

An Aesthetic Analysis of the Artistic Conception in Zhang Yiqing's Documentary

ANALYSE ESTHETIQUE DE L'INSPIRATION DES DOCUMENTAIRES DE ZHANG YIQING

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Abstract: Since televised documentaries began to popularize in China in 1990s, their artistic value has gradually exposed to people's attention. This paper studies the artistic conception of documentaries by analyzing the representative works of Zhang Yiqing. It mainly discusses the key points about artistic conception in Chinese traditional aesthetic and philosophy; the narrative style of Zhang Yiqing's documentaries(the theme, structure, and details) and the philosophical argument content; the television language(the commentary, off-screen voice, music, and stunts) using in his documentaries, and also its reference significance to traditional documentaries.

Key words: artistic conception, Zhang Yiqing, documentary

Résumé: Le documentaire télévisuel prend l'essor depuis les années 1990. Dès lors, le documentaire dont la valeur esthétique se révèle de jour en jour tire l'attention du grand public. J'ai choisi l'oeuvre de Zhang Yiqing comme exemple pour étudier l'esthétique de l'inspiration du documentaire. Cet essai traite principalement : des opinions essentielles issues de la recherche esthétique et philosophique sur l'inspiration ; les moyens de narration du documentaire de Zhang tels que le thème, la structure, les détails et la philosophie ; l'utilisation du langage télévisuel du documentaire de Zhang comme le commentaire, la voix off, la lumière et le truquage ; l'influence sur le document traditionnel.

Mots-Clés: inspiration, Zhang Yiqing, documentaire

The value of documentary lies in recording the history, reflecting the reality and enlightening the future. The artistic value of documentary has gradually exposed and people have been paying close attention to it. The theory of documentary has fallen to an extreme since 1990s: the restoration of the material reality. Many more people consider it as a direct recording, and a documentary is only a simple copy of an event. The human theme and the study of human is the topic of art. If life is only to delineate, it will certainly lose vitality. Only if the documentary style break away from the pure purpose of documentary and seek the sublimated artistic conception, can it achieve eternal artistic value.

Zhang Yiqing, now the documentary director of Hubei Television Station, is famous for the creativity, aesthetic features and abundant humanism in his documentaries. The diary on the red carpet, Set out for a long journey, the director, the world of Zhou, and Ying and Bai have won many prizes both at home and abroad. By studying these works, we can find the narration, structure, editing, techniques using in documentaries and the relationship between the thoughts and artistic conception creation the writer wants to express, we can

also find out the ways of expressing the beauty of artistic conception so as to draw some rules and instructions for the future documentary production.

1. A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF ARTISTIC CONCEPTION

Visual culture and its aesthetic phenomenon constitute the main part of the present culture; they exist everywhere in our time.

The beauty of pictures is an important factor of visual aesthetics. As far as Chinese aesthetic interest is concerned, the beauty of a picture closely relate with its artistic conception. No matter it is a movie or a picture of a sop opera or of an advertisement, the sense of artistic conception is the main factor of its artistic charm.

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Chinese traditional aesthetic thoughts of artistic conception are that artistic conception is a kind of beauty out of words and out of pictures. As for the form styles of beauty, it is elegant, simple fresh, and delicate. As for the ways of expression, it is winning and reserved. As for the relationship between form and content, it is feelings come from forms, images, and words, spiritual content weighs more than forms. As for the features of people's feeling it gives, it can't be digested over once but seems has permanent flavors. As for the relationship of life and art, it relates to feelings and reasons, and it appears be far away from reasons but reasonable. As for the specific expression of the relationship between spirits and materials, it expresses mainly by the contradiction between feelings and reasons, and the extent, ways of the unity of feelings and environments. Feelings and environments, however, both base on fiction and truth, therefore, artistic conception is the result of many factors' together- working and the product of kinds of rays' gathering from many angles.²

"Last appealing artistic conception interdependent with continuous life realm, so with universal feeling form, therefore, artistic conception opens up wide and profound huge backgrounds, displays flourish and vivid life-force."³ Dufrenne also pointed out this feeling essence of art: human beings associate truth with using feelings...because feelings exposes that feeling essence which consistent with truth." And he pointed out further that, "Art asks us to feel the absolute experience of feelings."⁴

1.1. The philosophical and aesthetic artistic conception theory

1.1.1 Conception in Chinese classical philosophy

The essence of the classical artistic conception is shown perceptually in "I"----- the core in the oriental life philosophy. The summit realm Chinese classical art pursue is the liberty and freedom of spirit. There are three levels in the artistic conception that shows the ancients aspiring the freedom.

1.1.2 Conception in aesthetic principles:

According to the aesthetic principles, every art is to express the consciousness of subjective life.⁵ From the manifestation form of the work of arts, the art

conception is unique (artistic, aesthetic) and broad spiritual space. The primary form of classical artistic conception shares the three levels: the integration of subject and object, the combination of space and time and internal image and external image.⁶

The integration of subject and object

The theory that man is an integral part of nature determines the integration of subject and object is the philosophical characteristic of the classical art conception structure. The whole oriental classical art is based on the theory. The aesthetic subjectivism is named "representation". All the oriental art is the poetic art for there is more or less poetic temperament and spirit⁷. As its core, the art conception without doubt possesses the character. The scene of the picture is remolded by the emotion of poetry means the artistic conception of drawing and painting is leveled by vivid and likeness in spirit as that in poetry. Since the richness and profound of the drawing and painting is compromised with the poetic emotion and imagination, it realizes the turn from practice to ideology ----- the direct vision turns into a hazy view and the limited conception becomes unlimited one.

The combination of space and time:

Conception. The artistic conception can be divided into view and condition.⁸ The latter refers to the whole result of the picture. To create the artistic conception requires people to think while viewing, to consider what else exists behind the covered. It is a process of an all round tasting. The interweaving of the conceptual levels of the rich picture enables the viewer changes his/her perception continuously which makes the stable picture into a dynamic roam about the artistic conception and the spread of the space has a sense of narration.

Internal image and external image:

Simply speaking, the internal image is the practical scene which is the ordinary artistic image. The viewer directly feels the images the artists present. The external image is the second level of the conception which is the different feelings among the viewers according to the different compromise of the images and the different tastes of the different viewers. The understanding of the image is not sole, but has the pattern of opening. The ideology and the practice are the two levels of the artistic conception. The notions describing the artistic conception-----thick and thin, dark and light, cover and reveal-----are all the result of the compromise. The practice is the material medium and the perceptual presentation of the concrete art working formed through

2 Yu Ming, *The development of Chinese classic artistic concept, in the Collection of artistic aesthetics*, edited by Wang Chaowen, Shanghai Huadong Normal University, 1990.6. P.259

3 L, Susan, *Art Problem*, Chinese version, China social science publishing house, 1997. P.41-55

4 Dufrenne, *Phenomenology of aesthetic experience*, China social science publishing house, 1996. P.525

5 Xue Fuxing, *On artistic concept*, people's literature publishing house, 2000.6. P.65, P.117-119, P.149-170, P.182.

⁶ Xue Fuxing, *On artistic concept*, people's literature publishing house, 2000.6. P.65, P.117-119, P.149-170, P.182.

⁷ Xue Fuxing, *On artistic concept*, people's literature publishing house, 2000.6. P.65, P.117-119, P.149-170, P.182.

⁸ Xue Fuxing, *On artistic concept*, people's literature publishing house, 2000.6. P.65, P.117-119, P.149-170, P.182.

it. The ideology is the thought the artist intends to express through the conception presented by the image. The task of the artistic creation is to express ideology through practice. The mode of thinking is to express emotion through artistic images.

1.2. The expression of artistic conception in literature

All the lyric literature is a combination of the emotion and scene. The theory of Baudelaire says that the things arouse aesthetic feelings have broadness and extensiveness. Thus, a desire, regret or a thought in the mind can convoke a matched image from the actual world⁹. How does the artistic conception express Composition in artistic works? There are several ways to realize it, concluding comparison, prevailing and blend.

1.2.1 Composition: It is to express the emotion through describing actual material which is concerning with the certain emotion.

1.2.2 Comparison: It is to express the emotion through applying the material which has the similarities to the emotion.

1.2.3 Prevailing: It is the process of expressing the objective materials which prevails the emotion of the subject, not requiring the concerning or similarity of the two.

1.2.4 Blend: Wang Guowei once said: "the best is to blend the emotion and scene"¹⁰. Apparently, this kind of articles describe materials or/and scenery, but actually they are to express the writers' emotion.

Besides, for the viewer, the production of the artistic conception is to turn the finished artistic work of the artists into the subjective spiritual existence of the viewer. The artistic conception is the "conceptualized image" in the viewer's mind¹¹. the aesthetic attitude and the personal experience determine the final state of the artistic conception.

2. THE REALIZATION OF BEAUTIFUL ARTISTIC CONCEPTION IN DOCUMENTARY MADE BY ZHANG YIQING

2.1 Theme

As a director, Zhang Yiqing said, "I'm lonely most of

the time." And this has become the soul of most of his works.

Everyone has legal rights for respect, as the director mentioned in *Zhouzhou's World*. What the author expresses is "respect", but considered as "care" by the audience. Zhouzhou is always lonely in his heart. There's only one bus, restaurant, and theater that he always has access to go for free. He lives in a separated, closed and fragile environment. "He is just a show." However, no one can fully understand his world, except Zhang Yiqing. Zhang annotated in his own way, and heard the voice from the bottom of his heart while Zhouzhou conducting the music. That voice is the faith in deep solitude, which has been found from Zhouzhou by Zhang Yiqing.¹²

After that, Zhang made "solitude" again as the theme of another work *Ying And Bai*. From Zhouzhou to Ying and Bai, Zhang has only taken the pictures of their actions instead of a word. For him, the best communication between two loners is to feel from solitude. A big cage, a bed with the bedclothes rolled up on daytime, a television that is always on, what is repeated is silent Bai, the panda in the cage or outside. Solitude is becoming acme. Only solitude has left in the complicated life. "Documentary is to record human soul, have you entered into their soul?" Zhang Yiqing said, "I think I have already done this, but maybe I haven't been into your soul."¹³

2.2 Structure

Kindergarten is his latest documentary, which is unbending, natural and allegoric. It's well-connected and rarefied, which are covered by unbending and natural. There are two clues in this film, one is record, and the other is interview. The structure of record part is from the first day of children entering the kindergarten, then their daily life, having meals, playing games, sleeping, spring outing etc, which are some snippet of life and record of specific details. Trace of adult world can be found from observing children's life. Their modal attitude, scrambling toys, breaking chairs and desks, cleaning shoe leather by spitting, singing adult's song, squatting on a chair... all are influences from adult world. The other clue, interview, changes the structure, and incarnates the representative topic that is the influence to children. Zhang said, "If life is showed in this way, it is bald. I think to add some conversation has some effect in changing the structure. It indicates a mode education, which is very practical, and it is also

⁹ Wang Wensheng, *On situation*, Shanghai art and literature publishing house, 2000. P.147-181

¹⁰ Wang Wensheng, *On situation*, Shanghai art and literature publishing house, 2000. P.147-181

¹¹ Xue Fuxing, *On artistic concept*, people' literature publishing house, 2000.6. P.65, P.117-119, P.149-170, P.182.

¹² Yang yang, Feng qiao, Liaoning TV station, *Director research of the documentaries Zhouzhou's World. and Ying And Bai, from the notes of the related symposium in Beijing film college.*

¹³ Yang yang, Feng qiao, Liaoning TV station, *Director research of the documentaries Zhouzhou's World. and Ying And Bai, from the notes of the related symposium in Beijing film college.*

multivocal, plenty and multi-functional.”¹⁴ “This structure and interview does not mean that we have to ask something sufficient, but he of course can say that his parents have no time to be with him, they need to have dinner for business, to do some hairdressing etc. Then they find out suddenly that children can talk in adult’s way, what they’ve learnt are from adults. What I want to express is that nowadays fewer and fewer things belong to children. It’s not because I specially represent them as adult, but that the world gives the children are adult things and many conceptive things.”¹⁵

2.3 Details

In Ying and Bai, many details humanize Ying, who has its own interest, its own mood, such as to rotate when it’s happy. It is fractious, and taboo that others sit on its cockhorse. However, the emotion it has most is solitude. It often stays in its cage, staring at somewhere for a long time. Its eyes and expression can often be seen from the film. Thus we can take it as someone that is like us human being, instead of an animal, and we can understand the Bai’s feeling to it --- the solitude in the film, not only animal’s comfortless in the cage. Standing near the window for a long time, looking at the colorful word outside, these details make us feel strongly that Ying is an individual with abundant emotion and innermost being. The audience can get more understanding of its inner heart after they get this suggestion, and get to know the artistic conception of the film.

Bai has Italian blood. Her romantic sentiment can be seen sometimes from her enthusiasm in music. She likes opera, but always plays torch songs. She likes to watch Italian films, of which Lady’s Fragrance acted by a famous Italian actor appeared in this film. Maybe Bai loves this film indeed, however, when it appears in this film, it innuendo Bai’s real life intentionally.

Any detail in this film is filled with free, lonely, life attitude etc. The director records Ying’s life details from subjective scene or next to the cage, which seems that Ying is also living in the cage, but actually what durance Ying is her heart.

From some aspect, music, commentary, light, color etc are also important factors for film artistic conception.

2.4 Music sound

Music has great effect in stirring up emotion. Either in film or television, we can always find that there’s music when final climax is coming.

In *Kindergarten*, children sing Jasmine together without accompaniment, which is accord with the

emotion of the film and foils slight desolation. Although it is not the sound of nature, it expresses some pure and desolate atmosphere needed in the film. What *Kindergarten* expresses is that children’s world is the rudiment of adult society. What they get are influences and refractions of adult conception, and difficulties that children meet when they are in the face of them. This slight desolation from adult society and children’s pure artistic conception is appropriate to be expressed by Jessamine sang by children, and contains strong aestheticism. Besides, that children’s chorus appear repeatedly becomes the matting of the story’s improvement. And its conception becomes stronger and understood by the audience.

The effect of music is not only a simple lyric part of the film, but also creates four-dimensional sight. The so-called four-dimension means expressional effect that goes beyond the actual progress of the gut and beyond the live specific emotion of the actors, and exists in a free way.¹⁶ This so-called “go beyond” must have some connection with the film. For example, in *Zhouzhou’s World*, in the very beginning before the name of the film appeared, trombone, French horn, Cha, kettledrums appears together with the music, behind its initiate rhythm it indicates that Zhouzhou’s life and destiny that will be talked about is grand, heated, and with dignity. This rhythm suggests the artistic conception and thinking that is created later in the film. This function of music goes beyond the specific details and superposes the things that happen in the real life and emotion, which makes the scene have multi expressive force.

2.5 Commendatory and voiceover

There’s no commendatory in *Ying and Bai* and *Kindergarten*. Only some accidental caption helps to express the theme. Zhang Yiqing said, “When pictures are not enough, commendatory is needed to complement. If you can express it completely, and is understood fully, there’s no need to say anything except for their watching. Although *Kindergarten* can be added some commendatory, however, once commendatory is attached, something will be lost. Such as *Ying and Bai*, it is so clear and nothing need to say, so how to and what to say? I emphasize emotion and mood, just like composing poems, when it gets to a step, to ‘a’ for a sigh, then nothing needs to continue.... It’s better not to say. And you should find out that way, which is multivocal. And everyone can judge it by their own experience and feelings, it will be more vivid.”¹⁷

Just as Zhang said, without commendatory, *Ying and Bai* can express the meaning apparently, which is accord with “Nothing more than I can say” in Chinese traditional artistic concept. When sound and pictures exist together, audience will pay more attention to the sound, which is natural response. Then they will ignore

¹⁴ from online material

¹⁵ from online material

¹⁶ From MediaChina.net.

¹⁷ from online material

the content in the picture, not as they do when there's no sound. The bourn in *Ying and Bai* is like a long-time and deep poem, which will be regarded as dull if you cannot get down to feel it, and your feeling may be that it is just the life of a person and a panda. When there's no sound added, you may be attracted and get interested by its feature.

It's the same as *Kindergarten*, if commendatory is added, many things will be lost. And the word from children and their daily behavior show that they're affected by adult world, and this can arouse audience's shock only when they observe it by themselves.

2.6 Color

The color of a documentary is not decided by the director. But some natural colors appearing in the film suggest the key, artistic concept and atmosphere of the film. There's almost black, grey, blue and white appear in *Ying and Bai*. These upset and cold colors are just the artistic concept and mood of *Ying and Bai*. That is why when we get the first sight of the film, we can feel the pattern and emotion features of something that will happen. The beginning color of *Kindergarten* is far away and fresh, that of *Zhou Zhou's World* is grand and romantic. The emotion key and artistic concept can be disclosed by color.

2.7 Color feeling and picture composing

The gym and perfume parts in *Ying and Bai* apply backlight. Backlight has several functions: to draw the figure of the object and distinguish it from the background, to emphasize the principal feeling of the object, to form bright lines at the edge of the object, to draw the contour line of the object clearly and vividly, to romance the atmosphere it needs to achieve and to rich and vibrate the picture, to resonate from the sight and heart, to make the content, artistic concept and rhythm of the film deeper and better. It can also depict people's characters such as dark, implicative, purge and dusky by using fuscous color.

The deepest impression that *Zhou Zhou's World* left on me is Zhou Zhou's conduct from the sight of a trombone's turning. This picture is romantic and elegant, composing the most beautiful picture. The usage of this special camera lens is from director's sensation, which indicates Zhou Zhou's character of romance, and adds poetic feeling to the picture.

The photograph of *Kindergarten* makes the picture possess tendency of strong beauty. The most expressive and arouse audience's emotion to the climax is the visional scene. Such as raining scene with Jasmine song, and children play games while calling "when red flower will blow", which is also visional and what can see is only children's figure and abates outside the garden. Their figure indicates happy and pure, and abates may accidentally appear, but it also tells the audience that the

world inside it is carefree and happy, and it should not be filled with violence and harm as the adult's society has outside.¹⁸

3. THE QUOTABLE SIGNIFICANCE OF ARTISTIC BEAUTY IN YIQING ZHANG'S DOCUMENTARY FILMS

3.1 The humanistic feelings based on and beyond common customs

The spiritual core of documentary films is mainly embodied in the culture and values. Documentary theme, from the discovery of the depth of soul revealed, and then expanded to the recycling of cultural spirit, the characteristics of documentary have raised to a new ideological heights. In recent years, documentaries whose theme is cultural regression were highly respected. And they usually get to the content-oriented culture: these documentaries saved the audience from the boring city life to new unknown scenery, giving them the access to the brand-new enjoyment.

It is unquestionable to broadcast that theme. However, we should be alert to the overflow of those relative themes. If we just look for the roots for no deeper purpose, the depth of idea and beauty can just be superficial and only exists in the original geographical. In that case, cultural excavation seems to be too weak. Documentaries in general should care for the common customs and go beyond common customs, presenting the humanistic feelings after the author's observation and consideration.

3.2 The production trends should be multiplied

The documentary films of Yiqing Zhang present the things after his consideration in the long and fresh style, beautiful pictures and clear narrative demonstration. But each time appear two totally different concepts which are controversies with each other. In many people's opinions, Zhang's documentary films violate the main principles because it is easy to see man-made marks and subjective color in them. Zhang said: "documentary films are different from documentaries. What you can see is the surface, but what I want to do is the spirit. For instance, many people doubt the TV programme in <<British and White>> is late with it. But Zhang asked whether it is important. Zhang has been insisted in his own way and adhere to the principles so that he has changed the rules. Quite a number of people think that these films are the breakthrough of traditional documentary films. No matter what skills to be applied, they all present the deep thinking.

¹⁸ from online material

In fact, it is my personal opinion that some of the questions are meaningless, such as whether Zhang's documentary films are true, or whether the subjective color of the films is too deep that they can't be called "documentary films".... The important thing for a film is what exactly it wants to express, whether the subjective color is too deep, whether it can bring some cool thinking to the cruel world, and whether it can bring enlightenment and comfort to the hearts of the people. TV shows should be the reality of the thoughts, should

be the beauty and kindness from the author's heart, his observation of the world, his sympathy for the things around, his concern for the weak, and the love from his inner heart. Do you begin to show the same kindness to those people around you? And do you begin to reexamine your own life? If those relatively true record can recall all the beautiful things in the memory from the bottom of one's heart and so that there is more concern for the world, that's the biggest significance lies in documentary films.

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