

Fictionality and Narrativity in Documentary Film

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Abstract: Bazin's realist aesthetic concept establishes the ontology of cinema on three pillars: first, the potential of the world to be completely reproduced in film; second, the authentic presentation of time and space dimensions; third, the essential identity between the screen image and its real-world counterpart. It is for this reason that documentary films have acquired their unique "documentary character". However, in the subsequent evolution process, documentaries have gradually shifted towards the domain of feature films. Starting from Robert Flaherty's creative practice, elements of reenactment and reconstruction have increasingly permeated this genre. Documentaries have paid more and more attention to narrative arrangement and plot construction, and are no longer limited to direct recording and faithful reflection of the real world.

Key words: documentary film; fiction; narrative

1. Fictionality of Documentary Films

French writer André Malraux once pointed out: "A film can tell a story, and that is where its power lies. For example, although *Four Springs* truthfully records life, storytelling techniques are also applied in this documentary."

From John Grierson's definition of documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality", to the belief held by "Direct Cinema" representatives Robert Drew and Richard Leacock that "the camera should always remain a bystander, neither intervening in the course of events nor disturbing it", these two almost contradictory aesthetic programs have kept issues such as the degree to which the image truth in documentary creation reproduces objective reality, and the legitimate boundary of the creator's subjective intervention when structuring materials, in continuous controversy. For documentary filmmakers, the practice of restoring objective reality in the process of shooting and weaving works inherently contains the tension space between documentary and fiction - a pair of seemingly contradictory orientations.[1]

[Image: Grierson: *Drifters*]

[Image: *Chronicle of a Summer*, cinéma vérité]

Subsequently, the rise of narratology provided a theoretical foundation for film narration. François Jost defines narration through a pragmatic methodology, arguing that "narration must be based on the telling of a story. For a long time, truth and fiction have not only been two different artistic creation concepts, but also labels for distinguishing documentaries and feature films. With the rise of postmodernist thought, the original boundary between truth and fiction in documentaries and feature films has been broken, and the creative technique of integrating reality and fiction has gradually become a new trend in film creation, giving birth to mockumentaries and docudramas. However, the forms of integration of reality and fiction in film and television creation are far more than these. The film *The Reunions* released in early 2021 achieved the integration of reality and fiction in the film with a new grammar, bringing a new viewing experience to the audience. Below I will take this film as an example to discuss the relationship between "documentation and fiction" in documentaries in detail.

The Reunions can be regarded as a complete film, or it can be disassembled into two short films that reflect each other.

The first half of the work, *The Good Luck*, uses a documentary-style approach to lay out the real experience of a rural family in Northeast China; the second half turns the camera to the shooting process of *The Good Luck* itself, revealing its behind-the-scenes texture and context. The first half of the film originates from the short film *The Good Luck* completed by director Dong Chengpeng (Dapeng) in 2018. In this segment, the creator strictly follows the documentary shooting paradigm: almost all the performers are non-professionals, the dialogue is mainly in dialect, and the camera scheduling remains extremely restrained and detached. At the same time, with the help of cinéma vérité-style character interview fragments, the work gradually outlines the temperament outline and life fragments of the third uncle - a character who has been isolated from the current world.

However, *The Good Luck* is also very different from a documentary in the pure sense. Among the many non-professional performers, a role played by a professional actor is embedded - Lili (played by Liu Lu), the daughter of the third uncle. Lili does exist in reality, but because she has not returned to her hometown for nearly ten years, the director chose a suitable actor to appear on her behalf. The "Lili" in the short film is not the real person after all; her words and deeds are independently developed by the actor based on limited life materials and according to specific situations and self-experience, thus carrying an indelible fictional quality.

[Image: The actor playing "Lili" in the film, with fictional elements]

At the same time, *The Reunions* forms a noteworthy comparative reference with *24 City* directed by Jia Zhangke, which was released in 2009. The latter uses a mockumentary technique to depict the ups and downs of individual fates in factories during the transition of the state-owned economy from a planned economy to a market economy, and its "half-truth, half-false" image form once attracted widespread attention in domestic academic circles.

In *The Reunions*' exploration of the issue of reality and fiction, the embedding of the The Good Wish part transforms the entire film from a relatively objective documentary work into an image text bearing the director's strong personal emotional imprint - in a sense, this is already close to a private family image about the director himself. Dapeng thus moves from behind the camera to the front of the lens, weaving his own growth context, family texture, individual experience and even implicit emotional folds into the plot context and visual composition of the film. In the late 1980s, the rise of the new documentary film already indicated a turn, that is, "dramatic reenactment, role-playing and other forms of fictional narrative once again occupied a prominent position". The entanglement between documentary and fiction in film creation is not a new topic, and *The Reunions*, with a posture different from existing paradigms, further dismantles and blurs the inherent boundary between reality and fiction within the film.

2 Legitimacy of Fiction in Documentary Creation

Following Foucault, Edward Soja further proposed the concept of "Third Space". These theories have enriched the research on spatial narrative and provided theoretical support for spatial narrative analysis in film and television works. As a narrative art, film has particularly prominent spatial narrative characteristics, and shares some narrative techniques and methods with narrative forms such as novels. The legitimacy of the existence of fiction in documentary creation is precisely caused by the gap between image truth and objective reality. That is to say, in the field of documentary creation, the application of fictional techniques is always strictly framed by the principle of authenticity, and its operational boundary is based on the fundamental premise of not distorting the natural evolution trajectory of events and not tampering with the real fate trend of characters. The "fiction" discussed here specifically refers to the dramatic tension constructed in the narrative structure, the scene reproduction at the level of expression techniques, the appropriate presetting of the shooting object's activity situation, and the longitudinal movement of the character's usual state on the time axis, etc., which are operation methods with obvious traces of the documenter's subjective intention intervention, rather than the plot fabrication that is divorced from objective reality and enough to change the inherent development logic of the event.

Documentary Type	Relationship between Documentation and Fiction
Expository Documentary	Authors of expository documentaries rely more on the power of commentary to persuade the audience to accept their views, with clear publicity purposes. Formally, the typical characteristics of their works are "voice-of-God", omniscient point of view, evidentiary editing, etc. Relationship between documentation and fiction: The reconstruction of objective reality is centered on clear thematic expression, and does not shy away from a priori structure and large-span montage statements.

Through the summary of the above two types of documentaries, it may be far from enough to discuss the documentation and fiction of documentaries, but it is enough to show that documentaries are inherently the process of reproducing the original appearance of life. Respecting objective facts is an attitude. On the premise of abiding by the basic nature and development trend of objective facts, creators can fully mobilize the rhetorical energy and structural skills contained in fictional techniques.

The Reunions is exactly a work that is difficult to classify according to the existing type framework. It takes real events as the base, narrates with the lens vocabulary of documentary style, and finally presents a story with quite rich plot texture, thus exploring a relatively rare grammatical paradigm between the documentary dimension and the fictional dimension of film. This exploration undoubtedly has certain enlightening significance for how to deal with the mutual penetration of truth and fiction in future image creation.

Gilles Fauconnier, the founder of the conceptual integration theory of mental space, systematically expounded the main context and research results of the theory in his book *Mental Spaces: Aspects of Meaning Construction in Natural Language*, and revealed that the cognitive mission of mental space is precisely to explore the behind-the-scenes cognitive mechanism hidden under the language form. Fauconnier pointed out that mental space is a partial information aggregate constructed in real time by human beings in the process of thinking activities and verbal communication, and its fundamental motivation for generation lies in the solution and grasp of local discourse meaning. Moving this theoretical perspective to the field of film and television creation, mental space can be regarded as an image space that reflects the inner spiritual landscape of characters, or as another spatial image generated by the audience due to emotional fluctuations and projected on the screen.

3 Integration Trend of Documentaries and Feature Films

After 1960, the typification of documentary development gradually became diversified, which also led to the view that the narrativity of documentaries and the documentary nature of feature films are gradually integrating. First of all, discussing the relationship between the documentary nature of feature films and the narrativity of documentaries is essentially discussing the relationship between feature films and documentaries. This question just illustrates the mutual integration state or increasingly integration trend of feature films and documentaries, indicating that there must be some commonalities between feature films and documentaries, and the two can learn from each other in many aspects. However, at their origin, feature films and documentaries are different film categories after all.

4 Conceptual Definition of Documentaries and Feature Films

By definition, the boundary of documentary can be defined as an audio-visual art form based on non-fiction and non-reenactment, and its inherent regulation lies in the documentary grasp of image and sound materials. The core characteristics of this genre are reflected in three dimensions: the existential basis of the recording object, the on-site faithfulness of the shooting process, and the accidental acceptance of event occurrence.

In contrast, feature films are a comprehensive film and television genre that integrates literary narrative, physical performance, musical rhythm and dramatic conflict, etc. Its foundation lies in the construction of hypothetical situations and artistic role-playing. In short, feature films take fiction and artistic deformation as the basic operation mode, and

incorporate real experience or imaginary events into a ideographic system of re-encoding and re-creation. Although the two share the material shell of audio-visual language, they are fundamentally different in their fundamental attitude towards dealing with real materials.

4.1 Narrativity of Documentaries

The "narrativity" orientation in documentaries points to such a creative consciousness: in content selection and expression strategies, it deliberately highlights the plot context and inherent tension of events, and replaces the passive reproduction of daily social landscapes in a pure naturalistic way with a narrative-driven approach. [2] For example, the documentary *Tough Out* conceptually belongs to the documentary creation form, but when we watch this documentary, we are attracted by the characters and plots in the documentary.

4.2 Documentary Nature of Feature Films

The so-called "documentary nature" characteristic in feature films refers to the conscious absorption and application of the expressive elements of documentary aesthetics by the creators during the shooting process of feature films, in order to enhance the credible texture and immersion effect of the image, so as to achieve the artistic purpose of touching the audience more deeply. The "documentary nature" here not only marks an overall aesthetic orientation of the film, but also points to the documentary techniques used in the specific creation link.

The documentary nature of feature films first relies on the realistic foundation of the subject matter origin: for example, works such as *Titanic* and *Dances with Wolves* are based on well-documented historical figures and real events, and then carry out dramatic reconstruction and image translation.

5 Views on the Integration Trend and Relationship between Documentaries and Feature Films

Both documentaries and feature films are inseparable from the development of cinema, and both have certain commonalities in their development.

5.1 Thematic Similarity

The narrative construction of feature films is always centered on characters, and the content that documentaries focus on is also inseparable from the living conditions of characters. For this reason, the narrativity pursuit inherent in documentaries, that is, its plot-oriented narrative orientation, must also be woven and presented around the actions, fates and emotional trajectories of characters.

5.2 Authenticity Shared by Both

The documentary tendency shown in feature films precisely reflects the creators' simultaneous pursuit and integration of the two dimensions of life truth and artistic truth. For example, the real scenes in *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* or *The Story of Qiu Ju* make us feel as if they are really happening.

5.3 Connection

Although the "documentary nature of feature films" and the "narrativity of documentaries" show a close relationship of mutual penetration and mutual complementarity, the two still adhere to their own non-confusable boundaries and bottom lines in their fundamental attributes. Feature films absorb documentary techniques, which reflects their conscious pursuit of the sense of reality of the plot; while documentaries introduce story-based narration, which is an expression adjustment adapting to modern aesthetic experience. [3] The two can learn from each other in creative methods: documentaries may well learn from the narrative techniques of feature films, and feature films can also adopt the shooting methods of documentaries. In contemporary film and television practice, whether it is the use of documentary means by feature films or the adoption of story strategies by documentaries, all reflect the continuous deepening of the awareness of cinema ontology, the gradual melting of conceptual barriers and the continuous rise of artistic innovation vitality.^[4]

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