



## **Realism in Ancient History Documentaries**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This project focuses on the representation of realism in ancient history documentaries. While documentaries are often distinguished from fictional films for the general public by their intimate connection to reality and their strong persuasiveness, the fictional component of documentaries is higher than spectators' expectations. Compared to other types of documentaries, the time and space distance between the producers of ancient history documentaries and the original material leads to the problem that ancient history documentaries face a greater challenge in authenticity. In order to seek the documentary mission of recording reality and to bring it closer to spectators' expected authenticity, exploring the issue from the perspective of realistic expressions in ancient history documentaries is meaningful. Therefore, by combining theory and practice, based on realism-related theories, this project explores the expressive techniques in ancient history documentaries and provides examples and reflections on theoretical practice in filming experience. This project proposes the impossibility of restoring reality in films and emphasizes that the realism in ancient history documentaries should be pursued with a belief in the way of conducting a ritual. The results are evaluations of the realistic tendency of the commonly used expression techniques in ancient history documentaries and confirm the importance of research investments and filmmakers' commitment during practice.

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## Introduction

Amnesia leads to the fragmentation of life, and the loss of history leads to the discontinuity of civilization. In order to move forward, humanity as a whole entity, must comprehend the past. From mummies to cameras, people have never stopped endeavoring to embalm things that are passing away. Yet, in the process of perfecting the replica, people also realized the irreplaceability of reality. With the development of technology, the camera has rescued the struggle of realistic style painting and replicated part of reality to some extent. The emergence of recording images to the popularity of motion pictures is a result of the unrelenting desire to replicate this visual spectacle of reality, from Edward Muybridge's 24 consecutive snapshots of horses to Louis Aimé Augustin Le Prince's 2s silent film *Roundhay Garden Scene* to the contemporary formation of documentary concepts. However, as technology and editorial mindsets have evolved, the documentary quality of camera-based work has declined at the same time. The contemporary documentary is more of a documentary-style film that expresses a point of view, and the purpose of the film is not only to document the world but also to fulfill a wish. With the inevitable evolution, I believe there is one subject matter that still needs to adhere to the core motivation of recording, namely the ancient historical documentary.

Unlike other documentaries or recent history documentaries, ancient history documentaries focus on things that lack living reference and experience, hence the interval of time and space increases its fictional component, and they face more difficulties than other documentaries in realistic expression. However, due to the



persuasive quality of documentaries and spectators' high expectation for documentary authenticity in general, documentaries on ancient history needs to keep the motivation of recording more than ever.

Therefore, how to make the ancient history documentary, which is full of loopholes, present in a realistic way becomes a key. Previously, multiple related arguments have focused on the discussion of the realism of images and the non-reality of documentaries, as well as some comments on the techniques of representation, but there is still room for the discussion and summary of enhancing the realism in ancient history documentaries. Therefore, this project starts the research with the aim of finding realist expressions in ancient history documentaries; this project includes a discussion of specific approaches from the theoretical aspect, as well as an audiovisual presentation of the theoretical findings in the form of an experimental short film. In the first part of this paper, I will point out the gap between the documentary reality and the expected authenticity from spectators. In the second part, I will consider the attitudes to cope with the gap and discuss appropriate techniques of realist expression from a theoretical perspective. In the third part, I will explain and reflect on the design and choices made in the experimental short films produced from the perspective of realistic expression. The aim of this project is to provoke reflection and provide constructive suggestions on the realistic expression in ancient history documentaries.

## **Stage One – The Concern Aroused**

### **Authenticity: The Gap Between Documentary Presentations and Audience Expectations**

For the public, documentaries are purifying streams of truth amidst the chaotic currents of information. The familiar world of realistic footage gives people the certainty that what they are seeing and hearing is real and trustworthy. It cannot be denied that documentaries come from reality, but what needs to be considered is whether they can represent reality. The dissemination of information carried by documentaries has an important impact on the development of civilization, the shaping of society, and the growth of individuals. Therefore, clarifying the relationship between documentaries and reality is meaningful for both documentary filmmakers and spectators. This stage will discuss the concern I found, the gap between the authenticity of documentaries and the audiences' expectations of documentaries. After making the gap visible, I will point out the problems arising from the mismatch between presentation and expectations, as exemplified by ancient history documentaries.

#### **The Definition of Documentaries**

The documentary aims to be a record, a record of reality. This recording characteristic sets it apart from other art forms and is brought to the forefront by the camera. First, unlike other forms of video production, the image of a documentary is not a secondary creation of reality, but rather an attempt to capture a fragment of reality. This aim of the documentary overlaps with the aim of the camera. In *Documentary: A*

*History of the Non-fiction Film*, Erik Barnouw refers to the origin of the motion image as an impulse to document events (3).<sup>1</sup> This impulse is not driven by commercial thinking or profit, but simply to “catching life” (6).<sup>2</sup> The documentary film is one of the many film forms that still retains this impulse.

Second, on the basis that the objectives of the documentary and the camera are in sync, the camera’s capacity helps both to better approach their purposes. The camera is a much more objective recording tool than other means of reproducing reality; in other words, its output is much more closely related to reality than other creative art. André Bazin points out that camera photography brings unprecedented objectivity to the image, “For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent. For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man” (13).<sup>3</sup> The elimination of human involvement helps the images more resemble the products of nature than man-made creations. D.N. Rodwick further explains the accomplishment of this objective reproduction in the loss of control over the light and shadow imaging after the shutter is pressed (47).<sup>4</sup>

It can be argued that with the help of the camera, at least on a psychological level, the documentary goes further than other reproductions with personal secondary creation (e.g., painting, sculpture). At the same time, there is no denying the hand holding the

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<sup>1</sup> Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-fiction Film*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 3.

<sup>2</sup> Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-fiction Film*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 6.

<sup>3</sup> André Bazin, *What is cinema? I* (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1967) 13.

<sup>4</sup> David Norman Rodowick, *The virtual life of film* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007) 47.

camera or the eye behind it, but their influence is more subservient to the reality of the environment, and the hands are working with the camera to complete the reproduction process. As Siegfried Kracauer points out in *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, the cinematographer opens his or her soul to feel and photograph things (15)<sup>5</sup>, and in the process of filming, the cinematographer's presence is dissolved in nature. Therefore, the documentary is closely connected with the camera, and with the help of the camera, it is certainly attached to reality in terms of its images, which are less distorted.

However, the connection between reality and the documentaries' images does not mean the documentary fully represents reality. As mentioned previously, the existence of the cinematographer is dissolved, in the other words, it does not disappear. "Dissolve" means "loosen," "weaken," "reduce," and "melt" ("dissolve, v.")<sup>6</sup>. The subjectivity is weakened by the cinematographer's intention of submitting to nature but still exists in a subtle state. The subjective ideology mixes with his or her environment, the two create a chemical reaction and lead to the creation of a new vision. The newly created matter is not the natural reality nor the subjective ideology of the photographer, but a new consciousness with the tendency to reality. The new realistic ideology is dissolved in the light reflected on the lens. As Hyun Kang Kim says, "the real in itself does not exist," which only "emerges when objective effects and pass through the subjective distortion" (26)<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, this interaction between subjectivity and nature is fluid, and when

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<sup>5</sup> Siegfried Kracauer and Miriam Hansen, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton university press, 1997) 15.

<sup>6</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2000) dissolve, v., online, Internet, 11 Sep. 2022. , Available: <http://dictionary.oed.com/entrance.dtl>.

<sup>7</sup> Christine Reeh-Peters, Stefan W. Schmidt, and Peter Weibel, eds., *The real of reality: the realist turn in*

the photographer's subjective intent is high, the product of the interaction will be what Kracauer refers to as "formative" (6)<sup>8</sup>. This type of formative image is produced by the artist-photographer who has the urge to produce beautiful artistic images, instead of "capturing nature in the raw" (6)<sup>9</sup>. These images embrace a less realistic component. In general, nature is still being kept but also gone in photography. Therefore, the photographed image is not representative of reality, and the camera cannot assist the documentary to be a perfect replica of reality.

What's more, the documentary is not the same as photography, the connection with reality gets weakened. After heavy editing of the images, the arrangement of the segments of the images, the human figure gradually covers the images. These images are similar to the camera and the stand in the late section of *Man with a Movie Camera*<sup>10</sup>, which seem to be automatic but are controlled by invisible hands. From the images seen, the camera and the stand are able to dance on their own as natural objects without interference, but in fact, the people swinging them are artificially removed. The same is true of the images in the documentary. The recording of the images seems to be played naturally, yet it is not the automaticity of nature, but the automaticity of fundamentally isolated digital data, the statement of the producers' concept. As many film theorists have pointed out, the documentary is not non-fiction in the strictest sense. Bill Nichols suggests that documentaries are "fiction unlike any other" and "views on reality"

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*contemporary film theory*, Value inquiry book series 367 (Leiden; Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2021) 26.

<sup>8</sup> Siegfried Kracauer and Miriam Hansen, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton university press, 1997) 6.

<sup>9</sup> Siegfried Kracauer and Miriam Hansen, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton university press, 1997) 6.

<sup>10</sup> *Man with a Movie Camera*, vols., 1929.

(111)<sup>11</sup>. Patricia Aufderheide points out that documentaries are “artistic representations of reality” (3) and “usable past” (92)<sup>12</sup>. Based on contemporary needs (e.g., political propaganda, commercial needs), the documentary chooses a story to tell and construct the narrative, and eventually delivers convincing arguments through collected materials from reality. They share much more common with fiction films in that they both create a new perspective world; the only difference is the documentary uses natural resources that are able to establish a familiar world to the spectators. Thus, the documentary unlike photography that the hands behind the screen do not dissolve but are involved in reproduction, or even distorted the original meanings, which leads to the weakened connection between the documentary and reality.

Overall, a documentary is a work of image between fiction and non-fiction. The documentary has a stable link to reality with the help of the camera, while at the same time, the realistic properties of its images are largely influenced by the person holding the camera. Therefore, the reality of a documentary image is not a natural reality, but a realistic style image can be obtained with the efforts of the camera operator. Moreover, since documentaries are not only about still images or moving images but also about the post-processing of the images, this leads to an increased fictionality of the documentary. Thus, a documentary is a fictional world with realistic images.

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<sup>11</sup> Bill Nichols, *Representing reality: issues and concepts in documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) 111.

<sup>12</sup> Patricia Aufderheide, *Documentary film: a very short introduction*, *Very short introductions* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 3; *ibid.*, 92.

## The Expectations of Documentary Spectators

Unlike the documentary's restless realism, spectators' perception of the documentary is wrapped by a sense of truth. First, to the spectators, the images of the documentary provide a sense of reality. As Bill Nichols puts it, "documentaries offer us a likeness or depiction of the world that bears a recognizable familiarity" (2).<sup>13</sup> The familiarity of the environment and people within the frame cultivate the audiences' trust. With the fundamental support from images, it is easily driven to the belief that "we see what was there before the camera, it must be true" (3).<sup>14</sup> In addition, the sequences' reasonable logic flows subsequently, leading to the acceptance of the documentary's argument. When the spectators follow the "evidence" presented by the director to think, they enter a third world that is neither real nor pure fiction. If the logical evidence does not make any significant mistakes, then the third world can effortlessly gain the same trust of the spectator towards the real world. Therefore, the ontological setting of the documentary generates incredible credibility for the spectators.

Second, the external factors associated with documentaries influence the spectators' high expectations of the documentary's ability to reproduce reality. What needs to be taken into account is that documentaries are products of society, and their relationship with society is closely linked. For spectators, the trustworthiness of documentaries is not only conveyed by images but also relies on the tags given to them by society. As Michael Renov points out, the "narration, site of exhibition, reputation, intention, interpretation" of the documentary, and "its category at the local video store"

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<sup>13</sup> Bill Nichols, *Introduction to documentary* (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 2001) 2.

<sup>14</sup> Bill Nichols, *Introduction to documentary* (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 2001) 3.

will affect the authenticity of the documentary to the public (270).<sup>15</sup> The “social bond” largely manipulates the public’s view of the documentary (270). For example, for the spectators, a documentary is placed in the history section, promoted by the central government, and shown on the big screen, before they start watching but solely based on these piled external tags, there is already a certain trust in the content of the documentary. This leads to the fact that the authenticity of a documentary for the spectators is based on external factors. If the external factors shape a high level of authority, then the spectator’s expectation of the documentary’s authenticity will be as high as the authority.

In addition to the ontological and social influence, the spectators’ personal wishes also affect their expectations of the documentary. As documentaries usually are divided into two types, including wish-fulfillment and social representation (1).<sup>16</sup> The wish-fulfillment type indicates the spectators’ needs for documentaries are not only expanding knowledge horizon but also spiritual fulfillment. While the development of the plot or the promotion of virtues in the documentary aligns with the spectator’s wish, the spectator’s recognition and expectation of the authenticity of the documentary will reach a high level. Truthfulness and authenticity are fairly subjective towards spectators within this condition.

Thus, overall, documentaries have a high level of credibility towards the external world. For the spectators, with the influence of visual and technical support for

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<sup>15</sup> Jane Gaines and Michael Renov, eds., *Collecting visible evidence*, Visible evidence v. 6 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) 270.

<sup>16</sup> Bill Nichols, *Introduction to documentary* (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 2001) 1.



production, external social biases, and personal preferences, documentaries easily hold a certain high level of trust. However, spectators' trust does not necessarily have a balanced relationship with the documentaries' performance.

### **The Problem Caused by the Gap Between Expectation and Presentation**

As discussed above, regarding the ambiguity of the documentary and the high expectations of the spectators, there is a clear mismatch between them. The gap between the two can result in the spread of misinformation and a loss of connection to physical reality. And with the development of the media, if the contamination of the documentary impulse deepens and the authority of the institution or method of communication increases, the confusion brought by seemingly trustworthy messages will grow. People's dialectical thinking will also diminish, ushering in the possibility that reality will be derived from artistic creation rather than art from reality. This disconnection from reality and the displacement between art and reality will lead to people's gradual loss in overly chaotic and "authentic" ideologies.

The above discussion of the dilemma is sketchily seen in documentaries on ancient historical subjects. First, the ancient historical documentaries, which refer to documentaries that focus on 3100 BC to AD 476 subjects in this project, have a common problem that the events they depicted are separate from the camera temporally and spatially with a huge distance. And it is important to emphasize that the interval here is already too far to trace; it is difficult to find a complete past again, either from historical traces or from modern living life. The discussion made by James M. Moran elaborates on the situation the prehistorical documentaries confronted, the gap between

the existing referents and the filmmaker only can be “bridged by speculation,” and they must fill the screen with scenes or backgrounds that may or may not be accurate” (259).<sup>17</sup> This means the fabricated past in ancient history documentaries is almost disconnected from physical reality, the only connection is the trace left, which is able to generate imagination. The ambiguity of the documentary tends to be fictional. However, for the spectators, the authority and persuasiveness of the documentary are not influenced a lot. Without enough reliable resources to judge the authenticity of the ancient stories to the public, the crisis that documentaries on ancient history are very likely to face is the widespread dissemination of misinformation, where people take imagined history as objective history. Thus, this non-matching situation is unfair to both documentaries and their audiences. Compared with other documentaries, the dilemma faced by ancient history documentaries, which are making their voices heard under various absences, is more acute, and the solution urgently needs to be discussed.

### **The Fulfillment of Ancient History Documentaries**

As in the above discussion of the realistic gap between presentation and expectations faced by historical documentaries, the focus is on finding possible solutions. First, it is important to clarify the purpose of the documentaries that restore the distant past. As James Moran refers to Alan Cholodenko’s highlight that “the documentary is presumed to be where fantasy and fiction end, where one can gain a

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<sup>17</sup> Jane Gaines and Michael Renov, eds., *Collecting visible evidence*, Visible evidence v. 6 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) 259.

purchase on the real (and its correlates: the true, the meaningful, etc.)” (266).<sup>18</sup> The same is true of ancient history documentaries, whose goal is to accomplish as much reliable restoration of past reality as possible. At the same time, the difficulties in achieving the goal cannot be ignored. The precarious objectivity of images, the problem of viewpoints in film production, the difficulty to untie social influence, and the unbridgeable rupture between event and camera all contradict our goal. And what we need to discuss is how to find the best balance between the goal and the intractable difficulties. It has been mentioned that many scholars have pointed out the non-objectivity of documentaries and the difference with reality, etc., but the studies and summaries of production practices that specifically tell how to implement realism to the end need supplementing. In the next section, I will discuss the methods of making historical documentaries to fulfill the spectators’ expectations for truthful information.

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<sup>18</sup> Jane Gaines and Michael Renov, eds., *Collecting visible evidence*, Visible evidence v. 6 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) 266.

## **Stage Two – The Solutions Considered**

### **The Path of Realism in Ancient History Documentaries**

In the previous stage of the discussion, I clarified that a crucial quality of historical documentaries is to provide audiences with the reality or truth of the past, and in this stage, I tried to find and discuss various practical ways in achieving realism in ancient history documentaries. However, the first thing I would like to point out is that the difference between documentary and reality is dimensional, and the rupture between historical documentary and past reality is impossible to recover. For the documentary, reality is the origin with an aura, and the documentary is a man-made artwork with a relatively high degree of restoration in a crowd of shoddy replicas of reality. The original reality exists as a sphere, and the person holding the camera is always in this sphere, feeling the existence of the sphere with his or her own narrow perspective, but unable to step out of the sphere and see the complete reality in multiple dimensions. The relationship between ancient history documentaries and past reality is not only the camera's inability to see the past tense of the complete sphere but also the inability in feeling the past sphere. For ancient history documentaries, this sphere is an onion. The cinematographer of an ancient history documentary stands in one of the onion slices, while the events he or she described are in another (modern historical documentaries and the events should be in the same piece, and for the modern subjects, the piece they lived is the sphere). The camera cannot penetrate the edge to feel the other onion slice but is more likely to speculate and imagine the feeling of being in the other slice through

a thin contact layer - the relics. Therefore, restoring the complete past simply is a utopian fantasy for documentaries.

Nevertheless, force majeure never means we should give up the pursue of historical truth and ignore the spectators' expectations of knowledge. For a sincere documentary filmmaker, the pursuit of the stated goal is his or her faith, and the completion of the documentary on historical subjects is the fulfillment of a ritual of the faith. It is similar to Nichol's statement that "documentary realism is not only a style but also a professional code, and ethic, and a ritual" (167).<sup>19</sup> Even though complete realities are invisible existences, this does not mean one can ignore their existence. On the contrary, documentary filmmakers should keep in mind the original intention of the camera, which is to provide an objective record of real events. Therefore, ancient history documentaries should still make the best possible artificial endeavor to approach reality. On the way to pursuing the long-cherished dream of reality, many theorists have already made their achievements, and I will consider the modern means of expression in ancient historical documentaries with reference to the statements of relevant realist theorists and points out the merits and weaknesses of the expressions with the goal of pursuing reality.

### **Historical Mindset**

Documentaries are records of history, and there are many similarities between historians and documentary filmmakers, thus, I believe historical documentaries can

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<sup>19</sup> Bill Nichols, *Representing reality: issues and concepts in documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) 167.

consider the restoration from the perspective of historic restoration. The relationship between documentary and history is intimate, as the two have an inclusive and juxtaposed relationship. First, contemporary history work is a product of speculation based on various records, while the documentary film is a part of history by providing partial records in the form of images to complete the historical retracing, and itself is a part of history. Second, both the writing of history and the completion of a documentary are subjectively dominated processes. They are both composed of systematic recordings, interpretations, and hermeneutics of selective portions of the past. Cuevas Efrén also argues that there is much in common between historians and filmmakers, including the choice of subject matter, the selection of material, the way it is organized, and the consideration of the needs of contemporary audiences.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, documentary films share similarities with writing history. We can consider documentaries in the same way that historians restore history. When we treat each shot of a documentary as a fragment of evidence or trace in historical research, we should think about how to collect, organize, and present the evidence obtained in a realistic manner.

In terms of evidence collecting and organizing, I believe that one of the founding figures of historiography, Leopold Von Ranke, provided much practical guidance for realism realization. In his quest to restore history, he proposed objectivism and the method of examination. Although later scholars have pointed out the flaws of his method, such as the inability to achieve the complete objectivity he sought and the neglect of the historian's subjective pursuit, these perspectives cannot deny the

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<sup>20</sup> Efrén Cuevas, *Filming history from below: microhistorical documentaries*, Nonfictions (New York: Wallflower, an imprint of Columbia University Press, 2021) 5.

significant value of his theories. As a host of documentary researchers and Ranke have long recognized, history or documentary cannot be defined as objective because they coexist with art. For example, Ranke notes in “On the Character of Historical Science,” “History is distinguished from all other sciences in that it is also an art,” “it is an art because it recreates and portrays that which has found and recognized” (9).<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the suppression of subjective readings is a misunderstanding; Ranke places more emphasis on the exclusion of bias and false narratives in the process of interpretation. His quest for historical objectivity and the suppression of historian commentary is a belief in reality. Thus, I propose that his theory is instructive for the collection, organization, and presentation of documentary materials.

First, Ranke was unusually rigorous in his collection of historical documentary evidence. Ranke’s obsession with documentation was radical for its time, and he proposed that the prehistory that is not documented but obtained by geological deduction should be eliminated.<sup>22</sup> He founded history on the study of primary information and documents. What I consider can be absorbed is the reliance on primary information and the conservative attitude toward speculative correlations.

Second, in evidence collection, Ranke suggested that information collection should be extensive and interdisciplinary. People subconsciously focus on their interested areas, and in fact, history occurs as a series of chain reactions resulting from the correlation of various fields (13). Some unexpected factors might also involve in

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<sup>21</sup> Leopold von Ranke and Georg G. Iggers, *The theory and practice of history* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2011) 9.

<sup>22</sup> Leopold von Ranke and Georg G. Iggers, *The theory and practice of history* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011) 16.

the process of events' occurrence. Therefore, collecting as many documents in various fields as possible is one of the ways to get close to the original. In terms of documentary films, I believe this means expanding relevant contextual research at the preparing stage and diversifying the presentation of related subjects.

Third, in the organization of historical events and materials, Ranke expressed the criterion of strict adherence to the sequence. He believed that the development of history is causal, and it is more reasonable to state the events in order (32).<sup>23</sup> At the same time, in dealing with the dilemma of unfamiliar fields, he states “we can note what significance history has” (16).<sup>24</sup> Rather than avoiding the missing information, he mentions that the absent part should be mentioned in a frank statement. I suppose this is something that can be followed in historical documentaries. Sometimes directors may change the narrative sequence in order to create suspense. However, it is more appropriate to narrate all the known information without trimming or omitting contents for restoring the irreversible linear development of reality.

Fourth, with regard to presentation, Ranke argues that historians should not add their own interpretations in the process of restoring history but penetrate the meaning of elements themselves, because historians can hardly avoid thinking from a modern perspective, such as influenced by political factors (14).<sup>25</sup> I find it often difficult to avoid personal interpretations in documentaries, however, one point that can be taken

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<sup>23</sup> Georg G. Iggers, “The Image of Ranke in American and German Historical Thought” *History and Theory*. 2.1 (1962): 32.

<sup>24</sup> Leopold von Ranke and Georg G. Iggers, *The theory and practice of history* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011) 16.

<sup>25</sup> Leopold von Ranke and Georg G. Iggers, *The theory and practice of history* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011) 14.



from Ranke's theory is that the director needs to avoid considering personal interpretations as part of authentic history. Thus, in general, Von Ranke's historical mindset provides a logical guide to the collection, organization, and presentation of historical materials for documentaries on the historical subject, achieving the pursuit of reality from the perspective of human subjectivity.

### **Realistic Image and Audio Design**

After setting the logical groundwork for the collection, organization, and presentation of historical image evidence, I will refer to several scholars who have made claims about image and audio design in terms of realism.

Siegfried Kracauer is a great scholar who walked with realism in his study of cinema. He roots his theory in physical reality and pursues the connectedness of the image to physical reality and spectators' illusion of physical reality triggered by realistic images. First, he points out that images should be photographic in nature, specifically in the sense that images should be honest as the camera captured. To achieve realism in images, he supports photographic images to be unaltered, immediate, coincidental, infinite, and ambiguous in meaning.<sup>26</sup> The photographic character he proposes is closely linked to the camera, not to the hand-held camera; in other words, the images suggested here point to the photographer's limited interference with the subject's physical presentation.

Second, not only the content but rooted in reality in the form of image

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<sup>26</sup> Siegfried Kracauer and Miriam Hansen, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton university press, 1997) chap. Introduction.

expression also means that there is a realistic connection. Kracauer emphasizes the movement of images, including the movement of the camera and the movement of things within the frame.<sup>27</sup> The external movement reinforces the infinite vision that reality possesses, while the internal movement increases the immediacy bringing a sense of unrehearsed reality. In terms of filming scenes, Kracauer embraces reenactment and animation, provided they are “realistic” enough, such as highly similar and dynamic environments to the original scenes. For the fantasy scenes, on the other hand, he emphasizes exaggerated or polished representations to bridge the gap with the real or recorded scenes, which helps reduce the reliability of imaginary scenes.<sup>28</sup> In general, in terms of filming approaches and settings, he endorses results that assemble reality or fictional scenes that deviate from reality in order to solidify spectators’ attention and reflection on reality.

Kracauer is not only strict about the images’ significance in reality but also values realistic presentation of the images. André Bazin, however, emphasizes an image that is able to arouse a feeling of reality psychologically. First, on the topic of reenactment, Bazin expresses a definite rejection of reenactment in the studio. Using *Scott of the Antarctic*<sup>29</sup> as an example, he points out, “The studio reconstructions reveal a mastery of trick work and studio imitation-but to what purpose? To imitate the inimitable, to reconstruct that which of its very nature can only occur once, namely risk,

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<sup>27</sup> Siegfried Kracauer and Miriam Hansen, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton university press, 1997) chap. General Characteristics.

<sup>28</sup> Siegfried Kracauer and Miriam Hansen, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton university press, 1997) chap. Areas and Elements.

<sup>29</sup> *Scott of the Antarctic*, vols. (Ealing Studios, 1948).

adventure, death. Certainly the scenario is no help.”<sup>30</sup> The fictitious setting is essentially different from the real natural environment, which may visually deceive the senses but psychologically there is always a negative voice that makes the images lose their glamour.

In contrast to the dismissal of successful scene reproduction in the studio, Bazin praises the unformed film *Kon Tiki*, which has low shooting quality and missing camera movement techniques.<sup>31</sup> The reason is that the film is not a false re-enactment, but a real reoccurrence of the same adventure. The film’s flaws, which existed under various obstacles, in this case, became proof that the adventure truly existed or was carried out. This makes the original adventure with all its thrills, surprises, threats, and so forth, reemit from the essence. Only things that have naturally happened or existed in reality can evoke a strong psychological reality. Just like the events portrayed in *Bicycle Thief*<sup>32</sup>, which he recognized,<sup>33</sup> only images that fit the real social situation, without acting and without stories, are real and touching. Bazin’s support of realistic filming is centered on feelings. To obtain a realistic feeling, the events need to happen naturally and be captured, enabling the documentary to meet the realistic “expectations” of the spectators and touch the reality in their memories.

After the discussion on the essence of Bazin’s realism, I suppose it is necessary to mention some of Bazin’s insights on the approach to photography. First, he expresses

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<sup>30</sup> André Bazin, *What is cinema? I* (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1967) 158.

<sup>31</sup> André Bazin, *What is cinema? I* (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1967) 160.

<sup>32</sup> *Bicycle Thieves*, vols. (Produzioni De Sica, 1948).

<sup>33</sup> André Bazin, François Truffaut, and James Dudley Andrew, *What is cinema. Volume 2: What is cinema? Vol. II / by André Bazin ; foreword by François Truffaut ; new foreword by Dudley Andrew ; essays selected and translated by Hugh Gray*, Trans. Hugh Gray and Hugh Gray (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2005) chap. Bicycle Thief.

a dialectical view on the application of montage. A film composed of clips is inevitably montage, but the non-misuse of montage is indispensable for realism. Bazin points out a critical issue with the use of montage, which would disrupt the fluidity and unity of space. However, the loss of spatial and temporal continuity and unity means an increase in the possibility of fictionalizing the image and the director's emphasis on the message of the cut scene; both of these weaken the realistic characteristics of the documentary image-the extent and ambiguity of the message. Confronted with potential problems, Bazin notes that "when the essence of a scene demands the simultaneous presence of two or more factors in the action, montage is ruled out" (50).<sup>34</sup> Therefore, maintaining the connectedness of elements within the frame space is necessary to avoid cutting the complex environment into a fictional narrative that relies on the spectators' association. Adding that this does not imply Bazin's rejection of montage, he points out that the application of montage to fictional tenses can be aptly contrasted with reality.<sup>35</sup>

Second, he points out the importance of deep depth-of-field shots and long takes for realism. The main reason is that deep depth-of-field shots contain a large amount of information and complex scene structure, which makes the spectators feel more exposed to reality and engaged, and long takes maintain the unity of time and space. In general, in terms of camera shooting, the proper use of montage, deep depth of field scenes, and long shots are all valuable for approaching reality.

In addition to paying attention to the means of shooting, I suggest considering

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<sup>34</sup> André Bazin, *What is cinema? I* (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1967) 50.

<sup>35</sup> André Bazin, *What is cinema? I* (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1967) chap. The Evolution of the Language of Cinema.

the feeling of image realism from the spectators' perspective. Regarding the perception and feeling brought by images to the spectators, I refer to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's and Vivian Sobchack's related theories. First, Merleau-Ponty points out the issue of perspective. The existence of things is not one-sided or separate, but multifaceted and mutually assured with all other objects. "The house itself is not the house seen from nowhere, but rather the house seen from everywhere. The fully realized object is translucent, it is shot through from all sides by the fully realized object is translucent, it is shot through from all sides by an infinity of present gazes intersecting in its depth and leaving nothing there hidden" (71).<sup>36</sup> Thus, in order to truly understand a subject, one needs perspective and the ability to respond to the object from different alternative perspectives. In our reality and visual record, we are unable to restore the transparent state, therefore, filming the items and restoring historical events from multiple angles is the method to consider.

Second, Merleau-Ponty mentions that the meaning of the film is not to convey information but to place the spectators inside the image.<sup>37</sup> Applying the interactivity of the human senses to the film will help the spectators' bodies to perceive the real circumstances of the images. As the five senses are complementary to each other, such as Sobchack quotes Richard Shiff, "touch and vision are caught in reciprocal figuration: it is touch that is figuring vision, and vision that is figuring touch" (82),<sup>38</sup> the control

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<sup>36</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Donald A. Landes, *Phenomenology of perception* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2012) 71.

<sup>37</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Hubert L. Dreyfus, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and non-sense*, Northwestern University studies in phenomenology & existential philosophy (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964) chap. The Film and the New Psychology.

<sup>38</sup> Vivian Carol Sobchack, *Carnal thoughts: embodiment and moving image culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) 82.

of the acquired senses (films grasp visual and auditory, and for other multi-dimensional products like VR is another story) can help the generation of other senses and further details the spectators' perception of the reality outside films.

For instance, Sobchack's feeling on Campion's film is "the film not only 'filled me up' and often 'suffocated' me with feelings that resonated in and constricted my chest and stomach, but it also 'sensitized' the very surfaces of my skin—as well as its own—to touch" (61),<sup>39</sup> and in response to the image of Ada's finger being chopped off, she claims that she foresaw the impending violation scene (79).<sup>40</sup> Therefore, the delicate depiction of the five senses facilitates the spectators' link with the real condition of the image depicted, thus contributing to the recovery of reality. At the same time, considering the strong influence of sensations on the spectators' perception of reality, I suppose senses depictions are well suited for documentary scenes that existed before a camera, while for fictional scenes in documentaries, strong sensations should be paired with exaggerated or apparently fictional images to avoid the spectators' lost between fiction and reality.

In addition to images, the application of sound also affects message transformation. The audio design in documentaries can enhance the realistic percentage, and can weaken their credibility. Bazin notes that the addition of sound to films is a leap toward total realism. Sound offers the possibility of progress in the reproduction of complete reality.<sup>41</sup> Sound can also elicit physical and emotional responses, as

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<sup>39</sup> Vivian Carol Sobchack, *Carnal thoughts: embodiment and moving image culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) 61.

<sup>40</sup> Vivian Carol Sobchack, *Carnal thoughts: embodiment and moving image culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) 79.

<sup>41</sup> André Bazin, *What is cinema? I* (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1967) chap. The Myth of Total Cinema.

Merleau-Ponty suggests, to create synesthesia.<sup>42</sup> What's more, as Kracauer mentioned, music can help people focus more on the camera image. However, the use of sound should be complementary rather than dominating the image. For music, Kracauer points out that the musical role is an accompaniment in the spirit of the subject matter rather than any leading narration.<sup>43</sup> As well as regarding dialogue, Kracauer addressed the realism of parallel synchronism, the complementary function of sham counterpoint synchronism and sham counterpoint asynchronism, and the limits of parallel asynchronism.<sup>44</sup> The application of extensive narration to explain the images in a documentary means that the video recordings move towards oratory and the meaning of words also is limited by the images. Thus, in general, the use of sound is bound to add a realistic quality to the film, at the same time, to enhance the authenticity of the historical documentary, the application of sound should strike a balance between audio and image.

### **Narrative Techniques of Ancient History Documentaries**

Based on the deliberation of scholars' theoretical insights related to records as well as films, we can recall some of the narrative tactics used in modern-made documentaries on ancient historical subjects and make a discussion on their applicability on the path toward realism expression.

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<sup>42</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Hubert L. Dreyfus, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and non-sense*, Northwestern University studies in phenomenology & existential philosophy (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964) chap. Cinema and the New Psychology.

<sup>43</sup> Siegfried Kracauer and Miriam Hansen, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton university press, 1997) chap. Music.

<sup>44</sup> Siegfried Kracauer and Miriam Hansen, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton university press, 1997) chap. Dialogue and Sound.

Chronicle Sequence: Chronicle sequence is not a strategy adopted by all historical documentaries. Due to the fragmentation of evidence, the content of the documentary may be presented in a parallel relationship, or it may dig into history in a retrospective manner in order to arouse the spectators' curiosity. *西汉帝陵 (Imperial Mausoleums)*<sup>45</sup> is a documentary series that makes a narrative out of chronicle sequences. Taking the first episode as an example, the film unveils the Ling Tomb by recounting the life of Emperor Gao-zu, Liu Bang, after he started making decisions related to the construction of the tomb. The film in this part of the narrative starts from the beginning of Emperor Gao-zu's planning for the construction of the tomb, the difficult considerations before the construction, the reference to previous emperors, the internal display of the construction of the tomb, the complete completion of the tomb, to the termination of Emperor Gao-zu's life. The unfolding historical sequence is in line with the previously mentioned restoration of events in an objective historical order supported by Ranke. The occurrence and specific sequence of historical events is the result of a combination of events, people, circumstances, and other factors. Thus, ignoring the sequence of events and mixing up the various causal connections, and simply listing the fragmented evidence to describe the events may have the problem of distorting past reality. Instead, the known order is restored to the original placement without intervention, leaving the events and the causal relationships to be studied intact. This historical sequence, which relies on the restoration of cause and effect, fits the temporal character of the event, bringing historical documentaries closer to their

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<sup>45</sup> *西汉帝陵 [Imperial Mausoleums]*, vols. (Shaanxi Broadcasting Station, 2015).



recording nature.

Admitting Absence: Due to the time gap, when recovering ancient history, we can easily find that parts of records have completely disappeared like dust in prehistory, making it difficult to even speculate. And in order to deal with the blanks or ambiguous segments, some documentaries have chosen to directly acknowledge the absence of evidence or point out the ambiguity of their own speculations. For instance, in *Ancient Graves: Voices of the Dead*,<sup>46</sup> expert Brier designed the mummification experiment to restore the ancient Egyptian mummification process. In the video recording, Brier points out the absence of detailed references and emphasizes the speculative nature of his experiments. Later in the documentary, in retracing ice man's life activities based on evidentiary findings, the narration emphasizes the speculative nature of the process; and the frequent use of the words "perhaps" and "or" in the recovery of ice man's mannequin acknowledges the existence of compositional display. These reduced absolutes acknowledge the existing absence in that historical fragment. The film does not choose to omit the uncertainty of the mummification process, nor does it fill in the blanks by treating the modern speculative results as an objective history of the past, but rather directly states that its presentation is speculative to fill the blanks. This admittance helps the film to recover the fragmentary history in its entirety from a modern human perspective. In a concrete unfolding study of a piece of history, absence is unavoidable, and either an omitting description or forcibly replacing reality is a distortion of the original past reality. Recognizing the elements of subjectivity and

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<sup>46</sup> *Ancient Graves: Voices of the Dead*, vols. (National Geographic, 1998).

creativity helps modern documentary filmmakers to accomplish retrospection while maintaining the purity of the defined original past.

Present Tense Footage: The connection between the camera and reality is quite important for documentary films. Then, when speculating and shooting historical relics from a modern perspective, it is appropriate to reconsider recording present tense footage with the camera. While narrating the ancient subjects, some documentaries choose to shoot present-tense footage related to ancient subjects. For example, in *Ancient Graves: Voices of the Dead*, plenty of modern laboratory footage of mummy genetic research is covered. This strategy of shifting temporal focus melts the temporal gap between the subject and modern reality, which helps the documentary content to be closer to the camera images' recording essence and avoid the imaginary stages of ancient history.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, the filming of present tense footage with a realistic approach facilitates the documentary quality by enhancing the realistic sense of the

images and their content (but the ability to retrace the historical presentation may be reduced at that moment).

For example, in *丝绸之路* (*The Silk Road*),<sup>48</sup> the film



Figure 1, Chang'an

uses deep depth of field shots as well as long shots of the streets of Chang'an to depict

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<sup>47</sup> Kracauer also mentions in his discussion of historical films in *Theory of Film* that one way to avoid the embarrassing problems of history is to focus on the reality in front of the camera.

<sup>48</sup> *丝绸之路* [*The Silk Road*], vols. (Japan Broadcasting Corporation & CCTV, 1980).

the departure point of the silk road (See Figure 1, Chang'an). The film chooses locations where modernity and antiquity are linked, and uses the streets, an area of uncertainty and improvisation, to represent the main theme of the silk road's prosperity realistically and historically. It achieves a perfect combination of past and present. The ancient topic documentary does not mean the documentaries should be far away from the present but shouts that it can use the realistic present tense footage to inspire the spectators to think about the distant past.

Primary Source: The choice of supporting materials for historical documentaries is wide, and some documentaries choose to use a myriad of primary materials to support narration. For example, in *The Silk Road*, the material aspects of the historical resources include terracotta warriors and horses, museum sculptures, ceramics, and clay sculptures; and the document supports include Dunhuang murals,

ancient poems, books, and scriptures (See Figure 2, Bayesian Sutra). The presence of these original materials, as remnants of ancient history, tells the



Figure 2, Bayesian Sutra

spectators the story that was once in silent way with utmost intensity.

Distinguished from primary materials, some historical documentaries may consider restoring objects with 3D stereoscopic or animation techniques or using expert oral narratives that do not have a direct link to ancient reality as historical support. From

the perspective of historical research and recovery, this type of virtual evidence skims over primary sources for direct presentation, which are not as comprehensive and objective as historical interpretations using primary sources. Therefore, when primary sources are available, the selection of these sources tends to be more realistic.

Live Reenactment: Out of the unavailability of first-hand audiovisual materials in ancient times, the use of real actors to act out the postulated historical plot was a common choice. For example, the 悬崖上的宫殿 (*The Palace on the Cliff*)<sup>49</sup>, the film uses live scenery and real people to recreate historical situations, in addition to interspersed interviews with experts. The entire film almost applies live reenactment to show the process of expert expeditions, the rituals of the Guge Kingdom, and the stories of Western missionaries in the Guge Kingdom.

However, such reenactment can neither completely reproduce the past nor help spectators to disperse their thoughts on the past. Instead, it may even cause unintentional deception through persuasive misrepresentation. As Nichols argues in *Speaking Truth with Film*, the representation of reenactment contains distinctive quality in reenacted scenes, and deceit issues will appear when the distinctions are not recognized by the spectators (35). The real environment and professional actors utilize the function of the camera, creating a connection with reality. However, the scenes are false drama without a natural process of happening but acting. With live reenactments, the documentary tries to use the false new link to act as the non-existent ancient link. This ambitious reenactment made the spectators hard to distinguish the real situations. It is

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<sup>49</sup> 悬崖上的宫殿 [*The Palace on the Cliff*], vols. (iQIYI, 2020).

a particular case when the technique is used throughout the documentary's past scenes. Thus, the traditional use of live actors to reenact past events does not lend itself to the realism of historical documentaries.

Activity Practice: Most reenactments focus on acting, however, there is a type of reenactment better described as re-appearance that has the realism power to soothe the spectators psychologically that Bazin recognized. The re-appearance often presents as the activity practice. For instance, in *Dawn of the Maya*,<sup>50</sup> the narrator practices past activity again in front of the camera. He reenacts the scene base on the pattern of stones, makes the sound of masonry, and draws the pattern on the stone (See Figure 3,



Figure 3, Sound of the Stone Tool

Sound of the Stone Tool). In this form of reenactment, although the intention of re-appearance is artificial, the whole process of activity reenactment is not a false drama; it is a new event that exists independently with a link to the camera. If the live reenactment overlap the historical scenes, then the activity practice simply tries to establish a parallel relationship with the original event. This form of reenactment does not cover the past but appears as a speculative form of the present; at the same time, this activity practice places the narrator in a similar position to the ancient people. Especially when the narrator is set in the location of the event, such as the narrator in

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<sup>50</sup> *Dawn of the Maya*, vols. (National Geographic, 2004).

*Dawn of the Maya*, he practices the past activities in the Maya's mountain area, making the spectators associated with the passing history. The reproduction of this activity is highly realistic while maintaining a link to the past.

Exaggerated Style in Reenactment: The exaggerated style of reenactment is different from most reenactments that pursue a sense of realism in images; they portray a strong sense of unreality. For example, in *西汉帝陵* (*Imperial Mausoleums*), ceramic three-dimensional figures are used in the narrative reenactment of the plot (See Figure 4, Ceramic Style Character). The characters' movements retain a mechanical stiffness and are



Figure 4, Ceramic Style Character

extremely limited, consisting only of blinking, nodding, opening of the mouth, and mechanical movement of the arms. This giving up of realism in the fictional circumstance, as described by Kracauer, facilitates the spectators' concern with physical reality.<sup>51</sup> Distances it from realistic scenes limits the persuasiveness of voice-over, understates the modern perspective of interpreting history, and avoids the possibility that the spectators fully rely on the content. This exaggerated approach presents the documentary filmmaker in a humble position, reinforcing the reality of the present, specifically, stating the present's inaccessible search for the past. It enables ancient history documentaries to make an argument for history while avoiding the widespread dissemination of potential misconceptions.

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<sup>51</sup> Siegfried Kracauer and Miriam Hansen, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton university press, 1997) chap. History and Fantasy.

Crosscut Reenactment: Crosscut reenactment does not strictly point to a certain way of reenactment, but rather focuses on crosscut. This technique of switching between reenactment and realistic scenes is different from applying the reenactment from the beginning to the end, making the difference between realistic scenes and fictional scenes obvious and helping the spectator identify reenactment and synchronized footage.

For example, in *The Silk Road*, in order to recreate the Yang Guifei depicted in Bai Juyi's poem, the director interspersed the reenactment between frescoes and empty scenes, which made the reenactment obvious. Specifically, the make-up of the actors, the matching with the camera, and the sudden disappearance of the actors become abrupt, making the fiction of the scene detectable. In the second half, in order to recreate the scene of riding horses and playing soccer, the film includes modern people playing Mongolian polo, interspersed between ceramic clay sculptures of ancient people playing soccer. This juxtaposition reinforces the distinction between the two, for example, leaving the distinction between modern and ancient costumes clear to identify. The use of crosscut reenactment avoids the potential for unintentional misdirection, thus enhancing the realism of the film itself.

Voice over: In terms of sound, as discussed earlier, the addition of sound can add realism or add more messages to images to complement information about reality. However, there are a few exceptions to the use of sound, such as the case of voice over. When voiceover dominates the entire film, the film is mostly in expository mode as defined by Bill Nichols. For instance, in *悬崖上的宫殿* (*The Palace on the Cliff*), the

entire documentary almost use voice over to narrate the history related to the Gugu Kingdom. In this case, the narrator acts as the voice of God, interpreting the images with an authoritative posture. The dissemination of information is conducted in an indoctrinated manner, and the spectators do not have much room for personal interpretation in front of the image. As Nichols Bill explains in *Representing Reality*, “The expository documentary may also try to mask or diminish its own shaping and modifying activity so that it seems self-evident that the world is indeed cast in the image that the film proposes” (113). Because of voiceover’s potential for manipulation, its extensive use is detrimental to the implementation of realism. In addition, when the voice over is parallel asynchronous, which means that the sound does not record with the image, and the image cooperates with the voiceover to visualize the oral content. As Kracauer argues, the image plays as an example of the oral narration, largely limiting the spectators’ comprehension of the information and their imagination of reality; meanwhile, the separation of voice and image loses the realistic effect of audio-visual synchronization.<sup>52</sup> Thus, instead of a trustworthy technique, the voiceover usually holds the risk of losing authenticity, spectators drive away from reality with aura, giving up the realistic effects.

Emotional Music: Another case of inappropriate sound application is the addition of emotional music. According to Kracauer’s idea, images should respect natural expression; however, music with a strong emotional orientation is too attention-grabbing or programmatic which seems to tell the spectator the right way to understand

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<sup>52</sup> Siegfried Kracauer and Miriam Hansen, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton university press, 1997) chap. Dialogue and Sound.



the director's filming.<sup>53</sup> It is acceptable in a fictional film, but in the reality-oriented images of an ancient historical documentary, which are already vulnerable with the only historical link of trace, they cannot withstand many ideological persuasions. For the spectators, the interpretive music affects the tendency of the images, sometimes even causing a shift in their meaning. For example, in *历史的拐点之汉匈之战* (*Historical Turning Point: The Battle of Han-Hsiung-nu*)<sup>54</sup>, the sequences, such as during the attack of Han generals in the war between the Han and Hsiung-nu are accompanied by grand and soaring incendiary music, as well as at the moment of Han army gradually gains the upper hand. This highly emotional music seems to tell the spectator to put themselves in the shoes of the Han army and cheer for the downfall of the Hsiung-nu and the victory of the Han army. This overly non-objective representation of reality is also contrary to Ranke's approach to history. Thus, the strong emotional music does not work to maintain the realism in ancient history documentaries.

**Reenactment Based on Painting:** Some ancient history documentaries choose to create a secondary creation

based on the original paintings. They reenact scenes from the paintings.

For example, *此画怎讲* (*How to Explain the*

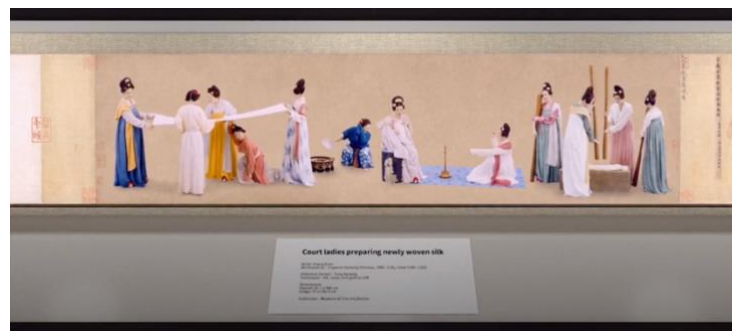


Figure 5, Court Ladies Preparing Newly Woven Silk

<sup>53</sup> Siegfried Kracauer and Miriam Hansen, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton university press, 1997) chap. Music.

<sup>54</sup> *历史的拐点之汉匈之战* [*Historical Turning Point: The Battle of Han-Hsiung-nu*], vols. (CCTV, 2016).

*Painting*)<sup>55</sup>, a documentary series based on famous paintings from the Five Dynasties and Southern Tang Dynasty (See Figure 5, Court Ladies Preparing Newly Woven Silk), combined with modern topics to recreate the scenario of the paintings, enact fictional stories, and introduce related concepts. However, the first-hand material of paintings is different from other first-hand materials, resulting in a non-realistic reenactment restoration. For ancient historical images, the common first-hand materials are objects that can be regarded as history itself, such as ancient porcelain; or there are multiple references to the same event that one can synthesize to restore history, such as documents. However, painting, as Bazin commented, because of the intervention of human factors, psychologically speaking, even if it looks realistic, it cannot display an objective reality.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, it is unable to represent an objective past reality by its own existence. At the same time, since a painting is usually a single work, rather than multiple people painting the same scene, the information it conveys cannot be confirmed accurate by comparison, as in the case of documents. Thus, reenactments based on paintings as primary materials are equivalent to creations made on unverified secondary materials. In *此画怎讲* (*How to Explain the Painting*), except for the opening shot of the antique painting, the rest of the settings, the plot, and the actors' actions are all fictional in nature. The only advantage of the painting is that it is framed differently from the infinite realistic shots, which reinforces the virtual nature and reduces the possibility of failing to distinguish between reality and reenactment.

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<sup>55</sup> *此画怎讲* [*How to Explain the Painting*], vols. (Shanghai Wow Power Film & Television Co., 2020).

<sup>56</sup> André Bazin, *What is cinema? 1* (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1967) chap. The Ontology of the Photographic Image.

However, with the reduced authority, the use of painting-based re-enactments throughout the whole film would make this type of ancient history documentary film more entertaining for the public. In terms of restoring history itself, due to its weak objectivity and accuracy, and its potentially entertaining quality, painting-based re-enactment is not enough to show the pursuit of realism.

Animation: Unlike live action or realistic scenes, many ancient history documentaries choose to include animated clips to do the restoration. In cases where traces got entirely lost, or where it is difficult to represent the situation with live action footage (e.g., hallucinations), the use of animation works well to help ancient history documentaries make some narrative presentation of history.

First, the animation solves some of the problems of historical subjects raised by Kracauer, including the abruptness of the actors' physical and facial performances, as well as the boundary problems of photography in the studio; the design of the animation eliminates the acting problems and ensures an infinite sense of space in the visual effect.

Second, if the animation imitates the camera movement inside and outside the frame, designs high-speed movement, and draws depth-of-field scenes and coherent shots, which can bring a sense of reality similar to the camera images. At the same time, the obvious artificial trace of animation matches the fictional nature of the subjective expression of the image, which not only avoids the problem of deception but also precisely expresses some invisible scenes.

For example, *The Buddha*<sup>57</sup> uses several different types of animations as

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<sup>57</sup> *The Buddha*, vols. (PBS, 2010).

narrative aids in the process of Buddha's attainment. A typical example is the use of cartoon animation when describing Buddha's entry into the metaphysical state



Figure 6, Buddha's metaphysical state

(See Figure 6, Buddha's

metaphysical state). The distinctive style of cartoon animation greatly reduces the qualities of physical reality, solves the possible misunderstandings brought by realistic scenes, and matches the characteristics of the topic, while explaining the difficult-to-film scenes.

In addition, as noted earlier, when authority is greatly diminished by the fictional sense of the images, the use of animation in a full documentary should be optimally avoided. It may lead to excessive entertainment and falsification. It is more suitable to function as an auxiliary output to complete the modest expression of the documentary. Therefore, the interspersed use of mock camera-recorded animation is a viable option for expressing speculation as a substitute for historical footage.

VR/Advanced 3D: In addition to the essential realism, some ancient history documentaries recreate history with advanced 3D and VR effects, bringing spectators a sensorial realistic experience. As Merleau-Ponty and Sobchack mentioned, films bring out feelings in reality, and films' realism evokes the spectators' reaction in reality, enhancing the spectators' perception of the depicted environment and situation. This is

excellent for live footage, but for the virtual portion of documentary films, it will be a different story. VR and advanced 3D are both evolutionary forms of animation, unlike the footage captured by cameras, they are all creations with a very high percentage of human intervention. However, because advanced 3D with a high degree of visual reproduction has a certain degree of similarity to camera images, and VR provides not only visual and auditory sensations but also affects the spectators from a spatial dimension, both are able to bring a much more realistic feeling than other animations.

For example, *国宝皆可潮 (Supreme Treasures in China)*<sup>58</sup> adds the images seen by the participant through the VR device in 3D and records the participant in reality with a juxtaposed window (See Figure 7, Juxtaposed Windows). The realistic feeling of the 3D architectural image is comparable to the camera image, and the VR

space and physical objects overlap with the space and object placement in reality (See Figure 8 & 9, Overlapped Setting). The



Figure 7, Juxtaposed Windows

combination of digital images

and physical reality brings the experiencer an unprecedented realistic experience. And the documentary also describes the effect of the combination of VR, 3D images, and site layout with time traveling.

However, such “real” images with no core of reality can amplify the effect of

<sup>58</sup> *国宝皆可潮 [Supreme Treasures in China]*, vols. (mgtv, 2021).

sensory deception and lose the humility of animation. In the current technological development in creating a sense of reality, VR gets relief in the problem mentioned to some extent, because the experience of the exit moment can make the feel of the difference between virtual and reality obviously. However, for the extremely delicate 3D screen, if it is mixed in the live scene or occupies the whole film, the spectator is led to real confusion. The fictional sense of virtual component is necessary for ancient history documentaries because the spectator immersed in the images needs to be aware of the disconnect between time and space and the fact that they are watching a modern interpretation of ancient stories. When VR and advanced 3D technologies increasingly



Figure 8, Overlapped Setting



Figure 9, Overlapped Setting

develop, they run the risk of falling into the situation that Bazin points out as a mimicry without a meaning reality, and the sensorially over-realistic images will affect the spectators' conviction of the post-speculative history. When technology develops to a certain extent and widely replaces the camera lens, it enhances the risk that history depends on modernity, going against the temporal irreversibility of physical reality. Therefore, given that the excessive realism of virtual scenes affects the spectators or experiencers' perceptions of reality, the application of VR and advanced 3D in ancient history documentaries should be considered with caution.

## **Stage Three – The Practice**

### **An Experiment on Realism in Ancient History Documentary**

In order to better put the discussed theories and evaluations into practice in images, this project made a short historical documentary film. In this short historical documentary film, I incorporate the findings above into the preparation, filming, and editing process to explore ways of expressing the dynamic relationship between the past and the present in a realistic style. Removing the distraction of commercial entertainment and dissolving the bundle of fulfilling social intentions, with the simple intention of pursuing a historically realistic presentation of images, the video work is designed experimentally. It aims only to present contemporary discoveries in a raw, rough, and historically realistic way, giving the spectator more space to organize and understand the content on his or her own, then to build up impressions and feelings about it. In this stage, I will reflect on the selection process in the preparation, footage gathering, and editing of the film work I undertake.

#### **Preparation**

In selecting my topic, I chose Judaculla Soapstone Rock<sup>59</sup>, which dates to 2000

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<sup>59</sup> Joshua Warren and Shadowbox Enterprises, “JudacullaRock.com” *JudacullaRock.com.*, 2021 2002, Available: <https://freecharm.com/JudacullaRock/JudacullaRock.html>; “Judaculla Rock,” *RomanticAsheville.com Travel Guide Romantic Asheville.com.*, 2022, Available: <https://www.romanticasheville.com/judaculla-rock>; *Judaculla Rock~Giant & Legend by Cherokee Scholar Tom Belt*, vols., 2021, online, Internet, 19 Oct. 2022., Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N28Tc50Qi6c>.

B.C. It is located in Cherokee, North Carolina, and is a soapstone ruin belonging to the Northern Indians (See Figure 10, Judaculla Soapstone Rock). Because the historic site is sufficiently aged and



Figure 10, Judaculla Soapstone Rock

the only relevant formal interpretations of it from modern Cherokees are mythological, it satisfies the general problem of the ancient subject matter - the great temporal gap and the limited remaining evidence. Therefore, it is a suitable entry point to thinking about problem solving.

The film is centered on the soapstone relics of the indigenous Indian Cherokee people and attempts to imagine and recreate a series of events that occurred on the soapstone after 2000 B.C. Due to the unavailability of historical recordings of the events around the rock, I planned to help expand the discipline by including animation and footage of modern Cherokee life to help elicit a fuller sense and understanding of Soapstone and Cherokee culture among the spectators. Therefore, besides the live scenes of the ruin, it also planned for the animated passing events, live scenes of the ruins, the modern forest live scenes, and the modern activities related to the soapstone (including stone carving and rituals), such as crafts, rituals, and dance ceremonies.

### **Footage Gathering**

During footage gathering, it is basically separate into two aspects, including



animation design and camera shots catch. In terms of animation, the short ancient history documentary made some choices in drawing details and content selections in order to stabilize the precarious realistic component and the conservative speculative attitude and to uphold the loyalty to realism. In animation drawing, I followed a realistic view of history and images to do screen design. In the historical aspect, I refer to a collection of historical findings and evidence related to Judaculla soapstone to imagine and recreate the scene. According to the data<sup>60</sup>, soapstone was quarried for soapstone bowls around the late archaic period (8,000 B.C. - 1,000 B.C.) and was carved during the middle woodland period (1,000 B.C. - 900 A.D.) and the late Mississippian period (900 A.D. - 1,500 A.D.).

Therefore, the animation takes a linear depiction, following the direction of temporal flow to reproduce the state of the soapstone at different time periods, including soapstone with scallop-like mining traces and soapstone with petroglyphs and mining traces. In the image aspect, at the beginning, in order to have the characteristics of numerous information, infinity, and spatial depth that reality has, I used the structure of extreme long shots, long shots, and full shots to compose the images. Meanwhile, to enhance realistic sense, it imitates the movement in reality, this short film chooses to make the still subjects inside painting have motions. At the same time, I chose a hand-drawn scroll style in order to emphasize the fictional nature (See Figure 11, Screenshot

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<sup>60</sup> "Story of the Cherokee: 13,000 Years," Official Website *Museum of the Cherokee Indian*. , n.d., Available: <https://mci.org/archives/era/paleo>; Joseph B. Mountjoy, *Collected papers on the archaeology of North Carolina*, vols., North Carolina Archaeological Council publication no. 19 (North Carolina, United States: North Carolina Archaeological Council, Archaeology Branch Division of Archives and History, North Carolina Dept. of Cultural Resources, 1982); Edward Wells III, Sarah Sherwood, and Kandace Hollenbach, "Soupstone Vessel Chronology and Function in the Southern Applications of Eastern Tennessee: The Apple Barn site (40BT90) Assemblage" *Southeastern Archaeology*. Vol.33.No.2 (2014): 153–167; Daniel Elliott, *The Live Oak Soapstone Quarry, Dekalb and Fulton Counties, Georgia*, vols. (Georgia: Waste Management of North America, Inc., 1986).

of the Animation). The strong sense of drawing and the imitation of the scrolls repeatedly stress the lack of answers and undermine the authority of the images.



Figure 11, Screenshot of the Animation

For content selections in animation, it includes evidence-based speculative past activities and ancient myths affirmed by the Cherokee. A series of physical evidence in Museum of the Cherokee Indian shows that the Cherokee had different activities at different stages of time as customs developed, including hunting, tool making, farming, fishing, and rituals. With reference to the paintings and exhibits in the Museum of the Cherokee Indian<sup>61</sup>, I have included in the animation activities that may have been associated with soapstone, including stone bowl making, stone carving, and rituals. In addition to the evidence-based history, the Judaculla soapstone and its location also bear the legendary story of the giant guardian, Judaculla. Based on multiple resources about the legend of the giants<sup>62</sup>, I integrated and restored the legendary story and interspersed it within the storyline based on the integration of evidence, preserving the possibility while emphasizing the fictionality.

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<sup>61</sup> Official website, <https://mci.org/exhibits>

<sup>62</sup> Joshua Warren and Shadowbox Enterprises, "JudacullaRock.com" *JudacullaRock.com.*, 2021 2002, Available: <https://freecharm.com/JudacullaRock/JudacullaRock.html>; "Judaculla Rock," *RomanticAsheville.com Travel Guide Romantic Asheville.com.*, 2022, Available: <https://www.romanticasheville.com/judaculla-rock>; *Judaculla Rock~Giant & Legend by Cherokee Scholar Tom Belt*, vols., 2021, online, Internet, 19 Oct. 2022., Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N28Tc50Qi6c>.

In terms of cinematography, I chose to coordinate the movement of the objects off-camera to achieve realistic motion, shoot without the intention of including complete items to render a sense of infinite edge, take multi-angle shots to ensure the unity of time and space, and record the sound simultaneously to stabilize the authenticity of sound synchronization. In terms of the filming content, in addition to the rock remains, the modern Cherokee performing community was added to enrich the scope of the study, thus

providing a richer cultural context for the restoration of the events surrounding the Judaculla soapstone and enhancing the perception of



Figure 12, Practicing Stone Rubbing

past reality. Additional footage also includes live experimental reproduction of tool-made or sculpture scenes (See Figure 12, Practicing Stone Rubbing). The result of the footage brings a palpable mix of fiction and reality, adding a tactile quality associated with sight and sound, and trying to provoke spectators to imagine and meditate on passing moments. The above is the application of the realism strategies that I considered in the footage gathering.

## **Editing**

The editing process is mainly divided into the processing of individual clips, the choreography of scenes, the textual addition, and sound editing. In the editing of the

animation clips, I edit them in the way of imitating camera movement. The sense of motion is reflected not only in the motion of the subject within the frame but also in the motion outside the frame with camera movement techniques, such as zooming, trucking, and pedestal. In the description of the mythological story, the segment mimics a long shot for the complete narration of the event. Therefore, in animation editing, I basically imitated the camera's realistic shooting style. In terms of audio editing, I did not try to hide parts of the details while editing audio clips, including the moving sound of the tripod and my footsteps. I consider these to help complete Bazin's psychological realism, informing the spectators of the existence and manipulation of the person behind the camera. The above are the choices I made in the clip editing for realistic presentation.

In the arrangement of scenes, my goal is to present an individual discovery of an ancient site with a chronological mindset along. I first set the introduction sequence at the beginning, continue with an overview of the Judaculla soapstone rock, and then enter a closer distance with the details around the soapstone. The beginning sequence is an explanation and introduction to the whole film. In this sequence, based on the expression of the text and the relevant video, I mainly intend to state that this short film is a modern exploratory restoration of the ancient Judaculla soapstone rock's related stories. In the following, I present the overview of the site. I start with animation and turn to the live scene as I want to present it in chronological order. The animation depicts the imagination of the rock-surrounded scenes that may have happened in different stages of history, then moving down the line, the images naturally went along the flow of time, linking to the current reality of the stone scene. And the long take of

the stone scene without additional cuts is intended to emphasize the unity in time and space and to record as much information as possible. In addition, I also added two different sizes of long take shots in that sequence. They are full shot and medium shot respectively. I tried to give the spectators a more comprehensive view through different angles and distances in the overview sequence.

In the next section, I develop the description of the details in the order of the traces produced or the events that occurred. The events that took place on the soapstone, from the earliest traces of quarrying to the carving activities to the latest traditional activity of ceremonies, are presented in detail. Meanwhile, I sorted the scenes of these three main activities by their relevance to the original event. Specifically, I make the marks on the rock present at first, and as the rituals lack trace on site, I replace it with the animated ancient ritual shots; then, I make the animation and museum scenes, or modern Cherokee performance take over. It is out of the closer connection between the footages and the original events that makes them play a similar role of primary source logically. The marks on the stone or the activity itself are the base of the following expansion. Additionally, during the carving sequence, I added the animation of the giant's carving between the ancient Cherokee people's carving, as I could not present an authentic voice that defined which one actually took place. In this section, I present a correlation-based juxtaposition between the live footage, animation, and museum or modern Cherokee footage in chronological order. I hope to offer hints for the spectators have a root and hints to wonder and contemplate the unrepresented past. The above is the intentional design on scene and sequence arrangement for realism.

Textually, I added some subtitles to the scenes of the modern Cherokee activities and animations. In the modern Cherokee performative activities, since the relevance of some scenes to the ancient Cherokee and the soapstone did not fit perfectly, I added the necessary textual explanations to avoid possible misdirection of the spectators' associations. In animations, I almost added time intervals, but deliberately omitted fragments of the Judaculla Giant's story to emphasize the unknown of mythology from the perspective of modern exploration. The above are the intention of textual addition.

In terms of the sound editing, I kept the sound of the live video without adding any background music, since the original sound is more immediate and purer for realistic purposes. In the animation stage, I inserted an accompaniment to complement the weak appeal of the artifacts; and to avoid strong rendering, I chose purely accompaniment music played by Cherokee instruments. In addition, I eliminated verbal evidence and narration, which are often found in traditional documentaries. This is because oral expression lacks tangible evidence and is directional, and voiceover narration loses its real-time effect while also limiting textual expression by image selections. I decided to adopt only natural sound and images, enhancing the vagueness of realistic expression, which are more powerful and less intrusive, and leaving the spectators the space they need for personal reflection and imagination on a topic as inconclusive as ancient history. Above all are the editing approaches to augment realism with suggestive language and animated graphics.

## **Problems and Future Improvements**

At the same time, there were still some difficulties and problems that were not avoided in the production of this short documentary. First, the pattern on the rock has gradually faded. Upon arrival at the site, I saw that local protections for the site only consisted of a wooden fence and some notices, which led to the daily weathering and other physical conditions directly effect on the soapstone. I found that the stones were much more eroded than shown in past photos, and most of the patterns were not recognizable in shape at a glance. This is not only a loss of first-hand information for photography but also a gradual blurring of history.

Secondly, things cannot always be planned, and modern stonework activity I preferred was not practiced in the shooting. Since stone carving no longer dominates Cherokee people's daily life, and compared with it, wood carving, ceramics, and weaving crafts are more available. The short film was not able to capture the modern soapstone carving on location but replaced it with other available activities' related shots. Another issue is that when the activity experiment was done to reproduce the sound and touch of stone friction collision, it was not conducted at the soapstone site. After the observation on site, it was found that the place was almost covered with grass and large stones, and no suitable crushed stone could be found there. Thus, to a certain extent, the charm of activity practice was weakened. Lastly, the images of modern group activities are local regular performances, especially for the footage of the feathered dancer, which is "Cherokee 'chiefs' dressed in the warbonnets of Plains

Indians.”<sup>63</sup> It lacks some real and natural modern activities, which can be captured only after going deeper into community life.

These shortcomings can be remedied by investing more time in the future. The endeavor could include spending time searching local stores, where probably still make soapstone crafts, or trying to find stone carving artisans who demonstrate at other events. What’s more, the supplement also can be made by expanding the search area for stone tools, delving into the daily lives of the Cherokee people to increase background research and getting more daily footage, and so on. Overall, this short historical film is an attempt to satisfy the pursuit of realism, and there is still much room for improvement. The same goes for modern historical documentaries, where people need to keep on striving to approach the unattainable aura.

If theory provides viable directions for the realist approach to documentary films, it is the practical filmmaking that make its way through the weedy woods. Moving forward is far more difficult than planning, making it possible to explain why there are limited films today that are well-known and have a realistic core. The obstacles on this path include the artificial quality of films, the missed or unprovable primary sources, the limited cost of time and funding, the director’s social status, social needs, and sometimes the political motives tied to them; at the same time, the path is not free from the temptation that the need for entertainment or storytelling in order to attract more spectators can cause the film to wander silently off course. Only long-time commitment and devout persistence will make ancient history documentaries stumble forward on the

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<sup>63</sup> John R. Finger, *Cherokee Americans: The Eastern Band of Cherokee in the Twentieth Century* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1991) 161.



path to reality.

## **Conclusion**

After going through the process of identifying the problem, discussing it, and trying to practice a solution, there are several conclusions to be drawn.

The first phase states the issues related to realism in documentary films. The documentary relies on the recording nature of the camera to create a link to reality, but it cannot represent reality; at the same time, this link is weakened as documentary films are image collage clips. However, under the influence of the social traits of documentaries and the personal visions of spectators, the general spectators have higher expectations of documentary authenticity than the documentary itself. This gap is most acute in ancient history documentaries, which have the potential to widen the distance between the spectators and the objective past. In order to solve the problem, it is necessary to use ancient history documentaries as an entry point to find a realistic way of expression.

The second phase discusses techniques that conform to realist expression based on theories of scholars related to history and images and evaluates specific techniques in modern documentaries on ancient historical subjects. After referring to the theories of Von Ranke, Siegfried Kracauer, André Bazin, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Vivian Carol Sobchack, I propose the realistic side of some of the techniques, including Chronicle Sequence, Admitting Absence, Present Tense Footage, Primary Source, Activity Practice, Exaggerated style in reenactment, Crosscut Reenactment, and Animation. And some of the less realistic expressive techniques include Live Reenactment, Voice over, Emotional Music, Reenactment Based on Painting, and

VR/Advanced 3D.

Finally, the third stage deals with the practical application of integrating the concrete situation (Judaculla Rock history) with specific techniques. Also, it is confirmed in the reflection that practicing realism in ancient history documentaries requires not only a clear direction from the theoretical aspect but also an adherence to the concept and a solid investment of time, energy, and finance in research and shooting in order to obtain the authentic footage. All in all, in view of the situation of the ancient history documentaries' problems and the difficulty of dealing with them, the solutions are still to be explored, including deeper theoretical excavations and summaries as well as the filmmakers' dedicated commitment.

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