

New Documentary Film Seeks to Be “More Real”

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Abstract: After the birth of documentary film, the discussion of “fiction” and “non-fiction” has not stopped. Influenced by the ideological trend of postmodernism, “new documentary film” overturns the concept of traditional documentary film and believes that it is feasible and meaningful for documentary to take “fiction” as a means. Adhering to the “new” exploration of this documentary, the author discusses the historical origin of new documentary films, the authenticity of new documentary films at home and abroad and the creative techniques of new documentary films, in order to provide innovative support for the true publication of new documentary films.

Keywords: New documentary film; Real; Fictional

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1. Introduction

Over the centuries of light and shadow, there has analysis between documentary and feature films. According to the academic interpretation, documentary is a kind of film without fiction. In 1926, John Gleason mentioned in an article published in the United States: “Robert Flaherty’s second film, *Moana*, released by Paramount In Hollywood, is a visual depiction of the daily life of a Polynesian youth, which has documentary value.” In this article, John Gleason made a groundbreaking reference to documentary for the first time. Later, John Gleason further explained the reference scope of the word: It refers to those film that make creative use of current news material, and the “use of natural material” is the “crucial distinguishing criterion.” This also just confirms that the first documentary exists at the level of news record. News Record films select typical facts from real life or historical events to reflect, in order to truly reflect life. (Concise Dictionary of News and Television, Radio and Television Press) Under the guidance of this concept, China’s previous documentary films focused on shooting the present reality, but neglected to show the past history, especially the ancient history without moving image data. Can documentaries only reflect reality but not history? Is the performance of history the patent of feature film? The author does not think that it is right to distinguish “reality” and “fiction” by duality legislation as a direct means to determine a film type. In today’s new media era, genres are more inclusive, and more films and TV are constantly intertwined and integrated, resulting in a more prosperous film and television era.

2. The historical origin of new record films

2.1. Flaherty and “acting”

In 1921, the *Nanook of the North* created by Flaherty was born. It is known as the first documentary in a real sense, and Flaherty is also known as the “father of world record films.” In *Nanook of the North*, Flaherty uses the means of “play” to reflect the spirit of the Eskimo’s struggle for survival. For example,

the walrus hunt in the first scene is the most classic. Flaherty had Nanook fight the walrus with a harpoon, but in fact the Eskimos no longer hunted the walrus with a harpoon, but with a rifle. In order to capture more primitive scenes, Nanuk hunted walruses in the way of his grandparents ^[1]. Flaherty repeated this “play” in later films, allowing eskimos to live in the same way as their ancestors. If the new documentary film uses the fictional means in the creation, the purpose is to better reveal the truth. Then, in Flaherty’s period, the fictional means such as “play” and “scene reappearance” have begun to take on the characteristics of new documentary films.

2.2. Grierson and “refactoring”

In 1920’s, Grierson, another pioneer in the world’s documentary history, organized a group of young British filmmakers to make many documentary films about real life and positive social ideals, and publish a lot of theoretical articles, which form a wide range of society effect. They came to be known as the British Documentary School, and these activities became known as the British Documentary Film Movement. In this movement, Grierson established the position of commentary in documentary film creation, and he paid great attention to the propaganda and educational role of commentary in documentary film. In the author’s opinion, commentary is to a large extent a kind of thinking guidance, compared with silent films, which directly shows the audience and lacks the audience’s independent imagination and judgment on the picture. In addition, Grierson also actively advocates the theory of “creative processing” of life, the so-called creative processing is a dramatic choice and structural arrangement of factual materials, and a reconstruction based on real materials. This reconstructed narrative method also better reflects Grierson’s fictional expression method in the documentary.

2.3. Real film and “interview”

In the 1950s, French anthropologist Jean-Pierre inserted a series of interviews and discussions with the characters in his representative work “Chronicle of a Summer”, which he and his companion Edgar Morin shot, in order to give the audience, the impression that the photographer was by no means an onlooker. For example, Jean-Pierre took the form of interviews and actively asked passers-by, “Are you happy?” Such open-ended questions lead to random responses from different photographers, some stopping and thinking, some talking, and some ignoring. This series of material was edited together and a new genre, “cinema verité”, was born. The “cinema verité” created by Jean-Pierre is clearly different from the “direct cinema” produced in the United States at the same time and mainly represented by Drew and Richard. “Direct cinema” emphasizes the weakening of the existence of the filmmaker and camera, and calmly and restrains the observation of the subject; However, “cinema verité” believes that both the director and the filmmaker should be a catalyst, and the act of taking the initiative to interview can stimulate the release of the truer self of the subject. The passive behavior of hiding behind the camera is a very negative to wait for the development of events ^[2]. The theme of a “cinema verité” film is often predetermined, and this mode of shooting is now widely used. The interview form of “cinema verité” also made theoretical and practical preparation for the later new documentary film.

3. The realistic view of new documentary films

3.1. Research on foreign new documentary films

From the above, we can see that the “fictional” means used by general documentaries are currently considered to include: “Performance,” “reconstruction,” “creative processing,” “scene representation,” “interview questions” and other techniques. In addition, with the improvement of computer digital imaging technology, the further influence of electronic technology on film and television, the “virtual” techniques and effects brought by it have a revolutionary change from the previous methods. In 1993, American scholar

Linda Williams proposed the term “new documentary film”, which instantly aroused a heated discussion about documentary’s “view of reality.” In her article “Mirrors without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary,” Linda Williams stated: “The oversimplified dichotomy between fact and fiction is the fundamental difficulty we have in thinking about the real problem of recording films. The choice is not between two completely separate systems of truth and fiction, but in the fictional strategy of approaching relative truth ^[3]. Documentaries can and should adopt all fictional means and strategies to achieve reality. What we see in *The Thin Blue Line* and *The Shoah*, for example, is an interest in constructing truths that are designed to exclude horrible fictionalisms, and even then, these truths are only relative and contingent. “New Documentary film” admits that “absolute truth” is impossible to reach, and we can clearly confirm this concept in the documentary films of different periods and genres we have studied before. To a greater or lesser extent, “fiction” techniques exist, but “New documentary film” does not seek to be “most real,” but to be “more real!” For example: Michael Moore’s “*Fahrenheit 9 /11*” and “*The Thin Blue Line*” is different. “*Fahrenheit 9/11*” choose the real stuff instead of historical play. Michael Moore re-selected, edited, arranged, and adjusted the speed of real news materials, combined with his voice acting and commentary, to give new tendentious meaning to the original materials, deconstruct the behavior of President Bush, and guide the audience to judge and understand the whole event. In the new documentary film “*Roger & ME*”, director Mike Moore tells the story of thousands of unemployed auto workers in Flint, Michigan, who lost their jobs due to general motors’ management strategy in the 1980s. Michael Moore, a resident of the city, filmed the economic downturn and the plight of workers, and recorded his face-to-face conversation with Roger Smith, the head of General Motors, in a fascinating documentary. The director promoted the narrative development of the whole film through a large number of interviews, commentary and aside, and then used the montage technique to show the materials in a cross and parallel way. This documentary was full of subjectivity and creativity from the early stage to the late stage, and the techniques of “new fiction” and “story-based” were fully played in the documentary. In short, “fiction” and “reality” in the new documentary are not antithetical, but perfectly intertwined. The authors of these new documentary films, through some “fictional” techniques, wipe a dusty mirror clean with their logical order, empirical concepts, etc., allowing you to see the whole picture of events, thereby causing the audience to think for themselves. It is like telling the background of the whole event, so that the audience directly go to a “more real” latitude.

3.2. Research on new documentary films in China

When it comes to the true view of China’s new documentary films, the famous domestic scholar Shan Wanli summarizes the characteristics of new documentary films into four points in his article *Meet the New Documentary Film*: First, actively advocate fictional documentary films; Second, deny the traditional definition of documentary film; Third, documentary films focus on historical issues; Fourth, documentary films have a large amount of audience ^[4]. Based on these four characteristics, Mr. Shan Wanli also analyzes the Chinese documentary series “*Chinese Civilization*” in his article. He noted that although “*Chinese Civilization*” was shown on CCTV in the documentary category, the author of the film stated at the beginning that it was not strictly a documentary. As it uses a lot of drama, storytelling and computer digital technology to reproduce scenes. “*Chinese civilization*” must be a documentary, because its background is based on archaeological facts and truly and objectively describes the history of China, but the special bridge section must require digital animation to describe the whole thing clearly. In other words, digital technology is only a means to assist the entire documentary. However, in order to distinguish it from the traditional documentary, it is entitled “New documentary film.” In fact, at present, China’s new documentary films have been in a period of development. It is better to call them new documentary TV films than Chinese new documentary films, because new documentary films are more displayed in TV documentaries

published by CCTV in China, such as *The Old Summer Palace*, *The Forbidden City*, *The Rise of Great Powers*, etc. They are all based on the real stories of Chinese civilization or historical relics, with extensive commentary, role-playing and theatrical performances, and computer digital imaging technology to recreate scenes of things that have been damaged or become history and cannot be photographed directly. Such a new documentary (television) film, through a series of storytelling, is more attractive to the audience. Is it imaginary? Obviously, it is not. It has objective historical material accumulation, real historical background, real characters and real stories, but the creator uses a series of “new fiction” means to package it. I don’t think it is untrue, but it makes people feel more real. However, this kind of creation must start from the established factual background. If the creation is made up and groundless for the purpose of achievement, it is a feature film wrapped in the appearance of a documentary. In a word, when creating new documentary films, we must pay attention to the boundaries and grasp the proper limits, so that “fiction” means become a tool to make a little contribution to the film.

4. Creative techniques of new record films

4.1. Subjective creation

The theory of “creative processing” proposed by Grierson which mentioned above refers to the dramatic selection and structural arrangement of factual materials, and a reconstruction based on real materials. It’s a far cry from the “direct cinema” that Drew pioneered in 1960. “Direct cinema” requires that there is no connection between the cameraman and the camera and the subject, recording like a “peeping” perspective. It does not rely on the commentary, not directly explain the shooting object, it is more rely on the audience’s own experience for imagination and analysis. The subjective creation is reflected in the following aspects: First, the author’s subjective commentary is used to explain and demonstrate the real problems in the film, and the content of the commentary is usually with strong concepts and ideas of the director. The second is to actively ask questions in the form of interviews. Generally, these questions are prepared in advance. Although the answers are various, the scope of questions is limited. In the third stage, a series of montage techniques are used to combine the materials creatively. The subjectivity of the editing techniques directly affects the audience’s judgment of the event.

4.2. Story-style narration

We can easily find that the new documentary film has a strong sense of appreciation, which comes from the story of the new documentary film means. In fact, a film with a story is not necessarily a feature film, but a documentary uses some of the creative methods in a feature film to make the documentary more wonderful in the process of narrative. Its material, characters, story and background are all real. In recent years, most of the documentaries in China have adopted the method of story narration. This method includes not only the above-mentioned captions, scene reproduction, details shooting, montage, but also more reflected in the content, such as: the first story topic. Whether the whole film is interesting, whether it has a story, start with the topic. Most of the topics of new documentary films have an attitude of exploring history, and the topics themselves are controversial and exploratory. For example, the topics of “The Evidence,” “JFK” and “Paris Is Burning” are all focused on topics of public interest ^[5]

The second is dramatic suspense. Documentary can never only record, simple material splicing is not a documentary art, and suspense is a good “tool” to cause the audience to reflect. The *Thin Blue Line*, a 1987 film directed by Errol Morris, is regarded as the first new documentary film in the history of documentary films. It tells the story of a police officer who is killed by a 28-year-old homeless man who turns out to be innocent. The director sets suspense for the whole film through flashbacks and interludes. It is followed by a series of details that provoke reflection, such as the car with no lights on, the police car chasing, and Morris scratching his head as he is questioned. With suspense, the audience watched deeply

and thought logically. At the end of the film, Harris made a dramatic confession in the phone call with Morris to get the truth of the incident, thus solving the suspense. The third is conflict contradiction. Contradiction and conflict are the “accelerant” of the film story, which can make the work story reach a climax. In Stone’s film “JFK,” the causes and consequences of Kennedy’s assassination are full of contradictions and conflicts. Stone, through the prosecutor Jim Garrison’s point of view, deduced that the assassination of Kennedy was a coup orchestrated by the government’s top officials in conjunction with American capital, the underworld, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

4.3. Missionary guidance

Reviewing the characteristics of “new documentary films”, it is not difficult to find that most of them want to lead us to explore a problem or a history. In this way of exploring the truth, through many means, the audience will imagine and judge the direction or the result of the same, for example, the influence of commentary, interviews, historical images, etc. In fact, in a way, this is what the director wants to see. Such as Michael Moore’s self-made American documentary “Bowling for Columbine.” The film is set against the backdrop of the Columbine High School shooting on April 20, 1999, and invites students who were injured in the columbine shooting to go to a department store and ask them to stop selling bullets.

We can clearly see that the film expresses strong dissatisfaction with the improper control of guns in the United States, and deep hatred of violence in the United States. Director Michael Moore guides the audience to know more real causes of the shooting, hoping that more and more people will understand the consequences of improper control of firearms in the United States. This is an example of missionary guidance. Through the separation of sound and painting, music foiling, parallel montage and other techniques, the director satirizes the actions of the National Firearms Association and the American news media in an absurd and humorous way, and also lets the audience begin to reflect on the consequences of gun abuse.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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