ISSN: 2710-0170

Representation of Marginalized Groups and the Construction of Their Subjectivity in Documentary Narratives

Yu Ji

Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Melbourne, 3141, Australia

Abstract

Although marginalized groups gain visibility in documentaries, they are often presented as objects. This article takes cases of Chinese and foreign documentaries as the analytical objects, and examines the paths and limits of subjectivity construction in image reproduction. The research finds that the unequal power relationship between the producer and the subject constitutes the structural starting point of reproduction. Some creators create space for the subjects to express themselves within the images through interventional coexistence (such as He Ku carrying 1,300 yuan to join the Chongqing stick carriers) and de-labeling narratives (such as "Pushing the Massage Parlor" which restores the daily life of the visually impaired); the adjustment of viewing distance—from Wang Bing's "ghost-like" observation in "Tiexi District" to Melgar's "Special Flight" which exchanges "moral agreement" for the detained person's narration—reflects different responses to the power of reproduction; and when these strategies touch upon privacy and stigma, they will encounter ethical dilemmas. The self-writing practice promoted by the popularization of DV and the penetration of digital technology (such as "This Is Life" which is composed of the self-shot materials from 509 ordinary people) transforms "being filmed" into "active speaking". These two paths mutually reference each other, slowly shifting the documentary ethics from "speaking for" to "concession".

Keywords

Marginal groups; Documentary narrative; Subjectivity construction; Image ethics; Self-writing.

1. Introduction

The "visibility" of marginalized groups in documentaries is not a transparent technical process. The control of the camera and the selection of scenes all point to the internal power configuration within the act of representation. Spivak pointed out in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" that marginalized groups lack platforms to express their concerns and channels to influence policy debates, and their conditions for speaking are systematically deprived. The same is true in the field of documentaries: when professional producers enter the shooting site with the posture of "speaking for marginalized groups", the subjects gain visibility and are also incorporated into the established narrative functions—as evidence of suffering, footnotes to social issues, or reflections of the producers' moral conscience.

The development of independent Chinese documentaries since the 1990s has made this issue even more urgent. The popularization of handheld camera equipment has enabled the camera to reach areas that were previously inaccessible, and the daily lives of groups such as laid-off workers, sex workers, and drug addicts have been presented. However, there is still a gap that has not been bridged between "having been captured" and "being seen": the marginalized groups in the pictures are speaking in the role of subjects, or are being spoken about in the role of objects? Xu Kaiyang pointed out when analyzing Zhang Zanbo's "Falling from the Sky": this film "avoids the posture of 'speaking for the underclass'", and spatializes the negotiation space

ISSN: 2710-0170

between the marginalized groups and state power. This judgment suggests a more general problem: when "speaking for others" itself may reinforce the status of the underclass, how can documentaries allow the subjects to appear as subjects [1]?

This article explores this issue. The construction of the subjectivity of marginalized groups involves aspects such as the reproduction of power relations, narrative strategies, viewing distance, and the self-expression practices of the subjects. The article starts from the structural dilemma of representation, analyzes the strategies of creators to "create space for the subjectivity" of the subjects, then examines the ethical choices of viewing distance and the ethical controversies it triggers, and finally examines the self-writing practices of marginalized groups and the tension between them and professional documentaries.

2. The starting point of reproduction: Who is filming, and who is being viewed

When documentaries reproduce marginalized groups, structural inequality always exists. This inequality has nothing to do with the good intentions of the producers; the possession of the camera itself constitutes a systematic distribution of power. The start and stop of filming, the selection of clips, and the overall narrative direction of the film are all determined solely by the producers.

Bill Nichols pointed out that documentaries do not "capture" reality, but rather "construct" reality through a specific narrative framework [2]. He divided documentary expression modes into six types: poetic, expository, participatory, observational, reflexive, and performative. McDougall's concept of "participatory film" emphasizes the communication between the film producer and the subject being filmed. This ideal has not been realized in most filming practices; the subjects usually have no idea of how they will appear on the screen in the end.

The development of independent documentaries in China provides rich materials for experience. Zhou Hao's "Using" documents a heroin-addicted man and drug dealer's daily life in Guangzhou. Zhou Hao established a relationship with A Long for two years, and this relationship's background was always "exploitation and being exploited". The English title of the film, "Using", directly points out this [3]. A Long clearly knew that Zhou Hao needed him and kept borrowing money from him; Zhou Hao clearly knew that A Long was the core of his film, and he maintained this relationship within the ethical bottom line. When Zhou Hao went to see A Long, he only carried 200 yuan and change for the return journey. The subjects were not completely passive; A Long "used" the director in his own way, and this "use" space was still defined by the director's filming needs.

Xu Tong's "The Harvest" exposed more difficult issues. The film documents the life of a rural girl named Ni Hongmiao who works in sex work in Beijing. In 2009, this film sparked a fierce debate at the "Cloud South" documentary film exhibition. Critics pointed out that the protagonist, Miao Miao, did not know that Xu Tong was filming a film and had not been informed that the film would be screened at home and abroad. The earliest version of the film had a shot where Yan Ge said, "Don't film, it will be deleted anyway," which later became the point of contention and was removed in subsequent versions. The film ultimately won the audience voting award, but the core of the controversy was not whether the director's intentions were good, but whether the subjects' right to know and autonomy in the reproduction process were effectively guaranteed.

ISSN: 2710-0170

3. From "Seeing" to "Concession": Transformation of Presentation Strategies

The structural dilemma cannot be eradicated, but some creators have left a subject position for the subjects in practice. Their common practice is no longer to pretend that the camera can "fully" reproduce, but to admit the intervention of filming, allowing the subjects' voices to carry more weight.

"The Last Stick" is an example. He Ku took off his military uniform and became the apprentice of Lao Huang, carrying 1,300 yuan and moving into No. 53, Self-Liberation Lane, and working with the stick carriers, waiting for work, carrying goods, and having meals in the communal kitchen. For a whole year, he first turned himself into a stick carrier and then turned on the camera. This sequence made the stick carriers in his film not be "being interviewed", but living their daily lives [4]. He Ku's clumsiness and embarrassment remained in the film, and the audience followed the gaze of an outsider into this group of people. The Paper commented that "to some extent, it got rid of the feeling of high-level scrutiny"—the disappearance of this feeling is because the filmmaker himself stood in the position of being scrutinized.

Fan Jian took a different path with Yu Xiuhua. "Still Tomorrow" faced the difficulty of too many labels. "Cerebral Paraplegic Poet" "The Emily Dickinson of China"—these labels helped her gain attention, but also flattened her into a consumer symbol. Fan Jian moved the camera away from the labels and focused on her marriage, quarrels, and poems written to love. The most powerful moment was at the poetry seminar, when someone compared her to Dickinson, and she immediately rejected it: Dickinson was unique, and I Yu Xiuhua was too. This sentence was the footnote of "de-labeling". Fan Jian had envisioned making a film about a poet whose life was in stark contrast to her poetry as early as 2014. The appearance of Yu Xiuhua in 2015 made this idea come to fruition. What he wanted to film was not the spectacle of a "cerebral-palsy poet", but how a specific person wrote poetry in the ordinary world.

The approaches of the two directors were different, but their underlying logic was the same: they both gave up the illusion of "objective recording" and acknowledged that every step the camera was present in was changing something [5]. McDougall's envisioned "participatory film" has been partially realized in these practices—the subjects were still unable to decide the final editing, but the way they spoke, the rhythm of their pauses, what they were willing to show and what they were unwilling to show, all gained greater weight in the final structure. This weight was not built up through techniques, but was the result of the creators stepping back voluntarily. This space was not given by technology, but was made available by the creators.

4. Distance of Observation: Uninvolved Observation and Restrained Control

The "letting go" is manifested in the choice of observation distance when filming. How far the camera is from the subject is not only a matter of camera positioning—it concerns whether the person in front of the camera is tense or relaxed, and also whether the audience is entering a world or being gradually led in.

Wang Bing's "Tiexi District" is a typical example of "non-involvement". This feature-length film, shot from 1999 to 2001, documents the decline of three large factories in Shenyang's Tiexi District during the state-owned enterprise reform, as well as the daily lives of the young people on Yanfen Street. Wang Bing described his relationship with the subjects by analogy: "For them, my camera is not a particularly prominent presence, just like a clock in the house" [6]. This was possible because he never thought of "distorting their lives or violently intruding", but rather "following the flow of their lives, entering it like a lodger". Some reviewers called it "ghost-like shots": the camera position is often very low, placed on legs or on tables, and when the workers

ISSN: 2710-0170

speak, they do not look at the camera, and the performance sense disappears. Wang Bing gave up "control over the subjects" and only observed. He did not ask questions or make evaluations, allowing the images to present themselves on their own, and returning the judgment power to the audience. But this "non-involvement" itself is also worthy of consideration [7]. The film retains the footsteps and door-opening sounds of the cameraman; these traces remind us: observation has never been neutral.

In response to this, French director Raymond Depardon chose a different approach when dealing with restricted subjects. His "San Clemente" (shot in 1980 and released in 1982) was shot in a psychiatric hospital in Venice that was about to close. The patients were admitted, and the word "consent" was hardly free. Depardon did not bypass this problem but turned the restrictions into aesthetics: He hardly made any editing interventions, shooting in a "real-time" manner, making the existence of the patients the content of the film rather than "extracting" dramatic elements.

Both paths point to the same cognition: The distance of observation is ultimately how the creator handles the power in their hands. Neither eliminates the inequality in reproduction, but both acknowledge this inequality and place the subject's state at the center of the filming. Nicolas Philibert filmed the deaf community from a greater distance. When shooting "In the Land of the Deaf" (1992), he immersed himself in a sign language course—the so-called "correct distance" was never decided by the director, but was found through the adjustment of the communication method with the subjects.

5. Ethical Tension: When the Camera Faces "Unsuitable for Public Disclosure" Life

The adjustment of the observation distance is ultimately about handling the relationship between the filmmaker and the subject. And when this relationship touches on law, privacy, or social stigma, it becomes particularly tricky. When filming marginalized groups, the trouble often lies in areas where the ethical manual does not cover. The subjects, with their illegal activities, private information that is not to be disclosed, or social stigma, "filming the real" and "protecting the person" are difficult to achieve simultaneously.

Zhou Hao's "Using" is full of such awkwardness throughout. A Long borrowed money every three or four days, and Zhou Hao "at most gave 200 yuan each time". When A Long went to prison, he still sent money. This cannot be judged right or wrong: Giving the money may have some impact on A Long's choices, even indirectly supporting his drug use; but if he refused completely, trust would be impossible, and the film could not have been made [8]. Zhou Hao left these confusions intact in the film. This openness itself is a stance—acknowledging one's presence and also acknowledging that presence can change something, rather than using "objective observation" as a shield.

The controversy caused by "The Harvest" points to another issue. At the Yunfest Film Festival in 2009, whether this film should be shown was debated for eight hours. Opponents said that the protagonist Miao Miao had no idea she was being filmed as a movie and even had no idea it would be shown at home and abroad, and her privacy was exposed too much. Supporters believed that this film at least gave sex workers a normal person's face, no longer being a subject of curiosity. Did Miao Miao know or not know before filming? Xu Tong stated in his response to the controversy that Miao Miao agreed to let him shoot the footage, but at that time, she did not know what the final product would look like. The root of the problem lies not in the quality of the film, but in this question: When someone says "OK", does this "OK" count? If her situation made it impossible for her to refuse, was just giving a nod in form enough in terms of ethics? Some researchers have proposed that filmmakers have the responsibility to truly give the

ISSN: 2710-0170

subjects the choice, allowing them to "make a decision without being deceived, lured, or coerced".

This controversy surrounding "The Harvest" also deserves another look. Some criticized Xu Tong for his "uncompromising arrogance" after the event. Documentary ethics are not rules that can be followed mechanically from paper; they are developed through repeated specific filming relationships, being pulled and gradually shaped by both parties. Directors cannot use "artistic freedom" as an excuse to absolve themselves; the subjects, with just a simple "agreement", cannot control where their images go—the real problem lies precisely in the middle ground where neither of the two can fully make the decision [9].

6. Reverse of Images: Alternative Paths of Subjectivity in Self-Expression

The construction of the subjectivity of marginalized groups in professional documentaries cannot be separated from the power gap between the filmmaker and the subject. If the marginalized group takes up the camera themselves, they change their position of speaking: from "being filmed" to "self-filming".

Wu Wenguang initiated the "China Villagers' Documentary Film Project" (launched in 2005), organizing 10 villagers from 9 provinces to shoot short films about their own villages using portable DV cameras. Its value does not lie in being "more real" than professional documentaries—that still presupposes the essentialist view of truth. The truly crucial point is that self-expression has changed the structure of "who is speaking". When villagers shoot their own villages, the camera focuses on what to film, how to communicate with neighbors, and what is worth filming, all embedded in their own life experiences. This "embeddedness" cannot be achieved even by the greatest efforts of professional directors.

The first-person documentary in North America emerged earlier. Marlon Riggs' 1989 film "Tongues Untied" documented the American black gay community, facing the "double oppression" of race and sexual orientation, using "I" as the narrative subject [10]. Catherine Russell summarized such practices as "self-ethnography": when the author realizes that personal history is closely related to the larger social process, autobiography acquires ethnographic nature, and identity "is no longer a priori or essential, but 'the performance of subjectivity'". Taiwanese indigenous documentaries provide another reference. After the mid-1990s, a group of indigenous directors recorded their own ethnic groups using "the indigenous perspective of their own images". The difference from traditional anthropological documentary images is that the camera "tells" from within the group rather than "observes" from the outside. Biling Yabu, a Tayal director, documented tattoo culture in his 1998 film "The Rainbow Story". Biling Yabu emphasized that indigenous images are centered on "telling themselves", "staring at themselves", and "filming themselves". This is in cross-contextual resonance with the village residents' image project—both respond to the issue of representation by changing the position of speaking.

There are also limitations to self-writing: The images of villagers rely on the continuous operation of the grassland work station, while the images of indigenous people are embedded in the production and broadcasting system of public television [11]. More importantly, it does not eliminate the issue of representation; it merely shifts it to another level: When marginalized groups decide "what to show" and "what to hide", they are also influenced by social conditions and power relations. However, the entity making the choice has changed—this is itself a substantive progress in the construction of subjectivity.

ISSN: 2710-0170

7. Conclusion

The construction of the subjectivity of marginalized groups cannot be achieved by a certain "correct" way of filming. The five threads discussed in this article—unequal power, interventional coexistence and de-labeling, ethical stance of viewing distance, ethical tension under privacy and stigma, and self-expression practice—interweave with each other, forming a dynamic negotiation process. The viewing distance indicates that "concession" is not a slogan, but the selection of the location in the filming field: Wang Bing uses the "clock-like" presence to dissolve himself, Depardon holds restraint in institutionalized shelter by "real-time", and Nicolas Philibert relearns the filming method to adapt to sign language expression. The three paths are different, but none of them attempts to "speak for" the subjects being filmed, but rather creates space for their speech.

The village residents' image project and indigenous practices do not make professional documentaries redundant; instead, they provide a reference system for evaluating their ethical stance—when marginalized groups have the tools and channels for self-expression, professional producers face more specific questions: To what extent is this film "about" them rather than "for" them?

From "representation" to "concession" does not mean giving up subjectivity, but maintaining self-awareness of one's power position. This self-awareness does not guarantee ethical "correctness", but makes representation change from one-way viewing to a process of negotiation, compromise, and uncertainty.

The limitations of this article lie in the fact that the cases are mainly focused on Chinese independent documentaries and a few foreign practices, failing to cover a wider non-Western context, nor do they address the influence of commercial platforms and social media on the self-presentations of marginalized groups. Future research could compare the differences in self-writing practices under different institutional environments, as well as how digital platforms change the conditions and boundaries of "concession". The value of documentaries may not lie in "revealing" what "true appearance" is, but in documenting how a relationship occurs and unfolds—this relationship itself is precisely the condition for the manifestation of subjectivity.

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