On the Scholarly Quality of Documentary Films *

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* [The case study used is the documentary film «Angry Monk – Reflections on Tibet», which was part of my doctoral dissertation in Visual Anthropology]

> *We must begin to recognize ethnographic films, indeed all films, as texts amenable to a cultural and critical analysis (…) in a manner parallel to, but not necessarily less significant, than printed word.*
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> Jay Ruby, 1989
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> *Precision produces its own kind of beauty. That is why the precision I call for in ethnography, whether visual or verbal, is a practice of art.*
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> Michael Oppitz, 1989

I encountered the concept of aesthetics twice in unorthodox ways during my education. In 1982, in our history class at secondary school, we read "The Aesthetics of Resistance" by Peter Weiss. In his unsparing examination of German fascism, the author conceives of aesthetics as a form of *resistance*. Aesthetics should encompass not only the category of the beautiful, but rather those qualities that bring about a transformation and renewal of social relations. The second encounter came almost ten years later, while reading the book "The Art of Precision" in a seminar on Visual Anthropology at the University of Zurich. In his book, Michael Oppitz defines *scholarship* (or rather, scholarly practice) as a form of art in its own right. This linking of aesthetics (art) with *resistance* and *scholarship* was, for me, both surprising and formative. It is therefore no coincidence that a few years later it was with Michael Oppitz himself that I was permitted to submit my licentiate and my doctoral thesis in Visual Anthropology in the form of documentary films. Both films are works of scholarship with a political background, presented in an "artistic" form: *Made in Hong Kong* (1997, 75 min.) and *Angry Monk* (2005, 97 min.). Both works were accompanied by a written supplementary text.

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In its financing as well as in its distribution and reception, *Angry Monk* is a mongrel, an unloved street mutt, so to speak. I deliberately use this negative term (rather than the more neutral and academic 'hybrid') because the joining of *art* and *scholarship* remains a taboo that is dissolving only slowly. While the research for *Angry Monk* was financed primarily through doctoral fellowships (1999–2002), I funded the production of the film exclusively through cultural funding bodies (2002/05). The exploitation of the finished film (festivals, cinema, television and DVD) took place first and foremost on a cultural (and commercial) level (2005/06). It was only afterwards that I turned to its secondary exploitation in the academic sphere. This has mainly taken the form of (block) seminars and lectures at various universities, accompanied by screenings of *Angry Monk* (2007/09). The reception of my film in the media was also largely separate. Only with the exploitation of the film in the university context did articles in scholarly journals appear, namely in the fields of Tibetology and Visual Anthropology (see below).

For visual work in academia, I see three possible forms in particular: *Visual Text* (the written component as supplement, as reflection), *Written Text* (the visual as illustration or as the subject of the work) and *Process-Oriented Work* (the experimental confrontation of image and word, e.g. performance, interactive exhibition). For my own part, in consultation with Michael Oppitz, I opted for the first option. The film *Angry Monk* (97 min.) constitutes the main body of my doctoral thesis and was treated as such in Oppitz's assessment. The bonus material on the DVD is an extension of my visual work (different language versions and additional scenes), while the written part mainly contains the source material and contextualises it (transcribed interviews, translations, reflection on working methods, bibliography, etc.).

The question now is: what constitutes the scholarly quality of a visual text that is accompanied by a written part? On the one hand, both the film and the written part must be embedded in a *scholarly discourse*. In my doctoral thesis this concerns two areas in particular, which are closely linked: on the one hand, the working through of recent Tibetan history and, on the other, the discussion of the perception of Tibet in the West. Both areas have become important fields of research, especially because the work of Tibetan authors and historians has brought to them an entirely new (and often more critical) perspective. A further central feature of the scholarly quality of a text seems to me to be the *transparency of working method and methodology.* I do not address this question within the film itself, but in the bonus material on the DVD and, more extensively, in the written part of my work. Last but not least, a scholarly work must ensure *access to the sources and the possibility of*

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verifying them. In my case this is provided above all in the written part, and only marginally in the closing credits of the film.

For the analysis of documentary films, the film scholar Eva Hohenberger, in her book *Die Wirklichkeit des Films* (1988), distinguishes between five realities. Her division strikes me as very useful with regard to the scholarly quality of visual texts. By *non-filmic reality* she understands the reservoir of representable reality from which filmmakers draw their ideas. The scholarly discourse outlined above also belongs to this field. By *pro-filmic reality* she means the filmed material, that is to say the selection of reality which the filmmaker and the camera have made. The question of which images (in Tibet) I deliberately chose is one I address extensively on the DVD and in the written text. With *filmic reality (the film itself)* Hohenberger refers to the productional apparatus of a film. For my doctoral thesis what was most relevant here was the extent to which I was influenced by production processes. Did I have to make any artistic or substantive concessions because the film was co-produced by a television broadcaster? Did I feel forced into concessions because the film later had to be accepted as a scholarly work by the University of Zurich? Here both "audience expectations" and "financial pressures" that affect the production of a film can be taken into account. I address these questions only briefly in the written part. The *filmic reality* she defines as the finished film that will subsequently be shown. Hohenberger refers to the subsequent exploitation and reception of the film as the *post-filmic reality*, which in turn becomes part of the *non-filmic reality* again. In my view, however, this is less a circle than a spiral, one that continuously enriches scholarly (and social) discourse.

It is precisely the reception of a work and its embedding in a broader discourse that constitute its scholarly quality (whether visual or written). In her film review in the renowned journal *History and Anthropology* (#19, 2008), Anna Grimshaw regrets that the reflection on methodology and data collection is missing within *Angry Monk* itself. Such reflection would have enhanced the film's value for the building of theory in Visual Anthropology and would have made the written supplementary text partly superfluous. In the field of Tibetology, Charlene E. Makley criticises, in the journal *Visual Anthropology* (#21, 2008), that I largely omit the Buddhist context and thus discuss my main figure only within his social and political environment. Precisely because the protagonist was also a Buddhist scholar, a discussion of the religious context could have become part of the discourse on the significance of Buddhism in Tibetan history. Both objections certainly have their justification within their respective perspectives. I simply did not wish to make the film they suggest. For me, however, this conflict illustrates very nicely how artistic and scholarly works can develop a life of their own that extends far beyond them and, in most cases, also outlives them.