

An Analysis of The Function and Influence of Documentary Crime Films

Shiai Wang

College of Applied Arts and Science, Beijing Union University, Beijing, 100191, China

2020030361025@buu.edu.cn

Abstract. With the development of the movie market, more and more directors choose to shoot documentary crime films. Most directors aim to arouse the audience's thinking about society and humanity by making these films, but not every audience can understand these films in this way. There is little research probing into the positive and negative effects of this kind of movie on audience. This article divides the audience into four categories: viewers who want to see exciting plots; viewers who want to know the details; viewers who are potential criminals wanting to learn criminal techniques, and viewers who are intending criminals expecting to get inspired. Based on this audience, the article attempts to make the following suggestions for filmmakers, social media platforms, governments, and individuals: Film production needs to reduce overly exciting plots, use humorous or soothing plots to reduce the possible psychological impact on the audience, and moderately expose the legal procedures. Moreover, social media platforms need to strengthen the way videos are moderated and help governments publicize their actions. The government should intensify the supervision of social media and provide psychological counseling channels. In addition, the government also needs to pay attention to the social problems shown in the movies and take measures to improve them and reinforce the legal restrictions. Furthermore, individuals need to care about their mental health and actively seek help. Besides, individuals should develop the ability to distinguish true information. Last but not least, people who make films need to regulate their film-making jobs.

Keywords: Documentary crime films; audience; director; positive effects; negative effects.

1. Introduction

The development of crime documentaries is more and more diversified. Since these documentaries are adapted from real events, they are easier to attract the interest and curiosity of the audience and have an advantage in the commercial movie market. At present, due to the development of relevant technology and the movie market in China, many directors have begun to shoot documentary crime films. They mostly focus on social issues, hoping to raise the audience's awareness about real society and human nature. However, it has to be admitted that not every audience can understand the film exactly as the director wants. Because different audiences have different purposes and intentions for watching the film, they can gain different things through the film after watching it.

At present, most domestic literature focuses on the expression method, content, and director's intention of crime films, rather than on the movie information received by the audience and the positive and negative effects brought about on the minds of the audience. In China, Zhang Hui, Gao Yangyu, and Pan Ailing, et al, mainly study the audio-visual language, characters, narrative mode, and expression techniques of Chinese crime films [1-3]. While Li Yijia is more concerned with the psychological narrative research of Chinese crime films, Zhang Qing and Ying Qianwen pay more attention to the characteristics of all the different types of films in the development process of Chinese crime films [4-6]. And Wang Anran cares more about the connection between the bloody, violent, and pornographic plots and the audience's psychology [7]. Among them, Zhang Qing and Gao Yangyu have studied documentary crime films in particular [2,5]. There is little research on the purpose of different audiences to watch movies, the information they get from movies, and the positive and negative effects produced on the audience.

The study tries to analyze four different types of audiences, talk about the different audiences' intention to watch crime movies, the information they gain from them, and the positive and negative

effects brought about on the audience, and make several suggestions for the film-making process, social media platforms, governments, and individuals in the hope of helping people better understand crime films, calling the society to pay close attention to the positive and negative effects that crime movies possibly bring about, and expecting the government to lay down the law of crime film-making.

2. Domestic Documentary Crime Films

Documentary crime films, based on real-life events, deeply investigate the social contexts of criminal incidents through the events themselves. These film directors often adapt these real-life events, modulating them to suit filmic narrative needs.

What deserves mentioning is that since the 21st century, Chinese documentary crime films have primarily been directed by the so-called sixth-generation Chinese directors.

2.1. The Function of Documentary Crime Films

As is well known that documentary crime films are meant to prevent and stop crimes, enhance the clarity of morals, strengthen citizens' legal and moral consciousness, reduce illegal and criminal activities, and raise the audience's crime prevention. They also aim to shape the audience's correct values and behavioral norms and make the viewers deeply aware of the seriousness of criminal acts and the harm to both individuals and society. Besides, they present the tremendous damage inflicted upon victims and society by criminal actions, educate viewers about how to stay alert against crimes, how to deal with potentially dangerous unlawful behaviors, and combat criminal activities. Moreover, these films serve as a good warning to the audience, intensify their safety awareness and coping capabilities, and promote harmony and stability in society. Although crime films may have these positive effects as mentioned above, these films often bring about some unforeseen negative effects, which is precisely the focus of this discussion.

2.2. Creative Style of Domestic Documentary Crime Films

The sixth-generation directors concentrate on the social reality in China during its transitional period of the new era and are committed to unveiling this reality and true human nature, encouraging the audience to think profoundly about society and human nature [2,5]. Take the film *Black Coal, Thin Ice* for instance. Its backdrop began in the 1990s and shows the living situation of people in that era and the difficulties that people in that era are facing. This film can help people better understand the real social situation of that time. It is known that the fate of people in every era is related to the changes of the times, and the social situation can determine the behavior of people in it to a certain extent [8].

These directors adopt objective and realistic narrative angles and shooting techniques. Many directors use on-set audio, long shots, and real crime scenes to reenact the crime process and minimize dramatic editing and shooting techniques [5]. The films were shot with an angle close to people's observation of things in reality so that the film scenes look much more like what the audience finds in their actual lives.

Moreover, amateur actors, who lack acting experience and professional training, are often employed to play different roles in the films to ensure authenticity in the films [5]. For example, the two films *Blind Well* and *Blind Mountain* directed by Li Yang have chosen some women to act as those women who had been kidnapped to the remote and poverty-stricken areas. Based on this, it adds a stronger sense of reality to the films.

2.3. Creative Ideas for Documentary Crime Films

To a certain extent, the audience's inclinations can influence the film's presentation methods and content [6]. To cater to the film market interests, some films beneficially incorporate dramatic and visually engaging shots. Crime documentaries are adapted from factual events to gather more gripping storylines convenient for filmic narration, striking a balance between commercial appeal and

artistic integrity. In other words, films need to take into account not only their artistic expression but also whether or not they have commercial value. Only films with commercial value and artistic representation can earn money and have a greater range of dissemination and greater influence [2].

Besides, sixth-generation directors make movies based on palpable events. Movies grounded on actual events can capture the public interest by using "real-life events" as a sales gimmick in the early stages of film promotion [2]. They pay close attention to the real life of ordinary people in society, the exposure of human nature in the current era, and the exhibition of the fate of individuals in the real world, and hope that the audience can think about real events related to the social reality in which they live, and the real human nature by watching the films the directors produce.

3. Different Types of Viewers and their Purposes for Watching Films

As Shakespeare said, "There are a thousand Hamlets in a thousand people's eyes." It is noteworthy that no matter how profound the meaning of the director's idea is, the audience is not always able to deeply understand the real intention of the film cherished by the director to educate ordinary people or to remind the audience of the potential hazards of crimes. This paper attempts to look into four types of audiences watching these films for diverse purposes, ranking them according to the potential harm they could bring to society after watching them.

3.1. Thrill-Seeking Audience

This audience type seeks out films with violent content and pornographic scenes out of curiosity. Interestingly enough, they are the least potentially harmful group to society. People need to satisfy their desire for voyeurism by looking at others and bringing them under their gaze, and they can gradually identify their viewing objects, producing a kind of "narcissistic" pleasure [9]. Here, "others" can be understood to mean that the audience can satisfy their desire to peep by watching the characters in the movie, to reduce their pressure in life.

It can be seen that the purpose of this kind of audience watching the film is not to think about the profound connotation conveyed by the film, but just to see the pornographic and violent scenes. When watching the movie, they are likely to watch the overall narrative plot without thinking or even directly skip the previous narrative plot to watch the violent and pornographic plot. After watching the movie, they rarely think carefully about the meaning contained in the movie, and such a result is inconsistent with the goal the director wants to achieve.

But on the other hand, it is a good thing for society for the audience to release their pressure by spending time watching films. Most audience can vent their desires and pressures using movie-watching. Gordon Dahl and Stefano DellaVigna found that the larger the theater audience for violent films is, the less violent crimes show up in society [10]. So as long as there is an outlet for their stress and desire to release, they will not seek other outlets, reducing the likelihood that they will use violence or seek to commit violence in real life. Therefore, this kind of audience is likely to cause the least social harm.

3.2. Audience Seeking Facts

This audience type aims to understand real-world events through documentary crime films, often looking up or posting reviews on social media. However, these viewers may be unduly alarmed by what is portrayed in the films and develop an unfounded fear of or worry about the social reality.

Based on true events, non-fiction crime films can attract many viewers who want to understand what is going on in society. They are exactly the kind of audience the director wants to fascinate. They can watch movies to understand facts existing in society, and they can think about society and human nature after watching them. Some people even search or write some reviews published on social media after watching the movie and discuss what they understand about the movie with relatives, friends, or those people around them. What they do can help them think about the content

of the film from a different perspective and can help promote the film and expand the influence of the film.

However, there is no denying that the film will have a psychological and cognitive impact on some viewers. For instance, in the comments section below the video clip of Thin Ice Fireworks on social media platforms, many people said that the film was "very depressing", and "after watching it I feel my heart is more tangled, it should be said that the mood is complicated", "after watching it I find life is not beautiful at all."

These viewers may be frightened by what is presented in the movie after watching it, and thus they fear the specific things they see from the movie. The mean world syndrome, developed by communication professor George Garbner in the 1960s, suggests that people are more likely to believe that the world on television is factual, and thus they fear or feel worried about the real world, believing that the real world is full of danger [11]. For example, as mentioned above, Blind Mountain tells the story of a female college student who is trafficked to a remote mountainous area and is forced to marry a farmer. After watching this movie, some viewers may even increase their prejudice against remote mountainous areas and rural people, so much so that they are afraid to go to these remote areas, thinking that farmers are uneducated or ill-educated barbarians. Some viewers are even so afraid of being abducted that they will not trust anyone else, and thus will not talk to strangers, and even will not eat the food strangers offer them.

3.3. Potential Criminals Scouting for Criminal Techniques

Some potential criminals may gain criminal "inspiration" through criminal films, which could pose a significant threat to societal harmony and stability.

Some documentary crime films show in detail the ways the crime is committed, the police investigate, and the law is implemented, some potential criminals may obtain criminal "inspirations" through documentary crime films or take advantage of the films to figure out the police's case solving techniques and investigation processes and to study the law that will be implemented to measure the penalty. For example, the film Documentaries of Major Criminal Investigation Cases in Western China contains real photos and videos of police who try to solve cases. The disclosure of such information to the public is only for popular science knowledge, to help the public achieve a better understanding of criminal incidents and the police system, and to reduce the public's sense of insecurity. In this way, the public's confidence in the national security system will be enhanced, and the public will have more trust in the safety of the country. It can also make some potential criminals who are incapable of committing crimes aware of the rigor of the legal system and the difficulty of evading justice, thereby cutting down the chances of committing crimes. At the same time, the film Documentaries of Major Criminal Investigation Cases in Western China also provides some potential criminals with a firm tendency to commit crimes concerning the films and copy or imitate what the criminals revealed by these documentaries, which will increase the probability of such people committing crimes. In this way, it may constitute a threat to the harmony and stability of society, aggravate the burden on the police system, bring harm to ordinary people, and cause extremely serious consequences.

3.4. Crime-Contemplating Criminals Getting Inspired

Last but not least, in society there may be some criminals who are contemplating crime but have not yet found a good method of crime that can satisfy them. Once they watch some documentary crime films, they may get some inspiration from them, find plans and methods to commit crimes and learn how to effectively evade police investigation. Simultaneously, they gain some legal knowledge that they cannot get elsewhere. Their methods of crime are often very covert, superb, and sophisticated, making it difficult for the police to track their criminal traces and find convincing evidence to prove them guilty. These viewers often pose a massive threat to society and are an unexpected negative effect of these crime films, since these viewers may have reached the level of expert criminals.

In other words, some documentary crime films may unintentionally become a platform for some intending criminals to get inspired, taught, and advised on how to commit crimes cautiously, gradually, rigorously, and even scientifically. Their criminal behaviors are often well-designed, well-conceived, well-organized and well-implemented.

4. Suggestions

4.1. Film-Making

Film producers should cautiously avoid the excessive inclusion of violence, gore, or sex in their productions. In other words, they should avoid over-dramatizing or over-describing the relevant plots, although such plots can attract the audience to a certain extent and increase the income and influence of these films. Even popular science crime and law movies should not exhibit a lot of real crime techniques and real bloody violence and sex scenes. They may hurt the audience who watch them.

Besides, crime documentaries, grounded on real-life events and narrative environments, are more likely to bring psychological impact to the audience. In addition, the producers should also take into consideration how to add some comforting or funny scenes after presenting violent and bloody pornographic plots without affecting the overall tone of the narrative, to diminish the psychological trauma suffered by the audience after watching such plots and reduce viewing by viewers who only seek to watch violent, gory porn. For example, the film *Crazy Stone*, directed by Ning Hao in 2006, uses some humorous elements to ease the tense atmosphere every time it presents a tense plot [4]. This can lessen the psychological damage brought about by the movie plots to the audience. However, it is important to note that non-fiction crime films still need to focus on depicting the truth. If too much emphasis is placed on humorous plots, the movie will lack seriousness and can be seen as entertaining a crime that should have been taken seriously. What is more, documentary crime films should not describe in a too detailed way how a crime is committed by the criminal and how the criminal case is looked into by police, otherwise criminals may take advantage of the details by copying imitating or even improving the criminal methods to commit sophisticated crimes and try to evade the police's investigation.

4.2. Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms should intensify the rigor of their video review mechanisms. If the title of a video clip is overly exaggerated and does not match the content of the original film, it should not be approved to be posted on social media platforms. Although most users of some social media platforms usually edit movies and condense the main plot into short clips that can quickly introduce and spread the overall plot, some users may deliberately choose violent pornographic titles to arouse people's curiosity to watch the movie to increase the number of streams. Such a short film does not distort the film in terms of content, but due to the incorrect or misleading direction of the title, it is still probable to charm viewers with different intentions to watch the film just for a few seconds of pornographic footage. For instance, when searching for *Blind Mountain* on a search website, the first recommended video title is a short film titled "A girl is deceived into the Mountain and tragically reduced to a blind mountain as a fertility tool". The high-score movie *Blind Mountain* is a deep narrative. Even on the most popular and authoritative websites, if people enter the information page of *Blind Mountain*, its cover will show up: a picture of the female protagonist with bruises, disheveled clothes, and messy hair.

The storyline of *Blind Mountain* itself is indeed about the abduction of female college students, but its focus is on the villagers' ignorance of moral laws and their lack of cultural moral education, aiming to expose the social phenomenon at that time and enhance people's awareness of the abduction incident, which is inconsistent with the above communication content. Such video clips can help the clip itself and the original film get more views and attention and may even help the film get some attention again many years after the original film aired. But at the same time, it is easy to attract some thrill-seeking viewers to watch the movie, resulting in the fact that the movie does not have a deep

impact on the audience. In this way, even if the film can obtain more financial benefits because of the transmission of the edited video, it cannot achieve the goal the director intends to have when making the film.

Second, these short films also make it easy for viewers who have never seen this film to think that the world is dangerous just by quickly glancing at the short film titles on social media platforms. It may also make viewers who have watched the movie recall the psychological damage they caused to the negative plot when they watched the movie, further deepening their concept of the "dangerous world."

Moreover, social media platforms should play a promotional role. After the government takes action based on the problems shown in the film, the media needs to make the government's regulations public. To show people the rigor of the legal system and the speed and efficiency of the police system to solve the problem, convey the image of the police who are serious and responsible, deter those who want to use the film as learning materials, and bring a sense of security to the general public.

4.3. Government

The government should strictly censor film content post-release, taking into account the possible impacts on viewers, and making a correct and timely judgement of whether or not there is some actual and serious impact that may have been underestimated on the audience, because too violent and bloody scenes may cause psychological damage that even the audience themselves may not have felt immediately.

Moreover, when a crime documentary is shown, the government should focus on providing free social and psychological counseling to the audience. If viewers feel any psychological harm after watching relevant films, they can seek help through professional, reliable, and free channels provided by the government. In addition, the government can also invite psychologists to make videos or conduct regular live broadcasts on social media platforms to discuss the content of the films and address possible psychological problems of viewers.

Besides, a crime documentary is meant to expose reality, so it inevitably has some plot about the failure of the legal system and the police. Therefore, the government should take into consideration the possible social impact of the films and actively study the legal and social problems revealed by the relevant films, accept the problems, and solve them promptly and properly, to maintain social stability and protect the people from psychological damage with maximum efficiency. Restricting crime documentaries is one business, but working out the effective measures to eliminate the root cause of the problem is another story. That is to say, the government should not ignore the negative effects brought about by documentary crime films on the audience.

In terms of film dissemination, the government still needs to strengthen the supervision of online platforms. At present, the country has introduced relevant laws to restrict the video clips produced by we-media users, but there are still many similar illegal acts on the Internet. The reason behind this may be that most scenario writers and film producers are not so familiar with the legal provisions. When they see other creators produce similar videos to obtain commercial benefits, they also feel that they can do the same without carefully considering whether or not it is illegal. Even if the videos are made by individuals, they are illegal. There are so many such videos that it is often very tough to investigate them one by one. As long as they do not cause bad effects, they will not be looked into in most cases, and social media platforms will not carefully care about this issue to gain commercial profits. Therefore, the law should start from the social media platform and increase the severity of the platform video review mechanisms. If a platform is found to have illegal videos, it should be responsible for the illegal actions, and legal penalties should be strictly inflicted on it.

4.4. Individuals

After watching a bloody pornographic and violent film, if the audience feels psychologically uncomfortable, they need to see a psychologist for the first time. If the audience ignores their psychological feelings and allows them to develop, it may cause very serious consequences.

In addition, the audience needs to be able to tell the difference between true and false information. To attract the audience's attention, some short clips of films on social media platforms deliberately use more exaggerated, pornographic, and violent titles, which are often inconsistent with the theme of the film itself. Therefore, the audience should be wary of the truth of the information they see and not believe it without thinking. Finally, film monographers should be aware of the content and title of their short films, knowing that anything they post on social media platforms may be harmful to the audience or violate the law. They should be careful with the work they create, considering the benefits their work can bring them based on its social impact.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, documentary crime films, particularly those produced by China's sixth-generation directors, hold immense value in raising awareness about crime and its societal impact. However, they can unintentionally act as a guide for potential criminals or instill unwarranted fear among the audience. As these films often walk a fine line between commercial success and social responsibility, filmmakers must avoid excessive violence or sexual content, incorporate soothing or humorous elements to counterbalance intense scenes, and be wary of how crime proceedings are depicted to prevent potential misuse.

Moreover, social media platforms need to take every video posted seriously and report on the positive actions taken by the government.

Furthermore, the government and the authorities must fortify regulations on film content, provide psychological support for affected audiences, and enhance censorship, particularly on online platforms.

In addition, individuals should understand that they can seek help from a psychiatrist designated by the government at any time and that not all information that appears on the Internet can be trusted. Besides, people who make short clips of video clips should think carefully about the actions they take before posting videos.

The main contribution of this paper is to put forward a new direction for the subsequent film research. Shortly, the study of the film can start from the perspective of different audiences and think about the significance of the film to different audiences.

Finally, this paper only makes an analysis of the audience of documentary crime movies and their social impact. In the future, other types of studies related to films and television can also explore the role of films from the perspective of audience and society and develop new insights.

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