

Image Narration and Value Expression: A Research on Documentary Study of Chinese Low-class People

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Abstract: As the marginal population in society, the underclass people are “the weak” in all social classes. The underclass people documentaries take the underclass people as the object, and they tell people’s story, reflect realistic problems and deliver social value by means of sound-image language. The development process of underclass people documentaries is divided into preliminary development stage, rapid development stage and diversified development stage. The underclass people documentaries write the images for the underclass people, draw a picture of the underclass people and form unique image narration features, thus expressing profound humanistic and historical value, allowing the underclass people documentaries to become an effect channel of recording marginal population’s living state and solving social security issues, and providing a new idea for creation and development of the underclass people documentaries.

Keywords: Underclass people documentary; image narration; value writing; humanistic care.

1. Introduction

As the marginal population in society, the underclass people have been always wandering between urban and rural areas for a long time. They have lost the basic right of speech in society and become “the weak” in all social classes. The underclass people documentaries are people documentaries which take the underclass people as the object, tell people’s story, reflect realistic problems and deliver social value by means of sound-image language. However, there are few researches about creation of underclass people documentaries in China now, so creating in-depth and valuable underclass people documentaries, focusing on typical and representative underclass people in society, reflecting the underclass people’s life security problem which is worth thinking deeply, and expressing strong humanistic care and realistic spirit become the starting point and ultimate goal for creation of underclass people documentaries. This paper studies the development process, image narration and value writing of underclass people documentaries with purpose of providing new references and enlightenment to creation and development of underclass people documentaries.

2. The Development Process of Underclass People Documentaries

The development process of underclass people documentaries can be divided into three stages.

Stage 1 from 1990 to 2000 was the preliminary development stage of underclass people documentaries. At this stage, the underclass people are gradually known by people and began to get attention from documentary creators. During this period, about 7 underclass people documentaries came out. Before the year of 1990, although Chinese documentaries themed on people developed to a certain level, the documentaries about the underclass people were “absent” until the documentary *Bumming in Beijing* came out to announce the birth of underclass people documentary. In subsequent 1990s, excellent underclass people documentaries came out continuously, for example, *A Family in Northern Tibet*, *The Sand and the Sea*, *The Last Mountain God*, *Home*

in Beijing, *Dragon Ridge*, *A Village in the Cave*, *Old Men*, etc. These documentaries used Grierson creation technique, focused on the marginal population in society, paid attention to the underclass people’s love stories, living conditions and destinies, and expressed strong humanistic care and realistic spirit.

Stage 2 from 2000 to 2013 was the rapid development stage of underclass people documentaries. At this stage, about 12 underclass people documentaries were created. Since then, the underclass people began to come to people’s eyes and enter people’s lives on a large scale. A lot of underclass people documentaries appeared and participated in or won awards on domestic and international film festivals, enabling the attention of underclass people documentaries to rise overseas continuously. For example, *Along the Railway*, *My Dad*, *My Mom*, *To Live Is Better Than To Die*, *Companion*, *Using*, *The Rich and the Migrant Workers*, *Wheat Harvest*, *Last Train Home*, *Fortune Telling*, *Cop Shop*, *Shattered*, *The Trail from Xinjiang* and other documentaries were beyond the mainstream system, but they had more delicate and deeper content than before and the audio-visual effect was greatly improved.

Stage 3 from 2014 to now was the diversified development stage of underclass people documentaries. At this stage, about 12 documentaries were created. In this new period, underclass people documentaries had higher quality and became more popular with the development of the era, the production technique became more mature, and the network streaming media also provided more convenient communication channels for documentaries. The documentaries created in this period such as *Flowers Strive to Bloom*, *Still Tomorrow*, *The Last Stickman of Chongqing*, *Senior 10 High School*, *Plastic China*, *China’s Van Gogh*, *A Way Out*, *Single Men: Unmarried Men in China*, *Hello Life*, *City Dream*, *After the Rain*, *We in the new Era*, etc. formed a pattern that independent documentaries and official mainstream documentaries coexisted. Such a pattern also showed the complicated relationship between the two. On one hand, the independent documentaries used sound and image languages which were different from the mainstream documentaries to reflect social issues, they were free from the grand narration

of mainstream documentaries and supplemented “underclass” politics and ethics to the mainstream documents. On the other hand, the mainstream documentaries made up the positive value orientation that the independent documentaries lacked, popularized the main melody and communicated positive energy. So far, the independent documentaries and the official mainstream documentaries have formed the main form of Chinese documentaries.

3. Image Narration of Underclass People Documentaries

Documentary is a unique narrative art. In the context of “mass media integration” trend and aesthetic taste diversification, the narrative technique and creation concept of underclass people documentaries have both changed a lot. The documentary creators select and edit life materials, express their own opinions and ideas by means of brand new narrative strategies and skills, and form unique narrative features in order to “meet their expected requirement of recording the facts and aesthetic standard, which is just the ‘narration’, ‘story’ and ‘telling’ requirements of narrative art.”^[1]

Most traditional underclass people documentaries use linear narrative structure. It is well known that feature films usually pursue the dramatic feature of film and prefer montage technique for narration, while documentaries narrate based on the truth and reproduce the corporeal reality, so fact-recording technique becomes a necessary approach for image writing. Based on the principle of insisting on fact-recording technique and giving consideration to the artistry, documentaries mostly use linear narration, non-linear narration, parallel narration and other structures. The underclass people documentaries generally use linear narrative structure. “Linear narration is a classical narrative measure. It follows the principle of ‘the three unities’ which means unity of time, place and event. It lays emphasis on the integrity of story, unity of time and space, causality of plot, and narrative coherence, so that the audience can accept and understand more easily.”^[2] However, for underclass people documentaries, at the same time of ensuring authenticity and orderliness, linear narration also has a shortcoming of insufficient story tension, which cannot be ignored in documentary creation. For example, the documentary *Companion* used linear narrative structure to describe the rural old woman Liu’s experience of raising pigs from 1997 to 2003. The whole documentary didn’t use commentaries. It connected and expressed more than 20 life details in chronological order only through story images and linear narrative structure, so that the audience could clearly learn the cause, course and result of event. Although the documentary was connected in chronological logic, the stories that happened to old woman Liu were non-constant, and it’s just the “non-constancy” in constancy gave the documentary more psychological and visual impact.

The creation of traditional underclass people documentaries frequently uses two narrative spaces of “spatial juxtaposition” and “spatial disorder”. Marcel Martin said in *Film Language*: “Film is an art that can control the space very completely”^[3]. As a unique type of documentary, underclass people documentaries mainly use two narrative spaces of “spatial juxtaposition” and “spatial disorder”. “Spatial juxtaposition” breaks the linear time stream to enable the time to blend in the space, and the short time in the film

can be used to indicate the long time in this way. While “spatial disorder” breaks the single space pattern in real life and presents multiple spaces by blending or alternately. In creation of traditional underclass people documentaries, for example, the documentary *A Way Out* used “spatial juxtaposition” to tell the story of two girls and one boy from different classes. MA Baijuan came from the rural area of Gansu, XU Jia came from a small town of Xianning Hubei, and YUAN Hanhan came from Beijing. The three people came from different places and had different family backgrounds and personal choices. In the spatial juxtaposition relationship of documentary text, different geographic locations were granted two meanings of symbol and metaphor, thus breaking through the limit of linear time stream and realizing the narrative transfer of documentary from “time orientation” to “space orientation”.

Underclass people documentaries mostly narrate from an “omniscient perspective”. The narrative perspective of documentaries is the view and standpoint for the director to express the real world, which means “who or what to reproduce”^[4]. It is divided into lonely narrator which is also the first-person perspective, on-site narrator which is the second-person perspective and onlooking narrator which is the third-person perspective. The third-person perspective, also the onlooking perspective, is the narrative perspective usually used by underclass people documentaries. The onlooking perspective can be used to achieve the most natural onlooking presentation of documentary shooting. The photographer considers itself as an onlooker who will not interfere with the shooting object, thus presenting the most real and objective impressions to the audience. Although traditional documentaries can reproduce the real life easily by combining Grierson creation technique with narrative perspectives, underclass people documentaries use the third-person narrative perspective to provide an omniscient god’s perspective, allowing the audience to treat people’s experiences and lives objectively and fairly. For example, the documentary *Bumming in Beijing* used the third-person narrative perspective to tell five people’s lives in Beijing. As the pioneer of new documentaries in China, *Bumming in Beijing* showed significant television documentary style. The subjective narration of leading characters and the impact of image language and omniscient god’s perspective enabled the whole documentary to be presented before the audience more objectively and truthfully.

4. Value Writing of Underclass People Documentaries

The value connotation of a documentary is the fundamental existing way and realistic target of it. The famous scholar LYU Xinyu said: “A documentary can only appear on TV by playing its social functions. The documentary maker should be a social worker in a sense”.^[5] For this reason, audio-visual innovation of documentaries is not enough. Documentaries must reveal the social realistic issues through clarifying and communicating image value and social value based on recording the objects and the objective world, so that people can think about something, learn something and realize something.

Image writing for the underclass people reflects important historical value of documentaries. After entering the new era, the documentary creators are recording the changes in work, life, and destiny of the underclass people including rural

migrant workers using the camera, observing the rural migrant workers' joy, anger, sorrow and happiness in the city, and exploring the historical and cultural value carried by the population of rural migrant workers. The documentaries panoramically show the media images of rural migrant workers as writers and people written, while the audience as the receiver of documentaries witness China's urbanization process and historical changes through image writing for rural migrant workers. For example, the documentary *Last Train Home* directed by FAN Lixin also has rich historical value from perspective of history. On one hand, as ordinary rural migrant workers, CHEN Suqin and ZHANG Changhua are participants and witnesses in the process of urbanization, and the change of their identity and status forms "the history of entrepreneurship of rural migrant workers". On the other hand, the documentary makers write the images of rural migrant worker and record and reproduce "the past" of rural migrant workers, thus working out "the history of images of rural migrant workers". From a certain point of view, whether "the history of entrepreneurship of rural migrant workers" or "the history of images of rural migrant workers" is more comprehensive and more vivid than general "written history", because it shows people's perception and understanding for history and reflects the rich historical value of documentaries.

Underclass people documentaries are also rich in unique humanistic value. The expression of human-oriented ideology is the most important spiritual core scope of documentaries and the direct manifestation for humanistic value of documentaries. The value orientation for creation of documentaries has unique content and characteristics in different theme fields, and different kinds of film and television works have completely different main themes and value orientations. Whether the creators or the general public have difficulty in making reasonable and accurate value orientation and judgment while facing the complicated social phenomena and literary thoughts, and any literary works have universally applicable principles. Throughout history, excellent film and television works are always themed on "humanistic care" and explore and upgrade people's social value for the works, the creation of underclass people documentaries in the new period is no exception. For example, the documentary *City Dream* told a story of fighting between the urban management bureau and the nail household WANG Tiancheng. WANG Tiancheng was doing business on the roadside throughout the year. With eccentric personality,

WANG Tiancheng behaved rudely before the urban managers and even took off clothes to wrestle with them. But after he went home, he behaved tenderly before his families. As urban modernization advanced, WANG Tiancheng gradually changed his ideas in the the process of fighting with urban managers and finally reached an accommodation with them. The director presented a new version of "story between police and gangster" in the context of new era from an objective perspective and vividly showed the living circumstances of small potatoes in society in the process of urbanization, which gave humanistic care to underclass people and made us think for a long time.

5. Conclusion

Now China has entered a period of political, economic and cultural transition, social class division becomes increasingly obvious, and the underclass people begin to catch the eyes of people and gradually get the attention of documentary creators. The underclass people documentaries write images for the underclass people and draw a picture of underclass population by means of objective and real fact-recording technique from an equal perspective full of "humanistic care", thus expressing the humanistic and historical value of underclass people documentaries, enabling underclass people documentaries to become an effect channel of recording the living conditions of marginal population and solving social security problems, and enhancing the audience's concern and understanding for the underclass people.

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