

Comparative Analysis of Documentaries on Chinese Miners

-- "Behemoth" and "Miners, Horsekeeper, and Pneumoconiosis" as Examples

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Abstract. Against the backdrop that the issue of Chinese miners' pneumoconiosis has been presented in diverse narrative ways in documentaries, this paper aims to conduct a comparative analysis of narrative perspective, visual expression, sound design, and ethical distance in *Behemoth* (2015) and *Miners, Horsekeeper, and Pneumoconiosis* (2019). The core findings reveal that *Behemoth* constructs a macro-narrative of urban development at the cost of ecology and human lives through stylized post-industrial aesthetics, framing miners as silent victims in the context of Ordos' "ghost town" resulting from rapid urbanization. In contrast, *Miners, Horsekeeper, and Pneumoconiosis* presents the micro-level suffering of families afflicted by pneumoconiosis with raw realism, exposing the personal devastation caused by the disease through long-term tracking of relatives. This study reflects on the systemic invisibility of miners' suffering and prompts critical reflection on the ethical implications of China's development model.

Keywords: Chinese Miners; Pneumoconiosis; Comparative Analysis; Urbanization; Labor Rights; Documentary Visual Narrative.

1. Introduction:

Pneumoconiosis, also known as "black lung disease", is an incurable occupational disease that mainly affects coal miners. According to the Beijing-based organization Love Save Pneumoconiosis, approximately 6 million people in China are currently afflicted with this condition, which stands as a toxic legacy of decades of rapid economic development coupled with lax workplace safety regulations (Fu Beimeng, 2020). Despite the massive scale of pneumoconiosis, the first-hand experiences of workers suffering from it remain rarely mentioned in mainstream discourse. In recent years, independent documentaries have emerged as a crucial medium for articulating these invisible narratives, with "*Behemoth*" and "*Miners, Horsekeeper, and Pneumoconiosis*" showing the plight of Chinese miners and their suffering from disease.

Both films take miners and pneumoconiosis, an occupational disease, as their themes; they tell the story of workers' hard lives and suffering from the disease. However, there are big differences between the two in the choice of perspective (a city versus a family), the use of sound (the miners' silence and the use of narration), and the distance between the photographer and the miners. These elements make the final presentation of the two films very different.

Behemoth is a 2015 Chinese ecological documentary directed by Zhao Liang. It was selected for the main competition unit of the 72nd Venice Film Festival. This film records the labor of a series of workers in the energy industry chain of Inner Mongolia and the microcosm of the bubble economy in Ordos, a prefecture-level city located in Inner Mongolia Province. Since 2004, the local government has decided to build a new administrative capital on this land. However, the place failed to attract residents and was therefore called a "ghost town" (Christian Sorace, 2016). The film narrates the supply chain of urbanization, starting from the first steps of bombing the mountain, until the city is abandoned. *Miners, Horsekeeper and Pneumoconiosis* is a 2019 documentary filmed by director Jiang Nengjie about the lives of rural coal workers in the central Chinese province of Hunan. Jiang directed, acted, raised his funds, and shot with the simplest cameras. Director Jiang was born into a family of miners, and almost all of his male relatives suffered from pneumoconiosis to varying degrees. This documentary took 8 years to shoot, tracking the Jiang family from starting mining to stopping mining, then being bedridden due to pneumoconiosis, and finally the death of the subject.

Behemoth and *Miners, Horsekeeper, and Pneumoconiosis* are representative works that adopt different audio-visual techniques, narrative styles, narrative strategies, and objective distances, resulting in distinct effects in conveying reality. However, existing studies tend to focus more on individual research on *Behemoth*; few studies have focused on how their distinct narrative structures and aesthetic strategies reconcile different ethical stances regarding labor, development, and visibility. This study conducts a textual and visual comparative analysis of the two documentaries, with a focus on the aesthetic presentation of documentaries and the anthropology in visual narratives. It also attempts to clarify how documentary forms can reveal the imbalances in relation to Chinese labor rights and social development.

2. The Urbanization of *Behemoth* and the Power Relationship of *Miners, Horsekeeper, and Pneumoconiosis*:



Figure 1. Mine explosion. First shot. (*Behemoth*, 2015)



Figure 2. Empty city. Last shot. (*Behemoth*, 2015)

In Zhao Liang's *Behemoth*, urbanization is allegorized as a monstrous, devouring system that erases the subjectivity of laborers, reducing them to nameless, voiceless extensions of an industrial supply chain that prioritizes macro-scale destruction over human agency. The narrative traces this chain from the initial mine explosion, where coal ash scatters into the sky like an invisible gray behemoth slowly engulfing the world (Figure 1), through the depths of the coal mine with its roaring orange-red iron slurry, to the calm focus on a body struggling to breathe on a hospital bed, and finally to an aimless figure carrying a mirror through an abandoned city (Figure 2). This visual journey exposes the scars of urban modernization: vast pits from open-pit mining, withered vegetation due to water consumption, and fog from air pollution, evoking a post-industrial aesthetic of "broken mountains and rivers" that Zhao Liang identifies as profoundly wounding (Christian Sorace, 2016). Shot from an urban perspective, the film marginalizes coal miners, granting them minimal presence—no names, no voices, no rights, with even protests rendered humble and silent—mirroring their real societal status. The titular "Behemoth" embodies this monster not just in natural landscapes or the cold steel and concrete of urbanization, but in every worker's body, with the film's visual shock lying in equating the scarred earth and damaged human forms as parallel victims of modernity. Central to this allegory is the mirror as a symbolic visual element, deconstructing the individual-society

relationship and reflecting the hollowness of modern civilization: laborers bear mirrors on their backs, their bodies becoming "carriers" of development's costs, where injuries and illnesses serve as "feedback" from an exploitative system that abandons symbiotic responsibilities, marginalizing individuals instead. In desolate urban ruins, the mirror emerges as a "medium" exposing civilization's illusions, turning overdeveloped cities into empty "shells" where promised prosperity dissolves into mirage.

In contrast to *Behemoth's* distant, macro-urban fable, Jiang Yiliang's *Miners, Horsekeeper, and Pneumoconiosis* embeds its narrative in intimate family storytelling to reveal the everyday marginalization of laborers within power structures that render them disposable, highlighting systemic neglect through a "seeing the big from the small" approach that lends the documentary profound authenticity. Over eight years of tracking, the film chronicles the director's family from mine opening to closure and eventual bedridden suffering from pneumoconiosis, capturing raw scenes like the family's post-village return discussion on treatment reimbursement: "My diagnosis stated that tuberculosis was caused by silicosis, and I was reimbursed by Xinning County Hospital. It was said that tuberculosis was caused by silicosis, and no reimbursement was given. It was said that it was an occupational disease." This underscores occupational diseases as governmental blind spots, with China's focus on economic development overlooking individuals, as Foucault argues that specific power relations integrate life mechanisms into explicit calculations, making knowledge/power agents of human transformation (Foucault, 1998, p.143). Under China's social rules, workers with such diseases navigate double contradictions—public/private, production/non-production, cultural norms/deviations—blurring their boundaries: work is public yet driven by personal survival, leading to lowered status in job-seeking to endure inequality from the outset (Wing-Chung, 2014). Through silence, they exchange health for money and survival, embodying the truth that "workers offer their labor, not their lives," yet in underdeveloped conditions, they are consumed and ignored like other production means, forming a Foucauldian "governmentality" where urban development exacts its toll on workers' bodies as structural violence. Ultimately, while *Behemoth* delivers a satirical, remote critique through allegory and scale, *Miners* offers a complementary, intimate directness via personal immersion, together interrogating the invisible labor sustaining urban progress and the human costs concealed within it.

3. Miners' Bodies and Bare Life:



Figure 3. A close-up of a coal miner (*Behemoth*, 2015, at 31:08).

Behemoth's images are extremely objective and distant, with most of the shots being fixed shots focused on the mine landscape. But this kind of photography is not alienated from the human subject (Yanjie Wang, 2023). On the contrary, the calm images of the film contain extremely powerful language, and the audience can freely use the information conveyed by the images to mobilize emotions. At one point in the film, the camera suddenly shifts from empty shots of burning flames and roaring construction sites to the faces of silent miners (Figure 3). Coal dust became their costumes, and their red eyes looked directly at the camera, making eye contact with the audience through the

screen. This crosses the barriers of time and space, forcing the viewer to acknowledge their existence rather than ignore their situation.

Different from the image expression of *Behemoth*, almost all the shots in *Miners, Horsekeeper, and Pneumoconiosis* focus on the miners. But the lens of this documentary becomes one of the mine workers, not an objective record, but the eyes of one of them. There is also a portrait of a miner in *Miners, Horsekeeper, and Pneumoconiosis* (Figure 4), which was taken when the miner was in the late stages of lung disease. Behind this portrait, he thought it could serve as his posthumous portrait. Both of them used different image expressions to deprive miners of their rights and status. Putting them in the cracks of society, they are completely reduced to "bare life". Agamben posits "bare life" as a state where individuals are stripped of their political and legal rights, reduced to mere biological existence, excluded from the realm of "bios" (political life), and confined to "zoe" (bare biological life) (Giorgio Agamben, 1995). In the context of these documentaries, miners afflicted by pneumoconiosis often find themselves in such a state: faced with pure bare life, those in power choose to ignore or this is their "invisibility" in social relations.



Figure 4. A close-up of a coal miner. (*Miners, Horsekeeper and Pneumoconiosis*, 2019, at 52:13).

4. The Distance Between the Presentation of the Documentary and the Miners:

This section claims that the two documentaries construct two different scales of distance from the miners themselves and their lives. In the *Behemoth*, the director is distant from all miners. Judging from the real relationship between the director and the miners, they are not close and have no connection. Therefore, director Zhao Liang just used objective lenses to record their lives and how they work every day. The audience rarely sees moving shots in his works; they are always very stable and calm fixed shots observing people's activities. Regarding *Miners, Horsekeeper, and Pneumoconiosis*, the subjects of the documentary are the director's family members, and the director represents the emotional distance between the camera and the audience and the subjects - the miners. By adopting a more down-to-earth narrative method, the director uses tracking shooting, hand-held photography, and other methods to truly record the stories that happened to the miners. The director is not in an invisible position in the film, but communicates with the miners behind the camera, giving them enough rights to "make noise". However, the director did not interfere too much in the narrative of the film.

As Derek Paget and Jane Roscoe pointed out, the analysis of sound, word, and music in film generally and in documentary particularly, while certainly not negligible, has been a relatively under-researched area (Derek Paget and Jane Roscoe, 2006). In these two documentaries, the sound directly affects the psychological distance and emotional connections between the documentary and the miners, and between the miners and the audience. In *Behemoth*, the miners have no voice; they have no opportunity to speak. The act of "speaking" represents rights and means that a person can make his or her own voice heard. The miners are silent throughout the film, and the audience's feeling towards them is that they are at the bottom of society. Noisy sounds from the world, such as the operation of machines, the loud noise of mountain explosions, and the sound of wind mixed with

cinders, fill in their gaps. Another sound element is the background music of the film. In fact, the music design of this documentary is not the sound of the real scenes at the same time, but uses dramatic music. Dramatic music here is not a supplement, a filling, or coloring of an already sketched outline, but an essential part of our understanding of what it feels like to live, feel, act, and dream in particular ways (David Sonnenschein, 2001).

Miners, Horsekeeper, and Pneumoconiosis, on the other hand, create a direct connection between the viewer and the miners' physical emotions through details such as dialects, coughing, and breathing. The sounds in *Miners, Horsekeeper, and Pneumoconiosis* come mainly from real-world sounds, with almost no background music involved. Beginning in the late 1950s and early 1960s, film crews began to be able to easily synchronize image and sound; the development of synchronized sound equipment not only improved the fidelity of the sound but also improved the relationship between the filmmaker and the subject (Holly Rogers, 2014). Jiang Nengjie's film also adheres to this documentary shooting concept, completely choosing the authenticity of the sound, and it reinforces auditory presence and physical experience. Therefore, in both documentaries, the use of sound directly affects the psychological distance and emotional connection between the documentary and the miners, as well as between the miners and the audience.

5. Conclusion

This paper analyzes how the two documentaries have accomplished the construction of a documentary on the themes of Chinese miners and black lung disease by taking the textual aspect represented by social issues, the visual aspect represented by the body, and the narrative distance represented by sound, respectively.

Zhao Liang's *Behemoth* is an unconventional documentary that takes a highly stylized look at China's miners and the issues of China's post-socialist development, represented by urbanization. Jiang Nengjie's *Miners, Horsekeeper, and Pneumoconiosis* is a typical documentary that uses a highly realistic approach to show the bare life of miners and their disadvantaged position in social power relations.

The theoretical contribution of this research lies in three interrelated areas: First, it enriches documentary studies by juxtaposing stylized aesthetics and observational realism as contrasting paradigms for representing marginalized labor. Second, it advances discussions on "labor visibility" by demonstrating how audio-visual strategies either obscure or amplify miners' lived realities. Third, it offers a critical lens for understanding China's modernity, illustrating how documentary form itself becomes a site for negotiating the tensions between economic development and human dignity. Further research could explore how emerging documentary practices—such as participatory filmmaking involving miners themselves—might reconcile these tensions, or examine how state policies and media censorship shape the production and reception of such narratives. Additionally, cross-cultural comparisons with documentaries on mining communities globally could illuminate whether China's case reflects universal struggles or distinct features of its developmental model.

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