

Constructing identity through empathy: A study of emotional narrative in oral history documentaries

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Abstract: Emotionality is a representation of artistic life and is undoubtedly the core of empathy. Only when a work of art reaches the emotional level can it have lasting significance. Based on the media practice analysis of the oral history documentary “Remember”, this article explores the path of the emotional power of oral history documentaries. It is found that it evokes empathy by focusing on individual memories, constructs a holographic space to strengthen and consolidate the empathetic experience, and finally achieves the sublimation of empathy by calling on national identity. This process from emotional arousal to emotional stabilization and finally to sublimation has achieved a clear path for oral history documentaries to construct national identity.

1. Introduction

Only a past that resonates with us can be in harmony with the present. Documentary has always been regarded as a special “memory album” with a special mission of recording history. As an oral history documentary with micro-narratives centered on individuals, the discourse is both fragmented and diversified, and the content is both emotional and story-telling. This gives it both historical warmth and deep emotional power, which can convey to us a deep emotional resonance. Starting from emotional narrative, this paper takes the oral history documentary “Remember” as an example to study the path of empathetic narrative and identity construction in oral history documentaries.

2. “Evoke”: Focus on the emotional expression of individual memories

Memory, as the core of oral history, “naturally carries emotional factors, and there is always explicit or implicit emotional expression in memory narratives” [1]. In the documentary “Remembering”, oral historians recreate history through their own close observations and profound memories of the times, combining storytelling and emotion, which not only evokes the emotions of users but also achieves the purpose of gaining insight into historical truth.

2.1 Focus on life experience and promote emotional involvement

As witnesses of history, the eyewitnesses' personal experience and real voices have extraordinary significance for the entire event. In the documentary, each person who experienced the Korean War focused on his or her own unique life experience and gave an individualized recollection of his or her own experience and what he or she saw and heard. During the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and

Aid Korea, due to the intense fighting situation, nighttime transportation could not meet the needs of the front lines, so supplies had to be transported during the day. Man Zhicheng faced the triple defense of napalm bombs in the sky, triangular nails and wind and thunder bombs (butterfly bombs) on the ground, and aerial bombing and strafing, and recalled the experience of successfully and timely transporting supplies: “The planes had flares, and we took this opportunity to step on the throttle and run, running desperately. The planes would hit you, and they were dive-style, so we suddenly braked and the planes passed by. We summed up this experience, and another thing was to walk to the side of the road, for example, there was a hidden turn against the top of a hill, or there was a small ravine at a fork in the road, and they would chase us and we would get in all of a sudden”; Lu Pin also explained the napalm bombs used by the enemy in the combat process in the documentary, emphasizing that they were more powerful than ordinary gasoline bombs. As long as a little napalm popped out and stuck to the body, it would be impossible to get rid of it, and you would be burned to death. It is this face-to-face, vivid personal account of war experiences and lessons that creates an atmosphere of communication with old friends, allowing the audience to involuntarily invest their emotions in the process and truly feel the true charm of historical events and characters.

2.2 Using plot-based narrative to stimulate emotional experience

Documentaries can enhance the empathy, interest and meaning of narratives, and enhance emotional rendering and inspiration through vivid and tortuous plot development. In “Remember”, many eyewitnesses narrate the events they have experienced in a plot-based manner while recounting their personal memories. For example, when Cheng Maoyou was telling the story of squad leader Luo Liancheng recorded in his diary, he said: “After attacking the Nanshan position in Shangping Village, he was wounded twice. When he was about to reach the main peak, the machine guns in the enemy's mother bunker fired, and the soldiers could not charge up. He was wounded three times and his intestines had already flowed out. He was at the front and closest to the mother bunker. Finally, when he saw that his comrades could not get up, he stuffed his intestines into his stomach, climbed up suddenly, and blew up the enemy's bunker with explosives, and died together with the enemy.” The heroic deeds of squad leader Luo Liancheng are vividly presented to the audience through the story of witnessing his comrades charging, stuffing their intestines back when they could not get up, and finally sacrificing themselves to blow up the bunker and die together with the enemy. In addition, there are Zhang Hengzhi who used his body to connect to the telephone lines to win communication time for the front line, She Shuqing, an epidemic prevention fighter who fought against poisonous insects, and Qiao Shuxin who shouted “We are the legs of the cannon”... These plotted narratives told by eyewitnesses are like a flash of history, stimulating the readers' imagination and making us follow them into the climax of the historical narrative. It is these real and concrete life experiences that give the audience a strong sense of substitution and are more likely to arouse the audience's empathy.

2.3 Incorporating historical details to bring people closer

In oral history documentaries, eyewitnesses focus on historical details and use oral expressions to turn abstract concepts into concrete expressions, breaking down history into small units. There are hardships as well as incentives and rewards. Wang Bipeng also vividly recalled the problem of night blindness among soldiers: “There are 170 people in our company, and almost half of them have night blindness. When we call the roll at night, it's like an eagle catching chicks. We have to lead one by one. If we don't have medicine, we boil pine needles to drink water, which is very bitter.” Hao Yongxiao recalled his experience of winning the third-class merit: At that time, the car soldiers used firewood to camouflage the car to prevent enemy planes from bombing, but the plane came at a low altitude and the wind was very strong, blowing away the firewood they covered. The plane turned

back and saw so many cars and came back to start shooting. He looked in front of him and saw that the car was covered with firewood. There was a car behind him that hadn't started, so he ran out to open the door. Without a key, he pulled the key string underneath, and after starting the car, he drove into the ravine. Because a civilian worker saved a car, he was awarded the third-class merit. In addition, there are Yang Bailin's memories of the cruelty of war and the words of his leader, "We have our heads hanging on our belts all day, and we'll be fine when we fall off." It is these subtle, diverse, and "trivial" experiences and words that are closer to the history of human life. Through their stories, they narrow the psychological distance with the audience, and thus arouse emotional resonance.

3. "Solidity": Constructing a holographic space of sound, picture and people

The narrative space of a film refers to the activity place or existence space created or selected by the filmmaker and processed to carry the things in the story or event to be narrated. The oral history documentary "Remember" constructs a holographic space by constructing sound, picture, group portraits, etc., which acts on the audience's vision and hearing, and in this process is associated with past social memories, etc., constructing an imaginary space about the history of the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea. The audience projects themselves into history through the act of watching, and further consolidates and deepens the emotional level through invisible interaction with the plot in the film.

3.1 Both audible and visual, history is tangible and perceptible

Oral history is to create a historical atmosphere through the narration of the parties involved, so that the audience feels that the events are happening in front of them. In this process, oral documentaries not only record the "voices of the past", but also record the eyes, expressions, gestures, and even the overall appearance of the narrator, making the documentary audible and visual, giving the audience a full range of feelings. In the documentary, the hero Jiang Wen recalled that his comrades who fought side by side faced a harsh environment and said: "People who came to the pass, especially those in the 19th Corps, froze to death before they were injured or killed. That's pitiful." After that, he choked up and said, with twitching mouth corners, and tears in the corners of his eyes, he emphasized again: "They froze to death and frozen stiff before they fought." It is this restrained artistic presentation of the narrator's emotions, such as the twitching of the corners of his mouth, the tears in his eyes, and the emptiness of his eyes, that seems to build a stage between the audience and the protagonist, attracting the audience to follow the narrator's voice, expression, memory, and thinking back to a tangible historical scene, and then enter that period of time with the protagonist.

3.2 Invoking memory symbols and reproducing classics

Maintaining the cohesion and unity of society requires a shared value system and code of conduct, and these things that are binding on all members are separated from the memory and recollection of the common past [2]. Oral history documentaries use symbols to transform emotions into something that appeals to people's perceptions [3]. Through vivid characters or objects, the expression of emotions and the dissemination of values have a more reliable carrier. At the beginning of each episode of the documentary, the classic song "March of the Volunteers" from the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea is played, and the story of the characters begins with "We crossed the Yalu River with high spirits..." In addition to classic symbols, some objects, gestures, and events that symbolize collective memory are presented in the documentary as powerful witnesses of the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea, such as the military medals worn by the volunteers during the

narration, the slogan “Steel Company” that inspired the soldiers, and the military salute by the narrator at the end of the interview... By calling upon these classic symbols, objects, gestures, and words that embody collective memory, and reproducing them repeatedly, viewers transfer the memories of others to their own experiences through association, comparison, and self-projection, thus processing them into a unique private memory of their own.

3.3 Using different perspectives to piece together collective memories

Everyone’s memory is a wave in the vast ocean of time, and every character’s life story is a different aspect of the social background. The documentary interviewed various groups of people in the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea. Among them are Zhou Quandi, the Chinese Paul of the heroic ice sculpture company, Tao Tianye, a war correspondent who captured the historical moment, Wang Shitian, who crossed the line of fire to transport supplies, Li Huasheng, who captured mines with his bare hands despite the danger, Li Weibao, who grew from a student soldier who just left school to a brave anti-aircraft gunner, Wu Guifu, an unknown hero who sacrificed himself to blow up the bunker, and The lark on the sky, Tian Guangxiu, etc.... Through interviews with different groups of people including signal soldiers, female rescue soldiers, chemical defense soldiers, militia platoon leaders, military banks, car soldiers, art soldiers, air force heroes, battlefield stretcher teams, journalists, confidential staff, etc., the oral history documentary “Remember” tells this period of turbulent years from different aspects and angles, restores the historical scene in the “noise of many voices”, and collages the collective memory of this period of history. The collective memory composed of the socialization of personal memories has become one of the necessary conditions for calling for group identity.

4. “Sublimation”: Calling for national identity and core values

For the most basic human emotions, the audience's perception is similar. Some words and opinions expressed by eyewitnesses and voice-overs in oral history documentaries can establish a strong public psychological consensus. The narrators reflect the wit, bravery, courage to sacrifice, and optimism of the volunteer soldiers during the war from an individual perspective. The voice-over summarizes and sublimates the experience of the volunteer soldiers hiding their merits and fame after the war and actively integrating into the tide of the times to promote social change and development. The national attributes and spiritual leadership role in this allow the audience to actively substitute their own understanding and thinking in the process of being moved, admired, and respected, accept spiritual guidance in emotional interaction, and construct their own imagination and identity of the nation-state in history.

4.1 The connection between fate and history awakens national sentiments

The people in the event are the emergence of individual experiences in a complex and ever-changing world, but they also carry the unique imprints given by the environment and the times. Some veterans in the documentary closely linked their individual fate with the fate of the country when recalling and explaining this period of history, which enabled them to complete the call for the national imagination community in the production of collective memory and the spread of meaning. For example, after Jiang Wen finished describing his war experience, he returned to the description of his individual fate and said: “I was over 30 years old when I fought in the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea. I had no family. I lost my mother at the age of 15 and my father at the age of 18. After returning from the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea, I started a family. At my age, the Communist Party took care of me and helped me start a family.” He also warned

contemporary people to “remember that hard work is hard-won, live a good life, and still demand peace. No matter what line of work you do, you can only do it well if you think about the people's affairs and the other side.” The narrators connect their own fate with history, focus on their own mental journey and explain their own feelings, integrate their personal fate with the historical environment, and make their personal experiences typical. It is this emotional expression that evokes the audience's value recognition and emotional resonance.

4.2 Injecting realistic elements and cultivating patriotic feelings

The stories told by the narrators are both an empirical historical experience and a mental presentation of historical feelings [4]. After narrating their own experiences in the documentary, the narrators will choose appropriate words to emphasize the value in combination with the current situation, providing an opportunity for individual memory to reconstruct national identity in collective memory, and also providing the audience with an imagination about the collective, thereby invisibly cultivating the audience's patriotic feelings. For example, after the narration, the anesthesia nurse Zhu Cheng said: “Everyone has parents and children, but if anyone invades our country, we will take up arms and resolutely fight back”; Jiang Wen also emphasized: “War is cruel, and there is no one who does not hurt people. If the enemy attacks again, I will fight even if I risk my life.” The spiritual achievements and value guidance contained in the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea can guide people to form their own self-concepts and cognition through their own life experiences and knowledge structures, reach a consensus on values with the parties involved, and finally condense into an identification with the country.

4.3 Connecting emotional clues and pointing to core values

Emotion is not only a potential emotional state, but also has the function of a medium to convey social signal value. [5] Although the diversified perspectives of oral history documentaries bring about differences in oral narration, the voice-over in the documentary will analyze the emotional main line of the person being recorded, extracting a relatively independent and complete emotional clue. When introducing the basic situation of the war, the voice-over will first introduce the macro background of the oral history, so that the group perspective is always closely centered on the theme of the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea; at the end of the documentary, if the narrator himself does not express his emotions, the voice-over will further sublimate and deepen it, or summarize it himself, or quote classics. For example, when talking about Sun Jingkun, he mentioned that he returned to his hometown Dandong in 1955 to farm, emphasizing that he always kept his achievements to himself, led his fellow villagers to develop production, and never asked the organization for more than ten years; in Liu Keren's episode, the voice-over chose the words from Wei Wei's “Who is the Loveliest Person”: Dear friends, please realize that this is a kind of happiness, because only when you realize this, you can more deeply understand why our soldiers fought desperately in North Korea. It warns contemporary youth to cherish their current happy life. The individualized narrative of the narrator around historical memory is essentially an expression of value stance, and the summary and connection made by the voice-over are like this. The two reasonably point to the core values of socialism together. Since then, national identity has also risen from national sentiment to social core values.

5. Conclusion

Emotional expression is the most basic form of social communication, and emotion is an indispensable factor in all historical processes [6]. Most people cannot grasp history at a macro level

like historians, but oral history documentaries combine oral and visual information to construct a three-dimensional memory, which enables the audience to empathize with ordinary people related to history and feel the weight of history from the bottom up. In this process, we should pay attention to the fact that when listening to the narrator telling the history, what we feel is actually a combination of events, feelings and concepts. However, we can also use reverse thinking and comprehensive thinking to make history as close to the truth as possible. In this way, relying on the individuality and commonality, macro and specific memories between different generations and multiple media, we can continuously create and expand the value and meaning of history.

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