

The Aesthetic Innovation and Transformation of Micro-Documentaries from the Perspective of Digital Media

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ABSTRACT

Traditional documentaries, based on film photography and linear editing techniques, construct an aesthetic system centered on "objective truth". Since the 21st century, the exponential development of digital technology has not only revolutionized creative tools but also brought about a deep transformation in documentary aesthetics: virtual reality technology breaks the boundaries of physical space, interactive interfaces reconstruct narrative power relations, and virtual generated images challenge the essential definition of "authenticity". These changes have driven documentaries to shift from one-dimensional "mirror images of reality" to multi-dimensional "production sites of meaning", and micro-documentaries have completed the transformation of the narrative system on this basis.

KEYWORDS

Digital media; microdocumentary; cultural code; mirror remodeling

The concept of "Documentary Film" dates back to John Grierson, a pioneer of the documentary film movement in Britain in the 1920s. He first used the term "documentary" in a film review published in *The Sun* in 1926 to comment on Robert Flaherty's *Moana*. The assertion that a documentary should have both "documentary value" and "creative treatment of reality" laid the ontological foundation of the documentary. Since then, Bazan's "image ontology" has led documentary creation to present an aesthetic paradigm of objectivity and truth, and its narrative forms have been constantly evolving with the evolution of media technology - from the reflective documentation brought about by Vertov's "film eye school" montage experiment, to the observational aesthetics of direct and real films, and to the database documentary of the digital age. It shows a distinct intergenerational evolution.

Micro-documentary, as a subtype derived from the digital media ecosystem, inherits the documentary genes of traditional documentary, and through the systematic reconstruction of media form and aesthetic language, completes the intergenerational transformation of the image paradigm.

1 Aesthetic Transformation of the image paradigm Empowered by technology

In 1895, the Lumiere brothers first released works such as "The Train" and "The Factory Gate", marking the official birth of non-fiction documentary images. These "Cinematographe", which were less than a minute long, objectively recorded the physical reality through mechanical devices, established for the first time the documentary ontology of the medium of images. However, when the traditional documentary paradigm was widely replicated and images gradually became promotional videos for the activities of the noble class and government departments, the aesthetic fatigue of the audience towards a single mechanical replication began to emerge. This technological determinism and the creative crisis of early political orientation prompted filmmakers in the early 20th century to start exploring reconstructive narrative strategies. As a result, the audience's love for documentaries was at a low ebb, and in the early 20th century, the first application of the aesthetic technique of "recomposition" in film and television emerged.

With the release and attention of Vlahadi's "Nanuk of the North", the concept of "observational" documentary aesthetics began to gain popularity. The documentary, by depicting the traditional survival skills of the Inuit, implanted a dramatic narrative structure within the documentary framework, giving the documentary a "romantic" aesthetic. Not only that, but the "cinematic eye" of Giga Vertov, which was carried out at the same time, injected fresh blood into documentary images, especially the "self-reflective" image documentation paradigm adopted in "The Man with the Camera", combined with montage editing concepts, created avant-garde documentary images. It also laid the theoretical and practical foundation for the subsequent emergence of real French cinema.

In the 1930s, German director Lenny Riefenstael, in her few documentaries, had a clear cinematic image thinking, that is, to express documentary truth through story-like narratives, and Dutch director Yuris Evans, with poetic documentary images as his main narrative system, both of these directors adhered to cinematic narrative techniques in their creative processes. In fact, they were influenced by early film theories. After the 1960s, documentaries gradually developed their own narrative system and aesthetic theory, as French theorist Andre Bazin pointed out: "The aesthetic quality of photography lies in its ability to reveal the truth... The camera gets rid of the old prejudice and removes the mental rust

that we feel on the object. Only this indifferent and detached lens can restore the pure and true appearance of the world, attract my attention and arouse my attachment." ^[1] The truth of the image that Bazan expounds is based on the documentary function of photographic images to restore reality, and through the presentation of the true appearance of life, it aims to reveal its essence. Therefore, at this stage, the truth of documentary becomes the main narrative aesthetic, with film photography and linear editing as the technical basis, constructing an aesthetic system centered on "objective truth".

But with the advent of the digital age, digital technology has completely overturned the traditional expression of documentary and authenticity, and Bazan's film theory has wavered. It is in this context that the "new documentary film" emerged, as its theorist Williams mentioned: "Rather than wavering between the idealistic illusion of the authenticity of documentary films and the cynical resort to fiction, it is better not to define documentaries as the essence of truth, but rather as those aimed at choosing relative and accidental strategies." ^[2]

By now, the "new fiction" technique has been widely used in documentary, giving documentary a more cinematic aesthetic, and the love for documentaries has never been more intense, such as the landmark documentary "The Thin Blue Line" (1988), in which the director employed a narrative strategy of recreating reality, based on the interviewees' oral accounts. In terms of the use of film and television language, it is through the depiction of a large number of local details, the use of suspenseful atmosphere music, stylized composition style, color tone and editing techniques, gradually presenting the complete event in detail, and expressing the director's narrative viewpoint in a reasoning and revealing narrative structure. Because of the abundance of interviews and evidence, the documentary's practical significance goes far beyond the documentary itself.

Throughout the history of documentary development, it is not difficult to find that traditional documentary, whether in the system of practical creation or in the system of theoretical development and transformation, has always used film as the main reference trend, which precisely stems from the early understanding of the theoretical framework of film and documentary, and with the discussion of the new art of film in the theoretical circle, Documentaries have gradually developed their own narrative system and aesthetic concept. Since the 21st century, the exponential development of digital technology has not only revolutionized creative tools but also brought about a deep transformation in documentary aesthetics: virtual reality technology breaks the boundaries of physical space, interactive interfaces reconstruct narrative power relations, and virtual generated images challenge the essential definition of "authenticity". These changes have prompted documentaries to shift from one-dimensional "mirror images of reality" to multi-dimensional "production sites of meaning", bringing about a new transformation in the creation of traditional documentaries.

Micro-documentaries, as a new form of documentary in the present day, are gradually evolving into a narrative form of images with typical characteristics of The Times. The compact narrative structure and relatively intensive production cost not only effectively adapt to the fragmented viewing habits of the younger generation in the postmodern society, but also precisely align with the "micro-culture" acceptance paradigm of the digital natives, significantly enhancing the audience base and dissemination effectiveness of this art form. It is worth noting that the exponential leap in digital technology has not only brought about a technological iteration of creative tools, but also triggered a narrative transformation in the aesthetic system of micro-documentaries.

2 Spatial Narrative and cultural code expression empowered by technology

Micro-documentaries, as a new subgenre of video in the digital media ecosystem, are video works that present social phenomena, cultural memories, or individual stories in depth through concise and documentary-style creation. In terms of spatial narrative expression, with the help of today's digital media, the visual expression and cultural representation of micro-documentary have been greatly enhanced.

The French sociologist Henri Lefebvre explicitly put forward the "space theory" in his book "The Production of Space", arguing that space can be divided into "the original and natural space, and the spiritual space of logical and formal abstraction". ^[3] Revealing the multi-dimensional attributes of space from physical existence to social construction, this theory provides an important perspective for dissects the spatial expression of video art. Based on this argument, in contrast, the spatial attributes of documentary art can include "the geographical space based on the natural landscape, the public space based on social interaction, and the emotional space based on the individual's inner self" ^[4]. However, with the deep involvement of digital media technology, the spatial attributes of micro-documentaries have gone beyond the three dimensions of traditional documentaries, giving rise to a "digital space" built between reality and virtuality. The digital space is not a simple replication of the real space. Instead, it deconstructs and reorganizes the geographical, social and emotional Spaces through technologies such as algorithms, virtual reality and interactive interfaces, creating a new type of expressive field that blends the virtual and the real.

In 2022, CCTV produced a series of micro-documentaries titled "Words from Meeting You", which adopted a dot matrix

structure of "5-minute single episode focusing on a single character - 25-minute theme integration and connection", which not only met the lightweight dissemination characteristics of short-video platforms, but also formed a systematic textual narrative through semantic connections between Chinese characters. This structure breaks the temporal and spatial limitations of linear narrative and builds a new digital narrative space. In terms of visual presentation, the director uses three-dimensional animation and personification to transform static Chinese character symbols into a dynamic ideographic system, that is, to visualize the pictographic symbols in oracle bone script through animation, and the evolution from seal script to regular script is given a personified "growth narrative". This digital technology-enabled symbol translation not only visualizes the reconstruction of historical and cultural memory, but also transforms Chinese characters from flat written symbols into dynamic spatial carriers carrying collective cultural imagination, breaking the boundaries of traditional documentary spatial expression and demonstrating the unique spatial production logic and aesthetic value of micro-documentaries in the digital media age.

At the same time, viewers enter the historical context of the generation of Chinese characters through animated scenes and participate in the reproduction of meaning through the bullet comments and comment functions of social media platforms, thus creating a collective cultural experience field where the virtual and the real blend. This spatial construction approach not only breaks through the static presentation mode of traditional documentaries, but also demonstrates the unique value of micro-documentaries in cultural inheritance and spatial innovation in the digital media age.

In the context of the deep involvement of digital technology in image creation, emerging media technologies such as AIGC and VR have become key drivers for micro-documentaries to break through the boundaries of traditional expression. In 2023, Jinan Radio and Television Station produced a series of micro-documentaries titled "Starting from the River". Guided by the creative concepts of "culture + technology" and "art + technology", digital painting technology was used to create over 700 images, visualizing the historical civilization behind the cultural relics of cities along the Yellow River in Shandong. By integrating historical and cultural symbols such as "Mencius' Mother Teaching Her Son" into the contemporary narrative context, and through dynamic restoration of the smoke form of Han Dynasty copper incense burns and construction of ancient life scenes, the works break the static physical space of cultural relics display and transform them into dynamic narrative fields carrying temporal and spatial memories, elevating cultural relics from simple material entities to spiritual symbols carrying collective memories. This application of technology not only breaks through the traditional documentary's objective record paradigm of geographical space, but also achieves a cross-temporal dialogue between historical scenes and contemporary perspectives through the virtual construction of the digital space, bringing the documentary to life in the eyes of the audience. In the virtual restored historical scenes, viewers can not only intuitively perceive the morphological evolution of the cultural relics, but also deepen their understanding and touch of the cultural value of the Yellow River through the sensory experience created by digital technology.

3 The Remodeling of cultural images in the Digital Age

Jacques Lacan's mirror stage theory, as an important cornerstone of psychoanalysis, reveals the original mechanism of the formation of human subjective consciousness. He refers to the period from 6 to 18 months after a baby's birth as the "mirror stage" of child development, which is the first time infants and toddlers gradually develop their ability to perceive themselves in front of the mirror, and they gradually establish their initial understanding of themselves, that is, the "first assimilation". As they grow older, children are gradually influenced by the outside world. That is, it requires the joint construction of the other and the self to complete the formation of self-subject consciousness. For traditional images, the viewer, as the viewer, intervenes in a subjective form and constructs the self through assimilation with the characters in the film. The rich narrative strategy of images is more about reconstructing the secondary identity of the "mirror stage" of early childhood, enriching dreams and illusions, completing the "stitching" in the film and television text, making up for the relationship between the self and the other of the audience, and reinforcing the "fantasy logic" brought about by the mirror text.

But in the context of the current multimedia era, the changes brought about by digital media have brought about essential alterations to the traditional narrative strategy of images. With the deep involvement of digital media technology, the power structure of image production and dissemination has undergone fundamental changes. Compared with the one-way communication model of traditional images that are centered on creators and construct "mirrors" through traditional and single narratives, today's micro-documentaries exhibit a significant decentralized nature, in contrast to the subject-building mechanism in Lacan's "mirror stage" theory.

The new narrative of images that changes the traditional mirror theory is the interactive documentary of the present. The emergence of interactive documentaries, empowered by digital media, has changed the previous single narrative module of traditional documentaries, but has strengthened the interactivity of digital technology in the digital media field, according to Judith Aston and Sandra Gordenz' article in *Documentary Studies: Interactive Documentaries* In the

setting domain, they propose that, It is pointed out that in the process of documentary creation, objectivity and truthfulness are its main purposes and goals. Under this premise, the application of digital interactive technology to achieve this purpose can be called an interactive documentary.

Digital media not only breaks the professional barriers of traditional image production, but also the popularization of its AIGC technology enables ordinary users to participate in image creation, from material collection, editing to special effects production. The intervention of multiple subjects has undermined the absolute authority of the creator. In "My Diary of Fighting the Epidemic" (2020), the directors adopted the narrative strategy of video diaries and told the story of Wuhan's fight against the epidemic from the perspectives of different occupations such as medical workers, ordinary citizens and aid workers from other places who experienced the epidemic in Wuhan. In the third episode, the artificial voice of an AI robot was used, with a cloud camera as the protagonist, presenting the entire construction process of Huoshenshan Hospital from the perspective of the camera's self-narrative, interspersed with online live streaming, Internet interaction and other content. It can be said that in this episode, not only the narrative content was created, but also with the assistance of the online social media platform, This shift in narrative subjects is an effective attempt at mass creation, an integration of interwoven diverse discourses, and a concentrated manifestation of the complete process of public text creation. Instead of passively accepting the preconceived "mirror image", the audience actively participates in the narrative through comments, reposts, secondary creations, etc., forming a decentralized communication network.

4 Summary

In the current context where digital technology is reconfiguring the media ecosystem, the creative aesthetic strategy of micro-documentaries is undergoing a deep paradigm shift. This transformation is essentially a systematic shift from traditional film and television narrative logic to digital narrative, and its aesthetic construction dimensions show multi-dimensional evolution characteristics in the digital media perspective: from the digital translation of spatial narrative strategies, to the immersive construction of cultural code dissemination, to the interactive reshaping of social and cultural mirrors, outlining the overall development trajectory of Chinese micro-documentaries with technological empowerment. It is worth noting that while the innovations in audio-visual experiences and the iterations in communication forms brought about by digital technology have injected contemporary aesthetic qualities and communication effectiveness into micro-documentaries, the essence of their creation still needs to adhere to the core position of the content itself. The dialectical unity of technological empowerment and humanistic core constitutes the fundamental logic for the sustainable development of micro-documentaries in the digital age - digital technology, as a narrative carrier and means of expression, ultimately needs to serve the in-depth exploration and meaning production of the story core. Only by maintaining a balance between technological innovation and humanistic expression can the creative transformation of micro-documentaries from technological empowerment to artistic empowerment be truly achieved, making them an important visual medium for documenting society and observing reality in the digital age.

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