Partially ethnographic and an ethno*fiction*? An anthropological revisit of *Dragonfly Eyes*

Yunchang YANG

Published online: 08 Jul 2025.

Submit your article to this journal ⤢

Article views: 20

View related articles ⤢

View Crossmark data ⤢

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

ESSAY

Partially ethnographic and an ethno*fiction*? An anthropological revisit of *Dragonfly Eyes*

Yunchang YANG

Institute of Sociology and Anthropology, Peking University, Beijing, People's Republic of China

ABSTRACT

Dragonfly Eyes (2017), created by Chinese artist Xu Bing and his team, has sparked significant academic and critical discourse owing to its use of surveillance footage to craft a dystopian narrative. In China, most of the discourse is led by scholars; however, in non-Chinese contexts, the film is primarily discussed by film critics and media practitioners. As the academic discussion of *Dragonfly Eyes* is limited in the West, this essay examines the film through the framework of "image anthropology" and attempts to expand the field of "Xu Bing Studies" in non-Chinese contexts. It argues that the film's approach can inspire ethnographic practices, especially ethnographic filmmaking, even though it is not an ethnographic film. To further this discussion, comparisons have been made with the film *Leviathan*. By exploring the parallel between its surveillance footage and other ethnographic imagery, the essay contends that *Dragonfly Eyes* is "partially ethnographic," offering fresh perspectives on observational cinema and ethnofiction. Additionally, the essay positions the film within the broader context of contemporary Chinese art, highlighting its potential to bridge the divide between art and anthropology. Ultimately, this essay proposes that *Dragonfly Eyes* challenges conventional narrative and visual forms, presenting new ways to engage with and understand social realities.

Dragonfly Eyes (2017) is a feature film by artist Xu Bing and his team that has been regularly discussed by scholars, film critics, and art practitioners since its debut. An issue identified after examining the literature surrounding this film is that an ontological fracture has persisted within this constant discussion. In China, most of the discourse is led by scholars, while in non-Chinese contexts, it is primarily discussed by film critics and media practitioners. For scholars in the Chinese academic community, this film, entirely composed of edited surveillance footage and containing a contemporary dystopian love story[1] of ordinary Chinese people, touches on important issues in the history of art and art philosophy in a significant manner. For instance, the considerable amount of surveillance footage is interpreted under the idea of the "atlas fever and meta-media" (Tang 2019), or "the appropriation of readymade film" by contemporary art (Li 2019). Additionally, when surveillance footage, which represents the actual presence of people, events, and objects, is given a fictional narrative, a tension between reality and fiction naturally becomes central to the debate

(Peng 2017; Wang 2018). Of course, there are ethical considerations regarding the use of surveillance footage as a medium of artistic creation along with its viewing by individuals (Dong 2019; Lu and Xu 2020; Zhou 2018).

Meanwhile, perhaps because *Dragonfly Eyes* premiered at the globally acclaimed Festival del film Locarno, it is often received in the West as a feature film, gaining attention majorly from film critics and mainstream media. In a series of reviews and reportage, it has been considered as the filmmaker's anti-surveillance challenge to the authoritarian state and Xu's reflection on the cost of China's rapid modernization and digitalization (Glassman 2017). It has also been criticized for its melodramatically banal narrative (Weissberg 2017), to the extent that pure surveillance footage is understood as merely an artist's conceit (Van Hoeij 2017).

The discussions and debates from various fields have deeply exploited the academic and industry value of *Dragonfly Eyes*. Acknowledging the intellectual validity and insight of previous endeavors, this essay attempts to expand the field of "Xu Bing Studies" in non-Chinese contexts, a field that has already gained some recognition in the study of contemporary Chinese art. In the West, the academic discussion of *Dragonfly Eyes* is limited. The only two edited volumes—*Xu Bing and Contemporary Chinese Art: Cultural and Philosophical Reflections* (2011) by Tsao and Ames and *Xu Bing: Beyond the Book from the Sky* (2020) by Fraser and Li—did not include texts related to *Dragonfly Eyes* because they were compiled and based on conversations and activities before the work was released, respectively. However, as Xu Bing's long-time researcher and curator, Dong Bingfeng stated, "Compared with some of Xu Bing's typical artistic models and themes … it [*Dragonfly Eyes*] is … very radical and alternative" (Dong 2022, 217). Therefore, similar to other articles in this special section, this essay serves to expand and enrich the literature and update the specialized study of this significant contemporary Chinese artist.

More importantly, this essay explores the possibility of approaching this work permeated with "openness and multiplicity" (Dong 2022, 217) in a manner that goes beyond the discourse of artistic research. That is, explaining how and why it can be reinterpreted from different perspectives than the extant ones that focus on *what* it is, e.g. a "readymade film," or delving into the ontological differences between surveillance footage and cinema. My interest in this work as a social anthropologist, implied by my previous trace of its social life (i.e. its different receptions in China and the West), dictates my thinking and perception of *Dragonfly Eyes* in a transdisciplinary manner, which invites an epistemological openness and multiplicity.

The way I am doing this is to reinterpret *Dragonfly Eyes* from the lens of what I call "image anthropology." This idea may immediately remind the reader of Belting's (2011) anthropology of images, which refers to an "anthropological approach" in its broadest sense to answer the question, "What is an image?" For Belting, to encompass all issues relating to *bild* (i.e. image/picture) has always been central in his research, as evidenced by his consulting of (predominantly) media theorists (e.g. Jean Baudrillard, Regis Debray, Lev Manovich, etc.), art historians (e.g. George Didi-Huberman, William John Thomas Mitchell, Jean-Pierre Vernant), and (occasionally) anthropologists (e.g. Claude Levi-Strauss) in the theoretical outline section (Chapter 1) of his book. His idea of "anthropology" refers to a study of Man in general, including, yet not highlighting, socially and culturally contextualized materials and analysis that would be more significant to sociocultural anthropologists ethnographically. Following this nuanced view, the idea of "image anthropology" that I propose focuses more on the anthropological understanding of images and the ethnographical agency they possess, asking "What do images *do*?" rather than what images *are*. This is not to deny the ontological significance of an

image, as the two questions shall lead to complementary answers. To be specific, my concern is, "To what extent is *Dragonfly Eyes* anthropological, both thematically and technically?" Further, what and how can *Dragonfly Eyes*, which is both a film and video art, contribute to anthropological knowledge-making and the discipline's constant self-reflection and renewal of its scopes, methods, and ethics, manifested by the relentlessly changing landscape in ethnographic writing and image-making, for visual and multimodal anthropologists?

It is certain that Xu Bing is not a visual anthropologist, narrowly defined, nor, by the same token, is *Dragonfly Eyes* a visual ethnography or anthropological film. However, the process of encountering, analyzing, interpreting, and constructing narratives from surveillance footage, which is a mimicry and revelation of reality, can be deciphered methodologically as "ethnographic." Surveillance footage and ethnographic images share parallels. They are both considered descriptive, and archival, documenting specific happenings at specific locations and often being too vernacular and banal to be incorporated into narratives and memories. Furthermore, I believe that the comparison between surveillance footage and ethnographic images, as captured and edited by anthropologists, mirrors a shift in the perspectives on key issues within the evolving discipline of visual anthropology. In essence, there exists a theoretical parallel between these two forms.

Consider the concept of "observational cinema" in the history of visual anthropology—a concept marked by its variability owing to anthropologists' enduring fascination with the act of "observation" and the ongoing, contentious debates surrounding "how to observe." When this term was first coined in the late 1960s, it denoted a genre of ethnographic filmmaking grounded in scientific observation, with its philosophical underpinnings rooted in an unwavering trust in the objectivity afforded by the mechanical rigor of the camera. Later, it was deployed by visual anthropologists as an

aesthetic that "respected things for what they were" (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009, 539), following either the distant and unengaged scientific view or diverting to a more subjective gaze saturated by first-person perspectives. It can be said that while both approaches claim to be "observational," whether "observation" is informative or interpretative dictates their discretion.

In 2013, Lucien Casting-Taylor, founding director of the Sensory Ethnography Lab affiliated with the Harvard Department of Anthropology, co-directed *Leviathan* with Verena Paravel. Aesthetically, this documentary/visual ethnography of the Atlantic fishery is "observational," minimizing human interventions throughout the filming progress, which was accomplished by 10 Go-Pro automatic cameras attached to different subjects and locations involved in the fishery industry, such as fisherfolk on the deck, fish being netted and processed, and the giant ship floating on the sea. As Pinney (2015) comments, the observational aesthetic in *Leviathan* is nothing like its forerunners. While by convention the observational viewpoint in observational cinemas can be objectively or subjectively oriented, aspiring to showcase the authors' seeing and their ways of seeing, in Leviathan, "The observation itself is insufficient," (Pinney 2015, 36); by appropriating Walter Benjamin's concept of "the optic unconscious" that is "native to the camera," he notes that *Leviathan*'s use of footage produced merely by movie cameras *without* a man (as an opposite parody of Vertov's 1929 masterpiece *Man with a Movie Camera*), has to a large extent decentralized the role of the author, namely the filmmaker, thus confirming the previously obscured significance of non-human actants, as well as surpassing and furthering the tradition and definition of observational cinema in visual anthropology (Pinney 2015, 37–39).

Dragonfly Eyes can push this thread of thinking even further. Surveillance footage, such as the Go-Pro image in *Leviathan*, is

"native to the camera," generating enormous impartial and indifferent non-human visions —consider how the lady falling into the pond who never came out at the beginning of the film was recorded. Such impartiality and indifference not only immediately attain what is pursued by early observational cinema, which is a "scientism, in which a detached camera served to objectify and dehumanize the human subjects of its gaze" (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009, 538), but also render a horrific experience to the audience, underlining the absolute cruelty of machines.

Despite the deployment of "mechanical eyes" in filmmaking, the differences in the scale of working and the authors' intentionality in *Dragonfly Eyes* and *Leviathan* should be noted. While the 10 Go-Pros in the latter are fixed to specific locations so that perspectives extraordinary to human eyes are obtained, the surveillance clips in the former, coming from thousands of surveillance cameras scattered across the vast Chinese territory, can spontaneously provide images that are both familiar and strange to one's everyday visual experience. Additionally, the pre-set Go-Pros are still partly the manifestation of the directors' intentionality of those imagined non-human visions; therefore, the cameras are imbued with a Gellian "secondary agency" (Gell 1998, 17; cited in Yang 2023, 57), while the director has a sort of "authorship," which is, "the agency of an ethnographic film-maker in making their films" (Henley 2020, 4). In this light, the camera placement is determined *before* the image-making process. On the contrary, in *Dragonfly Eyes*, the authors (i.e. Xu Bing and his team) are *simultaneously* the audience, as the sequence of surveillance footage and the embedded love story with the narration must match each other. Alternatively, its authorship enacts only *after* the audienceship, as the creators have to first retrieve the footage stored in various cloud servers and review it, then discard most of it and only save the clips that are visually relevant to the film's storyline.

There is, of course, a question of which comes first: the image or the narrative. I speculate that the answer would be "image." A quick reflection upon the places Qing Ting, the heroine, used to reside and work at would be helpful to solve the puzzle: After leaving the Buddhist monastery, Qing Ting went to work at a milk factory, but why a milk factory? Her workplace could have been any kind of factory other than one full of stalls, cows, and milking machines, as a woman worker's identity is what is genuinely at stake here. Following this, the male protagonist Ke Fan could have met Qing Ting in an electronic or apparel factory that appears much more frequently in academic and artistic works relating to China's social reality. To me, the only explanation for choosing a milk factory as one of the main stages of the story is that the footage of this milk factory reached the screens of the creators first. If my speculation is valid, then the restriction on the human agency in *Dragonfly Eyes* becomes remarkably radical. The utilization of Go-Pro camera's automatic photographing function empowered *Leviathan* with a human-less form that urges the viewer to rethink the relationship between things and humans, but for *Dragonfly Eyes*, images that are automatically created by machines have already been a preset. Such a preset, which highlights the agency of images over the authors, evens the position between images and humans and turns the filmmaker from the conventional role as an author to an author-audience. In this light, Dragonfly Eyes is a visual manifesto that paves the way to understand humans and their realities *through* images.

Finally, the interplay between real footage and fabricated narrative in *Dragonfly Eyes* brings to mind the idea of ethnofiction, a genre advocated and practiced by French visual anthropologist Jean Rouch, which also aims to blur the fine line between reality and fiction by having real people play "roles" of themselves or others. However, Rouch's ethnofiction is

fundamentally a "documentary," which *Dragonfly Eyes* is not. However, this is not to say that *Dragonfly Eyes* is not concerned with the social realities of the land in which it has been made. Ke Fan's fighting for Qing Ting and the price he paid in jail and Qing Ting undergoing plastic surgery and becoming a livestreaming showgirl highlight concrete social problems, such as violence, privacy, change of identity, and the new form of consumerism based on the digital environment and data traffic. However, what is truly frightening is how easily and smoothly these plots are accepted and even condemned as "ultra banal" (Weissberg 2017). For Xu Bing and his team, the banality in its narrative precisely depicts the passionless, mediocre, and predictable life Qing Ting and Ke Fan would confront in today's China. There is no turning point, no turning back, but ordinary people's hope is not lost overnight. Surveillance cameras treat the ordinary and the extraordinary equally. They are, themselves, a perfect metaphor of reality, which makes them ideal "ethnographers" as well. In this light, to recall Rouch, can *Dragonfly Eyes* be considered an ethno*fiction* (i.e. an ethnofiction fiction instead of an ethnofiction documentary), a parallel to and somehow reversal of his original idea of *ethno*fiction? What happens when a feature film is way-too-real?

In sum, I propose that *Dragonfly Eyes* is "partially ethnographic," even though it is not an ethnographic film, a field that has been established institutionally. It offers new possibilities to see without human eyes yet to retain a sharp reflection on our social realities that seem "way-too-real" through reasonable fabrications, which jointly correspond to and inspire core issues such as "observation" and "ethnofiction" that concern ethnographic filmmaking all the time. Ultimately, this essay argues that *Dragonfly Eyes*, as ethno*fiction*, may offer new forms and possibilities for the intersection, interaction, and integration of art and anthropology today. This interesting

coincidence should be kept in mind: *Leviathan* is an ethnographic film made by visual anthropologists but shown recurrently in galleries, museums, and contemporary art biennales globally, while *Dragonfly Eyes* is an art film screened in film festivals and reviewed by industrial practitioners. They are both attempts to break down the disciplinary barrier, which is also the point of departure of this essay.

Note

1. I have not recounted the plot of the film owing to the word count constraints. I assume that the reader has either watched the film or can easily find introductory texts online.

Acknowledgments

Funding

Notes on contributor

Yunchang Yang is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Sociology and Anthropology, Peking University. He holds a PhD in Anthropology and Visual Culture from University College London, with research interests in the anthropology of art and image, visual anthropology, digital and media art, and Chinese modern and contemporary visual culture. Yunchang is presently working on two monographs, focusing on the idea of "amateurism" in photography practices in China and the "ethnographic turn" in contemporary Chinese art, respectively.

ORCID

Yunchang Yang 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1258-7972

References

Belting, Hans. 2011. *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*. Translated by Thomas Dunlap. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Dong, Bingfeng. 2019. "从监控影像到影像监控——《蜻蜓之眼》的观看悖论" [The Seeing Paradox in *Dragonfly Eyes*]. *Dangdai Dianying* 277:141–144.

Dong, Bingfeng. 2022. "World Picture: Xu Bing's Dragonfly Eyes." Translated by Xiang Fan. *Chinese Independent Cinema Observer* 4:217–222.

Fraser, Sarah E., and Yu-Chieh Li, eds. 2020. *Xu Bing: Beyond the Book from the Sky*. Singapore: Springer.

Glassman, Daniel. 2017. "Review: 'Dragonfly Eyes'." *Point of View Magazine*. September 12, 2017. https://povmagazine.com/review-dragonfly-eyes/.

Grimshaw, Anna, and Amanda Ravetz. 2009. "Rethinking Observational Cinema." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15 (3): 538–556. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2009.01573.x.

Henley, Paul. 2020. *Beyond Observation: A History of Authorship in Ethnographic Film*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Li, Yang. 2019. "从图像褫夺到'无脑之眼'——影像挪用史中的《蜻蜓之眼》" [From Image Depriving to Eyes without Brian: Dragonfly Eyes in Moving Images Appropriation History]. *Dangdai Dianying* 277:135–140.

Lu, Ye, and Zijing Xu. 2020. "'玩'监控：当代艺术协作式影像实践中的'监控个人主义'——以《蜻蜓之眼》为个案" ["Play" Surveillance: "Surveillant Individualism" in the Collaborative Film Practices of Contemporary Art: Taking "Dragonfly Eyes" as a Case]. *Nanjing Shehui Kexue* 389:109–117.

Peng, Feng. 2017. "艺术与真实——从徐冰的《蜻蜓之眼》说开去" [Art and Truth: From Xu Bing's The Eye of the Dragonfly]. *Wenyi Yanjiu* 306:5–12.

Pinney, Christopher. 2015. "Aqueous Modernism." *Visual Anthropology Review* 31 (1): 35–40. https://doi.org/10.1111/var.12060.

Tang, Hongfeng. 2019. "图集热与元媒介——关于《蜻蜓之眼》的媒介分析" [Atlas Fever and Meta-media: Media Analysis of *Dragonfly Eyes*]. *Beijing Dianying Xueyuan Xuebao* 154:15–21.

Tsao, Hsingyuan, and Roger T. Ames, eds. 2011. *Xu Bing and Contemporary Chinese Art: Cultural and Philosophical Reflections*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Van Hoeij, Boyd. 2017. "'Dragonfly Eyes' ('Qing Ting zhi yan': Film Review)." *The Hollywood Reporter*. August 15, 2017. https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-reviews/dragonfly-eyes-qing-ting-zhi-yan-1029652/.

Wang, Xiaosong. 2018. "反转、科幻和非虚构——徐冰的《蜻蜓之眼》" [Turn Around, Science Fiction, and Non-Fiction: On Xu Bing's *Dragonfly Eyes*]. *Shu Cheng* 12:118–123.

Weissberg, Jay. 2017. "Film Review: 'Dragonfly Eyes'." *Variety*. August 13, 2017. https://variety.com/2017/film/reviews/dragonfly-eyes-review-qing-ting-zhi-yan-1202525754/.

Yang, Yunchang. 2023. "'图像—人类学': 影像民族志的观者视角与批评之维" ["Image-Anthropology": The Viewer's Perspective and the Dimension of Criticism in Visual Ethnography]. *Shehuixue Pinglun* 11 (5): 44–64.

Zhou, Wanjing. 2018. "监控与直播——论徐冰《蜻蜓之眼》的两种观看方式" [On Digital Surveillance and Live Broadcasting: Two Viewing Modes in Xu Bing's *Dragonfly Eyes*]. *Yishu Sheji Yanjiu* 82:109–114.