

The Construction of Reality in Documentary Images from a Postmodern Perspective

Yan Jiang

College of Theater Film and Television, Communication University of China, Beijing, China

Email: yanjiang@cuc.edn.cn

How to cite this paper: Jiang, Y. (2024). The Construction of Reality in Documentary Images from a Postmodern Perspective. *Art and Design Review*, 12, 209-218. <https://doi.org/10.4236/adr.2024.123014>

Received: July 19, 2024

Accepted: August 13, 2024

Published: August 16, 2024

Copyright © 2024 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

Realism emerged in the 19th century as a rebellion against Romanticism and other ideological schools of thought, emphasizing social reality and scientific methods. Realism is seen as a symbolic choice and a political goal, defined as a credible expression of reality. In film, realism emphasizes naturalistic narrative techniques and the use of non-professional actors, striving to present genuine social life and human emotions. From a postmodern perspective, documentary images might break the fourth wall, emphasizing diversity, uncertainty, and relativity. This approach opposes absolute truths and grand narratives, instead focusing on local, temporary, and pluralistic viewpoints. This paper utilizes theories from narrative studies, anthropology, aesthetics, and communication studies to discuss the construction of reality in documentaries.

Keywords

Construction of Reality, Deconstruction of Symbol, Visual Culture, Imagery and Power, Audience Interpretation

1. Preface

The shadows cast on the wall behind us are all of the figures on the mural. However, these figures do not belong to the world of historical reality. They exist there merely to cast shadows.

2. Narratology: Anti-Traditional Narratives and Authenticity

2.1. Deconstructing Reality

John Grierson first introduced the term “documentary” in 1926, emphasizing that a documentary is a form of “creative treatment of actuality” (Grierson,

1926). This concept suggests that while documentaries are based on real events and real life, they also incorporate the subjective choices and artistic interpretations of the creators. According to this understanding of his theory, throughout the discussion, documentaries can be described as an infinite approach to truth, representative, and selective in their objectivity.

Non-narrative elements are simply another part of the film. In this context, cinematography is tentatively identified as the most salient aesthetic component within documentary imagery (though this is highly debated). While images can illustrate a point, ultimately, they must return to the meaning or significance of words. Documentaries have an affinity with other non-fiction systems (such as science, economics, politics, foreign policy, and education) that consider themselves to have instrumental power. They can and should change the world itself, and they can and should influence human actions. Their discourse has a calm atmosphere because they believe their relationship with reality is direct, immediate, and transparent. Power operates through them. They are carriers of dominance and conscience, power and knowledge, desire and will. From this perspective, documentary creation undoubtedly casts a veil over the surface of reality. It is not necessarily absolutely true but generates the effect of reality—a tool of power. To serve the needs of social reality, it often deconstructs reality.

2.2. Multiple Perspectives and Fragmented Narratives

London Can Take It! (Watt & Jennings, 1940) illustrates the daily life and impact of war on London during World War II through a mosaic of perspectives and temporal shifts. The director disrupts linear narrative by swiftly transitioning between various scenes and viewpoints—such as civilians’ daily routines, refugees in air raid shelters, and soldiers in combat—allowing the audience to grasp the full spectrum of war from multiple angles, leaving a profound impact. This approach turns the story into a puzzle, requiring viewers to actively piece together and interpret its elements. It deconstructs traditional notions of time and space, highlighting uncertainty and contingency.

Thus, documentaries construct truths of societal significance in their exploration process, effectively deconstructing reality to some extent. They emulate explanatory arguments, crafting a case that appeals to public rather than private responses.

From Alain Resnais’ 1956 film *Night and Fog* (Resnais, 1956) focusing on unnamed victims’ suffering in concentration camps, to the 2021 documentary *Colette* (Giacchino, 2020) which shifts focus to the periphery of traumatic memories, using interviews with the younger sister of a persecuted individual years later as a focal point, the exploration and evolution of viewpoints enrich the diverse development of documentary imagery. As Plato himself said: “When the eye of the soul gazes upon objects illuminated by truth and reality, it understands and knows them, and its possession of wisdom is evident; but when it fixes its gaze on the twilight of change and decay, it can only form opinions, its

disturbance is confused, its views are variable, and it seems to lack wisdom!” Films present us with images of things. Images are imitative disturbances and false paths; they cannot arouse our reason or nourish our desire for truth.”

3. Anthropology: Cultural Relativism and Authenticity

A country’s documentary is like a family’s photo album.

Lefebvre once proposed: “Space is a product of the reproduction of social relations and the construction process of social order.” (Tong, 2011) The earliest creators to travel to China to shoot documentaries can be traced back to the late Qing Dynasty. This was akin to an anthropological record. Exotic creators completed narrative stories by collecting characteristic symbols and visually conveyed them to the world through images, giving the exploration of Eastern spaces an international perspective.

3.1. A Glance at the “Gaze”

Scholar Urry once termed these Western creators who came to China to collect and transform story images as “the tourist gaze.” (Urry, 1990) These travelers had a particular fondness for China’s historical themes and marginal spaces.

A sense of curiosity to some extent drives travelers to explore the distant and unattainable “exoticism.” However, cultural differences formed within historical contexts are an objective phenomenon and indeed a complex issue. This article will not elaborate on this complexity but will discuss the subjectivity present in the construction of documentary authenticity caused by these objective differences. The documentary *Lost Horizon* (Capra, 1937) seems to linger on the artistic expression of a “pure land” and the curious gaze towards “exotic costumes.” This gaze is still mentioned in the narration: “The Yao people fled to the southwestern side of the Ailao Mountains in Yunnan to escape the oppression of the Han people.” The creators cannot completely eliminate their entrenched cultural standpoint. In cases where the documentary’s theme has weak relevance to personal experiences, it is difficult for the creators to entirely escape subjective judgment. This is the “border area of China’s ethnic minorities” in the eyes of the creators, constructing the meaning of the “Yao people” for the audience. However, truly understanding the appearance of society requires delving into the inner workings of the observed subjects and even believing in their beliefs. This cannot be achieved through sentiment and imagination alone.

Western scholar Campbell pointed out that in humanitarian photography, “the relationship between the subject and the objective world is structured by a dominating relationship.” (Zhang, 1998; Kember, 1998) The documentary *China’s Seven Wonders: The Forbidden City in Beijing*, (Rickett, 2008) produced by the Discovery Channel, offers a detailed account of the highly centralized imperial power in China over the past 500 years. (Chen, 2008) The entire documentary resembles a “wild history” filled with gossip, satisfying the audience’s curiosity about Puyi’s personal life, representing a re-shaping of history. For exam-

ple, in one interview segment, Puyi states: “It was necessary to install a telephone in the palace—this marvelous Western import.” (Voiceover: With the telephone, he felt no longer like a bird in a cage.) The telephone, representing Western technology, subtly permeates the visual language, personifying Western ideology and illustrating American humanitarianism through the depiction of personal freedom. This aligns authoritative values with the audience’s viewing pleasure, promoting Western dominant ideology. Tony Davies, in his book “Humanism,” notes that humanism has been criticized as an ideological smokescreen that obscures various oppressions in modern society and culture, pretending to act in the name of marginalized and oppressed people. (Davies, 1997)

Of course, in order to be more easily accepted by Chinese audiences, the creators of the documentary typically include Chinese faces among the team members. At the same time, as a factual reference, historical documentary footage preserved by various countries during different historical periods also provides valuable references for China. In the recording of macro historical backgrounds, the construction of authenticity in documentary footage has significant historical importance.

3.2. Creator’s Private Domain—Expression of Authenticity in Primitive Culture

Bazin believed that “to understand what a film expresses, it is best to first understand how it expresses it.” (Bazin, 1975) In the documentary imagery of China, the concept of “China’s expression” has been a topic of much debate. Scholar Zhang Tongdao once commented, “The expression of ‘China’ is sharply divided into two qualities.” (Zhang, 2009) A significant reason for this is the short filming period of just 22 days, which made the filming purely an intuitive experience. Therefore, in my view, Antonioni’s depiction is merely a fragmented capture of “China’s expression.”

Through extended observation and cultural immersion, Phil Agland’s documentary *Beyond the Clouds* (Agland,1994) connects people and objects using a new documentary structure inspired by traditional Chinese serialized novels and resembling a TV series. The narrative is smooth and the structure is clear. In his delicate and restrained cinematography, *Beyond the Clouds* creates a lyrical atmosphere of tranquility and peace, resembling a museum built with documentary footage. The layered and interconnected montage reflects a metaphysics based on traditional Chinese aesthetics and philosophy. Agland’s meticulous “Chinese observational method” ensures an authentic reproduction of reality, faithfully constructing the “event scene.” This documentary is no longer merely an Oriental fantasy of Shangri-La. Such documentary footage, dependent on a primitive cultural background, maximally relies on the authenticity of different cultures themselves under the possibility of subjective expression and unfolds creativity within this context, which is truly remarkable.

Different creators, with their varied values, present different outcomes when applied to their expressive purposes. As a creative act, documentary filmmaking

is “not a simple ‘recording’ of a given moment, like all forms of photographic representation, because it cannot avoid being influenced by the moral and value systems of those who operate it.” (Hall, 1997) This precisely proves that the world constructed in documentary imagery is the director’s own version of the world. Regardless of whether they adopt the stance of an observer, chronicler, painter, or any other role, they cannot avoid subjectivity.

4. Aesthetics: Poetics and Authenticity

4.1. The Beauty of Control

In the book *Film Art: An Introduction*, Bordwell and Thompson claim, “We often differentiate documentaries from fictional films based on their production differences.” (Bordwell & Thompson, 2023) Generally, documentary directors only control certain variables in preparation, shooting, and assembly; some variables (e.g., script, rehearsal) can be omitted, while other variables (e.g., lines) can be omitted as well. Some (like setting, lighting, and characters’ behaviour) are present but often uncontrollable. They overlook the extent to which fictional films can mimic these characteristics, even in poetic or classic expository documentaries like *The Thin Blue Line* (Morris, 1988) or *Far from Poland*, (Godmilow, 1984) where there is a high degree of control over scenes, lighting, and behaviour.

The documentary *Naked Spaces: Living is Round* (Trinh, 1985) tends to identify an alternative set of values from other cultures and lifestyles, expressed in a poetic and obscure style. It is almost entirely constructed around the type of suspense used in the renowned documentary *Nanook of the North*. (Flaherty, 1922) This classic work emphasizes the rhythm of its form and the elegance of its expression. Although it was considered a coherent narrative at the time, under postmodern interpretation, we can see the fractures and incompleteness within it. For instance, does the scene of hunting seals faithfully reproduce the Inuit’s hunting methods or has it been arranged and edited by the director? (However, this paragraph does not discuss narrative theory but rather the aesthetics of his works.)

In Flaherty’s works, linear images arranged in chronological order and arguments driven by causal, premise-conclusion, problem-solving temporal processes have transformed into a “vertical,” more musical associative mode. In this mode, scenes appear one after another to create poetic resonance rather than adhere strictly to temporal and logical progression.

Naked Spaces shows us West African villages and some architectural details (with a few shots of residents). It does not inform us about the historical functions, or economic, or cultural significance of these particular buildings but rather accompanies the off-screen voice track of a female trio, unfolding alongside indigenous music from various regions. Each voice provides different forms of anecdotal commentary on issues such as fact and value, meaning and interpretation. The subtle aesthetic expression embedded in the construction of realism in documentary imagery establishes the aesthetic tone of the entire work, creating

an artistic atmosphere in the narrative space, and linking authenticity with watchability.

4.2. Playful Counterforce

In the aesthetic construction of documentaries, parody is often employed, allowing documentaries to critique authority and tradition in a lighthearted and humorous manner, thereby enhancing the film's social critique. *The American Ruling Class* (Kirby, 2005) uses a parody of musicals and news documentaries to explore the power and influence of the American elite class, revealing the absurdity and irrationality behind elite rule. In the film, Lucas combines real people and events with fictional storylines to showcase different levels of power dynamics and cultural phenomena in American society.

5. Communication Studies: Media and Authenticity

Lenin once said that film is “the most important of all the arts—a powerful means of communication with the illiterate masses.” (Lenin, 1969)

5.1. The Secret of Images: Extending into Reality

The debate among early documentary filmmakers about fictional works was particularly fierce. Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov and British documentary filmmakers John Grierson, Paul Rotha, and Basil Wright made sharp and unsparring comparisons between the commercial film industry the formal potential of film, and the social purpose of documentaries. They condemned Hollywood as a symbol of escapism and glitz. If documentaries also rely on images, at least they have more formal innovation and socially responsible motives and intentions.

Jean Baudrillard chose to revive Platonism for the postmodern world. In “The Evil Demon of Images,” Baudrillard states: “The secret of the image... must never be sought in its distinction from reality, and therefore not in its representational value (aesthetic, critical, or dialectical), but rather in its ‘extension into reality,’ in its short-circuiting with reality, and ultimately in its implosion with reality. For us, the increasingly clear lack of distinction between the image and reality no longer leaves room for representation itself...” (Baudrillard, 1994) There is a primitive joy in images, an anthropological joy, a savage fascination unimpeded by aesthetic, moral, social, or political judgments. It is for this reason that I consider them immoral; their fundamental power lies in this immorality. Like Plato, Baudrillard takes things to the extreme; in his case, to the extreme of nihilism rather than idealism. The representation of documentary images resembles a simulation of war more than war itself. Through them, joy and power, ideology and utopia, subject and subjectivity are tangibly expressed.

5.2. Interactive Texts: Shifting Power

I once came across an interesting explanation: “Our small taverns and metropolitan streets, our offices and renovated rooms, our train stations and our factories

seem hopelessly to have locked us in. Then cinema came along, blasting this prison world to bits with the dynamite of a tenth of a second. So now, calmly and adventurously, we travel through its far-flung ruins and fragments.” (Benjamin, 1969) Cinema, with its unique expressive methods, redefines and reconstructs reality, shattering the audience’s traditional perception of reality, and thus offering a new way of understanding within the postmodern context. This perspective not only focuses on the content of the film but also on its form and the audience’s experience.

5.2.1. The Dual Task of Sound: Voice of God and Audience Identification

Expository texts directly engage with the audience, and films that use *Voice of God* narration, such as *Night Mail* (Wright & Watt, 1936) and “The Battle of San Pietro,” (Huston, 1945) are the most familiar examples.

If there is one overriding ethical/political/ideological issue in documentary production, it is likely: How should people be handled? How should characters and issues be portrayed appropriately? Each mode addresses this issue in different ways and poses different ethical questions for practitioners. For example, the expository mode raises ethical questions about sound: how the text speaks objectively or persuasively (or as a propaganda tool). In terms of the dual responsibility to film subjects and the sought-after audience’s identification, speaking for or representing someone or something means what?

For the audience, observational documentaries establish a reference system very similar to fictional films, often revolving around interview forms in interactive modes.

5.2.2. Interviews: Who Holds the Power?

The form of interviewing itself raises ethical questions: it is a hierarchical discourse form stemming from unequal distribution of power, akin to confession and interrogation. How is this inherent hierarchical structure managed? Do filming and raw archives pose different ethical issues? What rights do interviewees retain? Legal protections provide some guidance in certain cases but not all. Informed consent offers another guideline; many documentary filmmakers apply principles of freedom of speech and press freedom, blurring the interviewee’s right to privacy.

Who Killed Vincent Chin, (Choy & Tajima-Peña, 1987) tells the story of a young Chinese-American man beaten to death by an unemployed white auto worker and his stepson, partly because they mistook him for Japanese, giving the auto worker and his son considerable time to explain to them and their friends. This restraint is all the more evident in the context of Renee Tajima and Christine Choy as women of colour and Choy’s long history of political filmmaking, not obedience to good news standards but a strong rhetorical strategy. The diversity of perspectives combines the narrative of auto workers with the narrative of Mr. Chen’s murdered friends and family, extracting a large number of shots from TV news broadcasts at the time of the event, and the interlaced raw mate-

rials created during the editing process, which requires viewers to find answers to the questions posed by the film's title.

5.2.3. Beyond Interviews (Commentary): Historical Truths in the Siege

Emile de Antonio's groundbreaking film *In the Year of the Pig* (de Antonio, 1969) turns to the past, or more precisely, to the relationship between the past and the present. Some films, like *Shoah*, (Lanzmann, 1985) emphasize the impact of the past on the present by making the interviewing process itself a central part of the film. Others, such as *Mommy, Are We Winning the War on Terror?* (Blumenthal, 1974) and *Rosie the Riveter*, (Field, 1980) highlight a continuous process of visual interpretation of the past through archival footage, transcending interviews to reconstruct the past in the present. For example, *In the Year of the Pig* revolves around a series of interviews with numerous observers or participants in America's involvement in the Vietnam War. This film helps establish a historical reconstruction based on eyewitness testimony and archival footage rather than commentary from voiceovers. De Antonio's presence is relatively subtle but continually implied through editorial comments (such as the statue of a Civil War soldier at the beginning of the film). Although we only hear De Antonio interviewed once and never see him on camera, the clear historical narrative about the origins of the war, clearly at odds with the U.S. government's account, indirectly points to De Antonio's organizational presence. The argument is his, but it arises from the selection and arrangement of evidence provided by witnesses rather than from commentary by a narrator. (The film fundamentally lacks voiceover commentary.)

On the other hand, *Babies and Banners*, (Gray, 1979) and *Union Maids* (Klein, Mogulescu, & Reichert, 1977) give the impression that the dispute is that of a witness and that the filmmakers merely act to present and illustrate it. (The film still lacks voiceover commentary, and the director's structural presence is not so obvious.) This focus on transcending has shifted from the author-centric authoritative voice to the witness-centric testimonial voice.

6. Conclusion

How many political issues have evolved into historical questions, how many historical issues have evolved into issues of the times, how many issues of the times have evolved into generational issues, how many generational issues have evolved into family issues, and finally become life propositions for everyone.

Documentary filmmakers maintain a pure love for documentaries and are passionate about real life, but they should strive more to "approach the truth," and maintain their independence and confrontation in front of power discourse. They calmly express and analyze through their lenses, using documentaries to explore their relationship with social life, and even to uncover the truth of facts.

7. Postscript

Our engagement with historical reality may only be achieved through represen-

tations, and sometimes these representations seem more eager to chase their own tails than to guarantee the authenticity of what they refer to.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Agland, P. (1994). *Beyond the Clouds*.
- Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and Simulation* (Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser). University of Michigan Press. <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.9904>
- Bazin, A. (1975). *What Is Cinema? Volume 1* (H. Gray, Trans.). University of California Press.
- Benjamin, W. (1969). The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. In H. Arendt (Ed.), *Illuminations* (pp. 217-251). Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Blumenthal, J. (1974). *Mommy, What's the Cold War*.
- Bordwell, D., & Thompson, K. (2023). *Film Art: An Introduction* (13th ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.
- Capra, F. (1937). *Lost Horizon*.
- Chen, G. (2008) *Discovery: Research on Programs of the Discovery Channel*. China International Broadcasting Press.
- Choy, C., & Tajima-Peña, R. (1987). *Who Killed Vincent Chin*.
- Davies, T. (1997). *Humanism* (pp. 126). Routledge.
- de Antonio, E. (1969). *In the Year of the Pig*.
- Field, C. (1980). *Rosie the Riveter*.
- Flaherty, R. (1922). *Nanook of the North*.
- Giacchino, A. (2020). *Colette*.
- Godmilow, J. (1984). *Far from Poland*.
- Gray, L. (1979). *Babies and Banners: Story of the Women's Emergency Brigade*.
- Grierson, J. (1926). *Creative Treatment of Actuality*.
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (Translated by Xu Liang & Lu Xinghua). Sage Publications & Open University.
- Huston, J. (1945). *The Battle of San Pietro*.
- Kember, S. (1998). *Virtual Anxiety: Photography, New Technology and Subjectivity* (pp. 11). Manchester University Press.
- Kirby, J. (2005). *The American Ruling Class*.
- Klein, J., Mogulescu, M., & Reichert, J. (1977). *Union Maids*.
- Lanzmann, C. (1985). *Shoah*.
- Lenin, V. I. (1969). On Film and Cinema. In V. I. Lenin (Ed.), *Lenin Collected Works* (Vol. 45, pp. 362-365). Progress Publishers.
- Morris, E. (1988). *The Thin Blue Line*.
- Resnais, A. (1956). *Night and Fog*.
- Rickett, J. (2008). *The Forbidden City*.

- Tong, Q. (2011) *Philosophy of Space* (pp. 31-41). Peking University Press.
- Trinh, T. M. (1985). *Naked Spaces: Living Is Round*.
- Urry, J. (1990). *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*. Sage Publications.
- Watt, H., & Jennings, H. (1940). *London Can Take It*.
- Wright, B., & Watt, H. (1936). *Night Mail*.
- Zhang, T. D. (2009). Chinese Expression: Interpreting Antonioni and Ivens' Chinese Images. *Contemporary Cinema, No. 3*, 94-96.
- Zhang, X. L. (1998). Critique of the Subjectivity of Existentialism. *Philosophy and Culture, 25*, 45-60.