

Constructing Authenticity: Interactive Documentary in the Age of Simulacra

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Abstract. With the continuous evolution of high technology, digital technology is profoundly reshaping the form of documentaries and the connotation of their "authenticity." In an era dominated by "simulacra," interactive documentaries have constructed a new representation of "authenticity" through the innovative application of digital technology. This study takes Baudrillard's theory of "simulacra" as its starting point and uses case analysis and textual analysis to explore how interactive documentaries construct "authenticity" in the context of digital media. The study finds that, unlike traditional documentaries that rely on "objective reproduction," interactive documentaries construct a sense of authenticity through three dimensions: "data authenticity," "perceptual authenticity," and "algorithmic authenticity," presenting a more complex and diverse picture. While possessing social and open aspects, it is also necessary to remain vigilant against algorithmic manipulation and technological ethics. Overall, the authenticity of interactive documentaries has transcended the "reproduction" of images, moving towards a process of co-construction between the audience and the media, and the social function of documentaries has been expanded to a deeper level.

Keywords: interactive documentary, authenticity, simulacra, hyperreality, cultural reflection

1. Introduction

Since its inception, the core issue of documentaries has always revolved around "authenticity". In 1926, Grilson first used the term "documentary" and proposed the definition of "creative treatment of reality". Authenticity is regarded as the value cornerstone and academic focus of documentaries. However, with the continuous evolution of digital media, the authenticity of documentaries has gradually deviated from traditional logic and entered a complex context dominated by data, algorithms and interaction.

Against this backdrop, interactive documentaries, as an emerging form, present new issues and challenges in the study of authenticity. Interactive documentary emerged under the trend of the integration of documentaries and emerging digital media. It no longer relies solely on the records of directors and cameras, but instead leads the audience into a richer narrative system through technical means such as websites, databases, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence. Sandra Gaudenzi defines it as: "Works that aim to record 'truth' and use digital interactive technology to achieve this purpose." [1]

In the era when "simulacra" [2] is prevalent, the emergence of interactive documentaries has made the criteria and presentation methods for judging the "authenticity" of documentaries increasingly complex and diverse. It breaks the passive acceptance status of the audience in traditional documentaries with its unique interactive experience and endows the audience with a certain degree of initiative at the level of "perceiving reality". However, from the perspective of "skeuomorphism", it is worth reflecting on whether the audience, in their seemingly autonomous choices, are engaging in a dialogue with "reality" or entering a "hyper-real" world constructed by symbols.

Therefore, this article will take Baudrillard's concept of "simulacra" as the theoretical basis, and combine case analysis, text analysis and other methods to explore how interactive documentaries can construct a "sense of reality" through links such as material data, user perception and digital algorithms. Further analyze the impact of digital technology on the authenticity of documentaries and conduct critical thinking on the authenticity of interactive documentaries in the context of "simulacra". Meanwhile, this article also hopes to provide a new perspective for understanding the issue of "authenticity" in contemporary media culture.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical research on simulacra: an overview

Baudrillard's "simulacra" theory originated from his work *Simulacra and Simulation*, providing an important philosophical framework for understanding the issue of authenticity in contemporary image culture. He believes that in a society where modern technology is constantly evolving, with the proliferation of media and information, the generation of symbols no longer needs to refer to reality but rather replicate themselves as simulacra. These simulacra will eventually become reality and lead to a state of "hyper-reality".

This theory not only serves as an important foundation for analyzing postmodern society, but also provides key ideas for understanding film and television culture in the era of media saturation. Zhang Jinsong [3] theoretically introduced key terms such as simulacra, simulation, and surrealism, and interpreted Baudrillard's postmodern theory from the perspectives of consumer studies and semiotics. With the continuous development of film and television culture, scholars such as Wang Ke [4], Li Mengjiao [5] and Li Xun [6] have also applied the theory of simulacra to the field of image media, linking specific cultural phenomena such as films, variety shows, reality shows and short videos with the theory of simulacra to explore the relationship between simulacra and images. However, there are still significant gaps in existing research when applying simulacra theory to the emerging field of interactive documentaries.

2.2. Documentary authenticity: a review of research developments

Authenticity, as a central topic in documentary studies, has long been discussed from multiple perspectives. Historically, reflections on documentary truth were predominantly concentrated on formal aspects. Scholar Ju Fei [7], for instance, examined the nature of different documentary genres and their relationship with authenticity by revisiting the very definition of "the real." Meanwhile, Wang Chi [8] systematically traced the evolution of Western documentary theory since the 1980s, conducting an ongoing inquiry into the question of authenticity based on the conceptual foundations of the documentary form.

The advent of the 21st century and the rise of digital technologies introduced new dimensions and challenges to the study of documentary authenticity. In response, Zhao Boping [9] and Dong Xiaoyu [10] proposed re-conceptualizations of authenticity that are better suited to contemporary, diversified creative practices. At the level of practical creation, Tan Diwen [11] used his graduate project *Yang Lao (Elderly Care)* as a case study to explore how interactive documentaries incorporate the audience into the construction of authenticity through "interactivity."

In conclusion, with the continuous evolution of high and new technologies, interactive documentaries, as an emerging category of documentaries, have gradually attracted the attention of the academic community. Research abroad started earlier and mainly focused on media characteristics, narrative strategies and audience participation patterns. Domestic research, on the other hand, started relatively late and has focused more on the analysis of practical cases and typological sorting, summarizing their creative methods and dissemination effects. However, on the whole, research on interactive documentaries at home and abroad is still in its infancy, especially in the exploration of the "authenticity" dimension, which is obviously insufficient. How to understand the authenticity logic of interactive documentaries in simulating reality and constructing narrative images remains a key issue that has not been fully answered, which constitutes an important space for further in-depth exploration and expansion in this study.

3. Analysis and results

3.1. Data authenticity: the foundation of objectivity

Traditional documentaries often transform the real world into fixed and linear audio-visual language through montage, narration and other techniques, thereby unidirectionally constructing authenticity. Interactive documentaries, with their unique features, partially transfer the initiative of "constructing" authenticity to users.

3.1.1. The objectivity of raw source material

The primary prerequisite for constructing the authenticity of interactive documentaries is the authenticity of the material content, that is, the video clips, audio interviews, photos, archival files, etc. of the film must originate from real events or people. This is the same as the documentary principle of traditional documentaries. However, unlike the subjective emotions and narrative intentions often carried by traditional documentaries, interactive documentaries usually present these data directly, giving the audience a perception of "data-driven truth".

Interactive documentaries can relatively more "directly" display unprocessed original image materials, thereby generating a more data-driven and objective texture of authenticity. This "directness" is reflected in both *Bear 71* and *Conversations*. For instance, *Bear 71* integrates and presents a large amount of raw digital data from wildlife trackers in the form of hyperlinks, such as the GPS trajectories of animals, the recording time and trigger position of cameras, etc. Because these images are automatically recorded after being triggered by animals and appear in a rough, unstable or long blank and repetitive form, they lack the subjective selection of human shooting in traditional documentaries, thereby weakening the director and editor's control over the presentation of the picture, presenting a primitive, unprocessed objective truth, making the documentary more open and personal [12].

Anandana Kapur's interactive documentary *Conversations* takes the original material to a new dimension. The director created a mobile application called "*Conversations*", through which Delhi

women can record and tell their own stories. This kind of "participatory interaction" means that the original materials are no longer merely the images collected by the production team, but the content that female users actively create and share through the interactive platform. This kind of "co-creation documentary" not only does not weaken its authenticity, but also reaches a deeper and more objective dimension of truth by endowing the subject with narrative power [13].

3.1.2. The openness of the database

Another crucial factor in constructing the authenticity of interactive documentaries is the openness of their database. Organizing and presenting a database of a large amount of original materials is the key to building and reproducing reality, while an open database is an important way to gain the trust of the audience and enable users to perceive the "reality" of the film. Although not all works offer a completely open database, most of them provide multi-dimensional original materials in different ways, creating an impression of "comprehensive" and "transparent", thereby enhancing the audience's sense of trust.

The multi-perspective narrative of *The Last Generation* and the interactive digital environment of *Bear 71* both, through the openness of the database, enable the audience to make their own choices, understand events from multiple levels and "discover" the information themselves. *The Last Generation* tells the history, current situation and future of the Marshall Islands from the perspectives of three children. Users can freely switch between different perspectives. Each narrative thread is embedded with various types and sources of original materials to provide a multi-dimensional viewing experience. As a typical hypertext interactive documentary, *Bear 71* uses technologies such as VR and GIS to construct a virtual environment composed of digital codes and information data, representing the real Banff National Park. Viewers can directly obtain the original materials and related information through operations such as zooming, dragging the map and clicking ICONS. It can be seen from this that open databases not only strengthen users' trust in the works but also give them an "objective and neutral" appearance. Therefore, the openness of the database has become an important strategy for interactive documentaries to prove their "authentic" value in the digital age.

3.2. Perceptual authenticity: the centrality of interactive experience generation

Interactive documentaries break from the linear narrative mode—the conventional method of conveying information chronologically used in traditional documentaries. Through the application of digital technology, they form narrative expressions characterized by non-linearity, hypertextuality, and openness [14]. This non-linear narrative, combined with the embodied experience of interaction, jointly creates an interactive experience of "authenticity" for the viewer. As Sandra Gaudenzi notes in defining interactivity, it is a "means by which the audience is placed within the work, and through this interaction, negotiates the reality that the work intends to convey."

3.2.1. Non-linear narrative and the sense of exploration

The non-linear narrative structure of interactive documentaries forms the basis for the viewer's interactive experience. The acquisition of this experience stems from how digital technology enhances film's expressive capacity as a language of images [15]. Interactive documentaries deconstruct narrative content—such as video clips, audio, and text—into independent units, integrating them via hypertext links into a network or tree-like structure. The audience no longer

merely receives a "story" arranged by the director but instead pieces together their own narrative path through exploration and choice.

The interactive documentary *Charity* sets up a series of nodes such as "Public", "Residents", "Cathedral", "Storm", "Leaves", and "House", and the audience can choose to enter them freely. Therefore, the work shows a significant non-linear characteristic. Its panoramic scenes and photography technology enable the audience to browse 360 degrees through drag-and-drop operations, thus following the explanations to explore the tension between the community and public artworks. This narrative structure simulates the complexity of the real world and the nonlinearity of cognition, making the "jigsaw puzzle" cognition that the audience acquires during exploration more convincing than passively accepting a complete story. This multi-perspective-based embodied exploration enables the audience to experience the immersive presence and experiential reality brought by "becoming" and "acting" in the digital environment [16].

3.2.2. The embodied experience of interaction

Edmund Husserl believed that "the body is the medium of all perception" [17], and as one of the narrative elements, the body was further incorporated into the film-watching experience. Therefore, the creation of interactive documentaries often combines interactive behaviors with non-linear narratives, aiming to break the passivity of traditional documentary viewing and create an immersive interactive and realistic experience.

The *World in Ten Blocks* places the stories of over a dozen immigrant small business owners in a long interactive online experience. The work simulates the user's walking and exploration in the real space through a first-person perspective and scrolling mechanism. Users can choose to talk with different store owners to gain a deeper understanding of their growth and immigration experiences. This active and embodied choice transforms users from viewers to actors, creating a strong sense of "presence" and "involvement", thereby deepening the cognitive "I believe" into the embodied "I feel". According to the "presence theory" in social psychology, such physical cooperation and interaction actually simulate the way the audience observes and explores the real environment. This enables the audience to feel their "presence" in their media environment, thereby generating a strong sense of real presence [18].

3.2.3. Form is content: the signifying function of the interface

The authenticity of interactive documentaries is further reinforced through the design and expressive form of their interface. "The dissemination of media is not merely the transmission of content and meaning, but also includes formal relationships". The unique value of interactive documentaries lies not only in the innovative application of digital technology but also in the deep intertextual relationship formed between their form of expression and their thematic content. This intertextuality, on a perceptual level, stimulates the audience's deep reflection on real-world social issues.

The theme of *Bear 71* is to reveal the invasion of the living space of wild animals by the expansion of human activities. It presents this theme intuitively in an interactive form that is highly dependent on digital technology. The audience can "track" the grizzly bear's movement trajectory through mouse operation on the interface. This tracking is intertextual with the real-life monitoring of animals by humans using collars and cameras. In the interaction, the audience unintentionally played the role of data collectors or monitors, thus experiencing more personally the impact of human activities on wild animals and the ubiquitous "presence" of humans. This form of imitation and experience enables the audience to confront the most microscopic level through embodied

operation - how wild animals survive in an constantly disturbed environment, thereby deeply perceiving the weight and complexity of the theme.

3.3. Algorithmic authenticity: the construction of technical logic as mediation

With the continuous advancement of technology, algorithms are no longer merely the operational logic in the background, but have become the key intermediary that shapes users' true perception through implicit technical operations. This kind of "algorithmic authenticity" is particularly important in the narrative of interactive documentaries. Through interactive logic and user traceability mechanisms, it transforms the audience from passive recipients to active content co-creators, thereby creating a sense of "customized for you" experience authenticity.

3.3.1. Interactive logic and customized outcome generation

In the context of digital media, "algorithmic truth" shapes the framework for users to understand truth through the intermediary operation of technical logic. Users who watch interactive documentaries are rapidly informatized by the algorithm platform. Through technologies such as traceability, backtracking, and tagging, every interaction is stored, and users' personal preferences are analyzed to create a "personal portrait" of the users [19].

For instance, the interactive documentary *Birth in the 21st Century*, which focuses on women's reproductive health, embeds interactive text within the video pages to encourage viewers to respond during the viewing process. This kind of response interaction is not merely a simple transmission of information, but rather a reflection of the audience's thinking about the information they receive. After the video playback ends, the algorithm will generate a personalized fertility choice document for download based on the interaction data of the audience. Here, "generation" refers to transforming the "data traces" left by the audience into personalized summaries and further expansions. Algorithms can extract cognitive preferences, emotional identifications and even potential needs by recording and analyzing users' choice data. Users thus experience a sense of "being understood", which greatly enhances their identification and immersion in the work, thereby establishing a deeper emotional connection.

3.3.2. User traces and personalized experience

From Deleuze's "rhizome" thinking perspective, it can be found that the text of interactive documentaries is actually open, networked and participatory. In other words, every interaction by the audience is a continuation and recreation of the meaning of the work. The "algorithmic authenticity" is precisely highlighted at the "trace" level in the interaction between users and digital content, and the audience also becomes the object of the algorithm unconsciously, being continuously analyzed and shaped.

For example, in the last interactive session of the interactive documentary *One Shared House*, users need to select their collective living preferences and submit the form. This submission is not the end of the process but a node for data collection: the information filled in by users and their browsing paths will be collected and recorded by the algorithm system behind the documentary, becoming indispensable raw materials in the database and thus forming part of the work. By analyzing these data, the algorithm can outline a more detailed user profile and provide a basis for generating more targeted personalized analysis reports in the future. As a result, every trace left by

users not only reinforces the real existence of the algorithm but also integrates individual experiences into a broader digital narrative.

4. Discussion

4.1. The social construction of authenticity: from representation to co-construction

"In a sense, the history of documentary is a history of the understanding of the concept of truth. The issue of truth is always linked with documentary, intertwined and inseparable, whether in the past or today." [20] In the evolution of contemporary documentary, authenticity is undergoing a profound transformation from one-way "representation" to two-way "co-creation." This model of two-way "co-creation" of authenticity resonates with Baudrillard's principle of reciprocity.

In Baudrillard's theory, the authenticity of traditional documentary is actually based on the author's "symbolic" representation of reality. The audience can only passively accept these symbols and interpret the "reality" the author intends to convey—a one-way flow of symbols lacking audience participation and feedback. Interactive documentaries change this unilateral narrative. Through active participation, the audience becomes a co-creator of authentic symbols, interacting with the work and entering a reciprocal mode of symbolic exchange. Authenticity is therefore no longer predetermined but is generated through continuous exchange between the "field" designed by the creator and the active "action" of the user.

More importantly, the authenticity of interactive documentaries has been endowed with new social functions during the co-construction process. For topics such as popular science, environmental protection, and public health, interactive forms enable complex information to be understood in a more intuitive and experiential way. The audience is no longer passive learners but co-creators of knowledge construction. Their experiences and feedback have enhanced the efficiency of information transmission and the sense of identity. This is not only an extension of the educational function of documentaries, but also a deepening of their social value, achieving the integration of technology and humanistic care in a mutually beneficial interaction.

4.2. The algorithmic gaze and the implosion of the real: crisis of power and reality

Foucault's "panopticism" discusses how the essence of disciplinary power lies in the uncertainty of being watched. The algorithmic gaze pushes this to a higher dimension [21]. In the interactive interface, while the audience can autonomously gather information and browse content, each interaction may constitute a digital "presence" or "marker." Even if the work does not emphasize the recording of viewer behavior, online interaction inherently accompanies the possibility of data collection. While watching, the viewer may also become a "specter" captured by digital technology, their actions themselves potentially becoming objects of observation and analysis.

From the perspective of power criticism, when "algorithmic reality" is pushed to the extreme, the "simulacra" constructed by the interactive experience may become disconnected from reality. The algorithm establishes an emotional connection for the audience through precise data analysis and builds a convincing "simulated" world through interactive experiences. However, this world may gradually deviate from objective reality, guiding the audience into a "hyper-real" realm. At this point, algorithms are no longer tools for recording and imitating reality, but have become programs for creating and defining "reality". This kind of self-replication of symbols divorced from reality eventually leads to the "implosion" of the meaning of reality, fundamentally challenging the essence

of documentary authenticity. Therefore, the real implosion triggered by the algorithmic gaze is a fundamental inquiry into the unique medium of interactive documentaries.

4.3. Differences in documentary creation across cultural contexts

In different cultural contexts, understandings of "authenticity" and the focus of documentary creation differ. Domestic documentaries in China often prioritize public education value, emphasizing "national narratives," where the construction of authenticity tends more towards conveying grand narratives and value guidance. Consequently, the development of interactive documentaries domestically is relatively slow, and the application of interactive technology is not yet mature. In contrast, the field of interactive documentary started earlier outside China, with more advanced technology and a greater focus on exploring individual experiences, narrative experimentation, and the application of cutting-edge technologies like VR and AI.

Due to the different cultural value orientations, there are also differences in the "simulacra" construction of authenticity in interactive documentaries at home and abroad: China places more emphasis on collective values and public education, while foreign countries pay more attention to individual experience and technical experiments. However, the construction of authenticity in different cultural contexts all face common media ethical challenges. For instance, how can we avoid the "illusion" of authenticity caused by excessive reliance on technology? How can audience data be used while protecting privacy? How can we prevent the form of interaction from sliding towards superficial entertainment? These issues remind us that how to use technology prudently so that it serves social care rather than merely being a display of technology or an emotional stimulus is a direction that needs to be focused on in the future. It is expected that domestic interactive documentaries will better integrate emerging technologies in the future, expand creative forms, maintain profound social functions while aligning with international standards, and form a diversified creative pattern.

5. Conclusion

Documentaries have never been merely a stack of images; they carry humanity's profound desire to understand itself and the world. The emergence of interactive documentaries has, in fact, turned "authenticity" into a possibility for dialogue between the audience and the world. When we click on a node, drag a map, or submit a form in front of the screen, what we touch is not just technological algorithms and databases, but the trajectories of vivid lives. Although, in the context of "simulacra," the real may be covered by layers of symbols, even leading to "hyper-reality," it is precisely this tension that reminds us to reflect: the value of documentary lies not only in showing "what happened" but also in inspiring "how we understand" and "how we respond."

The path of interactive documentary continues to extend into the future. It needs both the impetus of technology and the nourishment of culture. Only in this way can documentaries continue to guard that authenticity and humanistic sentiment belonging to humanity amidst the digital wave.

This study also has certain limitations. The case analysis samples are more concentrated on foreign works, with insufficient attention to non-Western contexts, which may affect the universality of the conclusions. Simultaneously, the coverage of cases is relatively limited, failing to fully represent the diverse characteristics of interactive documentaries, potentially making the research conclusions slightly less comprehensive. In the future, research and application of interactive documentaries should expand to broader fields, hoping to engage in further discussion with scholars from various countries.

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