

# *The Audiovisual Style of Malcolm Clarke's Oral History Documentary*

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**Abstract:** This article is primarily dedicated to an in-depth examination of the audio-visual style employed by documentary filmmaker Malcolm Clarke. This analysis is achieved through a meticulous dissection of scenes, shot composition, and sound elements within three of his notable oral history documentaries, namely, "A Long-Cherished Dream," "The Lady in Number 6," and "Soldiers in Hiding." The article initiates by offering insights into the concept and evolution of oral history documentaries as a distinct subgenre within the broader documentary realm. Subsequently, the article embarks on a critical evaluation of how Clarke's documentaries align with the specific attributes and expectations associated with oral history documentaries. It scrutinizes how Clarke adeptly harnesses a diverse array of cinematic techniques to unearth and present the often-overlooked facets of history, which remain concealed or marginalized within the grander narrative of historical discourse. Through this comprehensive analysis, the article provides a comprehensive assessment of Malcolm Clarke's contribution to the realm of documentary filmmaking and his unique approach to elucidating the lesser-explored dimensions of history.

**Keywords:** Malcolm Clarke, audiovisual style, oral history documentary

## 1. Introduction

Oral history documentaries have caught scholars' attention during the last few decades. Scholars used to record historical and social events by books, moving images, cultural relics, etc. Yet, these ways were found to ignore the voices of the marginalized [1]. In 1930, Allan Nevins, a professor at Columbia University in the United States, proposed the academic term "oral history" [2]. The historian Donald argued in his book: "Oral history is to collect oral memories and personal comments on major historical events through audio recordings and interviews [2]." With the rapid development of current media technology, oral history begins to be combined with actual video records and documentary filmmaking in particular. At the end of the 20th century, the oral history documentary entered the public's field of vision as a new documentary genre [3]. In today's era of digital media, if major historical and social events want to be preserved and reproduced in a more comprehensive and specific way, combining oral history with video and other media will be a practical choice. On the other hand, many witnesses in historical or social process events are often in a state of aphasia. Oral history documentaries can focus on the individual witness so that the public and society can hear their voices and present a multi-dimensional, more vivid historical society [4].

As a British documentary producer with an international ambition, Malcolm Clarke who has won two Oscars and worked both in the UK and China, has rich experience producing documentaries which are related to history. However, whether in Chinese or English academic, there are very few studies on Clarke's documentary works. Especially questions like what the general visual style of his work is and what kind of social culture he attempts to convey are still not clear? This article will, therefore, focus on three of Clark's documentary works: "A Long-Cherished Dream", "The Lady in Number 6" and "Soldiers in Hiding", all of which unveiled the history by focusing on the life of ordinary individuals. Through the critical elements of the three works, setting shot composition and sound, this article analyzes the significance of director Clarke's visual style and the director's treatment of these elements in the overall cultural ideology.

## 2. Background: Malcolm Clarke and His Work

Malcolm Clarke's documentaries are always crafted with strong emotions. He pursues to capture and record the joys, sorrows, joys, birth, old age, sickness and death of individuals. In terms of his filmmaking style, he endeavors to impress the audience and to make people laugh, cry, and think deeply rather than record the world without engagement. He focuses on individuals and tells the experience from the first perspective of those who have witnessed the event. By this approach, he challenges the grand narrative of social and historical events by offering an individual insight. "A Long-Cherished Dream" is a documentary produced by Clarke in China, which tells the stories happening in the reform process: building a well-off society in an all-round way. The documentary portrays four ordinary Chinese people striving for a better life. "The Lady in Number 6" is an "up close" interview with the oldest woman who survived in the Holocaust. Music gave the old lady faith and optimism to survive in an inhuman environment and stay live after the disaster. "Soldiers in Hiding" is a record of American veterans who participated in the Vietnam War who could not cope with the post-war effects and return to society and family to live an everyday life. Thus, they choose to hide in the wilderness and live helpless lives.

Zhen Xie, a researcher at the School of Journalism and Communication, and others explained the concept of oral history and the argument for authenticity based on the discussion of American oral historian Donald Rich. As they noted, oral history documentaries make the moving image more vivid, objective and multi-dimensional by fusing the oral accounts of multiple individuals. Also, he points out that oral history documentaries should be based on solid historical truth and then use images, sounds, and historical facts to express appeal and demonstrate the political and cultural ideology of a particular historical and social period [2].

In the analysis of the documentary "A Long-Cherished Dream", Ziyue Fu, a researcher who studies news media, explains how this oral history documentary tells a good story from multiple perspectives. First of all, Ziyue argues what makes this documentary impressive is the content which integrates the historical context of China's reform into the stories of ordinary people from a foreigner's perspective. It maps China's reforms, the Chinese people's helplessness, challenges, and hard work of the four protagonists. In addition, regarding audio-visual language, Ziyue pointed out that the director uses the frame design from panoramic to close-up shots and the selection of narration sounds [5]. This is an excellent shooting style of showing the audience details of the interviewees' emotions they can't see [5]. As a result, the audience will be more likely to resonate emotionally [5]. The director uses push and pull techniques to constantly cross-transform photos and moving images. In this way, the audience can intuitively see the process of Chinese history [5]. Zhang's research analyses the lens composition; however, her research does not include much information on Clarke's other shooting techniques (sound, scene selection).

Similarly, Yanan Li, in her article on the narrative strategy of this documentary, also points out the narrative characteristics of the oral history documentary deployed by Clarke. She argues that

Clarke deconstruct grand themes through individual narrations. The author points out that his documentary mainly uses synchronized sound (live sound) and background music, allowing the interviewer to narrate the story [6]. This way of processing the sound allows the audience to touch the emotions of the interviewer and more objectively show the authentic condition of Chinese society that the film wants to express and enhance the audience's sense of substitution [6].

Regarding the documentary "The Lady in Number 6", Canadian pianist Laurence Manning, in his review of the documentary "A Long-Cherished Dream", summarized the plot content in detail. The article describes the optimism of the interviewee, Alice Herz-Sommer, the protagonist of this documentary. Alice is the oldest Jewish pianist who experienced the inhumane slaughter, yet she retains her spirit of love for life and music. Laurence Manning praises the audiovisual techniques brought by Clarke for providing a more comprehensive portrait of the pianist and giving viewers a deeper consideration of the grand theme of the Holocaust from the perspective of a survivor [7].

In addition, an article published by Jim Vanden Bosch, founder of Terra Nova Films, in *The Gerontologist* magazine has made a insightful comment on the content of this documentary. Compared with the previous research, Jim Vanden Bosch described the reminiscent narrative techniques used by Clark and the plot that can express the positive protagonist's image (have fun playing and talking to friends in the room) in a concise manner [8]. Nevertheless, a more in-depth analysis of the director's visual style still await to be investigated.

These articles provide a detailed and specific analysis of the narrative structure and perspective aspects of director Malcolm Clarke's documentaries. The authors explain the multiple narrative strategies used by the director, including the visual style of long shots and close-up shots, as well as the auditory style of simultaneous sound. However, the previous research has not focused on analyzing how Clarke approaches to history by his close observations on individuals and how his documentaries offers insights to an alternative narrative of history. These factors may lead to the relatively incomplete and unrepresentative analysis of Malcolm Clark's personal shooting techniques and audio-visual effects in the existing literature.

### 3. First-Person Setting

In these three works, director Malcolm Clarke skillfully deploys specific settings related to the protagonists' daily lives and works to offer viewers an individual perspective of history. This style enhances the narrative of the oral history documentary. It further provides a micro-level observation which that vividly depicts the solid background in which transformation happens and unveils the details that may not take seriously by the official history record. The first episode of the documentary series "A Long-Cherished Dream" mainly focuses on the issue of relocation, a pivotal aspect of poverty alleviation reform in China's rural areas. As an official at the grassroots level within the village, the protagonist, Kaiyong, works tirelessly to persuade poor villagers to relocate to safer homes as part of a nationwide rural revitalization campaign. Portraying this process, the director has selected several spaces as his shooting locations. The first setting is the landslide section, where Kaiyong works every day. The second setting is the village committee, where different voices and standpoints could be presented. Indeed, Kaiyong is here to inform the villagers about the rural revitalization plan. Then, on a treacherous mountain road, Kaiyong repeatedly convinces residents. After that, the director shows the audience some simple and dilapidated houses where the villagers live, portraying Kaiyong's endeavors in persuading the villagers to agree on the moving plan. The last setting takes place in a newly constructed city building, which indicates the life the campaign offers. As historian John Hepp has noted, oral history documentaries adopt a 'top-down' approach, shaping their narratives through firsthand accounts and personal experiences [4]. The settings-from hazardous road sections and rundown buildings to the latest urban construction-created a space for individual stories [9]. Deploying the viewpoint of Village Party Secretary

Kaiyong, who has directly experienced China's rural poverty alleviation campaign, these settings effectively show the conditions during this nationwide reform period in developing areas in China. Furthermore, the landslide road section and high-risk houses depicted in the documentary tell Kaiyong's personal experience and reveal his work's significant challenges and hardships, which have yet to be fully shown in publicity. It reveals the tensions between rural and urban and between the grassroots and the elite. At the same time, it also critically demonstrates the sacrifice and sufferings that individuals encountered against the backdrop of China's rapid economic growth. This approach to history challenges the positive narrative of reform, which has been predominant in official propaganda and contributes to a comprehensive representation of the implications of Chinese reform.

In his other documentary, "The Lady in Number 6", the shooting location chosen by Clarke was the living room of the home of the pianist Alice. The home as a filming location sets an intimate and relaxed tone for the entire film. In the living room, there is a piano and many chairs. The home and furniture closely connect with the protagonist: The piano represents music (Alice played the piano daily); the tables and chairs represent this older adult's hospitality and love of conversation. Music and a willingness to talk save an older adult's life and keep hope alive. These sets show an optimistic attitude towards life as the oldest survivor of the Holocaust. The setting provides a solid background to understand the personal stories of the protagonists.

#### 4. Close-ups in the Documentary

Second, in terms of shot composition, Clarke tends to deploy close-up shots in his works to effectively capture the detailed inner emotions of individual interviewees. Close-up is a technique in this oral history documentary, which is often used to infuse emotional depth into the narratives, forging a powerful emotional connection with the audience and prompting deeper contemplation. The documentary "Soldiers In Hiding" tells the story that several Vietnam War veterans who could not face the fear and pressure brought by the war and chose to hide in wilderness areas and live an isolated life. In the complexities of society, they struggle to control their feelings and behavior, but the jungle offers them a sense of security. The documentary begins with continuous close-up shots of interviews with these veterans. These shots typically depict the veterans' composure; their facial expressions and eyes remain unchanged. Close-ups magnify the emotions of their inner world. However, they describe their experiences in a calm manner—feelings of exclusion, self-loathing, fear of human interaction, and recurring war nightmares—the fixed close-ups reveal a multi-layered narrative of their feeling. The audience could see tears in their eyes and other facial expressions clearly and get more personal history such as they have to bear their husbands' absence but still insist on giving their husbands support and companionship. The close-up shots of the faces of these veterans who experienced the Vietnam War have created a profound emotional impact on the viewer, leading audience to reconsider the trauma of war. It raises questions about whether retired veterans can truly reintegrate into everyday life.

Similarly, in "A Long-Cherished Dream", when Kaiyong comes to persuade the impoverished family to relocate, there is a close-up shot of the facial expressions of older people in the family. This scene highlights the sadness and helplessness of the older woman. She feels she is getting used to living in an old home, and her age is old. This nearly 10-second close-up shot magnifies the inner emotions of the older woman; this makes the narrative of the oral history documentary establish a closer emotional connection with the audience. The close-ups in Clarke's film serve a foci to underpin the individual's feelings and response to the surroundings. This section must be in one column.

## 5. Synchronic Sound

Third, interviews with eyewitnesses account for most of Clarke's three works. In terms of sound, Clarke used many synchronous sounds, including the self-narration of those who experienced it and live sounds. The synchronous sound can allow the voices of those who have experienced history to be heard more directly and honestly, giving those who have been ignored the right to speak and express their identity. Previous oral documentaries focused on the narrative of the entire macro-historical background and ignored the individual voices of those who experienced it and limited field groups [1]. In "Soldiers In Hiding", interviews with veterans are based on authentic voices from the scene. The public doesn't know about these veterans and their lives hidden in the jungle. They belong to marginalized groups in society. The use of synchronous sound allows the public to hear the authentic voices of groups that have yet to be paid attention to by people.

In addition, the second episode of the "A Long-Cherished Dream" documentary series tells the story of Yingbao, a young female driver of a large truck who still works hard after experiencing misfortune in life (domestic violence, being "sold" by her parents, divorce). Female images on screen, whether in movies or documentaries, always tend to be stereotyped and marginalized. Fortunately, the director of this documentary, Clarke, directly recorded the live interviews. Yingbao can use her voice to talk about her own experience. Female audiences with similar experiences in front of the screen will also hear the authentic voice of such a mentally and financially independent and strong woman. These authentic voices give these female audiences a positive identity representation and life confidence.

## 6. Conclusion

To sum up, this research analyzes three oral history documentaries from Malcolm Clarke, "A Long-Cherished Dream", "Soldiers In Hiding" and "The Lady in Number 6" by revisiting the setting, shot composition and sound that have been used in these works.

Indeed, the previous research analysis on Malcolm Clarke's audiovisual style was not comprehensive and detailed enough, and most literature focused on the content of his works per se and narrative strategies. To fill the gap, this research comprehensively analyzes the audiovisual style of director Malcolm Clarke, figuring out that Clarke chooses to shoot the life and work scenes from the first perspective, which challenges the grant narrative of history by introducing everyday narratives. In addition, Clarke is good at capturing close-ups of characters to make the documentary establish a close emotional connection with the audience, thereby inspiring a reflection on the narrative of history. Clarke also used the advantage of simultaneous sound to allow the documentary to show a more real story so that the ignored witnesses could make their voices heard by the public. Director Malcolm Clarke made valuable contributions and references to the oral history documentary narrative. Tables must appear inside the designated margins.

However, one thing that makes Clarke's documentary controversial is that his narrative is relatively lack of history narratives. As many researchers revealed, the development of oral history documentaries should first have historical facts, rigorous logic, and then appropriate artistic techniques [2]. Authenticity could be taken as a critical aspect to analyze Clarke's documentary in the future study.

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