

# Encoding and Decoding: Documentary Narration and Audience Constructs in Two Directions Revisited

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**Abstract:** *Successful documentary narration not only changes the world as seen by the audience, but also stimulates a further 'conceptual resonance' between the documentary voice and the audience's inner voice. Based on the two-way construction of the documentary narration from the coding dimension to the audience's inner construction dimension, this paper looks at the documentary narrator's perspective, skills and sound fusion, and analyses the narrator's ability to interpret the sound in the decoding dimension through the construction of an interconnected and interactive world of meanings.*

**Keywords:** *Documentary narration; Encoding and decoding; Audience dynamics*

## 1. Introduction

Traditional documentary studies have focused their vision on the study of the internal systems of film, which encompasses language studies, lens studies, aesthetic studies and even the study of documentary. The study of cinema from a communication perspective has been touched upon, but is not yet very popular. The dissection and close reading of cinema from the artistic sphere occupies the majority of film studies, while the study of documentary as an individual property and characteristic of the medium of communication has been repeatedly neglected. In fact, documentary is a kind of visual art, where sound and picture are doubly outputted in the auditory and visual sense, giving the audience a strong sense of scene and impact. Therefore, people with some audio-visual experience can often read behind the surface images to decode what the creators want to convey again. And the creators also try to use various techniques to accomplish the generation of their ideas. This paper will explore this through an analysis of the linguistic coding style of contemporary documentary narration, a textual analysis of documentary self-interpretation, and the ways and energies of audience decoding, in order to highlight the multiple constructions and meanings that audiences make of content.

## 2. The relevance of the two-way construction of the ground between documentary narration and audience

Documentaries are created from real life, using real people and real events as and expressed in an artistic way in order to show the nature of reality and provoke people to think. Documentaries are beginning to be noticed and loved by people, and documentaries on various subjects are coming out on various subjects, but at the beginning of the new century, when China's just entered the new century, the annual production of documentaries in China was less than 10, but now, according to the relevant departments, the annual production has reached several thousand. In October 2010, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) issued "Opinions on Promoting the Development of the Documentary Industry", proposing that domestic documentaries are an important cultural communication vehicle to showcase China's development and progress, published by the China Documentary Research Centre of Communication University of China. 2012 saw Chinese documentaries enter a "public era", and a new journey for the development of China's documentary industry has begun. The documentary "China on the Tip of the Tongue" was broadcast on CCTV's documentary channel and one set of programmes, attracting great attention to domestic documentaries.<sup>[1]</sup>As a result, the documentary has also been even asserted that Chinese TV documentaries are "on the rise". The documentary industry in China is currently developing rapidly and is the fastest growing in its history, with expanding production teams, growing audience demand and gradually expanding broadcast platforms. The development of documentary film in China has moved from a spontaneous stage to a self-conscious one. The development of documentaries has become a new bright spot in the

growth of television. A strategic choice for national cultural construction, international communication and film industry development.

Documentaries are based on a form of television film with realistic and up-close access to real-life events, reinterpreting the current environment or social culture from different perspectives in order to convey unique social values and educational significance. Unlike television dramas and other types of documentaries, most documentaries have only a small amount of character language from the beginning to the end, mostly background language and off-screen voices, mainly to record the profound meaning of events and the psychological activities of those being recorded. Most of the thematic language has to be explained and conveyed by the filmmaker, which requires a narrator to do so. The narrator needs to make his or her own sense and understanding of the subject matter and real-time scenes of the documentary so that he or she can immerse himself or herself in the situation and become part of the characters, which is very important for controlling the quality of the documentary. However, in traditional communication perspectives, documentaries tend to the active coding role of the narrator as well as the producer, ignoring the audience decoding in that they still have the agency to construct multiple meanings from it. The theory of encoding and decoding was first proposed by Stuart Hall, a leading figure in the British School of Cultural Studies, which emphasis the active role of the audience and examines the meaning of documentary films from the audience's perspective, and the multiple meanings of their texts. Thus, while the beauty of documentary films can be explored from the encoding dimension, that is, the documentary narration, the decoding dimension, where the audience's active reception still has a constructive meaning. This paper seeks to shed light on the structural tension between documentary narration and audience.

Daniel Bell has pointed out that contemporary times are moving into the age of the image, as with the advent of the television, the computer and the mobile phone, humans have gradually surrendered their mastery of sound and added visual ability to the extreme. <sup>[2]</sup>Because of the indirect expression of sound or the large amount of white space that needs to be savoured and repeatedly worked out, human beings, in the post-industrial era, are so impatient that they rely on "visual bombardment" and "visual dependence", which is leading them to the extremes of unidirectionality and is pushing the ability to interpret sound. The ability to interpret sound is gradually being pushed into a 'lost art'. This is why there is an urgent need for the narrator (the coder) to give new meaning to the narrative, to make it contemporary, to present the beauty and rebalance of the collision between verbal contexts and visual images.

### **3. Sound coding: reconstructing the narrative of documentary film narration**

Hall's view is more in line with this paper. <sup>[3]</sup>In Hall's article 'Television Discourse: Encoding and Decoding', he argues that the construction of meaning by the encoder is governed by laws and social structures, and that deviations in the decoding process are due to differences in the reference system between the transmitter and the recipient. From this point of view, the re-creation of the narrator is based on the laws of the social era, the norms of the practitioner, the production of 'safe' imitations based on the creation of the former, and the narrator's own stylistic characteristics over the years. So it is important to explore how the narrator responds to the aesthetics of the times and moves towards the people in accordance with the above specific aspects.

#### ***3.1 Differences in the coding of narrators' perspectives***

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The same subject can be deconstructed from different angles to produce different visual effects. A documentary is a record of social reality, and what it conveys is perception and understanding. In fact, everyone has different answers in mind, so the view of a documentary from different angles is different, and because of this difference, so is the dubbing style. The dubbing is presented based on the background framework foundation in the narrator's mind, and the strengths and weaknesses of the way

the perceptual material is handled can make a difference in how the dubbing style is layered. In the past, many documentaries were filmed from a top-down or elevated perspective, i.e. from a third party's point of view. This also resulted in the voice actors in the documentary not being able to immerse themselves in the scene and see things from the same spectator's point of view, making the voiceover seem raw and archaic and making it difficult for the listener to enter the scene. With no thought or feeling, both the rhythm of the voice-over and the style of speaking are uniform, giving a sense of strangeness. Nowadays, on the other hand, most and nowadays off-air voices mostly adopt a flat point of view, speak naturally and loosely, unconsciously playing down the traces of off-air voices, as if they have already experienced it themselves and are just narrating their own views as well as their own understanding, enhancing the expressiveness. For example, in the documentary *Close to Mao*, the voice-over artist recreates the life of Chairman Mao from the perspective of an ordinary person, spitting out words naturally and at a soothing pace. In the communication of spoken language, people often perceive the type of emotion through the flow of emotion. Situational reenactment and imaginative association are all techniques used in voice-over to appreciate the content of the script, to immerse oneself in it and to stimulate the emotions of the voice-over artist. Realistic and coherent emotions play a vital role in the expression of a documentary narration. A good story must have a deeply compelling thread. A good storyteller must be able to integrate this thread with the essence of the story. Hong Yun has a strong background in broadcasting and Chen Duo has strong narration skills. The documentary series 'Talking about the Yangtze' is majestic, and the male and female narration by Chen Duo and Hong Yun, which is both flexible and rigorous, complements the majestic 'Talking about the Yangtze' perfectly with a beautiful soundtrack. Apart from the well-produced documentary itself, it must be said that Hong Yun and Chen Duo are excellent documentary narrators and voice-over artists, and their narration adds to the documentary, enhancing its documentary and artistic qualities. The two teachers were deeply impressed by the content of the documentary when they were given the script to prepare, and their pride and proud emotions for the Yangtze River are felt throughout, giving the audience a deep sense of the magnificence of the country's mountains and rivers and the greatness of its people. The film's dubbing may seem subdued, but the narrator's heart is filled with awe at nature's bounty and an awareness of human ingenuity and hard work. Li Lihong keeps the characters and things around him, remaining curious and observant in life, saying that he is lucky to have done only one thing since his debut and nothing else. I understand that it is his dedication and love for life and careful observation that guides him from the inside out to give the voice, breath, mannerisms and voice patterns expected of a voice actor, so that the audience is drawn deeply into his seemingly banal narrative, walking through every corner of the country, appreciating the gifts of nature and experiencing the colours and flavours of food. The language used is motivated and the focused emotional expression is the blood of the documentary, which flows and rushes through the viewer's mind, making it vivid and vibrant. By incorporating the connotations of the documentary and understanding its essence, the voiceover artist can lead the viewer through the documentary with an emotionally charged voice. The *Yangtze River*, *Animal World* and *China on the Tongue* show us the charm of documentaries with a perfect combination of sound and image.

### ***3.2 Coding techniques highlight the documentary as a whole***

*Animal World* is a large-scale documentary series imported from abroad with a unique filming style, which was a novelty in China at the time. When Zhao Zhongxiang took over the narration of *Animal World*, there was no dubbing template to draw from. After reviewing a large number of foreign documentaries and combing through the rhythm of *Animal World*'s settings, Zhao felt that he could not use a high-pitched voice for the narration of a documentary like *Animal World*. I then boldly changed my broadcasting style", he says. In *Animal World*, I am generally somewhere between the news and the voiceover of a foreign art film. I didn't think it was possible to shout as much as the news". After much experimentation, he worked out an airy tone, using air to support the emotion and create a tension in his voice. This is the airy tone that we are familiar with from Zhao Benshan.

With this unique way of expression, he leads the audience through the fresh and natural world of animals, either tense or soothing, happy or relaxed, reflecting the authenticity of the documentary and expressing its artistic beauty through the unique voice of the dubbing artist. It can be said that the beauty of sound enhances the artistic quality of *Animal World*. The sublimation and refinement of themes by coding techniques is an important role of the narrative. No documentary can be completely divorced from the coder's element; it reflects the creator's ideological intentions. The narration allows for the direct expression of the creator's ideological tendencies and views, emphasising the ideological content and spiritual connotations of the whole film as a point of condensation, often playing the role of a finishing touch. In TV documentaries, there are many contents that cannot be or are not easily

expressed with images, and must be supplemented with narration to increase the amount of information in the documentary, so that the audience can obtain more information and enrich their cognition, and the advantages of narration are fully reflected here.

### ***3.3 Multi-dimensional sound intermingling coding to moisten the heart***

Subliminal voices attempt to enter the hearts of the characters and the audience, influencing the audience's subconscious and constructing the inner meaning of the documentary world at a subconscious psychological level. <sup>[4]</sup>For example, in *The Forbidden City*, the subdued and atmospheric sound of the narration is combined with the rhythm of majestic musical notes. In this, the viewer can even have the feeling of being in the Forbidden City in person to shock and resonate with the 'inner voice' community sound. The contrast between the intensity of the off-screen sound and the rhythm of the sound serves this 'subconscious sound'. Generally speaking, whether the viewer is satisfied with the variety of sounds in a documentary, and whether they have a good auditory sensory experience, is in fact an assessment of the documentary as a whole. The overall sound can have a direct impact on the expression of the documentary's content. As a more subtle presence, sound can subconsciously influence the viewer's subconscious response to a documentary. This is because a good sensory experience and artistic expression are the result of interaction.

It follows that a good sensory experience requires the viewer's mind and brain to complete the process of appreciation. The "subliminal voice" allows the viewer to talk and breathe with the documentary, with its images, and to share in a perfect appreciation of the process. Only in this way can the world of the documentary become one with the viewer's inner world, and only in this way does the "upper reaches of the mind intermingle with the realm of meaning". This "unconscious sound" is not just words, music or sound, but sound combined with images, an external form of aesthetic emotion created by the combination of sound and picture. Liu Zongyuan of the Tang dynasty once said: 'Beauty does not come from itself, but is revealed by people'. This 'unconscious voice' story is closely linked to the narrative, serving the content along with the picture, mobilising deeper emotions, longer-term memories and resonating with the collective subconscious. Thus, it is only at this point that an ultimately grand emotion is stirred. The "unconscious voice" is a deeper interaction between the visual and auditory senses, where the "subconscious" of the human brain receives and reacts to the information, allowing the viewer to become thoroughly immersed, to experience real-life repressed emotions and to gain a deeper psychological understanding in the virtual world. Virtual worlds provide a deeper level of psychological and emotional satisfaction, thus maximising the release of physical and mental energy.

## **4. Audience Decoding: Interpreting the Beauty of Narrative in Multiple Dimensions**

Hall sees coordinated symbolism as a process in which the coder and the translator are in a paradoxical negotiation. The documentary itself is a multi-symbolic text, and the multiplicity of interpretations is prevalent in the process of dissemination, and this interpretation is the most rational. One's cultural training, the accumulation of all one's past practices, and one's memory of the text he or she is interpreting, all constitute one's ability to decode. In other words, even in the same socio-cultural environment, two people influenced by the same dominant socio-cultural order may still have different results when decoding the same documentary. Each person has different learning experiences and so each individual has a different understanding of the world, society, family and emotions. Some people may penetrate the same documentary with lessons from history or implicit criticism of society, while others may only observe the simple narrative development of the film's plot. While the ability of the decoder does not determine the process or outcome of the film, it can have a significant impact on the decoder's decoding process and outcome.<sup>[5]</sup>

Theories explaining literary phenomena from the perspective of the reader. The public is not a passive part, but an active and dynamic part of history in its own right". In coding theory, the reader should not be suspended in the process of reading, but in the process of integrating horizons." A work, even if it appears in a new way, cannot be presented in stripping away the letter. But it can evoke the audience's memory of previous reading experiences and experiences through foreshadowing, overt or covert signals, familiar features." This new text evokes the reader's (listener's) horizon of expectations and the norms formed by previous texts, which are in a constant state of change, revision, alteration and even reproduction." The creation of a documentary is not only a combination of sound and image, but also requires the audience to fill in the "narrative gaps" and "meaning gaps" that may appear in the

documentary frame through their own thought processes. The Negotiated Audience will approximate to a part of the mainstream interpretation, but will also feel differently. "The existence of the phenomenon of the negotiated audience means that the process of watching a documentary is also a process of constructing an 'inner world'. This goes hand in hand with the content of the documentary, and in addition to the 'documentary script', there is also the 'script created by the audience' and the audience's inner feelings. Although they are rather fluid, ambiguous and fragmented, they are an integral part of the study of the aesthetics of documentary sound. Without the presence of the 'inner voice', it would be impossible for the audience to understand the inner language of the documentary.

It is therefore not difficult to understand that when the narrative sound of a film is too long it can lead to visual fatigue and inner reading fatigue, as well as causing impatience and resentment on the part of the viewer when receiving it. Conversely, as with the allusive nature of documentary and narrative language, the audience is empowered to construct a system of meaning for the world of the documentary and to reconstruct the inner voice. [6]The audience reconstructs its own perceptions of the content, which in turn enriches the aesthetic world of the documentary. The audience participates in the creation of the documentary through the 'inner voice', and thus the negotiated audience is born. At the same time, the multiple coded structures of the film's sound narrative repeatedly 'allude' and 'lure' the audience into the film through the combination of narrative language and music. The aesthetics of documentary sound is a 'two-way construction' process, where people go through the language of narration and the language of images to construct the self-contained virtual world in their minds. Therefore, no matter how meaningful or powerful a work of art may be, the meaning hidden in the text needs to be absorbed and understood by the audience. It is only through the absorption of the reader that the meaning of the work can become art or literature.

## 5. Conclusions

As a two-way construct of documentary encoding and decoding, it is not formed by chance, but by a combination of factors. Encoding and decoding are influenced by the social and cultural environment of the audience, as well as by their own ability to decode together. A beautiful documentary narration provides a bridge and a channel for the audience to enter this 'inner world', expressing everything in the film world through the layers of language and mobilising the audience's inner psychological structure to produce a distinctive aesthetic experience. The viewer's own memories of real life and fantasies are added to the interplay of the documentary's sound, ultimately completing the documentary's entire construction in the viewer's delightful interpretation.

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