# The Construction of Reality in Documentary Images under the Postmodern Perspective—Taking the Documentary Film "Youth (Spring)" as an Example

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**Abstract:** *Taking the documentary film "Youth(Spring)" directed by Wang Bing as the object of study, this article applies Baudrillard's theory of mimesis, Aleida Assmann's theory of cultural memory and Appadurai's theory of global cultural mobility to explore the construction of authenticity of documentary images in the postmodern perspective. The article focuses on three aspects: the decentring of individual experience, the plurality of group memory, and the postmodern presentation of documentary authenticity.*

**Keywords:** *postmodern; "Youth(Spring)"; documentary image; construction of truth; mimesis theory*

## 1. Introduction

On the level of individual experience, "Youth(spring)" shows the process of stripping and reconstructing the subjectivity of young workers in the Zhili Township area of Zhejiang Province. The young workers in the film experience the fragmentation and restructuring of their identities, and this kind of decentred individual experience is just like what Baudrillard called "mimesis", reflecting the blurring of the boundaries between the real and the unreal in the postmodern society. In terms of group memory, "Youth(spring)" presents the flow and reorganisation of diverse identities. The film shows the new generation of workers searching for a new identity in the midst of diverse economic relations and urban culture. These people are at the bottom of the social ladder and have long been neglected by the mainstream society, and they "are unable to identify a unique self-language to express themselves, or even if they do find one, it will be tampered with in the chain of production, consumption, and reproduction of the media mechanism." [1] . Its presentation in documentary film constitutes what Baudrillard called "hyperreal", i.e. a kind of mimicry that is more real than the real. In the presentation of documentary authenticity, Wang Bing adopts a postmodern interweaving of technology and narrative. Long shots, simultaneous sound and other "direct cinema" techniques, as well as the block narrative structure, together construct an "illusion of reality". This reality, as Baudrillard said, is no longer a reproduction of reality, but a pure image of itself.

## 2. Individual experience: decentred subjectivity stripped and constructed

By recording the daily life, work and communication of young workers in the garment factories in Zhili Township, "Youth(spring)" shows the process of acquiring a new identity and subjectivity in the context of urban culture. The film adopts a restrained and calm image expression, integrating daily details into the documentary narrative, presenting the complex dialectical relationship between reality and fiction, subject and object in the post-modern society. This constitutes Wang Bing's style of "less intervention", which builds up the film's true colours with the intuitive repression of reality. However, "the director's silence and the free play of the protagonists, the unadorned and original way of presentation together constitute the standard of Wang Bing's style of 'authenticity'" [2] , and it is precisely this kind of de-centred authenticity that is the key factor in triggering the resonance of the audience. By documenting the "youthful" lives of young workers in garment factories, the film shows the fragmentation and restructuring of their identities in the context of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation. The mechanised labour of these workers on the production line demonstrates the impact of modern industry on the subjectivity of the individual, in which individuality and needs are reduced to a minimum, and the worker becomes merely an interchangeable part of the production process. However, in this seemingly oppressive environment, workers try to rebuild their social identity and individual subjectivity by socialising during non-working hours. They share their lives, banter with

each other and discuss their future dreams in their humble dormitories. This ambivalent relationship interprets the meaning of "Youth(spring)", which is in cruel contrast to the popular image of a polished and vigorous youth, but at the same time their ever-bursting hope is the spark of youth in a hopeless situation. This constructs a complex social form that is not only a rebellion against the stripping of identity from industrial production, but also a self-confirmation and reconstruction of individual subjectivity.

Foucault argues that power is not merely an instrument of oppression or control; it is also a network that produces knowledge, subjects and social practices. In "Youth(spring)", the working environment of the garment factory demonstrates a remarkable power structure within which the workers' identities and behaviours are shaped and circumscribed. Their daily lives are rigidly regulated, and every detail, from the pace of work to the timing of breaks, reflects how power permeates every aspect of an individual's life. In Foucault's book Discipline and Punish, there are references to "disciplinary institutions" and "prison-isation", in which prison-isation is a spatial conception of the workings of power, and he argues that "the human body is manipulated, shaped and disciplined" . [3] . As in the factory production line, workers become more efficient, become obedient and cooperative, stripped of their individuality in repetitive labour, they are no longer individuals with independent thoughts and feelings, but become a replacement part in the production process. This stripping away of identity is a direct manifestation of the mechanisms of power, in which the individual subjectivity of the worker is minimised and used only as a means to achieve production goals.

At the level of symbolic expression in the documentary, the mimesis constructed by the medium of "Youth(spring)" makes the real of modern society no longer a simple reproduction of reality, reflecting the theories of the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, particularly on symbolic consumption and mimesis. Baudrillard points out that modern society has moved away from just producing and consuming material goods and has become more about producing and consuming symbols and images. These symbols and images become substitutes for reality, creating a mimesis that not only represents reality, but sometimes even replaces it.

In "Youth(spring)", the scenes of the workers' lives and their interactions are not just a direct record of their lives, but through the medium of film, the individual's life experiences are abstracted and symbolised, and thus transformed into social symbols that the audience can understand and feel. Such symbolic representations do not merely reproduce facts, but more importantly they reconfigure the audience's understanding and feelings about the lives of these workers. This reconstruction is not only cultural but also socially significant because it changes the way people perceive reality and the mode of social interaction.

Baudrillard further emphasises that the existence of mimesis reveals the increasing blurring of the boundaries between the real and the fictional in postmodern society. Cinema and other media are constantly creating new symbolic realities by encoding and recoding social reality. The extent to which these symbolic realities reflect the real has become indistinguishable, as they themselves constitute the way in which viewers perceive the world. Thus, a visual medium such as documentary is not just a tool for conveying information, but also a platform for shaping and influencing the perception of social reality.

In this way, Baudrillard's theories are crystallised in "Youth(spring)". Documentaries do not just capture and show life, but also intervene in the process of constructing reality through the powerful visual and symbolic medium of cinema, influencing our understanding and feelings about the world. Viewers are no longer mere receivers when they watch these artistically processed and symbolically transformed scenes, but become participants in this process of symbolic exchange, and their reactions and understandings will in turn affect the cultural and social meanings carried by this medium.

Therefore, at the level of individual experience, "Youth(spring)" is not only a record of individual workers' lives, but also an in-depth exploration of the relationship between the individual and society and identity in modern society. The film shows how subjectivity is stripped away and reconstructed in a decentralised social structure, and reflects how the boundaries between "reality" and "fiction" have become increasingly blurred under the influence of the media in modern society. This not only provides us with a deeper understanding of the lives of individual workers, but also offers new perspectives and frameworks for understanding the cultural dynamics of contemporary society.

## 3. Group Memory: The Flow and Reorganisation of Diverse Identities

The documentary "Youth(spring)" provides us with a key perspective to explore the plurality and mobility of identities through the expression and reorganisation of group memories, and it shows how the new generation of workers experience the mobility and reshaping of their identities at the crossroads of economic globalisation and cultural exchanges. The film is not only a simple documentary work, but also an important text that deeply explores how individuals and groups in modern society search for and reinvent themselves in a rapidly changing environment. Through delicate observation and in-depth documentation, it presents us with a complex and vivid group portrait of young workers in contemporary China.

Firstly, Aleida Assmann's theory of cultural memory emphasises the way memory is transmitted and maintained in society and culture. By documenting the lives of young workers in the Yangtze River Delta region, "Youth(spring)" not only captures snippets of their daily lives, but also depicts how they maintain and reshape their cultural identities amidst social change. Through narrative and visual symbols, the film makes the stories of these workers go beyond mere personal experiences to become carriers of group memories. The reproduction of these memories not only helps the audience understand the historical and cultural background of the workers, but also makes the film a cultural document.

Assmann's theory emphasises that cultural memory is not just a simple recollection of past events, but a dynamic, ongoing process through which social groups constantly reinterpret and reconstruct their collective histories. In "Youth(spring)", we can see how this dynamic process takes place. Through various practices in their daily lives, such as work, leisure activities, and social interactions, the young workers constantly reinterpret their cultural traditions and integrate them with their current living environment.

Secondly, Stuart Hall's coding model is also represented in "Youth(spring)", whose production team transforms the workers' lived experience into a media text through specific coding methods, such as the film's narrative structure, the chosen scenes and dialogue. This text may be decoded into different meanings by different viewers, and these decoding processes depend on the cultural background and personal experience of the viewers. The blurring of the line between truth and fiction in the film is a reflection of the complexity of media messaging mentioned in Hall's theory. According to Hall, the meaning of media texts is not fixed, but is constantly being reconstructed in the process of transmission. During the production of "Youth(spring)", the director and production team "encoded" the workers' life experiences through their choices and presentation. When the audience watches the film, they "decode" the information according to their own backgrounds and experiences. This process of encoding and decoding makes "Youth(spring)" not only a documentary about workers' lives, but also a complex cultural text that can stimulate diverse interpretations and discussions.

Meanwhile, Appadurai's theory of global cultural mobility provides a theoretical basis for understanding the mobility of identity in "Youth(spring)". His landscape theory explains how identity is reconstructed under the influence of globalisation. In the film, the workers do not only seek identity within their local communities, but their lives and ambitions are also affected by global cultural flows.

Finally, intercultural communication and postcolonial theory are particularly important in analysing multicultural expression in "Youth(spring)". Homi Bhabha's "third space", "the in-between state where different cultures meet". [4] This theory provides a framework for understanding the complexity and fluidity of identity in the film. The mixing of cultures exhibited by the workers in their work and personal lives reflects what Baba calls the dynamic process of cultural exchange and identity restructuring. In this third space, the boundaries between the traditional and the modern, the local and the global are redefined and intertwined, creating new ways of identifying oneself. Cultural exchange in this context is not a simple interaction between two parties, but rather a new, hybrid cultural space that emerges from the exchange process. In the film's "factory" space, different cultural elements collide and merge with each other, creating new cultural forms and identities, and the young workers in "Youth(spring)" are in such a "third space", which neither belongs to their native culture nor is fully integrated into it. The young workers in "Youth(spring)" are in such a "third space", where they neither belong entirely to their native culture, nor are they entirely integrated into the mainstream urban culture, but create a unique cultural identity between the two.

Through delicate observation and in-depth recording, the film presents many aspects of the young workers' daily lives. From their working environment to their living space, from leisure activities to interpersonal interactions, every detail becomes an important clue to decipher their identity. These

fragments of daily life not only show how they adapted to the new living environment on the material level, but more importantly, they reveal the workers' transformation and adjustment on the spiritual and cultural levels.

Through the medium of documentary film, "Youth(spring)" not only records the life of a specific community, but also explores the flow and reorganisation of group memory and identity in modern society through narrative and visual techniques. The film is not only a reflection of culture, but also a field of cultural interaction and social identity change, providing valuable perspectives and materials for understanding and studying group memory and identity in modern society.

## 4. Perspectives on the Real: The Postmodern Intertwining of Technology and Narrative in the Current State of the Art

Through its unique narrative structure and visual expression, "Youth(spring)" demonstrates the complex exploration of authenticity in postmodern cinema. Documentary films not only record or present facts, but also guide the viewer into a reality constructed by symbols and mimesis through specific narrative and visual strategies.

Firstly, the film makes extensive use of long shots and simultaneous sound techniques, which are often used in postmodern cinema to enhance the immediacy and immersion of a scene. The continuity of the long shot without editing emphasises the uninterrupted observation of the event, making the audience feel a sense of the passage of time and the reality of the scene. Simultaneous sound, on the other hand, preserves the original appearance of the live sound effects and enhances the real experience of audio-visual integration. The use of these techniques provides a powerful visual and auditory verification of the traditional construction of documentary authenticity. However, this technologically enhanced style of "direct cinema" does not simply reproduce reality, but is transformed into a part of the postmodern narrative through the use of director Wang Bing. The film's narrative structure adopts a non-linear and modular approach, challenging the traditional linear narrative logic through scattered scenes and fragmented story clues. This narrative not only presents multiple perspectives and complex social realities, but also reflects the rupture and reorganisation of individual experience in postmodern society.

Second, through this intertwining of technology and narrative, "Youth(spring)" creates a multi-layered sense of reality that encompasses both the physical realism of the images and the psychological and social dimensions constructed through the narrative. Every scene in the film, every dialogue, and even the choice and choreography of each shot, is engaged in a visual and psychological dialogue with the audience. This dialogue is not only about presenting facts, but also about how to interpret and understand the deeper meaning behind these facts.

André Bazin said: "The conjunction of theatre is 'therefore', the conjunction of fiction is 'then'". Wang Bing's works present the image effect of "drama without plot", he often does not base his film narrative on logical causality and strict chronological order, but rather uses non-linear narrative to stitch up the rhythm of the image, so that the parts of the film are independent of each other, and form a self-contained, put-together whole. Taking "Youth(spring)" as an example, Wang Bing said in an interview, "I think 20 minutes can constitute an effective narrative unit: it gives a complete story, switching from 20 minutes to other, the audience won't forget these 20 minutes, and the 20 minutes can also maintain the balance of the narrative between different locations. For my current 9-hour film, I think the 20-minute segment structure is more appropriate, and basically the entire film is structured that way, with occasional little breaks. If the story is complicated, the narrative structure should not be overly complicated. With this simplest structure, the film would also be the shortest in terms of duration."[5]

The narrative strategies and technological applications of "Youth(spring)" demonstrate how postmodern cinema uses technology to deepen narrative themes and explore broader social and cultural issues. In this way, the documentary not only records reality, but more importantly, it redefines "reality" in cinema and explores how individuals and groups find their place between memory, history and reality in a globalised and pluralistic society.

To sum up, through its elaborate technical and narrative techniques, "Youth(spring)" not only reflects postmodern cinema's complex questioning of authenticity, but also demonstrates how to deeply explore and express complex social reality through the medium of film. This in-depth exploration and innovative expression of cinematic authenticity makes "Youth(spring)" not only a documentary film,

but also a film work that explores the boundaries between the real and the mimetic, the reality and the illusion in the postmodern context.

## 5. Conclusions

By analysing the documentary film "Youth(spring)" directed by Wang Bing, this article explores the construction of authenticity in documentary images under the postmodern perspective. With the help of Baudrillard's theory of mimesis and other theories, the article discusses in depth the decentring of individual experience, the plurality of group memories, and the postmodern presentation of authenticity, revealing the blurred boundaries between the real and the unreal. Through its unique technique and narrative approach, "Youth(spring)" challenges the traditional presentation of documentary images, presenting a multi-dimensional perspective of a complex reality, making the audience an active participant in the interpretation and construction of meaning. This not only enriches our understanding of postmodern cinema, but also provides a new perspective for analysing cultural and social dynamics in modern society.

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