

# A Brief Analysis on the Construction of Subject Image in the Self-Documentary "Small Talk"

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**Abstract:** Taiwanese producer Huang Hui-zhen directed the camera at her mother and herself, trying to communicate and reconcile with her mother through documentary. Different from other private record documentaries, the conflicts within the subject construction in *Small Talk* is no longer limited to “person to person”, “person and family”, or “parents and children”. Instead, it constructs the theme of an ordinary family struggling with a collection of social issues such as homosexuality, domestic violence, sexual assault, aboriginal Taiwanese culture, etc.

**Keywords:** *Small Talk*; self-documentary; women’s issues; image construction

**Publication date:** January, 2021

**Publication online:** 31 January, 2021

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## 1 Introduction

"*Small Talk*" is produced by Taiwanese director Huang Hui-zhen about her mother and herself. Huang began shooting fragmented clips for the film on her own in 1998, and as the time progressed, Huang was able to build a professional production team. It took her 18 years and 16T of footage to finally complete *Small Talk*.

At the dawn of the 21st Century, film-making costs became progressively lower due to digital video's normalization; it enabled ordinary people to

record and create through cameras and the field became increasingly diversified. In the context of this era, "self-documentaries" began to emerge into the public eye and gradually became a new art form favored by independent documentary producers. Japanese scholar Nada Hisashi brought the concept of "I-novel" into cinema and created the term "self-documentary"<sup>[1]</sup> to define "a work of an artist's personal life or surroundings in which his/her family, friends, and himself/herself become the main focus."<sup>[2]</sup> Self-documentary differs from the traditional documentary for it makes the filmmaker/the observer also a character/a participant of the narration and image construction. Some representative works of self-documentaries include *More than One is Unhappy* by Wang Fen, *Home Video* by Yang Lina, *Nightingale*, *Not the only Voice* by Tang Danhong, *Sister* by Hu Xinyu, *Amateur* by Wei Xiaobo, and so on.

Although all aim at exposing filmmakers' privacy and real lives, there is a clear distinction between *Small Talk* and other self-documentaries. *More than One is Unhappy* focuses on the director's trauma caused by her parents' unhappy marriage and attempts a resolution through the film. In *Home Video*, the filmmaker seeks the reason for her family's breakdown with a detailed, multi-layer method but only gets a conflicted, inconclusive answer instead. *Amateur* is a bare reveal of adolescent boys' real but chaotic private life. "Throughout the film, scenes of these college

[1]NADA Hisashi and LI Rui-hua, "The Origin and Current Status of Japanese Self-Documentaries." *Film Art*, 2007(03): 132-137.

[2]NADA Hisashi and LI Rui-hua, "The Origin and Current Status of Japanese Self-Documentaries." *Film Art*, 2007(03): 132-137.

boys using vulgarities, talking about women and sex unscrupulously, and even watching pornography in the dormitory are unreservedly shown in front of the audience”<sup>[3]</sup>. The film's central image is the epitome of personal tragedy and family tragedy, the root of all the conflicts. By contrast, *Small Talk*'s subject construction is no longer about individual tragedies; rather, it displays various social conflicts on one female figure “A-ma” whose individual features fades out as the features of the era manifest. In so doing, *Small Talk* constructs a figure suffering from social tragedy.

## 2 Identity Construction of Subjects

There are two major subjects depicted in *Small Talk*: one is the creative subject, the character “A-zhen” played by the director Huang; the other is the expressive subject, the character “A-ma” played by Huang’s mother. Through monologue, interviews, audios, recording, etc., the film constructs several images for A-ma, including a lesbian abandoned by the society, a wife escaping from patriarchal oppression, a quiet mother, and a traditional guider of the dead souls. Meanwhile, it also portrays A-zhen as a mother who takes care of her daughter meticulously, who grew up in a broken family, who experienced sexual assault by her father, and who desperately wants to communicate with her mother.

French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan states in The Mirror Stage theory that an infant is able to recognize himself/herself and his/her mother in the mirror for the first time at the age of 6-18 months, and establish self-consciousness by identifying figures of others. Based on the theory, ego is formed through imaginative projection, on the basis of imaginary relationship established between the subject and one's own body. Lacan further suggests that the mirror stage is not only a concept of time, but also a cognitive function that accompanies the subject's every moment of life<sup>[4]</sup>. This means that subjects expect self-images from objects’ gaze, and the images they obtain can then help fulfill the construction of their ego. Evidently, in *Small Talk*, Huang’s identity has been

built and evolved from self-gaze and objects’ response, for she is both the observer and the participant in the narration and emotional expression through monologues and interviews. Not long after the opening, in her internal monologue, Huang says, “After I got married and had children, my mother certainly did not go live in the park. We continued to live together. Although we have been living together for more than 30 years, we still feel like strangers to each other. The food on the table might be the only connection between our lives.” As Huang depicts the image of her mother, she also achieves the self-identification of her subjectivity. Yet this recognition also separates the ego from the subjectivity. It is a stage that’s ultimately inevitable for many self-documentary filmmakers, that the subject gradually degenerates into an object and becomes “the other” in the process of constructing one’s self-identity.

Meanwhile, the filmmaker constructs and explores A-ma’s image through monologue, music, interviews, and other means based on her familiarity with the character. Due to Huang’s comprehensive understanding of her mother before the production, she is not exploring her mother’s world by the film; rather, she is trying to bring out all the social factors that led to her mother's tragedy. In this sense, the film's purpose is not to receive the result from the image construction but to discover the process of the figure construction. In the film, the director shows many silent scenes in the interview and few subjective expressions from A-ma, which makes A-ma often seem phasic. It is such a loss of the subject’s voice that highlights the power of “other” voices. A-ma's image gradually completes through others' descriptions. Being drowned out by others' comments and discussions, A-ma is constructed to be a "non-free person" who is restrained, oppressed, and ignored.

## 3 The Means of Subject Construction

As a self-documentary, *Small Talk* features diversified shots, interview scenes, monologues, location sounds, music, and many other techniques

[3]LI Rui-hua, “Exile” Privacy and “Performance” Life——The Ethical Controversy of Private Movies. *Movie Literature*, 2011(24): 9-10.

[4]Lacan, Jacques, and Bruce Fink. 2006. *Ecrits: the first complete edition in English*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

to construct subject images. First, time is managed aesthetically in the film. For example, when Huang talks about helping her mother with soul guiding with her sister in childhood, the footage of her two nieces doing the guide work filmed by Huang is shown instead, which not only reproduces the scene, but also implicitly suggests the traditional soul-guide rite is dying out. In constructing A-ma's image, the director uses a considerable number of close-ups and shallow focus to either make her subtle facial expressions the subject of observation or make her the background. In the scene where Huang says "When I was young, I used to wonder why she didn't want to stay with children, does she hate to see us," only the photo of Huang with her daughter on the table stays in focus, with her mother standing in the background, blurry. Same technique has been applied to many scenes with Huang's mother to let the audience feel the detachedness.

Secondly, the narrative flow of the film mainly relies on the monologues given by the director Huang. These monologues allow the audience to sympathize with Huang's emotions towards her mother and to picture Huang's image in their minds. Such use of monologue departs from the realistic film's principle of not involving in production and breaks the rules of observational documentary in which directors stay objective and neutral to the actions that happen in production; by contrast, Huang participates in the narration and actions to push the plot forward. At specific turning points, Huang's monologue helps invoke emotional reactions and create certain ambiance. Arguably, the monologue contributes more to building Huang's image than to building the image of her mother.

Thirdly, there are a lot of interviews in the film. Relatives, friends, granddaughter, and even former lovers of A-ma describe her differently with straightforward, obscure, critical, or appreciative languages to piece together a complex picture of A-ma at her different life stages. Interview is a technique commonly used in documentaries for its multifunctionality; it influences a documentary's topic and content; it provides the audience with

more information; and it is also a way of expressing the subjects' emotions.<sup>[5]</sup> Regarding the selection of interviewees, Huang does not avoid meeting with her mother's former lovers to the extent that she is almost "peeping" at their privacy. Surprisingly, the mother's "girlfriends" never show discomfort in front of the camera, and they are very open with sharing their past love lives with Huang. "She insisted on washing my underwear, saying that it made her feel great." says by one of them. Through the interview with these girlfriends, a world of homosexual lovers is gradually shaped and present to the audience, and so does a vivid figure of A-ma, who treats people genuinely and dares to love and hate. In stark contrast, the mother's siblings are cold and indifferent to her. Interviews with them further enrich the lesbian image of A-ma who is ignored and disdained by the family.

Finally, the classic scene in *Small Talk* is a 10-minute long dialogue between the mother and the daughter in the end. According to Huang in an interview, the actual conversation lasted three hours, most of which was silent. This dialogue is the climax and turning point of the film. It is also the tipping point of all emotions. In this interview sequence, Huang and her mother sit face to face, showing a confrontational blocking. Without any other diegetic sounds besides their voices, the film cuts between the full shots of the two and A-ma's close ups. As Huang gradually loses control of her language to become accusatorial, the previously established subject images are destroyed and rebuilt. With a single shot leaving room for the expression of complex emotions, Huang successfully conveys the message of the film in a restrained way.

#### **4 Breaking through Ethical Dilemmas**

Self-documentaries often fall into moral challenges for they peer into personal privacy as the filming subjects are commonly filmmakers' relatives or friends. "In the production of self-documentaries, the exposure of participants' privacy contributes to the maximal amount of authenticity, but can also possibly hurt the subjects for reminding them of the

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[5]TANG Qi-fang, INTERVIEW ROLE IN THE CREATION OF DOCUMENTARY FILMS. *Journal of Yunmeng*, 2002(05): 125-126.

trauma."<sup>[6]</sup> *Small Talk* handles this problem tactfully. No matter how many times Huang asks her mother's siblings whether they knew she is a lesbian, their answers are always "No." This is a problem that most self-documentaries encounter, that once a "family scandal" is mentioned, family members would reach an unspoken agreement to stay silent about it. Huang solves the problem sanely by asking the question repeatedly, not to discover the truth but to unveil their authentic reactions. She shows their reactions and let the audience realize that they are lying, which saves herself from having to confront the ethical dilemma with the relatives.

That being said, *Small Talk* deals with privacy and family ethics very thoroughly. Huang doesn't keep her mother's lesbian identity secret from the audience, neither does she hesitate to tell the memories of her father's sexual assault on her. On the opposite, Huang's mother is reluctant to reveal herself and often stays silent however Huang tries to open her heart time and time again. When constructing the mother's image, Huang accepts her mother's silence and expresses her love and grievances frankly. Through "others" and images, Huang presents a mother full of conflicts: a lesbian, a runaway wife, and a silent mother. The way Huang chooses to deal with these conflicts is to externalize them - she points out the fact that what happened to her mother and herself is not a family tragedy, but the consequence of a homophobic and patriarchal society. Even though the direct cause of all the sufferings for this small family comes from the father who never appears in the film, Huang's accusation is remarkably restrained. Uniquely, as a work that reflects family trauma and social issues, this film does not contain much sharp criticism; instead, it seeks to solve the problem in a caring manner. The externalization of the conflicts seems to be a simple decision of the director, yet it allows the film to receive higher awareness and broader acceptance than other self-documentaries.

## 5 Conclusions

The unique nature of self-documentaries' filming subjects and contents can sometimes make

filmmakers trapped by an excessive focus on privacy. Often, some of the self-documentaries satisfy the audience's curiosity and voyeurism, but fail to convey the central message. Moreover, since self-documentaries often rely on digging out personal and family secrets to construct subject images, they would inevitably run into ethical dilemmas or cause hurt to the subjects again in some cases. To protect the subjects, some producers choose to distribute and exhibit their films limitedly. Many other reasons hinder the expression and spread of self-documentaries as well. *Small Talk* can be seen as a breakthrough attempt in this regard. While still exposing privacy, the film always adopts a caring perspective to give voice to the marginal individuals who are ignored and oppressed by the mainstream; meanwhile, it also gives them enough time to remain silent on the embarrassing parts. And most importantly, the subject images shaped in the film is not merely an individual family member of a household, but a public image full of all kinds of labels with the characteristics of the era. Each of us can see part of ourselves in A-ma and A-zhen

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