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On Television Documentary Scriptwriting Techniques: Postprint

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Abstract

Television documentary is a televisual expression form that presents authentic content through diverse expressive techniques. It serves the functions of reflecting social realities, transmitting spiritual information, and expressing creative emotions. Television documentaries are produced based on scripts. Excellent television documentaries impose extremely high requirements on scripts: they must not only be fluent, authentic, and credible, but also poised, grand, and aesthetically rich. Only when the script language possesses irresistible artistic charm can the television documentary be endowed with infectious appeal. Script editors for documentaries must cultivate strong command over language to provide a continuous source of inspiration and impetus for the development of television documentaries.

Full Text

Abstract

Television documentaries present authentic content through diverse expressive techniques, serving the functions of reflecting social realities, conveying spiritual messages, and expressing creative emotions. As documentaries are filmed based on their scripts, outstanding works demand exceptionally high-quality writing—requiring not only fluency and credibility but also a dignified, grand, and aesthetically rich quality. Only when the script's language possesses irresistible artistic charm can the documentary achieve compelling emotional power. Scriptwriters must cultivate strong command over language to provide continuous inspiration and momentum for the development of television documentaries.

Keywords: television documentary; documentary script; writing techniques

2.2 Enhancing Artistic Value Through Poetry and Literature

A documentary script reflects the writer's linguistic proficiency, logical thinking ability, and underlying cultural literacy. Chinese poetry and literature are concise yet evocative, employing economical expression to create unique atmospheres, convey rich content, and embody profound emotions. Skillfully integrating classical and modern poetry into documentary scripts can elevate their quality and create artistic moods, thereby demonstrating the work's artistic integrity. In documentaries reflecting public security agencies combating crime and upholding social justice, writers may incorporate verses such as “iron shoulders bear righteousness,” “strong winds reveal sturdy grass,” or “raised eyebrows draw the sword” to deeply imprint the image of resolute law enforcement officers. During China's comprehensive implementation of rural revitalization strategies, General Secretary Xi Jinping's vision of building “three-dimensional” rural areas through fruit cultivation and related industries has generated numerous cases nationwide. In documentaries covering such themes, writers can employ verses like “Beyond green willows, dawn's chill is light; on red apricot branches, spring's bustle is bright” to highlight the vibrant beauty of rural revitalization and fruit industry development, endowing the entire work with both artistic beauty and contemporary significance. For documentaries depicting the prosperous Lantern Festival scene with its flower-like lanterns and joyful crowds, lines from Ouyang Xiu such as “The moon rises above willow branches, where lovers meet after dusk” can both express the theme and enhance the work's humanistic sentiment.

While quoting poetry in documentary scripts can achieve remarkable effects with minimal words, writers must avoid forced or inappropriate application. It is advisable to select well-known verses familiar to the general public to effectively enhance the documentary's accessibility.

2.3 Employing Documentary Style in Scriptwriting

Chinese television documentaries fall into two major categories: expressive and documentary. Expressive documentary scripts emphasize atmosphere creation and emotional rendering, while documentary-style scripts focus on sound-image correspondence and unity. With the continuous evolution of contemporary television programs, the boundaries between these two styles have gradually blurred, and today's most acclaimed documentaries are hybrid works combining both expressive and documentary elements. While modern documentary scriptwriting necessarily includes description and emotional expression, writers should appropriately employ documentary style, using plain description to deliver stronger freshness and impact to audiences.

The documentary style in scriptwriting essentially means “storytelling” — basing narratives on facts, making stories character-driven, and rendering characters through details. Before writing, authors should thoroughly investigate story backgrounds and relevant materials, establish themes and stylistic approaches, then employ plain description to faithfully present authentic plotlines. Using

more nouns and verbs while avoiding adjectives and adverbs can enhance a documentary's authenticity. Documentaries themed around exemplary individuals or events should adopt documentary-style scripts, moving audiences through clear delineation of characters, events, and details. Compared with grandiose but empty rhetoric, simple and authentic expression better convinces viewers and touches their hearts.

2.4 Using Words Sparingly and Effectively

“Using words where they matter most” describes the writer's skillful employment of details. Television documentaries require concise scripts, so writers must be economical with language. Detail description proves doubly effective in this regard, helping authors avoid cumbersome comprehensive narration by conveying substantial information through representative “points.” Details can rapidly immerse audiences in the documentary's atmosphere. In documentaries themed on urban modernization, for instance, writers might select a specific building for detailed description, allowing viewers to form impressions of the entire city through its appearance, features, and functions.

In documentary scriptwriting, smaller and more representative details more effectively capture audience attention and thought. Detail description can simply, efficiently, and quickly place viewers in specific character relationships and social contexts, deepening their understanding of the documentary's theme. A few well-chosen words can significantly enhance a program. Conversely, lacking detail description, macro-level depictions and visual presentations only create vague impressions in viewers' minds, lacking the power to genuinely move or infect them.

2.5 Writing Scripts for Auditory Experience

Television documentaries are characterized by their combination of sound and image. Scripts serve to explain and extend content while audiences watch the visuals. Unlike print media where text bears most communicative responsibility, documentary scripts work alongside images to convey content and ideas. An excellent documentary script must be created not only based on visuals but specifically for audience listening. Writers should consider what kind of auditory language paired with visuals can provide more vivid and appropriate aesthetic enjoyment; merely pursuing ornate diction does not constitute superior documentary scriptwriting.

When readers encounter compelling passages, they are willing to reread and savor them, gaining deeper understanding with each repetition. However, television documentaries play continuously and cannot be paused for careful reading like text. To provide audiences space for deeper exploration, creators can reiterate and remind viewers of previously mentioned information that may have become vague or that audiences wish to revisit, thereby enhancing their viewing experience.

2.6 Avoiding Redundancy Between Script and Visuals

During documentary screening, narration and visuals unfold simultaneously, immersing viewers in the work's context. In this process, script and visuals should perform distinct functions. While “sound-image correspondence” is the principle for combining text and visuals, interpreting this as direct verbal description of the image creates redundancy and diminishes aesthetic quality. By avoiding repetition of visual content, scripts can enrich and supplement the visuals, enabling audiences to access information that images alone cannot convey and making documentaries more substantive.

2.7 Creating Artistic Conception Through Language

Scripts play a crucial role in creating and elevating artistic conception in documentaries. Through language, writers can manifest a work's artistic conception through three aspects: external environment description, specific situation depiction, and character relationship portrayal. While visuals are the primary carrier for environmental presentation, textual description of landscapes remains indispensable for detailed, supplementary, and extended explanation, allowing audiences to experience perfect sound-image integration. Excellent environmental description through precise word choice and skillful phrasing can make viewers perceive beauty beyond the visual frame, such as pointing out extraordinary events or briefly explaining historical factors, enabling audiences to understand creative intentions beneath the surface and enhancing overall quality. Specific situation depiction further enriches visuals, enabling content to break through temporal and spatial limitations and present plots and characters more directly and vividly. Character relationship portrayal demonstrates special emotions between people, using the beauty of human nature to set off artistic conception. Representing social and cultural realities is an inherent documentary requirement, and both depend on the “people” in the work; thus, human nature manifestation is the eternal theme of documentaries. When depicting characters, writers should describe not only external features, experiences, and personalities but also relationship changes between characters and groups to form character evaluations and highlight human nature, ultimately enhancing artistic conception by demonstrating characters' kindness, optimism, courage, selflessness, and other spirits.

2.8 Summarizing and Elevating the Theme

The script is the soul of documentary creation, guiding the entire work's trajectory. Beyond supplementing and explaining visuals, scripts also serve to elevate documentary themes. In practice, restoring facts, creating atmosphere, expressing emotions, and depicting details are not particularly difficult; the real challenge lies in further sublimating the documentary's central ideas through summary and review. In documentary scriptwriting, authors should fully immerse themselves in creative emotions, maintaining passionate enthusiasm throughout, to infuse the final summary with greater sentiment and power.

3.1 Scripts Should Not Compete with Visuals

While documentary scripts constitute the work's soul and main thread for plot development and character establishment, they are not the primary information channel for audiences. Compared with scripts, viewers focus more on visuals, with narration flowing invisibly into their ears as a supplement to understanding. Thus, audiences watch documentaries with “visuals as primary, narration as secondary,” and scripts should avoid competing with visuals, which would create confusion about emphasis.

Not competing with visuals essentially means providing selective narration with room for imagination. Explaining every visual and content detail not only occupies audiences' time for reflection and analysis but may also interrupt their attention, affecting overall promotional effectiveness. Writers should always maintain the supplementary nature of text, yielding to visuals rather than competing with them.

3.2 Avoiding Excessive Realism in Scripts

Television documentaries should pursue artistic beauty, but overly realistic scripts limit creative imagination and damage the aesthetic artistic conception created by visuals. Scripts must restore facts yet not be rigidly realistic; they should employ documentary style and plain description without making audiences feel the work is stiff, ordinary, or unremarkable. Thus, appropriately balancing writing style is crucial.

In fact, avoiding excessive “realism” means scripts should not constantly describe visible on-screen content. Since audiences can see these details, describing everything meticulously not only fails to demonstrate the script's supplementary function but also diminishes overall viewing experience. Meanwhile, excessively “abstract” writing is also discouraged—scripts that stray far from visuals with flowery, wandering language can make audiences feel the work has deviated from its theme or distract their attention from visuals. As the foundation of documentary creation, only high-quality scripts can provide continuous inspiration for filming and production. Television documentary scripts should be both profound and charming, allowing audiences to experience irresistible artistic charm through the interplay of script and visuals. Improving scriptwriting techniques is a long-term process involving careful structuring and layering, along with unique literary treatment. Scripts should not be too full or excessive; appropriate 留白 (room for imagination) allows audiences time to digest and reflect. Writers should also use language to express backgrounds, experiences, and processes of specific situations and characters, providing audiences with more intuitive and three-dimensional experiences. Documentary scriptwriters should diligently master writing knowledge and techniques while continuously innovating alongside documentary development.

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

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