

**INTERTWINING GAZES AND VOICES:
REPRESENTATIONAL PRACTICES OF MINORITARIAN
FILMMAKERS IN VANCOUVER**

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Abstract

This thesis aims to reconfigure the conventional practice of ethnographic filmmaking by learning from the insights of four minority filmmakers. Using renewed notions of authorship and creative agency, I explore each filmmaker's approach to film production, as well as her relationship with her work and audience. Because of her unique sociohistorical background, I argue, she is able to experiment with a variety of representational styles and techniques, which in turn reflects the complexity of her everyday experiences. Through 'border filmmaking,' she exercises multi-dimensional/directional vision and speech, and strives to continually transgress and dissolve personal and social boundaries. Such intertwining gazes and voices challenge the conventional paradigm of ethnographic film, which has been built on notions of culture and identity as passive, bounded entities. Thus, I argue for a more experimental, hybrid approach to ethnographic filmmaking that stresses the negotiability of filmic meanings. I also argue that 'shared filmmaking' (collaboration between anthropologist and participants) must inevitably politicize the very process of production both on and off screen, which will consequently enable active dialogues in the academic as well as public spheres.

Keywords: ethnographic film; politics of representation; minority artists; visual culture

Subject Terms: Visual anthropology; Intercultural communication in motion pictures

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I. FADE OUT: Visual Crises?

Today, the disciplinary field of anthropology is undergoing continual negotiation, incorporating alternative methodological and theoretical approaches. But it has yet been able to create a reasonable space for the visual medium. Ethnographic filmmaking, for example, has long been an undernourished realm of anthropology. Although film technology used in anthropological research has evolved, many critical issues surrounding this subfield still remain unresolved. My research addresses and attempts to find answers to the major questions raised by postcolonial and feminist critics of visual research. I will begin my thesis by reviewing the contemporary interdisciplinary debate on the theory and practice of filmic representation. I will then introduce my research aims that I have situated in the spirit of such debate.

Debate on Ethnographic Filmmaking

Since George Marcus and Michael Fischer (1986) declared that there was a “crisis of representation” within anthropology, a growing number of critical ethnographers have challenged the epistemological groundings of academic authority, representation, and meaning-production. Marcus himself has explored the relationship between film and writing. Arguing that “the prestige and sovereignty of Western cognitive frameworks of representations are diminished,” he shows how, unlike the conventional linear writing, film editing such as montage (also known as collision editing) can articulate the complex relationship between time and space, which characterizes today’s plural social formations (1994:39).

Contrary to Marcus’s optimistic view of film, however, ethnographic filmmaking has always been troubled by the issues of representation. The anthropological utilization of film in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was influenced by the dominant paradigm of the time, namely scientific positivism (Henley 2000). It was based on the assumption that the camera was capable of collecting objective data because of its

apparently distanced, dispassionate nature. This view is particularly exemplified in the statement made by Margaret Mead, one of the pioneers in the field: “As anthropologists we must insist on prosaic, controlled, systematic filming and videotaping, which will provide us with material that can be repeatedly reanalyzed with finer tools and developing theories” (1995:10). According to Olivier de Sardan, the goal of early ethnographic film was to establish a “realist pact” with the viewer; that is, filmmaker-anthropologists strived to give an emic representation of social facts (1999:16). To achieve the fundamental principle of realism, editing was done in such a way that the narrative moved logically and chronologically. By carefully concealing how scenes were shot and put together, they attempted to create a seamless continuity and unbreakable reality. Undeniably, such manipulative practices resulted in unchallenged ideological constructions.

As anthropology gradually developed as a discipline that critically reflects on its own practices, filmmakers began to produce works that are subjective and reflexive, exploring new visual routes to ethnographic knowledge. For example, in his films Ruby makes his presence known to both the subjects of study and potential audiences. His films question his positionality within the process of creating a particular reality and encourage the audience to become “aware of their ethnocentrism, as well as the constructed and tentative nature of anthropological knowledge” (2000:186). Like Ruby, MacDougall sets out to problematize the seemingly invisible and omniscient camera that once acted as “a secret weapon in the pursuit of knowledge” (1998:120). He uses his camera instead to emphasize the filmmaker–subject interactions in an attempt to show reciprocal exchange, where observer and observed are less clearly divided.

Self-criticisms of ethnographic filmmakers such as Ruby and MacDougall, however, have yet to engage feminist and postcolonial perspectives that have long influenced interdisciplinary literature on visual research. The primary argument here is that although film’s reflexivity is crucial in interpreting and representing culture, it should not be reduced to a mere inquiry of technique and method. Filmmakers need to

pay critical attention to the very politics of representation, social contexts of positioning, and visual strategies of ideological control—all of which have strong implications of gender, race, sexuality, and so on.

While utilizing feminist film theories of representation and subjectivity, Klassen explains how feminist video takes into account the desires and needs of the people being filmed in order to “meditate the ever-present potential for objectification in visual representation” (1993:40). An example would be Juhasz’s recent video project (2003), which was created by the author and female prison inmates who shared the camera not on the basis of researcher–researched relationship, but as artists, activists, friends, as well as victims. Feminist filmmakers such as Juhasz have explored alternative ways to represent women’s lives in an ethical and empowering manner. Such an approach has come out of the feminist film theory that criticizes the nature of the filmic gaze inherent in the male-dominated world of observation and voyeurism. Film feminism, however, has in the past tended to rely heavily on psychoanalysis, and yielded Eurocentric and heterosexist logic by universalizing such ahistorical concepts as ‘desire,’ ‘fetishism,’ and ‘the female body.’

For example, mainstream feminists have all too often been blind to the specificity of lesbian desire and its role within the systems of representation. According to Mayne, lesbian presence in cinema disrupts the seamless flow of narrative and structure of the gaze, for “lesbianism is both lure and threat for patriarchal culture as well as for feminism, and it challenges a model of signification in which masculinity and activity, femininity and passivity, are always symmetrically balanced” (1990:125). Similarly, Straayer (1996) calls attention to the ways in which images manifesting traits of both sexes (e.g., the “She-man”) destabilize biological–sexual binarism and loosen the rigidities of sexual identity.

Essentialization of sexuality, gender, and race through representation is an enactment of individual and institutional sexism and racism. For instance, Collins argues that the oppression of black women has functioned not only through economic and social structures but also by means of “controlling images” whereby the figure of the

black woman is constructed as objectified Other (1990:77). She describes how this ‘Other’ is constructed through the power relations of seeing, in which objects of gaze are perceived as distorted reflections of the (idealized) image of the Self. In political and historical contexts, the film camera has operated like an investigative colonialist eye, an instrument for controlling the Other. Consequently, “structured into this assumption of the right to look is the power to define and categorize, which is crucial in determining who may or may not initiate or return the look” (Young 1996:48).

Within this critical framework of contemporary academia, an increasing number of anthropologists have started to grapple with the concept of the Other in a self-reflexive manner. As Devefeaux points out, “rooting out the implicit racism and the many manifestation of orientalism in a Eurocentric anthropology, as much as other intellectual traditions, we have grown self-conscious about our focus on the other as the object of our researches” (1995:333). As visual anthropologists, she and others go on to investigate how they are constituted as knowers, as creators and interpreters of visual signs. Unfortunately, although such an approach is critical, it does not necessarily establish and administer non-Eurocentric, democratized research models.

Meanwhile, a number of postcolonial filmmakers (often called Third World filmmakers) have criticized the existing ethnographic film and its principles. Trinh (1995) challenges the power relations often camouflaged in ethnographic filmmaking. According to her, despite the active participation of the subjects in filmmaking, the filmmaker-researcher who is behind the camera still possesses technology and operational knowledge. Referring to the films of Jean Rouch, whose ‘shared anthropology’ model has been widely acknowledged by many,¹ Trinh asserts that the “objectiveness of the reality” of what is observed and represented remains unchallenged

¹ This model was to incorporate the subjects’ opinions and criticisms of the very film they were in; by giving them access to the film, Rouch made possible the corrections that only their response could elicit. For example, he was able to correct the “inappropriate” soundtrack used in his 1951 film on hippopotamus hunting among Sorko fishermen, who commented that the music would provoke the animal to escape (Rouch 1995:224).

(1995:35). Such filmmaking practice, therefore, uncritically claims legitimacy, which acts as the driving force behind the scientific as well as imperialist agendas. While stating that “I am watching myself being pictured as a Savage,” Rony interrogates ethnographic film by employing the “the disembodied eye that observes the observer, the eye that scrutinizes the disciplinary praxis of Western scholarship” (1996:3).

Inevitably, the insights and challenges raised by such feminist and postcolonial critics have motivated ethnographic filmmakers to go beyond the disciplinary boundaries and start conversing with other visual practitioners, such as documentary filmmakers and television producers. As Morphy and Banks (1997) point out, an analysis of the similarities and differences between ethnographic films and *non*-ethnographic films can reveal the very nature of anthropological perspectives and representational processes. Since representational practices vary cross-culturally, they argue, visual anthropology needs to investigate these “different ways of seeing” and how these influence people’s conceptualization of the world (1997:21). Thus, anthropologists’ own visual practices *as well as* non-anthropologists’ visual practices have to be integral to the research agenda.

Such an agenda today has come to entail a collaborative media project in which anthropologists advocate cultural and political rights of people who have traditionally been the ‘subjects’ of anthropological inquiry. Despite its association with colonial history and observational science, visual technology is now being embraced as an innovative form of collective representation by minority activists. Film, as well as other communication forms such as video, television, and the Internet, can act as vehicles for mediating cultural revival, identity formation, and political struggle. For this reason, Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin argue that visual anthropologists now “feel a responsibility to support projects by non-Western or postcolonial groups who are resisting the impositions of Western or global capitalist media; and to support media use by subaltern groups (e.g., women, peasants) or minorities within nation-states” (2002:22). One of the examples is Ginsburg’s collaboration with Aboriginal Australians as part of

“cultural activism,” in which visual media are employed to narrate histories and constitute land claims (2002:51).

Ethnographic filmmaking now faces the need to re-evaluate the link between theory and practice. Anthropologists have just started to explore the visual practices of minority groups in search of diverse representations. The contemporary world, with its plurality of voices and evolving visual technology, challenges the right of filmmaker to re-present. Breaking down the barrier between researcher and researched, between anthropologist and non-anthropologist, offers an array of possibilities for ethnographic film.

Aims of This Research

The co-production of film is indeed a noble, ground-breaking attempt. Such a politically driven intellectual movement to incorporate the historically silenced voices of the Other, however, can potentially be dismissed as a mere ‘anthro-apology.’ My concern here is that the current agenda still takes for granted anthropologists’ institutional influence. While being skeptical of totalizing approaches, well-meaning intellectuals continue to situate indigenous and Third World films in an ‘appropriate’ anthropological framework. At the same time, the ‘native voice’ remains a differentiating category existing outside of the normative Western realm. In my view, inclusion of non-anthropological film practices does not necessarily mean *negotiation* of visual meanings. Minorities are included for the sake of disciplinary reappraisal, but their filmic expressions must conform to the logic that originates in the West. In such an instance, the anthro–non-anthro distinction goes unexplored and untreated. That is, the so-called collaborative project ostensibly creates a unified ‘we,’ not two conflicting (and thus) negotiated versions of reality. Anthropology has yet to develop a practical and ethical filming approach that accounts for nuanced ways people experience, interpret, and represent the social world.

The reason for this epistemological and methodological ‘negligence,’ in my opinion, has largely to do with the lack of attention given to the concept of authorship. Visual anthropology, as well as interdisciplinary media studies, has tended to place visual products in an abstract space of signification, where the author, the creator of such products or ‘texts,’ simply dissolves into a conceptual, almost non-existent entity. This is particularly evident in the case of so-called reception studies, which emphasizes the importance of text–viewer relationship by scrutinizing the audience as socially situated interpreters (media ethnography) or as psychologically motivated pleasure-seekers (psychoanalysis). Another approach has been to solely focus on the text (semiotics), which confines the process of signification to a rigid language system separate from the contexts of production and reception. With regard to film and its industry, these textual and reception analyses have been able to delineate the complex system of meaning-production. But at the same time, each filmmaker’s signature has been erased by such abstract theorizings.

My interest, therefore, lies in this ‘signature.’ That is, I’m interested in paying attention to a *specific* filmmaker’s approach to meaning-making, as well as her relationship with the text and the audience (see Appendix A, which illustrates this epistemological position). My standpoint is different from that of auteurism, which was a key theoretical and aesthetic movement in the 1950s and 60s.² Rather, it concerns an independent filmmaker and her self-reflective narratives constructed through interview—how she *herself* attaches particular ideologies and histories to the images she has created. This standpoint allows me to perceive the filmmaker as a sociohistorical author who, in both her film and our conversation, enjoys representational control over her own film productions, whether or not such productions involve a certain level of collaboration.

² Auteur theory, popularized by the film review *Cahiers du cinéma*, tended to romanticize (and thus essentialize) filming practice. The main debate centered on the issue of filmic distinction, namely, whether a film had a ‘personality’ in terms of technique, style, or theme, and whether it could be attributed to the director, the producer, or the writer.

Attention to creative expressions of social actors is nothing new in symbolic anthropology. But visual anthropology has only recently begun to investigate the site of media production, in which media-makers define their roles and identities within particular institutional power dynamics, such as TV stations (Peterson 2003:161–198). These emerging studies emphasize the process of visual representation by examining “the ways in which individuals and groups negotiate the constraints of the particular material conditions, discursive frameworks, and ideological assumptions in which they work” (Mahon 2000:468). However, even these novel inquires tend to value practice over author, who ends up disappearing in the wider discursive formations. Ever since Barthes (1977) constructed the author as a mere byproduct of writing, the concept of individual agency has become severely limited. Creativity, in this framework, becomes a matter of ‘choice’; that is, selecting or rejecting pre-existing (however socially and historically specific) modes of representation made available to the individual. This poststructuralist attempt to disavow autonomy and the subsequent attack on the claim to author-ity have had rather repressive ramifications, as recounted by Sawicki:

While self-refusal may be an appropriate practice for a privileged white male intellectual such as Foucault, it is less obviously strategic for feminists and other disempowered groups . . . a principal aim of feminism has been to build women’s self-esteem—the sense of confidence and identity necessary for developing an oppositional movement. [1991:106]

Although the Foucauldian notion of discourse and power has been invaluable for theorizing visual practice, there is also a need to account for the creative will of individual agents who engage in a variety of representations that not only reflect their experiences, but also (re)construct the actual world they live in. As Bourdieu (1977) reminds us, symbolic practice can entail social transformation, for personal history and social positioning allow autonomous individuals to improvise and innovate.

Re-evaluation of authorship and creative agency is especially significant for understanding the works of minority artists who have all too often been overlooked by mainstream social theorists. Art-as-ideology model used, for example, by the sociology

of art “has as its corollary a curious lack of interest in institutional factors involved in the production of art, and in the *actual* processes through which art—and its ideology—are constructed” (Wolff 1981:29, emphasis added). Such actual processes can be recounted by none other than the filmmaker-author herself, whose insider perspectives hold much theoretical relevance. For instance, by refocusing on women directors, Levitin, Plessis, and Raoul have found that “the directors remind us that theorists and critics must not forget the practical issues and technical innovations determine aesthetic effects and are also behind the successful delivery of a political message” (2003:10). What is urgently needed is the contextualization of film production—its political economy, history, and culture—voiced by the filmmaker herself.

The question of voice has long been a critical topic of debate especially among women of color. Spivak (1988) has argued that dominant discourses make it impossible for members of subordinated groups to voice any real resistance, since minorities have been obliged to speak in the mainstream terms, thereby generating meanings through established ideological frameworks. But if the production of knowledge is inherently connected to institutional power, then this power itself must be open to challenge. Foucault himself has stated that “discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (1978:101). This is because any discourse, when confronted by another, yields contradictions and ambiguities that can be utilized to challenge the taken-for-granted power relations. If we incorporate in this setting the understanding of creative agency as a source of resistance and social transformation, then we can better appreciate the subaltern voice in filmic representation *and* in social research, including my own.

This perspective is thus tied to my first research aim: *Foregrounding Minoritarian Film*. As mentioned above, my research pays close attention to specific authorship and explores what it means to be a filmmaker. In so doing, I attempt to take up the challenge posed by Foster: “When the subaltern speaks, are ‘we’ listening or are ‘we’ unable to listen? In an age in which there has been a voluminous outpouring of

‘postcolonial,’ ‘emergent’ feminist criticism, a specious lack of dialogue addresses the scanty discourse of Third World women filmmakers” (1997:213). Indeed, such shortage of interest continues to undervalue not only the creative agency of minority authors but also their unique social identities. Yet, as Parmar points out, agency and identity are inseparable especially for members of minority groups:

Being cast into the role of the Other, marginalized, discriminated against, and too often invisible, not only within everyday discourses of affirmation but also within the “grand narratives” of European thought, black women in particular have fought to assert privately and publicly our sense of self: a self that is rooted in particular histories, cultures and languages. [Cited in Bose 1997:127]

Such fights or ‘struggles,’ however, do not necessarily have to assert the politicized Self as essentialized. As I have found out, despite the fact that their films are inherently subversive, all filmmakers I interviewed take a dynamic, even playful approach to self-representation, as they continue to actively learn and make use of mainstream methods of visualization. Their complex and often contradictory representational practices thus reflect their fluid sense of self, which is certainly rooted, but never frozen, in marginalized histories. Consequently, instead of using terms like *subaltern*, *Third World*, *postcolonial*, or *diasporic*, I have decided to use a more ‘flexible’ word *minoritarian* to refer to the filmmakers I interviewed. I use this term not simply to indicate each filmmaker’s marginality (in terms of race, gender, and sexuality that are configured in social power dynamics), but to direct our attention to the multiformity and variability of her social existence. The term therefore suggests constant deviation from multiple standards—Eurocentrism, patriarchy, hetero-normativism, and so forth. While “majoritarian” connotes standards that are abstract and monolithic, “minoritarian” connotes variations that are specific and fluid: “The minority is the becoming of everybody, one’s potential becoming to the extent that one deviates from the model” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:105). This “becoming” entails creative agency that is at once subversive and transformative, and it is this subversive creativity that enables minority authors to continually redefine and rewrite their identities through their representational

practices. In this thesis, I will discuss this complex interplay of identity and agency, which characterizes minoritarian authorship.³

Minoritarian authorship is firmly linked to the politics of not only identity but also resistance. As Lowe explains, the works of minority cultural producers are situated at a distance from those of their mainstream counterparts, and these works more than often become a site of resistance to various forms of domination (1996:ix-x). In this post-industrial, neo-liberal era, resistance movements have indeed become very much embedded in the cultural sphere. The pervasive growth of mass media and visual technology has meant that one's identity is now closely interwoven with representational processes. That is, the 'relations of seeing' based on the notion of 'difference' play an increasingly key role in constructing hierarchical subject positions. At the same time, since "all visual images . . . are an omnipresent aspect of all human relations" (Banks 2001:177), film functions to reflect, reaffirm, or disrupt social power dynamics. For this reason, we cannot separate film's political value from its aesthetic value (Doane 2004). As hooks points out, "one can be critically aware of visual politics—the way race, gender, and class shape art practices (who makes art, how it sells, who values it, who writes about it)—without abandoning a fierce commitment to aesthetics" (1995:xii). By foregrounding minoritarian films, therefore, I will bring to the fore not just their artistic vision but their roles in resistance politics, that is, their 'interventionist' strategies.⁴

³ The potentially problematic ramification of this labeling (minoritarian) should be mentioned here. As Chow notes, "the conscious representation of the 'minor' as such . . . leads to a situation in which it is locked in opposition to the 'hegemonic' in a permanent bind. The 'minor' cannot rid itself of its 'minority' status because it is that status that gives it its only legitimacy" (2005:593). It must be emphasized, however, that any majoritarian–minoritarian relationship is specific to sociohistorical context and thus does not forever remain oppositional. While a dominant group strives to create and 'naturalize' a certain system through ideological legitimization (majoritarian standard), a subordinate group may choose to destabilize the system through deviation (minoritarian variation). Such majoritarian–minoritarian interaction not only transforms the system in question but also unfixes the boundaries of *both* groups. In this thesis, I will apply this thinking to cinema (as an institutional system) and discuss how the minoritarian filmmakers challenge its Eurocentric, heterosexist, and patriarchal conventions.

⁴ Ghosh and Bose use the term *gendered interventions* to illustrate multiple levels of women's pragmatic resistance, which characterize "collective movements, patterns of smaller resistance, as well as individual and singular acts of resistance" (1997:xix). We can also include 'racialized,' 'queered,' and other such 'minoritized' interventions to point to the existing social inequalities as well as diverse aspects of resistance.

Such interventionist strategies crisscross many discourses and unsettle established ways of seeing. This perspective leads to my second research aim: *Reconfiguring Ethnographic Film*. Here, I again turn to Foster's claim: "The speaking, writing, and filmic creative 'testimony' of non-Western women challenges the crossing borders of feminism [and in this case, anthropology] and arguably transforms and problematizes academic pedagogy" (1997:213). Thus, I will link what I have learned by foregrounding minoritarian film to the rethinking and revisioning of ethnographic film. 'Learning from' minoritarian film means re-learning the very nature of ethnographic film through comparison, and this is what Morphy and Banks have meant by "different ways of seeing" (1997, discussed above). Through this 'bottom-up' analysis, the line between academic and non-academic ways of seeing can be challenged and blurred. A truly practical and ethical filming approach is to integrate with, rather than represent, the gazes and voices of so-called ethnographic 'subjects.' This integral relationship is at once methodological and theoretical. It also implies deconstruction, for we must inevitably place ethnographic film within larger histories of colonialism in order to locate its oppressive filming conventions and look for moments of rupture and change.

Understanding of minoritarian authorship and interventionist strategies not only yields a transformative potential for anthropological thought and representation, but also urges ethnographic filmmakers to redefine their roles. Russell argues that film as an alternative to conventional ethnography can carry a subversive, political agenda: "If ethnography can be understood as an experimentation with cultural difference and cross-cultural experience, a subversive ethnography is a mode of practice that challenges the various structures of racism, sexism, and imperialism that are inscribed implicitly and explicitly in so many forms of cultural representation" (1999:xii). My ultimate goal, then, is to set in the motion a new critical interdisciplinary debate on ethnographic filmmaking, which will embrace and expand theoretical, aesthetic, as well as political possibilities that go beyond 'anthro-apology.'

II. CUT TO: Research Design

Analytical Framework

For this research, I have relied on major analytical approaches taken by women of color, as they encompass many perspectives of feminist and queer theorists, as well as important aspects of postcolonialism, poststructuralism, and postmodernism. By utilizing critical reflexivity, women theorists of color have paid attention to the specificity of history in order to identify and overcome multiple forms of hierarchy and oppression (Shohat 1998). They have also addressed the interlocking effects of such categories as gender, race, and sexual orientation that characterize today's plural social formations (Ghosh and Bose 1997). These critical tactics have been vital for my first research aim, which is to understand minoritarian filmmakers' approaches to meaning-making, as well as their interventionist strategies. In other words, these analytical tactics have allowed me to acknowledge the multiplicity of social experiences and reflect on its political implications. At the same time, this reflexive stance has enabled me to carry out a 'bottom-up' analysis that not only problematizes ethnographic film but also puts forward new directions for anthropology, which is what I set out to achieve in this research.

My research also echoes the commitments made by women theorists of color to emphasize minoritarian voice and agency. Storytelling has had a central place in feminist research, for women's personal narratives render *and* confront social structures and power relations. Moreover, as mentioned above, women of color in particular have shed light on the intersectionality of oppression and its effect on one's social location. This is indeed a significant move away from the "focus on the position of women whereby women are seen as a coherent group across contexts, regardless of class or ethnicity, [which] structures the world in ultimately binary, dichotomous terms, where women are always seen in opposition to men" (Mohanty 1988:78). Emphasizing minoritarian voice, therefore, means not just maintaining the shared spirit of resistance movements, but also scrutinizing each speaker's social positioning, as well as the specific context in which she

speaks. In this way, her unique agency, including her method for negotiating a range of meanings, can be recognized. Using this analytical approach, my research explains how a particular filmmaker interprets and represents the social world. More specifically, the filmmaker *herself* explains—in the form of personal narrative—how she defines gender, ethnicity, and sexuality, and how she has incorporated these meanings in her work. What needs to be noted here is that she has claimed her subjectivity not just in and around her film but through the very act of filmmaking, and by recounting this subjectivity during our conversation, she adds another contextual, discursive significance to it.

Similarly, her relationship to the filmic text must also be contextualized. For example, how she evaluates her own work may be different *now* (during the interview) compared to *then* (during the production). Paying attention to the situatedness of the author–text relationship, therefore, allows us to see further aspects of the film’s authorship. For this reason, I do not intend to ‘convert’ the content of her film into a fixed written description. The conventional treatment of images in ethnography has been anything but monopolization of meaning on the part of the ethnographer; that is, by imposing his or her own interpretation on the image, the ethnographer ignores the possibility of multiple readings. Thus, as Strecker points out, “we only do justice to people if we let them fully develop and express the ‘images they live by’” (1997:217). My research, then, focuses on the meanings the filmmaker gives to her work, including her intended agenda as well as her retrospective assessment. In her retrospection, the filmmaker also relates her work to the circumstances of film production (i.e., material, technical, and institutional conditions) and to her audience (i.e., reviews and reactions). By discursively situating herself as an author–speaker, she shows us her unique approach to meaning-making, as well as the nature of her creative agency.

Strategies of Inquiry

Because of my particular epistemological approach to dealing with the issue of voice and authorship, I have chosen semi-structured, in-depth interviewing as my primary

method. This relatively informal and context-sensitive method has given me an opportunity to generate rich, relevant data that resonate the interviewee's subjectivity. Qualitative interviewing, however, is not without limitations. For instance, it is heavily dependent on individuals' capacities to verbalize and recollect; and yet, people are not equally expressive. Moreover, it generates information in a 'designated' place instead of the 'natural' field setting (Creswell 2003:186). Interview is a social situation where meanings are created through interviewer–interviewee interactions. For example, my questioning technique based on assumptions and expectations, directly or not, has influenced each interviewee's responses. What is more, my apparently 'considerate' attempt to create a particular milieu, where each interviewee would take the lead and frame our conversational experience, has also affected her speaking position. Thus, her seemingly spontaneous 'voice' cannot be presented without context. This voice has also been shaped by her culturally specific understanding of interviewing and her previous experiences of being an interviewee *and* interviewer (i.e., some of the filmmakers have used interviews in their documentaries). By employing critical reflexivity, I have thus given attention to the very context of interview and its social dynamics. Consequently, I have treated my interview data as a unique "negotiated text" (Fontana and Frey 2000: 663). In the subsequent chapters titled "Narrative Portrait," I will show how each filmmaker and I have contributed to the production of situated knowledge.

Qualitative interviewing alone, however, does not produce a holistic picture. Therefore, prior to the actual interviews, I used supplemental avenues to further appreciate the background of each filmmaker participating in my research. These include media representations of the filmmakers (film reviews, film festival guides, TV interviews), our introductory and other casual meetings, and in one particular case, public exhibitions that showcased her artworks such as photography and painting. Through these avenues, I was able to develop a set of discussion topics or 'Interview Guide' (see Appendix B). For example, knowing that some of these filmmakers have additional artistic backgrounds (and it in fact turned out that *all* of them do), I was able to include in

the Interview Guide the idea of intertextuality—whether a filming style may resemble a painting, and so forth. As for the actual viewing of their films, each filmmaker provided me with information about the specific works she wanted to discuss, so that I would have enough time to watch and reflect on these films prior to the interview.¹ I continued to use supplemental avenues after our interviews, which subsequently helped me reflect on the filmmakers' comments from different angles. This has thus allowed me to engage in ongoing processes of conceptualization and interpretation.

The actual interview itself was recorded and transcribed for analyses. With the use of a tape recorder, I was able to obtain in-depth answers while attending to the interviewee's style of speech and the specific dynamics of our interactions. Despite these advantages, the seemingly objective nature of tape recorders must be problematized. For example, each interview was often interrupted by phone calls and tea breaks, during which time the recording was put on hold, and subsequently our conversation turned more 'natural.' This multi-paced, disruptive nature of our dialogue is not evident if one listens to the recorded tape. It should be noted also that my tape recorder could not fully capture the distinct 'atmosphere' of each interview that contained non-verbal cues, nuanced interjections, and so on. Once transcribed, our conversations became textually and visually realistic, allowing me to see how the interviewer and interviewee 'think,' and as a result, I was able to grasp the process of our thought exchange—a 'negotiated text' in the making, to be exact. However, the transcribing process itself was very selective, since it often required my skewed judgment of what would go into the text, that is, guess work for indistinct words. These drawbacks have certainly affected my

¹ My initial plan was to view each filmmaker's work *with* her and have a discussion, following the example of Pink's "talking around video" approach (2001:89). This, however, did not take place in every filmmaker's case. Some already knew their films 'by heart' and suggested me to watch those at Video Out library, a non-profit video distribution center, or lent me a DVD copy, which I watched on my computer at home. In other cases, the viewing experience was more public, such as film festival and premiere screening. These specific circumstances of viewing have affected my relationship with each film and resulted in different levels of familiarity. In each Narrative Portrait, I will discuss in more detail the context of each viewing (i.e., how the film was displayed and viewed) and its ramifications.

approach to dealing with the issue of voice. I have, therefore, utilized my field notes to critically think through the implications and to supplement my analyses.²

The Participants

Women filmmakers, particularly ‘minority women’ filmmakers, are still relatively few in North America. And yet, since the early 1990s, they have become a distinct socio-political force. As Kaplan explains, “minority women have, against all odds, produced a wealth of independent films of many kinds; they have adopted a plurality of themes, styles, and ideological perspectives, as befits their actual diversity” (2003:20). Minoritarian filmmaking is distinct in that it implicitly or explicitly operates in the common context of struggle against all forms of social inequality, while at the same time representing and accentuating heterogeneity. Most minoritarian films are produced independently, meaning that the filmmakers are directly implicated in all creative stages, from scripting to editing. Furthermore, in the case of North America, they are usually produced in metropolitan centers, where the constant transnational flux of people, capital, and information shapes everyday social experience (Marks 2000). Artistic vision of minoritarian filmmakers thus reveals the complexities of contemporary society.

Consequently, I have decided to focus on a group of filmmakers who, in a variety of ways, manifest such social significance of minoritarian filmmaking. Since minoritarian film production is a small yet unique emerging phenomenon, I have decided to concentrate on individual contexts in the form of case studies, instead of attempting to locate statistical patterns. This focus on context is also relevant to my research aims, which concern *specific* filmmakers’ approaches to meaning-making, as well as re-learning of ethnographic film through bottom-up analyses. Hence, I used a “theoretical sampling” strategy, which was closely informed by my theoretical position and literature

² My field notes are essentially ‘afterthoughts’ in that these were written, after each interview or casual meeting, from memory. These include descriptive notes (description of the physical settings and activities, as well as the filmmakers’ memorable comments that were not recorded on tape) and reflexive notes (my thoughts and feelings about the contexts and dynamics of our interaction).

review (Mason 2002:124–125). My view that minoritarian filmmaking is contextual and influenced by multiple social positionings thus led to the following sampling range:

Age: 20s-30s

Class: various ways of balancing the profession with other jobs

Education: (non-)Western education for academic and filmmaking skills

Ethnicity: immigrants from Asia living in (Greater) Vancouver

Sexual Orientation: straight, queer

Style: documentary, narrative, experimental;

“short film” (< 45 min) or *feature film* (> 45 min)

I then used this range of contexts as a guide to find potential participants. The number of participants depended on whether I would be able to make meaningful comparisons in order to achieve a well-rounded understanding of minoritarian filmmaking. Since my analytical stance prompted me to look for detailed personal narratives in spite of the limited length of this thesis, I chose to initially rely on three cases. Later on, as my research progressed, I decided to include one more case in order to strategically generate complex sets of contextualized narratives. With these four narrative accounts, I was able to carry out comparative analyses in the light of relevant literature, and then to contrast their themes and concepts with those of ethnographic filmmaking. In this way, I have been able to establish a wider resonance while at the same time bringing forward suggestions for future ethnographic filmmaking.

My search for potential participants was not only guided by my theoretical view but also affected by practical issues of access and resources. Within the still marginalized field of independent filmmaking, finding ‘Vancouver-based immigrant Asian filmmakers critically involved with issues of subjectivity’ turned out to be a rather difficult mission. It required careful planning, interpersonal skills, and cross-cultural sensitivity to gain entry to the world of ‘art cinema.’ With the help of Vancouver Asian Film Festival, Citytv, Pacific Cinemateque, and several local film organizations and schools, I have been fortunate enough to become acquainted with four filmmakers, who have generously agreed to take part in my research. They are all accomplished in the field of independent filmmaking; in fact, as it turned out, most of them know one another

from schools, artist organizations, production centers, and so on. Through networking and media representations, I became aware, even before I first met them, that all these filmmakers are engaged in exploring subject matters similar to my research, such as immigrant diaspora, cultural hybridity, cross-gendered/cross-cultural experiences, and political issues of race, gender, and sexuality. Knowing that the participants are familiar with these critical discourses made it necessary for me to consider the implications of representing those who are capable of, and accustomed to, representing themselves.

For example, the very notion of ‘sample group’ entails my subjective labeling practice, which places a person in a permanent, fixed category. My particular emphasis on age, class, and education (described above) is based on the literature that portrays minoritarian filmmakers as trained artists who also work for wage or salary to support their ‘emerging’ career (for example, Marks 2000:13; hooks 1995:128). But during the designing stage of this research, I never really considered the possibility that some minoritarian filmmakers may not see themselves this way, or regard their age, class, and education as determinants of their artistic vision. Similarly, my conceptualization of ethnicity and sexuality can be problematic, which is based on the view that metropolitan Vancouver is home to vibrant Asian and gay communities. Arisaka, for instance, warns against forcing nameplates on individuals: “Because of the undiscriminating racial sense in which the term ‘Asian’ is used, if one is from Asia or is an Asian American, almost without exception one is expected to know something about Asian thought and is thereby ‘given some authority’” (2000:224). Just as the category of ‘women’ has a history of contested meanings, she argues, the complexity of being ‘Asian’ must be scrutinized. Likewise, Butler criticizes the coercive categorization of sexual difference (gay, lesbian, bisexual, straight), as she keenly asks, “What happens to the subject and to the stability of gender categories when the epistemic regime of presumptive heterosexuality is unmasked as that which produces and reifies those ostensible categories of ontology?” (1990:viii). To scrutinize social categories, then, is to acknowledge and problematize this majority-controlled social ordering. This also applies to the mainstream classification of film style,

which I initially adopted rather unthinkingly. Since the participants' filmmaking careers are at different stages (i.e., the number of completed films varies from one participant to another), it is inadequate to claim that each of them has a 'regular' style. Moreover, as it turned out, none of them see themselves as 'just' filmmakers or videomakers,³ for they are also versed in other creative mediums (painting, writing, music, performance, etc.) and thus emphasize the importance of such interrelatedness in their films.

The challenge for me, then, has been to recognize and delineate different significations of ethnicity, sexuality, film style, etc. in particular contexts. To this end, I have followed the example of "the multicultural feminist project [that] places 'minorities' (racial, sexual, religious) *in relation*, without ever suggesting their positionings are harmoniously identical, while also envisioning ways in which diverse histories and cultures parallel, intersect, and allegorize one another" (Shohat 1998:6–7). By carefully interweaving the meanings each participant has chosen to negotiate through our conversation, including her own self-descriptive terms, I have thus analyzed her positionality in a way that not only respects her agency but also relates, with the help of relevant literature, her experiences to those of the other participants.

Ethical Considerations

The real challenge, however, goes beyond categorization and self-description. As already mentioned, the participants in this research are very much capable of, and accustomed to, representing themselves. In my introductory email to these filmmakers, I described my research as a 'collaborative project' which would 'empower minority women filmmakers working in the independent film industry.' But I soon realized that this was rather careless and arrogant. After reading the remark made by the Brazilian

³ The line between film and video is not easy to draw, due to film-video transfers for editing, digital proliferation, and general and scholarly tendencies to use 'film' as an all-encompassing term ('film festival,' 'film criticism' etc.). For these reasons, the participants themselves use 'film' and 'video' interchangeably when referring to their works. In this thesis, I will use 'film' to discuss their works for theoretical and analytical consistency. However, the importance of technological, aesthetic, and social differences between these two mediums will be noted where appropriate.

filmmaker Ana Carolina—“What I want to say is in my films, not in my interviews” (cited in Foster 1997:218)—I thought that my approach to interview and ‘give voice’ to accomplished filmmakers sounded very disrespectful towards their artistic works. Therefore, when the four filmmakers responded to my inquiries with enthusiasm, I was not only surprised and moved by their generosity and openness, but also burdened with some important questions: For whom do I do research? Why are these filmmakers interested in my research? These questions inevitably led me to reflect on my love of creative writing and its possible connection with the filmmakers’ artistic passion. Long before I started this research, I happened to scribble in my journal:

Who’s my reader/audience? Do I even need one? I’m not telling a story that others can enjoy. I’m just writing what I imagine/dream. But then all of a sudden, I start weaving deliberate political/moral meanings into my fantasy world—and how I hate that! Guess I have something to communicate to others—faceless ‘audiences,’ to compensate for my extreme shyness in speech. But then, who’d listen? Who’d bother? [Jan 13/03]

This trifling yet lingering ‘struggle,’ combined with my critical review of literature, subsequently helped me re-evaluate the notion of voice and the concept of authorship (as discussed in “Aims of This Research” above). This research, then, is a result of combining my love of writing with my passion for film, through which I have set out to pave the way not just for filmic and disciplinary reappraisal but also for social change. My struggle with meaning-making, however, is rather passive when compared to the participants’ own experiences, and such differences must be noted. As I found out, all four filmmakers actively elaborate on their works through film festival forums and program guides, websites (some their own), mainstream media interviews, and, indeed, this research. Consequently, their dynamic relationship with interpretive communities has become one of my key analytical concepts, which will be discussed later in this thesis.

Another ethical issue I was obliged to grapple with is the power dynamics inherent in the research process. Feminist scholars have long criticized the exploitative and objectifying nature of positivist research, and as an alternative, they have sought to bring the participants at the center of knowledge production, asking them to actively

contribute to the shaping of research process. I myself have tried to ‘democratize’ the researcher–participant relationship, often fighting against academic expectations and assumptions. Still, I was constantly reminded of my ‘structural power’ associated with the academic institution. For instance, the very notion of research ethics (the signing of informed consent form, benefits, confidentiality, etc.), which originates in the Western cultural traditions, came across rather puzzling to some of the participants, and I was compelled to ‘justify’ its formality. As it turned out, the participants’ own approaches to dealing with ethical issues and relationship-building required in film production are much more flexible and open-ended. While frankly agreeing to let me use their real names and film titles, therefore, they readily put trust in my research. I was also encouraged to be more casual, as one of them kindly said to me, “Don’t be afraid to ask anything.” They have been very understanding throughout this research, even when it took me, due to stress and time management issues, almost three years to produce a result for them to see. Without their open-mindedness, I would never have completed this thesis.

Had it not been for their openness, furthermore, my research aims would have gone down the drain. Prior to meeting each participant, I needed to consider how ethnographic film and its images would be understood by her. Since I did not know if the participants had any prior conception of anthropological practice, I brought to our introductory meetings a copy of *Rethinking Visual Anthropology* (Morphy and Banks 1997), which contains several stills of both conventional and recent ethnographic films. With this book, I tried to articulate my research aims to the participants, especially the point of ‘linking’ ethnographic film with their filmmaking experiences. In retrospect, this little introduction of mine was rather officious, and it may have subsequently influenced their responses to my interview questions. Nevertheless, they were very understanding of, and even sympathetic to, the postcolonial feminist critiques of ethnographic film, and all willingly shared the value in the purposes of this research. In fact, because the filmmakers were aware that their narratives would be analyzed within a critical framework, they keenly related their perspectives to my stance on filmmaking, while also

enjoying representational control over their own films. In this way, we were able to generate contextual interview data ('negotiated texts').

Since the production of situated knowledge is also affected by interpersonal relationships, I had to critically and reflexively assess my role as a researcher, and how my gendered, racialized, sexual, and national identities would shape my relationship with each participant. For example, my own uneasy perception of my Japanese citizenship, stemming from Japan's past imperialism and continued oppression brought by its neoliberal influences in Asia, inevitably forced me to speculate how the participants from the neighboring countries would think of my nationality and how such views might affect this research. At the same time, I tried to find some common ground to establish a close relationship with each participant. Thus, during each introductory meeting, I spent some time talking about my background—how I have lived one third of my life in Canada as a foreign student and how my identity crises and cultural sensitivities have led to my interest in anthropology and film. Through dialogue, I then tried to place these experiences in the contexts similar to those of the participants. Still, I was careful not to ignore the importance of "acknowledging how the dynamics of where we are always affects our viewpoint and the production of knowledge without privileging one particular position over another" (Wolf 1996:14). For example, as a straight woman intending to interview two lesbian filmmakers, I particularly felt inclined to pay close attention to the complex issues surrounding gay rights movements, as well as the political and aesthetic significance of Queer Cinema. Most importantly, I was compelled to re-examine my own 'minority' status. What is ironic is that I am trying to gain academic privilege (master's degree) by making use of minoritarian narratives. This fact in itself must be open to critical scrutiny, for my unquestioned claim to minoritarian status would not do justice to the participants. I must, therefore, write from the perspective of a would-be "anthropologist who has come to know others by knowing herself and who has come to know herself by knowing others" (Behar 1996:33).

Writing Strategies

I have organized the rest of the thesis in such a way that related topics appear in meaningful sequences. Chapters III through VI are the filmmakers' narrative portraits, arranged in the chronological order of the interviews. These portraits consist chiefly of the 'negotiated texts' that illustrate how each filmmaker and I have contributed to the production of situated knowledge through interviewing. I so intend to interpret and elaborate on these texts that the minoritarian voice still plays a key role throughout the portrait.⁴ Each portrait, then, contains interwoven themes and concepts that characterize the filmmaker's positionality and creative agency. In chapter III, Bernadette talks about her approach to reconstructing the past, sharing of subject position with her film participants, and the significance of film-viewing context. In chapter IV, Desiree talks about her visualization of desire, subversive use of humor, and social critique that draws on her everyday experiences. In chapter V, Kai talks about her experimental method that instigates active viewing, her use of her body as a subtext, and her multimedia approach to filmmaking. In chapter VI, Hoi Bing talks about exploring the space of in-between, her approach to mixing real-life and fictional voices, and her use of out-of-focus shots.

In chapter VII, I compare, in terms of relevant contexts, these generated themes and concepts with the help of literature ('Foregrounding Minoritarian Film'). I explain how the minoritarian filmmakers utilize their multi-hyphenated gazes and voices to disrupt the direction of looking (and speaking) relations, which, as a result, enables them to challenge the established regime of representation, and to strive for inclusive social transformation. In chapter VIII, I discuss how the filmmakers' intertwining gazes and voices can help deconstruct ethnographic film's binaristic approach to meaning-making, and propel it towards a representational practice that embraces contradictions and ambiguities ('Reconfiguring Ethnographic Film'). In chapter IX, I briefly consider how ethnographic film can engage the public and pave the way for social change.

⁴ Since the participants have generously allowed me to be on casual terms with them, I have kept the informal nature of our conversations, including my use of their first names.

My writing attempts to delineate the particularity of the participants' narratives, which have been constructed through the dynamics of our interviews, while also suggesting that their narratives may lead to wider discourses through dialogic encounters between the participants and the readers of this thesis. My approach, then, is essentially that of ethnographic narrative, which is "a mode of research embedded in multi-voiced dialogue where research participants have central space. As such, the participants speak to multiple audiences" (Dossa 2004:6). For this to take place, therefore, I attempt a kind of writing that embraces the nuances of each participant's speech by elucidating not only her social positioning but also the context of our interview. This will, hopefully, establish intersubjective connections through which she converses with, and argues with, readers from all backgrounds.

I also attempt to write in a manner that shows my positionality, that is, how my interpretations flow from my own sociohistorical experiences and theoretical approaches. To this end, I intend to argue reflexively by utilizing my field notes and clarifying my bias and limitations. The most difficult challenge, however, is to recognize the very politics of my argument—how I generate 'ordered packets' of meanings out of the participants' narratives, and how this may affect their subjectivities in wider contexts. 'Negotiated texts' notwithstanding, I cannot disguise my analytical, academic voice that shapes, and perhaps limits, the range of meanings generated through the participants' narratives. Moreover, my ostensibly seamless, linear writing should not overlook the fact that the interview data is bound by time and space, and that the filmmakers have moved on and done more artistic projects. Just as fragmented film stills do not tell the whole story, my research only contains the filmmakers' views and comments that are tied to particular moments. Yet through discursive practice, this thesis will inevitably become part of the phenomenon I am studying, that is, minoritarian filmmaking. I write, therefore, by emphasizing the constructed nature of my arguments, and by paying attention to my interpretive choices and their implications.

III. NARRATIVE PORTRAIT: Bernadette

Behind the Camera

I first came across Bernadette's name while skimming through the 2003 Vancouver Asian Film Festival program guide. Her brief biography accompanied by a picture of her radiant smile almost naturally caught my eye, and at once I started speculating about her documentary titled "New Arrivals"—its narrative, style, and possible link to my research. I had just entered the MA program at the time, and had yet to concretize my research aims. I nonetheless felt excited about the fact that her work focused on issues I too had pondered often: immigrant diaspora, memory, and the "North American Dream." Attending its screening, therefore, became an inspiring experience.

In the theater filled with an anticipating audience, the film was introduced by Bernadette herself, who noted that it was very much a personal piece and that she would leave the interpretation up to each viewer. Indeed, although the film told the stories of two newly arrived Filipino immigrants, Bernadette's own narration strongly resonated with their hopes and struggles in a poetic way. The screening was then followed by a Q & A session, during which time she happened to mention the Hollywood's depiction of North American life she had seen in the Philippines, and how it radically differed from the reality that awaited her in Canada. This critique also intrigued me, and I finally decided to approach her in the corridor afterward to ask, rather bashfully, if she would be able to spare some time for an interview. I was humbled and elated by her pleasant reply.

But it would take me almost half a year to design this research and yet another six months to prepare for the actual interview. During this long-drawn-out process, Bernadette kindly gave me support through our occasional email exchanges, and also agreed to meet with me for a more thorough introductory conversation at a café near her place. She was familiar with the nature of anthropology and thus keen to know what exactly I planned to accomplish with her film on one hand and ethnographic film on the other. Besides my interest in 'different ways of seeing,' I told her about my hope of

working in the independent film industry some day, and how my research reflected such passion. After lending an ear to my story, Bernadette recounted her own view on independent filmmaking—that it exists not for money but for passion, and that gaining practical as well as interpersonal skills through volunteering is crucial in the field. Her expert insight and abundant advice meant that our relationship was not merely that of researcher–researched but that of amateur–professional. After the subsequent interview, she suggested that we take snowboarding lessons together, and we became more comfortable in each other’s company. As we made trips to and from Cypress Mountain, my initial concern about making a ‘meaningful’ conversation in her car diminished gradually; we simply enjoyed chatting about everything from music to ethnic foods.

The interview itself, however, was somewhat contained in that the presence of the tape recorder compelled both of us to generate ‘relevant’ information within the given time and place. In mid-October of 2004, Bernadette welcomed me to her cozy, sunny apartment, and we first took our time to enjoy the jasmine green tea she prepared, talking, at the dining table, about the artworks on the walls (most of which were her paintings), as well as her photo albums. I also had the chance to meet her mother, who greeted me with a warm smile. But once the interview got under way, our dialogue became rather wary. The very first question on the Interview Guide (‘what is your background?’) turned out to be too broad, and Bernadette in turn asked me what sort of answer I was expecting from her. I had worried that the Interview Guide might be too specific, but now realized that some of the topics and the words I used to convey them in our conversation were either confusing or ‘abstract.’ When I first approached her at the film festival, I was just a curious spectator; now I felt like a clumsy journalist armed with jargon and self-interest. I was grateful, therefore, that she attentively asked me to clarify the meanings so that she could respond in a more elaborate way. After the interview, I apologetically admitted that I was still learning how to ask questions. At the same time, I was relieved to hear her comment that she nonetheless enjoyed sharing her stories with me.

Mary Bernadette Guevara was born and grew up surrounded by her extended family in Manila, where “a huge sense of community” formed an important part of everyday life. She received private Catholic education, through which she learned English. Although “the language of the street” is Tagalog, most Filipinos are familiar with English due to the strong Western influence brought by cables, satellites, and English-language movies: “It’s a culture that’s very embracing to Western society. But the culture has this Filipino identity. So it’s a balance.” At the age of 19, she came to Canada with her mother, who had applied to immigrate as a skilled worker; the rest of her family, including her father, stayed behind. She felt lonely in the beginning, and the rainy environment didn’t help much either: “I found myself being quiet; learned to be quiet. Not expressing enough. I talk less and listen more I see more and observe more than react to things.”

Although her education was temporality put on hold because of the visa situation, she soon started attending the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design to advance her training in filmmaking, which she had started at the University of the Philippines. It was not hard for her to be interested in film not just because of her love of art but because she had been inspired by the “larger than life” Hollywood movies. Locally produced, modest-budget films didn’t excite her much, but she adds, “I like Filipino films because I can really relate to the stories, relate to the characters, just by the way they look Now that I’m here in Canada, I can appreciate it more. I see Filipino culture right there on the screen Now it’s a bit of a novelty for me. On TV you see Filipino culture, but outside the window it’s snowing!” At Emily Carr, she was able to broaden her theoretical perspectives on film culture. Although she “didn’t get taught of a certain style,” it was nevertheless “a good training when it comes to thinking and organizing my thoughts.” For example, discussing with her classmates a particular movie and realizing how it had affected the viewers, including herself, turned out to be a “liberating” experience. In this critical context, she worked on several small film projects, and after graduation, she continued to engage in creative work, including graphic design,

animation, and a video project for her church. At the time of our interview, she considered her graduation project, “New Arrivals” (2003), as her most significant work, which subsequently became the key topic of our conversation.

Her POV

Gaps and Flashbacks: Poetics and Politics of Memory

Bernadette’s biography in the VAFF program guide explains that “her presentation style [used in “New Arrivals”] replicates memory or nostalgia, where images and ideas are presented separately (separated by black—mimicking the act of blinking or forgetting) but still coming together as a whole.” In our interview, she further elaborated on this point for me:

I wanted to make it look like a memory . . . there’re ‘blanks.’ Some people might have thought it was a technical thing . . . why gaps? Black gaps refer to somebody who is blinking, taking a break from the views they see, dreaming and waking. There is no straight flow . . . not that there is no continuity. This is the style of how you collect your memory . . . the things of the past incorporated with the things that are happening today around you.

These reflective pauses and blinks remind us of the motions associated with nostalgia. But for her, nostalgia is by no means redundant or negative: “Nostalgic is not happy, but neutral; melancholic, sad, but not tragic . . . there is a little hint of hope.” The act of recollecting, therefore, allows us to make peace with the past, while also embracing the present as well as future. Her film explores this very process by re-creating the past and evoking the feelings she experienced as a newly arrived immigrant: “I said in the film, ‘I looked at my old pictures . . . went back to the same place, same spot, to feel the same kind of feeling.’” By juxtaposing the still pictures of then and the reconstructed film shots of now, she is able to translate the past into the present, while at the same time conveying a sense of transition. What is more, for me, the black gap between two images symbolizes the very space in which Bernadette exercises her agency. Within this contemplative space, the “I” of the present is greeting *and* leaving the “I” of the past, that is, remembering *and* forgetting, thereby rendering this moment (i.e., blinking) a sense of

empowerment and growth. In so doing, she demonstrates how important memories are to our identities, our sense of self.

Reconstructing and representing the past, however, requires a depth of awareness and sensitivity. Bernadette told me how difficult it was to establish a perfect shot based on the pictures from her photo albums. She had to “locate that specific spot and get that similar frame on camera . . . [but] the viewpoint of a still picture camera is so different from a video camera; it has a different aspect ratio, different framing.” This was as much a technical issue as an aesthetic challenge, for she wanted to translate not just the image but a whole range of emotions associated with it. A friend of hers who offered to help with shooting, for example, could not figure out how the past felt like, “because she was not there when the picture was taken.” Bernadette, on the other hand, needed to look back to her own past and create nostalgic images that bear witness to the feelings of loneliness, uncertainty, as well as determination. Thus, watching her film, for me, was like watching her not just uncover memory but rewrite personal history in a very evocative and reflexive way. The film is indeed a testimony to her embodied knowledge.

Self-Representation and Intersubjectivity

Much as her film is about her own immigrant experience, it also narrates the stories of two other “new arrivals”: Celina, who came to Canada as a registered nurse but only found work as a domestic helper, and Daniel, an architect, but currently working at a gas station and a McDonald’s restaurant. I asked her if she had intended to show the shared feeling of alienation, caused not just by cultural difference but by the realization that the “North American Dream” has double standards. Her answer was rather unexpected, hence thought-provoking:

One of my goals, yes. But I wanted to create something where I could express *everything* I’d been feeling . . . from the moment I arrived at YVR till the day I finished the film . . . the whole journey squished together into this 15-minute video. I wouldn’t even consider that a finished video documentary. But that was as far as I was able to do when it comes time and resources. I wanted to express

whatever it was that I was feeling without boring another person. If you express too much of your life, it will bore another person.

Her reason for not making her film ‘autobiographical’ in the conventional sense prompts us to reconsider the very notion of ‘self-representation.’ Her approach is at once personal and intersubjective. When sitting alone, she would ask herself, “Am I the only one feeling this way? Why not go ask some people how they feel? Why did they decide to stay? What’s keeping them from going back to the Philippines?” By talking to people and spending time with them, she soon discovered that many were indeed going through similar experiences and feelings: “They have different reasons, but the bottom line is that everybody would just like to live a better life than how they use to live. They just found out this is a wiser thing to do. You’ll struggle. You start really low, from square one. Eventually, you’ll get over it and things will be fine.”

Among those she talked to were Celina and Daniel, long-time friends of hers. She found that the three of them were in the same place, “in the middle”—although they were not done with hardships, they were nonetheless working towards new beginnings. Indeed, at the time of our interview, Celina, who lived with her employer as a domestic helper, was now working as a nurse in the U.S. In addition to his job at the gas station, Daniel had just started doing some design work. And Bernadette herself, now done with school, was working on more films and art projects along with a full-time office job. Her film, therefore, was able to capture these transitions. Celina and Daniel are not mere documentary characters; they played a crucial role in helping her find a motivation to make this film. Realizing that her friends wanted to express what was like being “in the middle,” she, too, thought it necessary to use her own voice: “I’d been quiet for quite a while, so I thought, ‘I’m gonna speak up through film.’” The fact that she occupied the same place as Celina and Daniel enabled her to not only speak with courage but speak *through* her friends, melting their viewpoints into her own: “Experience has guided me in showing what’s good to show, which part of the interview is best—most powerful, but not too private. Even though they’d said a lot of things, I had to pull them out, not

because they didn't want to say it, but because I felt they'd feel too private or personal once they saw it." Her remark tells us that intersubjective representation involves more than just sympathy; it requires us to project the self into the situations being verbally described, sometimes compromising the interests and agendas of the self. Hence, her visualization process crystallizes in conversation, not through the camera lens.

This ethical approach, moreover, takes into account wider social ramifications. When I asked her if she had experienced any difficulty during the film production, she told me that the biggest challenge had been to "get the reality of low-paid workers [at a fast-food chain] and their environment without jeopardizing their jobs, because they might get fired and I would feel so bad." Although they casually agreed to be filmed, the workers were nevertheless careful not to show their faces and logos, and Bernadette shared their fears and concerns. Such class-specific concerns did not always limit her aesthetic principles, however; in some cases she found innovative ways to strengthen her and the participants' expressions. For example, since she could not film Celina's employer's house, she decided to use a friend's spacious house and asked Celina to 're-enact' her cleaning routine: "She's so natural, she actually made it convincing Then the owner of the house said, 'Why don't you clean it up, really?' And the friends who saw the film said, 'Why don't you shoot in my house, too? You can clean up my house!' I think it's just funny." That she, Celina, and their friends utilized humor through her film, despite the reality of hardships, struck me as liberating and empowering. Had it not been for their mutual understanding as well as their willingness to look for the positive in life, such conversation would not have been possible.

I asked Bernadette why she had not fictionalized her and the participants' stories altogether, knowing that she had faced complex ethical challenges. "Why *not* documentary?" she asked me in return:

I've always been a big fan of documentary. I like the way documentaries show the reality of the person's conditions. I think a documentary showing life of a certain person or . . . idea or certain event is more realistic, more powerful It is controlled in some way, but not as controlled as you create a fiction film. I

don't think the film would be as effective if it's a drama. I could totally be anonymous, right? But it wouldn't be that interesting. I let myself become vulnerable for that film . . . vulnerable of criticism, people's reactions . . . vulnerable of just everything. *That's* how it's made, and it becomes so interesting. I just don't see any other way that I can portray Celina and Daniel.

Her account shows us that this sense of vulnerability is the very key to making an intersubjective, and even subversive, film. Vulnerability invites questions and encourages discussions. It also brings discoveries: "I'd never known [Celina and Daniel] that way until I created this film. My friends and coworkers never realized I felt that way until they saw this film. It's like a journal—people don't notice until it's recorded."

Audience and Cinematic Apparatus

Since being vulnerable meant opening her heart to the public, Bernadette told me that she experienced doubts halfway through the production: "I was scared to show it to anyone—too personal." She wanted to keep the experience of struggle and loneliness to herself. But "at the same time, I had the urge in me to show it to them—responsibility to show. Film has to be shown." With the encouragement from others, she thus decided to exhibit her film outside her school as well, that is, at film festivals in Vancouver, Montreal, and Toronto: "While the film was being shown, all I could think about was 'I hope it's over, I hope it's over.'" Since she did not have any support materials, such as a complementary website, the amount of publicity and feedback the film received came as a surprise for her: "I didn't really expect people to like this film, as I said in my intro to the screening, 'I don't expect you to like it, just watch it, and react to it Whether it's positive, negative, not feel anything, it's up to you. I'll be happy with that.'" While listening to her recount her relationship with her audience, I was rather perplexed by its ambivalent nature; but I soon learned that it had to do with not just the sense of vulnerability but her sincere desire to trust her viewers with interpretation:

I trust festival audience, those who like film festivals should have an open mind, because the films are not censored, not conventional: 'watch at your own risk' I thought that if it's being shown in a certain venue, or in a certain event, where a context would be explained, in line with the event's goal or agenda, then I'd show ["New Arrivals"]. But I really think that it's not something

to be shown just anywhere else. Basically I'm curating my own film, just like the way a curator would curate an art exhibition. It's not something to be shown just out there. It's a different kind of art. I think that's what it is. That's what's holding me back from showing it to other people.

Thus, at the time of our interview, her film had only been shown for school and festival purposes: "I haven't explored other venues where I can appropriately show my work—where it would be seen as me, representative of where I'm coming from and not be interpreted or looked as just part of some kind of exhibition." I was, however, still trying to understand why she would not venture further to find a larger audience, since "film is a tool for self-expression for 'ethnic-minority immigrant women' like you" [later I realized that this statement of mine was rather presumptuous and misleading]. She agreed that film is a powerful tool, but also noted the importance of viewing *context*:

It's nice because it's visual. Like a painting, it's visual. And it's audio—so you can tell them. And it's controlled, meaning they have to see it for a certain period of time. Not like a painting—they can choose to just walk past it, if they don't want to. If it's a film, they have to come to a theater and sit down. They should at least commit a few minutes—hours to see whether they like it or not. It'd be embarrassing for them to step out . . . unless they want to make a statement or something.

Because "New Arrivals" is personal, intersubjective, and also vulnerable, she would like the viewer to take time to absorb it and reflexively ask questions regardless of his or her opinion of the film. Finding such a milieu is therefore an important part of Bernadette's representational practice.

She did, however, told me that her film was intended especially for three types of audiences. Her first intended audience are Canadians in general, who are unaware of the experiences of new immigrants, especially those of Filipino immigrants. Her second intended audience are Filipino immigrants and Filipino Canadians. She wanted to give them a sense of solidarity: "'You're not alone. Now things are getting better. If you're in the dumps now, hang on there.' Misery loves company! If you know someone else is going through the same thing as you do, you get strength from that." Her third intended audience are Filipinos back home, many of whom "still have the idea that if they go to

the U.S., Canada, or Europe, they become happy, rich.” The contrast between her film and the Hollywood portrayal of Western life would indeed be significant:

Our excitement of coming here because of what we saw from Hollywood movies was more powerful than the truth we’ve already seen. I just want them to see something that is being done by someone who is from here. Then they can decide if they want to come. Not to say it’s a bad thing to live here, but to show it’s what they’re most likely to experience once here.

She later told me that she was planning a trip back to the Philippines in a couple of months, and that she might take her film with her, so that it could be shown in her home community. In addition to having the international audience in mind, Bernadette explained how she would like to one day make films in the Philippines, where a growing number of people see film not as a form of entertainment but as a form of expression: “Even before I was born, lots of people had used film to show their political views. I’m looking forward to being a part of that—what do you call it—movement.”

“Painting with Light”

After releasing “New Arrivals” to the public, however, Bernadette needed to take a break from creating and being in film, for she had exhausted much of her energy and thought that she was being under people’s criticism and eyes. Thus, it took her some time to be able to reintroduce herself to others, to let them know more about her filmmaking experience. Upon hearing this, I was prompted to ask if filmmaking had become the basis of her identity. Her response was, again, thought-provoking; she told me that she saw herself as “holistic.” Since she had trained herself in other art disciplines such as music and painting, she had been able to communicate her thoughts through soundtracks, as well as create scenes containing abundant colors. She simply happened to work best with the film/video medium: “So I want to be known as a filmmaker, who is enthusiastic about other things.” This view is also reflected in her name card she gave me during our introductory meeting, which describes her as a videographer, graphic designer, and multimedia artist. When I asked her about these self-descriptive terms, her answer was simply, “Oh, that’s for *business* purposes!” Even her name “interchanges”:

known as Mary at work, and as Bernadette among friends (when she happened to mention this during our interview, I, too, started calling her Bernadette).

Her flexible approach to negotiating and representing her identity is one of the reasons why I was compelled to rethink the nature of my own research. All of a sudden, the very notion of ‘minority filmmaker’ seemed rigid and shallow. Thus, in the middle of our conversation, I asked Bernadette, rather abruptly, what she thought about my focus on ‘alternativeness,’ wondering if she would be comfortable with such categorization. This seemed to confuse her a little, so I further went on to talk about my own awareness of self—how it had been formed, in most part, in opposition to the mainstream culture. Her subsequent response gave me a lot to ponder on:

To be honest with you . . . I wouldn’t say I’ve discovered who I am. I’ve discovered what I *can* do and what are the things I want to do But it’s not yet complete—I’m still trying to discover my interests and skills, still searching. What has changed is, I have learned to accept who I am, and my culture. I told you I tried to change my accent . . . but somehow I’m also proud that I do have an accent, that as much as I’m Canadian (I’m a Canadian citizen now), I’m more proud that I belong to this other culture that I have an origin. And that origin is not something I’m trying to reclaim, trying to dig up, trying to take it as mine. It’s already mine. It’s already in me. If I wanted to be Filipino, I don’t have to work to be Filipino, because I already am Filipino. And I’m glad that I’m in that kind of situation where I belong to *both* cultures. I’m starting to appreciate how Canada is embracing of its multicultural citizens. Because I can become Filipino *and* Canadian at the same time and still be part of Canada . . . and be unique. Because you contribute something totally different from anybody else’s.

This uniqueness—the blending of two cultures—is the very component of her gaze and voice, and such blending is in continual progress. It thus explains why Bernadette was careful not to describe her style in a concrete, categorical way. For her, a style of a film changes throughout its production, and a style of a filmmaker changes throughout his or her life: “It comes and goes, right, depending on your mood, depending on the season, depending on the situation. It’s kind of like ‘you grab it and have it,’ and you move on or grow out of that style, but somehow when you move out of that style, you still carry a little bit of that style, and . . . it grows into a new thing.” Thus, a style is constantly available for reflection and reconfiguration.

I asked Bernadette what it was like for her to make films. Her reply, in my view, beautifully reflects her approach to meaning-making. Before entering the film program, she asked a friend in the program what filmmaking was all about: “[The friend said,] ‘You paint, right? When you paint, you paint using brushes and colors; when you do film, you paint with light.’ That pretty much explains everything. I wanna paint with light. I wanna paint with people. I wanna paint with characters and settings. That’s how I paint. So it’s a different kind of painting. It’s a *moving* painting.” This exquisite metaphor not only points to her holistic and fluid creativity but also lets us understand how she transcends personal, geographical, temporal, as well as aesthetic boundaries. Through film, she translates the past into the present, while uncovering memory and rewriting personal history. Her narrative is inspired by, and inspires, those with whom she shares a range of social concerns. Her blending of style brings forth a positive vision that embraces all corners of society. She has made her film vulnerably for the very reason that it opens up space for critical reflection, both for herself and her audience. And in turn, film has given her a strong sense of purpose:

Right now, I’m trying to—actually gaining confidence in what I do I just have to take ownership of that and take confidence from that. It has to have professional quality. There’s an accountability, a huge sense of responsibility. The scope of festivals that “New Arrivals” has been shown, has given me that kind of confidence. I’ve started something that has gone this far. Imagine how well another film would go—it would go further if I didn’t stop. That’s where I’m getting my motivation from.

IV. NARRATIVE PORTRAIT: Desiree

Behind the Camera

I came to know about Desiree through the 2003 VAFF program guide, but because of the evening class I was taking at the time, I was resigned to missing her short film, “Salty Wet.” Yet I continued to speculate about the “visual wanderer” who had made a “karmic journey” across Malaysia, Japan, and Canada. So when I happened to see her on a local television program several months later, I almost immediately recognized her and her pleasant smile. She was commenting on her recent film, “Out for Bubble Tea,” which had been produced as part of the TV station’s *CineCity: Vancouver’s Stories* initiative. Although I only tuned in halfway through the program, I still became excited by the fact that her film, which deals with the issue of ‘coming out’ in a culture-specific context, was being broadcasted on a major media network. The station, Citytv, consequently helped me get in touch with Desiree, who responded to my rather formal inquiry with good grace. Attached to her email was her CV, whose filmography and review excerpts subsequently helped me appreciate her extensive career and background.

A couple of weeks later, we met face to face at a café of her choice. Desiree easily recognized me sitting by the window and greeted me with a broad smile: “Hello. Hajimemashite” [Nice to meet you]. Then Japanese conversation flowed on naturally; I felt like talking to an old friend. Desiree, too, told me that she was pleased to use Japanese after having had little opportunity to do so in Canada. Accordingly, her experience of living in Japan became our first topic, followed by my own experience of studying abroad. I then proceeded to talk about my research aims and procedures, which I found quite difficult to articulate in my native language, and before long, I was substituting English for more ‘academic’ terms in a surprisingly awkward way. Although Desiree didn’t know much about anthropological practice, she was well-informed about the contemporary issues surrounding voice and expression, and on more than one occasions she put my mind at ease by helping me finish my sentences with her keen

insights. We took a stroll along Commercial Drive afterward, enjoying the sight and scent of the local shops and continuing our conversation about her journey across international borders. Mixing jokes with rhetorical questions, Desiree shared with me her sharp observations on the three distinct societies where she has resided—indeed, I soon found that such observations are intricately embedded in many of her works.

Out of her extensive filmography, she suggested eight of her films for me to try. Six of these were catalogued at the Video Out library, a division of Video In production center she was well associated with. The library was homely with friendly staff and a couple of VCR equipments, and I felt free to frequent the place to take viewing notes. Her major feature film *Sugar Sweet* was commercially available, and I watched the DVD on my computer. What I found particularly valuable was its bonus features, including Desiree's commentary and on-screen discussion with the co-writer Carole Hisasue. These helped me not only gain further insight but recognize her deep devotion to her work. Such devotion was also evident at the premiere screening of "Some Real Fangs," where she took the lead in interacting with her guests, while also creating ample room for the actors to voice their opinions during the Q & A session. I was impressed as much by the film as by the sheer enthusiasm and cheerfulness of the cast and the audience.

In late October of 2004, Desiree kindly agreed to meet with me once more at the same café for an interview. Having viewed many a film, I was bursting with questions, but we first went over the bureaucratic requirements (i.e., ethics) and also casually updated each other on our recent lives. For the recording, Desiree suggested that we talk in English, so that I wouldn't have to translate the transcript; this certainly turned out to be quite timesaving, and I appreciated her thoughtfulness. Since the brunch-time café was rather noisy, we had to talk while leaning towards the tape recorder placed in the center of our table. But as our conversation progressed, we talked more freely, taking little notice of those sitting nearby. Because she had already told me much about her background at the previous meeting, our focus subsequently became narrower and more specific than the Interview Guide. Moreover, since I thought I had to cover all the films

within the set time and without tiring Desiree, at times I felt as if I was rushing through the questions. Indeed, while transcribing our dialogue, I realized how carelessly and needlessly I had interrupted her. Despite all these, Desiree was very laid-back and candidly related her views to my often naïve comments about her works. In so doing, she generously let me into the world of her filmmaking.

Desiree Lim was born and raised in Kuala Lumpur. Despite being a third-generation Chinese, she often felt as though she was being treated as a second-class citizen due to the Malaysian government's ethnic policies. There was also no freedom of speech: "There's a lot of oppression in terms of media reports—how news is made for the consumption of the public." For Desiree, who grew up aspiring to be a manga artist, such social injustice became one of the reasons for wanting to leave the country. At the age of eighteen, she decided to go to Japan, the country she had come to know through kendo. After studying journalism at Sophia University in Tokyo, she began working as a producer and director at one of the country's major television networks, TV Asahi. But she soon found, ironically, that the Japanese media was also controlled, however in a different way: "The Japanese media is very self-censored. I can almost say it's an innate mentality to self-censor, *jishuku suru* They don't really say what they think. They say what the company wants them to say." Eventually, therefore, she became independent to tell her own story. Although she had trained in television production (and Western theories) at the university, she developed her own visual skills by watching and reading about films and by briefly attending a film center that specialized in experimental techniques. After making a number of films for almost a decade, she moved to Vancouver in 2001, where she has found more space to pursue her filmmaking career.

Her transnational journey has been, and continues to be, the very force behind her artistic vision. Indeed, her work tells much about being a "culturally diverse hybrid":

I can't really pinpoint which cultures I come from. I'm a mix of a lot of cultures. And a lot of different languages—not just like linguistically but in film, in cultural forms Japanese sensibility speaks to me. Chinese sensibility speaks to me. And Western sensibility speaks to me, too. So I don't consciously break down

my work like that. But I think I get all those kinds of influences in my work. I don't consciously think about it, because it flows through my work, I hope . . .

At the time of our interview, she was working on a few projects both in Japan and Canada and had future plans to make films in places like Hong Kong and Taiwan. Despite her busy schedule, she gave me an opportunity to read one of her latest Japanese scripts when we met again following our interview, allowing me to peer further into her creative world. Although she had not returned to Malaysia since leaving the country, she told me that she would one day like to go back and “do something.” International border-crossing is what makes her filmmaking unique. Within each film, too, she crosses borders of all kinds.

Her POV

Representing the Senses: Poetics and Politics of Desire

In her CV, Desiree writes that she has been “working from a queer artist’s perspective on the themes of gender and sexuality.” It wasn’t until I started viewing her films that I realized how intense these themes could be. For example, I was simply swept away by the vivid sensuality of “eRoTiCiSm” (2001), which is “Dez’s visual experimentation of ‘female eroticism’ through women’s eyes in Japan” (CV). I asked Desiree what had motivated her to make this film:

Not sure. Probably I wanted to have women talk about sex. At first, I thought of getting women together to have a conversation. But it’d be boring; so I thought, ‘I’ll get them to write a poem about sex instead.’ When I first approached them, they were like . . . what? They’re not the kind of people who’re used to writing poems. So I told them to write anything that made them feel sensual, any *kotoba* [word]. And I got them to start thinking, and they just came up with it. They were beautiful.

The poems were written and recited by her friends, whose ages range from twenties to fifties, as well as by Desiree herself. Visualizing each woman’s unique desire, its written symbols and metaphors, was not easy, but Desiree was nonetheless able to collect and put together the fitting images in about two months. Indeed, these visuals and sounds—waves pounding against rocks, burning fire with beating drums, a close-up on a mouth

munching at a fig, etc—drew me into the mesmerizing world of the senses, including smell, taste, and touch. Moreover, since these sensual images were constantly blurred by bright colors and lights, I became apprehensive, almost to the point of being afraid of their mystery and power. Desiree agreed with this interpretation of mine, and added, “It’s about finding your own desire in the images.” Indeed, the film’s title itself makes us ponder about its significations and implications: “In the piece, ‘e’ is actually an *on’na* mark [♀RoTiCiSm]. I’m playing with the image of the word itself. Sort of like a porn art. But also it makes you think, maybe it’s not *the* eroticism that you always think.”

Her daring approach to exploring sexuality is employed to the fullest extent in her debut narrative film *Sugar Sweet* (2001), which has become the first lesbian commercial feature made by a queer filmmaker in Japan. *Philadelphia International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival*, among a number of other positive reviews, calls it “a fun, sexually charged romp” where “the vivid dyke underground is steeped in exotic women, fetish foreplay, and safe sex, but director Desiree Lim skillfully blends eroticism with romanticism” (CV). What I found particularly interesting is the ‘gaze-within-a-gaze’ interaction generated by the film’s ‘movie-within-a-movie’ narrative. For example, in the scene where the protagonist Naomi, a lesbian director, films one of her cast, Miki, we recognize two cameras—Naomi’s and Desiree’s. That is, Miki’s face filmed by Naomi (on REC mode) is juxtaposed with Naomi’s face filmed by Desiree (which suggests that Miki is intently looking at Naomi in return). I asked her if she had created this scene with any specific intention:

I think it’s just what we call the POV of the camera. I don’t find it really that original actually. It’s just a gaze. The only thing I think unique about is, instead of the male gaze, it’s a female gaze. I think you find a lot of it in my work. People sometimes may find, ‘Well, what’s the difference? It’s sort of like being a man and *objectifying* a woman anyway. So what’s the big deal?’ I’ve never heard of it—towards me, I mean. But I can see some people can feel this way. But I just don’t agree. Because women do desire It’s just human nature to look at things, beautiful things, and objectify and sexualize I always just like to play with that, because I just don’t feel shy about it.

Having had read many feminist arguments fixated on the ‘maleness’ of the filmic gaze, I found her response quite thought-provoking. Because desire is human nature, *anyone* can sexualize, exoticize, and problematize anyone and anything through playful innovations. For instance, Desiree and co-writer Carole rewrote the script to include Miki’s exotic dance scene after discovering the actress’s dancing talent (DVD commentary). Since the *Sugar Sweet* production involved a bigger, diverse crew than her shorts, it meant a constant interaction, and Desiree found joy in communicating ideas and skills: “To me, it’s sort of like a circus.” She also told me that many of her innovations used in this film had been influenced by the Shanghai-born, Hong Kong-based filmmaker Wong Kar-wai. His funky, colorful, avant-garde films such as *Fallen Angeles* and *Chungking Express* depict strong female characters; but at the same time, these films are also romantic and melancholic. These seemingly contradictory depictions are due to culture-specific sensibilities with which Desiree can strongly identify and sympathize.

Such sensibilities can be combined with humor, as is the case with “Salty Wet” (2002), her experimental short made in collaboration with the Vancouver-based video artist Winston Xin. Here, they set out to “find out how much queer people know about their own sexual culture” by asking immigrants of Chinese descent to interpret Cantonese and English slang words and superimposing provocative images over their responses. For example, the interviewees instinctively associate “tofu women” with “soft bodies meshing together,” and Desiree and Winston’s subsequent visualization humorously calls attention to the power of such imagination: “It’s not to make fun of them, but to realize that there’s so much to learn about sexual terms . . . and how it can be racialized or sexualized or gendered by different interpretations and different perspectives. A word can mean a certain thing to you, but not to somebody else.” Indeed, the interviewees’ (mis)interpretations are unique in that they employ and combine various cultural and gender discourses, in the same way the film’s title fuses two words (“salty” and “wet”) to suggest a new meaning (“sex maniac”): “In slang, you combine two words but it has nothing to do with the actual act itself. Sometimes it’s interesting to explore what you

think about them. Very provocative, sexually expressive. But playful, turning things into art.” Although we are uncomfortable with such (con)fusions in formal language, we tend to tolerate them in slang, and because slang is deeply associated with sexuality, the life force itself, it has subversive potential for challenging the established norms. Desiree brings forth this potential in her work by penetrating deep into the sensory world with her camera, and by refusing to reduce ‘desire’ to a mere text. In so doing, she makes available diverse sexual identities for herself, her film participants, and her audience, and creates somatic forms of intersubjectivity.

Visual Narrative: “Play with It Subversively”

Humor is very much part of Desiree’s films, as explained by her CV: “Her vision as a cross-cultural, cross-gendered filmmaker contours the artistic flavor and humor in her works.” Although her film style would change depending on the subject matter, she told me that her *visual* style had so far been influenced by manga, comic books: “Not just because it’s comedy but it looks colorful, like *koma manga* [comic strips] But manga isn’t always funny—it can be sad and has a range of different human emotions. But aesthetically it just turns out to be that way. I don’t know why, but it has been . . . up till now.” Her dynamic, comical visualization is especially well manifested in her music video, “Dyke: Just Be It” (1999). Using fast-moving sequences and rhythmic sounds of pots and pans, she depicts her friends in their everyday life (cooking, rallying, motorcycling, craft-making, etc.), and it indeed feels like flipping through colorful comic pages. Moreover, although there is no voice-over narration, the film effectively delivers its message by putting a humorous spin on the Nike slogan, “Nike—Just Do It,” and crediting the women for being themselves (“Dyke: Just Be It”):

I wanted to play a joke on Nike and make [the film] slick and look like a commercial I don’t know if you got the point of it, but it’s like a . . . public services announcement to promote the visibility of Japanese queer women People don’t think . . . a person sitting next to them could be a lesbian. She is a career woman or a student, just a ‘normal’ person. We’re there. But in Japan, there is no awareness. There aren’t even human rights for gay people It’s

out of the frustration. But I don't like resorting to sort of like *kurai* [gloomy] image. I turn that kind of frustration, anger, depression into humor.

Her account offers us an important insight into her positive, uplifting approach to filmmaking. For her, humor and identity politics go hand in hand, for humor evokes pride, a sense of solidarity and empowerment. Because the social injustice against queer individuals is deep-rooted in the mainstream discourse, Desiree's approach is to "take a popular culture, or a genre, or a character, or a figure—some kinda element from popular culture—and *reverse* it and play with it subversively. That's what I like to do . . . and to tell ourselves, 'Don't take yourself so seriously. Life is funny.' I like to laugh at myself, ourselves. That's what I do. That's what I derive from mainstream culture."

Humor, however, can be both light and heavy, and "Disposable Lez" (1999) is one such example. This "black comedy" is "Dez's latest attempt to reflect on the harsh reality of the dyke dating culture with her queer sense of humor" (CV). It tells a story of Urara, who frequently experiences breakups and matchups: "Lesbian relationships are quite short-term and transient, because we're not really bound by what I call, what a lot of people call, heterosexism—marriage, family, kin. So our relationships tend to be fluid—can be anything that we create out of it, because there's no rule, there's no recognition or awareness from the outside world." In this film, accordingly, Desiree humorously summarizes Urara's up-and-down, heartbreaking love story in a memorable catchphrase: "Anytime. Anywhere. Anyone. Disposable Lez/z. Caution: Please use conscientiously and proper consultation with your heart" [narrated in Japanese, subtitled in English]. Here, she is playing with language because the words "lens" (contact lens) and "lez" (lesbian) sound similar to the Japanese audience. I, for one, found the word "disposable" cynical, and thought—ignorantly—that the catchphrase was trying to problematize the notion of disposable (and thus) objectified people. When asked if it was her intention, however, Desiree said that the focus was rather on relationship itself: "Sometimes we treat *ningen kankei* [human relations] like it's disposable. Everything in this culture is disposable As a civilization, we take things for granted . . . throwing

things away. I was playing a joke on lesbians being environmentally friendly because we recycle.” She told me that there is a tendency to “dispose” *but* “recycle” partners within the queer community, for “the majority of people today are straight” and lesbians “don’t have a big pool of options.” I was prompted by her reply to reflect on my own taken-for-granted heterosexual relationship, and realized, much to my embarrassment, that the catchphrase was intended not only for queer audience (humorous message) but also for those in ‘the majority’ (political message). I now better understand her second slogan, which appears after the closing credits have run: “Help! Disposable Lez! Let’s preserve our precious resources. Please help recycle! Be kind to people. Be kind to lesbians.” Humor is not always meant for a temporary comic relief; it compels one to critically reassess the dominant ideology, be it romantic relationship or film theory.

The use of humor becomes even more imperative when a film is broadcasted on a major network during prime time, which was the case for “Out for Bubble Tea” (2003). Set in Vancouver, it tells a story of May, an immigrant from Hong Kong, who is struggling with the issue of coming out to her family as a lesbian. In this film, Desiree went back to “a more basic theme,” although she herself had been “quite over the phase”:

I know there’s nothing out there, in terms of mainstream media that speaks to the larger audience about what you go through when you come out. It’s a very difficult phase. It’s almost like . . . the phase of asking people, society, people around you to accept you as who you are, who you really are. I think it’s not a subject that’s been really discussed in mainstream media. It’s really hard for a lot of young people and older people who come out in the later stage of their life to find a role model, or people who’re like that. They are repeatedly isolated before they get connected to the community It’s very important to have a story like that on mainstream TV. People who watch it, they know that ‘oh, it’s part of life—it’s not something that’s really out of this world.’

And yet, the film had to be toned down, so that “people [would] not feel as awkward or repelled about certain issues or certain subjects.” She therefore turned to humor, for “everyone can relate; everyone likes comedy.” Indeed, I particularly found the use of flashbacks and ‘flashforwards’ (future speculations) very intriguing, and these guided me through May’s inner struggle voiced during her tête-à-tête with her two close friends.

Moreover, despite their cultural conservatism, May's parents were depicted in such a way that many North American parents would understand, and even share, their seemingly innocent viewpoints ("Kids here are different" etc). I somehow 'felt' that the film had a different kind of comical atmosphere compared to her Japanese films, and indeed, Desiree herself raised this point during our interview: "I grew up, like here, watching white people. Everyone on TV is white. We make very very little programming of our own So I grew up watching American TV in Malaysia. That's why I'm so versed in their humor and Western entertainment culture." And because her humor is so versatile, it plays an important role in challenging the line between East and West, gay and straight, while opening a path to the depth of awareness and sensitivity.

Critiques through the Personal Lenses

Quite early in our interview, I asked Desiree, "What do you want your film to do for society?" I suppose this was too big a question, for it took her a moment or so to reply: "For each film, it's different. But in general, it's basically: 'You know what, get out of your little box. The world is so diverse—racially, gender-wise, sexuality-wise, anything.' People tend to get caught up in their own little box and they expect certain things to be certain ways. And if you don't fit that box, they don't care. They don't understand." As our conversation went on, I gradually came to realize that this message does not just stem from her work but from her own personal life experience, which is carefully woven into the worlds she creates/represents. In *Women Breaking Boundaries* (2001), for example, she sets out to document an art festival organized by women artists in Tokyo, and during the process of interviewing and recoding the artists working on their projects, she also turns the camera on herself and her own work, "eRoTiCiSm." The festival, whose focus was women's creative expression of body and sexuality, was the first of the kind in the art history of Japan, but it was not taken seriously by the mainstream art world and media. Moreover, the women artists themselves had conflicting views on the festival's 'feminist' agenda: "There were a lot of women in there

who weren't sure why they were doing it, because a lot of them had this fear of being ostracized as feminists. Actually in the art world no one wants to be called a feminist, because they would be ostracized. In Japan, if you're ostracized as a feminist woman artist, you are not able to climb that ladder." While recording the artists' disputes, Desiree herself decided to address this issue by speaking in front of her camera: "I wish I could be free of roles and labels. But sometimes we need to use these words for our own cause—to challenge the norm and get our messages across." And the word she chose to describe the collective project is *Kojichu* [Under Construction]—'(wo)men are at work' to "prove their existence and readdress the act of art-making" (subtitled in English).

Women Breaking Boundaries is not a documentary in the strict sense, for it tactfully blends the recorded events with a fictionalized news program, whereby Desiree's reflections and criticisms of these events are 'reported.' While being interviewed by a 'newscaster,' she recounts her own experiences of dealing with social roles and labels—how she had to face the fear of coming out as a lesbian. That she decided to tell a personal story in her documentary very much intrigued me, and when I mentioned this during our conversation, she provided me with further details:

When I was working in the TV station [TV Asahi], I was not out. I was making films, but at work I was not known to make these things. The only places that my films get shown are queer festivals or some women's events. The mainstream world and the underground indie world are so separate that they don't know what they're doing on the other side. I didn't feel that it would be to my advantage to come out because I'd hear homophobic remarks all the time at work. I didn't want to be ostracized or discriminated against. So I never came out at work, and I quit the job. I was with them for four years. And then the irony is, when I made *Sugar Sweet*, the *joho bangumi* [information program] from the same station came to interview me. So I came out on their station big time.

Her background story prompted me to point out the similarities between her and Miki from *Sugar Sweet*, a corporate executive who leads an 'underground' night life (i.e., exotic dancing). She, too, has to maneuver around crude homophobic remarks made by her male colleagues, and this painful scene comes directly from Desiree's past: "The sad thing is that the people I worked with are considered elite in the society—they are

educated, so-called journalists.” By utilizing elements of her life, she therefore subjectivizes and politicizes her work, regardless of genre. At the same time, she leaves enough room for interpretation, so that the viewer can process the complexity of represented issues in his or her own way. For example, at the end of “Out for Bubble Tea,” May and her girlfriend are shown moving in together, with a house warming gift from May’s parents; yet I kept wondering about the subsequent family relationship, which is not explained in the film. Desiree, for her part, had this to say: “What really did happen? We don’t know. So at the end, what you *do* know is that she did come out, and her family is probably okay with it. We don’t know to what extent, but they’re probably okay with it, because they’re visiting them. There’re so many levels, different levels of acceptance.” She then told me about her own relationship with her mother, its gradual changes over the years. Because of her own varying experiences, Desiree knows that she cannot place May and her parents into a mold and give a definitive answer. This and her other films show us that in order to get out of our little box, we need to be flexible and sensitive to the limitations and potentials of human nature.

Across Interpretive Communities

Although her main intended audience are queer viewers, many of her films incorporate themes and issues that are also recognizable to mainstream viewers: “The mainstream audience is not as perceptive and open to the stories I have to tell, things I have to say. So part of my work is to find that bridge, to hopefully find a bigger audience.” Besides the use of humor, therefore, her dance musical “Some Real Fangs” (2004) makes reference to the classic issue of the generation gap in a familiar yet upbeat manner. Moreover, Desiree explained to me that this musical was inspired by the popular queer interpretation of *Wizard of Oz*, whose theme—finding and accepting oneself—bears much relevance to today’s identity politics, and indeed, any viewer could identify with the premise. Within this shared context, her film’s primary function, which is a subversive parody of lesbian vampirism in dominant cinema, can be better appreciated by

viewers from all backgrounds. The protagonist, a young Indo-Canadian “vampire wannabe,” has a far more complex and nuanced identity than the archetypes created by white/male/heterosexual individuals. Although shot in Vancouver, the musical was made as part of a shorts series organized by a Japanese production company, and it has thus become a truly transnational film. For Desiree, finding an appropriate avenue to reach diverse audiences has become ever more important, as her filmmaking practice itself has become multifaceted in the recent years. She told me how shocked she was to find very limited media representation of minorities—any minorities—when she first came to Vancouver:

I’d thought that Canada was a culturally diverse country. But everything in mass media is so white, you know. It’s only in the past few years they’re starting to do culturally diverse, visible-minority initiatives to bring more images, and this “Out for Bubble Tea” is one of them. It’s really weird. Why so late? So for me as an artist, it’s great. There’s still lots to do. There’re a lot of challenges and doors to break down. If everything is settled and established, there’s nothing left to do.

“Out for Bubble Tea,” consequently, received many responses from the viewers, including Chinese-Canadian families who had felt ashamed of talking about the issue of sexual identity: “They were glad to see this film and realize that they’re not the only ones. Especially when it’s in an Asian culture, in this case Chinese culture, families do get really isolated with their own problems.”

As one of the artists in *Women Breaking Boundaries* remarks, art becomes art because it interacts with audience. I was particularly reminded of this point when I attended the premiere screening of “Some Real Fangs” and joined the audience who cheered and laughed *with* the characters on screen. When I brought this up during our conversation, Desiree commented that queer film audiences are generally vocal and expressive: “I think it’s the audience’s appreciation of what they’re deprived of. You don’t have the luxury of seeing these kinds of images of yourself and your own stories. So when you see it you really appreciate it, and it sort of comes out in your reaction. That’s why you cheer and you laugh.” The reactions of audience, however, are not always consistent or uniform. For example, when *Sugar Sweet* was screened at the

Tokyo Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, the viewers (who were mostly queer women) didn't know what to make of the film: "I guess I wasn't realizing how outspoken and how provocative this could be I think it came as a shock to them. The images are quite explicit. I also think it's because the Japanese audience are not really expressive, in a sense that they don't laugh." But the audience in Miami, especially queer women of color, were grateful to Desiree for putting on the screen the positive images of minority women "being who they are": "Even though it's in Japanese, I was actually really gratified by that It became a very strong inspiration to me to keep doing what I do."

Desiree's approach to meaning-making indeed involves a crystallization of negotiated encounters between her and her audience. Into a variety of discursive resources she pours new energy—energy of the senses, parodies, as well as intimate lenses that blur the line between her everyday life and the lives she represents. Such subversive energy helps us move from conventional interpretations to transformative ways of seeing and thinking. As she wrote in the VAFF program guide, Desiree is truly "a visionary video artist" who "strives to challenge the fine lines between fact and fiction, earth and fire, top and bottom and any other conflicting elements that challenge the imagination":

My take on life is that a person or life is not what it seems to be. I may look a certain way or you may perceive me as something, but you know that there's more than meets the eye. So I guess I try to apply that kind of thinking—there's just so many ways to look at something. And I think people tend to get caught up with . . . 'This is what it should be,' 'A woman should look a certain way,' or 'If you're Chinese, you must be like this,' or 'If you're Japanese, you must be like this.' So, a lot of people are so stuck with certain ideas. Because I come from so many different elements, I like to try to break that down: Maybe that's not what you think it is. What about looking at it this way? Have you ever thought of this or that?

V. NARRATIVE PORTRAIT: Kai

Behind the Camera

When I first stumbled on Kai's short film "Her" in the 2003 VAFF program guide, I was at once bewildered and fascinated by the accompanying grainy still picture, which showed what looked like a bare torso and breasts. The synopsis read that the film was "a meditation into fantasy and the solitude of love," and accordingly, I started speculating about its meaning and connection with the picture. I would not find out about these until several months later, however, for I could not attend, much to my regret, the screening of the film due to my class schedule. While I went on to design this research, the distinctive image stayed with me. So when I learned that the VAFF website had her contact information, I decided to send her an email explaining, somewhat stiffly, how her film might 'tie in with' my research aims. She gave me a prompt, spirited reply, and after a couple of email and phone call exchanges, we decided to meet for a casual introduction.

Standing on the busy street corner in Chinatown, our rendezvous point, I saw and recognized Kai by her bold yet affectionate expression I had seen in her VAFF biography. After our frank and relaxed greetings, she kindly invited me to her place to watch her films. As we drove to her apartment in her convertible, we intermittently exchanged our personal histories—that we both attended high school after arriving in Canada around the same time was especially a delightful discovery for me. Once at her apartment, I proceeded to talk about my research, while also trying to make connections with her filmmaking and other creative interests, including her colorful art works displayed on the walls. Although she was not very familiar with ethnographic film, her keen commitment to feminist theories and activism meant that we shared many critical perspectives on the issues of representation. After our brief exchange of ideas, I got down to watching on VCR four short films she had selected among her many works, and Kai, in the meantime, put together her CV and filmography for me to take home. Each viewing was followed by a discussion—I would ask her questions based on my interpretations, and she would

explain and relate her views to my comments. These discussions, along with my jottings and Kai's CV, subsequently helped me reflect on the films in a more thorough manner.

Before I met her again for the actual interview, I had the opportunity to appreciate some of her art projects other than her films. True to her self-descriptions—"independent multimedia artist" (email signature) and "interdisciplinary artist" (name card)—Kai is equally versed in a variety of creative mediums. Among these, I became acquainted with her photo installation at Gaywest Vancouver's Queer Culture Exhibition, her mixed-media painting at Onion Gallery's "Rust" Exhibition, and her performance piece at Western Front Performance Art. Before I received invitation from Kai, I had had very little contact with the 'independent' art world, and indeed, I found her artistic space to be rather different from ordinary galleries and theaters people would visit to experience 'art.' Hers had an energetic crowd of artists and visitors who enjoyed a strong sense of community. After coming home from one of the exhibitions, I wrote in my journal with such exhilaration: "Like scientists who use numbers to communicate with one another, Kai and her fellow queer/feminist artists share distinct aesthetic languages to test the limits of human expression—its capacity to invent and subvert." Through our interview, accordingly, I was able to learn the significance of such languages used in her works.

In early November of 2004, we met at the patio of a downtown café of her choice and started talking, more or less spontaneously, about the U.S. presidential election, as well as about our recent lives. After a while we went inside to start our interview; the noise (espresso machine, blender, music) initially concerned me, but we were soon talking avidly without worrying about our surroundings. Before we began recording, Kai told me that she was very much used to being interviewed—in fact, she had one with channel m (CHNM-TV) the day before, and that she was open to any queries. Indeed, I myself had tuned in to her interview with Colour TV (Citytv's multicultural program) regarding her film "Tilted," as well as her interaction with her audience at the 2004 VAFF screening of "A Girl Named Kai." Compared to these occasions, I was able, because of our prior meeting, to ask her more specific questions using the terms and

concepts already familiar to both of us. Her openness and willingness to discuss any issues, even such sensitive matters as censorship and her family relationship, have in turn given me the courage to write more boldly but also considerately in this thesis.

Kai Ling Xue was born in Hualien, “the most beautiful place in Taiwan.” Shy in youth, she turned to art as a key vehicle of self-expression. With the encouragement from her mother, she decided to attend an art school for the talented. There, she broadened her repertoire, including drawing, calligraphy, traditional brush painting, Western oil painting, watercolor, and sculpture. She also learned English primarily from her mother, an English teacher, who eventually brought her and her younger two siblings to Canada for the better chance to learn the language and Western arts. In 1997, she started attending a public high school in Port Coquitlam, where students of color were a minority: “It was hard, but I fit in pretty well, I would say, just making friends through arts.” While her family went back to Taiwan after a few years, Kai, now with her Canadian citizenship, stayed behind to study interdisciplinary media at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design. Her new pursuits included performance art, photography, and filmmaking. When I asked which medium was her favorite, she told me that she couldn’t break them apart. For her, film is an extension of photography, painting, and performance—cinematic expression is very much like a series of photographs or a collection of multiple paintings, through which her body and voice play a central role.

Although she had received financial support from her parents, Kai was also managing various part-time jobs alongside her creative projects. After graduating from school, for example, she had worked as a freelance photographer, a driver, a bar hostess, and a fish-cannery laborer: “I want to see people at different levels . . . to study about our society and see what is wrong.” The cannery job in particular had a profound effect on her, as she shared the pain of drudgery with foreign workers and single mothers during the cold morning hours. Yet far from becoming weary, she found creative inspiration in the very economic constraints she had been under. She took her work materials—including actual fishes—to a National Media Conference to make her plight known:

“People were very shocked. I brought it up as: ‘I’m an international artist. I’ve shown my art internationally since 2001. And as a young emerging artist, I still have to have a part-time job. Now I’m gonna show you a proper way to put on my work outfit, when I’m not a media artist.’ And the title [of the performance] was called ‘Media Artist at Work.’” Kai’s passion for art is fueled by, and fuels, the politics of everyday life.

Her POV

Questioning the “Perfect Image”: Aesthetics of Action

Kai finds artistic and political significance in her personal experiences, including traumatic experiences that would overwhelm and silence most of us. When I attended the opening of her photography exhibition, she briefly told me that the work was her reaction to the physical violence she had suffered three years ago. During our interview, I asked rather tentatively if it was okay for her to talk about the matter. “Totally,” she replied:

I think people are afraid that other people are different. When people see a person very different from them, they get scared. And when they’re scared, they tend to be nervous. And if they’re nervous, they might be angry. Anger brings violence. That’s why I got bashed, because I was different . . . it took me a while to process all that. So that’s why I decided to do performance. I transformed myself to extreme masculine to extreme feminine. It’s a human process—it’s just to prove that I’m capable of being any of those. But as a free person I decide to be this, or that, or that, you know, on my own choice, on my own time.

The photo installation shows eight images of Kai performing ‘gender’ in a continuum—from a most ‘stereotypical’ girl, in terms of costume and posture, on the left to a most ‘stereotypical’ boy on the right. Between these there is no clear-cut line, but the gray space that deals with “the question of what is acceptable.” The installation, moreover, prompts us to see beyond the static appearance: “It’s also about gesture, how you live, how you talk, how you walk. I see that as a public performance. Those photographs are just a documentation of the moment.” Indeed, Kai *lives* gender, which changes from day to day, from moment to moment, and through her work she makes us realize the contingency and flexibility of gender identity. Aptly titled “Gender Fucker” (2003), her installation thus challenges the male–female dichotomy, which is built on the (assumed)

consistency of physical types and role behaviors. Fearlessly political in its effort to address human rights issues, her art simultaneously asserts the right to, and validates, the diversity of human existence and expression.

Such political and aesthetic strategies also characterize her films. In “Kitore” (2002), for example, Kai and Kristina Nameless, her then girlfriend and collaborator, explore the concept of ‘the erotic’ without relying on the conventional depictions of gender (i.e., male/female; masculine/feminine; butch/femme). As an experimental erotica, the film “illustrates the elasticity of eroticism and provides a new language in which to define it” (CV). This language, when written down, can be as foreign as the title itself, which is a backward reading of the word ‘erotic,’ with the filmmakers’ first initial replacing the last letter. Similarly, the film’s visual and aural languages can be quite unfamiliar to the viewer. That is, its images and sounds are so mysterious that it almost feels like being lost in a dream world. In fact, it wasn’t until I asked Kai about the title that I realized, to my surprise, that I had been watching an erotica. During our discussion that followed my viewing, she told me that the film’s messages change depending on one’s perception. Indeed, these “pulsing images,” where figures move ambiguously with hazy lights and deep sounds, are open to any interpretation. Kai further elaborated on this point during our interview: “You can’t even recognize if it’s male, female, transgender, bisexual, what not. You find out on your own The images are so abstract you can see anything you want to see.” Because of this ‘complex open-endedness,’ however, the film had so far been screened in limited venues: “It’s just that it’s very experimental to the point that people didn’t understand. But people don’t have to understand. People tend to be afraid that if they don’t understand it, they don’t like it. But if they watch the colors, hear the sound, and enjoy it—that’s the whole point. I don’t expect people to understand the whole theory behind it.”

Celebrating the abstract is not the same as having a *laissez-faire* relationship with the audience. On the contrary, Kai’s film acts as a critical intervention, for it necessarily compels us to turn our conventional understanding of aesthetics on its head. “What is a

perfect image?” Kai poses us a rhetorical question. Her approach is not to “spoon-feed” the audience with messages, but rather to involve them in active viewing. I don’t have to speak the language of “Kitore”; I can however (re)construct my own language of interpretation—how I view and define ‘the erotic.’ The virtually rebellious aesthetics in her work dares us to break the rigid notion of form and content, and to seek meanings that have traditionally been suppressed. All four films that Kai chose to show me are subversive in this way. She told me that she had been inspired by such independent films as Vincent Gallo’s *Buffalo 66* and Darren Aronofsky’s *Requiem for a Dream* and π (*Pi*). Their experimental, often playful use of camera, color, and sound has generated much discussion among the general public and critics alike, thereby destabilizing the closed turf of mainstream cinema. Kai works for a similar cause: action. Social transformation doesn’t occur through the text; it occurs when the text is digested through active interpretation. Discomfort and fear are an inescapable part of the process. Yet Kai tells us that we can still find enjoyment, not in the text itself, but in the very process of interacting with that text, which, as a result, gives us a sense of empowerment.

Subtext and Subversive Text

Although her art allows ample room for interpretation, Kai nonetheless has particular agendas intricately woven into the text. In many of her works, she experiments with what is probably the most intimate method for creating a subtext—through her body. This practice stems from her experience as a performance artist. For example, she was one of the principal participants in a series called “That 70’s Ho” (2004), an event that recreated and paid homage to the performances done by women artists of the 1970s: “[The title of the series] reclaims and empowers a derogatory term given to women ‘who are not afraid of their bodies and how to use them’” (event leaflet). Kai, however, found this proposition rather problematic: “I’m interested to see what happened, as a female artist. But at the same time, have things been changed, or are we still standing in the same spot? So that’s why I felt the need to be part of it and push things forward.

Everyone just has to pitch in, in order to move things.” She was pointing to the fact that art cannot be separated from social contexts—the contexts that still oppress women:

I do volunteer work for Vancouver Rape Relief Women’s Shelter. I pick up the crisis line. Supposedly from the statistics every minute there’s a woman being raped right now. I pick up lots of phone calls, and it’s just making me angry, as a woman, as a feminist. We live in a dangerous environment—we always have to be careful, watch where we stay, watch while we walk, watch which part of town we’re in. Why do we have to care so much about our own safety?

One of her performance pieces at the event, therefore, dealt with female victimization and resistance. Building on Carolee Schneeman’s famous “Interior Scroll,” the performance ends when Kai, naked and covered with blood, consumes a banana, the phallic symbol, that she had extracted from her vagina. Although I did not see this particular performance, listening to Kai’s account made me utterly stunned, just as her audience must have been. I then realized that one’s ‘empowerment’ cannot take place without first problematizing one’s vulnerability. For Kai, the body is a political medium for confronting women’s social invisibility and vulnerability in the public sphere, and precisely because of this confrontation her art/act becomes empowering and meaningful.

The focus on the body, accordingly, had been an essential component of her filmic self-representation. In “Her” (2001), Kai turns the camera on herself to explore the physical and psychological experiences of pleasure and pain. This black-and-white “visual poem” was made after she broke up with her first girlfriend: “I’m not a good writer. I don’t think I can be as poetic as if I paint or if I take a picture or if I make a movie I always make a film when someone breaks my heart.” Indeed, despite the absence of uttered words, “Her” is visually and aurally poetic—and even surrealistic—with the abundant use of ‘watermark’ scratches (made randomly through manual film processing) and rhythmical, poignant accordion music, and consequently, these give the film “an ephemeral and timeless quality which illustrates the intensity of the subject matter” (CV). Kai told me that it had been easier for her to talk about life and express herself through experimental narrative. Because of the aesthetic flexibility of her visual poetry, Kai’s strong emotions projected on the screen seep into all directions: “Who

hasn't had their hearts broken by someone? It doesn't have to be your girlfriend or boyfriend. It can be your sister or a friend or your child . . . it's the universal theme we all have." But her primary agenda had been to embody this universal theme and generate her own meanings. Thus, we see her gazing upon and 'desiring' her own naked body through the recurrent use of double exposures and intercuts:

The image is like, 'I make love with myself'—because the ultimate love, for me, is myself. That's very narcissistic. But if you can't love yourself, how can you love others? I wanted to embrace myself and rise from beginning. That's the concept I had I wanted to create the visual of 'me and myself.' But sometimes you can't see it clearly. It almost looks ghostly. You can never see yourself entirely unless you're standing in front of a mirror. But I really like the concept of constantly interacting with myself, constantly loving myself, constantly talking to myself.

I was inspired not only by the fact that Kai had turned a heartbreaking story into a self-actualizing and -celebrating film, but also by the realization that one's gaze can have such positive power. 'Positive' in the sense that we can employ our own gaze to scrutinize our sense of self, reflecting on our image across space and time (i.e., double exposures and intercuts), and questioning the boundary between self and other. For this reason, gaze can potentially become a transformative device. Kai, for example, unleashes the liberating energies of the unconscious by using the screen as her own personal mirror, and as a viewer, I felt encouraged to celebrate these energies *along with* her, and also to find my own in my own way. By experimenting with new expressions of desire, she shows us how we can counter our tendency to objectify cinematic images.

Turning the camera on one's own body, however, is not an undemanding task, especially when, in my view, there is a possibility of being labeled as self-objectifying. I asked Kai if she had thought about this possibility: "Yeah. I was really young at the time. I was eighteen and very shy. That was my first time making a film, first time being nude in front of a camera. So I was very vulnerable." And yet, at the same time, this vulnerability allowed her to re-evaluate the nature of gaze: "Later on as a director, I will be shooting other people nude in my picture—how can I know how they feel? So I have to do it myself to understand, and help me direct other people. Fair thinking, trying to be

fair.” Her take on depicting the female body is indeed a stark contrast to that of mainstream filmmakers, who are “generally rich middle-aged white men,” which therefore means “what they want to see, what they want other people to see, is a very narrow perspective.” Kai, on the other hand, strives to transform women, especially Asian women, from the object of desire to desiring individuals:

We’re from a very conservative culture. We’re not supposed to talk about sex or even have any sexuality. We’re supposed to be submissive and obedient. I find it very problematic. As individuals, we can have our own feelings and own power. Fine, if you want to be obedient and submissive, that’s your choice. But that doesn’t mean it represents *everyone*. And not a lot of women are making erotica. As an Asian woman, I want to make erotica to challenge our culture, society, people in general.

In “Her” and many of her other works, Kai embraces her own body vulnerably yet courageously, thereby breaking the myth surrounding Asian female sexualities. She moves body politics to a novel, more strategic level by showing us how one can rework the racialized/gendered body from within, not from without.

Breaking the myth of any kind often means confronting cultural taboos, as illustrated in “A Girl Named Kai” (2004). This film is an “experimental drama” that explores her “relationships, self discovery, passion, secrets and dreams” (CV): “It’s autobiographical, very personal. That’s why it’s kinda scary. Erotica is scary because it’s nude. In that film [“A Girl Named Kai”] I wasn’t nude the whole time, but I felt like I was nude, because I showed so much stuff about myself . . . but I was trying to show my honest side through my art.” Indeed, although there is no dialogue or voice-over, Kai has nonetheless constructed a candid, visual self-portrait with the effective use of montage and subtitles. The most memorable montage sequence, for me, is the juxtaposition of the Chinese New Year’s parade with the images of Kai shaving her head and getting her upper chest tattooed, along with a subtitle that reads, “I rebel against my culture.” During our interview, I asked Kai about the meaning behind this powerful symbolism:

I wanted to reinvent myself as a Chinese woman who’s supposed to have long hair. So instead I shaved my head, and then later on got the tattoo. Because I felt like, this is not something to be ashamed of. This is my body. To claim my body, ‘This is mine. This is my mark. This is me’ *Shaving away the pain . . . and*

the shame [quoting the film]. Cultural burden. I'm still celebrating, too, but in a much more meaningful way. I have to do that, in order to rise above and be myself, a full human. That is a struggle, right there.

This struggle, expressed through her body, thus reveals the delicate line between detachment (shaving off the cultural burden and unanswered expectations) and attachment (tattooing the auspicious Chinese bat, which Kai herself designed, as part of her cultural roots). Such conflict becomes even more profound in the private context, as she describes in her subtitles how “torn” she feels within her family: “My parents still deny my open secret.” Through this film, Kai therefore tries to restructure her family ties, even though at the time of our interview, she had not been able to show it to her parents: “All I want is to offer my family a chance to get to know me, a rebel daughter” (subtitle).

When I first saw this film, I became simply captivated by its abundant imagery and asked Kai how she had collected all the footage. Just as one would keep a journal, she told me, she had been “writing with images.” Thus, the film is very much like an abridged version of her “visual diary.” She would take her camera along with her—to London for the screening of “Her,” to Taiwan for her homecoming, to San Francisco when visiting her aunt, and here in Vancouver. She would use different types of visual formats (16mm, Super 8, Video) and would also ask her friends and siblings to film her from time to time, which allowed her to form closer emotional connections with them, as well as with the images. “Can you imagine?” she asked me during our interview. “After shooting for three years I got a *lot* of stuff. If I were to make a half-an-hour film, people'd be bored. So I picked the most exciting events and concentrated.” Thus, this nine-minute film, consisting only of “most saturated” images, offers a glimpse into her life. It is only a glimpse, for just as the film, her life moves like fast montage sequences, and dances to the enthusiastic rhythm of beating drums: “That's how my life is . . . that's how I see things. It takes time to see and feel things. But so many things happen very fast.” Accordingly, she takes us “on a journey through her past, present and beyond” (CV), as well as four distinct geographical locations, in a swift yet reflexive manner. She has edited her visual diary in such a way that ‘a girl named Kai’ *thinks* through the

intense, conflicting images (e.g., East and West, queer and non-queer, family and school) and urges us into reflection on wider social and political issues.

Tilt: Seeing from a Different Angle

For Kai, film footage is not unalterable but rather constantly available for articulating different perceptions in shifting contexts. When she found 1970s' 16mm medical footage in a school dumpster, for example, she decided to edit it into her own narrative, complete with a new soundtrack. The result is her experimental comedy "Tilted" (2003), which uses "dark humor to illustrate people's homophobia and ignorant attitudes towards queer issues" (CV). For instance, we see a group of doctors examining X rays of a hand, while Kai's voice-over tells us that they are in fact discussing her "tilted hand" and figuring out what is "wrong" with it. For Kai, this metaphor has a deeply personal, double meaning: "I used the metaphor, 'tilted, not straight.' I'm just slightly tilted, right, what can I say? And I used my pinky, because my pinky, see, is kind of tilted . . ." She then showed me her little finger, which prompted me to ask if it had always been like so: "I was born with it. It's not my fault. They called me tilted, so that's why I made that. And there was conflict in my family. It inspired me to tell the story." Indeed, in the film Kai narrates how difficult it has been to tell her family about her "tiltedness." Her pain notwithstanding, she further contextualized her film for me: "'No, I think your finger's straight.' That's what my mom said. The denial . . . that's hard to overcome. People want to see what they want to see."

In addition to exploring family relationship and conflict, Kai takes full advantage of the medical footage to play a subversive trick on scientific discourses, including the conventional perspectives on homosexuality. For example, while reflecting on her brother's naively humorous comment—that she must have caught "queer germs" in a pool—she inserts the image of microscopic organisms as a compelling visual aid. During our interview, she inevitably raised the issue of medicalized sexuality: "In the beginning homosexuality was seen as a disease, a mental problem—it's not. I was just born this

way. It's not like I choose or not choose. It just is." What she shows us in her film, therefore, is the controlling nature of this medical gaze that attempts to detect and define a 'problem,' whether through a microscope or an X-ray machine. What I found particularly empowering is the fact that Kai has 'recycled' the medical footage to inflict her own view onto it. By disrupting the conventional uni-directional looking relations, she demonstrates how our awareness changes with the angle of perception.

The production history of "Tilted" also tells me much about Kai's resistant strategy—by recycling and reworking the materials of dominant society, she has produced a resilient collage of discourses. This hybrid aesthetics is not limited to her films. Her painting series titled "Pinky Don't Give a Damn!" (2001), for example, uses hardwood 'canvases' onto which sanitary napkins are applied and then embellished with vivid colors and spontaneous lines. Kai has deliberately employed this mixed-media approach to challenge not only the taboo topic (i.e., notion of sanitary napkins as 'dirty' and shameful) but also the traditional, men-centered painting culture (e.g., 'holy' painting of a goddess): "Some people told me, 'The maxi-pads painting is disrespectful; you can't do that.' But why is it disrespectful? Are you saying my body is dirty? Is the natural process (what we're made of) dirty?" The subversiveness of her painting is its layered nature—"something frightful" is masked by the "candy-like" appearance:

I was observing a man checking my painting. Once he looked at the little sign and realized, 'Oh it's maxi pads!', he looked really shocked and quickly backed off and turned away It's okay when you don't know what it is but is beautiful; but it's not okay once you find out what it is? That's wrong. So I always like to pick people's brains: why's that, what's wrong?

While listening to her recount this intriguing episode, I remembered how she had described, during our first meeting, her black humor used in "Tilted": "sugar-coated medicine." It makes it easier for us to engage in her work, but it is the bitterness of the medicine that makes the work powerful and effective. Such a remedy allows us to gain critical perspectives on the social conditions that Kai endeavors to transform.

“Pushing the Boundary”

Kai draws much of her inspiration from her audience, that is, their reactions to her works. She told me how it was important for her to understand a person’s particular reading of her art, for it could potentially lead to a new discovery: “If a person watches my watercolor and feels this way or that way—that’s just really interesting for me to see. I just like to see those reactions. Through their eyes, it might be something completely different.” I asked Kai who her intended audience was, especially regarding her films:

Everyone. Some people say it’s a queer film, but at the same time, [“A Girl Named Kai”] ended up playing at Vancouver International Film Festival and lots of Asian film festivals that’re non-queer. It’s for people to see different aspects of other people’s lives. Most of my films are about me. It’s quite autobiographical. I’m not any more special than you or anyone—I’m just a person. It’s how I communicate. That’s the way for me to talk to people. I’m just telling them my story.

She also pointed out that because film is reproducible, it can be “sent out to all places, all at once,” whereas it’s much harder for her paintings and other artworks to reach the same number of people within a given time span. Kai values and strives to foster active dialogue with interpretive communities across international borders, even if it means being forced to fight discriminatory censorship. A month before our interview, I learned through Kai’s email list that Canada Customs had seized the film “A Girl Named Kai” on its way back from the Austin International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival. The reason, as explained in the brusque letter sent to Kai, was “suspected obscenity.” Despite the fact that the film contains no nudity or sexual content, it was not returned to Kai until she contacted the Customs with the help of Little Sister’s Bookstore, who themselves have had legal disputes with the agency over the importation of gay and lesbian-related literature. Little Sister’s introduced her to a lawyer at their cost and supported her throughout the ordeal: “Many people said, ‘Oh that’s a ten-minute film. You can get another tape.’ I was like, ‘No, it’s not about money. It’s about human rights. It’s about women’s rights. It’s about queers’ rights. They can’t do that because they’re bigger guys. They can’t just shut me up.’” The contemporary societal obsession with

controlling artistic freedom through state policy has been more than invasive. Censorship inhibits us from living expressively and reflexively, and thus keeps the oppressive social structure in firm place. Despite the traumatic process she had to go through, Kai was more than ever ready to put her voice and vision for a collective cause: “It gave me a lot of exposure It’s good to practice such things. I’m sure it’ll happen again in the future. But I’m pushing the boundary.”

If one feels ‘safe’ to make or appreciate art, then it’s not the art that points to social change. Kai’s art, on the other hand, is at once approachable and subversive. She defies the notion of the ‘perfect image’ by extensively utilizing experimental techniques that undermine the sureness of meaning, and instead gives her audience an incentive to cultivate active viewing. Through her body, she symbolizes and negotiates binary hierarchies that have historically enforced oppression, while her hybrid aesthetics celebrates the versatility of perception. Her approach to meaning-making automatically begins with questioning and disintegrating the synthetic social barriers:

My films mainly focus on sexuality, gender, and race . . . for now. I might move on to something completely different later on, but now I want to focus on those subject matters, because this is something I’m dealing with right now, as a human, as an Asian-Canadian, as a queer woman, and also as a feminist. So that’s why I want to tell my story—just give me a chance to explore such subject matters and challenge our society and culture. For example, what is gender, what is sexuality? Not just black-and-white. There’s lots of gray. And as an outsider, I would say . . . we still have our brown skin, and people see us as . . . not from here. But I mean no one’s from here except for First Nations. So I want to challenge the concept of outsider and all those issues.

VI. NARRATIVE PORTRAIT: Hoi Bing

Behind the Camera

Almost half a year after I interviewed three filmmakers, I was still ‘sorting out’ the overwhelmingly rich data along the line of relevant literature. During this challenging process, I started to see the need for more insights that would help me refocus and rekindle my research aims. Subsequently, I sent out an inquiry email to local film schools hoping to find an ‘emerging’ filmmaker with up-to-the-minute stories. I was fortunate enough to meet a couple of generous students in person, whose critical, fresh perspectives helped me move my analysis in a productive direction. But it was Hoi Bing’s kind reply that ultimately motivated me to take a further step. In her crisp yet unassuming email, she gave me her background information, as well as her offer to lend me a hand with my slow-moving research. I immediately took to the fact that she had lived in Canada for fourteen years and recently graduated from SFU’s film program. After some email and phone call exchanges, we decided to meet face-to-face.

While waiting outside the Sperling/Burnaby Lake SkyTrain station, I tried to speculate what Hoi Bing might look like. From our phone conversation, I was picturing a serene, laid-back person many years my senior. But when a bright blue car came into view, I thought I recognized its driver—the friendly, self-assured student with whom I took one of the film classes some years before. Just as we exchanged our hellos, I excitedly asked Hoi Bing whether we took the same film theory course. She paused, and calmly reflected that we might have been in the same class indeed. The sheer coincidence surprised and relaxed both of us, and as we drove to a nearby café, we casually started talking about our backgrounds, as well as the pros and cons of the film program at SFU. We stopped by her place to drop off her groceries, and then headed to the café, where I had, true to Hoi Bing’s word, one of the best coffees in town. Over this aromatic coffee, I proceeded to talk about my research using broad yet sometimes weighty terms, thinking she might already be more than familiar with such issues as

representation and identity. And indeed, Hoi Bing told me that she took interest in my research for the very reason that she herself had grappled with the question of self-representation both from aesthetic and theoretical standpoints. She then briefly described each of her video/film projects she had worked on in school, and mentioned that her latest one titled “neither . . . nor . . .” (2004) might be quite relevant to my research. I felt delighted and grateful when she agreed to let me interview her regarding this film.

We thought about watching the film together at her place, but in the end she suggested that I take a DVD copy home and view it at my own pace. She had already given me much information on this work, including behind-the-scene stories. So when I came back home and watched it on my computer, I was able to identify and appreciate the specific aspects of the narrative and images she had explained to me. Still, I replayed the DVD a couple of times to take notes, which resulted in a scene-by-scene ‘shot list’ based on my interpretations. I would have met Hoi Bing again to ask questions right away, but my scheduling conflict kept delaying the interview. Since she generously let me hold onto her DVD, however, I was able to keep refreshing my memory.

In mid-August of 2005, I invited her to my place, where she had preferred to meet for our interview. Although my old, creaky apartment is not suited for welcoming a guest, I somehow managed to make the room bright and comfortable enough to have a conversation. We sat at the kitchen table to first of all go over the consent form. I was rather relieved to find that Hoi Bing was familiar with its bureaucratic procedures required by the University and didn’t seem to mind its redundant formality. Although she told me that she had never had an interview of this kind, she was more relaxed and poised than I was throughout the recording. I tried not to interrupt her unnecessarily with my leading questions (as I often had with the other filmmakers), but soon I started to feel that the ‘shot list’ I had prepared was too subjective, as if I had dissected her film without leaving enough room for her to elaborate. Nevertheless, Hoi Bing kindly related her views to my interpretations, and towards the end of our interview, she reassured me by saying, “I think it’s the theory course. That’s why you know what questions to ask.”

Hoi Bing Mo was born in Mainland China and moved to Hong Kong at the age of nine. To her, Hong Kong was a “closed-minded society,” where she never felt belonged. She was rather at odds with the education system, and had to repeat her last year of high school. Knowing the competitiveness of university admission (for there were only two universities at the time), she decided to come to Canada to pursue her interests in art. In 1991, she started taking ESL with the intention of studying visual arts at Nanaimo’s Camosun College. Her education was temporarily put on hold when she married and had a son, but her determination to learn never wavered. While in the visual arts program, she particularly became fond of the film and video mediums, which ultimately led her to SFU’s film program. Working and raising her son as a single mother, she fulfilled most of the program requirements part-time, and the film “neither . . . nor . . .,” her last production at SFU, has become the fruit of her long journey.

Although she started working full-time to return her student loans after graduation, she was also being involved in artistic projects, including a translation job for major film production companies and community-based video/animation. Compared to these large-scale productions, her own works done in school are rather introspective, narratively but also visually. Her portrayal of her and others’ “state of mind,” for example, relies heavily on the visual: “I learned traditional drawing, pencil drawing at a studio in Hong Kong. I think that really helped me with framing and composition. And I took a few photography courses, and I really liked it. I think photography had a huge influence on my filmmaking.” Her emphasis on cinematography, moreover, is not unlike that of Wong Kar-wai: “I’m not sure if Wong Kar-wai would be Wong Kar-wai without his cinematographer, Christopher Doyle. I think that kind of photography really had an impact on me.” For Hoi Bing, a film’s significance often lies in the beauty of the visual, and not in the plot itself: “I watched [Wong’s] *Days of Being Wild* with my brother. He got so angry at the end; he’s like, ‘What kind of a film is that?! What kind of ending is that?’ It ends with a guy combing his hair, and he only appears at the very very end.”

Such thematic ambiguity and aesthetic elasticity also characterize many of her works, reflecting, hence, her equally complex life experience.

Her POV

“neither . . . nor . . .”: In-Between Spaces

Hoi Bing’s “neither . . . nor . . .” is a visually-guided exploration of place-making. At first glance, it appears to be a simple story about changing residence, as it begins with the protagonist, played by her friend Silvia, moving into a new house. The first few scenes show Sylvia trying to ‘adjust’ to the new environment, but since there is no dialogue or voice-over, the viewer has to become acquainted with the character only through her action (e.g., vacuuming the floor, decorating the walls with posters, family pictures, etc). Since I was particularly fascinated with the use of family pictures, I asked Hoi Bing if the photographs had been intended to illustrate the protagonist’s background:

I don’t actually remember . . . in the beginning, she had this poster of flowers, a picture from IKEA. When you don’t know what to get, you just go to IKEA, look around, and oh, they have everything! You don’t have to be creative; you just go for it. And she’s trying to create a home for herself. She’s obviously not a conventional person, but she’s lost. Maybe she can try traditional or conventional way (so an IKEA poster), but it didn’t work out. And then she had this other poster, a piano; it was getting worse. So she went back to her own possessions, like her family pictures. So it was a way to show the real character gradually. I’m not sure if it was clear, but it was *my* idea of showing it.

If the standardized posters are an epitome of mass culture (which I didn’t take notice of initially), then the family pictures connote the opposite—particular and evocative. Yet these black-and-white pictures are frozen in history, detached from what is happening around the protagonist. So we see her trying to ‘keep up with’ the masses instead of corresponding with her past; but the more she tries, the more she loses her place in her own house. During this short opening sequence, Hoi Bing thus shows us that our sense of home is deeply influenced by our sense of self.

Hoi Bing, like her protagonist, had faced with the issue of place-making. As it happened, she herself moved three times during the film production—within the span of

just a few months (and conveniently, she was able to use these places as her filming locations). She attributes her experience not to the lack of physical shelter and security, but to her own shifting, drifting sense of self:

I wanted it to be an unsettling play, and I think moving is sort of symbolic, in a way, because she can never settle. And it's also autobiographical. I can never . . . not that I don't want to—I want to settle. This character wants to settle so badly. That's why she keeps looking for the perfect place, which really doesn't exist. If you don't feel settled, it doesn't matter where it is—you just can't settle.

Hoi Bing told me that even after years of living in Canada, she didn't feel she fitted in anywhere in the society. The same could be said of her friend Sylvia, whose unusually long braids symbolized her 'out-of-place-ness'—wherever she went, she would get stared at. Although in the film she stars as Ying, a fictional character, much of its narrative had been inspired by her eccentricity. In fact, at one point in the film, she faces the camera and talks about her hair, merging, as a result, her own real-life account into the otherwise fictional narrative. Sitting outside 'the new house' and playing with her braids, she says in English, "The longer the hair, the shorter the wit," and then in Cantonese, ". . . that really pisses me off . . . I grew my hair on purpose . . . to see if I became more stupid (laughs)." I asked Hoi Bing if Sylvia was referring to a Chinese saying; but she was not sure whether it was a particular platitude. "But," she added, "in Chinese culture . . . I don't know about Japanese (it's maybe the same), but even in this culture . . . or in some Middle and Eastern European cultures . . . they like women who have long hair. It's feminine." Interviewing her friend, therefore, led to a thought-provoking discovery: "It was really interesting to hear what *she* said about having long hair. My way of protesting that is to cut my hair short. But her way of protesting it is 'I'll grow it and see if I'm going to get stupider.'" It is this disinclination to be molded into a static type that deprives Hoi Bing and Sylvia of a permanent place both in the physical and social worlds.

Although their rootlessness often results in the sense of being lost, it does not necessarily mean helplessness. On the contrary, it motivates them to continually engage in place-making, the literal and symbolic practice that is invested with variability and

versatility. Sylvia's speech is one of the recognizable outcomes of such practice. Because she is used to negotiating across cultures, she is able to move back and forth between the two languages almost effortlessly. I, for one, thought that the interview had intentionally been done bilingually. But Hoi Bing told me otherwise: "Sometimes I asked the questions in English, and sometimes I asked in Cantonese. I don't think I did that on purpose. I just went with the flow." Sylvia, too, would alternate the languages depending on the situation. Interestingly enough, the film's music, like Hoi Bing's and Sylvia's speech, had also been made spontaneously and flexibly. Hoi Bing recounted that she had worked with two of her friends to create the soundtrack:

I sort of told them I wanted instrumental. I wanted something not too depressing, but not happy either. I wanted something in-between. What they first gave me was . . . kind of like rockish, like [imitates the heavy rock sound; we both laugh]. And they just improvised a whole bunch of pieces for me, and I helped them choose It wasn't written—they didn't 'compose' it. But it was improvised. It was just a guitar and also a keyboard.

The result, in my opinion, is a melancholic yet soothing sound that seems to reverberate with the protagonist's way of life, because her life, like the music, is "something in-between"—ambiguous, fluid, and always improvised. In trying to make a space for herself, she constantly experiments with contradictions and opposites. She knows very well that doing so means disturbing the social order, and she will always be made to feel different. Yet by casting light on this hybrid, disoriented space of in-between, Hoi Bing shows us that it is in this space that we often find a sense of purpose and freedom.

"Recognition of Voice": Position-Taking

Like its title, "neither . . . nor . . .," this particular film is not easy to categorize when it comes to the question of genre. It is not strictly a fictional film, as Hoi Bing has incorporated a documentary-style interview (Sylvia, appearing as Ying, talks about her real life), as well as her own biographical elements. She told me how her script evolved over time—at first, it was about a parent-child relationship, with a focus on the mother who feels out of place, much like Hoi Bing herself: "When I go to my son's school, I'm

like a little kid. I have to pretend I'm a grown-up in order to talk to those parents. And when I'm with my friends, none of them have kids. So it's kind of hard." But once she realized that the story was beyond the scope of her school production (in terms of time and budget), she decided to narrow the focus and speak through just one actor: "I thought, 'It doesn't have to be about a single mother; it can just be about a person who feels unfitted.'" Sylvia, consequently, seemed like a natural candidate for this role:

I knew I wanted to use an Asian person . . . in my very beginning stage of thinking about just using one actor, I still wanted to use a female Asian character. And I didn't want to use someone who's a professional actor. That wouldn't be as natural, because I wanted to do a little bit of documentary. And I also didn't want to use someone pretty, like a professional actress. That's why I came up with Sylvia. She's so perfect; she's odd-looking. She's got these long long long long braids.

With her in mind, Hoi Bing rewrote the script, and when she approached her, Sylvia expressed a strong interest in the story, and was at once willing to take part.

But the script was by no means 'complete,' for it continued to evolve throughout the production. For example, Hoi Bing took some of Sylvia's responses from the interview scene and inserted them into several fictional scenes as a voice-over narration. This may give the viewer the impression that the voice-over is a scripted line, hence Hoi Bing's opinion. For instance, in the scene where Sylvia (as Ying) gets stared at by a man at a bus stop, we hear her voice-over: "I don't really care what they think anymore" (subtitled in English). I had taken it as part of the script, until Hoi Bing told me that it was in fact Sylvia's reply to her interview question regarding her braids. Conversely, in the last scene where Sylvia (as Ying) is leaving the house, we hear her English narration: "I don't wanna mortgage. I don't wanna job that doesn't interest me. I don't wanna family I can't commit to. I'd be a terrible parent." I thought this was Sylvia's reflections on her real-life circumstances. But as it turned out, it belonged to Hoi Bing herself, who decided to reveal her own feelings (though voiced by Sylvia) at the end: "That's mine. But in retrospect, I wish I hadn't put that in there, because that makes it too obvious, I think. I don't know if I needed that." Since my interpretation was that Sylvia/Ying had

been able to articulate a particular individuality and sense of determination through this voice-over, I told Hoi Bing that the ending, for me, had a positive tone.

What intrigued me is that both Hoi Bing and Sylvia had put their respective everyday realities into the film's narrative, and that there is no clear line between Sylvia's accounts (unscripted utterances) and Hoi Bing's accounts (written words). Added to this is the blurred line between Ying (fictional character) and Sylvia (actor). I was rather perplexed by all this during my 'analysis' stage—the more I tried to separate their voices, the more I seemed to get buried in them. Then I went back to our interview transcript and remembered that Hoi Bing and I had discussed a couple of times the film's opening voice-over. At the beginning of the film, a woman asks in Cantonese, "Doesn't 1+1=2?" (the English subtitle appears at the bottom of the black screen). I had automatically assumed that it was spoken by Sylvia, so when I learned almost by chance that it was Hoi Bing's voice, I was more than surprised; to me, she and Sylvia sounded alike. "I don't think it matters that much," Hoi Bing said. "I didn't think whether people would recognize my voice or not." But for her, using her own voice at the beginning of the film had personal significance, "because it's ultimately my question": "Isn't life just an equation? Isn't it supposed to be simple? Doesn't one plus one equal two? But it doesn't, always." Indeed, Hoi Bing's life is not reducible to a simple equation, and nor is Sylvia's; their lives are far more unstable, unbalanced, and thus entitled to different methods of representation. One such method Hoi Bing has chosen, in my view, is the merging of reality with fiction. In the fictionalized setting, Ying embodies an infinite number of positions from which to speak creatively and daringly, and it is through this character that Sylvia and Hoi Bing are able to interpenetrate their lives and exchange their voices. Thus, far from being opposed polarities, reality (Sylvia and Hoi Bing) and fiction (Ying) are quite capable of coexisting within the same text. Ying's life doesn't yield a perfect sum total; it is rather a powerful exemplification of human complexity and solidarity. I hadn't been able to appreciate Hoi Bing's and Sylvia's voices, because I had been trying to dismiss Ying's character as simply and entirely fictional.

(Dis)locating the Vision

Hoi Bing experiments not only with voice but with gaze as well. As a narrative film, “neither . . . nor . . .” lacks coherence, for there is a greater emphasis on the visual than on the plot. Throughout the film, as Ying engages in mundane activities (cooking, eating, cleaning, taking out the garbage, etc), we see many close-up shots—even extreme close-ups—of steaming pots, chopsticks, vacuum cleaner, feet, and so on. Often, these fragmented jump-cut images are blurred, almost to the point of being unfathomable:

I like using a lot of out-of-focus shots. I don't know why, but I'm just very attracted to it. And I don't believe that everything always has to be focused and beautiful. And I think that the in-and-out-of-focus also represents your state of mind, your subconscious. There is no focus for her. There is no one place, no one focal point for her life, for her environment. There just isn't one.

Indeed, even though the close-up shots give us greater access to Ying's world, the vagueness of the images necessarily compels us to look *more* closely and carefully. We then begin to see what is like to live in the space of in-between. Ying's subconscious mind is diffusive, as demonstrated by the subjective camera that wanders and dissolves into the surrounding environment. The camera, however, does not solely represent Ying's point of view; it is also Hoi Bing's gaze (un)focused on Ying and her living space. Like Ying's, her gaze is often vague and reflective. The extreme close-up shot of Ying's forehead and eyebrow, for example, is quite unnatural; but for me, it has a gentle touch, almost as if Hoi Bing is trying to understand her protagonist's state of mind with great sympathy. Even though her cinematography is not “focused and beautiful” in the conventional sense, her treatment of the visual is sensitive, reflexive, and thus far less deceptive than mainstream cinema. She encourages her viewers to ask why, for example, the vacuuming scene is shot out of focus: “Vacuuming is very domestic, and very traditional. But because she's such an unconventional character, I didn't want it to be a conventional frame or composition to show the domestic scene. I think it's just one way of showing the character or personality.”

If the filmic gaze can be unfocused, then it can also be partial or absent all together. What is unique about this film is its recurrent use of the black screen as an

interval between two scenes. When I asked Hoi Bing if she knew why she had preferred to use this particular technique, she paused, and said, “I don’t. More subconscious than conscious. I think it was just . . . how it worked out visually. I don’t think that has a lot of meaning. And also, when you blink, you just go to black. I think I had that in mind, but it was very subconscious, I think.” Her reply was rather unexpected, for I had taken it to be a deliberate aesthetic. Yet her subconscious use of the black screen has nonetheless resulted in a mysterious tone, which appeals to the *viewer’s* conscious mind. The soft, fade-to-black transition gently pushes me to reflect on what I have just seen, and to also anticipate the next image. As a result, I ‘see’ just as much on the black screen as anywhere else in the film. The black screen is not always silent and contemplative, however, as it is sometimes accompanied by audio. For example, while we watch Ying cook noodles, suddenly the screen deprives us of the image, leaving behind only the tapping sound of her chopsticks. “I think that’s why it’s more visual,” Hoi Bing commented reflectively when I mentioned this fascinating scene. Indeed, it is her (subconscious) emphasis on ‘what is not seen’ that makes the viewer engage in active visualization. Even the film’s ending requires a great amount of imagination, for its final shot—Ying taking a box out of her house—doesn’t show what the box is or where she’s going. Hoi Bing herself didn’t know whether her film had a clear sense of resolution. Though her vagueness baffled me at first, I soon realized that she didn’t *have* to have all the answers—her film had been telling me all along that not everything could be focused and explained with a lens. When I asked Hoi Bing what she wanted her film to do for society, she said she didn’t know yet, but then added:

I don’t think a film or art has to be so . . . I don’t know if I should say exclusive or inclusive . . . it can be for a wider audience. I believe that. Even an experimental film, if it’s done interestingly enough—visually, I think it can. And with the subject matter, it doesn’t always have to be exclusive. I think it can be political *and* visually interesting. Then I think it can reach a wider, broader audience.

Her film is like an open-ended visual adventure. It invites us to look, and look again—to break the conventional frame of imagination and see what has never been seen.

Self-Negotiated Text

Since I couldn't precisely 'pinpoint' her unique style, I asked Hoi Bing how she herself would describe her own style, if she indeed had one. After a pause, she said:

I have a really hard time to describe what I'm doing, too. Especially, in my second year at SFU, we were told to make either experimental or narrative. I insisted: Why can't I make both? It's a school; it's a learning process. If we don't explore here, where do we do it? We can't afford it after school. At least at school we have the equipments to play, to fool around.

What mattered to her was the experimentation—not with the film genre but with the filmmaking *process*. For example, she chose to shoot “neither . . . nor . . .” on a digital video not simply because of the cheaper cost but because it offered her a greater opportunity to play with the lens. She also made her way into the turfs of lighting, editing, sound design and the like with a similar venturous spirit: “Only because I wanted to learn, not because I didn't want anyone to touch my film. I had no problem with other people giving me advice.” Since she did not model her film on any existing style or technique, she preferred to explain her work in the context of its production, rather than to use ready-made labels.

The intricate nature of “neither . . . nor . . .” had meant that the viewers often found it hard to digest its narrative and visuals: “Normally people would just go ‘huh?’ I have this really good friend who came to see the film, and she said to me at the end of the film, ‘I liked it, I love it!’ And then the next day she's like, ‘Actually, I didn't understand anything.’” The positive feedback, however occasional, nonetheless affirmed her sense of achievement: “I didn't need a lot of people telling me anything. Just a couple of them, it was enough.” She was glad, too, that I asked her about the opening voice-over (“Doesn't $1+1=2$?”): “Nobody, not even the teacher asked me why it's in there. But I had my reasons.” I told Hoi Bing that since I had been given in advance some background information on her film, which I subsequently watched a few times, I was able to reflect and generate questions. Her school audience, on the other hand, lacked those opportunities. Although her financial and time constraints had prevented her from showing the film to a wider audience, Hoi Bing did mention her interest in film festivals

and even video-hosting websites (though she was somewhat uncertain about their copyright-related issues and technology). She would like her audience to ask her questions, and more importantly, to ask themselves questions openly and critically.

By making the filmmaking process as varied and expansive as possible, Hoi Bing provokes a dramatic rupture with conventional practices. Her experimental and sometimes playful filmmaking has enabled her to create a filmic voice that breaks through the wall between reality and fiction, as well as a filmic gaze that challenges the viewer's imagination. Such aesthetic dynamism is indeed a reflection of her own fluid sense of self. Her approach to meaning-making stems from the space of in-between, where she is both self-searching and self-determining. It is for this reason Hoi Bing told me that her ultimate audience had always been herself:

My first film was also out of focus. This guy walked by the editing suite and didn't say anything, and at the end, he told me, 'Oh good, you did it on purpose!' I was really happy with my first-year project Because I was so happy with that, in my second semester, I had this writer's block. I couldn't think of anything. So my teacher said to me, 'Try not to impress anyone but yourself. Just focus on what you want to do.' And then that turned out really good. Throughout my two years in the visual arts program, everything I did was personal, personal stories. After the first semester at SFU, I started thinking I needed to do something else. But at the same time, even if I'm doing a story on someone else, I can just impress myself. I don't have to impress other people.

VII. DIVERSE ANGLES: Foregrounding Minoritarian Film

Oppositional Gazes and Voices

Before proceeding to explore what it means to be a minoritarian filmmaker, we must first understand each participant's relationship with the dominant visual culture. Mainstream media operates within the existing power dynamics, and therefore the 'majoritarian gaze,' just like the 'scientific gaze' of ethnographic film, acts as a tool for representational control. For members of minority groups, this majoritarian gaze is often the cause of inner conflict. To attest one such experience, Fanon once recommended his fellow Antilleans to carry out a little experiment: "Attend showings of a Tarzan film in the Antilles and in Europe. In the Antilles, the young negro identifies himself de facto with Tarzan against the Negroes. This is much more difficult for him in a European theater, for the rest of the audience, which is white, automatically identifies him with the savages on the screen" (1967:152–153 n.15). In the first instance, a black man identifies with the white hero's gaze, since it is as white and French that he has been acculturated. But in the latter, he is forced by the presence of white spectators to identify with the colonized Other, for he knows that their dominant gaze defines him as such. For Fanon, gaze is at once a psychological and political force.

Minority authors such as Fanon cannot exclude all traces of mainstream discourses from their works, for they have been persistently exposed to dominant cultural institutions. The participants themselves have raised this issue. Bernadette, for example, talked of the strong Hollywood influence in the Philippines, which had ultimately inspired her to take up filmmaking (p.28). Likewise, Desiree attributed her Western sense of humor to the American television in Malaysia (p.47). Members of subordinated groups can, if 'we' so wish, envisage and narrate stories by employing the dominant gaze and voice. Conflict arises when, like the Antillean in a European theater, I'm compelled to direct this gaze upon myself, only to find my voiceless reflection locked in an oppressive, one-dimensional position. This is because, as Feng points out, "cinema has

created us, representationally speaking” (2002:24), and not vice versa. The on-screen reflection does not speak my lived experience, but my internalized dominant gaze nonetheless forces me to bear that image. Said would say this conflict is a mere byproduct of Orientalism, the discourse “by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period” (1978:3).

In this ‘information age,’ there is a renewed interest in the image and knowledge of Other, and the seemingly well-intentioned attempt of the mainstream media to ‘feature’ minority groups has, according to Yin, simply resulted in the “new Orientalist/Assimilationist paradigm” (2005:149). Minorities can now speak in the civil language of the state, but they must do so by putting on stereotypical masks, so as not to upset the popular imagination of the public or the existing structures of domination. As Chakraborty explains, “racialised subjects have the double burden of proving that they are equally valid candidates for citizenship at the same time as having their difference marked and fetishised” (2004:209). Thus, the mainstream cinema, populated and run by “rich middle-aged white men,” continues to generate “a very narrow perspective” (Kai, p.60). The voyeuristic and discriminatory majoritarian gaze is embedded in not only the discourse of race, but also those of gender and sexuality. The common association made between long hair and femininity, as noted by Hoi Bing (p.70), is a sign of the controlling male gaze at work. Similarly, the ‘archetype’ of the lesbian vampire is very much a construct of the heterosexist gaze (Desiree, pp.49–50). The role of the majoritarian gaze, then, is to maintain social hierarchy by appropriating the images of minority groups and creating unequal looking relations.

The act of appropriation, however, invites resistance, often leading to “struggles over who has the power to define whom, and when, and how” (Dua 1999:22). For example, in her film *Kai* reclaims and redefines the image of a Chinese woman by shaving her own head (pp.60–61). By refusing to shape her subjectivity in accordance with the prevailing imaginary, she challenges her own internalized majoritarian gaze that

places a “cultural burden” on those who are expected to have long hair. What is more, through this self-reflection, she is able to look back to the ‘center,’ where the majoritarian gaze originates. Hooks might say that Kai is exercising a critical, resisting gaze, just as “all attempts to repress our/black people’s right to gaze has produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze” (1996:198). The other three participants, too, have created images and narratives from positions that are necessarily opposed to the center: Bernadette’s gaze critiquing the Hollywood’s portrayal of Western life (p.35); Desiree’s gaze disputing the objectifying male gaze (p.42); and Hoi Bing’s gaze (and voice) questioning the traditional familial institution (p.72). And yet, as we have seen throughout their Narrative Portraits, their works are not all about ‘reversing’ the direction of the looking relations. This is because they refuse to permanently occupy a subject position that can only be recognized in relation to the center. As I will explain in the rest of this chapter, the minoritarian gaze and voice are critical and subversive, but not always oppositional, and such complex nature is reflected in the participants’ approaches to film-/meaning-making.

This complex nature of the participants’ gazes and voices, moreover, is the reason why I hesitate to describe their films along the line of ‘counter-cinema.’ Also known as oppositional cinema, this broad term is associated with the practices of filmmakers who question the hegemony of Hollywood and other dominant cinemas that are all too often Eurocentric, heterosexist, and patriarchal. Such filmmakers’ works are ‘counter-hegemonic’ in that they strive to overturn the existing filmic conventions, which have been established within, and maintain, the unequal structures of power. Certainly, the issue of social inequalities runs through the participants’ works as well, but they do not reject outright the mainstream methods of visualization and storytelling, for reasons I will provide in the subsequent sections. Yet such has been the agenda of the counter-cinema movements, and their revolutionary spirit has been expressed in a number of ‘manifestos.’ Solanas and Getino’s 1969 essay “Towards a Third Cinema,” for example, called for a liberatory cinema which stood outside and against the neocolonial capitalist

influences. The requirements for this cinema were “making films that the System cannot assimilate and which are foreign to its needs, or making films that directly and explicitly set out to fight the System” (1976:52). Thus, a third cinema was to be neither entertainment (Hollywood-based first cinema) nor art (European-based second cinema), but rather a collective political tool which would aid the anti-colonial struggles in the Third World. Meanwhile, Mulvey’s 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” pushed for the destruction of spectatorial pleasure in order to create an alternative cinema. She argued that the classic narrative cinema constructed and exploited the female ‘to-be-looked-at-ness,’ which only corresponded to the voyeuristic male gaze; hence, “the first blow against the monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions . . . is to free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics and passionate detachment” (18). More recently, in her 1992 essay “New Queer Cinema,” Rich celebrated the renaissance in gay and lesbian filmmaking, noting its radical approach to reassessing and promoting diverse images that challenged the hetero-normative imaginary. The “queerness” of such films, she argued, “is no more arbitrary than their aesthetics, no more than their individual preoccupations with interrogating history. The queer present negotiates with the past, knowing full well that the future is at stake” (34). Although I agree with the critiques and aspirations of these authors, I cannot help but notice their binaristic stance—‘our’ cinema as opposed to dominant cinema. Because dominant cinema serves as a point of reference, such counter-strategies do not necessarily displace (but instead simply replace) the existing filmic conventions.

My other concern is counter-cinema’s overemphasis on filmic form, which in essence is anti-illusory and self-reflexive. Thus, counter-cinema practitioners endeavor to make films that call attention to the ideological underpinnings of their own representations. In this sense, their approach is similar to that of Brechtian theater, which heavily utilizes ‘alienation effect’; that is, through disruptive and interruptive performance, it distances the audience from the narrative, so that they can become ‘aware’ of the operational processes of both the stage and the social world (Brecht 1964).

In their attempt to demystify the constructed reality on screen, however, counter-cinema practitioners take the risk of being overly methodical while suppressing spontaneity. The result is often a difficult, almost elitist film that not only bores its viewers but also keeps the *potential* audience at bay. If a film cannot attract/engage viewers, how can it hope for social change? While Solanas and Getino rejected the notion of cinema as purely an entertainment form, and Mulvey advocated “passionate detachment,” they rashly suppressed the viewer’s desire to look and gaze. Counter-cinema movements can also deprive *filmmakers* of pleasure and creative freedom. Indeed, joy of innovation is an integral part of the participants’ filmmaking, which they willingly share with their audiences. What they value is ‘passionate engagement.’

Passionate Engagement

For politically motivated filmmakers, it is often tempting to antagonize the human emotions associated with the act of ‘looking.’ But the participants tell us that it is this very attention—our desire to look—that can be cultivated into critical consciousness. Desiree, for example, makes use of humor to draw our attention, for “everyone can relate; everyone likes comedy” (p.46). According to Bing, “less powerful groups have effectively used humor to introduce new ideas to those who have closed their minds to anything that threatens or offers alternatives to an existing situation . . . because humor is assumed to be fiction and is relatively non-threatening, it can begin to open closed minds” (2004:30). At the same time, as Kai reminds us, humor can act like “sugar-coated medicine” (p.63). Lured by its sweetness, we freely enter the world presented on screen, but when the bitterness kicks in, we start to experience a sense of uncertainty. This is because humor is inherently a disruptive force—in the process of ‘making strange,’ it uncovers what is hidden and challenges our assumptions. Thus, Kai’s “Tilted” pushes me to confront the socially and medically fixated perspective on homosexuality (pp.62–63), while Desiree’s “Disposable Lez” urges me to question the normativism of heterosexual relationship (p.46). Humor can also take the form of parody, as is the case

with Desiree's cutting joke on Nike (p.44). By making subversive play with the popular cultural icon, she not only denaturalizes but de-authorizes its capitalist and masculinist significations. For Kai and Desiree, then, humor is a vital strategy for destabilizing the status quo, and since this strategy can be employed in many innovative ways, their films are in no way formalist. As a viewer, I never once felt alienated by the subversiveness of these films; rather, I recognized the humor as the filmmakers' open invitation to celebrate their (and my newly formed) critical insights. In this sense, their films share the same liberatory spirit with the 'carnavalesque' literature of Rabelais (Bakhtin 1984). Equipped with bold language, shape-shifting tricks, and unrestrained satire, Kai and Desiree have, like the intrepid Renaissance writer, set out to plow the collective field of imagination. Far from being redundant, therefore, humor can be productive of knowledge—it allows alternative ideas to relentlessly break into public discourses.

Conversely, humor, especially parody, has increasingly become associated with mainstream cultural practice. As Jameson explains, "aestheticization of everyday life," often seen in the postmodernist pastiche movement, has been nothing but materialism-induced apathy void of context and political agenda (1998:73). Consequently, the casual 'yeah, whatever' attitude flaunted by, for example, mainstream sketch comedy not only replicates but also reinforces stereotypes and oppressive social conditions. For members of minority groups, such 'aesthetics' can be condescending at best, domineering at worst. Humor without critical self-reflection cannot invite universal laughter. According to Riggins, minority authors such as Mexican-American writer Richard Rodriguez are able to achieve "the critical distance to parody the pretensions and distortions of both [their own and dominant] groups," because their everyday lives necessarily require them to deal with conflict arising from two contradictory environments (1997:6). Desiree herself talked of her versatile humor that had allowed her to juxtapose and satirize often polarized groups (p.47). Her humor appeals to all of us because it recognizes diverse social positions while simultaneously challenging their assumed stability.

Because of its unsettling yet engaging nature, humor helps us cross established boundaries and redefine our sense of self. As Desiree and Kai have shown us, the most intense humor stems from critical reflection on societal and personal hardships. Such humor can communicate serious issues and emotions in a candid, unflinching way. Bernadette, too, has utilized humor to share life's difficulties with her audience as well as the participants in her film (p.32). Her humor offers those in similar situations an avenue to critical consciousness, and ultimately, empowerment. Her film, at this point, becomes not just a form of social critique but a tool for healing and inspiration. Unlike "divisive" humor that thrives on the us-them dualism, Bernadette's humor is "inclusive"; it finds strength in collective (however varying) experiences of suffering and resistance (Bing 2004:28). Inclusive humor also makes possible self-conscious parody. As made clear by her comment, "I like to laugh at myself, ourselves" (p.45), Desiree's "Some Real Fangs" not only demolishes classic stereotypes but also introduces a 'fresh and fun' approach to being a lesbian (pp.49-50). As Bing and Heller explain, "lesbian jokes" have become, since the 1990s, "more visibly aimed at demonstrating that 'lesbian' itself is an externally constructed category of identity, a fiction, that has been used by some in the interests of identity politics, and by others in the interests of demonizing and disenfranchising lesbians" (cited in Bing 2004:29). The participants' subversive yet inclusive humor, therefore, nurtures my gaze by showing me how to, like their gaze, acknowledge 'differences' as sites of negotiation, transformation, caring, and respect.

The spectatorial gaze can also be enriched and politicized through sexual desire. Women's sexual agency is a prominent theme in Desiree's and Kai's works, and indeed, they daringly and playfully invite their viewers to participate in their explorations of desire. Thus, instead of negating the conventional pleasures of cinema, they take full advantage of its apparatus (i.e., cinema's projection technology which creates an 'all-seeing,' pleasure-seeking spectatorial position). Desiree and Kai are not really preoccupied with the anti-illusionist agenda of counter-cinema, and hence I can smoothly identify with their camera in order to enter the world on the screen. Their interest,

however, lies in turning selfish pleasure of a voyeur–spectator into empathetic pleasure of an interpreter–participant. For example, Desiree’s use of two cameras (one held by the on-screen character), which has resulted in the ‘gaze-within-a-gaze’ interaction, prompts me to recognize that a woman has the right to look *and* be looked at simultaneously (p.42). Likewise, Kai’s use of the cinematic screen as her personal mirror teaches me how to direct my gaze onto myself, thereby transforming the potentially objectifying force into a critically reflexive, liberating one (p.59). According to Foucault, pleasure and power are inherently interconnected, for power “doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no, but . . . it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be thought of as a productive network which runs through the whole social body” (1980:119). Both Desiree and Kai, therefore, utilize this ‘productive’ power of cinema and experiment with its pleasures; in so doing, they disseminate critical discourses, which in turn challenge the very intuitional power of the male-dominated cinema and related structures of injustice. Such critical discourses—alternative expressions and practices of desiring—not only assert Desiree’s and Kai’s creative agency but also open up a space where we can disinvest from conventional representations in order to embark on new imaginings.

Regarding the long-established conceptualization of gaze in film theory, Smith once questioned, “Can it extend definitions of male and female beyond the active/passive, voyeur/exhibitionist stereotypes? . . . Lesbian sexuality has been repressed, rendered invisible and impotent by society” (1990:154). While defying such dichotomies is certainly on their agenda, Kai and Desiree tell us that the filmic gaze has more than one dimension. For example, Desiree’s gaze in *Sugar Sweet* is at once sexual and cultural (p.43). The filmic gaze, just like desire, cannot be separated from its sociohistorical context. As Glick points out, liberative sexual agency is never a matter of individual psyche, for “we cannot proclaim any cultural practices, sexual or otherwise, as resistant without examining how these practices function within the racist, imperialist, and capitalist social formations that structure contemporary society” (2000:41). Indeed, for

minority women, expression of desire itself is a political act. In response to Hollywood's oppressive caricatures, Shimizu notes that "because Asian female sexuality on screen typically signifies a particular racial perversity, to bring emotions such as pain and discomfort to bear on representation of intimacy renders their sexuality in a very different way. It makes Asian women more human in their relationship to sex" (Shimizu and Lee 2004:1387). This is what Kai has done in "Her," where she embodies the pain of heartbreak and longing while at the same time re-imagining the Asian female body and sexualities (pp.59–60). What is more, such experimental representation of subjective bodily experiences "invite[s] the viewer to respond to the image in an intimate, embodied way, and thus facilitate[s] the experience of other sensory impressions as well" (Marks 2000:2). Desiree's "eRoTiCiSm," too, is as much a sensory exploration of desire as a visual representation of sexuality. By engulfing me in its intense, fluid images and sounds, the film instigates me to reflect on its power and mystery, and hence on the very definition of desire: "Maybe it's not *the* eroticism that you always think" (pp.41–42).

Through their humor and desire, the participants shake me out of my habitual ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling. They not only nurture but unfix my gaze, which as a result prompts me to reflect on my own sense of self, and how it interacts with their films. I don't have to be distanced from the filmic text (as in the case of counter-cinema) or fight for that distance (as in the case of mainstream cinema) in order to gain critical consciousness. Hooks explains how black women are compelled to resist complete identification with the often degrading images and narratives of dominant cinema, and because of this critical distance, they are able to achieve "pleasure of interrogation" (1996:208). Indeed, such resistant viewing leads to greater discernment and sense of empowerment. Unlike mainstream narrative films, however, the participants' films call for *passionately engaged* viewing, precisely because the authors passionately invite us to interact with their worlds—critically, subversively, playfully, and even erotically. I can perhaps draw an analogy between this cinematic pleasure and the 'festive pleasure' described by Bakhtin. Whereas the "monolithically serious" official feasts of the Middle

Ages and the Renaissance “sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it,” their folk counterpart, carnival, took delight in breaking this pattern by mobilizing civilians: “Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom” (Bakhtin 1984:9, 7). Such festive pleasure, felt by all people, thus stemmed from their sense of life turned upside-down, both physically and symbolically, through destruction and creation. If we were to see mainstream cinema as ‘official’ and ‘monolithic,’ then the participants’ films would display the characteristics of carnival; they defamiliarize the dominant visual culture while simultaneously motivating us to construct our own vision. And just like carnival’s “laws of its own freedom,” their films adhere to nothing but their own innovations.

Such creative freedom, as I have thus far argued, involves humor and desire. It is also directly related to aesthetics—that is, narrative and visual experimentation. None of the participants’ films I have seen carry the narrative unity or visual (and aural) harmony so common in mainstream cinema. Instead, they are, in one way or another, ambiguous, contradictory, complex, and unpredictable. While Kai explicitly describes her aesthetic approach used in the four films as ‘experimental,’ the other three filmmakers tend to describe their innovations in terms of experimentation with the notion of style (p.36, p.44) or with the filmmaking process itself (p.76). But what they have in common is their rejection of a totalizing aesthetic. In this sense, they share many aspirations with technically inclined avant-garde filmmakers. The participants, however, put a greater emphasis on the textual than on the technical. That is to say, they innovate not for innovation’s sake but for the sake of interpretation. For example, the dream-like images and sounds of Kai’s “Kitore” instigated me to work out their meanings on my own, which, quite surprisingly, turned out to be rather different from what the backward reading of the title suggests (p.56). Similarly, Hoi Bing’s out-of-focus shots led me to devote my full attention to the images, so that I would, through her vague yet gentle lens, begin to

understand Ying's state of mind (p.74). Their free-spirited filmmaking has de-conditioned my gaze in such a way that I am now able to not just contemplate but critically and playfully reassess their films; this gaze can better communicate with the diverse and fluid subject positions explored throughout their works.

Critical consciousness and aesthetic innovation do not contradict each other; indeed, as Hoi Bing puts it, a film can be “political *and* visually interesting” (p.75). Through their films, the participants share with me not just their joy of innovation but their critically passionate approach to everyday life. Not all viewers are, however, willing to indulge in the subversive ‘festive pleasure’ and have their worldviews disarranged. Kai, for instance, recollected that many had found “Kitore” difficult to understand (p.56). Hoi Bing, too, talked of her classmates’ confused reaction to her film (p.76). This is because the openness of their films does not come up to the expectations of viewers who are, to borrow Kai’s word, used to being ‘spoon-fed’ (p.57). Hoi Bing herself humorously recounted an instance where her brother had become irritated by the ambiguous ending of *Days of Being Wild* (p.68). In mainstream cinema, every voice, action, and ‘look’ must have cause and effect, so that their meanings can be easily picked up and categorized. Challenging dominant cinema, therefore, requires not only travestying and problematizing its conventions but also stretching the bounds of viewers’ imagination. This is why the participants keenly value their relationships with interpretive communities, which, as I will discuss below, take place *off* screen.

Textual Remapping and Renaming

As we have seen in their Narrative Portraits, the filmmakers willingly aid us with our interpretation in a variety of ways: film festival program guides and Q & A sessions, television interviews, DVD commentary, and for this particular research, one-on-one conversation. More recently, Desiree has created a website of her own to communicate with a wider (and prospective) audience. The participants are well aware that how a film is introduced to its viewer will have a significant impact on his or her interpretation. For

example, unlike Hoi Bing's school audience, I was able to appreciate and consider many implications of her film, for she had given me its background information during our first meeting (p.76). Filmic interpretation is also influenced by viewing circumstances. Watching a DVD at home allowed me, along with playback, more time for reflection and retrospection, whereas at film festivals, my viewing tended to be more impressionable owing to the reactions of fellow viewers (for example, the premiere screening of Desiree's "Some Real Fangs" p.50).¹ Because they know that film viewing can never be fixed or standardized, the participants do not tell us how to see or what to like. Granted, they provide us with still relevant information whether through DVD commentary or film festival discussion, but all four spare no pains to emphasize 'open reading.' For example, Bernadette made it clear, in her introduction to the festival screening of her film, that it was "up to you" to make responses in whatever manner, for she trusted her audience to have an "open mind" (p.33). The participants' view that individual viewers will come to different, but equally valid, interpretations of their works seems to reflect their acute understanding of 'translation.' Like such entities as culture and identity, one's visualized experience or idea is not fully translatable, for "translation is not a transparent transfer of meaning; it is always an interpretation and, as such, operates as a mode of resignification. But the act of translation-as-a-resignifying practice is the very condition of communicative practice between individuals and collectivities" (Brah 1996:246). While they readily advocate open-mindedness through various communicative mediums (interview etc.), the filmmakers are also aware that being open-minded is not just about suspending the existing frames of reference but questioning the ideological implications of these frameworks as well. They do not tell us just how to go about doing so; instead,

¹ These examples raise questions about the conventional reception theory which treats film viewing as a fixed relationship between spectator and screen. The conceptualization of cinematic apparatus and its ideological effect on the spectator (positioned in the darkened room, the eyes glued to the screen with the projection of the film coming from behind the head) may still be applicable to 'traditional' movie-going experience. But when it comes to social events such as film festivals, viewing can become more dynamic and communal. Meanwhile, DVDs (and their 'bonus features') have made film viewing both interactive and interruptive. Thus, even if we take a single viewer and a single film, varying spectatorial positions can result in a number of different readings.

they invite us to actively—and passionately—generate and negotiate the meanings of their films, thereby subverting the conventional filmic and societal gaze. We do not often recognize our unthinking adherence to reductionist logic until we are faced with the uncertainty of open-endedness. For example, Hoi Bing’s emphasis on ‘what is not seen’ (p.75) and Desiree’s refusal to conclude her story (p.49) compelled me to visualize explanations of my own. The ambiguity of images and narratives not only questions the modern notion of ‘truth,’ but destabilizes the basic premises of spectatorship.

The participants’ films, regardless of genre, maximize the interpretive languages of the audience. That is, each film gives its viewer an incentive to enter into a dialogue with its characters as well as its author. Just as in conversation we generate meanings by ‘tossing and catching’ words, the viewer must ‘catch’ each word (or sign) sent out by the screen and transform it into his or her voice/view. As Bakhtin points out, the word in language “becomes ‘one’s own’ only when . . . the speaker appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral or impersonal language . . . rather it exists in other people’s mouths, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word and make it one’s own” (1981:293–294). Accordingly, the participants’ films make this “moment of appropriation” rather playful and yet simultaneously self-reflexive for us viewers, who must necessarily reassess, and sometimes readjust, our own cultural, political, and historical positionalities in order to assemble the words and signs into a meaningful story. It is this discursive practice of each viewer that renders the participants’ films great significance, as they begin to resonate with a multiplicity of perspectives and associations. Unlike mainstream films that strive for monopolization of meaning, openly unconventional films encourage diverse, context-specific readings, which can subsequently lead to lively discussions in the public sphere. The participants themselves are interested in this dialogic process; all four value, however in different ways, their viewers’ reactions and feedbacks, for, as Kai has pointed out, these could bring forth a new discovery (p.64). Indeed, images and

narratives take on a life of their own after leaving the author, and open reading makes it possible for these to be remapped and renamed in ever-expanding circles. And herein lie transformative possibilities for society, because such practice inevitably tampers with mainstream discourses. This is not to say that the author's 'signature' gets erased during the process of remapping and renaming. The participants' signatures are embedded firmly as in the text as in this process itself; that is, the viewers carry on the subversive spirit of the filmmakers by employing the very gaze that has been enriched through passionate engagement. This thesis of mine is one such example.

Back in 1936, when cinema was still a novel phenomenon, Walter Benjamin optimistically noted its progressive nature, since for him, film's mechanical reproducibility had the potential for democratizing access to and experience of art (1988). For filmmakers such as Kai, filmic reproducibility is a means to foster dialogues across geopolitical borders (p.64). Indeed, the issue of distribution and exhibition is intricately interwoven with the politics of representation and interpretation, and it is especially so in this age of digital reproduction and virtual technology. Just as television undermined the "concept of cultures as localized communities of people suspended in shared webs of meanings" (Ablu-Lughod 1997:123), the Internet has annulled the notion of interpretive community as 'contained' in a physical location. The cinematic screen itself has become diversified and decentered. A person watching a downloaded movie on a cellphone, for instance, has a more fractured yet flexible viewing experience than a moviegoer. What do these recent developments mean, then, for minoritarian filmmakers who value their relationships with their viewers? Although cyberspace could mean increased opportunity to showcase her work, Hoi Bing remarked that issues surrounding copyright and technical feasibility made her somewhat hesitant about video-hosting services (pp.76–77). Bernadette, too, was cautious about showing her film at venues other than her school and film festivals, for she preferred her audience to critically reflect on the viewing context and its relation to her film (pp.33–34). Their concerns are explicable given the current tendency of new media users to decontextualize and commodify digitized images and

hypertexted narratives. And yet, *potentially* liberatory dimensions of the new media cannot go unnoticed. Woodhull, for example, explains how women with common issues and aims have been brought together by the very information technologies that have advanced the interests of neoliberal economy (2004:252). And yet, although these new forms of community have utilized the increasingly fluid space of communication to achieve political mobilization, she nonetheless notes, such activity has been limited to a small privileged section of the world. She also questions “the possibility that the mere existence of electronic linkages could guarantee meaningful political participation for ordinary citizens, and that new public ‘spaces’ would work to the benefit of women, ethnic and religious minorities, and others who have traditionally been excluded from effective involvement in the public sphere” (256). Indeed, the same could be asked of interpretive community; active discussion, let alone open reading, is implausible if the new media continues to be built and controlled by a handful while power hierarchies remain intact both at local and global levels. Film’s reproducibility and accessibility, therefore, are profoundly affected by existing socioeconomic structures, and these same structures are what the participants have had to struggle with in their creative endeavors. As I will argue below, ‘politics of art’ begins at the site of not reception but production.

Subjectivities in Creative Motion

Since the introduction of video and more recently digital technology, motion picture production has become less costly and more manageable, thanks to the equipment’s relative inexpensiveness, lightweight portability, and multitasking capability. And yet, despite this seemingly democratizing potential, women/lesbian filmmakers of color remain a rarity in both mainstream and independent film industries. Wajcman (1991) has incisively linked women’s near absence in the technical culture to society’s structural inequality, which bars women from effectively participating in cultural production and transformation. For the participants, such marginalization of access means that they have to constantly struggle with every social aspect of filmmaking,

including such managerial matters as financing and publicity. In short, all four seek what their mainstream counterparts take for granted—time and place to devote to their creative passion. Bernadette and Kai, for example, had held jobs in conjunction with their creative projects (p.31, p.54). Similarly, Hoi Bing, a single mother, had relied on both her earnings and student loans to complete her education as well as her films (p.68). Desiree’s experience at TV Asahi, meanwhile, is a harsh reminder that discrimination and glass ceiling are still very much part of everyday reality even for accomplished artists like Desiree (p.48). Moreover, although she had been able to receive some financial support from both public and commercial sources, Desiree was nevertheless quick to point out that such “visible-minority initiatives” had been a rather recent development (p.50). Indeed, at the current time of diminishing public funding and service, the agenda behind ‘institutionalized diversity’ can be called into question: “In the establishment’s view of diversity, the rules controlling the representation of diversity usually reflect the will of the winners in political and military struggles . . . the rationality of consensus is only a few steps from the desire for one system, one truth” (Schutte 2000:49). Undeniably, such ostensive celebration of diversity ignores the lived reality of injustice and disparity, which cannot be explained easily within the parameters laid down by a dominant group.

It is understandable, therefore, that the participants had not waited for more favorable circumstances to be brought about; rather, they had set out to challenge, through none other than their art, the very barriers that impinge on their artistic endeavors. Much of their creative strength in fact lies in the constraints and disadvantages they have struggled with, as evident in Kai’s striking performance, “Media Artist at Work” (pp.54–55). For the participants, ‘politics of art’ and ‘politics through art’ are synonymous, in that they have “not only critiqued the role of the artist and the purpose of art within mainstream modernism . . . [but] also critiqued the dominant art world’s exclusion of them, especially when they chose to express openly their distinctive experiences and identities in their art” (Collins 2006:737). But unlike the black/feminist artists of the 1960s and 70s who pushed for “art for people’s sake” (735), the participants have

attached both collective and personal values to their works. That is, much as they create art that cultivates people's worldviews, they have shown us that art is, first and foremost, a means of making their presence known. For the shy young Kai, art was always an integral part of communication and relationship building (p.54). After having had to become quiet in the new country, Bernadette finally decided to "speak up through film" (p.28, p.31). For Hoi Bing, too, film and the question of self-representation had always been inseparable (p.77). The participants' refusal to be made silent/invisible is most apparent in their bold defiance against oppressive forces, be it censorship (p.40, p.64) or physical violence (p.55). Each participant has sought to establish her own resilient space in the art world (mainstream or otherwise), where she can express her gaze and voice as freely as possible. It is in this space that she exercises her rights as an individual artist.

Because of such resistant nature of her artistic space, the resulting work necessarily becomes political. According to Mullin, "political artworks" do not have to carry campaign slogans; rather, "they engage imaginatively with political topics and . . . their creators explore how they are political subjects" (2003:202). This is because constructing an artistic space inevitably requires a minoritarian artist to identify the barriers imposed by not just the art world but larger sociopolitical institutions as well. Kai herself told us unequivocally that her films mainly dealt with issues of sexuality, gender and race, precisely because these were "something I'm dealing with right now, as a human, as an Asian-Canadian, as a queer woman, and also as a feminist" (p.65). By exploring how they are positioned within society, the participants thus contextualize and confront social inequality and injustice, including overt and subtle forms of racism, sexism, and heterosexism. Bernadette's "New Arrivals," for example, sheds light on the emotional and economic struggles of not just herself but two other recent immigrants to Canada, who often faced limited opportunities even as skilled workers (pp.30–31). In *Women Breaking Boundaries*, Desiree recounts her experience of workplace homophobia in Japan, which is starkly reenacted in *Sugar Sweet* (p.48), while her "Dyke: Just Be It" asserts the public presence of her friends and their everyday activities (p.44). Similarly,

in “Tilted” Kai relates her familial conflict to society’s deep-rooted ignorance about queer issues (p.62), and in “Her” she counters the cultural orthodoxy that stifles Asian female sexualities (p.60). Meanwhile, Hoi Bing’s “neither . . . nor . . .” tackles the ultimate question of ‘one’s place in society,’ a compelling challenge born out of her uncertainties as a young single mother (pp.71–72). For all four filmmakers, everyday experiences are the very “moments of creativity,” to borrow Bannerji’s words: “For an individual, her knowledge, in the immediate sense (which we call ‘experience’) is local and partial. But . . . it is the originating point of knowledge, an interpretation, a relational sense-making, which incorporates social meaning. This ‘experience’ creates and transforms” (1995:86). By consciously allowing her artistic space to reflect her unique social experiences, therefore, each filmmaker contributes to the building of political knowledge that is at once critical and liberatory.

Being ‘political,’ however, often comes with the burden of accountability. As Riggins points out, “minority authors are likely to have a broader notion of the political, seeing the political dimensions of everyday encounters, and to have a different relationship to a community. They may either wish to represent a community or realize that their statements will be interpreted as such by outsiders” (1997:7). Because their films are essentially personal but also socially engaged, the participants are well aware that such works can be subjected to public scrutiny. Bernadette told us how the release of her film had made her feel—as if being under people’s criticism (p.35). Kai, too, explained to us why making an autobiographical film was similar to being filmed nude (p.60). And yet, it is their vulnerability that gives their films both political and artistic strength. By opening her heart to her viewers as well as to her cast, Bernadette has created common ground through which we can compare our experiences and discover diverse views in a reflexive manner (pp.32–33). Kai’s decision to film her own nude body, meanwhile, has enabled her to critically approach the camera from the standpoint of her future cast (p.59). In making representational choices, all four filmmakers habitually reassess their subject positions so that their films, once placed in the public

domain, will not be categorized and treated unthinkingly according to the established labeling system. *Women Breaking Boundaries*, for example, explicitly deals with the social stigma associated with ‘feminist art,’ and in spite of, or rather, because of her and her fellow artists’ conflicting standpoints on the issue of naming, Desiree has in the end decided to hoist the collective banner, “Under Construction” (pp.47–48). For the participants, the balance between collectivity and specificity is not a necessary quest; instead, they value the very process of (re)creating relationships through filmmaking. This can mean sharing of ideas and talents with a crew (Desiree’s “circus” production, p.43), or sharing of the camera with friends and siblings (Kai’s “writing with images,” p.61). Such creative relationship facilitates innovative forms of intersubjective representation. Bernadette’s close friendship with Celina and Daniel is especially notable in that all three strengthen one another’s voice in her film, despite the fact that she had to omit their more compelling yet private stories (pp.31–32). This is because, in the course of conversation, they had been able to locate the shared subject position called “in the middle,” and it is through this position that they were able to intersect their otherwise varied histories. The same could be said of Ying, the fictional character in Hoi Bing’s film. By interviewing her friend Sylvia, Hoi Bing was able to construct this “out-of-place” character who embodies both real and fictional speaking positions, which were subsequently utilized by both Sylvia and Hoi Bing herself (pp.72–73). One major key to minoritarian filmmaking, in my view at least, is this coalition-*building*, which is always informed by a reciprocal exchange of everyday social experiences.

Coalition building also involves the participants’ viewers, who are encouraged to engage in active dialogues with their filmic texts. In so doing, those in similar social circumstances are likely to develop a sense of solidarity as well as autonomy. Bernadette, for instance, explained how Filipino immigrants and Filipino Canadians could borrow strength from her film’s survival stories (p.34). Likewise, Desiree stressed the importance of minoritarian presence on mainstream television, not only to raise public awareness but to offer queer viewers an empowered sense of place in society (p.46).

Since queer people of color “have been forced to isolate themselves in an ‘other’ group which is self-contained even within the general ‘otherness’ of their race and place” (Bose 1997:130), Desiree’s “Out for Bubble Tea” has thus become a valuable incentive, especially for Chinese-Canadian families, to break their silence (p.50). As empowering as they are, however, none of the participants’ films claim to bear a single Truth about a particular social group. Desiree does not concretize the ending of “Out for Bubble Tea,” because she knows from her own experience that there are “many levels, different levels of acceptance” (p.49). Even though she shares the same subject position with her cast, Bernadette does not standardize the three voices; it is her own unique voice, not those of her cast, that corresponds with her reconstructed past (p.30). In a similar vein, Hoi Bing opens her film with her own voice, because the question “Doesn’t 1+1=2?” is ultimately hers to address through her life, not Sylvia’s or anybody else’s (p.73). Kai has also put an emphasis on personalizing her filmic narratives in order “for people to see different aspects of other people’s lives” (p.64). The participants’ films do not simplify or summarize the social world for us viewers; instead, they reshape the way we see the world by engaging us in passionate, open interpretation of their innovative, lived texts. Accordingly, the filmmakers not only set our imaginations free but also invite us to be part of inclusive transformation—through their works, we learn “how to take our differences and make them strengths,” so that our imaginations can begin to “dismantle the master’s house,” that is, racist, heterosexist patriarchy (Lorde 1983:99).

The participants find artistic fulfillment in the pooling of our hopes and enthusiasms brought through inclusive transformation. It is the viewers’ constructive responses that inspire their ongoing action. Both Desiree and Kai explained to us how their audiences’ individual reactions had fueled their will to keep envisioning the desired future (p.51, p.64). Despite the heavy sense of responsibility she had felt, Bernadette had also gained increased motivation to further her creative efforts (p.37). Hoi Bing, too, noted that she appreciated positive feedback, but more importantly, engaging questions from her audience (p.76). Each participant’s positive, energetic approach to everyday life

stems from her sense of purpose—to create and transform. This sense of purpose, as I have argued above, begins with her determination to actualize her artistic space, where she can set out to reconstruct the social world using her voice and gaze. Taking charge of her own resistive space is thus, in my view, her creative agency. In speaking and looking from and via this space, moreover, she continually explores her positionality in relation to larger social structures as well as to the people involved in her filmmaking. Her subjectivity is therefore in constant creative motion. Not surprisingly, such fluid subject positions are influenced by, and influence, her sense of self. Indeed, as I will argue next, she does not so much maintain but negotiates her ‘identity’ through filmmaking (and art-making), and her gaze and voice play a crucial part in this process.

Intertwining Gazes and Voices

Writing from a perspective of a “middle-class + Catholic + urban + woman who is a product of American-style colonial education” in the Philippines, Diaz criticizes the “Me” narratives of feminist writers of color in the West, who restrict the Self to “an immediate cultural location that seems to have very limited references to global conditions within which the Self is also embedded” (2003:15). Contemporary identity politics must surely take into account neoliberal economic forces proliferating global hierarchies, and no woman of color living in a so-called wealthy nation-state can close her eyes to such repressive forces she is in effect part of. Yet she is also, paradoxically, at the receiving end of exploitative globalization. Already in 1997, Koptiuch had made a critical observation that “forms of power/knowledge generally associated with the colonial and postcolonial exploitation of a distant third world are becoming increasingly apparent in the treatment of U.S. minorities” (237). As a result, minority groups in the United States (and Canada) have been, and continue to be, further marginalized not only through the state’s economic and foreign policies but by its ideological legitimization (i.e., discourse of Othering). For those who have crossed international borders dreaming of a better life in North America, re-encountering the discriminatory hands of the neoliberal

institutions, which triggered their migration in the first place, is nothing short of disheartening, as evidenced by Bernadette's "New Arrivals." Even relatively well-to-do 'business migrants' who have seized the opportunities engineered by transnational corporations and selective immigration policies often find themselves at a disadvantage once in the new world: "By defending themselves as Asian Americans, an ethno-racial category, rather than as American citizens with universal political claims as members of the nation, Asian Americans continue to be trapped by an American ideology that limits the moral claims to social legitimacy by nonwhites" (Ong 1999:180). What is evident, then, is power dynamics operating at multiple and interconnected sites created by today's transnational flux. For transmigrants, these sites are not just geopolitical locations but junctions of race, gender, sexuality, and other such social classes, which consequently affect their sense of place as well as their sense of self.

Accordingly, many films of transmigrant filmmakers "explore the complex identities generated by exile—from one's own geography, from one's own history, from one's own body" (Shohat 2003:62). The uniqueness of the participants' filmmaking, as we have seen in their Narrative Portraits, is that they *continue* their migratory movement—geographically and temporally—in the course of film production. Desiree, the "visual wanderer," has made films by utilizing her artistic connections both in Japan and Canada, and "Some Real Fangs" is one of them (p.38, p.50). Kai's "visual diary" is a riveting example of an autobiography in the making, which bridges three continents (p.61). Bernadette, meanwhile, has made a symbolic journey across time by translating the past into the present (p.29), and Hoi Bing, in a similar vein, has explored the gap between a personalized past and a mass-produced present (p.69). Filmmaking for each participant, then, is a means of exploring and negotiating her identity, instead of preserving her 'roots.' Bernadette herself explained to us that her Filipino cultural origin "is not something I'm trying to reclaim, trying to dig up, trying to take it as mine. It's already mine"; her aim, instead, had been to discover her interests and skills in the new and changing context of both Filipino and Canadian cultures (p.36). As Hall points out,

“identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from,’ so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation” (1996:4). Indeed, each filmmaker-author *redefines* her gender, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. *through* her own representational practice, and in so doing, she challenges dominant discourses, including the discourse of Othering. Again, Hall reminds us that just as identity formation takes place within representation, so must resistance; according to him, an effective “counter-strategy locates itself *within* the complexities and ambivalences of representation itself, and tries to *contest it from within*” (1997: 274).

In order to carry out such interventionist strategies, each participant utilizes not only her ‘roots’ but also the epistemic maneuvers of mainstream culture. More specifically, she takes advantage of mainstream filmic conventions, or ‘rules’ that govern visual narratives. Besides having grown up with Western visual media, each filmmaker has actively sought its theoretical knowledge: Bernadette and Kai at Emily Carr (p.28, p.54), Hoi Bing at SFU (p.68), and Desiree at Sophia University (p.40). Thus they understand, quite reflexively and critically, the nature of the dominant gaze that objectifies based on social power relations. They are also familiar with the mainstream usage of filmic language (i.e., words and signs communicated via projection), and therefore can recognize, for example, a particular genre’s grammatical style. Consequently, the participants had often chosen to take on the framework of dominant cinema, not to replicate its conventions, but rather, to disrupt its assumed authority over the representation of the social world, including the knowledge of the Other. We can recall how Desiree’s subversive parody denaturalizes lesbian archetypes (pp.49–50), and how Kai’s self-celebration removes the objectifying gaze from the racialized/gendered body (pp.59–60). Since dominant cinema asserts the totality of its representation by standardizing filmic language, deviating from such standards invalidates the cinema’s knowledge claim. Bernadette and Hoi Bing, too, have de-standardized filmic language

by letting out its inherent complexities and ambivalences; their unique use of ‘shared speaking position,’ for example, does not reduce, but multiplies, the meanings of the spoken narratives (p.31, p.73). What differentiates the participants’ counter-strategy from that of counter-cinema is their emphasis on variation, not on form. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, counter-cinema has, in resisting dominant cinema, established its own standards, which have been repeated and replicated in their own right. The participants, on the other hand, do not subscribe to any standard. Granted, they do not refuse the dominant (and counter-cinema’s) conventions; they readily undertake established modes of visualization and storytelling so as to *convert* them into infinite variations. Regarding majority and minority usages of language (in this case literature), Deleuze and Guattari have noted the differences between: “the majoritarian as a constant and homogeneous system; minorities as subsystems; and the minoritarian as a potential, creative and created, becoming” (1987:105–106). In this framework, we can see both dominant cinema and counter-cinema (‘subsystem’) trying to maintain a certain order, and we can also see the four filmmakers subverting such uniformity *and* creating diversity. This subversive creativity is indeed the key to the participants’ filmmaking. It paves the way to the things I have so far written: joy of innovation and politics of art. What is more, because such creativity means constant experimentation with filmic language, it enables the filmmaker to redefine and express her identity in its fluidity.

The question for us to ask now is, “What brings about subversive creativity?” To seek an answer we can perhaps turn to each participant’s migratory history and experience of living between two or more ‘regimes of knowledge.’ Bhabha talks of fragmented diasporan culture which resembles neither its parent nor host cultures: “This ‘part’ culture, this partial culture, is the contaminated yet connective tissue between cultures—at once the impossibility of culture’s containedness and the boundary between” (1996:54). Such “contaminated yet connective tissue” says much about transmigrants’ ability to suture together dissimilar pieces of cultural fabrics in order to survive in a new environment. The suturing of cultural fragments often generates complex practices and

worldviews that do not fit into any established category. Bernadette's comment about blending of two cultures and its continuous effect on her artistic style certainly comes to our mind (p.36). Kai, meanwhile, has shown us her ambivalent sense of attachment to, and detachment from, her Chinese culture (p.61). Desiree seems to echo Bernadette and Kai in saying that being a "culturally diverse hybrid," she does not consciously break down her work into clear-cut cultural realms (pp.40–41). Indeed, cultural hybridization is the underlying characteristic of all four participants' filmmaking. In particular, Hoi Bing's "neither . . . nor . . ." embodies it in the space of in-between, where Ying constantly experiments with contradictions and opposites (p.71). Ying's in-between space is very much like Hoi Bing's and the other three filmmakers' artistic space, which they have constructed to express their creative passion. As I have argued, it is in this space that they explore their shifting positionality and engage in social critique. Such social critique, stemming from "a place of hybridity," is most effective precisely because it "overcomes the given grounds of opposition" (Bhabha 1994:25). That is, because this "place of hybridity" consists of disjunctive yet plural, and often paradoxical cultural discourses, the participants are able to utilize these discourses to disrupt social order, which is built on the oppressive Us–Them mentality. To put it another way, each participant has an "epistemological advantage" to see the social world from many possible vantage points and negotiate with "many margins and many centers" (Shohat and Stam 1994:48–49). Subversive creativity, then, springs from this fluid access to multiple looking (and speaking) positions: "There's more than meets the eye There's just so many ways to look at something" (Desiree, p.51).

We may now want to ask, "How does she go about negotiating with many margins and centers?" Clearly, having access to multiple epistemological positions is to acquire multi-hyphenated gaze and voice. By expressing such gaze(s) and voice(s) through her artistic space, therefore, she is able to 'confuse' the direction of looking (and speaking) relations, thereby reworking the self–other (center–margin) dichotomy. Kai's "Her" beautifully demonstrates one such process by showing us how to direct our gaze

onto the stranger-lover *within* ourselves (p.59). This gaze is not the conventional gaze of 'a while heterosexual male,' but something new, both objectifying and liberating. It first endorses our "needed sense of difference between the 'self' and the 'object,' which becomes the 'Other'"; then gradually, it urges us to acknowledge that we're only drawing an "imaginary line" (Gilman 1985:18). What she has done, and shown us to do, is 'decentering' of the self. According to Schutte, "the self's decentering" occurs when we recognize that "the other, the foreigner, the stranger, is that person occupying the space of the subaltern in the culturally asymmetrical power relation, but also those elements or dimensions of the self that unsettle or decenter the ego's dominant, self-enclosed territorialized identity" (2000:46–47). We can say that the self's decentering is a stepping-stone to social decentering, since dividing lines of many kinds (male|female, queer|non-queer, East|West, etc.) have been drawn by the objectifying, self-idealizing majoritarian gaze, which has been internalized, though in varying degrees with different effects, by the population at large, including myself and the participants. Because the filmmakers have hybridized this gaze with 'deviant' gazes of the margins, they are able to not just show us how to respect the other within and without, but also deconstruct these dividing lines, or borders, through their films and other artworks.

Some of the borders that they tackle are those of culture, gender, and sexuality, which are all interrelated. The majoritarian gaze exploits these borders to construct the orientalized/gendered/queered body, onto which discursive and even physical force is applied. Kai's encounter with, and fight against, this violent gaze had led her to use her own body as a site of deconstruction. Through her performance, she has shown us how the vulnerable, other-defined body can *simultaneously* be a resistive, self-defined body (p.58). Similarly, her photo installation shows her manifold performances, or practices of *multiple* femininities and masculinities (pp.55–56). Such an endlessly performative self takes away an 'essence' from the heterosexual gender identity, and shatters the "construct of heterosexuality as origin" (Butler 1991:22). Kai asks us, "What is gender, what is sexuality? Not just black-and-white. There's lots of gray" (p.65). Indeed, her works

embody this gray space, which, evidently, reflects her own artistic space; she invites us there to re-negotiate, through interconnected subject positions, our concepts of gender and sexuality. An ambivalent space can also be exemplified through spoken narrative, and this is what Desiree has done in “Salty Wet” (pp.43–44). The film not only demonstrates the sensuality and viscosity of language but celebrates an array of meanings generated through the (con)fusing of various cultural and gender discourses. By creating borderland images based on these meanings, Desiree has shown us that slang, just like desire, knows no boundaries or dimensions, and can thus take our imagination beyond established limits of formal and/or specialized languages. She has also shown us how the participants in her film, immigrants of Chinese descent, can bounce between Cantonese and English, causing not just multi-level associations but temporalities of perception and consciousness. These temporalities challenge the notions of linear time and confined space, and indeed, problematizing such ‘neat’ spatiotemporal lines necessarily becomes part of minoritarian filmmaking.

Transmigrants who have crossed borders of many kinds often enter into what Smith calls “the contested politics of place-making” (2001:5). Their marginalized histories, imbued with experiences of displacement, make it difficult for them to settle in a new land that does not necessarily understand such backgrounds. What often follows is an anxious and ambiguous sense of time and space, which affects transmigrants’ conceptualization of the social world. One such example is “A Girl Named Kai,” whose past memories, present struggles, and future hopes—deriving at once from four different geographical locations—collide and intersect through fast montage sequences (pp.61–62). Memory also plays a central role in Bernadette’s film; for her, past and present interconnect through the act of blinking—a poetic space represented by black gaps (pp.29–30). Her approach to reconstructing the past, moreover, is not to ‘reproduce’ history, but rather, it is to rewrite it in a transformative way. Deleuze and Guattari might say that she is ‘mapping’ instead of ‘tracing’ her sense of self, for “the map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant

modification A map has multiple entryways, as opposed to the tracing, which always comes back to the ‘same’” (1987:12). Indeed, the map is a fine tool for experimenting with both physical and social boundaries, and such ‘nomadic’ place-making is what Hoi Bing demonstrates in her film. She has shown us that there is no “perfect place” to settle for those who question societal assimilation (pp.69–70). Her mind thus drifts over geographical and institutional territories without acquiring a sense of permanent attachment, as illustrated through Ying’s out-of-focus gaze: “There is no one place, no one focal point for her life, for her environment” (p.74). Such a wandering, ‘mapping’ gaze defies territorial imperatives and instead engages in constant exploration. In so doing, it unravels established hierarchies and opens up transformative opportunities.

Boundaries can be deconstructed not just visually but aurally.² Because sound pervades beyond the filmic screen and gives a heightened presence, it can effectively engage all human senses. The mysterious and deep sounds in Kai’s “Kitore,” for example, not only make the images ‘pulse’ but also penetrate through the gender dichotomy; such flexible sounds can therefore be heard and felt in diverse ways (p.56). Likewise, Desiree has used diverse, multi-track sounds in order to amplify the many dimensions of eroticism (pp.41–42). Unlike the conventional film music which is ‘composed and codified’ in such a way as to regulate the audience’s psychological response, Hoi Bing’s film music was ‘improvised’ so as to evoke the ambivalence of in-between space (p.71). The participants’ unstructured handling of sound tells us much about their attitude towards media specificity; not only do they experiment with filmic (visual) language, but they apply their subversive creativity to musical language as well. In fact, all four filmmakers question the notion of film as purely a visual medium, and instead actively cross-fertilize it with many aspects of other artistic mediums. Such

² In visual anthropology, film is almost always associated with image (hence ‘visual’ theory, method, etc). Thus, very little attention has been given to other components of film, such as sound. Likewise, film theorists have historically given sound a second place, due to the common take on sound as a mere supplement to the image. It wasn’t until the participants pointed out the importance of sound that I realized my fixation on the visual. Only recently have the academic circles finally started to show interest in the ‘senses of film’ (for example, Marks 2000).

expressions as “painting with light” (Bernadette, p.37) and “writing with images” (Kai, p.61) clearly capture their intertextual approach to filmmaking, which makes possible multi-dimensional, multi-sensory representation of ‘reality.’ Indeed, by blurring media specificity, they blur the perception of truth, too—a vital tactic common in works of many displaced filmmakers who test the established notion of “authorial vision and style” (Naficy 2001:8). This careful ambiguity is particularly significant, for the Western cognitive tradition continues to attach weight to vision (‘seeing is believing’) in a monolithic way, which then categorizes, simplifies, and legitimizes the social world. The participants’ hybrid aesthetics, therefore, exposes the instability of perception and the need for critical reflection. It can be hybridization of genres (docu-fiction, p73), or of styles (comic-strip film, p.44), or of film footage (collage of discourses, pp.62–63), but all prompt us to consider the many ramifications of such mixing. Like the man appreciating Kai’s maxi-pads painting, we may be ‘shocked’ to find what is hidden (p.63), but by taking a second look, we will certainly begin to understand how complex histories intersect in a single artwork. For the participants, boundaries hold no fear; the allure and power of their works lie in the freshness of their vision and speech. Such works continue to live—and grow—in our memory and imagination.

What does it mean to be a minoritarian filmmaker? It means to exercise subversive creativity and challenge the established regime of representation, including the discourse of Othering. Specifically, it means to utilize multi-hyphenated gazes and voices, and disrupt the direction of looking (and speaking) relations. In so doing, the filmmaker deconstructs dividing lines of all kinds, be it sociohistorical, spatiotemporal, or aesthetic. She *transgresses* these lines by demonstrating how she can be simultaneously situated between and across multiple borders. She then *dissolves* these borders by showing us their contingency, ambiguity, and changeability. Her ‘mapping’ gaze continually works to (con)fuse often contradictory discourses and challenges those who uni-directionally seek ‘truth.’ She lets us know that there is no discursive fixity; the

majoritarian gaze cannot fix the Other or itself, for we are all, in one way or another, affected by today's transnational flows and shifting power dynamics, and as such, a dominant group's tenacious hold over representation only generates more diverse, visible forms of resistance. The minoritarian filmmaker, in establishing her own artistic space, has had to fight against social inequality and injustice sustained through such representational control; since this resistive space necessarily reflects her minoritarian experiences and hybrid cultural discourses, she is keenly aware of her positionality that shifts and multiples in a blink of an eye. Thus, unlike the majoritarian gaze that only allows the construction of one-dimensional identity in relation to the (imagined) Other, her gaze recognizes that the 'I' is "not a unified subject, fixed entity, or that solid mass covered with layers of superficialities one has gradually to peel off before one can see its true face. 'I' is, itself, *infinite layers*" (Trinh 1989:94). Accordingly, her subversive creativity, that is, constant experimentation with filmic language, enables her to explore and express many such layers. Yet, to make a film with the 'I' is not to *be* that 'I,' for by the time the film is made, its author is already beyond that 'I' and becoming something else. As Brah points out, "a particular 'identity' assumes shape in political practice out of the *fragmentic relationality* of subjectivity and dissolves to emerge as a trace in another identity-formation" (1996:125). The minoritarian filmmaker's film, then, is a testimony to the *process* of her identity negotiation, as well as her border deconstruction. The filmmaker continues to rewrite her identity in the very act of transgressing and dissolving boundaries. Her film thus does not assert the totality or finality of meaning; instead, it embraces ambiguity and contradiction.

Becoming acquainted with the four filmmakers gave me an invaluable opportunity to reflect on my own transitional, multi-layered, and fragmented identity. And yet, I always wondered how the participants could be so courageous, and even playful, in accepting and utilizing to the fullest their gazes and voices. Artistic passion and resistant spirit alone, I thought, cannot make possible such compelling border deconstruction. Eventually I came across Anzaldúa's writing and found one plausible

answer: divergent thinking. Speaking of multi-hyphenated *mestiza* self, she writes, “*la mestiza* constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode) to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes. The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity” (1999:101). Indeed, without tolerance one cannot transgress *and* dissolve borders. This divergent thinking—a consciousness of the Borderlands—has enabled the participants to take on the borders from/through many vantage points with such serenity and vivacity. Their filmmaking is, then, ‘border filmmaking’; it intertwines multi-hyphenated gazes (and voices) so as to contradict, complicate, and liberate our worldviews in an *inclusive* way. It is these intertwining gazes and voices that render the participants’ humor versatile, their desire multi-faceted, and their filmic innovations unhindered (i.e., subversive creativity). As a result, we can passionately, open-mindedly, and self-reflexively interpret their filmic texts. Such gazes and voices, moreover, make coalition-building possible—through vulnerable yet intersubjective representation, through viewer–text dialogue, and through active public discussion. The filmmakers have shown us that ‘inclusive transformation’ is to acknowledge not the Difference constructed by the majoritarian gaze, but rather, dynamic differences negotiated through incessantly intertwining gazes and voices. Through their films, every divergence ripples out into infinite possibilities.

VIII. FADE IN: Reconfiguring Ethnographic Film

Deconstruction

Thus far I have tried to foreground minoritarian films with the implication that the participants' critical insights bear much relevance to ethnographic filmmaking. It is, indeed, their intertwining gazes and voices that help us develop a practical and ethical filming approach which accounts for today's plural social formations. They give ethnographic film an incentive to move its attention from bounded 'cultural groups' to sociohistorical processes and power relations that are marked by fragmentation, multiplicity, and indeterminacy. Such a move has long been embraced by critical ethnography, as evident in Gupta and Ferguson's proposal: "What is needed is a willingness to interrogate, politically and historically, the apparent 'given' of a world in the first place divided into 'ourselves' and 'others.'" A first step on this road is to move beyond naturalized conceptions of spatialized 'cultures' and to explore instead the production of difference within common, shared, and connected spaces" (1997:45). Yet the issue of just how to go about *visually* exploring such complex matters has remained unsolved by visual anthropologists. Just recently, Poole has looked into the nature of photographic gaze and suggested that "perhaps what is needed is a rethinking of the notion of difference itself, a questioning of its stability as an object of inquiry and a new way of thinking about the temporality of encounter as it shapes both ethnography and photography" (2005:172). As we have already seen, the participants are quite familiar with "connected spaces" and "temporality of encounter," and are far ahead of intellectuals in visualizing such concepts. What exactly is it, then, that's deterring visual anthropologists from doing the same? I would argue that it is the conventional (i.e., institutionally sanctioned) ethnographic gaze that has drawn a rigid line between reality and fiction, and between written text and visual text. We can begin by deconstructing these lines by following the participants' example: hybridizing the ethnographic gaze with gazes of the margins.

The four filmmakers have shown us that representation has less to do with realist images than cultural discourses. By negotiating conflicting cultural voices at play, they have visualized and often fictionalized the very process of their identity formation and resistance. Their films do not show any 'essence' of their everyday life, but rather the unfolding of their exploration into the ever-fluid intersection of gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. Such films thus embody the filmmakers' hybrid artistic space, which itself never stays frozen. The participants' ambiguous sense of time and space, moreover, has generated multiple, disruptive, and intersecting narratives and images that do not conform to the mainstream notion of reality. Yet their films are much more significant socially than a conventional documentary that professes to contain a particular 'fact,' precisely because they demonstrate the evidence of lived and growing agency. A filmmaker-anthropologist working in this deterritorialized age can perhaps start emphasizing such agency, which confuses and negotiates, on screen, power relations, ideologies, memories, fantasies, and other embodied experiences.

Because creative agency of minority members most likely stems from hybrid space, the resulting filmic representation can become ambiguous and contradictory. The filmmaker-anthropologist will need to accept not only this 'unstable' representation but also the inherent ambiguities and contradictions associated with filmic language itself. As the participants have shown us, there is no absolute, unitary filmic language (or any other representational language). Any attempt to fix and stabilize filmic meaning through standardization would be no different from dominant cinema's careless claim to the knowledge of the Other (i.e., stereotypes). The participants, on the other hand, have taken full advantage of the instability of filmic language in order to illustrate the fluidity of hybrid space. In so doing, they have emphasized the contingency and multiplicity of filmic meaning, which can be negotiated by the audience through open reading. Their films are critical and reflexive, not because they are anti-illusory but because they question the notion of singular truth by refusing to underplay, and instead acknowledge, the existence of diverse discourses. They are also compelling and liberating, simply

because their authors' humor, desire, and innovative techniques engage us in active viewing while also making us readjust our own cultural, political, and historical positionalities. The challenge for the filmmaker-anthropologist, then, is to contextualize and represent the variability of hybrid space in ways that are both textually open-ended and theoretically relevant.

One solution to such a challenge, I argue, is to adopt a more experimental, intertextual approach. There is a long-standing debate in visual anthropology over the difference between visual and written texts, that is, whether the visual should be used as a stand-alone research tool or as a supplement to the traditional written ethnography (for example, Mead 1995:4; Ruby 2000:160). The participants' hybrid aesthetics certainly defies such a dichotomy; the idea that separate realities exist in separate forms is a rather limited and uncreative one. The filmmakers have shown how one can utilize many aspects of artistic mediums in order to achieve a much thicker yet contingent representation of reality. In theorizing and representing a hybrid space, the filmmaker-anthropologist can, in my view, depend equally on writing and filming, always intertextually referencing each other, but there is no reason why an ethnographic film should not be poetic, performative, painterly, musical, and thus more disorderly. Indeed, aesthetic hybridization is very much part of the filmmakers' subversive creativity, which has enabled them to effectively explore the fluidity and complexity of their identities and experiences. Since such subversive creativity embraces multiple and simultaneous epistemologies, the filmmakers are able to show "a potential as well as an actual plurality of universes" (Harvey 1989:301), which, as a result, prompts us into critical reflection on disjunctive yet interconnected social realities and transformative possibilities. Because filmic experimentation means not just a collage of styles but also a negotiation of discursive frameworks, the filmmaker-anthropologist will also need to intertwine his or her academic gaze and voice with more marginal, multi-hyphenated gazes and voices. Doing so first requires decolonizing the discourse of Othering generated by the conventional ethnographic filmmaking.

Decolonization

While collaborative filmmaking has become something of an intellectual movement, the conventional ethnographic gaze continues to separate the filmmaker-anthropologist from his or her film participants. This, in my view, has much to do with the filmmaker-anthropologist's firm adherence to the academic notion of 'ethnographicness.' Yet as Pink points out, there is in fact no concrete line between ethnographic and other types of films, for a film's definition is always contextual: "A video recording that ethnographers see as representing ethnographic knowledge about an event and how it is experienced might, in their informants' eyes, be a video of a birthday party" (2001:79). If such ontological and epistemological distinctions are not negotiated, 'shared filmmaking' will be making vain efforts. It has been long since Marcus argued that "anthropological representations as claims to knowledge now exist in a complex matrix of dialogic engagement with diverse other representations, interests, and claims to knowledge concerning the same objects of study" (1994:41). I wonder why, then, ethnographic film has not shattered the certainty of its own gaze in order to acknowledge the possibility of its partiality and the existence of 'other' gazes. Perhaps in the case of ethnographic film, the very form of anthropological self-reflection has not been adequately reoriented. That is, we need to critically historicize not only the practices of ethnographic filmmaking but also its conventional gaze *in relation* to 'other' gazes—gazes that have been buried in the silenced histories of colonialism and neo-colonialism. Many such gazes, once foregrounded, are likely to reject the Eurocentric notion of 'history-as-chronological-progress,' and challenge the boundaries that have been used to establish anthropology as a scientific discipline. Thus, historicizing ethnographic film means decentering ethnographic film; we need to consider reflexively how and why anthropology has drawn, and continues to preserve, a firm line between anthropological and non-anthropological ways of seeing.

Decentering can be carried out at an individual level on screen, as has been demonstrated by the participants. Ablu-Lughod's seminal work, written in 1991, argues

for an anthropological practice that “unsettles the boundary between self and other,” in order to problematize the established “study of the non-Western other by the Western self, even if in its new guise it seeks explicitly to give voice to the Other or to present a dialogue between self and other” (137, 139). In visual anthropology, such a practice has since meant turning the camera on the researcher him or herself. In particular, feminist ethnographers have tried to make their on-screen presence “as much a subject of the film as the cultural phenomena being studied” (Folkerth 1993:62). Although this approach has certainly made ethnographic filmmaking more ethical and reflexive as it has enabled the filmmaker-anthropologist to place his or her body in the same framework used to interpret and represent the Other, I would argue that it could also needlessly reinforce the ethnographic (i.e., intellectual) gaze. Self-reflection would be more effective if done through a ‘contaminated’ camera. Just as the four filmmakers have readily hybridized the dominant gaze with those of the margins, filmmaker-anthropologists can perhaps start blending their internalized academic gaze with seemingly non-academic ones. This may include those that correspond with their respective social positions, which may or may not be marginalized in terms of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. But it is their film participants’ often marginal gazes that can ultimately decenter their researcher-self, rendering, as a result, their academic gaze more fluid and versatile. Such a gaze, or a contaminated camera, will most likely be receptive to subtle social practices and complex individual agencies. This approach is not quite the same as cultural relativism, or seeing the world ‘from another’s shoes,’ because in this case the self remains separate from the shoes, foreign objects. The contaminated camera, on the other hand, is at once individual and collective; it is as much a filmmaker-anthropologist’s gaze as his or her film participants’. Consequently, it voluntarily embraces the multiplicity and instability of human perception.

The actual process of the self’s decentering and subsequent intertwining of gazes and voices, however, cannot take place without ongoing relationship-building. The four filmmakers themselves value the very process of (re)creating relationships through

filmmaking, as they are acutely aware of their and their participants' shifting positionalities. Just as an ethnographer must view him or herself "in terms of shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations" (Narayan 1993:671), so must the filmmaker-anthropologist try to situate him or herself across multiple boundaries that instigate minoritarian resistance. If we recognize filmmaking as taking place not between passive, bounded individuals but rather between active, transgressing individuals, we will see less of researcher-researched binarism and more of intersubjectivity. But intersubjectivity alone will not be enough for the self's decentering; the filmmaker-anthropologist needs to welcome the stranger within, the Other he or she has, up to this point, observed from a distance. Only then will the filmmaker-anthropologist start to recognize and embody, for example, a sense of vulnerability unique to minority groups, who are used to being mis-/under-represented. We recall how Bernadette and Kai talked about their experiences of dealing with this vulnerability *both* as observer and observed, for they had known all too well that "not only is the observer vulnerable, but so too, yet more profoundly, are those whom we observe" (Behar 1996:24). And yet, the filmmaker-anthropologist who has embodied this vulnerability may be surprised to find within him or herself a strong determination to achieve a liberatory, free-spirited representation.

Indeed, shared filmmaking cannot ignore such complex nature of minoritarian agency. Hooks has aptly explained why minoritarian art holds great potential for social transformation: "I asked my audience to consider why in so many instances of global imperialist conquest by the West, art has been other appropriated or destroyed . . . if one could make a people lose touch with their capacity to create, lose sight of their will and their power to make art, then the work of subjugation, of colonization, is complete. Such work can be undone only by acts of concrete reclamation" (1995:xv). By making their presence known through their artistic space, despite the deep-rooted social and political barriers, the four filmmakers have proven their immense capacity to not just create art, but generate their own rhythms that fuel their confidence and willpower. They have done

so by not just resisting, but taking advantage of dominant discourses—the very forces that confine them to the margins. Disregarding the existence of such creative agency or subsuming it under an already established category would be to distort the contemporary social picture. As Schutte reminds us, “the scientific practices of a dominant culture are what determine not only the limits of knowledge but who may legitimately participate in the language of science” (2000:47). Shared filmmaking, then, must go beyond sharing of representational technology and move towards sharing of representational knowledge. Since the insights of minority members who live between two or more regimes of knowledge tend to be subversive, they may be able to unravel the limits of scientific frameworks. For example, while humor and desire may seem redundant or even irrational to an academic, the participants have shown us how these can be productive of knowledge, both as a tool for social critique and an avenue to disseminate alternative discourses. ‘Merging with’ such minoritarian insights will be possible only if the filmmaker-anthropologist engages in an ongoing conversation with his or her film participants, while at the same time reassessing and readjusting his or her positionality.

The filmmakers themselves have demonstrated how this could be done. In *Women Breaking Boundaries*, Desiree shows us the *process* of the women’s on-screen conversation, even though the merging of conflicting views, including Desiree’s, was never ‘finalized’ in the course of film production. Bernadette’s and Hoi Bing’s use of shared subject position, which works to generate multiple meanings, is one outcome of their persistent off-screen conversation with their film participants. Following such examples, I myself have tried, in this thesis, to delineate how my positionality was continually modified through my conversations with the filmmakers, and how this modification has influenced the way I represent their views. But I have nonetheless sought the stamp of ‘academic credibility,’ and in so doing I may have limited representational/interpretive choices for myself, for the filmmakers, as well as for the readers of this thesis. The filmmakers, on the other hand, place an emphasis on the *negotiability* of variable subject positions, thereby eschewing the totality or finality of

filmic meaning. Their approach not only embraces but endorses creative agency of individual social actors—at once vulnerable, resistive, conflicting, and thus political.

Such nature of creative agency means that the very process of shared filmmaking must also be politicized. The four filmmakers' works have become necessarily political precisely because the filmmakers have continually explored their positionalities in relation to the people involved in their filmmaking, as well as to the larger social structures. In a similar vein, ethnographic film needs to be placed in the broader context of power relations. This means that the filmmaker-anthropologists will have to reflect on how they and their film participants are being placed and displaced—physically and socially—in relation to shifting influences of global neoliberalism and consequent domestic politics. As Rosaldo points out, emphasizing agency in relation to social structure is to “focus on the unfolding interplay of political struggles, social inequalities, and cultural differences” (1993:105). This *unfolding* interplay of power and creative resistance is precisely what the participants' films demonstrate; they show the very process of border transgression and dissolution, while paving the way for inclusive transformation. Filmmaking, therefore, is not merely an aesthetic (or academic) practice; it can be the grounds of action, with concrete outcomes in the social world. The ultimate challenge for the filmmaker-anthropologist, then, is to carry out such border deconstruction with his or her film participants, and not to simply represent ‘their’ social concerns. If I were to make an ethnographic film, I would have to be ready to not just decenter my self but change my way of social existence, appreciate contradictions and ambiguities, and continually redefine my identity. The contaminated camera I would carry could then be truly part of perpetual coalition-building.

IX. OPENING CREDITS <<

New Visions and Narratives

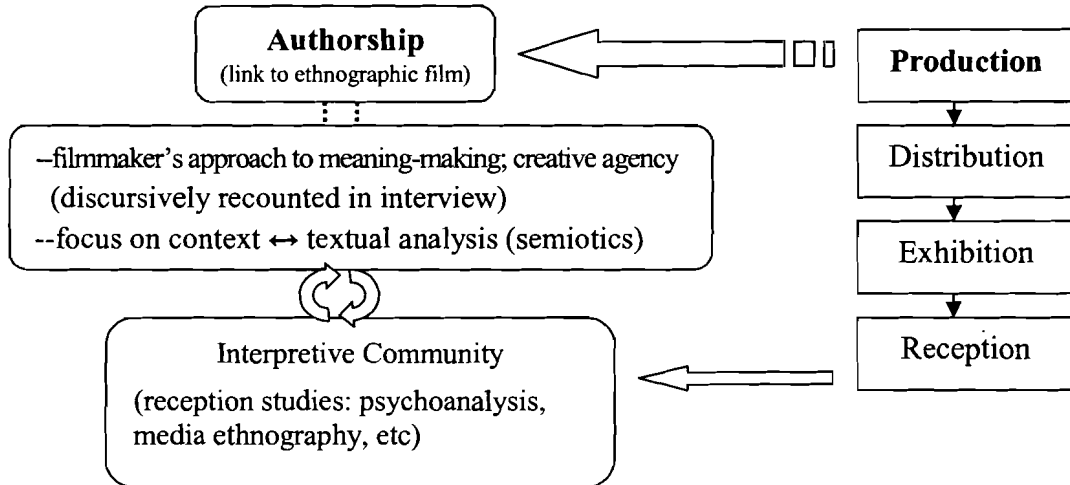
Throughout this thesis I have attempted to demonstrate the spirit of minoritarian filmmaking I have learned from four filmmakers: Bernadette, Desiree, Kai, and Hoi Bing. I hope my writing has been able to convey the subversive yet inclusive nature of the filmmakers' intertwining gazes and voices, thereby engaging readers from all backgrounds. The remaining space of my thesis obliges me to briefly consider the academic and political implications of 'inclusive transformation' that can be potentially realized by ethnographic filmmaking. The majority of ethnographic films, to this day, have been discussed and circulated within academic circles, most of whom are anthropologists and students of anthropology. This almost 'esoteric' communication seems to contradict the aims of shared filmmaking. It not only alienates the film participants but also makes the film's reflexivity seem rather self-justifying. Noting visual anthropology's tendency towards self-seclusion, Pink (2003) has called for a more open, interdisciplinary approach to visual research, one that will embrace a reciprocal exchange of ideas among various disciplines. Being challenged (and encouraged) by different theoretical perspectives and criticisms will certainly enable visual anthropologists to strive for a more relational, power-conscious representation. This thesis itself has been written with the hope of opening a critical interdisciplinary debate that will broaden the horizons of ethnographic filmmaking, and I anticipate that more such dialogues will take place.

Still, filmmaker-anthropologists can, in my view, venture out of the academic realm and engage a yet larger number of people. Because a completed film gets remapped and renamed as it passes through interpretive communities, its author cannot claim monopoly over meaning, but can nevertheless shape the way it is interpreted: open reading. We recall how readily the four filmmakers have advocated open-mindedness in order for their viewers to reflect on their positionalities and generate diverse, context-

specific readings, thereby enabling discussions in the public sphere. These discussions are inherently political and liberatory, as it involves negotiation of often conflicting yet stimulating interpretations. It is these public dialogues that ultimately challenge the established regimes of knowledge. Shared ethnographic filmmaking, therefore, can also work towards a similar goal by involving the film participants, academics, as well as general public in an ever-expanding coproduction of new visions and narratives. An ethnographic film, if made with subversive creativity, will very likely attract the public. Yet as has been the case with the four filmmakers, it is the filmmaker-anthropologist's task to 'inspire' open-mindedness in the public through various communicative forms, so that a great many will be willing to indulge in the subversive 'festive pleasure' and have their worldviews disarranged. Such participatory viewing experiences will lead to reduced fear and increased tolerance for contradictions and ambiguities generated through border deconstruction. The four filmmakers have taught me that it is this shared awareness of human diversity that becomes a springboard for social change.

Appendix A: Epistemological Diagram

The diagram below shows the epistemological position I have taken in this research. It illustrates how a social phenomenon (i.e., film production) can be studied, and how such knowledge can be demonstrated.



Appendix B: General Interview Guide

The following is a general outline which covers the common topics I discussed with each participant. Our conversation took an exploratory approach rather than a question-and-answer format. That is, the topics became more specific and/or expanded in each interview context, often diverging from the composition of this guide. This outline was emailed to each participant before the interview, so that she would have the opportunity to read through the questions in advance.

The focus of interview:

- A) Identity formation through film/video (cultural, gender, sexual identity issues)
- B) Aesthetic, social, and political values of independent filmmaking

Underlying Themes and Question Examples:

(growing up experiences)

- 1) What is your background? What are important influences in your life?
- 2) Can you briefly talk about your family, education, work experience, and your home community?

(motivation for immigrating to Canada)

- 1) Why did you decide to come to Canada (to Vancouver)?
- 2) When did you come to Canada?
- 3) Did you come here alone or with your family?
- 4) Did you have any acquaintances in Canada?

(influence of film)

- 1) Which films/filmmakers have inspired you?
- 2) What do you think about mainstream (e.g., Hollywood) movies in general?
- 3) What do you think about the mainstream depictions of Asian women (and Asian lesbians) in North America?
- 4) How is film (its art and technology) viewed in your home country?

(cultural difference)

- 1) Have you ever experienced culture shock/home sickness?
- 2) What do you think of Canadian society in general compared to your home country?
- 3) How do you keep in touch with your home country?

(aspirations)

- 1) What kind of future projects do you have, or do you want to work on?
- 2) Do you ever think about making films/videos in your home country, or anywhere else?

(motivation for film/videomaking)

- 1) Why did you decide to do independent film/videomaking (in Vancouver)?
- 2) Where did you learn film/videomaking skills?
- 3) Why do you make film as opposed to video (and vice versa)?

(film/video topics and styles) *Questions #4~#7 refer to individual film(s)/video(s)*

- 1) How do you describe your style in comparison to other films/videos (e.g., mainstream)?
- 2) How do you see yourself as? (a filmmaker, a racial/ethnic minority, a woman?)
- 3) What is the overarching theme/focus in your films/videos?
- 4) How did you come up with this particular film/video topic?
- 5) Why did you decide to make a film/video based on this topic?
- 6) How long did it take to make this particular film/video (from concept to release)?
- 7) How did you create this particular narrative (plot, visual style, etc)?
- 8) Do you have other artistic interest (e.g., painting, photography, etc)?

(difficulties and benefits of independent filmmaking; artistic, technical, and interpersonal skills)

- 1) How do you manage your film/video financially (e.g., budget, funding, equipments)?
- 2) How do you go about building networks and professional relationships? (e.g., getting support for production, finding an outlet for the finished product, etc) How do you gain access?
- 3) Have you ever had any ethical issues? How do you handle them?
- 4) How do you make aesthetic decisions during shooting/editing? How do you negotiate with your crew on such issues?
- 5) How do you handle the practical aspects of film/videomaking (e.g., when having technical issues using camera, lighting, editing, sound equipments)?

(audience) *Questions #3 and #4 refer to individual film(s)/video(s)*

- 1) Who do you make film/video for? Who is your intended audience?
- 2) Why and how do you enter your works in film festivals?
- 3) How did you feel when you introduced this particular film/video to the audience at the first screening?
- 4) How did you think of the reactions/responses to this particular film/video?
- 5) What do you want your film/video to do for society?

Appendix C: Participants' Film Synopses

The following is a list of the films discussed in this thesis. The synopses have been made available by the participants.

Mary Bernadette Guevara:

“New Arrivals” (2003)

“New Arrivals” is a documentary that shows the poignant reality of the immigrant experience in Canada. In this movie, the director narrates her experiences as a newly arrived Filipino immigrant youth in Canada, and interacts with fellow new arrivals—Celina (a registered nurse/domestic helper) and Daniel (an architect/gas station attendant and a McDonald’s crew member). In “New Arrivals,” the characters discover the truth of the “North American Dream,” which comes to them as a huge culture shock. Despite being highly educated and eligible to work in their professions, the characters still find themselves being limited to very low paying jobs—jobs that most Canadians would not want to take. [2003 VAFF program guide]

Desiree Lim:

“Disposable Lez” (1999)

“Disposable Lez” is a play on words of “disposable lens”—a black comedy on how fast and frequent many lesbians tend to dump (dispose) and find (recycle) girlfriends. Dez’s latest attempt to reflect on the harsh reality of the dyke dating culture with her queer sense of humor . . . Urara overhears the conversation of two high school girls talking about how convenient disposable lens are to use these days. In their conversation they never mention the words “disposable lens” and they somehow trigger Urara’s memories of how frequent she has been dumped lately . . . The copy at the end of the first half of this video tells the audience that “We can use Disposable Lez anywhere, anytime.” But the second half, Urara gets “picked up” (recycled) and the ending message tells the audience we should “try to recycle and be environmentally friendly”! [CV]

“Dyke: Just Be It” (1999)

A music video celebrating the visibility of Japanese queer womyn as themselves, in their element. With a bit of cultural subversion, “Dyke: Just Be It” puts a queer spin on Nike ads “Nike – Just Do It.” A visually and musically empowering piece with a strong message of having the pride and faith in being queer and out there. [CV]

“eRoTiCiSm” (2001)

A video poem by women of ages ranging from 20s to 50s, voicing out their erotic images of women, and their love and desire for them. Dez’s visual experimentation of “female eroticism” through women’s eyes in Japan. [CV]

Sugar Sweet (2001)

Naomi is an aspiring filmmaker caught between her desire to create art films and her need to make a living. She's hired to direct some girl-on-girl action for a straight porn company, but her bosses freak out when she screens her arty rushes. Meanwhile, Naomi's friends are dishing her for taking the job in the first place, and she gets turned on by a virtual online relationship with a woman named Sugar. And when Naomi begins directing a scripted "reality TV" matchmaking show and sets up her best friend with the mysterious Miki, the fiction becomes positively surreal. A fun and sexy romantic comedy of three women caught in a love triangle in the urban Japanese dyke world. [www.desireelim.com]

Women Breaking Boundaries (2001)

A documentary that follows the journey of four Japanese women artists' process in the creation of their artwork and involvement in organizing the first ever all-female art exhibition in Japan of 39 professional and amateur artists from Japan and Asia. It documents the personal struggles, conflicts of ideas and interests—through the honest voices of the artists involved and by reflecting the reality of Japan's art scene through their eyes, as women. [provided via email]

"Salty Wet" (2002)

"Salty Wet" is an experimental piece exploring the interpretations and misinterpretations of queer sexual slangs in Cantonese and English. We ask immigrants of Chinese descent "obscenely" sexual terms in both Cantonese and English, bringing out the humor and cultural representations and misrepresentations of the sexual terms that are part of our lives. [CV]

"Out for Bubble Tea" (2003)

May, Kim, and Ling are three Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong who like to hang out at the neighborhood's Bubble Tea house. May is struggling with the issue of coming out to her family as a lesbian, Kim has a crush on the waitress at the Bubble Tea house, and Ling is trying to get out of a family matchmaking arrangement. "Out For Bubble Tea" is an entanglement of coming-of-age issues as new/old young immigrants and queer women of color. Three young women whose lives unfold through their tete-a-tete at the Bubble Tea House—a place where young Chinese immigrants go to socialize and organize. [Video Out Distribution catalogue]

"Some Real Fangs" (2004)

Tara is the heir to the Vampire tradition in her family. The time has come for her to grow her fangs. But first, she has to find her true love and have the first fateful kiss on a special Lunar eclipse that happens once in 120 years. And she only has two weeks to do that. Tara meets Nelly at a local Blood Bank and it is love at first sight. With the help of her best friends Mitch and Leslie, Tara starts wooing Nelly, only to find out she already has a boyfriend . . . Is Nelly the special one? Will Tara win the race against the clock and grow her fangs? A multicultural musical-comedy about a Vampire Wannabe's coming-of-age, girl-meets-girl adventures in the backdrop of Vancouver's bright lights and back streets. [Video Out Distribution catalogue]

Kai Ling Xue:**“Her” (2001)**

“Her” is a black & white Super-8 film presented in experimental narrative style with original music. The film is a meditation into fantasy and the solitude of love. Hand-processed film and advanced editing give “Her” an ephemeral and timeless quality which illustrates the intensity of the subject matter. [CV]

“Kitore” (2002)

“Kitore” is an experimental film shot on Super-8 which fuses a variety of techniques in order to confront the convention of the erotic and how it is viewed. The abstract images contained in the film draw the viewer into a cerebral and aesthetic exploration of sexuality and gender divisions, and challenge the boundaries of technology and the traditions of film. Original sound accompanies a rich tapestry of pulsing image, created with a combination of archaic and contemporary processes. “Kitore” is like no other erotic film made. It illustrates the elasticity of eroticism and provides a new language in which to define it. [CV]

“Tilted” (2003)

Short and sweet! “Tilted” is a 5-minute short, using 70’s found 16mm medical footage presented in experimental narrative style with an original twist. The film uses dark humor to illustrate people’s homophobia and ignorant attitudes towards queer issues. “Tilted” is truly a thoughtful and empowering film. [CV]

“A Girl Named Kai” (2004)

This experimental Video-Film has three chapters. “A Girl Named Kai” is about relationships, self-discovery, passion, secrets and dreams. By using different types of film formats (Super 8 and 16mm), Xue takes the audience on a journey through her past, present and beyond. [CV]

Hoi Bing Mo**“neither . . . nor . . .” (2004)**

“Neither . . . nor . . .” portrays a misfit among the social norm. It is about ambiguity and in-betweenness that life offers. It shows that life is not a simple equation.
[provided via email]

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