

# The Artistic Truth of the Web Series

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**Abstract:** In China, the popularity of the web series has soared over recent years. Web series are popular due to their technical characteristics, their flexible and intriguing narrative skills and the progression of cyberculture, which distinguish web series from traditional television programmes. However, these traits can also lead to some negative drawbacks, such as the lack of originality, the homogenisation of content, and the exaggeration and sensationalism of real-life situations. These problems are likely to put artistic truth of web series at risk, transforming them into endless homogeneous audio-visual products, thus affecting the artistic creativity of their visual images. The first section of this study explores the development of the web series by analysing external factors, including interactive modes, technical production and commercial investment. The second section focuses on the internal factors contributing to the transformation of the content of the web series. The final section investigates how these changes result in diminishing artistic truth of the web series. The paper concludes that technological innovations enable web series to produce more vivid experiences, and the extreme fantasies they create enable viewers to indulge their endless desires and become addicted to the virtual world, even making them reluctant to face the real world.

**Keywords:** Web Series, Artistic Truth, Desire, Reality, Simulacrum

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## 1. Introduction

Web series is currently growing in popularity. Viewers can enter a vivid, image-saturated world and find unprecedented visual experiences anytime and anywhere. Undoubtedly, there are fictional aspects for most audio-visual works. However, these elements do not influence the expression of the artistic truth. In the author's opinion, artistic truth encompasses aesthetic values that have been filtered and refined from real life to represent the audience in the physical form of visual images; this includes the web series. Moreover, artistic truth is the reduction and refinement of the visual world; it can reveal overlooked objects and moments and connect viewers' minds in the physical form of visual images.

The ontology of art has been a heated topic throughout art history. Plato thinks that the essence of art is imitation and to transcends the real existence of the phenomenal world. However, Arthur Danto argues that some art can be considered as imitation, while some are not. In this regard, he claims, 'Art, in his philosophy, is a component of Spirit, together with philosophy and religion.' [1] It can be seen that

the symbolic work of art can achieve a balance between the spiritual and the objective world.

Although the web series cannot be created without the real world and can be elaborately made with a complicated plot, complex characters and vivid scene-setting, it should not be solely a representation of people's surroundings. According to the author, the artistic truth of the web series is the true extraction and sublimation of the visual world and audio-visual art can convey passionate feelings and connect viewers' minds. The aim of this research is to explore the innovative aspects of the web series compared with traditional television programmes. The differences can be divided into external and internal factors, and investigating these variations will analyse the positive and negative influences on the artistic truth of the web series.

## 2. The Emergence and Transformation of the Web Series

With the proliferation of the Internet, the dissemination of texts and hypertexts has become free and convenient, and

mass culture has dramatically changed.

Traditional TV programmes can no longer meet the personalised needs of the audience. A variety of ingenious modes and content have gradually appeared on broadcasting platforms. In recent years, a new combination of film and television known as the web series has emerged. It changes the audience's viewing habits; viewers are no longer universally accepting the content, but they are able to actively participate in the creation of the plot by providing real-time suggestions and feedback. Since the successful overseas operation of multiple video platforms, a large number of Chinese video website platform producers have joined in the production and release of web series, thus contributing to the rapid development of numerous web series in a short time.

### 2.1. The Process of Development

In 2000, the web series *Primary Colours*, which was directed by five college students, was considered as the first Chinese web series. Although the whole production cost just 2,000 yuan, the feelings it expresses are both sincere and unforgettable. In 2007, China's first interactive web series *Crazy*, began to use the method of interacting with netizens online, reflecting the advantages of the online media industry. In 2010, due to the intense copyright protection, the copyright price of TV series soared, which contributed to the emergency of many novel web series from dominated video websites. Subsequently, the iQiyi video site launched its self-made web series, *Online Love* and the Tencent video site created its first web series, *WeiHun Men and Women*, which starred many famous actors from the film industry. This practice increased the popularity of the web series. Since 2014, major video sites have continually increased their investment in self-made web series and have become a mainstream video form.

As an emerging form, the definition of a web series is still controversial. Qian Yu proposes, 'It is a new form of drama performed in real time and interactively, introduced by a PC terminal and transmitted through the Internet.' [2] In the broad sense of this term, all the TV series distributed through the Internet can be collectively referred to as web series. However, the concept of web series in the narrow sense is different, as, 'the creation, shooting, production and broadcast of web series is determined by the characteristics of online media.' [3] From the perspective of these two scholars, the latter interpretation is more specific. The method of putting TV series on online platforms cannot be defined as a web series; with the nature of cyberculture and their special method of production, they can be called web series.

### 2.2. Technical Production

Today, the Internet has become widely available, and the web series is an outcome of web videos. The web series brings people opportunities to enter a vivid, fabulous and engrossing paradise filled with different styles of computer-

generated visual works. The interaction between the web series and the audience is greatly enhanced in comparison with traditional TV series production. Before the production of a web series, audiences can complete questionnaires provided by the creators and determine some plots through real-time suggestions and feedback to the producers. This means that the plot of the web series can be tailored according to the appetites of their viewers. Moreover, during production process, the audience can choose different types of plot and character personalities according to their preferences, demonstrating a user-centric situation.

Additionally, there is another prevalent method of interaction between the audience and the creators: bullet screen comments. Bullet screen comments refer to an interactive form of scrolling real-time comments of viewers on video sites. The widespread participation of this method creates a field in which everyone can express their feelings and critique the web series they are watching. These methods of participation have already formed a constant mode of production and thus present conditions of reproduction in the long term. In this way, producers can expand their horizons and produce enticing content from multiple viewpoints and angles, which contribute to the acquisition of the originality of artistic truth.

However, the age of mechanical reproduction brings many benefits, but it also puts humans in a precarious situation. This method of production may result in the loss of originality of a web series and form a cycle of the analogous reproduction of visual images. The presence of originality is the prerequisite for the production of any work of art. Just as Walter Benjamin said, 'Technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself.' [4] In this regard, the accessible mode of real-time interaction and production would not produce anything new. The most attracting aspect of visual images, whether still or moving, is their inaccessibility. First, the viewing or observation of a web series precedes expressions of language. If the audience glances over general scenarios and expresses their opinions with subjective emotions, they cannot obtain an in-depth understanding of the object or the meaning the web series intends to convey. According to the author, the essence of visual images is to create a moment or even a period of silence for viewers' minds.

Furthermore, the audience believes that they are entitled to participate and comment on the web series they watch. However, these activities are behind-the-scene manipulations; audiences' participation, in essence, is a series of codes to increase popularity and maximise economic returns that is invested by the producers of web series. Herbert Marcuse once argued that the evolution of technology is the acquisition of the enslavement of man and the loss of human nature.

Additionally, Webster and Feren proposed three communication policies targeted audience models, namely, 'victim': effect mode; 'consumer': market mode; 'trade currency': commodity mode. [5] It is not difficult to find that

the audience's interaction is a manifestation of commercial means.

Finally, this mode of production and reproduction of a web series can be considered as an automatic machine. Certain attempts to forms a web series can make it appear retouched, but too much is likely to mask or even distort details and fragments, which may be overlooked. This may pose a threat to the meaning of images that are produced.

Commenting on the originality of the object and the reproduction of photography, Andre Bazin writes, 'For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man.' [6] In this way, both the originality and the artistic truth have already been obscured by excessive comments and interactions.

The artistic truth is not purely obtained by repetitive production and reproduction, endless viewing, and comments, but a result of viewers' rational thinking. Even if web series enjoy a certain advantage by virtue of technical innovations, it is not a mechanical apparatus. Making many reproductions cannot reveal the production of reality and artistic truth.

### 2.3. Commercial Production

Rising investment in the web series industry has become the norm. This involves not only the urgent needs of the producers of web series but also the willingness of various investors. Sufficient funds can ensure smooth production of web series and can also promote continuous growth in this industry. According to the *2019 China Research Report on Network Audio-visual Development*, the market size for the industry of short video is 187.13 billion (CNY) and the growth rate is 477.7%. [7] Today's web series industry is so attractive that a large number of investors are willing to invest money. Capitalists from all walks of life have perceived commercial opportunities of participating in this activity. The purpose of investing is to produce high-quality web series to obtain commercial returns.

The pressure from investors who blindly pursue commercial interests could transform the artistic creation into the endless pursuit of capital. Karl Marx believes that the capital is bloodthirsty. While affirming the value of capital, Marx analysed its negative status, arguing that 'It is an unrestricted and endless desire to transcend its own boundaries.' [8] Too much intervention of capital in the creation of a web series will trigger a deviation from the original intention of the creators. Marx coined and classified the term, alienated labour; the third category is the alienation of the essence of the human. That is because 'Man is a conscious being that he makes his life-activity, his essential being, a mere means to his existence.' [9] Therefore, if the change in the creator's original intention is due to forces of capitalism, then the artistic truth of the web series has also been destroyed.

Capital cannot make a web series of good artworks. As Corey Anton once said frankly in his book: 'But in a world increasingly filled with deliberately and sensationally staged experiences – an increasingly *unreal* world- consumers

choose to buy or not buy based on how *real* they perceive an offering to be. Business today, therefore, is all about being real.' [10] Compared with commercial production, the role of artistic production can bring more benefits to the web series. Pierre Bourdieu states: 'In the representation of the legitimate relation to the work of art as an act of 're-action' claiming to replicate the original creation and to focus solely on the work in and for itself, without any reference to anything outside it.' [11] They are both production methods, but they bring different results. According to the author, commercial production can supplement artistic products. If a web series is dominated by economic capital alone, the web series will fall into a trap of commercial interests.

## 3. The Characteristics of the Web Series

### 3.1. The Participation of Grassroots

The introduction of web series and the popularisation of art both have positive influences. They provide many people with opportunities to think and innovatively create excellent work. In this process, a group of ordinary people in society are involved in the creation of a web series. Wang Fen proposes that 'They are at the bottom level in a socio-political climate and they relatively occupy less social resources. They are a dominant group in traditional society in a non-core zone.' [12] The low cost, low threshold, convenient and free communication method of the web series provide unprecedented opportunities for the participation of grassroots groups. This group is a major and significant component of the creators. The author believes that grassroots is not a title for underprivileged groups but is a state that is eager to make excellent cultural products.

Due to differences in life experience, culture, capital, technology, etc., grassroots groups have demonstrated a different way of creating to others. In 2004, Chris Anderson first proposed the concept of long tail effect, saying that 'The wave of grassroots creativity would overwhelm the script-readers and tape-listeners of any studio and label.' [13] Here the term intangible assets refer to creativity. In other words, novel ideas can compete with hundreds of millions in capital investment. Mainland Chinese director Li HongChou created many undergraduate-oriented and educational web series to respond to the current situations of young students, such as housing, university life, family education. What makes their creations different is that the scenes are portrayed by university students. This results in a different perspective to the works. As a result, their works are enthusiastically favoured by many youth netizens.

Before 2008, grassroots groups were the main source of the web series. The cheap production equipment and simple creative approach provide opportunities for grassroots involvement and also inject vitality into the development of different web series. With the help of the Internet, grassroots express their inner feelings with sincerity, which is different from the productions of those groups with huge commercial backing. It is pure passion that motivates grassroots groups to

present the best works to the audience under the conditions of insufficient funds and lack of technologically advanced equipment.

### 3.2. The Flexibility of Narrative Skills

Unlike the relatively specific narrative structure of the TV series, the narrative structure of the web series tends to be more flexible. The TV series has fixed a time limit, focusing on establishing suspense at the end of each episode and revealing suspense at the beginning of each episode. Due to the flexible features, the web series can narrate the story freely.

First, there is a distinctive difference in context between the web series and the traditional TV series. Many TV programmes pursue well-worn themes that are common to all cultures, such as romance and crime. However, these hackneyed themes, with their topics are ranging from politics, society, economy are no longer favoured by the creators of web series. Specifically, web series provide people with information about current events in cities, countries or even in other countries in an interesting way, which can expand viewers' horizons.

Second, the divided and reversed time and space arrangement of a web series is also distinctive. It emphasises the discontinuity and psychological contrast of characters' personalities and plotlines to make the audience concentrate on each clip as much as possible, which is more gripping than the conventional sequential narrative mode. For example, in the sixth episode of the web series *Wonder Lady*, the twelve-minute episode is composed of eight independent stories. In the play, the time and space arrangements in the play range from ancient to modern times and portray multiple identities of a specific protagonist, which is rare in a TV series. Consequently, the discontinuity is separated in the whole web series, which can resonate in viewers' minds and realise artistic truth.

Finally, the rhythm of a web series is characterized by ups and downs, which makes the whole plot more dramatic. It not only promotes the development of the plot but also breaks down the original expectations of the audience and deepens the connotations. Taking the web series *Day and Night* as an example, the protagonist Pan Yueming, plays two roles, switching back and forth between two brothers with different personalities. The intricate relationship between the characters laid the foundation for a dramatic plot development. Therefore, the contradictions and conflicts of the plot make it intriguing.

### 3.3. The Influence of Postmodernism

The openness and popularisation of art bring an advantageous edge for the creators of web series. The postmodernism of the 1980s and 1990s was characterised by a scepticism and challenge of the established values, ideas, and styles. These attitudes have also influenced the development of online literature and arts, which includes the web series. Many creators draw on their experience of

postmodernism and become anti-traditional and anti-authoritative; web series then become avant-garde compared with TV series. There are many styles or strategies that are used in the creation of web series, such as parody, appropriation, juxtaposition to make the creation itself more artistic.

Appropriation is a common technique in the creation of a web series. Using appropriation, it is a good way to attract the audience's attention and build their own loyalty. The familiar plot or character is reused and reinterpreted, which arouses viewers' curiosity in advance. For example, in the web series titled *Unexpectedly*, many fragments of well-known film and television works are imitated, including *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Outlaws of the Marsh*. Through the interpretation of different eras, it presents unique characteristics and brings about a rich visual experience.

The usage of parody is another distinct characteristic of the web series and is an effective way to realise artistic truth. For example, Deyun Community, a Chinese comic dialogue group, applies traditional cross-talk techniques to the creation of their web series. In 2018, the comedy web series *New Legend of White Fat Man*, which starred Yue Yunpeng parodied the 1992 *The New Legend of White Snake*. The web series is completely different from the traditional plot. Male actor Yue Yunpeng dressed up as a woman and challenged the traditional notion that only the slim female can be considered beautiful. This practice brings about a new connotation. The realistic problems reflected in this edition are more impressive than the original.

However, the excessive use of postmodern techniques brings about negative aspects, such as the homogenisation of plots and the lack of artistic truth. Although one of the functions of a web series is to entertain, long-term viewing of web series that lacks artistic value will make the audience addicted to sensory enjoyment. Creators should not ignore that too much sensory stimulation would pose a threat to the artistic truth of the web series. Take the example of the 2016 web series *Go Princess's Go*, which rapidly gained popularity and was broadcast nearly 400 million times, which was finally forcibly removed from all websites due to unethical plots and vulgar languages and pictures.

Therefore, if the work focuses too much on sensory stimulation and ignores the spiritual values, it will be difficult for it to be recognised by mainstream society.

## 4. The Relationship Between Artistic Truth and the Web Series

### 4.1. The Desire of the Subject

Desire is a basic element of people's thoughts. What is the subject of a web series? From the perspective of creating a series, its producer can be considered as the subject. The author believes that the agency and expectations of the creators of web series are essential for the acquisition of artistic truth. It plays a significant role in the works of all creators.

In the past, most moving images were shown to the public by the producers only after they were finished, and there was little possibility for the creators to make changes. Neither praise nor criticism affected the work itself. Now, in the information era, many web series use the approach of broadcasting while production. The real-time comments and ratings of a web series inevitably affect its creation. So, this visual art form is confined to many aspects other than the creation itself. Therefore, creators may find it difficult to conceive plots and details for each scenario without the intervention of external factors, such as the pressure of the producer or executive director. All of these can result in the transformation of the inner desire.

Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud believes that the human mind can be divided into three parts: id, ego and superego, which mainly reflects of a person's actions. The id emphasises the most primitive desire or impulses of the human personality. Freud believes that the unconscious eroticism and sexual desire of human beings are the fundamental driving forces of people's behaviours, and art creation is no exception. Currently, many people are easily influenced by an intense commercial atmosphere, which is sometimes incompatible with the acquisition of artistic truth in artistic creations. Consequently, this is a prominent manifestation of struggles between inner desire and regulatory constraints.

Jacques Lacan offers another perspective on desire and closely combined desire and psychoanalysis based on subjective consciousness. He writes: 'Indeed, this form crystallizes in the subject's inner conflictual tension, which leads to the awakening of his desire for the object of the other's desire: here the primordial confluence precipitates to an aggressive competition, from which develops the triad of other people, ego, and object.' [14] In his view, the desire of the subject is subverted into the other. From this, in the creation of a web series, the intentions and expectations of creators are likely to be converted into a pursuit of commercial interests; consequently, that the real truth of the web series have already disappeared.

#### 4.2. Fiction, Reality and Simulacra

In the information age, culture and art are no longer the beacons of spiritual pursuit but are instead regarded as consumer goods. Excessive material satisfaction and multisensory indulgence are at an unprecedented level. People no longer consume basic demands but confirm their identity and realise their inner fantasies and desires through consumption. Web series play an inevitable role in the consumption of art and literature.

All texts and images are represented as codes that can be restored anytime in the digital world. These codes have no volume and no weight; they are virtual. The context of the web series can be fictional. So, what is the reality? Jean Baudrillard writes: 'Reality could go beyond fiction: that was the surest sign of the possibility of an ever-increasing imaginary. But the reality cannot surpass the model - it is nothing but its alibi.' [15] In this regard, reality is not the

representation of the objective world; rather, it is the technological reconstruction, extension and creation of the imagination. The transcendence of fiction is reality.

The reality of the web series can be realised using many aspects, such as background music, tone of each image and character personality. These aspects should be connected to the development of the plot. For example, in the web series *Night and Day*, a former police captain and twin brother reversed their roles in the daytime and night. The intense atmosphere and indistinct appearances make audiences constantly curious about each episode and eager to determine the outcomes of the murders.

Paradoxically, when it comes to the successive phases of the image, Baudrillard writes, 'It is the reflection of a profound reality; it masks and denatures a profound reality; it masks the absence of a profound reality; it has no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum.' [16] For Baudrillard, the simulacrum is the name of the image. The relationship between the image and reality becomes unclear, and the meaning of reality becomes more complicated. His viewpoints bring more possibilities for creating an image. The simulacra of simulation possess characteristics of operationality and control. In essence, images are perfect simulacra, which mean that images have been substituted for simulacra.

Given the complicated relationship between reality and simulacra, Baudrillard argues that it is incorrect to wish to restore the truth beneath the simulacrum. From his perspective, Baudrillard depicts the entirety of the images, which brings valuable tips in the broad sense of both images and web series. The meaning of visual images, includes the web series, and is not confined to reflection or representation, which is likely to put an end to the depth of an image.

According to the author, fiction, reality and simulacra are different stages of images. They are intertwined with each other and become mutually dominant. Therefore, the combination of fiction, reality and simulacra contributes to the artistic truth.

#### 4.3. The Virtual World and the Real World

The web series satisfies people's need to enter a world that never appears in their real life. That is the reason why web series is favoured by so many people; screen time is like a time machine that can transport audiences to any place they desire. However, too much screen time can make people addicted to the fiction created by the web series and are unwilling to interact in their real world. It may lead to the alienation of human beings, and people may become more indifferent about their real-life situations. In 2018, the NHK TV station launched a documentary called *Sanhe Talent Market*, which made the phrase 'Sanhe Great God' a popular vocabulary term. Young people who do odd jobs in the film are immersed in the virtual world and have little hope for the future. They seem to be free, but in reality they are lonely and helpless.

Virtual life is both close and distant to our real lives. People can watch it anytime and anywhere through a network

terminal. The fictional characteristics of the web series can extract people from their real world and transport them to a magical visual world where they are able to experience things that could never happen in real life. Guy Debord believes that the virtual image world is separated from real society. He says: 'The images which detached themselves from every aspect of life fuse in a common stream where the unity of life can no longer be re-established. Reality considered partially deploys itself in its own general unity as a pseudo-world apart, an object of contemplation only.' [17] The world of the virtual image replaces original real life, and people are more willing to accept the fake world it represents. The virtual world can be more realistic and beautiful than the natural world. In the movie *Matrix*, there is a matrix. It creates an illusion and a virtual world designed by a computer program. Consequently, people lose themselves in the world and gain satisfaction that cannot be obtained in their daily lives.

It should be noted that every detail and fragment of the object conveyed in a web series can be considered as symbolic. In a web series, the dialogues and behaviours of characters will become symbolic and pass it to the audience. The viewers can obtain temporary satisfaction through continuous consumption. In the long term, the audiences are likely to redefine their lives and behave irrationally. Jean Baudrillard says that 'We live in a world of simulation, in a world where the highest function of the sign is to make reality disappear, and at the same time to mask this disappearance.' [18] The reason why the virtual world looks charming is because of the symbolism.

In reality, the virtual world is derived from real life. The web series is prevalent due to the supplement of the emptiness of real life. Artistic truth is not achieved solely by the virtual world or the real world. In the author's opinion, their role is to mutually deny each other. What viewers see or receive from web series is a manifestation of our visible world, it also a latent motivational supplement for achieving a meaningful life in their own life.

## 5. Conclusion

The audio-visual effects in the web series are fascinating. They create an intriguing world that audiences would never experience in reality. However, all web series are fictional. Technological advances and commercial investment encourage the production of more creative web series. It should be acknowledged that in the course of creating these series, producers face huge challenges. If creators are driven by commercial interests or desires and ignore the truth and spiritual values of the art, all the visual images and products are likely to become puppets of commercial interests, and in essence they become indistinguishable. A web series is not only a source of entertainment but also an important force to convey aesthetic and cultural connotations. Producers endow

web series with authentic humanistic spirits so that they can greatly resonate with the audience's minds and deliver artistic truth.

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