

From Instant Gratification to Thick Description: Research on Breakthrough Strategies of Long-Sentence Narration in Micro-Series

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Abstract: Driven by national policies and the upgrading of digital industries, micro-series are undergoing a paradigmatic shift from sensory stimulation to in-depth narration. Targeting the superficial aesthetic taste and skewed value orientation caused by syntactic impoverishment in micro-series, long-sentence narration stands as the core approach to upgrade audio-visual structural construction. Relevant research demonstrates that the introduction of modifying and reflective audio-visual elements effectively facilitates micro-series to evolve from episodic emotional arousal to lasting emotional sedimentation. In practical creation, long-sentence narration reconstructs the semantic space of micro-series through the development of character arcs, in-depth thick description of social issues, and embedded emotional blankness. Confronted with dual risks including rigid production cost constraints and the audience's ingrained reliance on instant pleasure, establishing a dual-track narrative framework featuring suspense hooks at the macro level and detailed thick description at the micro level serves as an effective solution to ease industrial contradictions and strike a dynamic balance between commercial logic and artistic pursuit.

Keywords: Micro-series; Long-sentence narration; Thick description; Syntactic impoverishment; Breakthrough strategy

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1. Introduction

In November 2025, China Net Audio-Visual Association released the *White Paper on China's Micro-Series Industry Development (2025)* at the 3rd Hangzhou Micro-Series Conference. Statistical data indicated that the average daily viewing duration of micro-series hit 120.5 minutes per capita in the first eight months of 2025, surpassing the 110-minute average viewing length of long-form videos by the end of 2024. Zhou Jie, Deputy Secretary-General of the Association, remarked that micro-series have transformed from fragmented casual entertainment “snacks” into a mainstream daily leisure option for the general public^[1].

The instant gratification delivered by micro-series originates from dopamine-triggered episodic emotional stimulation. Adopting ultra-concise narrative syntax, such works compress plots and intensify

conflicts to quickly fulfill the audience's compensatory psychological demands such as class advancement and emotional revenge, enabling instant mood satisfaction with minimal time cost, which fuels the rapid expansion of the whole industry. Nevertheless, explosive industrial growth is accompanied by prominent quality defects. According to the *White Paper on China's Micro-Series Industry Development (2024)*, 72.4 percent of negative user feedback centers on superficial content and distorted values ^[2]. During the annual Two Sessions, Committee Member Wang Zhongyi also pointed out that the insufficient proportion of high-quality original productions has become a bottleneck restricting industrial quality improvement ^[3].

The over-reliance on instant pleasure and lack of value accumulation stem from flawed narrative construction. Drawing on Paul Virilio's acceleration theory from *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, certain scholars argue that micro-series are plagued by accelerated violence, which diminishes audience subjectivity and undermines the capacity for constructing layered, profound meanings ^[4]. This paper defines such drawbacks as syntactic impoverishment: fragmented narration, excessive information input, and inadequate emotional reservation reduce micro-series to mere tools for sensory excitement and block in-depth meaning conveyance. Against such a context, this paper puts forward the concept of long-sentence narration and explores how micro-series can realize transformation from shallow instant pleasure to humanistic thick description via upgraded narrative paradigms amid policy-oriented high-quality development and accomplish value accumulation under an accelerated media environment.

2. Linguistic metaphor and audio-visual transformation of long-sentence narration

2.1. From subject-verb-object to attributive-adverbial-complement: Expansion of narrative construction

Short sentences feature straightforward expression in linguistics, while long sentences carry sophisticated logic via additional modifying components. Conventional micro-series predominantly adopt the simplistic subject-verb-object narrative mode, where stereotyped plots of protagonist counterattack and vengeful conflicts simplify real-life complexities and reduce characters into plot-driven tools catering to instant gratification.

Proposed in this research, long-sentence narration retains the short single-episode runtime of micro-series while introducing an audio-visual narrative logic equivalent to attributive, adverbial, and complement modifiers: attributes refine personal traits to avoid stereotyped characterization; adverbials elaborate social contexts to prevent unrealistic plot setting; complements extend lingering aftertaste to break fast-food-style narration. Rather than a mere linguistic analogy, this mode structurally optimizes the audio-visual grammar of micro-series and endows each narrative segment with multi-dimensional functions including plot advancement, character building, contextual implication and value shaping.

In line with Christian Metz's film semiotics, narrative syntagmas constitute the fundamental unit of image expression ^[5]. The syntactic dilemma of micro-series arises from highly stereotyped narrative syntagmas, homogenized plot twists and reversals, as well as insufficient room for narrative retardation and ideological reflection. Essentially, long-sentence narration expands the structure of narrative syntagmas by adding multiple modifying layers on the basis of original plot functions and boosting the information density and emotional depth of each narrative unit. It does not stretch micro-series into full-length videos but elevates connotative quality through refined audio-visual rhetoric within limited runtime.

2.2. Borrowing thick description: From episodic emotional spark to settled emotion

The value pursuit of long-sentence narration aligns with Clifford Geertz's thick description theory proposed in *The Interpretation of Cultures* ^[6]. Geertz differentiates thin description and thick description: thin description merely records surface behaviors objectively, whereas thick description excavates underlying social connotations and hidden logic behind actions. Early micro-series fall into typical thin description, where character behaviors only serve plot progression without profound inner implications; by contrast, the thick description advocated by long-sentence narration explores intricate inner worlds of characters and unfolds complicated textures of social realities.

It should be noted that Geertz's thick description originates from ethnographic writing and relies on abundant text space to accumulate ideological depth, yet micro-series are confined by limited screening time and have to complete thick description within a narrow temporal and spatial scope. Therefore, its thick description pursues higher information density instead of redundant content stacking, allowing single shots and trivial details to deliver multiple interpretative meanings. Intangible cultural heritage-themed micro-series have set exemplary precedents: centered on traditional craftsmanship, daily living scenarios, and inheritor images, relevant productions reconstruct regional cultural texture via digital communication, enabling audiences to grasp not only surface plots but also historical roots and cultural connotations behind behaviors.

2.3. Theoretical dialogue: Literary narration, traditional long-form drama and punctum of short-video media

The construction of long-sentence narration absorbs theoretical nutrients from three sources. First, the character-centered tradition of literary narration. Different from the pleasure-driven logic prevailing in micro-series, literary narration anchors whole storytelling around individual characters. Proven by successful adaptive cases, fast-paced plots still need to enrich character settings and ensure all character behaviors derive from internal motivation instead of compulsory plot arrangements. Second, social issue tradition inherited from long-form dramas. Premium full-length works usually function as social forums and spark public discussions via presentations on social stratification, history, and ethics. Long-sentence narration requires micro-series to upgrade social topics from marginal background into core story drivers and embed reflective thinking inside existing narrative grammar. Third, punctum aesthetics unique to short-video ecology. Roland Barthes put forward the concept of punctum in *Camera Lucida*, referring to subtle details striking audiences and arousing empathy ^[7]. Born within the short-video ecosystem, micro-series inherently possess instant eye-catching advantages. Long-sentence narration never abandons such appealing effects but upgrades punctum from superficial sensory stimulation to profound meaning delivery via facial expressions, daily objects, and other detailed elements that endow plots with emotional weight and ideological tension.

The integration of the above three dimensions forms the theoretical framework of long-sentence narration: rooted in humanistic depth of literary characterization, framed by realistic social vision of long dramas and expressed via punctum aesthetics of short videos, the narrative system combines literary profundity, realistic perspective and viral communication advantages of short-form content.

3. Breakthrough approaches: Realizing thick description via long-sentence narration

3.1. Extension of character arcs: From functional icons to living individuals

Characters in traditional micro-series exist merely as functional accessories to push plots forward and shift

personal traits arbitrarily to satisfy pleasure demands, which violates the basic narrative ethics of respecting complicated individual life.

The phenomenal 2025 micro-series *Ordinary Folk* sets a new benchmark for characterization. Consisting of 105 episodes with a total runtime of 276 minutes, it exceeded 2 billion views on the Hongguo Platform, registered a 77-minute average single-user viewing length, and received update requests from 360,000 viewers. Director Wang Shu stated during casting that he intended to select performers combining the youthful boldness of Li Xiaoyao and prudent wisdom of Mei Changsu ^[8]. In its well-constructed ensemble cast, every supporting role owns distinctive developmental trajectories: the heroic sacrifice of senior constables, the transformation of unruly garrison soldiers into fearless warriors, and Xinian's spiritual recovery from self-abasement to self-respect. These figures break subsidiary roles and evolve into independently meaningful living beings ^[9].

The success of *Ordinary Folk* reveals a core rule: extended character arcs do not necessarily sacrifice narrative rhythm. The key lies in implanting personality development into plot evolution rather than arranging independent character segments separately. Once every plot turning point coincides with the personal choices of protagonists and side characters, functional icons successfully transform into vivid living subjects, which constitutes the core principle of long-sentence narration in character construction.

3.2. In-depth depiction of social issues: Transforming background settings into core narrative drivers

Scholars summarizing Tencent Video's micro-series production experience emphasize the vital guiding role of down-to-earth realistic themes ^[10]. This paper further argues that social issues are not passive content filled into narrative frameworks but structural engines propelling storyline development.

The hit micro-series *Escape from the British Museum* adopts another typical thick-description tactic. Sharp visual contrast is shaped between the rigid architectural appearance of the British Museum and the muddy figurine Jade Pot, while a shaky handheld camera builds invisible historical trauma space beyond vertical screen boundaries. Its phenomenal emotional outburst stemming from anthropomorphized cultural relics is built upon layered historical foreshadowing of lost antiquities. This case proves that thorough social depiction does not require grand narrative architecture; precise visual symbols and spatial comparisons can trigger the audience's historical perception and emotional resonance within an extremely short time.

3.3. Emotional blankness and pragmatic tension: Inserting transitional details amid dense plot hooks

To retain continuous audience attention, conventional micro-series fill every second with intensive lines and frequent conflicts. From a pragmatic linguistics perspective, genuine narrative tension originates from interactive relations among locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary levels instead of one-way information input.

This research proposes inserting transitional trivial details including eye contact, silent pauses, and non-essential side plots between concentrated suspense hooks. Discarded as redundant in traditional productions, such fragments serve as carriers for emotional precipitation.

The 2025 intangible cultural heritage micro-series *Revival of Ink Charm* applies such logic to suspense narration. Centered on the unsolved restoration mystery of *A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains* dating

back to the Kangxi reign, it depicts the complicated bond between counterfeit craftsman Wu Molin and upright civil official Liu Dingzhi, who shift from mutual exploitation to joint heritage protection. Instead of rushing suspense development while introducing ancient scroll restoration, creators insert lingering close-ups of craft details at critical moments: the subtle wrist tremble of Wu Molin while replenishing ink pigments and glistening tears in Liu Dingzhi's eyes staring at antique paintings. Such blank-oriented processing converts intangible heritage craftsmanship from cold knowledge into tangible life experience. As relevant commentary put it, *Revival of Ink Charm* fulfills the cultural mission of micro-series: "small in scale yet substantial in content, short in duration yet profound in connotation" ^[11].

4. Ecological restructuring: Risk boundaries and solutions of long-sentence narration

4.1. Structural contradictions: Rigid production costs vs. audience's ingrained addiction to instant pleasure

Existing studies note the differentiated vertical and horizontal screen development and diversified profit competition of micro-series, laying industrial context for analyzing practical obstacles of long-sentence narration implementation ^[12]. Long-sentence narration requires prolonged script polishing cycles, upgraded costume, makeup, and props standards as well as sophisticated audio-visual scheduling, leading to rigid cost increases contradictory to the industry's pursuit of ultra-fast capital return. Industrial surveys indicate the average production cycle of equal-volume micro-series shrank drastically from six months in 2020 to merely 15 days in 2023. Under such a tight schedule, standardized assembly-line production abandons time-consuming thick-description creation as a dispensable cost.

Meanwhile, long-term exposure to accelerated aesthetics cultivates fixed instant-gratification consumption habits among viewers. Any decelerated narrative pace introduced by long-sentence narration for deeper emotional accumulation tends to cause audience discomfort and a sharp decline in completion rate under fragmented viewing scenarios. Relevant researchers warn that high-quality transformation should avoid blind artisticization and develop content systems matching vertical-screen viewing characteristics ^[13–14].

4.2. Breakthrough framework: Dual-track narrative model of macro suspense hooks and micro detailed depiction

The dual-track narrative model effectively relieves the above conflicts: macro layout retains frequent plot twists and strong suspense design consistent with micro-series media traits to secure fundamental audience retention; microscopic texture embeds consistent thick-description details so that every suspense trigger carries implied meanings beyond superficial conflicts.

The core operation principle is summarized as "adopting short-sentence rhythm to wrap long-sentence connotations". Within a two-minute single episode, the first 90 seconds advance plots via compact conflicts, while the remaining 30 seconds realize emotional sublimation through long takes, silent frames, or idle side descriptions. Rather than rigid time allocation rules, such a structural mindset requires every narrative unit to balance plot-driven functional segments and meaning-depositing modifying segments, with adjustable proportion based on specific genres and themes.

4.3. Driving forces: Policy dividend and long-term cultivation of audience emotional identity

Paradigmatic transformation of any art form results from combined effects of administrative governance and market rules. Creators shift from instant-pleasure short-form scripts to refined long-sentence works out of both artistic pursuit and rational consideration of policy bonuses and sustainable audience emotional accumulation.

From a national policy perspective, long-sentence narration serves as a strategic option for creators to comply with industrial regulations and obtain institutional development qualifications. Relevant research finds the industrial development logic shifts from economy-culture dual drivers to governance-culture orientation under the promotion of the Micro-Series Plus Action Plan ^[15]. Superficial instant-pleasure short scripts featuring excessive sensory stimulation and problematic values easily violate supervision regulations and get phased out rapidly. In contrast, reflective long-sentence works with detailed depiction and in-depth social topics perfectly align with state-level official initiatives such as “Travel with Micro-Series” issued by the National Radio and Television Administration.

From long-term audience operation, long-sentence narration helps overcome viewer aesthetic fatigue and build exclusive brand competitiveness. Despite persistent instant gratification inertia, the 72.4% negative feedback rate proves the marginal utility of stimulus-focused narration has hit a bottleneck. Faced with massive homogeneous slapstick plots, audiences gradually grow cognitively exhausted, making long-sentence narration a worthwhile long-run investment in audience emotional identity. Previous research confirms promising outcomes of slow-aesthetics creation: when local customs and landscapes are poetically displayed via attributive-adverbial-complement detailed descriptions, audiences obtain inner comfort and group identification instead of transient dopamine excitement ^[16].

5. Conclusion

Micro-series’ evolution from episodic emotional arousal to lasting emotional sedimentation involves far more than thematic replacement but thorough narrative restructuring, which also promotes platform operational logic shifting from blind traffic accumulation to systematic ecological optimization.

As a mature audio-visual creation methodology, long-sentence narration retains the inherent short-duration feature of micro-series via structural expansion while endowing productions with realistic depth, traditional cultural connotation, and positive mainstream value. It supplies systematic solutions against homogenized creation, bridges macro policy guidance and grassroots practical writing, and helps value expression land concretely through refined audio-visual rhetoric instead of empty slogans.

Amid the media acceleration era, exploring creation value constitutes the core proposition left by long-sentence narration for industry practitioners. Only by constructing profound spiritual connotation with long-sentence narration and conveying positive values through attractive plot highlights can micro-series achieve sustainable high-quality development amid media convergence trends.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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