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Is There Such a Thing in the Chinese and Western Documentary Film?

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Abstract

This article explores the ongoing debate surrounding documentary film's relationship with reality, focusing on the concepts of implicit realism and subjectivism. It examines the origins of documentary realism, contrasting Western direct cinema with Chinese Jishi-ism. The article argues that while documentary film inherently strives for realism, theorists have approached it from various epistemological and ontological angles. The debate over the subjectivity and objectivity of documentaries, whether documentaries are an objective presentation of truth or the subjective expression of personality. Such an assumption, which we now believe to be philosophically untenable. In fact, the reception of the films was in general less conditioned by these film-makers 'rhetoric than by these powerful, if unstated, culturally implicit claims of objectivity. It highlights the shift from socialist realism to phenomenological realism in Chinese documentaries and the influence of postmodern-pragmatist perspectives that question the objectivity of documentaries. The article concludes that the question of convergence between representation and reality remains central to documentary film.

Keywords

Chinese Jishi-ism; Direct films; Documentary; Realism; Subjectivism; Reality

1. Introduction

Despite the intrinsic realistic, or naturalistic, tendencies of the documentary film, however, most theorists have attempted to theorize documentary realism in other than realist terms, both epistemologically and ontologically, like representational realism, direct realism, naive realism, and so on. What is undeniably the case, documentary films cannot evade the question of realism. Western direct films and Chinese Jishi-ism all reflect on the relationship between documentary film and the representation of actuality.

2. Origins and Development of Documentary Realism

The term "documentary film" was initially probably derived from the French term "documentaire", one coined by French critics to distinguish serious travel and expedition films from more superficial, generic travelogs (Aitken, 2013). From the beginning, the documentary was regarded as more serious, and authoritative than other types of film, and the source of that sense of greater import was thought to lie in the documentary's relationship with reality. The first use of the term documentary in English was probably by John Grierson in 1926. In developing his notion of documentary film is the "creative treatment of actuality" (Nichols, 2017). For example, Grierson argued that the documentary film should strive to represent an underlying reality, or what he called the "continuing reality", as opposed to the surface events of reality. Grierson was quite clear about this, arguing that, in some cases, a modernist or formalist approach might be better suited

to capturing what he called "the real" than documentary naturalism. Grierson was opposed to a "cinema verite" approach to the documentary film, and his own film, Drifters (1929), can be defined as an example of documentary-realist modernism, modeled on idealist premises. Griersonian documentary realism, therefore, can be defined as a form of abstract "representational realism".

In China, the concept of the term "documentary film" is inseparable from actuality or reality. The Chinese authoritative dictionary "Modern Chinese Dictionary" explains the documentary: "A film that truly reports a particular issue or event" (Qamar, Irtaza, & Raza, 2024). Another authoritative dictionary "Ci Hai" also describes "what a documentary film is about the fact that must be the reality, truth or existence in life" (Xia, Chen, & Chao, 2009). The so-called truth is the objective existence.

Chinese researcher Qian Ying mentioned in her book *The History of Chinese Documentary Development* that "The film begins with records. The Chinese documentary records real events in our society" (Qian, 2024). Shan Wanli believes that "the beginning of Chinese documentary film is also the beginning of Chinese film" (Shan, 2005). China's first film, *Dingjun Mountain* (1905), was the original record of the performance of the Peking Opera. In addition, *The War in Wuhan* (1911) and *The War in Shanghai* (1913), which responded to the Chinese Revolution of 1911, recorded the real process of the war. These two documentaries, which recorded revolutionary historical facts, created a Chinese documentary that focused on the real life that people were generally concerned about, focusing on the major real events that occurred at the time. This is also the definition of documentary in the *Movie Art Dictionary* published by China Film Press: "It is generally not restricted by the news, it can record the current events or actuality, and it can also reproduce the history in the past. Real events can also reveal some aspects of daily life that are ignored by people. They can discover themes from the society, or they can express the scenery of nature, animals" (Wang, Wang, & Feng, 2023). Regardless of the definition, it is not difficult to figure it out, the Chinese documentary is focused on real and realistic representation. Due to the influence of Lenin's proposed "Visualized political theory", traditional Chinese documentaries focus on news documentaries (or Newsreels), which achieve the purpose of advocacy and education. Just as "An account of a fact (or group of facts) is intersubjective in a given community if and only if all the members of it agree on it" (Bunge, 1993). This is socialist realism. The "truth" it said is not something else, but the truth that is inferred according to socialist theory. It is true that it conforms to the spirit of socialism. Even if there is no trace in the reality, it is still the real existence. At the same time, if it is determined that socialism is inherently right, then even if there is a phenomenon of backwardness and ugliness in actuality, it is not the truth. Because it does not conform to the spirit of socialism and cannot reflect the essence of socialism. Therefore, the political inclination and authenticity of the documentary during this period are interlinked.

2.1 Western Direct Cinema

The basis of Grierson's realism is the expression of abstract, ontological reality. The direct film's position is that through quiet observation, cameras can capture the truth in actuality. At the time of shooting, take non-intervention and uninterrupted, only observation, trying to hide the filmmaker’s own existence. Avoiding narration, music, or any other elements that might undermine objectivity during post-production. And try to strive for a direct representation of the real world without any medium.

2.2 Chinese Jishi-ism

In China, Jishi-ism took place in the 1990s, which is 30 years later than the western country, It is similar to direct cinema. For example, CCTV's series of documentaries *The Great Wall* (1991) is widely regarded as a milestone toward Jishi-ism. On the one hand, the documentary emphasizes the synchronization of sound and picture, the long takes, and in post-production, try to avoid adding extra commentary, soundtracks, and so on. On the other hand, the documentary emphasizes the communication and interaction between the observer and the observed. From this point of view, *The Great Wall* has the characteristics of verite cinema in its form. However, after *The Great Wall*, not only did the host or observer no longer appear, but also any other subjective interventions from the filmmakers were considered to be detrimental to the objectivity of the documentary. Observation has almost become the only legal method of the documentary. Obviously, Jishi-ism at this time has moved away from cinema verite and tends to direct cinema. "Jishi-ism advocates that the documentary presented an 'unmanageable truth', and endeavor to maintain the objectivity of the object" (Cao, 2023).

In 1992-1993, China’s CCTV convened more than 100 experts and scholars to define "television special programs" including documentaries. In the final definition of the documentary, experts and scholars made a clear statement on the documentary:" It requires capturing material directly from real life, shooting the real people. Fictional stories and role-playing are not allowed. The basic reporting method is photo or video interviewing, that is, in the process of the event, using the ‘wait, grab, pick’ or follow, to record the real thing that happened. While ensuring the overall truth of the record,

the details are required to be true" (CCTV Research Office, 1994). According to this definition, in addition to Jishi-ism, there is no other legal choice for documentaries. This is different from the previous socialist realism. It does not mention politics, does not talk about inclinations, and only focuses on whether works are presented in objective reality. Yang Tiancun clearly pointed out: "The Jishi-ism is also called phenomenological realism, which corresponds to the pursuit of the essence of realism" (McGrath, 2023). "Chinese Jishi-ism reveals its own ideology to draw a clear line with socialist realism" (Yang, 1995). However, a clear modern example of subjectivism is phenomenology. In fact, according to its founder, the gist of phenomenology is that it is a "pure egology", a "science of the concrete transcendental subjectivity" (Husserl, 1950). We can find the confusion and contradiction in Yang Tiancun's statement.

3. The Debate on Implicit Realism and Subjectivism

3.1 Representational Realism and Screen Theory

All the positions referred to previously can be closely related to reality. A representational realism position also accepts that a documentary representation is a constructed, signifying article, and means that a representation can never converge totally with reality or the truth. A representational realism position contains within it the propensity to slip into conceptual idealism: representations do not represent reality in any substantial way at all, but primarily mobilize concepts, ideas, and forms of rhetorical discourse. This approach to documentary epistemologically is at odds with a philosophical realism approach, because it does not focus on the idea that representation can converge with reality.

The "screen theory" approach of the 1970s is based on this idea. The object, in terms of screen theory, was to understand documentary as a signifying structure, rather than as something that could be said to represent reality. For instance, Bill Nichols argues that "We need to examine the formal structures of the documentary film, the codes and units which are involved, in order to re-see documentary, not as a kind of reality frozen in the amber of the photographic image a La Bazin, but as a semiotic system which generates meaning by the succession of choices between differences, the continuous selection of pertinent features" (Nichols, 1976). And in "Jishi-ism is not the truth", the Chinese scholar Zhong Danian regarded the documentary as a symbolic system and reconfirmed the semiotic identity of documentary images.

The paradigmatic shift from utopian representation in the Theory of Film to the critical deconstruction of signification here was based on the presumed need to understand how representations, such as documentaries, mobilize ideological configurations, and, how the idea of "reality" was often used to naturalize dominant ideology.

"A statement is objective or impersonal if it purports to describe, explain or predict one or more facts occurring in the external world- which of course includes the brains of others" (Bunge, 1993). It is subjective or personal if it is about one's own feelings or beliefs. The documentary gives the filmmaker sufficient freedom they put their personal thoughts into the documentary. Documentary representation begins to be less conditioned by objective events and statements.

3.2 Subjectivism and Phenomenology

Subjectivism is the philosophical view that the world, far from existing on its own, is a creation of the knowing subject. Like "'each offers a new way of seeing, of organizing experience', of 'imposing order on sensory data'" (Bunge, 1993). Similarly, The Chinese director Zhou Bing presents events as truthful re-enactments in *Memory* (2001), *The Forbidden City* (2005), and *Dunhuang* (2010), and another Chinese director named Sun Tiantian's *Kang Youwei*. *Bian* (2011) depicts him by storytelling and Wu Wenguang's first-person documentary in terms of independent production. In China, the representation can, at least "converge" with some sort of reality, although that reality may be an abstract one. Although different from the way of signifying in the Western, the Chinese documentary has begun to calm down from the direct cinema wave and has started to express personal subjectivity in the documentary.

The concept of reality, and of the ability of documentary to represent reality, was, in turn, marginalized, as the critical study focused on how documentary film mobilized forms of rhetoric to create the so-called "impression of reality".

3.3 Postmodern-Pragmatist Turn

In the 1980s, this approach was also reinforced by a postmodern-pragmatist turn, strongly influenced by Foucault, Derrida, and others, which tended to regard documentary representation as connected to ideology and the priorities of interest groups. Here, the documentary was primarily seen as a player in a political struggle, either on behalf of dominant groups or minorities. Such a position is fraught with obvious difficulty because it implies that documentary film does not, in fact, represent reality at all and is unable to achieve any kind of truth or objectivity. As the sociologist Luhmann (1990) said: "There are as many realities as observers, for every one of those is 'a construction of an observer for other observers'. Consequently, there is no objective truth. The individual only relates to his own constructs" (Bunge, 1993). Documentaries become the medium of ideology and individuals or groups, focusing on subjectivity and ideas.

4. The Search for Objectivity and the Embodiment of Subjectivity

In effect, the idea that documentary film is little more than a self-interested rhetorical structure removes part of the value from the documentary. The question of convergence remained an important one for documentary film because most lay people still assume that documentary film is able to be more than just a form of conventional rhetoric and that it is able, in some way, to represent reality well, or fairly, or "truthfully." Therefore, Bill Nichols argues that "It is only by examining how a series of sounds and images signify that we can begin to rescue documentary from the anti-theoretical, ideologically complicit argument that documentary-equals-reality, and that the screen is a window rather than a reflecting surface" (Nichols, 1976).

"Objectivism or realism is a philosophical doctrine. It is the view that except in the arts, we should strive to eliminate all subjective elements from our view about reality" (Bunge, 1993). In other words, objectivism prescribes that we should strive not to include our own feelings and desires in our pictures of the external world. Because of the context Grierson established for the documentary, is always described as an objective record of the filmmaker's subjectivity. and they reinforce an unmediated evidentiary claim. Therefore, the documentary is presented as windows on the world, not windows on the filmmakers' experience or even on the film-making. Even the persistent use of black-and-white stock long after the film had gone to color, earnest objectivity for an audience in the reception of realist images. Brian Winston's article "This objective-subjective stuff is a lot of bullshit." claims that "The anti-objectivity rhetoric turns out to be a smokescreen" (Winston, 2008).

In the case of the documentary that claim was that it is the film-maker's subjectivity that is being objectively recorded. "The films are claimed as objective evidence of the subjective experience of the filmmaker. But so sensitive is the filmmaker and so accurate is the recording of his experience on film that the audience can supposedly act as judge of the original event. The result is that this rhetorical strand, objectivity is bullshit" (Winston, 2008). From the day of its birth, the film has a subjective and personal style. The shooting location, commentary, post-production, and so on. All of that reflects the subjectivity of the documentary. They are deliberately and systematically "objectivity - unsigned" of the pursuit of objectivity, in essence, is the embodiment of subjectivity. The discussion was grounded in a search for objectivity, this is in fact that is a manifestation of subjectivity.

5. Conclusion

The question of the relationship between documentary film and the representation of reality has always been central to discussions and assumptions concerning the medium. The position in which it is assumed that a direct relationship may exist between representation and reality. Such an assumption, which we now believe to be philosophically untenable. As Chinese scholar Wang Chi believes in his article" The meaning of film material and the hegemony of direct cinema" that documentary representation is described as a chain of meaning that is constantly being promoted. In this meaning chain, images acquire their own meaning in mutual reflection. In fact, the reception of the films was in general less conditioned by these film-makers' rhetoric than by these powerful, if unstated, culturally implicit claims of objectivity. Like Alan Rosenthal said: "The objective-subjective argument is from my point of view, at least in film terms, a lot of nonsense. The films are my response to a certain experience (Rosenthal, 1972)". The films are now both self-expression while still being objective evidence.

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