

# Letter from the Editor

YING ZHU

When I began to draft this letter in Hong Kong in the wee hours of the morning on November 8, 2020, media outlets had just declared Joe Biden the winner of the US presidential election, following days of slow-motion ballot counting. As Biden and running mate Kamala Harris issued calls for unity, Trump was busy tweeting allegations of election fraud. Six months have since passed, but the United States remains a profoundly polarized country. The US is not alone in this regard. At the core of the divide is the rise of populism around the globe in the past two decades, which has brought the far-right Alternative for Germany to the German national parliament; catapulted Trump to the US presidency in 2016; Brexit in the UK; and the ascent of populist parties in Austria, Brazil, Bolivia, France, Hungary, Israel, Italy, India, Indonesia, the Netherlands, the Philippines, Poland, Scandinavian regions, and more. Things have come full circle for me to be drafting this letter during the immediate aftermath of a US election that brought out record numbers of voters from two major parties to cast their verdict on the tumultuous four years of the Trump presidency.

A bit of a historical background for the journal is in order, if a four-year span can be counted as history: When first approached about launching a film and media journal in 2017, I was skeptical as to the need for yet another academic publication, given the proliferation of new journals in recent years, many of which were short-lived. I was also mindful of our field's trademark opaque and jargon-filled writing and was wary of perpetuating the same ritual.

As I waited for inspiration to strike for a cutting-edge idea that might move beyond these conventions, I struggled to make sense of the rapidly evolving political climate and landscape shaped by the concurrent of populism, tribalism, isolationism, and authoritarianism, with the humanities writ large under deepening assault globally. I recall an observation made to me during the 2016 US election by a college intern tasked with checking the pulse of the election by replaying hours upon hours of Trump's campaign speeches and rallies. A key takeaway the intern shared based on this grueling exercise

---

1. Yasmeeen Serhan, "Populism Is Morphing in Insidious Ways," *The Atlantic*, January 6, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/01/future-populism-2020s/604393/>.

was that Trump was an affective speaker and an effective storyteller. She sensed how people could get sucked into Trump's narrative of how the world was and what the world ought to be, which clearly echoed his supporters' implicit view of the world. The gut-wrenching observation by the young intern was an epiphany and brought me clarity and purpose as to what a new journal might explore, eventually leading to the birth of this new peer-reviewed and open access (OA) academic journal, *Global Storytelling: Journal of Digital and Moving Images*. This new journal aims to bring scholarly engagement in film and media studies back to the fundamentals of storytelling—both in terms of its affect, which concerns emotional engagement, and its effects, which concern social impact.

Affect and effects are important frameworks that allow us to understand our relationship with the world and with each other. In our journal's coinage of terms, we pay special attention on affects and effects of *audiovisual* storytelling across multiple platforms (including both theatrical and digital distribution channels) to better understand how storytelling shapes our perception of the world both historically and in real time. Our journal will cover modes of storytelling from narrative features to documentaries, long journalistic videos, personal essays, broadcast series and serial dramas, and user-generated online content.

Storytelling remains fundamental to our understanding of reality. It frames our perception and experience of events, shapes our cultural affiliations and identifications, and empowers or impoverishes us by either enriching or depriving our individual agency. In the last decade, for instance, populist politicians around the world have utilized a particular flavor of narrative to appeal to voters. From Donald Trump in the United States to Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Rodrigo Duterte, Viktor Orbán, Vladimir Putin, Kim Jong-un, etc., the ability of populist leaders to connect with the people via a potent narrative is palpable. In the case of Trump, he has kept his narrative premise simple with the catchy slogan, "Make America Great Again," and his evocation of an America in decline has been effective in summoning our deepest fears. In his storytelling, Trump is sent by God to defend people against all things evil and to bring back a better time—which happens to be a common trope in classic Hollywood films. Indeed, nowhere is the power of storytelling more pronounced and immediate than in the stories channeled through film and other audiovisual media. Leni Riefenstahl's Nuremberg films of Hitler rallies immediately come to mind. Elsewhere throughout history, the conspiracy-filled narrative of the common man against parasitic and corrupt elite institutions is another populist film trope that endows the movement with a moral purpose and credence. The flawed but strong masculine savior is another long-standing narrative in classic storytelling. The hero trope works well with the fear Trump stokes about an unknown future and the nostalgia he invokes about an imaginary rosy past; both prove brutally effective.

Storytelling plays a crucial role in the social construction of knowledge and perspective as we compulsively seek moral clarity, cultural certainty, and social cohesion. Audiovisual storytelling can trigger instant corporeal and emotional reactions that are central to our sensory engagement with the world. Proliferation of media conduits and content offer storytelling a contested terrain of competing cultural impulses and political inspiration that frequently renders images and meanings fluid and capricious. Competing narratives are frequently messy, uncivil, inflammatory, vulnerable to manipulation and deceit, and ripe with willful ignorance and denial. When it comes to storytelling in the digital world, a brief tweet or a short TikTok video can go viral and grow into a full-blown social movement in an instant. The effects, or social impact, of such supercharged affective audiovisual storytelling demands our scholarly attention. The characteristics and impacts of storytelling across both traditional and digital media thus become the foci of this new journal.

Our journal publishes traditional scholarly essays, book reviews, and film reviews, as well as provocative polemics by leading public intellectuals, policy makers, and film and media practitioners. It encourages diverse opinions as well as interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches to facilitate spirited and rigorous debate for a better understanding of culturally diverse narratives. The goal is to foster engaged academic and intellectual debates concerning the politics, economy, culture, and technology of storytelling in its varied formats and formations from production to circulation to reception. It is global in scope and diverse in approaches that engage scholars of both humanities and social sciences. Though not adhering to any particular methodological approach, we do focus on storytelling as a particular field of inquiry.

We live in challenging times. Colleagues at the Academy of Film of the School of Communication at Hong Kong Baptist University narrowly managed to host an international symposium on storytelling in Hong Kong in late January 2020, amidst lingering social unrest in Hong Kong and the arrival of COVID-19 on the horizon, which put the world into lockdown shortly thereafter. As contributor Robert A. Kapp notes in his book review in this issue, “At the conference in Hong Kong and on the streets of Hong Kong, in those waning days of January, people wore masks. Something serious was afoot in Wuhan. Hints of travel restrictions into and from Hong Kong were drifting about. Streets and malls were deserted in those first days of the epidemic alarm and those first days of the Chinese New Year shutdown.” Owing to the dedication of our speakers, as well as our organizing team and the unwavering support from Hong Kong Baptist University, the symposium completed without major hiccups, though a couple of speakers failed to arrive in Hong Kong due to border lockdowns. Some of the papers and topics covered at the symposium are now part of the inaugural issue of our journal.

Within the context of political unrest in Hong Kong, a pandemic that has put much of the world into lockdown, rising Sino-US tensions that threaten to shatter

the existing global power dynamic, and the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections capping four years of populist insurgency, we chose to highlight in our inaugural issue questions related to the narrative of virus, the narrative of social unrest, and the narrative of China's global image campaign within shifting Sino-US relations.

Part reporting and part opinion piece, "Hong Kong Unraveled: Social Media and the 2019 Protest Movement," by a long-term US journalist and Hong Kong resident who wishes to remain anonymous, argues that social media played a toxic role in the Hong Kong protests of 2019 by overwhelming diverse voices and taxing mainstream media to a degree that it relinquished traditional principles of discovery and balance. As in other places where it has mixed with politics, social media polarized the Hong Kong public and dominated international views of the protests. Among other consequences, the author argues, Hong Kong became a pawn in geopolitical rivalry between China and the United States, in part because both China and the United States accepted the view that Hong Kong was in the throes of full-fledged rebellion. Left behind were voices in the middle ground, the business community, and others who were mostly silent witnesses as representations of Hong Kong were reduced to widely traded scenes of violent protest.

Writing from a different perspective, though with equal reservation, Sam Ho's piece, "Tragedy of Errors at Warp Speed," expresses his wariness and misgivings about the way social protest unfolded in Hong Kong. Ho, a native Hong Konger and a veteran curator of Hong Kong film archives, shares his provocative yet heartfelt reflection on the past and future of his hometown. It is interesting to note that Ho moves freely and fluidly between the United States and Hong Kong and reserves his most scathing condemnation not for China's central government but rather for the British colonial legacy in Hong Kong and the xenophobic and racist undertone of the US government in its involvement in Hong Kong's affairs. Ho's almost quaint critique harks back to critical discourse of a different era when phrases such as (anti)imperialism and (anti)colonialism ruled the day—a different era indeed. Ho's piece opens a dialogue between different generations of Hong Kongers as they struggle to confront the new political reality. Most importantly, Ho's counterargument reflects the legacy of his own upbringing, suggesting to us that the narrative we acquire in our early life shapes our perceptions of the world.

In her article, "Unleashing the Sounds of Silence: Hong Kong's Story in Troubled Times," Andrea Riemenschnitter reminds us that "Hong Kong's story is difficult to tell." True to the interdisciplinary nature of our journal, Riemenschnitter's essay employs a cluster of methodologies (comprising concepts from ecocriticism, microhistorical discourse analysis, social anthropology, and other disciplinary fields) to address the ramifications of inscribing Hong Kong's story within protest-related literary, visual, and multimedia art productions, including street-art performance, handover-themed

art exhibitions, Wong King Fai's video "Umbrella Dance for Hong Kong," and Samson Young's sonic multimedia installations. Grouped together, Riemenschnitter's analysis complements Anonymous's and Ho's through her focus on the role of art in the Hong Kong protest movement and her nuanced exploration of how differing truth claims articulated by grassroots storytellers (including the protest-supporting artists and intellectuals), institutional stakeholders, external observers, and others negotiate with each other in an environment of growing mutual distrust. Riemenschnitter examines the role and function of storytelling in this escalating conflict and the kind of affective space thus created.

In her account of the Hong Kong protest, New York-based playwright Stefani Kuo published a video in December 2019, calling attention to the increasingly violent police actions against protesters in her hometown. As Riemenschnitter writes, "Pleading to America for support, she describes how she imagines herself dying as one of the movement's victims in Hong Kong's streets while her father at home apologizes to the authorities for her misconduct as a protester." I wonder how Ho might respond to his fellow bicultural traveler Kuo's pleading for help from Americans. Riemenschnitter's quote at the beginning of her essay, from the Book of Songs (ca. 600 BC), "Do not blame the speaker, take note of his warning," seems particularly apt at this critical historical conjuncture. As Ho submits his grand narrative of geopolitical and sociohistorical interpretations to articulate his reservations about unceasing social movements in recent years, he might yet have to reconsider the agencies of young committed activists and individual citizens across the demographic ladder or listen to their narratives of idealism and passions, hopes and fears, as they pursue a democratic polity in the city.

In his "Imagining a City-Based Democracy," a review of Laikwan Pang's *The Appearing Demos* (2020), Enoch Yee-lok Tam argues that the book urges us to think deeply about social movements, not only as political events, but also as they relate to citizenship and citizens' rights in a globalizing city—specifically, "how these individuals' exercise of autonomy and mutual respect can bring a new connectivity into being, one that denies the neoliberalist connectivity that continually morphs along with market conditions." While Pang, on the one hand, adopts a bottom-up and microscopic approach to interviewing several dozen protesters of different ages, genders, occupations, and educational backgrounds, on the other hand, her analysis of the political impasse in Hong Kong is macroscopic and has global reach. Pang obviously would not underestimate the conflict between city-based democracy and the primacy of state sovereignty, but she warns against forsaking our efforts to engage alternative political imaginations in actualizing a future for the city. As Tam points out, Pang puts several theories into dialogue when contextualizing the Umbrella Movement within global political movements. These theories include Hannah Arendt's philosophy and ethics of political action as well as ideas from Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos* (2015) and Manuel



Castells's *Networks of Outrage and Hope* (2012) that include the conceptualization of *demos*, the use of social media, the critique of a neoliberal economy, and the connectivity of global citizenship

Richard Peña, a veteran director of the New York Film Festival, remains a true cinephile with a singular focus on Chinese film. His piece, "China and the Film Festival," offers a historical overview of the circulation and ascendance of Chinese cinema within the world of film festivals and the role film festivals play in telling and shaping the story of national and regional cinemas. Peña reminds us of the role governments around the world have played in promoting their national cinemas and the attendant rise in "cinematic nationalism" after World War II that demonstrated "a new desire to make sure their histories and cultures would be represented." Peña's own career as a film-culture bureaucrat from Chicago to New York City closely paralleled the rise of Chinese cinema in the US art-house circuit. His rich and informative autoethnography describes his encounter with *Chinese cinema*, a term in his usage encompassing Chinese-language films from Taiwan, the People's Republic of China, and Hong Kong. Regarding Hong Kong cinema, Peña highlights Wong Kar-Wai as the island's first internationally recognized auteur, whose films follow the narrative of modernism central to both European and US discourses on what counts as worthy cinema.

Jonathan Haynes's essay, "Nationalism from Below: State Failures, Nollywood, and Nigerian Pidgin," takes us away from Hong Kong, on the eastern edge of the Pearl River Delta, to Nigeria, on the Gulf of Guinea in Africa. The focus here is the Nigerian film industry, known as Nollywood, which was initially a low-budget feature-film industry grounded in the informal sector of Nigeria's national economy. While critical of the Nigerian government's (mis)handling of this nascent indigenous media industry, Haynes argues that Nollywood remains a powerful, unifying cultural force on both the national and Pan-African levels and that Nigerian Pidgin is more important than ever as a linguistic medium of communication and as a symbol of national, regional, and Pan-African unity and communicability. Here is a powerful instance of the ways national politics and policy intertwine with cinema as a storytelling medium.

Carl Plantinga's essay, "Collective Memory and the Rhetorical Power of the Historical Fiction Film," examines the rhetorical power of historical fiction as a tool to establish collective memory. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach grounded in our journal's mission, Plantinga draws on both media theory and social-science research to unpack scenes from films such as *Selma* (2014), *Lincoln* (2012), and *Black Klansman* (2018) to illustrate his argument in support of mainstream historical fictions for their affect and effect in keeping alive our collective memories of controversial social issues. As Plantinga reminds us, what happens in the recent past will one day become part of historical fiction, and historical fiction is a crucial way to narrate history and tell stories about history.

Michael Walsh's essay, "From Nations to Worlds: Chris Marker's *Si j'avais quatre dromadaires*," brings back *Si j'avais quatre dromadaires* (1966), a forty-nine-minute-long documentary film composed of seven hundred and fifty still photographs taken in twenty-five countries around the world by Chris Marker, the French photographer, documentary film director, and film essayist. Walsh argues that this lesser-known film by the well-known director actually marks a pivot point in his work: the moment at which he broadens his creative imagination from the national to the global, a feature for which his later work is celebrated. *Si j'avais quatre dromadaires* is the first of Marker's international films that takes us from Pyongyang to Havana, from the Dead Sea to the Arctic Circle, presenting us with the enduring challenge of a world system that is in perpetual configuration and reconfiguration (if not conflict) and jostling, politically, economically, and culturally.

Peter Hitchcock's essay, "*American Factory* and the Difficulties of Documenting Neoliberalism," takes a close look at Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert's documentary *American Factory* (2020), a project produced by Netflix and distributed by Barack and Michelle Obama's Higher Ground Productions. A poignant movie about how a Chinese company established an auto glass factory in Moraine, Ohio, on the site of a former GM production plant, the film won an Oscar for Best Documentary Feature at the ninety-second Academy Awards in 2020 and is featured in discussions concerning ongoing Sino-US trade tensions. Using *American Factory* as a case study, Hitchcock focuses on the contemporary capacity of the documentary form to capture the specific logic of socioeconomic and geopolitical contradictions, which, in this case, is explored through the rubric of neoliberalism. Hitchcock argues that the conceptual framework of the documentary complicates how the story of a transnational factory might be told and how salient issues of labor and trade can be explored. The paper also connects the film's style of documenting workers to a longer cinematic history.

Along the Sino-US nexus, the eminent China watcher Robert A. Kapp reviews a new book, *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: China's Campaign for Hearts and Minds*, coedited by Kingsley Edney, Stanley Rosen, and Ying Zhu (2019). Though charitably grading the book as a "fine contribution," Kapp calls the volume an elegy, if not a eulogy. As he puts it, "Within a few weeks, as the world writhed in the grip of a metastasizing pandemic, *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics* became . . . a work of history." In Kapp's assessment, neither China nor the United States under Trump has much global sway in terms of soft power. In the case of China, perhaps Kapp is right to say that the book is a swan song and that soft power was only an interval in China's global cultural projection. Yet the recently concluded Fifth Plenum of nineteenth Communist Party of China's Central Committee reiterated the imperative of "transforming China into a cultural power . . . by enhancing the country's soft power, promoting the cultural industry, and boosting people's confidence in Chinese culture." It remains to be seen whether China's continued use of the term will prove Kapp wrong.

Carlos Rojas offers a theme-based critical appraisal of writings about viruses, pulling from works such as Frank Snowden's *Epidemics and Society* (2020) and Nayan Shah's *Contagious Divides* (2002). The latter in particular focuses on the juncture of disease and racial differences. Rojas concentrates on works that explore the narrative intersections between viruses and ethnicity (particularly Asian). In Rojas's telling, when a plague struck Manchuria in 1910, it moved southward, primarily along the trajectory of the railroad, and this event became the catalyst for the International Plague Conference held in Mukden in April 1911, the first international scientific meeting held in China that anticipated future international health-policy coordination. Coincidentally, it was in 1910 that the United States officially opened an immigration detention center on Angel Island, off the coast of San Francisco, which, from 1910 to 1940, became the Angel Island Immigration Station and the primary port of arrival for most Chinese seeking to visit or immigrate to the United States. Angel Island came to symbolize America's treatment of Chinese arrivals in the shadow of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. In addition to having to confirm their identities, immigrants passing through Angel Island were also carefully screened for infectious diseases, reflecting the widespread perception during this period that Chinese individuals and Chinese communities were prime vessels for disease. Rojas further takes us through the SARS pandemic, noting that the outbreak happened to coincide with a major shift in China's public-health system from "stopping disease in individuals" to "stopping the spread of disease" within society. Rojas concludes by suggesting that

an underlying issue that runs through each work involves a set of imbricated assumptions about illness and ethnicity, including the widespread perception in the West and the Global North that infectious diseases are typically brought in from elsewhere, and particularly from the East and Global South, which has been perceived as bearing traits of high poverty levels, densely populated metropolises, and close contact between humans and wildlife, it is also compounded by a set of racist and Orientalist attitudes.

This is the case concerning COVID-19, which has been described as the Wuhan virus or the China virus or Kung Flu. As Rojas puts it, "That Wuhan, a major Chinese city with over ten million residents, was some sort of cultural backwater proved oddly compelling for many commentators." Rojas points out that the classic "outbreak narrative" has become a dominant way of framing the threat of infectious disease, which leads to the narrative of the North's successful containment and even eradication of diseases carried by patient zero as the super spreader from the Global South.

---

2. Sun Jiashan, "Films Likely to Feature More Original Stories," *China Daily*, November 3, 2020, <http://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202011/03/WS5fa095eba31024ad0ba82a4a.html>.



Taken together, the research essays, polemics, and book reviews in this inaugural issue of our journal hope to ignite renewed interest in the affects and effects of audiovisual storytelling in the era of instantaneous and border-crossing transmission of stories. Last but not least, together with the Michigan Publishing, we have made a conscious decision to run our journal as an OA publication so as to provide articles online at no cost to either readers or contributors. The low-cost paperless model is possible due to the generous administrative support of the School of Communication at Hong Kong Baptist University. Our mission is to make our articles accessible to the widest possible scholarly and intellectual communities as well as media practitioners, policy makers, and the general public, as we engage in rigorous academic and intellectual policy debates concerning storytelling. Our model aims to ward off profiting from unpaid labor by our academic peers who contribute research, perform peer reviews, and serve as members of editorial boards with no remuneration.