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SHOWING CULTURAL CONTEXT AND REVEALING CULTURAL MOTIVATION: “OBSERVATION” AND “PARTICIPATION” IN FOLK CULTURE DOCUMENTARIES

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Abstract

“Observation” and “participation” are the two most important creation modes in the history of documentaries. Both represent different documentary ethics and views of the reality. This paper takes folk culture documentary as an example. It combines folk culture documentary with specific folk culture cases. It analyzes the ways of “observation” and “participation” in folk culture documentary production by showing cultural context, explaining human behavior, and revealing cultural motivation.

Keywords: Folk Culture Documentary, Folk Culture, Observation, Participation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since its birth, with the update of film equipment, the change of creation technology and the change of the audiences' need of the times, documentary has experienced the changes of creation mode, making concepts and method. In the 1920s and the early 1930s, the former Soviet Union documentary makers Dziga Vertov and others borrowed avant-garde shooting techniques and boldly went through the creative form of documentaries (Aufderheide, 2007). Under the leadership of John Grierson, the British documentary movement in the 1930s further promoted the social function of documentaries and made the production of documentaries more in line with the needs of the country and nation. The 1950s cinema of the Britain started a program while Lindsay Anderson and others used documentaries to show the poetry of ordinary people's everyday lives (Mackillop & Sinyard, 2018). In the early 1960s, in the United States Frederick Wiseman, Maysles Brothers, and Robert Drew created a neutral creative tone with an observational style. During the documentary of the 1970s and 1980s, filmmakers gradually began reproducing history through use of archival film materials and expert interviews, which further strengthened the historical display ability of documentaries.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The 1930s definition of documentary by John Grierson continues till this day, when he defined it as "creative treatment of actuality." (Barsam, 1973) This definition points out two important key issues in the creation of documentaries. First, the subjects of documentaries are real people and real events, and the core principle of making a documentary is authenticity. Second, the creation of documentaries is a kind of creative processing with subjective initiative. This definition also sheds light on a paradox in documentary filmmaking, where the factual ideas are indeed insightful, but not actually engaging. Since the development of documentaries, the reason why documentaries have maintained strong vitality and attractiveness is that the form of documentaries has achieved a balance between a creative vision and respect for history and the objective world (Nichols & Baron, 2024).

The creative processing of documentary makers has contributed to the formation of the director's style, documentary genre, and creative mode, such as Joris Ivens' poetic lens, Dziga Vertov 's experimental avantguard perspective, Frederick Wiseman's observational style. These different directing styles have given us a unique sense of experiencing the world. Nichols (2017) divided documentaries in following six basic modes: "participatory, reflexive, and performative. poetic, expository, observational." Meanwhile, he proposed the interactive mode, which gradually explores and develops with the rapid development of new media. Nichols argued that we should identify several types of documentary films. In this context modes and models play a key roles (Nichols, 2017). Models and modes represent the way in which different documentaries especially cinematic documentaries are made (Nichols, 2017).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 As Two Important Documentary Creation Modes— "Observation" and "Participation"

Around 1960, the history of film creation ushered in a technological innovation. The lightweight 16mm camera and portable synchronous tape recorder came out, and reliable sound recording for a reality in process of documentary creation. This seemingly small step in the field of technology has driven a giant leap in the concept of film making. Before the birth of the portable synchronous recorder, due

to the cumbersome radio equipment, it was difficult to receive the synchronous sound of the shooting scene, such as ambient sound and human voice. As a result, more documentary filmmakers have to add subtitles or commentaries during post-production to replace the subject's speech to express their views clearly. In fact, the voice of the subject is deprived, and the documentary ultimately expresses more of the filmmaker's voice. The emergence of portable synchronous recording enables the protagonists of documentaries to speak for themselves. They can fully tell their stories and opinions in front of the camera instead of relying on the filmmakers' post-dubbing. This is a major revolution in the connection between the director of film and the subject in the history of documentary filmmaking. In such a revolution, two distinct concepts of documentary filmmaking were born at the same time, known in film history as the "Direct Cinema and the Cinéma vérité." They questioned the utility of voice-over commentary, and the observational and participatory representations became extremely engaging. The American Drew Group (Robert Drew, the Maysles Brothers, etc.) is the representative of the "American Direct Cinema Movement", which advocates minimizing the human factor during filming, eliminating pre-scripting or interfering with the filmed. They stress that the documentary maker is a state of absolute spectatorship. The filmmakers did not intervene in the event, did not control the subject, did not interview the subject, used the new synchronous sound technology to show the life situation, weakened the editing, and expressed it with the image and footage itself. Moving shots, blurring shots, and shaky shots were common at that time, because the direct film makers often didn't require actors to go through advanced rehearsals in pursuit of an immersive viewing experience. Some large-scale scenes, such as parades, elections, urban riots, rallies, etc., are simply unpredictable, so the direct filmmakers often follow their subjects at all times to capture actions and stories that may occur at any time. Although some of these shots look rough, this rough documentary aesthetic is not a defect. On the contrary, it shows the original appearance of the event to a greater extent, showing the undisguised reality. Films such as *The Salesman* (1968) and *Grey Gardens* (1975) are classic works completed under the guidance of this making concept (Copenhaver, 2002). In France, however, another group of documentarians, represented by Jean Rouch and Marcel Ophüls, took a completely different approach. They advocated the formation of interactions between the filmmakers and the subjects, such as questioning, communication, guiding and so on, and showed the inner world of the subjects in the interaction, forming a profound excavation of social phenomena, thereby showing records and reflections on the real life. Both of the above used new sound technology to emphasize the use of simultaneous sound in documentary production, and oppose the imposition of commentary. At the same time, the two discussed two important topics in the documentary:

3.2 The Relationship between the Filmer and the Filmed

With the continuous development and extension of the documentary production concept and production mode, the shooting ethics in the documentary production process, that is, the relationship between the filmer and the filmed, has become increasingly complicated. Today's documentaries are increasingly inclined to amplify the individual stories of characters, that is, to tell history and society from the bottom. Even with celebrities and big shots as the subjects, the filmmakers focus on the details of the subjects' daily work and life, and put characterization at the core of the film. Behind this, it actually reflects a kind of social relationship. The documentary filmer is not only facing a single individual, because behind each individual there is a social and historical support force. Political and personal is not a binary separation relationship. Personal daily life is also a public and political proposition. Every individual story is a political expression. The relationship between the filmer and the filmed reflects the unique perspective of documentary filmmakers to explore social and public

issues and discuss political issues from the bottom up. When the subject has the initiative to express, when the daily life of the subject of the documentary is often placed under the lens, when the filmer asks questions again and again, some new problems begin to emerge during the shooting process. For example, is the subject voluntarily? Does the person being watched and their behavior cause discomfort to the audience? Or increase the audience's desire to peep? To what extent can the filmer observe the subject's life? Will the filmer's questioning of the subject cause discomfort to the subject? Is there any element of acting or lying about the person being photographed? Are the pictures and information obtained in such a relationship game approaching the truth or drifting away?

3.3 The Authenticity of Documentaries

The question of the authenticity of documentaries has always been under debate, and there is no standard answer so far. In the early days of documentaries, the common understanding of documentarians was that they tended to think that documentaries were mirror reflections of real life and real people. The representation of documentary film is not only realistic but also portrays real time and space both in fiction and non-fiction (Bruzzi, 2002). The films were identified as the representation of point of view not a mere window into the reality (Ruby, 1991). To put it simply, I think the authenticity of documentaries can be divided into two poles: one is the real level of appearance, that is, the daily life manifestations that are seen and heard with one's own eyes and ears. The other is the real level of thoughts or ideas, that is, the concepts and values that people have solidified in their hearts. The observational mode promoted by the Direct Cinema is more of a superficial truth. This production method emphasizes the observation of the daily life of the subject through an unobtrusive camera to obtain first-hand, direct information on behavior, language, and scene. On the contrary, the *Cinéma vérité* are more inclined to obtain the information behind the images displayed on the screen through interviews and communication between the documentary filmmaker and the subject, including the psychological reaction of the subject and the historical information of the event. In the process of research, shooting and production of many documentaries, these two views of authenticity are comprehensively used by documentary filmmakers. Because truth is actually the product of human intervention in the material world, the material world does not depend on human senses to exist, but it is perceived through human senses. Therefore, a good documentary is not a record that stays on the surface, nor does it ignore the basic aesthetic essence of the documentary, but can express the truth that reflects the essence of things through the deep record of objective things.

3.4 When Folk Culture Documentary Encounters "Observation" and "Participation"

Folklore is formed and accumulated in the long-term development of human society. Folklore is the sum of the production and consumption, clothing, food, housing and transportation, weddings and funerals, seasonal orders, entertainment, etiquette and belief of the people from generation to generation (Fulan, 2007). The function of documentary is to transfer ideas and bring closer people, places and culture (Giesman, 2014). The folklore documentaries encapsulate a swath of folklores, rituals, more traditional behaviors and songs. Moreover, it also plays a decisive role in bonding people of various beliefs and thoughts (Sherman, 2014). The documentaries of folk culture seldom rely on specific folk culture. The study of folk culture involves topics such as cast, state power, local culture, women's status, and cornered groups. The starting point of filming of folk culture documentaries originates from the documentary maker's knowledge and understanding of specific folk culture. Currently, folk culture films focus on have individual folk ritual activities, and adopted a nuanced, small-to-large technique to represent folk culture by molding individual character and group character.

3.5 Presenting Folk Cultural Context and Human Behavior Process Through “Observation”

Various types of documentaries, folk culture films should place several characters in a different folk culture context, present folk culture through various stories of the characters. “Out of context, code is incomplete because it contains only partial information.” (Hall, 2003) That is to say, folk culture documentaries put more emphasis on the presentation of folk culture contexts or specific communities. The significance of doing community studies ethnographically is to provide a sample of economic and cultural adaptation and participation in the contemporary world and historical dimension, so there is still a need for personal, direct and emotional observation (Zhuang, 2015). The need for a successful folk documentary is not the only visual recording of the context, but a clearer struggle that can provides a clear picture in to the processes of human habit (Sherman, 2014).

4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This article takes the Daokou Fire God Temple Fair held in Daokou, a small town in northern China as an example. Daokou Fire God temple fair is a traditional community folk activity in northern Henan province, China, which has existed for more than a hundred years as an important way for people to sacrifice and pray. The Fire God in China is the God of fire in Chinese mythology and legend. It is one of the oldest god worshipped by people. According to the legend, in ancient times, Sui ren made fire by drilling wood, which brought light to human beings and made them enter the stage of cooked food. In memory of him, people called him the Fire God. In primitive society, the primitive people offered sacrifices to the Fire God every year to thank him for his blessing and kindness to mankind. Later, this custom was mainly popular among Chinese people. There are many kinds of performances in Daokou Fire God temple fair, such as stilt, dragon dance, lion dance, yangko dance, bamboo horse and so on. The organizers and performers spontaneously participate in the rehearsal and performance, and spontaneously donate money to maintain the operation of the ancient society. The development of Daokou Fire God temple fair has now become the people’s praise and yearning for a better life. As a unique form of expression and carrier of Daokou local spring festival culture, the fair not only includes ceremonial ritual street tours and performances, but also extends to produce snacks, tourism, role playing and other rich contents. Daokou Fire God temple fair, as a typical folk culture, shows a variety of folk culture at different levels. The belief in the God of fire and its extended community gathering are the media for local society to integrate cultural resources. Temple fair integrates belief, trade, food and folk art. It is a place where folk culture gathers. The Chinese famous anthropologist Zhong (2010) divides folk culture into three parts: material, social and spiritual folk culture. Zhong believed (2010): Material folk culture refers to the repeated and patterned activities of human beings in the process of creating and consuming material wealth, and the product forms derived from such activities. It mainly includes production folklore, business folklore, food folklore, clothing folklore, residential folklore, transportation folklore and medicine and health care folklore; Social folk culture, also known as social organization and institutional folk culture, refers to the customary system of social relations formed by people under specific conditions. It is concerned with the collective behaviors used and inherited in the process of union and communication from individuals to families, villages, nations, countries and even the international community. It mainly includes social organization folklore, social system folklore, annual festivals and folk entertainment customs.

Under normal circumstances, the material folklore and social folklore in folk culture are often presented in a more manifesting way, such as a grand folk ritual, a unique clothing with regional characteristics, etc. As the theme of folk culture documentary or the life background of the protag-

onist, these contents are more likely to be seen, heard and recorded by the documentary filmmakers intuitively. For example, the grand parade performance of the Daokou Fire God Temple will last for three days every year. The process of the parade performance is complicated and the team is huge. It needs to be closely observed and recorded by the documentary director as the basic video material of the documentary, such as setting up a lamp shed, inviting the Fire God from the temple, offering sacrifices to the Fire God, posting invitation to other teams, performing on the own site, performing in the street, sharing the feast, sending the Fire God to the temple and so on. These ritualized behaviors are the core content of the folk culture, the symbol that distinguishes this folk culture from other folk cultures, and the cultural source of the unique way of living and thinking of the protagonist in the film. The detailed observation and recording of these contents is the most basic respect for the folk culture, and it is also the premise for the production of this documentary. At the same time, in addition to the unique folk rituals, the normal life of the protagonist, such as clothing, food, housing and transportation, is also an important portray of folk culture. During the production of documentaries, observation and recording of this part can more truly reflect the living space of the protagonist, and show the characteristics of folk culture from details, but this part is easily forgotten by the documentary makers.

Daokou Fire God Temple Fair is located in Daokou, an ancient town with a long history and civilization, which was an important land and water wharf in China in ancient times. The China Grand Canal, a world cultural heritage, passes through the ancient town of Daokou. The protected area preserves rich historical relics such as original ancient river channels, ancient wharves, ancient city walls, ancient temples, ancient dwellings. In the production of documentaries, the careful observation and selective presentation of these contents will increase the cultural connotation of the film, because all materials are the carriers of the spiritual world. For example, the unique residential form of Daokou actually shows the Feng Shui culture of Chinese residential culture. In the ancient streets along the canal, no matter what kind of dwellings are, they pay great attention to Fengshui. The knowledge of Fengshui is a mystical in China. Chinese people opine that earth is made up of three things air, water and land. This believe of fengshui will increase the relationship between humans and nature. Fengshui is widely used in arts. The beat house according to Chinese is the one that is closest to the nature. As the venue of Daokou Fire God temple fair, the unique traffic folk custom, architectural folk custom have attracted the attention of some documentary creators. They either appear in the documentary as background elements or become the main content of a documentary. These documentaries pay more attention to the use of aerial photography and all shots to express the geographical features of the small town and the lively scenes of ancient temple fairs, use follow-up shots to follow the protagonist's sudden behaviors in the grand performance, and use a large number of close-ups to express traditional Chinese elements such as lanterns and Spring Festival couplets, traditional clothing and so on. These footages, based on close observation of folk culture, provided the conditions for the quality of folk culture documentaries in two respects. Firstly, it provides documentary makers with a sociological and anthropological knowledge reserve to understand the folk culture and dig deep into the stories of the characters. All films, fictional and non-fictional, are a coding process by the director with the help of audio-visual language symbols. The director converts his own understanding of life into symbols such as sound, picture, color, montage and so on, and the audience decodes these audio-visual language symbols to understand the director and obtain the meaning of the film. That is to say, if you want to accurately present a specific folk culture and transmit correct cultural information, as a producer, you need to be familiar with, master, and understand the folk culture first, and then you can complete the coding on this basis. The detailed observation of folk culture provides documentary filmmakers with the premise to reserve

this knowledge, and also provides the possibility for documentary filmmakers to interpret human behavior in the film from the perspectives of anthropology, sociology and folklore. This in-depth understanding will accompany documentary filmmakers in the whole process of documentary production from research, interviews, shooting, editing, making the storytelling and characterization of documentaries more profound and specific. Secondly, it provides background information such as environment and culture for the narrative of folk culture documentaries. All characters do not live in a vacuum, and all the characters would have meanings only when they placed in a specific context. Characters in a unique folk culture have unique human behaviors that can only be fully interpreted in conjunction with the specific local natural and cultural environment. For example, in the famous documentary “Streetwise” (1984), director Martin Bell’s portrayal of the heroine Tiny, whose rebellious, lonely, and fragile character performance is inseparable from the director’s efforts to shape the city, family, and surrounding network where she lives and to present the street culture in the United States at that time.

4.1 Obtain the Motivation Behind the Folklore Phenomenon Through “Participation”

Burne believed the folklore encapsulates several things which strengthens the mental part of the equipment and isolates it from the rest. It makes the filmmaker skillful in various domains (Burne, 1967). To some extent, this kind of assertion strengthens the spiritual folklore level in folklore culture. In other words, whether it is ritualized folk culture such as diet, folk songs, wedding and funeral ceremonies, festival customs and religions, or the daily folk culture hidden in the details of daily life, there is a huge social psychological and cultural motivations hidden behind it. However, the visual presentation of such problems at this level cannot be fully realized by observation alone. Documentary makers need to obtain further information through interviews, dialogues, participation and so on.

4.2 Obtain more Folklore Information Through Interviews

Interviews are the main and common way of intervention in participatory documentaries. Documentary filmmakers would gain a deeper understanding of the historical information of the event and the emotional information of the filmed by interviewing. And through some appropriate film production methods, such as making the filmed appear on the camera, only retaining the voices of the filmed, allowing the film makers also appear on the camera, or hiding the film makers and so on, to form different performance effects. When designing an interview plan, documentary filmmakers can use unstructured interviews, structured interviews, semi-structured interviews or more casual chats to conduct dialogue, guide, question, and stimulate the subjects to help the subjects to reveal more information. In folk culture documentaries, “the trajectory of an individual’s life is fully displayed in the cultural context, and many aspects of the local society are also presented. Therefore, researchers can further understand the social mechanism and essence through personal interaction.” (Zhuang, 2015) For example, through interviews, the documentary can excavate and discuss the historical origins of the Daokou Fire Temple Fair and the psychological motivations of the villagers who spontaneously donated money to participate in the performance. At the same time, through interviews, we can fully express the psychological changes of farmers in the process of urbanization and modernization in China, family traditions, ancestors, clan ethics, and traditional virtues deeply hidden in the cultural genes of the Chinese nation. This makes the production of documentaries not only at the level of display, but at the level of interpretation and discussion.

4.3 To Further Experience the Inner Activities of the Subject Through Participation

In folk culture documentaries, the protagonists of the film often have to participate in some folk ceremonies or folk activities. In addition to calmly and objectively observing the entire activity process

as a bystander, the documentary makers could also participate in folk activities with permission, to experience the rituals and procedures of the entire folk activities, feel the food, wear folk costumes and so on. The process of participation can help documentary filmmakers to further feel the feelings and emotions of the subjects and understand the motivation of their behavior. For example, there will be many forms of performance in the Daokou Fire Temple. If the photographer or director of the documentary can step on the stilts and join the parade in person, they can more truly appreciate the hard work and danger of walking on stilts, and can also understand the joy and excitement of the subjects during the parade, and feel their sense of belonging in the family and the collective. At the same time, the participation process can also achieve the effect of reflective mode documentary. For example, in the documentary *Minding the Gap* (2018), Chinese director Bing Liu is both the photographer and one of the documentary's subjects. The director's personal participation in various skateboarding activities made him more immersive in the performance of other skateboarding teenagers in the film. In short, it is helpful for the film makers to get a kind of further and close relationship with the subjects and ask more relevant questions during interviews, furthermore, it helps the film makers to refine the theme of the film more in line with the real situation, and to shape the characters more accurately through audio-visual language. To visually portray the folk culture, the artists such as the cameraman and the director should identify and describe the in-depth analysis of folk culture. Which demands the filmmaker to deeply see the specific folk behavior or ritual for certain period of time and control its process, details, phenomenon, and characteristics. Furthermore, it is pertinent to use the means of interviews, experience, and communication, to gain deep knowledge of the history, causes, and influences of folk culture. There are concepts of emic and etic in anthropological fieldwork. In anthropology, the concept of emic refers to the research object's own interpretation of things, and etic is the interpretation of things from the perspective of anthropological investigators. The observation behavior in the creation of a documentary is more able to realize the etic presentation in a specific folk culture, and the participation behavior is more convenient for its emic expression.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, compared with the production process of ordinary documentaries, the production of folk culture documentaries has an extra process of interpreting folk culture and human behavior. Directors should be qualified anthropologists and sociologists, who could best use their academic knowledge can actively. Moreover, they should use the methods in anthropological and sociological research to acquire and interpret the specific folk culture. Based on the relationship between the directors and the subjects is properly handled. The actual folk culture view is reflected from the outside to the inside. Only in this way can documentaries try to present folk culture through proper presentation mode, narrative structure, composition, scene, color, editing rhythm, and music on the basis of understanding and explaining human behavior.

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