

Research on Narrative Strategies and Innovations of Netflix Documentaries in the Grierson Model: Take Documentary *City of Wonder* as An Example

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Abstract. With the continuous development of the Internet, Netflix Documentary have emerged as a new form of documentary in the public eye. Netflix documentaries both inherit the creative features under the Grierson model and make artistic innovations based on it. The Grierson model has always been the classic form of documentary creation. Under the Grierson mode, this paper takes the documentary *City of Wonder* as a case study. The study finds that: 1) in terms of narrative perspective, the documentary still uses third-person narration as an perspective for interpretation, which has both networked communication qualities; 2) in terms of narrative content, it adheres to the tradition of people-oriented and reality observation, but highlights the embedding of urban cultural imagery; 3) in terms of narrative time and space, it uses parallel montage and other editing techniques to enrich the narrative space; 4) in terms of narrative structure, it uses the aesthetics of reception; 4) in terms of narrative structure, the structure of invocation in the concept of reception aesthetics is used, in order to leave an blank and complement the meaning of the text.

Keywords: Grierson model; Netflix documentary; *City of Wonder*.

1. Introduction

The Grierson model is one of the most important forms of traditional documentary art creation and expression. In the 1930s and 1950s, the Grierson model was one of the most powerful methods of documentary film making in the world. ¹⁶Popular education, realistic concerns and poetic expression constitute the core elements of the Grierson model. The main expression of its artistic form is the addition of narration and rich background music to the picture, strengthening the uniqueness of the form, the integrity of expression and artistry. Grierson has always insisted on the aesthetic and aesthetic pursuit of documentary film, and he regards poetry as an indispensable quality of film. He believes that the poetic treatment could have been seen as a great progress in documentary cinema; in addition, Grierson also proposes that documentaries should focus on reality and shift their gaze from the ends of the earth to their own doorstep, he said, studio films greatly ignore the possibility of opening the screen to the real world that only shoot stories performed in front of an artificial backdrop, documentaries shoot live scenes and live stories.

It can be seen that the basic connotation of the aesthetics of film and television embodied in the Grierson model has the following qualities.

1) As a mass media, documentary films should shoulder social responsibility, implement public education and possess the ability to tell stories.

2) Documentary films present to deal with realistic subjects. A new vibrant art form can be used to tap into the ability of film to grasp the environment, observe reality and choose life.

3) At the same time, documentaries should be concerned with poetic expression. Material and stories taken from their original state are more beautiful, or more real in a philosophical sense, than what is acted out, and different aesthetic devices should be used to deal with different material. Grierson treats poetry as an indispensable aesthetic experience.

The documentary creation method that Grierson insisted on and pioneered provided important reference and guidance for the development of subsequent documentaries. Under the framework of Grierson's model, many documentaries have opened up new exploration and innovation. With the

continuous development of Internet platforms and online communication, Netflix Documentary has emerged and flourished as a new form of documentary.

Youku once held a special forum¹⁷, where the term NetflixDocumentary was explicitly stated. Li Ni, the COO and deputy director of Beeping.com, clearly put forward the concept of Netflix Documentaries. According to Li Ni, Netflix Documentary are works produced under the third wave of documentaries, mostly driven by Internet platforms, produced for Internet users, broadcasted and disseminated on Internet platforms, and on the basis of retaining the true core of documentaries, the form is rich and varied, and unconventional.¹⁸ In academic circles, Li Ni's interpretation has also been adopted by several scholars, such as Liang Guijun(2019)¹⁹, Du Zhihong and Wang Jiajia(2020)², Jin Zhenmao(2020)²⁰, etc. However, some scholars have also generalized the meaning of "web-based" to the original intention of created for the web and included some documentaries created by traditional media platforms to adapt to the online communication environment in the analysis of Netflix Documentary(Zhao Zhoumin 2020)²¹.

Netflix Documentary include *Guardian of Liberation West, But There Are Books, First Time in Life, Is 100 Years Long*. The popular Netflix Documentary not only inherit the classic documentary creation under the Grierson model, which gives viewers a strong visual impact and impression through the form of narration with beautiful images, but also make a series of innovations to the Grierson model in terms of creation and narrative strategies to adapt to the networked and fragmented communication.

Youku, as one of the three major video broadcasting platforms, based on the development of Internet platform and the good trend of online communication, has invested and created many high-quality Netflix Documentary works towards public view. Among them, *City of Wonder*, directed by Xiao Han, is a typical representative of Netflix Documentary. As a humanistic travel city documentary, *City of Wonder* uses the creative method of documentary with variety to take ordinary people living in the city as the entry point to tell the stories of people with the inner spirit of the city; at the same time, it explores the wonders of each city hidden in the daily life through the personal perspective of the stars, so as to depict the cultural core of different cities. The show also uses the personal perspectives of the stars to explore the everyday wonders of each city, thus depicting the cultural core of different cities. By the end of the first season, *City of Wonder* has garnered 139 hits, nearly 1 billion video views and a Douban rating of 8.⁸, making it a successful breakout documentary in early 2021.

This documentary not only inherits the characteristics of Grierson's model of human text and narration, but also makes new attempts in narrative structure and narrative time and space based on the characteristics of online communication and platform development, and creatively develops the traditional Grierson model.

The following paper will analyze the narrative strategy and content innovation under the guidance of Grierson's model by using the case study of the Netflix documentary program *City of Wonder*.

2. Using Third-person Narrative Perspective, with Internet Interaction

City of Wonder follows the Grierson model of documentary authenticity in its narrative perspective, with an omniscient narration that illustrates the documentary images. The narration plays a pivotal role in the narrative. The film is narrated from the third-person omniscient point of view, and from the content, the objective and neutral presentation meets the requirements of documentary authenticity. In terms of plot, the calm and atmospheric narration, together with the magnificent and tense images, the opening narration has a pre-prologue narrative function, attracting the audience to watch immersively and serving as a link to the following opening. The ending narration has the function of summing up and sublimating, bringing the documentary to a

perfect conclusion, meaningful and leaving a blank.

For example, the opening sequence is prefaced by a narration with a collection of many wonderfully realistic images:

Eight hundred miles of lakes and mountains, one hundred thousand families of fireworks. The silence of Hangzhou is like an ancient painting scroll unfolding slowly. Above the ethereal beauty of the East, the prosperity of a modern city blossoms. This is Hangzhou.

In China, everyone knows there is a big city called Tieling, the real Tieling is actually a small city, but he has become a business card of the northeast, the city GDP may not be high, but the joy index is extremely high.

And the end of the show ends with a third-person narration with a time-lapse shot of the drone, which is meaningful and leaves room for the audience's imagination.

At the same time, the narration was designed with the audience in mind, taking into account the fun humor and combining it with current events on the internet to meet the qualities of networked communication. Tieling is jokingly referred to by the commentary *as the end of the universe*, a small town without social phobia, and Guan was joked that she looks like herself—indeed, like Michael Jackson in his own impersonation show.

The design of the humorous narration with a sense of the Internet caters to the fragmented and entertaining of Internet communication. The script and commentary design of the documentary seriously consider the characteristics of the current Internet audience, which is an innovative thinking of the Grierson model based on the authenticity of the Netflix Documentariy, and successfully meets the preferences of the current audience.

3. Narrative Content: Adhere to the People-oriented, Taking into Account the City Imagery Embedded

Grierson emphasizes the humanistic aspect of documentary film. Humanistic concern refers to the attention to human needs and the affirmation of humanity and human values.²²This documentary insists on people-oriented in its narrative content, starting from ordinary individuals, telling the experiences of individual small people in the city, glimpsing the development of the city from individuals, and witnessing the alternation and development of old and new cultures. As the program team has said in an interview, *We hope that the audience will see the deeper spirit of the people behind the city's food, beauty, dialect, and character.*²³

The program invites vegetarian guests with classic city symbols to present city culture; meanwhile, it also invites celebrity guests such as Guan Xiaotong, TANGOZ, Li Xueqin, Zhang Jie to explore city cultural symbols together with vegetarians. This caters to the pursuit of traffic and topics under the network communication, and leverages the power of the platform to achieve win-win communication. The variety path of documentaries is also a feature of online documentaries. The combination of star with vegetarian is very attractive, with the star going to the city life with fireworks, and the vegetarian coming into the camera as a typical representative to show the city style as a regional explorer and cultural spokesman. Although the documentary takes the city as the mother theme, it still starts the narrative with people as the main thread, and shows the city through different characters, which is exactly in line with the concern for humanity and society in the Grierson model.

In the narrative, This documentary also takes into account the embedding of symbols and imagery of the city. In the book of *Urban Imagery*, Lynch suggests that in any city, there is a public imagery, or a series of public imagery, that is a composite of many human imagery.²⁴In the script design and documentary presentation, the documentary places extra emphasis on the embedding of cultural symbols of the city, including traditional classical symbols such as people, architecture and food, as well as the cultural symbols of the new era. For each city explored, the cultural symbols of a city are presented to the audience. In Hangzhou, for example, there are traditional cultural symbols such as West Lake, but also cultural symbols in the new era such as music festivals,

animation festivals and Asian Games, where old and new imagery blend to construct the city's image, presenting a lively and dynamic city cross-section with rich connotations.

4. The Artistry of Narrative and Parallel Montage

Grierson also emphasizes the concept of creative truth in documentary film. In Grierson's evaluation of Berlin Big City Symphony, his pursuit of poetry is revealed, where poetry is more of an artistic effect, and flexible and thoughtful presentation of reality is Grierson's definition of artistry. This is Grierson's definition of the artistry of documentary film. Bell believes that art must have a meaningful form, which refers to the arrangement of different elements such as points, lines, and surfaces in a picture, causing emotional pleasure to the recipient, clearly stating the formal expression of art.²⁵

The artistry of meaningful form in *City of Wonder* is reflected in narrative time. The French narratologist Genette, through the study of story time and narrative time, proposed the tense of narrative, that is, the relationship between story timeline and narrative time. In order to pursue artistry and watchability, documentaries often use a narrative sequence that does not coincide with the development order of the story itself to create a certain degree of suspense, for example, they often use pre-order and reverse chronology to narrate. In the documentary *City of Wonder* the director will use the pre-order technique to splice the main plot and key shots of the story at the beginning, as a teaser. It gives the audience a visual impact and leaves an artistic effect of suspense.

At the same time, the Netflix Documentary chooses to try to use the parallel montage editing technique to flexibly integrate the content of the footage, and subtly transitions through time-lapse and other empty shots and narration, breaking the linear narrative feature in time, and the whole film's emotional expression is unfolding and smooth. Based on real images, *City of Wonder* uses montage to present the human and spiritual landscape from different dimensions and facets, which is an artistic creation of the film, following the principle of documentary authenticity, but also conforming to the meaningful form required for documentary as a medium art product. This is in line with the pursuit of poeticism in the Grierson model.

5. Narrative Structure: Blank-leaving as An Interaction

According to Isser, a scholar of receptive aesthetic theory, who has proposed the theory of blank-leaving in The Structure of the Call of the Text²⁶, blank-leaving and unqualified meanings in the text are the bridge between the author and the reader, and it is the unqualified and meaningful blank in the work that prompt the reader to search for the meaning of the work, thus giving him the right to participate in the composition of the meaning of the work²⁷, in which the interaction forms the structure of the text's invocation. He believes that blank-leaving in a text is an unspoken invitation to seek missing connections²⁸. In the blank, the author presupposes the gaps and the reader fills them with his imagination, forming an interaction and communication around the work between the two, and then extending and recreating the meaning of the text, and this interactive emotional appeal is also realized in the development of media.

The *City of Wonder* relies on the Internet platform's own media properties to provide viewers with many opportunities for interactive communication, interpreting and explaining the content of the text, filling the gaps in the text, and satisfying viewers emotional demands. Viewers can express their feelings about the documentary via comment sections. Comments and likes, as a feedback mechanism of readers to the text²⁹, enrich the blank of the video text.

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