

# **An Exploration of Three Contradictions in Documentary Filmmaking: Transcending the Boundaries of Reality and Fiction, Reconciling the Tension Between Agency and Passivity, and Breaking Through the Shackles of Power and Limitation (Post-Print)**

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## **Abstract**

**Objective:** To explore the contradictory relationships between reality and fiction, active and passive, power and limitations in documentary creation, and to analyze the impact of these contradictions on the artistic value and social influence of documentaries.

**Methods:** By analyzing the creative techniques employed in the films “Paths of the Soul” and “Man with a Movie Camera,” as well as the French documentary “Women,” in conjunction with documentary theory, this study examines the core contradictions in documentary creation and their resolution strategies.

**Results:** The contradictions between reality and fiction, active and passive, power and limitations in documentary creation are intertwined. Through appropriate creative techniques—such as the reconciliation between reality and fiction in “Paths of the Soul,” the balance between active and passive in “Man with a Movie Camera,” and the reflection on power and limitations in “Women”—documentaries can enhance their artistic quality and social impact while maintaining authenticity.

**Conclusion:** The contradictory relationships in documentary creation are dynamic. Creators need to strike a balance between reality and fiction, active and passive, power and limitations. By developing a deep understanding of their subjects, respecting facts, and appropriately employing fictional techniques, documentaries can better convey humanistic concern and social responsibility, demonstrating diverse artistic styles.

## Full Text

### Preamble

#### Exploring the Triple Contradictions in Documentary Filmmaking—Crossing the Boundary Between Truth and Fiction, Reconciling the Tension Between Active and Passive, and Breaking the Shackles of Power and Limitation

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### Abstract

**[Purpose]** This study investigates the contradictory relationships between truth and fiction, active and passive, and power and limitation in documentary filmmaking, analyzing how these contradictions impact the artistic value and social influence of documentaries. **[Method]** By examining the creative techniques employed in the films *Paths of the Soul* and *Man with a Movie Camera*, as well as the French documentary *Woman*, and integrating documentary theory, this paper explores the core contradictions in documentary creation and their resolution strategies. **[Results]** The contradictions between truth and fiction, active and passive, and power and limitation are deeply intertwined in documentary production. Through appropriate creative approaches—such as the reconciliation of truth and fiction in *Paths of the Soul*, the balance between active and passive elements in *Man with a Movie Camera*, and the reflection on power and limitation in *Woman*—documentaries can maintain authenticity while enhancing artistic quality and social impact. **Conclusion** The contradictory relationships in documentary creation are dynamic and evolving. Creators must find equilibrium among truth and fiction, active and passive, and power and limitation. By developing deep understanding of their subjects, respecting facts, and judiciously employing fictional techniques, documentaries can better convey humanistic concern and social responsibility while demonstrating diverse artistic styles.

**Keywords:** documentary creation; truth and fiction; documentary subjects; game relationships; feminism

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## 1. Reconciling the Boundary Between Truth and Fiction in Documentary Creation: The Case of *Paths of the Soul*

Documentaries distinguish themselves in the cinematic landscape through their authentic objectivity and humanistic contemplation, yet the path of creation is fraught with challenges. First, unlike fiction films, documentaries cannot pre-script plots and conflicts, and the selection of real individuals as subjects directly determines a work's success or failure. Second, filmmakers often unconsciously adopt a condescending perspective toward their subjects, compromising documentary objectivity. Third, controversies regarding authenticity and performativity have persisted throughout documentary history, with diverse viewpoints—such as the subjective intervention of *cinéma vérité*, the objective observation of direct cinema, and new advocacy for reenactments—creating conceptual confusion among creators. Finally, while documentaries can move audiences and generate social resonance through powerful visual imagery, their capacity to effect real change remains limited as audiovisual works constrained by factors including funding, technology, access, and culture.

### 1.1 “Authenticity” : The Essential Attribute of Documentary

In the documentary field, “recording” occupies a central position. The camera, through its recording function, can precisely capture and reproduce the external characteristics of objects. It is precisely this capacity for “material reality reproduction” that creates an inseparable connection between documentary and objectivity. As L. Barsan stated in *Dictionary of Film*, understanding the concept of “truth” depends on the aesthetic and philosophical choices people make regarding cinema, as well as the imperfections and definitions of works created under the banner of documentation. This is an ancient yet constantly renewed proposition, and exploration of the “truth” concept has undergone continuous evolution [1].

Tracing back to Flaherty's early thought, he championed the principle of “authentic results,” employing artistic scene reconstruction to meticulously depict authentic fragments of Inuit historical life, creating an almost lifelike atmosphere. Subsequently, Grierson proposed the concept of “artistic re-creation of reality,” viewing documentary as an artistic form and advocating selective presentation when recording reality. Meanwhile, André Bazin, from a psychoanalytic perspective, profoundly analyzed the fundamental nature of documentary art—using images to capture and reproduce life as it is. This perspective aligns with the camera's function of “faithful recording,” emphasizing precise “replication” of life's original appearance and highlighting the ontological characteristics and documentary value of images as a recording medium [2]. The public possesses an innate curiosity for “truth-seeking,” and the documentary essence perfectly satisfies this psychological need by presenting the real world as it is, recording authentic human stories and social scenes with minimal subjective intervention, thereby distinguishing itself from fictional and performance arts.

## 1.2 “Fictionality” : The Extension of Documentary Boundaries

The interpretation of “fiction” varies across film genres. In documentary, to enhance dramatic tension or profoundly reveal a theme, filmmakers often employ techniques such as organizing scenes, reenacting events, or staged photography. Although these practices deviate from pure documentation, they enrich documentary expression. In fiction films, by contrast, story content typically consists of meticulously crafted fictional scenarios that do not directly mirror real life but are artistically constructed by screenwriters to enhance cinematic appeal and emotional resonance.

Bill Nichols observed: “This creative form establishes a frank, intimate atmosphere that contrasts sharply with the detached, objective atmosphere traditionally claimed by documentaries” [3]. In contemporary documentary creation, building core competitiveness has shifted toward the deep integration of rigorous factual attitude and narrative artistry. Excellent documentary works should not only guide audiences to observe social reality but also serve as mirrors for self and world cognition, thereby stimulating profound reflection. Notably, fictional techniques employed during creation—including but not limited to scene reconstruction, role-playing, and event reenactment—essentially represent multi-dimensional presentation strategies for authenticity. Such artistic processing does not dissolve authenticity but rather strengthens the expressive power of essential truth through creative narrative means, providing audiences with deeper cognitive experiences.

## 1.3 The Reconciliation of “Truth” and “Fiction”

Since the birth of documentary, “truth” and “fiction” have existed in a state of binary opposition. Although pursuing authenticity remains documentary’s essential aspiration, discussions about the nature of truth have never reached a definitive conclusion. Truth possesses multiple dimensions: it encompasses both objective reality and artistic expression; it exists both in textual narrative authenticity and in the sense of reality constructed through fictional narratives. This cognitive breakthrough reveals new possibilities for documentary creation—integrating dramatic narratives into real events or revealing deeper truths through fictional techniques, enabling the two to move from opposition to dynamic balance.

This conceptual innovation breaks traditional documentary boundaries, providing creators with broader narrative space. When truth and fiction are no longer mutually exclusive choices, documentaries can transcend single documentary modes and enhance narrative tension through artistic techniques such as reenactments and animated interpretations while maintaining core authenticity.

*Nanook of the North*, Flaherty’s 1922 masterpiece, is often revered as a foundational documentary work. Although it actually represents a reenactment of Inuit life, this approach shares remarkable similarities with Zhang Yang’s *Paths of the Soul*. The latter skillfully builds a bridge of reconciliation between truth

and fiction.

**1.3.1 The Interweaving of Authentic Pilgrimage and Fictional Narrative** The *Paths of the Soul* crew lived with all the pilgrims for a year, recording authentic prostrations, newborn life, and other living fragments that demonstrate the film's truthful elements. Unlike traditional fiction films with pre-written scripts, *Paths of the Soul* had no predetermined screenplay; instead, it followed the pilgrimage improvisationally, with the director editing the final work from captured material. This approach reduced directorial presetting and revealed more of the pilgrims' authentic experiences. However, since the pilgrimage itself was initiated for the purpose of filming, it was not, strictly speaking, a purely spontaneous pilgrimage. Therefore, from a narrative perspective, the story possesses a certain fictional quality.

**1.3.2 The Fusion of Real People and Amateur Actors** The film's performers were eleven villagers from Mangkang County's Pula Village, all without acting experience—genuine non-professional actors. By establishing specific character backgrounds (such as needing an elderly person in their seventies who might die en route, a pregnant woman giving birth during the journey, or a butcher seeking redemption), the director both preserved their authentic identities and served narrative needs. This dual identity unified in the performers, achieving reconciliation between real people and fictional characters.

**1.3.3 The Harmony of Authentic Filming and Montage Editing** Director Zhang Yang, discussing the relationship between truth and fiction in cinema, stated that during filming, one can choose to observe life coldly from the sidelines or participate deeply within it, and this choice directly affects camera methodology—for instance, employing detached long takes or handheld camera work that breathes with the actors [4]. *Paths of the Soul* exemplifies this approach. The film undertook a year of authentic shooting, traveling over 400,000 kilometers to capture interpersonal relationships and emotional changes through experiential creation. While pursuing authenticity, the film masterfully integrates both narrative and expressive montage techniques [5]. Narrative montage advances the story according to chronological sequence, while expressive montage conveys specific emotions or intellectual depth through shot composition. These two methods intertwine in the film, jointly constructing a framework that is both authentic and artistically expressive.

Centered on the pilgrimage team's journey from formation to circumambulation, *Paths of the Soul* intersperses key scenes such as Tsering Chökyi's childbirth, a road accident, and the death of elderly Yangpei. These scenes possess strong visual and emotional impact, demonstrating characteristics of expressive montage while naturally embedding themselves within the film's overall narrative. Particularly, the birth scene of Düzhi Denda, a real-life miracle that cannot be restaged, was faithfully recorded and skillfully integrated into the fictional

narrative framework, becoming a crucial element for advancing the story and deepening its themes.

Although *Paths of the Soul* employs realistic techniques, its story is carefully orchestrated, with plot points rooted in authentic life and characters, thereby possessing strong internal authenticity. The film uses documentary techniques to shoot a fiction film, achieving reconciliation between truth and fiction and opening new pathways for fiction film creation. In contemporary contexts, combining truth and fiction represents a new approach to creating artistically valuable documentaries.

## **2. Balancing the Active and Passive Dynamic in Documentary Creation: The Case of *Man with a Movie Camera***

The relationship between active and passive in documentary creation can be understood as the relationship between the creator (camera) and the filmed subject. During shooting, a game-like relationship often exists between them, reflecting both the creator's initiative and the subject's passivity, as well as their bidirectional interaction.

### **2.1 The Creator's Initiative: Camera as Tool for Observation and Guidance**

In *Man with a Movie Camera*, director Dziga Vertov viewed the camera as an observational tool surpassing the human eye, directly recording and capturing the inner emotions of real life. Without artificial sets, professional actors, or subtitle assistance, the film intuitively presents a day in the everyday life of a Soviet city: a cinema preparing for screening, a city at dawn, a busy daytime, and a leisurely night. The entire film represents an authentic capture and record of urban life. At a deeper level, from the moment the cameraman steps out of his home, the film embodies the essential purpose of capturing life moments with a camera—what the “Kino-Eye” movement vigorously advocated: the camera as an indispensable tool for reflecting social reality. Vertov's initiative lies not only in selecting subjects but in precisely capturing timing and angles, emphasizing the camera's role as an irreplaceable tool for reflecting reality and the documentary's authenticity.

### **2.2 The Subject's Passive Presentation: Balancing Authenticity and Artistry**

During filming, subjects often occupy a passive position. Facing the camera lens, they may experience nervousness, discomfort, or other emotional reactions. However, this passivity does not imply lack of authenticity or expressiveness. On the contrary, under the creator's guidance, subjects often reveal more genuine and natural emotions and states.

The challenge for creators lies in maintaining subject authenticity while achiev-

ing artistic quality and watchability. This requires creators to focus not only on subjects' inner emotions and states but also on artistic elements including composition, lighting, and editing rhythm. Through skillful narrative and shooting techniques, they combine subjects' authentic emotions and states with artistic elements to present a unique artistic style.

### **2.3 Balancing the Active-Passive Dynamic: Interaction Among Creator, Camera, and Subject**

Achieving balance between active and passive is crucial in documentary creation. Excessive active guidance may compromise a film's authenticity and objectivity, while excessive passive recording may render a film monotonous and lacking artistic quality and watchability.

In *Man with a Movie Camera*, Vertov combines the camera's active capture with subjects' passive presentation through clever editing and narrative strategies, creating a unique artistic style. He respects subject authenticity while employing creative wisdom and technique to make the film more vivid, three-dimensional, and watchable. This balance requires creators to possess keen observational skills and solid shooting techniques while maintaining respect for authenticity and pursuit of artistry.

In the evolution of contemporary documentary imagery, the development of the "direct cinema" movement engendered aesthetic paradigm innovations in observational documentary. This establishment of creative philosophy gradually constructed a unique cognitive framework for objective aesthetics: creators systematically eliminate intervention in narrative progression by implementing an "presence as absence" filming ethic—avoiding reshaping event processes, refusing to guide character behavior, and maintaining spatial-temporal continuity—forming a methodologically significant principle of non-intervention.

The game process between creator and subject is dynamically changing, and their relationship is not static. It may be a cooperative "partnership," a "competitive" relationship for discursive power, or a "parallel" relationship of conscious avoidance [6]. Timely identification and understanding of this relationship enables creators to make correct judgments and choices during filming, thereby better controlling documentary creation.

## **3. The Realistic Significance and Dilemma of Feminism in the Power-Limitation Contradiction: The Case of the French Documentary *Woman***

The power of documentary lies in its ability to present nature and society, history and reality through intuitive visual language, stimulating public emotional resonance and action, thereby wielding strong social influence. However, this power is not invincible; it remains constrained by multiple factors including funding, technology, cultural differences, and political movements, thus possess-

ing inherent limitations. Power and limitation essentially reflect documentary's social responsibility and dilemma. A documentary certainly holds realistic significance and value, yet as an audiovisual work, it cannot deterministically change reality.

The French documentary *Woman*, co-created by Ukrainian director Anastasia Mikova and French director Yann Arthus-Bertrand, spans 50 countries and authentically records the perspectives of 2,000 women on various life aspects, covering themes from childbirth to female growth and physiological phenomena. The film employs group portrait interviews in confined spaces, where subjects look directly into the camera for one-on-one exchanges, resembling conversations between soul and God. Each woman is presented with equal close-up shots, highlighting often-overlooked emotions and experiences.

As Arthus-Bertrand stated: "I believe love will change the world. I view the world with open eyes. Rather than pessimistically crying in darkness, I prefer to illuminate light. I want to use film to illuminate light, while needing billions of people to act together to illuminate light" [7]. The film directly focuses on female groups experiencing injustice across education, family, workplace, and multiple dimensions. Their revelations expose the severe reality that gender oppression remains widespread in contemporary society, with their lives devastated as if by tsunamis and earthquakes. However, breaking silence is merely the starting point for seeking change; subsequent repair and reconstruction require extraordinary courage, rare opportunities, and broad social support.

The production team was female-led, ensuring dialogue authenticity. The directors hoped the film would transform gender concepts, call for gender equality and social justice, and enable audiences to re-examine women's inner worlds, denouncing gender oppression and discrimination. The film does not adopt extreme feminism but demonstrates women's interdependence with men, society, and nature. Its social significance lies in guiding audiences to contemplate gender relations and learn how to interact with the opposite sex. Women's shared sensibility, resilience, and flexibility shine brightly in adversity, witnessing feminism's development and promoting free expression of female subjective identity.

Although documentaries as audiovisual works can provoke audience reflection and resonance through authentic stories and profound emotional depiction, their influence remains limited. Viewers may experience empathy and reflection after watching, but relatively few may transform thought into action. Moreover, even those willing to act may be constrained by social structures and cultural concepts. Feminism always oscillates between liberalism and conservatism [8]. In the future, as female directors rise in the documentary field, feminist documentaries will become perceptible and resonant forces, injecting rich texture and diverse possibilities into feminism, making it more realistically significant and constructively meaningful.

## Conclusion

The three pairs of contradictory relationships—truth and fiction, active and passive, power and limitation—constitute the complex ecology of documentary creation. Understanding and properly handling these contradictions not only enhances artistic value but also effectively conveys documentary’s social responsibility and humanistic care. In future documentary creation, we must continue exploring how to find equilibrium among these contradictions to produce works with profound meaning and social value.

As Bill Nichols observed: “To accurately define the concept of ‘documentary’ is as difficult as defining ‘love’ or ‘culture’ ” [9]. The reason for this definitional difficulty lies in the fact that documentary creative practice exists in a dynamic, changing environment. The contradictions of “truth and fiction” in the filming process, the “active and passive” relationship between creators and subjects, and the “power and limitation” of documentary thematic influence have always existed. However, we must clearly recognize that documentary is an art about “people.” Only when creators fully understand the “person” beneath the lens [10] and achieve deep empathy based on value identification, constructing an emotional community through intersubjective interaction, can the preconditions for generating quality cinematic texts be established. The vitality of this artistic form stems precisely from the plasticity of its boundary settings—dynamic narrative thresholds constitute both its aesthetic tension and the endogenous driving force for media evolution. Under the continuous drive of formal innovation, documentary art will inevitably present a more inclusive ecological diversity landscape.

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

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