

A Frame of Images: Intentional Reference based on Roland Barthes' Visual Rhetoric

-- Take the New Media Documentary "The Human World" as an Example

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Abstract

Different from the art of persuasion in Western classical rhetoric, Roland Barthes' concept of visual rhetoric pays more attention to the implicit meaning of image information, and has become an important tool and carrier for documentaries to convey messages with rich connotations, explanations and performances. Having reviewed previous literatures on visual rhetoric, this paper looks at the issue from a new angle, beginning with the three dimensions of language, image and comprehensive elements of visual rhetoric research. Based on the visual images of the new media documentary "The Human World · Special Program Against Epidemic Situation" which was released on May 21, 2020, this paper analyzes path and construction mode of rhetorical meaning of the documentary.

Keywords

New media documentary, Visual rhetoric, Image, "The human world".

1. Introduction

As an image analysis method, visual rhetoric emphasizes the intentional references behind the image system. [1] Being different from the persuasion art of traditional rhetoric, visual rhetoric not only focuses on the rational logic of language and characters, but also pays attention to the perceptual meaning of denotative image information, such as color, scene, depth of field, and composition. Because of its rich meaning, interpretation and performance, vision is frequently used in virtual models, online social networking, documentaries, short videos, micro films and other image texts, and it has become an important tool and carrier for expression. As a form of image text recording the real situation, a documentary uses multi-modal visual elements to express the rich meaning information such as collective memory, national emotion and national identity. Documentaries wrap them in the presentation and arrangement of image information, so as to realize the multiple expressions of social discourse space. The ideographic elements needed for documentary films are pictures, words and sounds. How to combine these elements and reproduce a situation containing physical facts and psychological world in a three-dimensional and multi-dimensional way depends largely on rhetorical devices. [2]

The new media documentary "The Human World · Special Program Against Epidemic Situation" which went on screen in 2016 zooms in the problem of domestic doctor-patient relationship. It recorded and presented several touching stories of doctor-patient relationship using the intrusive follow-up camera throughout the process. This documentary won double prizes in word-of-mouth and audience rating. Because of the popularity and the large success that it has hit, the documentary will be shown again in the third season of 2020. In this documentary,

stories has been categorized into six themes: “Red District”, “Face”, “The Past of Raytheon Mountain”, “I want to find you and I will be with you”. From the theoretical perspective of rhetorical visual rhetoric, three questions can be raised regarding the techniques used in this documentary: a) what rhetorical structures are hidden behind various text elements of the film? b) in what ways can a director arrange the visual elements of a film to tell a good story of anti-epidemic? and c) how does this visual rhetoric strategy inspire the communication and visual presentation of new media documentaries? This paper will interpret the text language, visual images and multimodal discourses used in the film, and analyze the rhetorical significance, practical path and construction mode of the device.

2. Language Metaphor: Rhetorical Effect of Cross-Domain Mapping

Roland Barthes has classified the types of information contained in visual images into linguistic information, denotative image information in the category of image information, and connotative image information with intentional reference.[3] Chen Rudong, the scholar who first put forward the concept of visual rhetoric, also divided the intentional meaning of visual rhetoric into language visual rhetoric, image visual rhetoric and comprehensive visual rhetoric.[4] Therefore, this paper is based on the established framework, investigating the issue of visual rhetoric from three perspectives: language, image and comprehensive visual elements. The documentary “The Human World” has been selected as the sample text for this study.

Language visual rhetoric is a kind of rhetorical mode which takes language as the carrier and which creates visual effect through text narration.[5] Language takes place in documentaries in multiple forms, including subtitles, narration, commentary, music and other visual arts. The most important language visual rhetorical device in these arts is metaphor, and its thinking process is reflected in the cross-domain mapping of concepts. The presupposition of visual effect has been wrapped in metaphorical rhetoric by the information coder when the audience follows the cognitive system of the target domain and outlines the image and meaning of the original domain.[6] In “The Human World”, metaphors can be seen everywhere, containing in it a specific logic of rational persuasion. “I miss you, dear dad. That day, when I knew you were going to go to Wuhan for support, I was so happy to fly. I knew that as long as my father went to Wuhan, He could win the battle, because my father was an omnipotent Superman”. This is a short message Zhang Chen received from his son. Zhang Chen is a member of the ninth batch of medical aid team that went to Hubei Province to support the medical workers there during the epidemic. The metaphor “battle” that the little boy used in his message implied that the virus had brought great social unrest, yet as he typed the verb “win”, it was suggested that hope had never ceased to exist in people’s heart. Hence, “win the battle” is a metaphor that shows the child’s confidence in his father’s support for Wuhan and his expectation of returning to the order before epidemic as soon as possible. “Omnipotent Superman,” on the other hand, refers to the father’s image in the child’s eyes. In this metaphor, “superman” was taken as the target domain, portraying the father’s firm will to volunteer in Wuhan and his braveness of fighting against the epidemic. Thus, the audience can grasp the understanding of the original domain along the meaning system of the target domain, and finally realize the cross-mapping process of metaphor.

3. Image Frame Selection: Description of Visual Image

With the influence of the documentary “film eye” theory, some documentary scenes begin to capture life, convey meaning through visual images and examine them with certain image grammar. “In interpreted images: Grammar of Visual Design”, Kress and van Lewin divide the meaning system of visual symbols into three types: representational meaning, visual composition meaning and communicative meaning. Among them, representational meaning

refers to the element structure and narrative relationship in the image text. The meaning of visual composition can be realized by means of grammatical means such as information value, saliency and frame. The communication and interaction meanings emphasize the communication mode and cognitive attitude of the image as a medium between the creator and the viewer. The following article will analyze the image visual rhetoric strategy of "The Human World" from these three perspectives.

3.1. Symbolic Meaning: Narrative Change of Lens in Image

The representational meaning of image refers to the representation and recording mode of information or knowledge adopted in the image picture to realize the dual functions of information presentation and visual enjoyment. A group of images are mainly composed of subject, object, companion and the environment. The composition can be realized by the control of lens language on depth of field and field category. When dealing with images, "The Human World" uses various lens languages, such as empty lens and variable speed lens, to narrate images and deconstruct the changes in people's lives brought about by the COVID-19 epidemic. In the use of empty shot and scene shot, the documentary depicts the scenes and doctor-patient feelings of hospitals such as Wuhan subway blockade, public places lighting out, road open and so on, through the empty lens conversion of far, full, medium, near, close-up, etc. The use of this lens makes the originally lengthy and plain picture full of hierarchy, makes the characters without intersection and the grand and abstract status of patients clearly recorded in the image text, thus bringing different visual experience to the audience, deepening the idea of exploring the inner world of the characters under the mask, and representing the resistance of medical patients to the virus and the yearning for a better life Righteousness.



Fig 1. Left: Empty Shot Close-Up; Right: Empty Shot Prospect

In variable-speed photography, ascending photography and descending photography often bring about subtle changes, which are used to expound on the mood of the environment, reminiscence and reverie. When the film shows the anxiety of people in many hospitals of Wuhan, it uses the degraded picture to show five sets of shots in one second, and finally focus on the Yangtze River Bridge of Wuhan; While pointing out the events, places and time, this group of shots also points out the rhythm of Wuhan from a dynamic city to a silent one. The image of "isolated island" and "arrow" is used to depict the prosperous Yangtze River Bridge, aiming to show that Wuhan is about to turn better.



Fig 2. Left: Descending Photography; Right: Ascending Photography

3.2. Meaning of Visual Composition: Characters and Environment

The so-called "meaning of visual composition" is obtained by selecting the image frame to understand the visual elements of the image. As an art work with strong documentary characteristics, the screen sense and aesthetic feeling of the camera depend on its elements.

Since it is difficult to have enough time to debug the lens when people shoot the visual frame selection, the depth of field, light, shadow and color of the composition and the visual elements of narrative modeling and expression become increasingly important in the documentary.

When the film plays the fourth season "face", it uses the shooting mode of depth of field to select the visual frame. In the deep field lens, the post subject image grammar is used to emphasize the drugs used in the hospital. The situation of the patients is placed behind the objects, and the virtual drugs are used to highlight the measuring device. This composition shows that the drugs are not very effective to the patients. In the shallow depth of field lens, the main body is placed in the back to highlight the protective suits of the medical staff. The close-up shot shows the expressions behind the goggles of medical staff and their indentation marks after wearing protective equipment for a long time, which highlights the dedication and professionalism of medical staff, so it can retain the sufficient information chain of the picture and the audience can focus on the details of the theme and conduct deep thinking.



Fig 3. Left: Front of Main Bod: Depth of Field; Right: Main Body Postposition: Shallow Depth of Field

In the new media documentary, the use of light and shadow color can well transform the text elements in the image into the narrative relationship between the director's perspective and the environment, which can be reflected on the Internet screen. The documentary uses the visual symbol of light and shadow color to convey the emotional meaning of the characters. For example, the scene of the Yangtze River Bridge is shot at the beginning and the end of the documentary. Although with the same composition, scene, depth of field, the documentary uses different black and white color pictures to point out different emotional meanings. In this documentary, the black-and-white picture at the beginning refers to the human resistance to the merciless flu, while the bright light and shadow are used in the end. The lens is mainly blue. Although it is a cool color, it means the efforts of medical staff and the victory made by everyone. From this perspective, the transformation between warm and cold colors, between light and shadow colors, plays an emotional role in the documentary's rhetorical significance. And this kind of composition, scene, depth of field, light and shadow highlight, visual frame selection of relevant intention, become an important part of image composition.

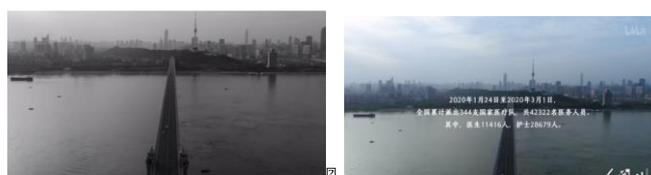


Fig 4. Left: Cold Tone; Right: Warm Colors

3.3. The Meaning of Communication and Interaction: The Transmission And Understanding of Visual Interaction

The communication and interaction of images emphasizes the establishment of a visual interaction relationship by watching. The creator of the image expresses and spreads through the visual image, and the viewer obtains the understanding and interaction through the visual resonance, so as to achieve the common cognition of the meaning of the visual image and realize the similar communication effect. Then, in the creation, whether the audience can understand the image's underlying feelings that the creator wants to express should be specific to the visual ideographic system of the documentary. The photographer should select the visual symbol frame that condenses the special emotion into the picture. The audience can identify with the photographer's aesthetic experience through the visual experience. The process of transmission and understanding is the structural mechanism to realize the visual communication and interaction.

In the creation of the documentary "The Human World", the creator will try to use the image text of universal value to achieve the effect of visual communication and interaction in order that the audience can obtain the above feelings in the process of watching. For example, the close-up shot of shaved head, mask indentation marks or goggles, these elements with strong anti-epidemic visual symbols convey the image of Chinese hero doctor in the media subject, so resonance in the visual communication between the audience and the creator emerges, and the audience naturally produce self-emotion mapping.

4. Comprehensive Visual Rhetoric: The Discourse Purpose of Constructing Identity

When both language symbols and image symbols enter the documentary narrative system, it is necessary to pay attention to the comprehensive visual rhetoric based on language rhetoric and image rhetoric, which presents the characteristics of multi-media, multi-modal and multi-element. The function of this rhetorical strategy is far more far-reaching than the visual expression of single shot film and television images, especially in the function of constructing social identity. Compared with the persuasive rhetoric of words, the comprehensive visual rhetoric in documentary is not intuitive and obvious, but is realized in an implicit and silent way. This is mainly due to the psychological cognitive mechanism of image text and the cognitive inertia of the brain: when the language text attempts to change the audience's psychological cognition through persuasive discourse, it may be regarded as a psychological invasion and cause "antagonistic interpretation"; However, the intuitionistic and diversified implicit characteristics of visual text make the audience sneak into the image and unconsciously identify the persuasive discourse constructed by the author behind the image.

As a kind of media text, the new media documentary should not only complete the narration, but also realize the social communication function. Therefore, it is very important to realize the connection between the visual image and the visual values of the disseminator and the receiver. At the end of the film, language rhetoric expresses family support and sublimation of medical staff's inner language text in the form of reading family messages by doctors and patients. Image rhetoric echoes the color picture of Wuhan Yangtze River Bridge with the black and white picture at the beginning, and ends with the visual rhetoric mode of combining language and image in the picture, forming a complete image frame selection. Through the selection, use and optimization of visual materials, the combination of language rhetoric and image rhetoric, the purpose of "persuasive discourse" can be achieved. The original sad medical documentary can get diversified meaning information, truly record the memory and spirit of fighting influenza, so as to emphasize the established social and universal identity, and express the established image meaning: good expectations for the future between doctors and patients and citizens.

5. Conclusion

"China Documentary Development Research Report 2020" points out that new media has invested 1.3 billion yuan in documentary production, an increase of 18% year on year. As one of the important representative works of new media documentary, "The Human World" takes six themes as the social epitome of doctor-patient relationship, which is recorded on the screen of Internet visualization. As far as visual rhetoric is concerned, through the vivid anti-epidemic discourse, the visual frame selection of lens reality is realized. In the process of recording, based on Roland Barthes' text language, the denotative image of direct meaning of visual image and the image with intentional connotation, Chen Rudong's meaning device of language Visual Rhetoric, image visual rhetoric and comprehensive visual rhetoric, some social practices are done. In this regard, the newly developed new media documentary makes the interpretation, meaning and performance of images in universal lens to achieve the expected viewing effect of perception mode, thinking mode and emotional identity.

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