

# The Three Dimensions of Authenticity in Documentary Production

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**Abstract:** *Authenticity is the lifeblood of documentaries, and the authenticity in documentary creation is a dynamic reality that is interpreted. The state it presents directly depends on the creator's understanding, perception, and feelings about the real world. Thus, the subjective differences in creators' perceptions of authenticity inevitably imbue documentary creation with a 'viewing from one's own perspective' and subjective hues, resulting in documentaries with different levels and types. Creators' understanding and feelings about life and the world can be roughly divided into three realms: 'seeing mountains as mountains,' 'seeing mountains not as mountains,' and 'seeing mountains still as mountains.' These correspond to three types of documentary creation: objective reality, subjective reality, and absolute reality. This article not only analyzes these three levels of documentary creation but also emphasizes that most documentary works focus on representing objective and subjective reality, with very few pursuing the absolute truth of facts. It also discusses how documentaries serve as a place for memory, providing a space for spiritual exploration, imbuing documentaries with the poetry of life and living.*

**Keywords:** *documentary; truth; realm*

## 1. Introduction

Documentaries are among the oldest genres in the film and television arts. Since their inception, they have served not only as a window into the world but also as a vital means of transmitting human cultural heritage. [1]For a long time, as an 'archival memory,' documentaries have recorded real events, people, and memories from everyday life with 'as precise traces, the most concrete relics and records, and the most vivid images'[2], transforming them into public historical memories. Therefore, as a technical means to reconstruct material reality, documentaries are more documentary-like than other film and television works in terms of audience perception. Although 'most ordinary people still believe that documentaries are not only a traditional rhetorical form but can also present reality in a good, fair, and true way'[3], some theorists have observed the hidden and helpless nature of absolute truth behind the documentary's documentation——. As a reality framed by real life, the subjective initiative of the framers cannot completely avoid unconscious interference, making it impossible to fully conform to an absolute objective stance. Therefore, as a historical memory space, documentaries cannot achieve any form of truth in this world.

## 2. First, Seeing things from my own point of view: the "realm with me" of objective reality

Wang Guowei once said, "When I observe things, they all take on my colors." From this perspective, the world most documentaries present is the world through the creator's eyes; the consciousness they convey is the creator's inner vision; and the memories they evoke are the traces of the current phenomena. The creator's perception and feelings "determine how we view it and outline its contours"[4]. Therefore, most documentaries present a realm that embodies the 'self-involvement.' Under the direction of Chen Xiaoping, documentaries such as 'A Bite of China' and 'The World of Flavors' select distinctive and typical small family groups as subjects to showcase how the local environment shapes the dietary culture, values, and attitudes of the people and tribes it nurtures. In these films, the director's involvement and guidance are evident. They speak of the natural way, saying, "Seasonal delicacies are fleeting, yet they return year after year." They speak of the coexistence of all things, saying, "For the passing travelers, the sea shows eternal tolerance and silence, not blaming the past, nor questioning the future." They speak of carrying forward and opening up new horizons, saying, "Looking back, it seems that time flows like water, and life is no longer young. However, the rhythm of the sea remains unchanged, just as the human

quest continues." Though it speaks of the objective laws of things, the fleeting appearance and departure of the night-blooming cereus, year after year, seem to symbolize the cycle of life; though it speaks of a silent and inclusive ocean, not blaming the past or questioning its future, it also embodies the profound virtue of a vast universe that remains silent despite its grandeur; though it speaks of time passing swiftly and the passage of time, it also highlights humanity's relentless pursuit against the relentless passage of time, day and night, and from the perspective of what remains unchanged, both things and I are endless. Though it speaks of the 'secret reserves of the sea,' it also highlights the creator's generosity, making us share in its beauty.

Whether in the narration or visual presentation, whether in the choice of family or the affirmation of values, the director's choices and influence on the film world are significant. "The First Time" also adopts a topic-determined 'approach, selecting key figures with the most representative and interpretative value after determining the topic. The state and thinking patterns of these key figures in the film, as well as their life experiences and emotional changes, although rooted in their own emotions, are still guided and planned by the director. In the "Schooling" episode, the director emulates "Kindergarten" by interviewing some children about their future plans, such as "What do you want to be when you grow up?" and "Moving from the small class to the middle or large class." These children answer questions with a naive and innocent mindset, which, when posed by adults, unconsciously carries a philosophical 'insight in the hearts of seasoned adults. Everyone's life has its own 'growing up' at different stages, and what we need to do is to bravely and resolutely move on to the next stage of 'growing up.'

Moreover, the selection of shots and the editing techniques used imbue the director's intentions into the film. In Chen Xiaoqing's representative food documentaries, the concentrated display of the smiling faces of the main characters in each episode vividly conveys the joy of the working people and their resistance and acceptance of their labor. What are typically ordinary emotional responses in daily life become more distinctive through the alienation effect created by the camera and screen, thus becoming typical and serving as emotional codes for labor in the film. This method of constructing atmosphere, which makes the ordinary extraordinary and the subtle attention-grabbing, is a direct expression of the director's subjective intent.

No longer relying on long-term objective observation to ensure the reliability of reality, and rejecting the responsibility and goal of 'reconstructing material reality' as proposed by Kracauer. This documentary aims to subtly guide the audience into a world they see, without forcing them to understand and accept the influence and infiltration of their own ideological concepts. However, its 'non-fictional' approach to real life remains one of the bottom lines for documentaries to maintain 'relative truth.' That is, if documentaries aim for a realm of truth, this truth is not the objective reality but the subjective experience of the creator, as documentaries are essentially a translation of life, conveying the creator's interpretation of life to the audience. [5] Therefore, the level of the creator's understanding of life directly influences the quality of the film they create. The film, as a subjective reenactment of material reality, embodies its artistic value in the creator's relationship and perception with the real world.

### **3. Second, "the other world" in "my eyes": the cognitive level of creators**

As a medium for creatively processing the real material world, the content of documentaries is both a concrete manifestation of real space and time and an inner product of the creator. Therefore, the world depicted in documentaries is also a 'form.' Form is a significant concept in Buddhism, often used as a medium for verses to convey Buddhist ideas and perspectives on the world, or to express a state of mind. 'The creation of a state of mind depends entirely on our perception; its existence is entirely within the scope of our perception' [6]. Since it relies on our perception, which varies in intensity, the state of mind also varies in magnitude. Zen Master Qingyuan Weixin once used the concept of mountains and waters to convey his three-tiered understanding of life to his disciples:

Thirty years ago, before I began my Zen practice, I saw mountains as mountains and waters as waters. Later, when I met a teacher and entered a certain state of mind, I realized that mountains are no longer just mountains, and waters are no longer just waters. Now, I have found a place of rest, and I see mountains as mountains and waters as waters once more. "[7]

Mountains and waters are the essence of the material world, and in documentaries, the portrayal of these landscapes serves as a representation of the restoration of material reality. It allows people and events in the real world to be preserved in the audience's individual memory through aesthetic perception. 'Perceiving mountains as mountains and waters as waters' represents an aesthetic experience of natural landscapes. It chiefly lies in comprehending the beauty of nature and showing profound

admiration and praise for its natural essence. Great Mount Tai 'focuses on Mount Tai, from ancient times to the present, both domestically and internationally, it extensively and deeply affirms Mount Tai's status as the foremost of the Five Great Mountains, and its profound impact on the Chinese people, Chinese culture, and national spirit. Therefore, watching 'Great Mount Tai' is like seeing Mount Tai in person. 'Seeing mountains not as mountains, seeing water not as water' means that the creator breaks through the original appearance of things, and through personal experience, sees the deeper meaning behind the landscapes. Under this influence, the creator no longer merely restores and presents the real world but also has their own perspective and guides values. In 'Clear Weather on the Mongolian Grassland,' Guan Ye Jiqing's three visits to the Pu Jie family not only showcase the living conditions and changes in the lives of ordinary people during Mongolia's economic transformation period but also explore the ultimate theme of life. Heaven and earth are impartial, making all things equal to me. The grass on the Mongolian grassland withers and thrives each year, and new life is born in the flocks of sheep. Pu Jie's younger brother takes over from Pu Jie to ride and manage the sheep, symbolizing the endless cycle of life and the existence of a place where everything has a beginning and an end. However, the gathering and dispersal of fate are like the quiet wind in the wilderness, though all phenomena are empty, there is no ignorance, nor is there ignorance exhausted, yet it cannot stop a sigh that seems to be there but is also gone.' A Bite of China' expresses the selflessness and gratitude towards the sea. The countless shots of the sea in various forms and at different times not only depict the sea but also highlight the relationship between nature and humanity, the selflessness of nature, and the grandeur of human will. The third level of cognition, where mountains are seen as mountains and waters as waters, embodies the concept of 'forgetting knowledge and form.' This means forgetting conceptual and prescriptive knowledge, stepping away from the definite and visible surface shapes of things. By remaining open and observing, one can achieve a pure perception that connects the inner senses with the external world. In this aesthetic contemplation of clarity and taste, one can liberate oneself from constraints to explore the infinite realm. However, it is challenging for a director to truly reach the third level of 'seeing mountains as mountains,' as this level involves an attitude of neither sameness nor difference between the object and the self. Using objects as intermediaries can create a concept of 'no object.' Freeing oneself from the constraints of material desires, one can move from the realm of desire to the realm of clarity, which is the pure state. Not only is it difficult for creators to reach this level of inner peace, but also, as artworks, their audience, with different life experiences and knowledge systems, rarely grasp the principle that 'if one sees all forms as non-forms, one sees the Tathagata.'

Master Zixin used the metaphor of mountains and rivers to convey three levels of enlightenment to his disciples. Similarly, documentary creators use their films as metaphors to unconsciously reveal their perspectives on the world. More often, the camera in a documentary reflects the creator's state of mind. Therefore, maintaining a level gaze towards the subject and not forcing an unequal status between the camera and the subject is key to deeply observing the essence of life. In "Dragon Spine," Pan Jien, unable to afford his tuition at home, had to go alone to the mine to seek his fortune. The film calmly and restrainedly shows Pan Jien's "gold rush journey" from departure to return, neither pitying him for his hardships nor overly praising him for his challenges, as pity implies an unequal status between the two parties, and praise is similar. When facing hardships, the director did not use many adjectives; it was poverty, being out of school, and struggling to make ends meet, a situation but not a state of life. Pan Nenggao and his grandfather learned to plant rice in the paddy field; he did not think about the hardships, but was happy with his grandfather's praise, "Pan Nenggao is the most capable." When Pan Jien brought the hard-earned gold home, he did not think about the hardships, but was happy with his brother's innocent remark, "I'm afraid the people who buy the gold can't afford it." Not exaggerating hardships to show perseverance, nor belittling hardships to show human triumph over nature, is a true reflection of their vitality and trust. In comparison, the long segment of "The First Time" seems somewhat inferior. Writing poetry is how children observe the world, a poetic perception of life that encompasses more than just loneliness and pain. Children who write poetry are not limited to those in remote rural areas. Imposing limits on something inherently free is a form of arrogance towards freedom. Setting suffering for emotions is a sign of insincerity towards oneself.

Liu Xiaofeng, in his book "Introduction to Modern Social Theory," states, "In art, the dichotomy of rationalization and irrationalization interpenetrates and often manifests in opposition: the cool depiction of the present world and the passionate expression of the inner self complement each other." [8] While most humanistic documentaries, after extensive collection of life materials and interviews, or 'selecting the scene,' distill their observations and insights into themes and focal points, their documentary style remains the most critical evidence and factor in their persuasiveness. Therefore, in humanistic documentaries, 'the cold depiction of the present world and the passionate expression of the inner self' is not a manifestation of conflict but a reminder to creators to transcend the material and grasp the essence.

Heidegger believed that Dasein must 'enter' the truth of being while also 'exit' the truth to truly be what it is.

However, the challenges of 'beyond the image,' 'within the circle,' 'one step in,' and 'one step out' are immense, and their essence and atmosphere can only be captured in a fleeting glimpse, where 'words may be finite but meanings are infinite.' Language alone is insufficient to convey this philosophical depth, let alone when images use the 'false' material world to 'restate' the truth of objective reality, thereby conveying to the audience a sense of human existence in the material world. Therefore, most documentaries can achieve a second level of interpretation, which is enough to imbue the film with a compassionate sympathy for humanity and an active inquiry into the essence of human existence. The third level, encompassing the concept of "no self" and embodying the idea of "seeing mountains as mountains and waters as waters," attains the profound realm of "heaven and earth coexisting with me, all things being one with me." It provides a deep understanding of the world once the veil is lifted. This signifies the progression from art to philosophy within the context of documentary filmmaking.

#### **4. Third, the place of record: the place where the spiritual significance is pursued**

The field of memory is a dual space: on one hand, it is extremely self-contained, entirely enclosed within its identity and name; on the other hand, it is always ready to expand its meaning. [9]In other words, as a field of memory, the aesthetic value and social significance of documentaries are constrained by the director's spiritual height and the audience's level of recognition and understanding. As a means of preserving memory, the creation of documentaries is like scooping up a scoop of clear water from a long river. How to scoop up and which part of the clear water to scoop up is decided by the director, while how the audience perceives and uses this scoop of clear water is determined by them. The presentation of documentaries is the director's intention, but what they actually convey and what the audience can intuitively grasp, this scope and boundary, can never be fully articulated.

Typically, once documentaries enter social life, they move beyond merely recounting the surface of reality. Instead, they serve as a 'setting of current social and cultural memory nodes,' providing a stable, authentic, and socially and culturally rich reality that can be recalled and read over time. Thus, 'documentaries express the filmmaker's views, which, at a deeper level, is a sense of responsibility. '[10]This sense of responsibility, on a micro level, involves a contemplation of individual destinies, and on a macro level, it represents the ultimate concern for all humanity. It reflects on social history through the tangible and perceptible lives of individuals, and more importantly, it opens up an 'open space 'through the artwork itself, allowing people to gradually approach the truth as their understanding deepens. At a certain stage of social and cultural development, when creators and audiences can intuitively grasp the unobstructed state of truth in art through the work, it is hoped that the ultimate goal of documentaries, 'seeing the mountain as the mountain,' can be achieved.

The pursuit of meaning is the essence of human spiritual activities. Through the construction of the spirit, people transcend the given reality, refine a purposeless world, and establish their own survival significance in history. [11]The 'Heavenly Timing: Wuxu Zhi' documentary series selects 11 families from six locations, including Tiantai Mountain, Chengdu, and Luoyang, using the 24 solar terms as a timeline to recreate a group of traditional Chinese farming families who follow the natural rhythms of nature. The 24 solar terms, observed by our ancestors, represent the wisdom of Chinese traditional culture and symbolize how our ancestors have lived a life of labor and poetry over thousands of years. 'Jue Shui Yue Zai Shou' tells the story of Ye Jiaying's deep connection with poetry through poetic scenes, exploring her lifelong spiritual growth. It aims to bring Ye Jiaying's inner spiritual strength to light from the sealed historical environment, confirming that this strength enabled her to overcome obstacles and illusions and construct the meaning of her individual life. 'Hexi Corridor' and 'China in Ancient Books' explore the survival significance of humans in the past through the recreation of historical epics; 'Guarding Liberation West,' '72 Hours of Documentary,' and 'A Bite of China' explore the survival significance of humans in the present through the recreation of contemporary life.

However, just as the field of memory is a dual space, bridging the closed and the infinite, a documentary is also a dual space. From the perspective of meaning construction, it connects the director and the audience. The director projects their views on the real world into the documentary, allowing the audience to agree or disagree, accept or reject. Spiritually, it connects historical texts with contemporary consciousness. Due to the influence of modern cultural knowledge and thought patterns, we cannot truly reconstruct the spiritual texts of the past, making most humanistic historical documentaries difficult to escape the guidance of our current mental state. However, this dislocated dialogue is not without meaning.

The key to this dislocation lies in the differences in our own mental states, which are revealed through historical texts as the current spiritual significance. "More importantly, through the dialogue in historical time, the meaning in historical texts is revealed through our questions, and the meaning of contemporary life is also revealed by the other party (the text in history). Dialogue is a two-way process of meaning display, showing both the meaning in historical texts and the meaning of life intentions in contemporary history." [12] Additionally, the documentary's recounting of the material world also allows us to re-examine the material space of our daily lives. Just as Zhu Guangqian described the fisherman living by the sea who cannot appreciate the beauty of the sea but treasures his farmland. The emergence of documentaries makes people temporarily leave the utilitarian material world and enjoy the flowers and trees in the world with an aesthetic attitude.

## 5. Conclusion

Thus, documentaries serve as a platform for the dialogue and conflict between historical and contemporary spirits. They not only extend the temporal dimension to explore the roots of spiritual significance or demystify, but also provide a space where people can experience beauty and artistic conception in their daily lives, revealing aspects that are often overlooked due to familiarity. This concrete representation helps people break free from the monotony of daily routines and rediscover the meaning of life and existence. More importantly, when documentaries act as a battleground between the world and the earth, the persistent pursuit of truth ultimately brings it to light.

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