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The Quiet Resistance: Watching, Feeling, and Remembering in Contemporary Documentary

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Abstract: This essay examines how women navigate personal and social pressures through artistic practices in contemporary documentary. Drawing on Still Tomorrow (Fan Jian, 2016), Stories We Tell (Sarah Polley, 2012), and my own documentary project about a Chinese law student abroad, it argues that art is not only a medium of expression but also a quiet strategy of survival. Yu Xiuhua writes poetry as resistance to disability and an unhappy marriage; Polley reconstructs her mother's past through layered memories and staged images; while my protagonist seeks comfort not in speech or creation but in the act of watching theatre. Across these cases, expression and observation both function as ways of reclaiming emotional space, resisting silence, and shaping identity. The essay highlights how art enables women to live, pause, and make sense of themselves in the face of uncertainty.

Keywords: Documentary, Artistic Expression, Memory, Spectatorship, Women's Resistance, Identity, Emotion.

1. Introduction

This essay explores how women use artistic expression, whether by creating, narrating, or simply observing-to process emotional tension and resist social pressures. My own documentary focuses on a Chinese female law student studying abroad. Faced with academic stress, social anxiety, and uncertainty about her future, she finds comfort not through speech or creation, but through watching theatre. Each performance becomes a temporary escape from daily pressure and a quiet space for self-reflection. In the theatre's darkness, she watches others struggle, resist, and feel. And in doing so, begins to see her own emotions more clearly.

To better understand how artistic practices help women navigate personal and social difficulties, I examine two documentaries: Still Tomorrow (Fan Jian, 2016) and Stories We Tell (Sarah Polley, 2012). Both films follow women whose lives are shaped by gender roles, family histories, and societal expectations. Yu Xiuhua, the subject of Still Tomorrow, writes poetry about love and freedom while living with disability and an unhappy marriage. In Stories We Tell, Polley reconstructs her mother's past through layers of memory, using film as a way to understand her own identity.

This essay argues that in all three cases, art-whether it takes the form of poetry, film, or theatre-is not simply a form of expression, but a strategy of survival. These women use art to resist silence, reclaim emotional space, and rebuild fragmented identities. As Michael Renov states, documentary's power lies not only in conveying facts, but also in its capacity for emotional expression and inner truth [1].

2. Poetry and Resistance in *Still Tomorrow*

Still Tomorrow(dir. Fan Jian, 2016) is a documentary that records the life and creativity of contemporary Chinese poet Yu Xiuhua. Twenty years ago, her mother married her to a stranger who was a ten years older than her, this marriage brought her much pain and regret. She responds to her fate by writing poems about her broken body and her desire for true love. The film focuses on her marriage and family relationship difficulties after her literary fame and financial independence, while interspersing her poetry readings with clips of her daily life, presenting the image of a physically challenged but mentally independent woman.

As a documentary that combines observation and participation, it not only captures the trivial details of real life, but also implies the director's emotional involvement in the fate of the characters [2]. Instead of speaking of social injustice in a fiercely critical manner, the film slowly reveals Yu's attitude towards marriage, body and freedom through her own language and attitude.

Although born in rural China, suffering from cerebral palsy, and in an unhappy marriage, Yu Xiuhua has established an unusual form of self-expression through poetry, and has demonstrated her romantic soul. Still Tomorrow not only documents her rise to literary status, but also reveals how she has used her writing to fight for the right to speak out under the weight of her physical disability, gender, and family structure. Her most famous poem, 'I Crossed Half of China to Sleep with You', breaks the public stereotype of 'rural disabled women' by talking about love, desire, and freedom in straightforward, enthusiastic language [3].As Tang Ying points out, although the documentary appears to be a realistic presentation of Yu's life, the director's camera arrangement, editing strategy, and choice of poetry texts actually also deliberately portray her as fragile and pathetic, placing her in the position of a woman who is at once gazed upon and lyrically [4]. The camera lingers on her staggering back and the silent scenes of family arguments, reinforcing her image as a 'sufferer', which appears to be deliberate. As Tang Ying points out, through structural arrangement and emotional guidance, the director creates a 'poetic consumption of sadness' [4]. Although this kind of treatment can arouse the audience's sympathy, it also tends to obscure her complexity as a poet and a female subject, and also tends to make people feel the implicitly conveyed downlooking of the disabled. Even so, Yu Xiuhua still uses poetry to complete her counterattack on reality, fighting against the institution of marriage and physical limitations through words.

3. Memory, Performance, and Selfhood in *Stories We Tell*

In contrast, the heroine of my documentary is not a creator, she does not give voice to herself through words, and her resistance is not direct. But she carves out a psychological escape route for herself under pressure by watching theatre. She takes a brief break from reality in the dark theatre, and by watching the pain and struggle of others' stories, feeling their emotions and empathising with them, she establishes a slight but real connection with real life. As Shohini Chaudhuri argues, the act of viewing images itself can activate the viewer's inner 'memory-world' as an alternative trigger for emotions and experiences [5]. For the character in my film, every time she watches a play is not just a pastime, but more like a silent self-analysis. It is as if she 'sees' her unspoken self in the theatre character and releases her unspoken emotions.

In Stories We Tell (2012), director Sarah Polley turns the camera on herself, using documentary as a tool to reconstruct her family's past. She also examines how personal narratives are built, reshaped and sometimes blurred by memory. Through interviews, home videos, and reconstructed Super 8 film, Polley creates a mosaic of voices about her dead mother Diana, revealing contradictions and emotional complexities that resist any single truth. As Manohla Dargis has argued, the film is 'revelatory rather than exploitative' and its power lies in how Polley explores 'the space between life and different, sometimes conflicting, representations' [6].

Rather than trying to resolve these contradictions, Polley embraces them. The film does not offer a settled version of Diane's life, but rather opens up the process of storytelling itself to review. Her use of faked home movies and staged recreations blends seamlessly with authentic documentary archival material to draw attention to the constructed nature of memory. In this way, the film resists the objectivity of the traditional documentary, positioning itself within what Stella Bruzzi has called the 'performative documentary' - a mode in which the act of reenactment is recognised and integrated into the film form [7]. According to Bruzzi, this type of documentary 'does not hide the fact that it is a re-enactment', but rather highlights the subjective and emotional work of the filmmaker. Stories We Tell exemplifies that Polley's presence is both behind the camera and within the narrative of the film, and she shapes its meaning through the act of making it.

One of the most shocking moments in Stories We Tell is when Polley reveals that the Super 8 home videos we watch throughout the film are actually staged recreations of scenes from the episodes. Polley's siblings and close friends recall scenes that were never actually recorded. By blending fictional footage with real recollections, Polley draws attention to the ways in which personal history is not only remembered, but also visually imagined. The initial aesthetic authenticity of these faked home movies lends them emotional authority, but they also reveal the fragility of memory and the ease with which images can deceive. Polley makes no secret of this fabrication - in fact, she makes it the subject of the film itself.

Michael Renov's framework also helps to identify the emotional core of the film. In his categorisation of the function of documentary, Renov emphasises 'expressiveness' as one of the fundamental tasks of documentary is using film not only to inform, but to express emotion, ambiguity and inner truth [1]. Stories We Tell fulfils this expressive role through its fragmented structure, layers of personal testimonies, silences and emotional gaps that speak louder than facts. The film is moving not so much in answering questions about Diane's life or Polley's origins, but in inviting the viewer to witness how memory is shaped by love, regret and longing.

The concept of storytelling as emotional exploration resonated strongly with my own documentary film. Although my main character does not speak or create, she watches. Her ritual of watching a theatre performance becomes a quiet space for self-reflection and emotional projection. In the darkness of the theatre, she steps outside the demands and social pressures of academic life into a world where the pain, resistance and joy of others become mirrors of her own unspeakable emotions. Just as Polley reconstructs her mother through layers of memories, my character reconstructs her inner world through the performances of others.

Shohini Chaudhuri writes that viewing cinema can activate a "memory-world"in the viewer, allowing them to "experience through others what cannot be expressed directly" [5]. For my protagonist, each performance is not just entertainment, but a form of indirect self-discovery. The theatre becomes a safe space to feel emotions that are too difficult to voice-a space where she can temporarily escape and, paradoxically, become more in touch with herself. This process reflects what Corrigan calls "the essayistic gesture"- a cinematic space for reflection, not resolution [8].

Both Polley's documentary and my character's viewing experience challenged the notion that 'talking is the only way to express or process emotion.' Sometimes watching becomes an act of emotional authorship in its own right.

The tension between personal experience and social expectations is at the centre of Still Tomorrow, Stories We Tell and my own documentary. In each of these documentaries, the female subject is placed under a variety of pressures. There is the patriarchy of the countryside, the mythology of the family, and the academic and cultural pressures of a foreign country. Their response to these pressures is not confrontational in the traditional sense, but rather self-defining through art, memory and more importantly through the act of watching and being watched.

In Still Tomorrow, Yu's poetry is her protest. Born with cerebral palsy and trapped in an arranged marriage, she writes about love, sex and longing in raw and direct language. Her poetry breaks through stereotypes and presents an image of a woman who refuses to be degraded by her environment. As Huerta and Xu observe, Yu's most famous poem,' I've Travelled Halfway Across China to Sleep with You,' subverts expectations by openly expressing the desires of the rural female subject, which are often silenced in public discourse [3]. However, as Tang critically points out, the documentary's depiction of Yu Xiuhua is not without its complications. Through selective editing, framing and emotional pacing, the film has the potential to reduce Yu to a symbol of poetic suffering, reinforcing rather than dismantling the image of the 'vulnerable female subject' [4]. Thus, while her poetry affirms her subjectivity, the film's aesthetic decisions also reflect the limitations of how documentary can mediate between the individual and the cultural structures that shape her.

In contrast, Stories We Tell is not about external oppression, but about the internal tensions of fragmented family memory. Sarah Polley's investigation into her mother's secret past is not just about recovering facts; it is about understanding how

identity is constructed through the stories others tell about us. The film's use of staged Super 8 footage-initially mistaken by viewers for authentic home videos-complicates the documentary's relationship with truth. As Bruzzi argues, performative documentaries acknowledge their own constructedness and use this self-awareness to explore emotional and subjective realities [7]. In doing so, Stories We Tell does not aim to resolve the contradictions in Diane's life, but instead to reveal how each person's version of her reflects a different emotional truth. Renov supports this in his theory of expressive documentary, noting that one of the medium's core functions is to communicate emotion, not simply record information [1]. Polley's emotional vulnerability, woven into the film's structure, transforms her role from passive listener to an active author of her own "puzzle-piece" identity.

4. Watching as Quiet Resistance: My Documentary Practice

In both films, artistic expression becomes the means through which the protagonist claims her emotional space in the world. Yu Xiuhua does so through writing, Polley by constructing a layered narrative about memory and absence. In my own documentary, the protagonist-a Chinese law student living abroad-does not express her feelings in words or art. Instead, she watches. Theatre becomes her escape, not only from academic stress and social isolation, but also from the silence that often surrounds mental strain. In the darkness of the theatre, she connects with fictional characters who feel more real than the people around her. She sees fragments of herself in the struggles and resistance of others on stage, just as Polley reimagines her mother through the eyes of others.

5. Conclusion

While Yu writes herself into public figure and Polley edits herself into emotional clarity, my protagonist explores her identity more quietly by observing, absorbing, and slowly understanding her own emotional structure through others' stories. In all three cases, the relationship between self and society is filtered through a medium of poetry, film, and theatre. And through these mediums, each woman is resisting the unfairness of her fate through continued feelings, memories, and presence.

In both Still Tomorrow and Stories We Tell, artistic expression becomes a way for women to respond to emotional and social pressure. Whether through poetry or personal storytelling, both protagonists reclaim agency by shaping their own narratives. These films offer more than insight into personal lives-they reveal how art can carry emotional weight, create distance from pain, and allow space for reflection. Together, they provide the conceptual and aesthetic grounding for my own documentary practice.

My film does not rely on speech or direct confession. Instead, it follows a quieter path: one where emotion is expressed through observation, and meaning is formed in the act of watching. This method may seem passive on the surface, but it allows for a subtle and introspective engagement with the world. By using theatre as a mirror, my protagonist explores her own identity without needing to explain it aloud.

Art in these documentaries is not simply a tool, it is a kind of emotional time, where women live, pause, and make sense of themselves. In my work, I follow this tradition by letting silence, empathy, and viewing become the language of emotional survival and identity-making.

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