

School Research Incentive Fund

Dr. Linda C.H. LAI (Principal Investigator, School of Creative Media)

Dr. Kimburley W.Y. CHOI (Co-Investigator, School of Creative Media)

1. Title of the proposed research

What is in a 'Talking Head'? – a visual ethnography on performativity, reflexivity and social interactionism.

2. Duration of the project

Jan 2010 – Jan 2011

3. Abstract of the project & theoretical parameters

The project analyzes around 60 talking heads video shot from 2005 by different video researchers and media studies students in aspects of visual ethnography, social interactionism, gender politics and globalization theory.

The use of talking heads seems to have been a usual practice in mainstream documentaries and audiences are conditioned to view talking heads as pure vehicles for information that are transparent and neutral in showing the opinions of the subjects. The single use of talking heads in in these collected video works, however, highlights these videos' constructedness as cultural artefacts and the performative nature of the observed in the presence of the video camera.

The project would like to examine:

- (1) the aesthetics and effects of talking heads in formulating the politics of reflexivity in visual ethnography;
- (2) people's presentation of self as well as self-representation through impression management in the presence of the interviewer and in front of a camera.
- (3) the textual and performative richness of speech, or, the multiple layers of narratives embedded in self narratives and speech performance: from manner of speech, basic information, choice of subject matter, anecdotal deployment, narrativization strategies, culturally coded self-confessions, to the articulation of one's 'philosophy' of living.

The proposed project will examine these videos on textual level, such as people's choice and content of their tales in aspects of gender politics and globalization theory. For example, some videos in our collection ask the subjects to recite the same folklore *Cinderella*. The retelling demonstrates both the histories of colonialism and children's playfulness to subvert the ideologies of the classic-tales, which is where the global and local meet in a here-and-now performative mode.

How this research differs from and many existing sociological research is that 'Talking Heads' does not rely on background information of social demographics to form the interpretive framework. Instead, benefiting from anthropology and cultural studies' emphasis on field presence, we apply 'thick description' to exfoliate the rich layers of the text to challenge demographics-based assumptions. The research, therefore, appeals to phenomenological approaches that focus on studying the process and actual presence, in order not to fall back on grand conclusions. This is in line with key positions in the discipline of Cultural Studies, which calls attention to *differences* rather than *typifications*.

4. Key objectives:

- To examine people's presentation of self in the presence of the interviewer and in front of a camera, including:
 - Language and linguistics
 - Performance (gesture, posture, the use of scripts and props)
 - Techniques of staging the self successfully
 - The rituals, rules and paradigms of people's presentation of self
 - The structure of social encounters (dynamics between interviewer and subject)
 - Relation between performance and the definition of the situation
 - Power relationship between the observer (the audience) and the observed (the person does the talking in the video)

- To examine the aesthetics of talking heads in visual ethnography and the politics of reflexivity:
 - The visual and textual authority of visual ethnography and the invention of ethnographic realities
 - talking heads video as a way to solve the problem of power imposition between the interviewer and the subject

- To examine the videos in textual level in relation to globalization theory and gender politics

- To construct an on-line archive for these collected video works, the content code system, and our analyses for public access for teaching and research

5. Research methodology

We start collecting the talking heads video since 2005. We would develop a style and content coding system to code and analyze the collected videos. We would also use the software NVivo (already acquired) to do video analysis and to set up an archive. In the course of the analysis, we may conduct new interviews as we continue with the work of classification and re-classification of the existing 'talking heads'.

6. Significance of the proposed research, major deliverables

Both Lai and Choi presented the project findings in the 8th Crossroads in Cultural Studies Conference in June 2010 organized by the Association for Cultural Studies. These findings may also be published in journals on visual anthropology and cultural studies.

The construction of an on-line archive would be the final phase of these plans for the collected video works, the content code system, and our analyses for public access for teaching and research. Our motives for preparing the archives were twofold. Firstly, we want a complete record of our research, including its defects, for teaching purposes as well as for research. It is rare for ethnographers to provide a more-or-less complete record of their research and coding system—it is unprecedented to do this for public inspection. Secondly, we hope this archive would serve as an exemplar for how ethnographic research should be presented, to encourage transparency and depth. We are aware of the negative effects of conventional publishers on ethnography which effectively restricts ethnographic works to extended essays with popular appeal and little or no data. We see the on-line archive as a means of subverting this trend.