modern architectural design appeared on the island, these people under taboo live in a separate space, but still close enough for the family to provide basic care for them. The replacement of traditional tribal housing with modern housing

Figure 1.   Traditional three-element housing unit: a semi-subterranean house (front), a work house (left), and a roofed platform (right).

designed for nuclear families results in a situation that makes daily connection of the family with the people under taboo extremely difficult. According to a doctor interviewed in the film, such taboos are indigenous peoples' ways of making sense of phenomena beyond their power of understanding.

In times past, indigenous people who came into contact with dying or old people with contagious diseases might have contracted the diseases and died shortly. These incidents of mysterious death were attributed to the doings of 'anito'. The taboo against the contacts with the sick and the elderly was a way for indigenous people to cope with the mysterious death and stop the spread of contagious diseases. In the film, a doctor with Western medical training is interviewed by the director to give a modern interpretation of the taboo. In addition to drawing on the medical expertise of the doctor, Si-Manirei exploits the affective power of visual images by staging shots of the skinny, bonny bodies of people under her care. These shocking images apparently carry persuasive power. Si-Manirei eventually persuades a group of about forty indigenous women to help her with the tough work. Together, these indigenous women fight against all odds, even against the resistance of some elderly people who insist on abiding by the indigenous belief and refusing their help.

The camera, an invention of modern technology, is presented as a threat to indigenous tradition. But while in Taiwan's mainstream indigenous resistance discourse, the camera is usually associated with imperialist, oppressive, violent penetration into indigenous territories, it comes to stand for the 'good' in Si-Manierei's hands – an ethical presence calling for one's 'response-ability' to what Emmanuel Levinas calls 'the nakedness of the face' – the destituteness and hunger of the Other (1969, 75). Thus, in line with the recent development of indigenous ethnographic filmmaking happening elsewhere in the world (Nicholas 1994, 63; Ginsbury 1999, 157), Si-Manierei rewrites indigenous people's relationship to modern technology. Although the film still operates with the opposition between indigenous cultural tradition and modernity, modernity is not conceptualized unquestionably as a force to be overcome by the indigenous people. This is a point worth elaboration. The indigenous movement in Taiwan began to emerge in the mid-1980s – the era of social movements in Taiwan, which led to the democratization of the Taiwanese society. Since then, the question as to how to constitute the indigenous subject has been on the top of the movement's agenda. In mainstream indigenous discourse, there can be detected a basic pattern of reconstituting the indigenous subject. First of all, very often the constitution of the indigenous subject is seen to hinge on the resurrection of 'authentic' indigenous culture. Hence a binary opposition between indigenous culture and modernity is built into the discourse. A great emphasis is placed on the preservation of indigenous culture against the encroachment of modernity. Secondly, what is at issue is usually the male indigenous subject position. The quest for indigenous subject position is often implicitly cast as a quest for male indigenous identity. Moreover, the indigenous speaking 'I' usually proclaims his subject position by critiquing the negative impacts of modernity on indigenous culture and tradition. The writer Syaman Rapongan, the most celebrated Tau writer often taken to be the spokesman for Tau culture, is a case in point. His works consist mostly of prose writings that show his efforts to reclaim his identity as a Tau man through reconnecting with indigenous Tau cultural tradition (Chiu 2009). They demonstrate how the opposition framework usually operates in indigenous discourse.

However, as various critics have noted, such a conceptualization of indigenous culture tends to hinge on a problematic notion of 'authenticity' (Langton 2003, 83; Perkins 2003, 99; Clifford 2007, 17; Himpele 2008, 104–8), or, in the words of Faye Ginsburg, 'cultural refrigeration' (Ginsburg 1995, 283). The 'fossilization' in the performance of

'authenticity' may run the risk of 'locking individuals and groups a priori into a genealogy, into a determination that is immutable and intangible in origin' (Chow 1998, 17). *And Deliver Us from the Evil* reminds us that the institution of indigenous subjectivity does not always require an unquestionable subscription to traditional indigenous cultural practices. Si-Manierei's intervention invites a redefinition of the meanings of modernity for indigenous people. Her camera, a material embodiment of modernity, is a controversial presence on the island, making it no longer feasible to conceptualize the indigenous question in a simplistic framework of 'indigenous culture vs. modernity'.

I would like to focus specifically on two scenes to delineate the subversive meanings of the camera in the film. At an early point of the film, we see a group of indigenous women watching a film showing an emaciated woman of, literally speaking, mere skin-and-bone lying powerlessly on a piece of rag, apparently waiting for death. Half way through the film, we are presented with the same image of the scraggy old woman whom Si-Manierei is paying a visit to and taking into her nursing care. It then dawns on us that the scene of the women's film-viewing actually implies Si-Manierei's use of the documentary film in progress to recruit her nursing care helpers. With her camera, Si-Manierei tries to activate ethical 'recognition'. The elderly and the sick are, in a sense, the marginalized 'Other' in the indigenous community. The film urges its viewers to 'recognize' these marginalized others and to engage in an ethical response to them (Figure 2). In Emmanuel Levinas's terms, 'To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger. To recognize the Other is to give' (1969, 75). The scene of 'film within film' therefore suggests the power of the camera in mobilizing indigenous women to work collectively to intervene in the construction of indigenous subjectivity. Instead of seeking to construct indigenous subjectivity through questions about 'being', the film unfolds before us the process of 'passing over to what is other than being', 'otherwise than being' (Levinas 1998, 3). The relationship with the Other replaces the question of 'I' as the site of indigenous subjectivity.

In another scene, we see again the intriguing implications of the camera for the indigenous people. In this scene, Si-Manierei and the indigenous women encounter harsh

Figure 2.   Nursing care for the elderly. Courtesy of the director.

words from family members of the elderly they are visiting. They are charged with disrespect for the family for not having asked for their consent to come and take care of their elderly. Significantly, we only 'hear' the confrontation but do not see it. What we see is grass on the ground, while we hear the family members reproaching Si-Manierei and her helpers. Apparently Si-Manierei was not allowed to continue her filming. She was forced to put down the camera. After a few minutes, the 'grass scene' is abruptly interrupted. The presence of the camera is forbidden. What happens is un-representable. It cannot, and should not, be represented. Paradoxically, the absence of 'relevant' images in front of the camera speaks powerfully of the challenging power of the camera. It calls into question the insistence on reproducing traditional practices. It is noteworthy that these challenges are no longer represented as associated with imperialist, oppressive power that comes from the outside. The challenges are posed by the indigenous women who are trying to negotiate with their cultural tradition. In other words, it is the tradition, rather than 'modernity', that the less privileged indigenous groups have to question in their attempts to define themselves as 'human' subjects.

Indigenous subjectivity redefined

Ultimately, *And Deliver Us from the Evil* points to a new direction for thinking about the re-constitution of indigenous subjectivity. To date, mainstream indigenous resistance discourse in Taiwan stresses the importance of the assertion of the indigenous 'I' *vis-a-vis* the dominant social group. Since the indigenous subject's quest for self-identity through the reconnection with authentic indigenous culture constitutes the narrative plot, the quest tends to be conducted in terms of a nostalgic rhetoric. The notion of 'authenticity' and a hankering to recover the world indigenous people lost in their contact with modernity often dominate the discourse. In the documentary film, Si-Manerei boldly questions the insistence on the re-turn to primordial practices as the only way of constituting indigenous subjectivity.

The documentary calls into question the dominant practice of constituting the indigenous 'I', which relies mainly on the evocation of 'authentic' indigenous cultural practices. Shifting the focus of indigenous discourse from 'I' to the heretofore faceless 'she', Si-Manierei's documentary opens up a new space for indigenous subjectivity formation. In the film, indigenous subjectivity is accomplished not so much in the fight for one's rights to be an indigenous man as, a la Emannuel Levinas, in the infinite responsibility for the Other (Levinas 1998, 135–40). The indigenous subjectivity is represented in the film as constituted by the non-reciprocal ethical responsibility for the Other – responsibility understood here as 'response-ability' rather than 'accountability' (Perpich 2008, 87). Showing their *ability to respond* to the demands of the Other – the sick, the elderly, and those relegated to the margin of indigenous society, the indigenous women intervene in mainstream discourse on indigenous subjectivity.

In this turn from being-in-itself to being-for-the-Other (Perpich 2008, 107), the discourse of indigenous subjectivity is drastically re-formed. Subjectivity is made possible in the 'face-to-face' with the Other – the response to the plea 'of the weak to the powerful, or the poor to the rich' (Morgan 2007, 66) Rather than the persistent representation of the inner world of the indigenous subject in quest of his identity, subjectivity emerges through 'opening' – the engagement in a relation to the Other (Levinas 2006, 63–4). The assertion of ontological 'I' yields to the ethical relationship with the Other. Thus, subjectivity is no longer conceived in terms of indigenous 'essence'. Once the question of indigenous subjectivity is de-linked from the question of indigenous essence and being, the appeal to

'authentic' tradition – the imagined locus of indigenous essence – ceases to be the only way of defining indigenous subjectivity. Ultimately, the film suggests that indigeneity is not something that remains the same. Indigeneity does not rest on 'essence' that cannot and should not be changed. In doing so, they implicitly call for a redefinition of the notion of 'indigeneity'.

Situated within the contemporary indigenous movement, the film makes a significant contribution to the on-going debates on indigenous subjectivity in Taiwan. As the indigenous women in the documentary try to negotiate with the resistance of their husbands, the tribal community, and the people they try to help, they implicitly point to a new way of conceptualizing indigenous (women's) subjectivity, which is not male-oriented and does not posit an unquestioned dichotomy between cultural tradition and modernity. A few words of caution are due here. Although the film implies a critique of traditional indigenous cultural practice, this does not mean a simplistic celebration of modernity. As the director explains in an interview I had with her in 2009, the problem of the sick and the elderly as presented in the film is partially generated by the replacement of traditional indigenous architecture with modern housing design. In a traditional indigenous house, the sick and the elderly would still live *with* their family in a sense even if they inhabit a separate space from the main house. The institution of modern housing design based on the concept of Western nuclear family leaves no room for such a connection.

It is worth mentioning that in spite of the attention the documentary film has received, *And Deliver Us from the Evil* was soon blocked from public screenings because of unexpected complication. For it seems to the indigenous community on the island that the film consolidates the stereotypical impression of indigenous people as uncivilized barbarians. As a result, all public screenings of the film are banned unless members of the tribe are present to circumscribe possible film interpretations with indigenous viewpoints. Significantly, Si-Manirei endorses this sanction. One may suspect that the director cannot help but yield to the community's decision under great pressure. However, in the interview that I had with her, Si-Manirei explained that the documentary was made with the indigenous people on the island as the intended audience. The indigenous audience would be able to grasp understated cultural nuances that the director does not try to elaborate in the film. However, when the film is viewed in a different context with non-indigenous people as the main audience, the representation of the nursing care problem is often quickly absorbed into mainstream discourse to consolidate the stereotyped image of the indigenous people. This certainly is far from Si-Manirei's intention. The sanction of film-screening underscores the need of non-indigenous audience to be educated and gain knowledge about indigenous culture before they try to interpret the film. In other words, the presence of the indigenous perspective often exposes the blind spots of non-indigenous interpretations of the documentary film and ultimately leads the audience to reflect on the limitations of their understanding of the representation of indigenous culture in the documentary.

The documentary therefore exposes not only the limitations of reclaiming indigenous subject position with a nostalgic rhetoric but also the danger of interpreting the film without knowledge about indigenous culture. Thus, indigenous tradition is simultaneously contested and asserted. As Michael Dodson nicely sums up in discussing the indigenous question in the Australian context: 'Certainly, the practice of fixing us to our blood or our romanticized traditions has been a cornerstone of racist practices. But depriving us of our experienced connection with the past is another racist practice' (2003, 40).

Media technology and the empowerment of women

Like Si-Manirei's film, Mei-ling Hsiao's *Somewhere over the Cloud* reflects on the double-edged power of media technology in exploring new possibilities of subject formation in an increasingly modernized world. As in the case of Si-Manirei's film, Hsiao's documentary celebrates the power of the camera to create space for women to accomplish their dreams while exposing the risks involved in the use of media technology. The documentary begins with a strong excitement as a web cam is successfully set up, transmitting the image and voice of Elodie's father Gilles in France to Elodie and her mother Mei-ling Hsiao in Taiwan. The Internet is expected to bridge the long distance between the family members who are forced to live apart from each other because, like so many modern couples, Hisao and Gilles have difficulty finding jobs in the same place. Hsiao decided to leave her husband Gilles in France and came back to Taiwan with her daughter to pursue her career as a filmmaker. To reduce the risk of the disintegration of her family, Mei-ling resorts to the use of the web cam.

The beginning of the film shows how Elodie learns to recognize her father through the Internet digital transmission of his image. For the little toddler who is just beginning to develop her social cognition, 'father' means the image of the man on the monitor screen. In a significant scene shot at a very early stage of Elodie's childhood, Elodie tries to find her father behind the computer. Amused by her vain attempt, Gilles laughs teasingly: 'You won't find me behind the computer. I'm not behind it, I'm in it! Hey, hey, hey!' For the toddler whose first contact with 'father' is with the image that appears on the monitor, 'father' lives *in* the computer. His appearance and disappearance depend on the computer's on/off switch. The film cuts back and forth between the scenes shot in Taiwan and those in France, suggesting Elodie's experience of constant shuttling between the virtual image of
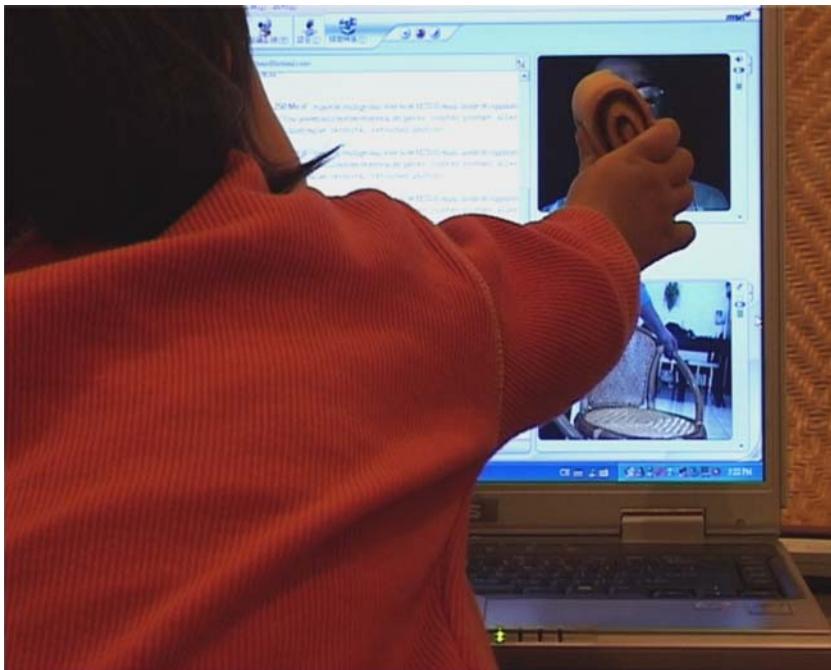

Figure 3.   Elodie interacting with Gilles on the monitor. Courtesy of the director.

the father and the presence of his actual body. Tracing the growth of Elodie for whom the fusion of the human and the machine, the virtual and the real, is part of her daily life, the film throws into relief the increasing important role of media technology in shaping human subjectivity. Children of global image flows grow up with the overlaying of their experience of the physical world with digital information. The physical and the informational/digital are so densely and continuously interwoven' that humans inevitably become 'biotechnological hybrids' – in the words of Andy Clark (2003, 53).

In addition to the story of Elodie and the shaping of human subjectivity in the age of globalized images, the film also tells the story of the young mother/director as an artist in the making. In the film, the mother is the camera. There is almost no distinction between the camera and the mother. With a video camera always in her hands, the mother-filmmaker gains empowerment through an ingenious coupling of her human body with the machine. The fusion of her body with the video camera makes it possible for her to turn the routines of a caring mother into material for her artistic work. For, as a mother with a small baby, she cannot go out to do fieldwork and stay put in a place like other documentary filmmakers do. Struggling hard to do both the job of a mother and that of a creative artist at the same time, the young mother ingeniously makes home a workplace with the help of modern technology. In a sense, she becomes what Haraway calls a cyborg: 'No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological polis based partly on a revolution of social relations in the *oikos*, the household' (1991, 151). The private household and the public workplace merge so that the mother can become an artist, finding in her parenting experience inspiration for her work of art to be.

The question of 'humanity'

Thus, the film presents media technologies as an important source of empowerment for a woman struggling desperately to be a mother and a professional artist at the same time. With the aid of the Internet and the web cam, the mother creates a virtual unity for the family and the possibility for the father in France to reach out for their little daughter half an earth away. However, as the film unfolds, the mother/director begins to realize that the empowering media technology has a downside. The fusion of the human and the machine is not without problem. As time passes, the virtual unity of the family begins to fall apart. The identification of the mother with the camera calls into question the definition of 'mother' since a mother with a camera is not just a 'mother' but also 'something else'. Halfway through the film, the family is shown travelling in Europe. The mother's camera follows the movement of Elodie as she stumbles away from the camera towards what appears like a riverbank. Suddenly, there is a confusing tilt of the camera following a shot capturing the father rushing forward to catch Elodie just before she falls into the river. The father turns towards the camera and says angrily: 'Listen, I swear! If you let her fall in the water, I'll take you and your camera and throw them in too. If she falls in the water, I'll drop you and your camera in the water too. Just like that'. A lot is condensed in this unexpectedly captured scene – the panicking and angry father, and the surprised mother who nevertheless continues to shoot with her camera. We have here all the implicit challenges that the family are brought to confront. What is at stake here is not only the safety of the toddler, but also the marriage of the couple and the 'humanity' of a mother coupled with the camera.

Immediately following this scene is the mother/filmmaker's voice addressing her late teacher and mentor who inspired her interest in filmmaking. It is worth quoting the whole passage since this voice-over reveals the intense psychological struggle of the apparently cool, cyborg mother:

> Dear Robert: I've never been so helpless and feel unsure about my work of filming Elodie. Before I came back to Taiwan, her father brought up the idea of divorce. He said he couldn't stand living with a camera anymore. He couldn't imagine this continuing on for ten or twenty years. All he ever wanted in the past two months was a simple family trip. And I set out like a donkey laden with equipment. He started to call me the camera. He thought my daughter was just a tool to me, a character in my film.

Hsiao is forced to admit that being a 'mother' and being a 'photographer' are two incompatible jobs, often in conflict in the filming process. The human-machine symbiosis, which makes it possible for the mother/director to pursue her dream to be an artist, becomes troublesome. As the symbiosis involves 'user-technology co-adaptation' and as human nature is 'culturally and technologically open' (Clark 2003, 87), the mother follows the movement of her child with both the loving eyes of a mother and the detached vision of the camera. The problem is that these two visions are often in conflict. There is an unexpectedly high price to pay. But nonetheless there is no turning back. As Hsiao sees it, it would mean the end of 'life' for her if she re-turns to the traditional role of a mother and wife and quits filmmaking.

In the process of forging what she believes to be a life of 'humanity' for herself, the mother runs the risk of subjecting the daughter to 'inhuman' treatment and surveillance. Elodie begins to rebel against the camera as she gradually grows up. In one scene, the camera shot shows Elodie turning her back on the computer and refusing to have any interaction with Gilles on the monitor. Gilles makes the point: 'I can see she's really annoyed/ by all of this fooling around in front of the camera/ because she really doesn't understand what I'm saying/ She feels really bored'. Apparently the virtual father can never substitute for the biological father to generate the same warm feelings in human interactions. In spite of all Gilles's efforts to maintain a close relationship with his daughter, Elodie becomes estranged from her father. She refuses to be touched by her father when he is really around, crying all the time and saying: 'Don't!' or 'I don't want it'. In the following scenes, we see Elodie taken to see a doctor of child psychology and then a shaman, as the parents try anxiously to deal with the difficult child. As we watch the child making all the troubles in the scenes, we realize that the mother continues to film and register almost in a nonchalant way the disturbing behaviour of her daughter. The filming is interrupted only when the father comes forward towards the camera and says: 'Okay, it's time to turn the camera off now'. The film ends with a scene at the airport where the father is bidding farewell to Hsiao and their daughter. The final shot shows Gilles bending over to imprint a kiss on the filmmaker's camera lens after making the pointed remarks: 'It's all the fault of the camera'. This gesture implicitly calls into question the humanity of the wife who is increasingly identified with the camera. Rather than enabling the family members to reach out for one another, media technology creates distance.

The film shows how the post-humanist coupling with the machine can open up a space for women trying to forge an identity for themselves. We see how the young mother transgresses the boundary between the human and the machine to re-write the story of housewife and parenting mother. However, the construction of the mother's post-human subjectivity risks violating the rights of her child who is exposed to the omnipresence of media technology in her life. The film is an example par excellence of what Michael Renov calls 'domestic ethnography' which, as a kind of supplementary autobiographical practice, 'functions as a vehicle of self-examination, a means through which to construct self-knowledge through recourse to the familial other' (1999, 141).

Media technology delivers mixed blessings, which have drastically changed human conditions. The documentary suggests that human subjectivity is increasingly implicated

Figure 4.   Elodie seeing her father off at the airport. Courtesy of the director.

in the workings of media technology and thus becoming post-humanist in a sense. It poses critical questions about modern conditions of living: What is 'father?' What is 'mother?' How does 'family' function in a world of modern technology? What does it mean to grow up in an environment deeply implicated in technological networks? How does technology shape human subjectivity? What impact does advanced technology have on our personal relationships and self-pursuits?

Women and contemporary documentary filmmaking in Taiwan

With the decline of the written word in our everyday-life representation and consumption, documentary filmmaking is gaining currency as a new mode of 'creative writing' for young people in Taiwan. Since the 1990s, we have witnessed the emergence of prominent women documentary filmmakers. To provide a full analysis of the breadth and depth of the documentary films produced by them requires space beyond the scope of this essay. The two documentary films are chosen to illustrate the vibrancy of women's documentary filmmaking in Taiwan and its social significance. As one of the few indigenous documentary filmmakers in Taiwan, Si-Manirei shows us how to create through documentary practice a site of critical negotiations with indigenous cultural tradition as well as with mainstream discourse on indigenous representation. Mei-ling Hsiao, on the other hand, focuses on the private space of a middle-class family to address the mixed blessings of media technology in creating new subjectivities. The former intervenes in contemporary debates on indigenous subjectivity, whereas the latter sheds light on the stakes involved in the constitution of human subjectivity in the age of global mediscape. Both are aspiring women artists/professionals who turn to the help of the documenting camera in the pursuit of their dreams. Their critical engagement with the issue of

subjectivity not only opens up new dimensions in thinking about the gender politics in documentary filmmaking but also illustrates the impacts of media technology on the everyday life as well as the professional space of women from different ethnic backgrounds.

Acknowledgements

Notes on contributor

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