

# **A COLLAGE BARBAROUS**

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## Abstract

*A Collage Barbarous* is a short experimental film that navigates a voyage of exile and femininity, and drifts towards the embodied experience of traveling between worlds. The film journeys through an amorphous structure of space and time, albeit the specific locale of the contemporary Sichuan province. *A Collage Barbarous* is an alternative short version to the original cut - a feature length film titled *The Good Woman of Sichuan*. Whilst the film meanders towards inconsistency and uncertainty, one can still vaguely recollect the happening - a young woman goes on an anonymous journey to her late husband's hometown Leshan, a small city in Sichuan province. There, she meets an old friend, a local theatre actress preparing for an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan* (Sichuan). In a home-place unfamiliar, the traveling woman meets the imaginary. Ghosted by Shen Te, the protagonist of the play, the actress loses the self at the intersection between fiction and reality. Unprepared, the filmmaker loses control of her camera. Together, they drift into a polyrhythmic experience of stasis.

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## Introduction

*A Collage Barbarous* (and *The Good Woman of Sichuan*) is an experimental film that explores a wildly contradicted femininity against the backdrop of an emerging Asian urbanism and mondialisation. The film serves as a canvas, a journey, and an experience where one may reimagine a contemporary Chinese womanhood amongst the entanglement of conventionality, modernity, and mondialisation. It seeks for a new language of femininity that lurks behind the subjects and their imaginations. In my opinion, this language is inconsistent but fluid. In the film, I recount dreams, memories, and desires; I look at fiction, storytelling and documentation. They offer me neither clarity nor linearity. In the making of the film, time and locales have been abstracted into a new sensation of lines and shapes. In turn, the film (both the making and the work) has created a lively space for me to sculpt a female body through an ephemeral and experiential construction of contemporaneity.

By drawing connections with Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Person of Setzuan*, I work to reconstruct myth through a female gaze that weaves together distinct times and locales. In response to Brecht's essay "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" (1936), the film also looks at critical relationships between the camera and the subject. In conversation with the Brechtian theatre, the film seeks to invigorate a different structure of storytelling by abstracting space and time, with keen interests in igniting an unconscious positionality of a Chinese woman across space and borders, and in opening doors for alternative narrativization of eccentric relationality.

As an artist writing between lands and working between forms, I am interested in a palpable language that refuels itself in the encountering. Inevitably, the method, the emotional, or the poetic, engages travel. On the road, the film guides itself in a transient state, forming a

language in process and a subjectivity of its own in searching. It is unaware of the process, unknown to its own limitations and paths. The nature of this process, like the dreaming, or the recollecting of the past, is unpronounced, as it is unstable, obscure, and even contradictory.

In this paper, I will analyse the material and dialogic languages on the move - one of the experimentations in this film, as situated in our contemporary discussions regarding documentary, ethnography, postcoloniality, and femininity. However, I intend to move beyond recounting popular texts of discoursing, to the embodied writing of experiencing. In conversation with a writing in exile and a filming in process (of this film), I'd like to write towards an aesthetic that challenges the way institutions disembody individuals while claiming a grand refusal of the division between who feels and who interprets.

The paper includes analysis of the literary and the historical, and the filmmaking process throughout the development, production, and post-production stages. The leading chapter, titled "Research and Recollections", revolves around the various influences on the film, including my previous films, research-creations, other artists' work, and the literature that has inspired this process, both the creative and the scholarly, without necessarily distinguishing the two. However, far more interesting than cataloging these influences, in my view, is to experiment with the connections, particularly the outrageous and eccentric connections between different theories and practices. In other words, my interests (in both the film and this paper) do not rely on cause and effect, but on correspondence and affinity, from the strangeness and obscurity of certain hermetic connections. "An unapparent connection is stronger than an apparent one" (Heraclitus). Just as the eccentric and unapparent connections from the research have inspired the creative process of the film's making, I'd like to bring this paper forward and inward, to engage in detail in the poetics of an uneventful and yet visceral experience of my filmmaking process.

That being said, without doubt, I speak my experience, and that only. The following three chapters “Writing in Exile”, “Archiving the Process”, and “Aesthetics of Tonality”, will respectively delve into the three mutually challenged segments of the film’s making: the brainstorming and researching, the filming on location, and lastly but not the least, the editing. As Dennis Tedlock has written, “any poetics is always an ethnopoetics”. (Tedlock 2011) In that regard, every aspect of the making intertwines deeply with languages, aesthetics and poetics.



## Research and Recollections

In this chapter, I will elaborate on the influences cast on the film, including my previous experimentations, other artists' work, and the writings that have inspired the process. I see this analysis chapter as a disassembling of what may have come around and entered into the film's making. However, delineating a history can be unreliable, when the urge to converge at a clarity is irresistible, thus less interesting. That being said, I'd still try to make this recollecting more fun, at least for myself, even if only marginally.

The chapter is divided into four parts: "The Traveling Self", "The Imaginative Self", "The Traveling Meets the Imaginative", and "Dissemination of Space in Dialogic Languages". The titling of the partitioning is extended from my previous study in comparative literature, an essay that looks at spatiality, language, and the self in Voltaire's *Candide* (1959) and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1985). As I often hold doubts about the recounting of histories and realities whether they are personal or collective, I prefer having fictions intertwine the histories, or allegories of the histories, a distant and yet visceral pull on my own practice and thinking. I hope this framework could allow for a juxtaposition of histories and languages that are separated but connected.

In one of my previous studies in comparative literature, I looked at *the traveling self* in *Candide* which chronicles the journey of Candide across a variety of geographical spaces across countries and continents, from Europe to the Americas, back to Europe and finally settling in the Ottoman Empire. In the geographically ambiguous places visited in the novel, the encounter between the traveler and the Other foregrounds the intersubjective layers within *the traveling self*. On the other hand, in *Things Fall Apart*, where space is relatively more confined and

physical boundaries more definite, the production of the self has more to do with storytelling and imagination. In other words, the self depends largely on the larger cultural and natural environment concerning boundaries. What the boundary heightens is the unknown world outside of it. The construction of the self in *Things Fall Apart* is *imaginative*, as the self constantly incorporates its imaginations of the space, both inside and outside.

In my mind, the relationships between *the traveling self* and *the imaginative self*, alludes to a structure informing this chapter that is supposed to be about “influences”, which has to do with travel, boundary and place, a structure that will be accentuated and interrupted by reflections on my first documentary venture in Abu Dhabi, *Vicky, I and Herself*, as well as works by Trinh.T. Minha, Chantal Akerman, Mati Diop, and Apichatpong Weerasethakul. The questions of intertextuality and adaptation will also be raised, along with my deepest regards to Mikhail Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination* (2010). By bringing these two literary fictions into conversations with my reflections in the filmmaking process, I hope that the support paper will produce a versatile accounting of the eccentric and sensorial connections between various practices that are pertinent to this film, and its surroundings.

## **The traveling self: debunking my past**

During my years living in Abu Dhabi, I made my first film in documentary form, *Vicky, I and Herself*, a short film that narrates the drifting subjectivities of Southeast Asian female migrants in Abu Dhabi, blurring the line between reality and fantasy. Merging documentary footage with fictional circumstances, the short film tells the stories of Vicky and her friends from southeastern Asia, estranged in Abu Dhabi, imagining, dreaming, and hoping to be remembered by the city. I overlay the non-fiction footage with a semi-fictional narrative account from a young Chinese female blogger and geologist in Abu Dhabi. The film is constructed through a voice-over that fictionalized Vicky into a mysterious figure who exists in reality but expanded in imagination.

This hybrid short documentary film attempts to return agency to the Southeast Asian female migrants in Abu Dhabi through hybrid visual art forms. The stories of Vicky and her friends were not lodged within any cultural or temporal boundaries. I therefore incorporated documentary, found footage, poetry and prose to rebuild connections between different utterances and voice their lives as Southeastern women living only but impermanently in the United Arab Emirates. Connected by different voices, forms, and narratives, *Vicky, I and Herself* explores the politics of seeing and reflects upon the private and social experiences in a continuously flowing time and space.



Image 1. Still from *Vicky, I and Herself* (2019)



Image 2. Still from *Vicky, I and Herself* (2019)

The truth is that the two passages above were only written after *Vicky, I and Herself* was completed, as a part of the support paper for my undergraduate thesis at NYU Abu Dhabi. The words, the concepts, or the motives did not exist prior to the final cut. A structure surfaced in the editing room when I was faced with months of footage, unsure what to do with it. The structure of the film was born out of my attempt to grasp what I had filmed. Not being able to arrive at an understanding in the end, the attempt itself naturally became the guiding structure of the film.

*Vicky, I and Herself* was my first venture into questioning the relationships between documentary, fiction, exile, postcoloniality, and femininity. However, after Vicky and her friends saw the film, none of those attempts that had kept me up at night came up in our follow-up conversations about the completed film. What really grabbed their hearts were the vignettes - those obscure and fragmented scenes, which they had a memory of but couldn't place precisely. They certainly did not have a problem with not being able to remember things well. Quite the opposite, I feel Vicky had enjoyed those scenes precisely because they were obscure and hard to grasp, which may allow one to imagine the memories without constraints; perhaps it's the possibilities, the possibilities of the past.

Now if we were to take a step back and look at the overall framework of the film, it explains my questions with lucid narratives and motives - questions such as "who are they?", "who am I?", "why are we here in Abu Dhabi?" and, "what's our relationship?" The film does question authorship and attempts to return agency to the subjects, but I couldn't help wondering if it speaks the language that addresses the Other, one that has to separate me and Vicky. In other words, I wonder if the language and structure adopted in *Vicky, I and Herself* has been made conveniently presentable and relatable to the spectators? Have I myself, played an active role in prematurely appraising the footage and the lives within? Have I myself already assumed a clear breakage between those on screen and those watching? Has the obscure footage of the real become an aestheticizing tool for the overarching framework that so persistently feeds on a clear comprehension of the Other? The questions I'd raised during the making of *Vicky, I and Herself* have also been in conversation with documentary's recent tendencies towards the questioning of documentary truth. As Bill Nichols put it, "documentary has come to suggest incompleteness and

uncertainty, recollection and impression, images of personal worlds and their subjective construction” (Nichols 1993, 174).

Rereading what I have written for the undergraduate thesis, I began to have doubts - and felt it wouldn't be enough to simply acknowledge the questions of subjectivity and multiplicity, yet using a clear, archaic and singular language. I began to ponder the use of language, one that relates to relationality and power, in the context of exile. In some way, *Vicky, I and Herself* is clear, as it is understandable and relatable; I couldn't help but question what this clarity responds to, and who this clarity serves. Questions involving the needs to be made understood and relatable in documentary form filmmaking kept me restless at night. On edge, I went back to re-reading *Candide* and *Things Fall Apart*.

The traveling self as manifested in *Candide* is one that is constantly adapting and learning. Trinh T. Minh-ha summarizes the traveling self as containing “other than myself” and “the other self” (Minh-ha 2010, 27). According to Minh-ha, the movement between space inevitably induces negotiations between the self, the historical and social self:

Every voyage can be said to involve a resiting of boundaries. The traveling self is here both the self that moves physically from one place to another, following “public routes and beaten tracks” within a mapped movement, and the self that embarks on an undetermined journeying practice, having constantly to negotiate between home and abroad, native culture and adopted culture, or more creatively speaking, between a here, a there, and an elsewhere. (Minh-ha 2010, 27)

The “resiting of boundaries” that Minh-ha foregrounds in her essays points to the instability and oscillations within the traveling self. The contradiction within the traveling self suggests the internal and external negotiations between the multiple self, the self and the Other. The negotiations between home and abroad take place during *Candide*'s physical expeditions to the

lands of the Other. The boundaries involved in the traveling process are blurry because the mobility of the travelers foregrounds the fluidity of space and destabilizes fixed boundaries. The adaptations of the traveling self thus contribute to the profoundly unstable but advancing self. It is in Candide's traveling process whereby "the self loses its fixed boundaries - a disturbing yet potentially overpowering practice of difference" (Minh-ha 2010, 41).

I carried Minh-ha's words, together with the residues of my memories in Abu Dhabi, back to China, and then soon after, to Canada. My mobility across borders is incited and granted by various forces that at times contradict each other, but without doubt divulge an uninhibited predilection towards cross-cultural exchange, either by choice or by compulsion. The internal negotiations between the multiple self, the self and the other, which take place during almost any cross-cultural or cross-spatial exchange, don't normally end up with a clear agreement.

The sentiments of uncertainty, confusion, inconsistency, as well as the disoriented grasp of memory, place, and logic, have converged in the traveling self, that being myself, and my collaborators in *A Collage Barbarous* (and *The Good Woman of Sichuan*), whose lives have also been split between more than two lands. That being said, I find it almost impossible to come up with words on a page to recount a "personal experience" of exile. The lived moments are potent but there is hardly any narrative that can encapsulate or concretize the experience. Each moment between locales is simply juxtaposed to the next, an embodied time that is resisting any form of logic or cause and effect. One that endears nothing but correspondence and affinity.

## **The imaginative self: connectivity and an open departure**

There is always a memory, a sensation, and a thinking that surrounds a woman roaming between places. Here, the abstraction isn't merely a choice or a method, but it is all that's left, unconcealed. Perhaps this is why works by Chantal Akerman, Mati Diop, Apichatpong Weerasethakul have always seized my full body, emotion, and mind. I find a courageous generosity in their work that divulges an unguarded tranquility and chaos, without pretense. The grotesqueness, either the literal or the aesthetic, is never apologized for.

One of the major influences on *A Collage Barbarous* (and *The Good Woman of Sichuan*) is the work from Mati Diop, a filmmaker working in both France and Senegal, whose adventurous films explore exile and identity, memory and loss using both fiction and documentary methods. Her short film *Big in Vietnam* (2012) is a primary inspiration that instigated the formal and narrative ventures I have undertaken in the thesis. Diop's *Big in Vietnam* is a short film that has to do with filming a movie in Marseille, where the protagonist, Henriette, a French-Vietnamese director, is shooting *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, assisted by her son Mike. In the opening scene, the main actor dressed in the costume of the movie, a historical fiction, wanders around the forest and goes missing. Henriette walks off her own set in search of the actor. She journeys through Marseille, the port city, discovering a world that reminds her of the one she left. There, she meets a man haunted by a journey of no return. This is a work that poetically travels across various borders, those being the physical, the formal, the spatial and the imaginary.

'My characters rarely find themselves where they want to be in the world: there is always somewhere to escape from, to return to, or to conquer by means of the imagination' (Picard



2014), says Diop in an interview. The oneiric and fluid sensation in Diop's work is accentuated by the blurring of different performances and worlds; there is a fiction within a fiction, a past within a past. What inspired me most endearingly was the saunter in Diop's work. The sauntering within and across those physical and imaginary spaces had me muse on what the boundary constitutes: where lies the boundary in that forest between a fiction and an elsewhere, between a present moment and a memory? The demarcation of space is as fluid as it is unknown in Diop's films, which puts forward the question of the how - how do our bodies experience the multitudes of the physical spaces and those imaginary ones? This is the question that has been hyper-present throughout my years of exile and creating works in traveling.

One answer to this question is juxtaposition. Here, I speak about an existence, as well as a form that holds rather than explains. As Sartre so comments on Camus' words, "we bounce from sentence to sentence, from void to void; the sentences are not, of course, in relation to each other, but simply juxtaposed" (Jean-Paul 1946, 13). To the sensible, the juxtaposition may seem emotionless. To the others, there may be a telepathic relation between the juxtaposed, a connection that has to involve risk and imagination. Leo Goldsmith describes the notion of telepathy as a central subject in Mati Diop's films, as telepathy is a feeling across distance, "a form of relation that generates friction as a remote sensation of touch; it requires a medium - a spatial, technological or occult connective tissue - in and through which the self dissolves" (Goldsmith 2018). This dissolving self certainly involves risk, a risk of losing one's past, and one's former shape and structure. Meanwhile, the dissolution also creates - it can now create through the now uninhibited connective tissues and means of imagination.

Another major influence on my filmmaking practice, particularly on the thesis, is the sensational reality in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's work. Roaming permeates Weerasethakul's

films, a kind of roaming that is intertwined with place, nature, culture and myth. Although most of Weerasethakul's films are set in Thailand, the place presented on screen appears to be palpably alien. The unique texture of the place is one that renders multiple experiences. My personal bond to Weerasethakul's films is closely tied to this texture, one that holds a structural playfulness and a spirit of openness.

My favorite work from Weerasethakul is *Mekong Hotel* (2012), another film that seems to be about the making of movies, but extends far more open and interlayered than most works of the similar philosophy. For me, *Mekong Hotel* is one that openly presents a multilayered process without a centripetal force to organize. I find it a rare work that so generously documents the process of thinking, making, imagining, without assuming or claiming any superiority within them. Isaac Marrero-Guillamon compares Weerasethakul's *Mekong Hotel* to his first feature film *Mysterious Object at Noon* whose coherence relies on the exquisite corpse method, and he describes *Mekong Hotel* being a much more open-ended film, structured around- or moving freely between multiple narrative levels:

Unlike many films structured around the making of a film (or their own making, for that matter), there is no attempt to signify any of the layers listed above as ontologically superior, that is, as more real or important. Everything is filmed in the same way, with the same patient, fixed, deep focus and wide shots. These Bazinian framing strategies do not attempt to inscribe a human perspective (as handheld shots or a shallow depth of field may do), but rather produce an ample stage where a number of stories, characters, actors, landscapes, questions, and so on may be hosted. The camera rarely moves or chases the action; characters may enter and/or leave the scene, in turn providing an acute sense of the frame and its outside. The shots' generous duration, their amplitude and stillness hence become welcoming devices. (Marrero-Guillamón 2018, 20)

In turn, my deep connection to Weerathakul's work largely lies in the space that's generously created on screen, which serves as a departure instead of as an end goal. It's a space yet to be

freely inhabited and explored; that is something I have been deeply connected to, a creation of open departure.

### **The traveling meets the imaginative: a stubborn deflection**

Form can hardly be isolated when the work does not follow a linear fashion, not only structurally but also spiritually. I cannot consider the form and aesthetic of this work as a result of a certain thought or research process. Rather, I find it didactic to divide the method and the objective, the emotional and the interpretive, the present moment and the history. Each intuition, questioning, epiphany, self-doubt or influence has collaged into the working, by which I mean the methods, experimentations, and the aesthetics. Nevertheless, certain works from the artists that I admire, in particular, certain formal decisions, had a strong emotional grip on me.

The question of duration has been brought up many times by audiences, critics and interviewers, after the public screenings of *The Good Woman of Sichuan*. However, I don't wish to devote any page on this aspect, or what has apparently been categorized as “slow cinema”. In fact, I find it counterproductive to participate in the discourse of it, which could possibly insinuate and even reinforce a binary thinking that has been institutionalized by popular reviewers. In the process of making *A Collage Barbarous* (and *The Good Woman of Sichuan*), I had never isolated the notion of “slow cinema” or “temporality”, and consider it as an active method or aesthetic objective; each shot is as long as it needs to be, depending on the aura at the moment of filming and its rhythmic relations to the surroundings. This facet will be elaborated in later chapters “Archiving the Processus” and “Aesthetics of Tonality”, during which the aesthetic of the durational will be grounded in the filming and editing process of the work itself, rather than being a floating concept.

Despite my hesitance in isolating the reflection on form, distinct moments of certain shots had stimulated me in physical and emotional ways; I had in turn carried these physical/emotional reactions into the formal considerations of my thesis work. Most of these simulations came from Chantal Akerman's films, in which I find a riveting emotional stubbornness. Jane Simon notes in Akerman's works a "fertile oscillation" between extremes:

Like the other films discussed here, and like so many of Akerman's films, the spaces, conversations, textures and habits of daily life are archived here and personal relationships are imbricated in broader events in a fertile oscillation between drama and banality, between minor expressions and broader historical currents. (Simon 2017, 165)

I am often engrossed by Akerman's films because they take me to the extremes as well as the in-between - a flimsy playfulness of a girl's meandering in the city merges with the mundanity of a domestic life; spontaneous drives sit right next to precise movements within highly confined and static frames. In experiencing Akerman's works, I find this aspect alluring, a stubborn deflection from consistency, constantly resetting and rerouting.

One particular film I'd like to bring forward here is *No Home Movie* (2015), a documentary film focusing on conversations between the filmmaker and her mother just months before her mother's death where 90 percent of the film's visuals are located within the house, her mother's apartment. In a number of instances, the film cuts "randomly" to a long static shot of an unknown desert land where a zealous wind blows. That particular cut of deviation penetrated me. Many readings of this cut mentioned the contrast between the domestic and the outside. To me, this cut is a pure desire for a deflection, a turning away - it is stubborn, emotional, and purely intuitive. Just like the missing actor from the first scene of Mati Diop's *Big in Vietnam*, who just walks off the set and goes missing, both directors openly share with us movements of deviation, whether it is the form or the character who initiates these minor zigzagging movement; one is

drifting on the verge of a fiction, or a fantasy, while the other is departing a language, or an aesthetic. Both entail a stubborn desire to leave, to depart, to escape from, to drift, to diverge, to walk off and cross over.

Form is not an isolated concept but one that is concrete and diverse in the process of my filmmaking practice, each film is distinctively grounded in its own time. Nevertheless, when I think of the encounter between the traveling and the imaginative, I cannot help but note an abstract formal movement that is unique in each work, but similarly fueled by an urgent desire to deflect. The imaginative bodies in the traveling produce a stubborn desire to deviate, particularly via a straight-up manifestation of form. Usually, I find these deflections in form not a result of a calculated study or rumination, but rather a strong, pure, and stubborn desire - an intuition fueled by intensifying energy from the overlapping movements and imaginations that persist and penetrate.

### **The dissemination of space in dialogic languages**

Mikhail Bakhtin's writings and his concept of the dialogic had an immense impact on my artistic endeavours in exploring creative relationships between languages. To illustrate my reading of and connection to his thinking, I will, for the last time, reference *Candide* (1959) and *Things Fall Apart* (1985) to recontextualize his words, because the novel, according to Bakhtin, is the most natural environment of languages, more than any other form of art.

Bakhtin's essay "Discourse in the Novel" presents the multi-directional movements that occur in the internal space of language. Although Bakhtin's arguments are based on the general form of the novel, he deconstructs the abstract notion of languages into spatial entities. In the

essay "Discourse in the Novel", Bakhtin examines the interwoven movements in the consciousness of language. He identifies the novel as a natural and authentic environment of utterances, an environment that is unified by a centralizing force of utterance, but operates in the midst of 'dialogized heteroglossia' which refers to the coexistence of distinct varieties within a single form of language (Bakhtin 2010, 272). It is interesting to note that, as established by Bakhtin, "the process of centralization and decentralization intersect in the utterance". This force of decentralization therefore points to the stratification of language, culture and society, and the possibilities of the multi-and the other.

Bakhtin's 'dialogized heteroglossia' can be found in Voltaire's organization of the textual language where we experience the multiplicity and dissemination of spaces within the text. This relationship is manifested in the episode that starts with Candide and Cacambo hearing a few little cries that seem to be uttered by women. Before they sight the running girls and monkeys, the sounds of the unknown cries startle and baffle the two travelers because they cannot distinguish whether these were "cries of pain or of joy" (Voltaire 1795, 39). The emotions that this unknown country evokes are almost beyond comprehension and absorption, as even such petty cries are capable of startling them to "jump to their feet hastily" (39). Taking a step further from the characters' uncontained reactions in the face of bafflement and even stupefaction, we observe that the text internally comments on the dramatized actions of the two wanderers and the surroundings, identifying this "anxiety and alarm" as emotions that an unknown country naturally "inspires" (39). The French verb "inspire" also appears in the original version which describes "cette inquiétude et cette alarme que tout inspire dans un pays inconnu". The word "inspirer", used in this context, does not entail a casual relationship which is normally considered disconcerting when juxtaposing an unknown country and the emotion of anxiety. Instead, the

word “inspirer” suggests a positive, anticipating and communicative influence that is not only far from being fixated unidirectional, but also serves as an open and “dialogic orientation” (Bakhtin 2010, 284).

Candide, unlike the European colonizers in Okonkwo’s communities, does not attempt to invade. Instead, what Voltaire accentuates in these erratic adventures is the interwoven and dialogic relationships within the text itself. Voltaire’s use of language foregrounds the intersubjective dynamics within the text itself. In this case, the self existing in the textual spaces must negotiate between what lies on the oppositional poles, propose an alternative structure that is interwoven and dialogic in nature, and resolve itself in dissemination towards an outside. The novel and its use of dialogism has a bearing on my practice and the film *A Collage Barbarous* (and *The Good Woman of Sichuan*).

## Writing in Exile: falling apart into pieces

The embryo of *A Collage Barbarous* (and *The Good Woman of Sichuan*) was a short story I wrote in 2017, titled “Swimming in the Ashes of My Man”. The story follows young widow Yani visiting her late husband’s hometown village for no particular reason. The trip was bizarre, dreamy, and sometimes a bit funny. The sensation of the uncanny was my primary interest going into this writing; an eerie dislocation between a character who moves illogically and a surrounding that extends magically. Later, the bizarre short story has taken multiple forms of adaptations and experimentation.

When I was taking Jill Magi’s class on documentary poetry in Abu Dhabi, I handmade a poetry chapbook out of found-texts only, an erratic collage of the language from Jean-Michel Rabate’s *The Pathos of Distance* (2016), and the article “Real case, three tricks teach you how to save a marriage?” published by a marriage consulting website called “Flower Town Emotion”. Similarly, in this chapbook, I played with eccentric compilations of texts, distinct paper and metal materials to create a sensation of dislocation between and within places, in particular, a sensation that is experienced by women.

Later in the summer of 2018, I spent an uneventful two-month period in Paris. A lot was happening in the city such as the World Cup, but I was so bored that I revisited the short story “Swimming in the Ashes of My Man” and began to fill my time by adapting the story into a feature screenplay. It was close to one-month of writing, and for the first time, I wrote a script in Chinese. Writing a long form screenplay allowed me to immerse myself into the detailed movements and environment multidimensionally. In the duration of that month, writing on a random table in a strange new country everyday, I felt that I had gone through a long trip of



unknown attributes, filled with bizarre encounters and strange sensations. Despite the process being quite magical, I had many struggles closing the script; I was completely lost in navigating towards the final destination, if there was one. That whole writing experience culminated in me destroying the whole screenplay; I buried it in one of the random google drive folders.

After arriving in Canada in the fall of 2019, in preparation for the thesis production, I decided to recycle the ideas and experimentation previously exercised but to render a new experience that only cinema could indulge. For approximately six months, I had been engaged in various forms of writing and journal keeping specific to the film. Firstly, I drafted a short novella; it delineated the first encounter of the protagonist, a woman, arriving in her late-husband's hometown, an abandoned village. The encounter is interrupted by distorted flashbacks of her wedding and a mysterious man that had once entered her dream (see Image 5).

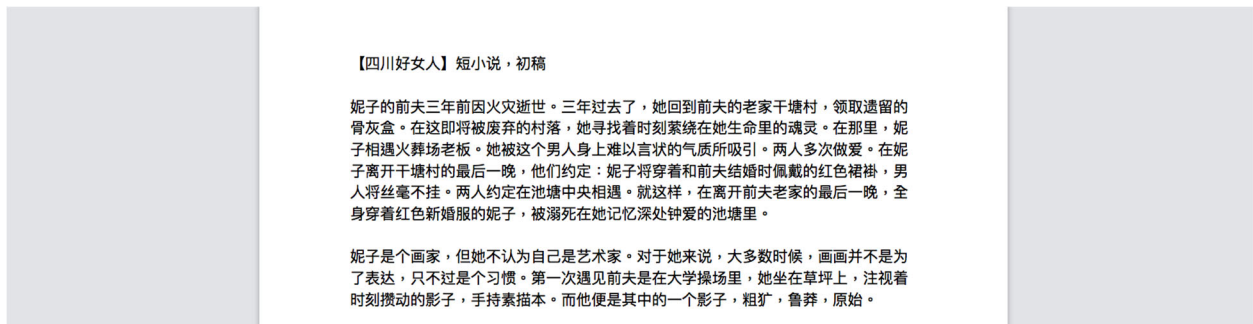


Image 3. Still of an excerpt from short novella “The Good Woman of Sichuan”

Moving from the short novella, I drafted a scriptment for the film which was dissected into three parts. In this scriptment, I took a step further from the fictional framework and incorporated improvisation and intertextual elements into the project. It included specifically designed scenes but left the approaches open; it also introduced Bertolt Brecht's play *The Good*

*Person of Szechuan*, into the film's narrative. Below is a rough structure that I delineated at the time:

#### PART I :

- NINI rides the train back to her late-husband's hometown; Nini checks into a hotel; Nini showers.
- Phone rings in the hotel; Nini picks up the phone. It's a promotional call from a local traveling agency. Nini explains her reasons here, not to travel.
- Nini goes to clothing stores; she purchases various styles of clothing.
- For a few days, she dresses drastically differently, but goes to the same restaurant and orders the same dish.
- Nini takes a walk in the park, and mountain areas.
- O.S: phone call conversation between Nini and her best friend LI. They grow up together in the same town. Li is pursuing a PHD in literature in London at the moment. She is free, with numerous boyfriends and girlfriends. In the phone call, Li talks about her PHD thesis research, where she studies the "traveling self" in Voltaire's works, particularly in *Candide*. Li reads a paragraph of her essay to Nini. Li expresses that Nini shouldn't have gotten married so early, and that she shouldn't have trapped herself in such a small town, at such a young age.

#### PART II :

- ZHAO and Nini meet in the town.
  - Zhao is Nini's high school classmate. She is now a theatre actress.

- Zhao is currently in the town, researching for her new role in a local adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Woman of Szechuan*.
- Nini draws illustrations of Zhao
- Nini shares with Zhao her recurring dreams on a mysterious trespasser man into her room; (the story of the dream contains multiple layers of the dreamt reality)
- Zhao tells Nini about this theatre play, and her thoughts on the character.
- Nini rehearses with Zhao on the play, reading lines together etc.,
- In the end, Nini proposes to Zhao: both of them invent a role for herself, without telling each other what the role is; there will be no script; each has to prepare her own costume; the two women meet at one place, and live a day together with their new roles.

### PART III:

- The improvisation day of Nini and Zhao's new selves.
- O.S: phone call conversation between Nini and her best friend Li: Li tells Nini that she doesn't want to leave her apartment these days; she doesn't want to go to movies, nor going on dates. Li also shares with Nini that her research essay has taken a shift these days: Recently, Li has new perceptions on "the traveling self", after re-reading Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, where the traveling appears instead in stories, something full of vigor, imagination and adaptation. Li expresses her loneliness in London.

I find this scriptment a major development from a pool of scattered thoughts and documentations towards a stage where the narratives, ideas and forms I had in mind began to interconnect in a more dialogic and organic way. Having the three-part structure was an interesting constraint against which the characters and circumstances had become more grounded than before.

While a more connected web of characters and experimentations began to take shape in this scriptment, I was also aware that the actual filming process on location, particularly one of documentary nature, would bring forward something new, unexpected, uncontrolled and potentially disruptive. In order to not limit the possibilities of the film within my preconceived notions, I decided to continue writing, to disseminate what's written in this scriptment. To deconstruct my own writings, I started to write down scenes and sounds in the simplest form possible, sporadically. Most of the written scenes and sounds consist only of a few words describing the most basic elements such as: “forest, near water, she walks, she eats”, or “sleeping, two people”, “skype, director, rehearsals”, “neighbor, tree, raining”. This writing process went on for months (since February 2021), and throughout the production period (June-July 2021).

## Archiving the Processus

The filming process began after we all safely arrived in China in the middle of the pandemic. Sherry, my cinematographer, flew from Abu Dhabi, while I myself flew from Toronto. Weihang, the actress, was in Chengdu for that year, and because of Covid-19, she had to stay much longer than planned. It was unusual for all of us to have to stay in China for a long period since we had been abroad for many years, and we'd only come home briefly during holidays. Since the pandemic had put everything at halt, I found the month we spent in Leshan existed in a vacuum of time, fully detached from the future or present for any individual; for us, there was hardly any stability in thoughts, plans, or relationships.



Image 4. Still from *A Collage Barbarous* (also *The Good Woman of Sichuan*)

Three of us resemble each other in age, so it's safe to say that we were all in a transitional phase. *Where do we go from now?* - this was a question that persisted in the air, metaphorically and literally. In that sense, the tiny apartment that I rented in Leshan was a sanctuary, in which time stood still, and the only thing that progressed was the footage being accumulated each day. Three young Chinese women who had been moving from place to place for years suddenly stopped here, in a small apartment in Leshan, Sichuan. The body had stopped moving, but thanks to the generosity of time, possibilities became wide open. The physical boundaries only intensify what is outside of it. Gradually, I became aware that this was not going to be an experimental fiction work about a woman in a strange place. Instead, I had a strong feeling that this would be a non-fiction, but the subject can hardly be seen or heard; it can only be experienced.

While the sensation of the experience was taking over my consciousness, I began to merge the filming, the writing, and the everyday time. I also began to let go of my previous plans, concepts, and structures of the film, simply because I couldn't do it - it would be cruel of me to put more restrictions on our bodies than what had already been imposed. In that stream of thought, I decided that every frame had to live outside of it. In other words, what was going to be captured on camera had to be open rather than closed; the images and scenes must inspire rather than define. I communicated with Sherry and Weihang that we would only know what to film each day on that day. We would only film what we didn't know, rather than what we thought we knew. Curiosity, simplicity and fun became the key words in our processus.

## Documenting the city and self

Documenting the city was a journey that had been assimilated into our experience roaming the town. We didn't come into filming with any preconceived notions of what each documentation would signify. At the same time, the documenting process didn't foreground the distinction between us and them; rather, we tended to film the locations that we had a connection to. Sometimes it had to do with our previous experience in that place, some other times it was an endearing curiosity.



Image 5. Still from *A Collage Barbarous* (also *The Good Woman of Sichuan*)

Leshan was a small city that none of us knew well. Each day, we'd venture into the city - we took strolls along the streets in the old town, the new district, and by the Yangtze river. Depending on the weather, the atmosphere, and our predilection, I would plan on the morning of

each day what could be filmed that day, and then we headed out with our equipment to a location we visited the day or a few days before. Sometimes it was a hairdresser salon or a noodle shop, some other times the riverside. When I was location scouting together with my cinematographer Sherry Wu, I realized that even if you pass by a certain place everyday, there are many things you don't notice at first. It requires time and effort to get to know a place deeply and to acquire new perspectives.

The camera setting, therefore, resembled a documentary film shoot, recording static observational shots. However, the observational shots were never intended to document objectively. Usually, each frame and its duration were to manifest a dynamic that lived in the air, a rhythm and space contributed by all of us, the townspeople, the filmmakers, as well as the actresses, both distinctly and simultaneously. Inevitably, we ourselves also appear in the film, moving fluidly between the front and back of the camera. But our roles in the film, or even in those very moments of being filmed on location were neither persistent nor consistent. There were many fictions involved in the project; some can be pronounced while others might have only been secrets that slipped away from one's unconsciousness.

### **Imagining the rehearsals: my fiction meets Brecht's play**

I had incorporated fiction in both the development and production process of *A Collage Barbarous* (and *The Good Woman of Sichuan*). In my pre-written fictions, Weihang He was supposed to play the role of a widow who travels to Leshan, her late husband's hometown, for no particular reason; I, myself, was supposed to play the role of an actress in Leshan preparing and finding inspirations for an abstract stage adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's play *The Good Person of*



*Szechwan*. At the same time, Weihang and I were constantly practicing lines from the play, as our genuine selves; in these experiments, we had played different roles from the play. Further, we had done improv sessions with a Chinese female theatre director based in London, who guided us through various improvisations and games via zoom calls.



Image 6. Still from *A Collage Barbarous* (also *The Good Woman of Sichuan*)

The distinct scenarios listed above were filmed both as documentation and as formal experimentation. However distinct these roles were, each scenario was never strictly independent or segregated from another. The background of each scene was designed to be open and loose, only at times tinted with a slight inclination towards one particular role or a story. Towards the second half of the filming, the roles that we had taken upon ourselves became too confusing to differentiate or be aware of. As a result, in a number of situations, whether in a fictional indoor framework or in a docu-fiction setting involving an outdoor context, we stopped communicating

or ruminating on the intentions of the scene or characteristics of our roles; we began to blend our multiple roles into the environment, focusing on nothing else but experiencing the present.

## **Aesthetics of Tonality**

The total material accumulated during the production month was around 100 hours long. Editing became the most exciting and terrifying stage of the entire process. After reviewing the footage, I tried to put together a cut following a rough chronological timeline of the fiction framework that I had in mind before the production. However, the initial assembly turned out to be very boring; it certainly didn't reflect or capture the multiple layers of our experiences at the time. Therefore, I made a radical decision that I would let go of every narrative structure prior to the filming. Instead, I decided to edit towards a rhythm, and I became particularly fond of one that's illogical and barbarian.

As a result, the editing became a long process of finding melodies and incantations; some were evident, while others were cached. One significant characteristic in this process was that I edited the film from the beginning to the end, working on sounds and pictures simultaneously. In other words, I made this decision because I did not want to impose any structure on top of the film, unless the rhythm of the sounds and images naturally took me to certain places. Editing the sounds and images at the same time, provided me with a push and pull energy that was constantly negotiating and collaborating, forming for a dialogic rhythm.

The editing opened up many unknown spaces in which I had found interesting sub narratives that I wasn't aware of before. By reviewing the footage and editing in the dark towards an unknown tonality, I had grown more and more aware that this camera might have a personality of its own. It seemed that the camera was walking around the town by itself, as if it had a separate experience and thinking process that may not overlap with ours. I'd like to think

that because on most occasions, the camera sticks to long static shots where the filmmaker might not always have been present or seeing from the exact same perspective.



Image 7. Still from *The Good Woman of Sichuan*

The final scene of the *The Good Woman of Sichuan* (see Image 9), exemplified this notion of a ghostly subjectivity of the camera. At the time of filming, I set up the camera in front of an empty bench downstairs our residential building; the camera was placed very close to the chair on which I also placed a black hat. After the setting was determined, I hit the recording button and went next door to purchase a bottle of water. When I came back five minutes later, I found a family of three sitting on the bench right in front of the camera, a large camcorder directly pointed at them. However, they did not seem bothered by the colossal equipment in front of them; instead they chatted for about half an hour before leaving. I didn't disturb them at the

time. When revisiting the footage in the editing, this scene magnified my intuition that there is a magical sensation that had been present throughout the film where the camera is both visible and invisible.

What has been captured in the film may not necessarily represent us, especially given that *we*, as a collective, were particularly unstable and inconsistent. It confirmed my belief from early on that this was indeed a non-fiction, but the subject of the documentary could hardly be seen or heard. It could only be experienced. The rhythm, therefore, was the only and most palpable sensation one can gather from the subject, and it could only vaguely be experienced via a genuine and open engagement with the body. I was affirmed that the tonality of the film which slipped out in the editing process was another utterance, an alternative narrative, a different being, and an obscure way of communication.

## Conclusion

Though created amidst the pandemic between places, the original cut of my thesis and my debut feature film *The Good Woman of Sichuan* had a successful festival run in 2021. It had its world premiere at the 71st Berlin International Film Festival (Forum), followed by screenings at MoMA's Doc Fortnight, CPH: DOX Copenhagen International Documentary Festival, etc. I am very thankful for the diverse and open approaches that the graduate film program at York University had granted me, allowing me to experiment and discover without limitations if possible. *A Collage Barbarous*, the short cut, was a condensed and alternative work that stands next to and independently from *The Good Woman of Sichuan*.

I have carefully preserved every piece of notes and writings in preparation for this thesis. They are not meant to be remembered, but I believe that through the cracks of these words and drawings, a certain space would become open for a past and future that I had not been aware of yet. It must stimulate and inspire. When flipping through these random journal notes, I came upon a few words written in quotes, large and capitalized:

“absurdity is limited, rebellious and mortal”.

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## **Filmography**

*Big in Vietnam* (2012), directed by Mati Diop

*The Good Woman of Sichuan* (2021), directed by Sabrina Zhao

*Mekong Hotel* (2012), directed by Apichatpong Weerasethaku

*Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000), directed by Apichatpong Weerasethaku

*No Home Movie* (2015), directed by Chantal Akerman

*Vicky, I and Herself* (2019), directed by Sabrina Zhao