
AI translation • View original & related papers at
chinaxiv.org/items/chinaxiv-202310.00889

Post-print of Montage Aesthetic Exploration in Vlog-style Documentaries

Authors: Wei Ying

Date: 2023-10-08T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

With the rise of Vlog short videos as an emerging product of mobile media, Vlog-style documentaries have flourished in recent years. The democratization, entertaining nature, and fragmentation of Vlog works have brought documentary form into a brand new stage, and also posed new aesthetic requirements for documentary creation. This paper takes the documentary “Boiling Hot Pot” as an example to analyze the use of montage in Vlog documentaries during filming.

Full Text

Montage Aesthetic Exploration of Vlog-Style Documentaries

Wei Ying

Suqian University, Suqian, Jiangsu 223800, China

Abstract: With the rise of Vlog short videos as an emerging product of mobile media, Vlog-style documentaries have flourished in recent years. The civilian nature, entertainment appeal, and fragmented format of Vlog works have ushered documentary forms into a new stage, presenting novel aesthetic requirements for documentary creation. This paper analyzes the application of montage in Vlog documentary production using the documentary *Boiling Hot Pot* as a case study.

Keywords: Mobile media; Vlog; Documentary; Montage; Aesthetic

1. Vlog Technology in the Mobile Media Era

Internet technology has enabled new media to fully leverage its interactivity, immediacy, and convergence. In this context, the integration of traditional and

new media forms to pursue innovative development has become an inevitable path. Within the broader environment of media convergence, the concept of “mobile media” has emerged as a comprehensive product derived from media technology under new circumstances. Compared with traditional media, mobile media is characterized by its civilian nature and strong immediacy, capable of satisfying the public’s personalized and quotidian media needs. During information sharing and dissemination, it presents content through diverse forms such as images, animations, audio, and video, with more vivid modes of expression.

The year 2019 marked a period of rapid growth for short videos, with platforms like Kuaishou, Xigua Video, and Douyin gaining widespread popularity. However, an accompanying limitation was the time constraint imposed on filming. Vlog short videos represent a novel media format that merges traditional blogs with short video content. Their innovative departure from conventional blogs lies in transcending the limitations of text and image-based carriers, employing video to document the daily lives of the general public while maintaining a popular, life-oriented expressive style. These works record films reflecting the personalized style of vloggers, with post-production involving independent creative processing that yields more distinctive personal styles.

Vlog productions use real life as their creative material, employing montage creation and narrative techniques to record genuine people and events in everyday life. Through subsequent editing and processing in software such as Premiere, these real-life events are presented, reflecting folk life patterns. Consequently, authenticity stands as the most crucial element of Vlog—a principle that must be upheld throughout documentary creation. Vlog-style documentaries flexibly utilize journalistic characteristics, employing objective and realistic expressive techniques to record socially relevant topics and the normal lives of ordinary people. They objectively reflect authentic life scenes, restoring the everyday life patterns of common people through the camera lens. Vlog documentaries represent a new trend in documentary development. This innovation aligns with the evolution of mobile media, organically combining documentaries with Vlog short videos and breaking away from traditional documentary presentation forms.

2. The Evolution of Vlog Documentaries in the Contemporary Era

Under the backdrop of mobile media convergence, both the form and content of documentaries have undergone substantial reform. Traditional documentary forms were relatively monolithic, primarily focusing on reproducing and reconstructing large-scale historical subjects. Today’s audiences, however, demand the integration of new era elements to satisfy their aesthetic preferences. Creators have thus employed new media technology to process and create documentaries while preserving their documentary essence. The integration of multiple audio-visual elements with new media technology has diversified documentary production possibilities, rendering topic selection more “civilianized,” montage editing more “entertaining,” expressive techniques more “narrative,” and content

duration more “fragmented.” This approach perfectly aligns with new media and caters to popular tastes.

The transformation of documentaries within the mobile media landscape signifies that documentary development has entered a completely new stage. People no longer focus exclusively on the scientific, educational, and historical narratives within documentaries; instead, they can derive reflection and understanding of life from fragmented authentic content, making documentaries more compelling. Vlog-style new documentaries better embody fragmented life patterns and reveal life details, more closely aligning with the fundamental characteristic of documentaries—authenticity. Typically ranging from 5 to 12 minutes in length, these works are short, concise, and easily disseminated. Their distribution through mobile media platforms accommodates people’s daily habits. In terms of content innovation, they abandon the historical and documentary tone of traditional documentaries in favor of everyday subjects such as food, travel, and real events. Creators employ vivid and interesting editing techniques to present these quotidian observations, narrating from a civilian perspective that reflects the relaxed vitality and casualness of Vlog-style documentaries.

3. Montage Aesthetic Analysis of the Vlog Documentary *Boiling Hot Pot*

The application of Vlog-style documentaries in local cuisine filming has become a popular recording method. In *Boiling Hot Pot*, for instance, the director connects traditional Chinese hot pot culture through ordinary small stories in each episode, allowing audiences to follow the creator’s first-person perspective through streets and alleys, recognizing flavors through their scents. Using simple imagery and family tastes, they search for authentic Chinese hot pot. Each episode introduces the characteristics of hot pot from a specific region, presenting the owner’s personal hot pot philosophy through an interesting local restaurant, a group of lively and unpretentious diners, and unique hot pot recipes. From production to broadcast, the program leads audiences both online and offline to experience the passionate hot pot culture across the country and observe the various facets of human life. Each approximately six-minute episode employs concise and brief montage narrative techniques to present complete thematic content, breaking the narrative forms of traditional documentaries.

3.1 Montage Perspective: Subjective Camera Narrative

3.1.1 First-Person Narrative in Vlog-Style Documentaries First-person perspective refers to a narrative approach where the narrator in the film uses a clear personal identity to tell the story. In this configuration, “I” determines the selection and arrangement of image content, with the organization of material and subjective feelings all controlled by “I.” Traditional Chinese documentary forms emphasize subtlety and restraint, maintaining greater objectivity and rationality. Audiences often rely on social expectations

to complete self-cognition but rarely engage in subjective self-examination –this represents precisely the innovation and breakthrough of Vlog-style documentaries.

This breakthrough narrative approach can minimize the psychological distance between narrator and audience, allowing viewers to obtain the most authentic feelings through the companionship of on-screen images. This seamless sense of immersion leads audiences into the visual world constructed by the creator. By opening links between society and ordinary people through independent first-person recording, creators integrate their personal cognition and emotional experiences into the film, realizing the free expressive form of documentaries in the contemporary self-media era. First-person narrative thus perfectly aligns with the free expression methodology of Vlog-style documentaries.

3.1.2 The First-Person Perspective as Creator’s Perspective Typically, documentary subjects represent localities, cities, humanities, and reality. With the development of new media technology and the emergence of Vlog short videos, the influence of first-person documentaries has expanded further. Both the first-person perspective and the filmmaker’s off-screen voice enable audiences on the other side of the network to clearly see, experience, and even participate in the entire on-site filming process. This constitutes the most significant difference between Vlog-style documentaries and humanistic or historical documentaries: they possess a stronger sense of live presence. By integrating the filmmaker’s experiences, they trigger public recognition and reflection, narrating stories of shared human experience with clear social value judgments and personal positions.

Vlog-style documentaries typically utilize small cameras, mobile phones, or other electronic imaging equipment that creators already possess, pointing the lens at themselves, relatives, passersby, or friends. While lens selection involves certain subjectivity for creators, the images and scenes presented to audiences remain objective. This first-person recording method opens independent links between society and ordinary people, allowing creators to merge personal cognition and emotional experiences into their films and achieve the free expressive form of documentaries in the self-media era.

3.1.3 Authenticity in Character Portrayal Authenticity in character portrayal constitutes the primary aesthetic element in Vlog documentaries. Objective authenticity represents the core principle of documentary filmmaking. Since Vlog documentaries record life, the authentic portrayal of characters serves as both the foundation of Vlog documentaries and an immutable presentation form throughout documentary history. *Boiling Hot Pot* selects local hot pot restaurant owners as filming subjects in each episode. While these appear to be everyday activities—eating, chatting, selecting ingredients in the back kitchen—placing these trivial matters within different contexts allows viewers to experience the normal life patterns of various cities and their inhabitants’ passion for

hot pot, thereby transmitting special emotions within the documentary. This expression of the creator's subjective emotions transforms mundane activities into vehicles for emotional connection and cultural understanding.

3.2 Montage Rhythm: Spatial Compression and Accelerated Narrative

Beyond participating in narrative as background elements within the frame, spatial environments can function as empty shots to achieve scene transitions and render character emotions and moods. Empty shots appear infrequently and have shorter durations. Moreover, although story backgrounds in documentaries may be related, spatial environments lacking close connection to the core content and thematic expression are compressed or omitted. To prevent audience confusion caused by direct omission of spatial fragments, documentaries typically employ subtitles, character monologues, or third-person narration.

For example, the work utilizes question-and-answer scenes that naturally prompt audience questions: What constitutes Chongqing's hot pot recipe? The film provides answers through first-person off-screen narration: "I don't know what you call a recipe. I only know how much heat to add here and how many ingredients to make it delicious." Rather than extensively showing environmental shots of the restaurant, the film compresses these elements. This approach accelerates narrative rhythm and creates compact storytelling while simultaneously reflecting the owner's serious and responsible attitude toward both the restaurant and customers.

3.3 Montage Orchestration: Transition Without Techniques

3.3.1 Black-Out Transition In terms of transition methods, Vlogs primarily employ simple techniques such as covering the lens with a hand or pressing it against one's body. Although these methods appear somewhat crude from an image aesthetics perspective, they create a more authentic and natural overall effect. The civilianization of narrative approaches also enables audiences to better enter the light and shadow world created by the creator, forming a pseudo "being there" experience of personal involvement.

3.3.2 Dialogue-Driven Scenes Each episode of *Boiling Hot Pot* tells a different hot pot story, but regardless of narrative approach, editors must adhere to fundamental montage principles and apply different scheduling treatments to each scene type. Dialogue scenes emphasize dramatic storytelling and authenticity, requiring editors to determine precisely when to cut character lines and when to cut character reactions, thereby controlling the documentary's on-site rhythm.

In the "Chongqing Hot Pot" episode, which depicts Lao Tao and Meimei Jie's hot pot restaurant at a Chongqing alley entrance, the characters' sight line directions are crucial when filming scenes of Chongqing diners gathered around tables,

eating hot pot while engaging in enthusiastic banter and humorous conversation. Axis-crossing errors result in chaotic, unnatural images. These group scenes with numerous characters pose significant challenges for post-production, as editors must consider axis issues while ensuring important characters' sight lines maintain correct directions.

Table scene editing is particularly difficult because editors must maintain consistency in movement across shots showing Chongqing people eating, joking, and playing drinking games together. To avoid problems like inconsistent movement, editors intersperse insert shots and close-ups—such as detailed shots of hot pot ingredients or Lao Tao and Meimei Jie busy serving tables. These insert shots create connections between shots, presenting smoothly and naturally the Chongqing people' s passion for life, where a table of hot pot provides the best comfort when they feel tired or weary.

Vlogs frequently capture large crowd scenes, with cameras shuttling through crowds or using dollies to design push, pull, pan, tilt, and follow shots among the masses. Although such shots appear unstable, they precisely simulate the momentum of human walking, enhancing image realism. This combination of authentic filming pursuit and montage assembly constitutes a commonly used editing technique in Vlogs. The sound of boiling hot pot, clinking bowls and chopsticks, and lively conversation among guests creates an immersive experience. The lens serves as the audience' s eye, allowing viewers to unconsciously comprehend the entire event through the director and cinematographer' s perspective.

3.3.3 Long Shot Scheduling Soviet film master Mikhail Romm stated: “In any art form, there are powerful means; in film, they are close-ups and long shots. Just as pauses sometimes work better than words.” Both close-ups and long shots are important expressive means and among the most powerful tools for creating rhythm. Because of their importance, long shots should not be used casually as ordinary shots but must be employed appropriately. Their function is emphatic, powerful, and decisive; therefore, long shots should be placed in expository environmental scenes.

In the third episode of *Boiling Hot Pot*, which addresses the local characteristics of Northeastern Chinese sauerkraut hot pot, the urban environment and folk customs of Northeast China constitute important elements. The environment is constructed through empty shots of characters' surroundings and long and medium shots of character activities, which together create atmospheric context. Naturally, environmental exposition forms an organic whole with the film' s content rather than being deliberately expository. For instance, at the beginning of the third episode, the creator films large panoramic shots of the Northeastern urban environment and the spiritual outlook of pedestrians from a first-person perspective, followed by one or two shots revealing characteristics of Northeastern hot pot restaurants, without deliberate description.

3.3.4 Elements of Motion Editing Vlogs employ numerous internal motion shots where actors and all elements within the frame move relative to one another. For example, a panoramic view of a hot pot restaurant shows boiling soup steaming, familiar customers eating enthusiastically, with no one moving about—only the sound of bowls and chopsticks colliding fills the space. Chinese cinema has long established aesthetic realm as the highest ideal, with the aesthetic pursuit of life forms constituting the developmental direction of Chinese cultural vitality, achieving high consistency between “goodness” and “beauty.” In Confucian thought, reason and sensibility, morality and aesthetics, and the individual and society are unified, with human happiness lying in transcending the ordinary to shape goodness and beauty within real life circumstances.

Because Vlog documentaries record life, authentic character portrayal serves as both their foundation and an immutable presentation form throughout documentary history. *Boiling Hot Pot* selects local hot pot restaurant owners as subjects in each episode. While filming seemingly trivial activities—eating, chatting, selecting ingredients—these mundane actions, when placed in different contexts, allow viewers to experience the normal life patterns of various cities and their inhabitants’ passion for hot pot, thereby transmitting special emotions within the documentary.

References

- [1] Aufderheide, P. (2018). *Documentary* (L. Liu, Trans.). Nanjing: Yilin Press.
- [2] Nichols, B. (2017). *Introduction to Documentary* (X. Chen & Y. Liu, Trans.). Beijing: China Film Press.
- [3] Zeng, Y. (2016). Analysis of micro-documentary narrative strategies under media convergence background (Master’s thesis). Jinan University, Guangzhou.
- [4] Zhang, X. (2018). Characteristics and development trends of Vlog—From the perspective of visual persuasion. *Youth Magazine*, (17), 98-99.
- [5] Zhuang, Q. (2014). Post-editing awareness in documentary pre-production. *China Media Technology*, (6), 5.

Author Biography

Wei Ying (1981–), female, from Suqian, Jiangsu, is a lecturer whose research focuses on digital film and television post-production.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv – Machine translation. Verify with original.