

A Fleeting Glimpse of Truth

LI XIAOFENG

Li Xiaofeng is a documentary filmmaker, poet, and curator of the Maritime Film Festival and Forum. Since 2003, he has been engaged in documentary filmmaking, focusing on individual experiences, social transformation, and cinematic representations of reality. His documentary works include *Night Walker* (2005), *My Last Secret* (2008), *Black Gold Everywhere* (2011), *Yesterday's Rhapsody* (2015), and *A Study of the Spirit Procession* (2019). His films have been selected for and received awards at numerous international documentary film festivals, including the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival (YIDFF), CPH:DOX Copenhagen International Documentary Festival, and International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA). He is the author of the poetry collections *The Moon over the Andes* (2024) and *The Flood Beasts in My Dream* (2015).

A Fleeting Glimpse of Truth

Li Xiaofeng

As I understand it, the problem of post-truth is that, in the age of social media, internet users are liable to draw on political allegory, moral admonition, and entertainment scripts to fill in the gaps of news events that remain, for the moment, ambiguous or unclear. They invent stories and add dramatic turns; yet the plot often reverses in the end, and the resulting “truth” proves far removed from the facts.¹

In the post-truth era, documentary moving images—as a media form widely circulated on video platforms and television channels—pose a question for their makers: how can they restrain the desire to fabricate stories and maintain clear understanding and independent judgment amid a welter of confusion?

It must be recognized that ignoring the facts while smugly weaving stories and drama around presumed audience preferences is a basic reason documentaries can be hijacked by “manufactured truth.”

My view is this: contemporary documentary should not move toward drama and story. It should move toward poetry.

I. “The Nonprofessional”: Becoming a Nonprofessional Author

For someone who regards making documentaries as the highest form of happiness, it is crucial to remain a *suren*—an ordinary, nonprofessional maker—and to preserve a nonprofessional cast of mind. This may be the most reasonable choice for anyone who deliberately commits to independent production.²

Only by remaining nonprofessional will you disregard the cost, expend every effort, and exhaust every possibility in order to make the work as good as it can be. You do not seek the uniformity of industrial production; you seek the precious texture of the handmade.

It is telling that, among the questionnaires returned to me around 2012 by seventy-seven documentary practitioners working in the field, more than half chose “uncertain” when I asked, “Do you consider yourself a professional in documentary filmmaking?” Documentary director Ji Dan offered a particularly representative answer:

Neither “professional” nor “amateur.” I have neither the professional pride nor the airs of a vocation. Yet I have no other primary occupation, so this is not something I do in the spare time left over from another line of work. Judged by the uncertainty and lack of finish in my methods and expression, however, I am close to a novice. I would rather remain raw than become professional.³

1 Translator’s note: *Naobu* (脑补), literally “to supplement with the brain,” is Chinese internet slang for mentally filling gaps in incomplete information, often by inventing a plausible or dramatic narrative.

2 Translator’s note: The three section headings form a deliberate lexical series around *su* (素), whose semantic range includes plain, unadorned, elemental, and nonprofessional: *suren* (素人, an ordinary or nonprofessional person), *sucai* (素材, raw material or footage), and the author’s coinage *suxiang* (素像, here “the unadorned image”). The English headings prioritize function while preserving the Chinese terms in this note.

3 Translator’s note: “Remain raw” renders 生下去, a play on 生手 (“novice”) and 生 (“raw,” “unripe,” or “unpolished”). A more literal paraphrase would be “I would rather go on being a novice.”

Ji Dan's view struck a deep chord in me.⁴

When you face the people you film, you are neither expert nor director. You are simply an ordinary person who lowers yourself into the dust and whose feelings are as genuine and palpable as theirs. What you must do is exchange your time for theirs and allow your life to resonate with theirs.

Does not the “innocent eye” associated with Robert Flaherty ask us to relinquish preconceptions on location, resist established order, and remain receptive to an open future?

II. “Raw Footage”: Capturing Present Reality

First, what is reality?

I find Christian Metz's formulation persuasive: “Reality assumes presence (la présence), which has a privileged position along two parameters, space and time; only the here and now (hic et nunc) are completely real.”⁵

In 1927, while filming *The Bridge* in Amsterdam,⁶ Joris Ivens became so completely absorbed in his obsessive study of the bridge that a bridge operator exclaimed, “Are you trying to eat this bridge? You prowl and crawl around that wheel like a tiger.” Ivens, for his part, reflected: “I caught the decisive moment with my camera—the instant when I found the right position from which to shoot. . . . It had to be here and now.” Through the making of *The Bridge*, he learned that “to select, emphasize, and seize with confidence everything that the abundant reality before us might yield, the only method is prolonged and creative work.”⁷

In 2000, on Baibu Street—an old Suzhou lane of whitewashed walls and dark-tiled roofs—I tried to observe and record the reality of the “here and now.” I began filming the daily life of an elderly woman on the street and her caregiver. By a fortunate accident, I entered the field of documentary, a realm full of bitterness and hardship yet impossible to give up. Twenty years passed in a flash. In Suzhou, Beijing, northern Shaanxi, and elsewhere, I completed six or seven works in succession.

I can share how we obtain our footage, for readers' scrutiny:

1. Live with the people you film as much as possible, ideally sharing their lives from morning to night. Even when the camera is not running, maintain close contact and observe at close range.

4 Translator's note: The phrase 心有戚戚 echoes *Mencius* 1A.7 (心有戚戚焉), where it denotes inward recognition or sympathetic resonance. “Struck a deep chord” preserves its function rather than its classical wording.

5 Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 22. The manuscript cites Christian Metz, *Dianying yuyan: Dianying fuhaoxue daolun* [*Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*], trans. Liu Senyao (Taipei: Yuan-Liou Publishing, 2000), 43. Yuan-Liou's catalog dates the first edition to 1996; “2000” may identify a later printing and should be checked against the copy used by the author. The body follows Taylor's established English wording.

6 Editorial note: The manuscript locates the filming in Amsterdam. The International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam and the European Foundation Joris Ivens identify the film's subject and location as the Koningshaven lift bridge in Rotterdam. The translation retains the manuscript's wording and records the discrepancy rather than silently correcting it.

7 Joris Ivens, *The Camera and I* (New York: International Publishers, 1969), 28–29. The manuscript cites Joris Ivens, *Sheyingji he wo* [*The Camera and I*] (Beijing: China Film Press, 1977), 21. Catalog and scholarly citations located during verification identify the China Film Press edition as 1980. The quoted wording in the body follows the Chinese manuscript rather than silently substituting the published English passage.

From 2001 to 2003, to make it easier to film a blind mother and daughter in Beijing's Fragrant Hills, we rented a room in a village house near their home and lived there for two full years, simply to create as many opportunities as possible to encounter their lives as they unfolded. When this later became impossible, we still tried to pursue long-term follow-up and fixed-site filming.

2. Keep the crew as small as possible.⁸ Except in the case of unusual subjects, in the digital-image era one or two people—never more than three—are enough for most independent documentaries to move in and out of a location. A large crew, with cables crisscrossing, lights being set, and dolly track being laid, will likely do little more than disturb the atmosphere and create mutual distance and estrangement.

I therefore strongly believe that, on location, a director must either double as cinematographer or sound recordist during production, or serve as editor in postproduction. The director must operate the equipment by hand and commit to the scene at close range, one hundred percent; only then can the work possibly be truly one's own.

I always look forward to footage alive with the freshness of everyday existence and the unadorned texture of life. By contrast, I find stale and false footage unbearable and keep my distance from it.

III. "The Unadorned Image": Toward the Phenomenal World in Its Authenticity

As documentary authors, what we ceaselessly seek is still a documentary cinema oriented toward authenticity, even though authenticity is a word that often perplexes.

Let me borrow Martin Heidegger's formulation. Discussing the relation between truth and art, he writes: "Truth, as the clearing and concealing of beings, happens in being composed. . . . All art . . . is, as such, in essence, poetry (*Dichtung*)."⁹ In *Being and Time*, Heidegger uses changes in light to describe truth's movement between brightness and darkness. Truth resembles a clearing in a forest: branches and leaves tremble, patches of light interweave, and the surrounding things are brought together into a vivid, changing scene.¹⁰

As I understand it, documentary practice as a form of artistic exploration aims, in Heidegger's terms, to reveal the dynamic process by which "truth" manifests itself like "light" in a forest clearing.

Looking back at the beginning of my documentary work, my steps were clumsy, but they were not entirely fruitless:

First, relinquish preconceptions and open the mind to the unforeseeable. In 2000, on Suzhou's Baibu Street, I originally intended to film the demolition of an old street and assumed

8 Editorial note: The Chinese reads 尽可能少地缩小团队规模, literally "reduce the size of the team as little as possible," which contradicts the examples that follow. The translation follows the evident contextual sense, "keep the crew as small as possible," and flags the source wording for authorial confirmation.

9 Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 44. The manuscript cites Martin Heidegger, *Lin zhong lu* [*Holzwege*], trans. Sun Zhouxing (Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2004), 59. *Dichtung* here denotes poetic composition or poesis more broadly, not verse alone.

10 Zhao Yifan, *Cong Husaier dao Delida: Xifang wenlun jianggao* [*From Husserl to Derrida: Lectures on Western Literary Theory*] (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2007), 143. The forest-clearing account is presented through Zhao's secondary exposition, not as a direct quotation from *Being and Time*. Bibliographic metadata and thematic context were verified; the precise wording on p. 143 should be checked against a complete paginated copy before final publication.

the entire project would be finished within a month. But the demolition failed to materialize; the project dragged on for years, and both my subject and protagonist changed substantially. The seasons continued their cycle, while human affairs altered slowly. Early in the shoot, the old woman could still walk around the small courtyard and play with her bird. By the middle, she could only come and go in a wheelchair. Near the end, she was confined to bed. Outside the window, the plantain leaves greened and withered, withered and greened again. The mellow bells from a nearby bell tower and the tick-tock of the alarm clock on the bedside cabinet, sounding in the silence, each possessed a kind of “semiotic self-referentiality” that pointed beyond everyday time. While the old woman could still walk, she often set the old wall clock in the living room with her own hands, striving to salvage memories from the current of time. Once she was bedridden, the wall clock in the living room seemed to respond in kind and stopped as well, as though inadvertently intimating an ineffable mystery.

When a person relinquishes the urgency of having to finish a work immediately and looks and listens with sufficient patience, perhaps only then does the work truly begin.

Second, in improvised filming, those unforeseen moments when “truth surfaces” are often accompanied by an unexpected delight.

I would like to share an extraordinary experience from the filming of my recent documentary *Ballad of Roaming Spirits*:

A grand huahui ritual festival was about to begin. An elderly farmer led two “sacred sheep,” which he had carefully raised for more than half a year, toward the slaughter site to complete the animal offering.¹¹ Then something wholly unexpected happened: when one sheep saw its companion being slaughtered in the distance, it suddenly arched its back, recoiled, and refused to take another step forward. . . . I watched the sacred sheep that had lived day and night with the old farmer for more than half a year and was now about to become an innocent “victim.” As I kept filming, I found myself slipping into a daze. I raised the camera and panned toward the crowd beside me, then toward the festival preparations behind me, and finally, as if under some uncanny compulsion, turned it toward my own nearly vacant face. . . .

It was a trance-like filming experience that still strikes me as unbelievable.¹² To some degree, I relinquished the controlling impulse of a “director” and inadvertently entered a state akin to instinctive automatic writing. Yet it was precisely in that state that I seemed to catch a fleeting glimpse of truth.

For a moment, I felt that poetic documentary might not be so far from me after all.

11 Translator’s note: *Huahui* (花会) can denote a local temple-centered ritual gathering, procession, or festival; the exact regional institution is not defined in the manuscript. “Sacred sheep” and “animal offering” preserve the local designations 神羊 and 献牲 without equating them with a single standardized religious rite.

12 Translator’s note: *Chushen* (出神) means to fall into a trance or become rapt; literally, it can suggest the spirit leaving the body. The wording also resonates with *youshen* (游神, “roaming spirit”) in the film’s Chinese title, 游神考.