

A study on the beauty of ecology from a humanistic perspective -- the aesthetic features of the "Lu School" documentary

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Abstract: In response to the contemporary call for fostering a “community of life”, the documentary trilogy — “Oasis of the Great River”, “Changshan Archipelago”, and “Mount Tai” — produced by Shandong TV, employs a narrative approach to vividly portray the dynamic relationships between humans and nature. Through diverse perspectives, these documentaries convey a non-anthropocentric ideology. On the one hand, they display the beauty of Chang Island, the harmony of Mount Tai, and the effective governance of the Yellow River. On the other hand, they skillfully express social consciousness by aligning macro policies with individual visions.

Keywords: Ecological documentary; Value communication; Aesthetic analysis

1. Introduction

With the progress of China’s industrialization and development demands, regions across the country have witnessed excessive exploitation of local resources, resulting in a critical ecological governance dilemma. Since the 18th CPC National Congress, the Party and the country have proposed accelerating the reform of the ecological civilization system and building a “community of life for humanity and nature”. This marks a new height in China’s ecological civilization narrative. In this context, constructing an ecological narrative and building an ecological discourse system has become the responsibility of television media. The documentary trilogy — “Oasis of the Great River”, “Changshan Archipelago”, and “Mount Tai” — produced by the Documentary Center of Shandong Radio and Television Station, is a large-scale documentary series that focuses on the ecological development of Shandong. It focuses on the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, depicting the economic and cultural transformations experienced by the Yellow River Delta, Chang Island, and Mount Tai in the era of ecological transformation. Through poetic expression, it crafts aesthetic imagery of ecological and humanistic beauty, effectively conveying the shared values of harmonious coexistence and providing viewers with abundant aesthetic experiences and emotional resonance.

2. Tilling the Sea — Spatial Narratives Depicting the Prosperous Scene of Fishing Communities

The concept of space has gained increasing academic attention since the emergence of the “spatial turn” in philosophy and sociology research during the mid-to-late 20th century. Various forms of visual storytelling have embraced spatial narratives. In the realm of documentary filmmaking, the visual narrative often hinges on temporality, yet the storytelling itself necessitates robust spatial elements. As aptly expressed, “Spatial narrative depends on the progression of temporal dimensions, while temporal narrative benefits from the changes in spatial dimensions, and the two complement each other.”^[1] Within documentaries, space serves as both the backdrop for characters, events, and settings and a vital foundation for narrative structure. The Changshan Archipelago, situated in the northern part of the Shandong Peninsula, facing the mythical Penglai Pavilion and bordered by the vast Yellow and Bohai Seas, is renowned as a string of pearls of the Peninsula. It stands as a significant marine fishing area, a hub for cultural tourism, and a designated natural conservation zone in China, boasting economic potential and ecological richness. The documentary “Changshan Archipelago”, comprising three episodes titled “Pearl of the Vast Sea”, “Seafaring Families”, and “Prospering by the Sea”, explores Chang Island’s natural beauty and cultural traditions through the lenses of living beings, homes, and rebirth. As a documentary centered on islands and the sea, “Changshan Archipelago” presents the two distinct spatial realms — the island’s terrestrial space and the maritime expanse — delineating unique

spatial narrative traits. It skillfully portrays the transition of meaning between the two through the dialogue of space, from segregation and conflict to harmony and integration.

As the fundamental cosmos for humanity in the world, the concept of home serves as the wellspring of people's happiness. With its inherent maternal nature, it provides a stable refuge in the storms of nature and life, imparting strength to weather challenges. Echoing Gaston Bachelard's words, "Without a home, man becomes a homeless being."^[2] The documentary "Changshan Archipelago" consistently underscores the profound significance of the "home" space for island residents. Whether it's the rising smoke from a fishing family's courtyard, the enthusiastic fishermen in the hand workshop, or the well-organized machinery in the pier and shipyard, these elements collectively shape the imagery of "home" on the island. When sea delicacy harvester Wu Shilun dives into the sea at a depth of twenty meters for fishing operations, the camera vividly captures the cold seawater and unpredictable marine environment, while highlighting the sole, slender air tube that sustains his life. At this moment, Wu confronts dual dangers from the external marine environment and his own physical condition. Simultaneously, the narrative seamlessly connects with the portrayal of "home" imagery through pictures of red blessings on the jade wall, a crimson cutting board and stove for cooking, a cherished family photo in the album, and Wu's wife and joyful children eagerly awaiting his news. Through nuanced tones and symbolic images, the creator crafts a comforting "home" space for the audience. As the momentarily lost Wu Shilun finally returns home from the sea and shares a meal with his family, the stable imagery of his home attains its full realization. The home transforms into a harbor where fishermen find solace after their arduous work, embodying a harmonious balance between the challenges of the sea and the comforting embrace of family life.

In contrast to the stable home space on land, "Changshan Archipelago" intricately portrays the ocean with a sense of ambiguity. The interplay between land and ocean spaces creates a unique dialogue, showcasing the havoc wrought on aquaculture equipment during storms and the tumultuous journey of fishing boats through turbulent waves, underscoring the inherent danger of the ocean. The ocean is presented with its captivating natural beauty and abundant resources, coupled with the unpredictable and destructive force of storms and upheavals. Together, they shape a complex marine space, providing essential resources for fishermen's survival while also serving as a concealed and hazardous place.

Edward Soja's spatial narrative theory delineates space into three dimensions: physical space, emphasizing tangible dimensions; mental space, emphasizing spiritual dimensions; and social space, which deconstructs and recombines the first two spatial structures, integrating political, economic, and cultural elements. In the spatial narrative of "Changshan Archipelago", the creator vividly portrays specific natural landscapes in both land and ocean spaces, completing the construction of its physical space. Cultural and spiritual spaces are effectively depicted through the lives of fishermen, the resonance of seafaring songs, and the observance of fishing customs. These set the stage for the integration of the two in social space.

3. Ecological Oasis — Dynamic Narratives Unveiling the Life of the Great River

As the mother river of the Chinese nation, the Yellow River holds a dual significance, symbolizing both abundant natural resources and profound cultural value. Since the turn of the century, notable documentaries centered on the Yellow River have emerged, such as the monumental "Yellow River" produced by CCTV in 2000, and recent works like "Families Along the Yellow River" and "Tranquility of the Yellow River", which explore the culture and ecological landscapes on both sides of the Yellow River. In contrast to earlier documentaries that predominantly concentrated on the Yellow River's origin and course, the documentary "Oasis of the Great River," produced by Shandong TV and premiered in October 2022, provides a fresh perspective. It received extensive promotion and tracking reports from various media outlets such as People's Daily, Dazhong Daily, and Global Times. Additionally, it was included in the State Administration of Radio and Television's "14th Five-Year Plan" key documentary topic planning (second batch). The documentary is organized into three segments — "Life", "Habitat", and "Harmony" — progressing from depicting the four-season propagation of large river creatures like Oriental storks and red-crowned cranes to showcasing the harmonious coexistence of humanity with the river's diverse life forms, ultimately reaching the inheritance of the Chinese nation's river culture. It paints a magnificent chapter of harmony and coexistence between the Han ethnic group and the great river, embodying the aesthetic connotation of interconnectedness between humans, nature, and all living things.

The Yellow River Delta serves as the grand entrance of the great river into the sea, nurturing diverse

life and harboring countless untold natural stories. Since the broadcast of the CCTV documentary series “The Song of the Forest” in 2007, there has been a growing emphasis on conveying human emotions in nature documentaries. This aligns with the widely recognized concept of a “community of life”, where all things coexist equally. “Oasis of the Great River” not only inherits but also advances the ecological documentary genre by skillfully narrating the life stories of the great river’s inhabitants through dynamic and engaging narrative techniques.

Dynamic storytelling is prominently displayed through a commitment to humanistic ideals. By “imbuing nature with an equal identity and emotions as humans” [3], the documentary shifts from anthropocentrism to the natural concept of “harmony between nature and man”. The initial episode, titled “Life”, zeroes in on the avian inhabitants of the Yellow River Delta. It employs poetic visual language to highlight the seasonal transitions of Oriental storks, sparrowhawks, green-backed kingfishers, Chinese crested terns, and other birds in the delta, capturing their survival journey through the seasons, including autumn migration and foraging, the challenges of winter survival, and the process of breeding and thriving in the spring. The production team overcomes the challenging shooting conditions in the tidal flat area, successfully capturing the first-ever breeding footage of wild, red-crowned cranes. They adopt a humanistic perspective to specifically document the life trajectory of an Oriental stork named Xueyan and her mother. Having observed their resilience during winter challenges, the narrator warmly expresses, “In mutual dependence and companionship with her mother, Xueyan traversed the cold winter.” When portraying the breeding season of Oriental storks in spring, the narration foretells, “The Oriental stork couple will achieve a significant event this spring,” and “This new couple will construct a love nest together, weaving a happy future.” The documentary uses a touching narrative to suggest that wildlife, much like humans, experiences both the challenges and joys of life. Its goal is to encourage viewers to appreciate the inherent equality and inclusiveness of all living forms.

Dynamic storytelling is also evident in the natural characteristics of audiovisual rhetoric. In traditional Chinese culture, concepts such as “following the rules of nature” and “all things are interconnected” not only embody the philosophical idea of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature but also reflect an aesthetic ideology that breaks down barriers between humans and the natural world. “Oasis of the Great River” uses authentic footage of the Yellow River tidal flats to offer a panoramic record and showcase the beauty of the Great River, embodying a unique national aesthetic ambiance. The documentary interprets the life of the great river through a diverse visual language. Distant shots capture the vast Yellow River tidal flats in different seasons and times, conveying beauty akin to “the sun setting over the long river”. Medium shots focus on individuals like researchers, farmers, fishermen, power workers, and singers along the banks of the Yellow River, illustrating a humanistic beauty that reflects love, protection, and reverence for nature by the local residents. Close-up shots meticulously document the natural activities of birds like black-winged stilts and tufted puffins, complemented by “silhouette-style scenes” that capture the nest-building and courtship of these birds. Interwoven with excerpts from the “Book of Songs,” such as “Among the islets in the river, the turtle-doves coo” and “The phoenixes and feng birds are calling in harmony”, the documentary presents a unique ecological beauty. Furthermore, the production team extensively employs aerial shots, providing viewers with a novel perspective on scenes like wetland cities, Yellow River tidal flats, and the confluence of rivers and seas. This showcases the splendid scenery along both sides of the great river and the spectacular spectacle of flocks of geese and ducks. Through seamless narrative scene shifts from macro to micro, the series adeptly blends the grand aesthetic atmosphere with intricate details, creating a harmonious and unified sense of natural beauty.

Dynamic storytelling is exemplified through sophisticated narrative techniques as well. With the evolution of documentary aesthetics, objective representation and emotional expression are no longer conflicting but rather integral components. In “Oasis of the Great River”, the use of metaphorical montage techniques is particularly prominent. For example, in the third episode, titled “Harmony”, scenes of fisherman Wang Yuejiao settling her family and the birth of a newborn are intercut with scenes of the Oriental stork family guarding their nest and the birth of their chicks. Through this artful montage, the documentary sparks the audience’s imagination, metaphorically alluding to the equality of life shared by the great river’s creatures and humans. Furthermore, the footage of Oriental stork reproduction, conservation zone planning, old trees on the tidal flats, and the Oriental stork nests on the tops of zoo enclosures forms a metaphorical montage. By weaving these multiple threads, the documentary subtly juxtaposes humans and animals, transforming the great river into the nurturing mother river of life.

4. Majestic Mountains — A Panoramic Display of the Grandeur of Mount Tai

While Chinese nature documentaries continue to evolve, the theme of “Mount Tai” has consistently been revered as the pinnacle by documentary creators in Shandong. Productions such as “Pulsating Mount Tai”, a joint venture by CCTV and Shandong TV in 2021, and “Mount Tai Vanguard Ode,” co-produced by Shandong TV and Taian TV in 2011, have delved into profound explorations and interpretations of Mount Tai. Against this backdrop, the creators of “Mount Tai” skillfully wield their cameras as brushes, employing a sketching technique to vividly present the magnificent landscapes of the mountain. Simultaneously, they offer diverse perspectives to showcase its cultural features, effectively conveying the spirited essence of Mount Tai.

4.1 Sketching Technique Showcasing Mount Tai’s Distinctive Features

The term “sketching” was originally applied in fine art. Different from painting methods such as “ink wash”, “coloring”, and “shallow vermilion”, which emphasize shading or coloring, sketching uses simple lines, prioritizing the portrayal of lifelike “skeletal structures”^[4]. In documentary filmmaking, creators have embraced the sketching technique across three distinct modes: “First, objectively and truthfully recording individuals and historical events. Second, expressing succinctly and poetically, infusing the work with profound aesthetic realms. Third, seeking answers through plot development, methodically accumulating and overlaying details to achieve recognition.”^[5] “Mount Tai” employs the power of the sketching technique to showcase the unique geographical environment and cultural sentiments of Mount Tai.

Firstly, the application of the sketching technique in “Mount Tai” is evident in the macroscopic portrayal of the geographical environment. On the one hand, it skillfully captures the mountainous terrain and landscapes of Mount Tai and its surroundings from a distance and provides a comprehensive view of the main peak, Yuhuangding, and the Tianmen Sky Ladder. These shots effectively encapsulate the aesthetic beauty of a “distant view”. On the other hand, the documentary delves into minute scenes such as underwater fish and rock patterns, showcasing the creator’s adept mastery of intricate details. By seamlessly bridging perspectives from the distant to the near, the splendid scenery of Mount Tai is vividly brought to life.

Secondly, the sketching technique is skillfully demonstrated in the manipulation of time. The creators portray Mount Tai in its various seasonal states — spring, summer, autumn, and winter. Aerial shots, for example, showcase the flourishing vegetation during spring, while slow-motion sequences unveil visitors navigating snow-covered paths in winter. Meanwhile, by utilizing Liu Zuocang’s smartphone footage of the summit’s scenery, the creators ingeniously showcase the scenic transformations of Mount Tai within a single day through the perspective of an “ordinary person”.

Thus, through seamless transitions between distant and close-up perspectives and the thoughtful portrayal of time’s passage, the documentary vividly showcases Mount Tai’s distinctive geographical location and breathtaking views. This portrayal further reflects its enduring historical heritage and significant role in Chinese civilization.

4.2 Diverse Narratives Conveying the Essence of Mount Tai

Since Flaherty’s “Nanook of the North”, innovating narrative styles has been a central focus for documentary creators. Telling stories in ways that align with contemporary traits and meet audience audiovisual preferences has become a top priority for each generation of documentary creators. “Mount Tai” employs diverse narrative techniques to depict the distinctive geographical environment of Mount Tai and simultaneously convey its profound cultural essence.

“Mount Tai” commences with a geographic perspective, using Mount Tai’s unique location as an entry point to unveil the mountain’s enduring cultural traditions. The documentary rationalizes the correlation between Mount Tai’s special geographical position and the customs of Chinese feudal dynasties, such as “inspection tours” and “mountain worship”. Through creative approaches, including the use of two-dimensional traditional Chinese animated sequences to recreate significant historical scenes and employing live-action dramatization to bring historical figures back to life, the creators, with a rigorous scholarly spirit and a truthful attitude towards history, showcase various facets of Mount Tai’s historical, religious, and cultural traditions.

5. Conclusions

In the current Chinese-language documentary landscape, Lu-style documentaries, in conjunction with the distinctive regional characteristics of Shandong, are delving into the modern significance and value of Qilu culture with their profound historical perspective and grand narrative style. These works not only explore the historical origins of Qilu culture but also provide a fresh interpretation within the cultural context of modern society. Audiences are thus provided the opportunity to immerse themselves in the profound essence and charm embedded in Qilu culture, actively contributing to the preservation of this invaluable cultural heritage.

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