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The Algorithm Landscape and the Visibility Paradox of the Countryside: The Production Logic and Consumption Shift of Rural Aesthetics on Short Video Platforms

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Abstract: Short video platforms have become the main channel for rural culture to enter the public's view. However, this visibility is not neutral; it is accompanied by the visualization of rural life: algorithms selectively amplify rural images that align with the preferences for traffic flow, aesthetic coding transforms labor into an attractive rural landscape, and commercial monetization converts the landscape into a consumption entry point. Based on the theory of landscape society, this article proposes the concept of "algorithm landscape," defining it as the rural image order constructed by the selective allocation of visibility through platform algorithms, and constructing a "technology–aesthetics–business" triple mechanism loop to explain the production logic and consumption shift of rural aesthetics. The study points out that algorithmic visualization constitutes a visibility paradox: while the countryside gains exposure and income, its real experience, the subjectivity of the creators, and cultural autonomy face the risk of being undermined. Empowerment and recruitment occur simultaneously in the same process.

Keywords: Algorithmic landscape; Rural short videos; Visibility paradox; Rural aesthetics; Consumption shift

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1. Problem statement

In the process of urban-rural digital integration, short video platforms have become the main channel for rural culture to enter the public's view. The rural population has gained unprecedented opportunities for expression, and rural culture has been widely perceived across geographical boundaries. Agricultural products and local tourism have gained new dissemination channels. However, the presentation of rural areas in short videos is not an objective record of reality. Existing research has pointed out that rural short videos are filled with dehumanized and poetic content, and the visibility of the real rural areas is activated while being systematically obscured [1]. This "being seen" is premised on a specific selection mechanism: which

rural image can gain visibility, in what aesthetic form it is presented, and for what interest structure it serves are all deeply shaped by platform systems and algorithmic logic.

This leads to the core issue of this paper: How do short video platforms produce a specific rural aesthetic landscape? Does this production also reshape the symbolic boundaries and cultural subjectivity of the countryside while giving it visibility? This paper attempts to propose the concept of "algorithmic landscape" and construct a "technology–aesthetics–business" triple mechanism model to analyze the production logic of rural aesthetics and the consumption shift, revealing the visibility paradox contained therein.

2. Literature review and research gaps

Regarding rural short videos, domestic academia has accumulated relatively rich discussions, which can be generally sorted out into three dimensions.

First, the image construction and visibility dimension. Scholars focus on the shaping of rural images by rural short videos, pointing out that the platform selectively obscures, capital-driven profit-seeking, and producers' reverse obscuration constitute multiple forces affecting the visibility of the real rural image [1]. Second, the landscape and aesthetics dimension. Duan Peng et al. use landscape social theory to examine rural users' practices on the platform, pointing out that the platform landscape society faces the crisis of daily landscape commodification and being capitalized [2]; more studies reveal the appearance and romanticization of rural landscapes from the perspectives of objects, people, and relationships. Third, the production mechanism and platform logic dimension. Researchers have begun to focus on the penetration of platform mechanisms such as visibility algorithm recommendations and commercialization in rural content production, but they mostly focus on a single mechanism.

Overall, existing research has three gaps: The application of landscape theory mostly stops at "pointing out the problem," lacking a theoretical update of the landscape concept in the era of algorithms; Algorithms, aesthetics, and commercialization are discussed separately, lacking a closed-system explanation of the coupling of the three; The consumption dimension is mostly treated as an accessory conclusion of criticism, and the translation mechanism of landscape to the consumption entry point has not been fully explained. This paper selects landscape theory as the core theoretical resource because it concerns how images mediate social relations and who controls the image order, which corresponds exactly to the object of this investigation; Selecting the triple mechanism approach corresponds to the three links of the landscape production chain: Technology answers "Who can be seen," Aesthetics answers "What is seen," and Business answers "Why is it produced like this."

3. Core concepts and theoretical framework

3.1. From landscape society to algorithmic landscape

The classic expression of the landscape concept comes from Deleuze: Life presents itself as a vast accumulation of landscapes, and landscapes are not a collection of images, but social relationships between people mediated by images [3]. Baaderia further advanced the critique to the symbolic level, proposing simulacra and hyperreality; Kernan developed the landscape into the theory of media spectacle. Regardless of which path, its analysis object is the communication system dominated by mass media institutions: Image production is monopolized by a few institutions, and the distribution of visibility is stable and top-

down. When the communication infrastructure transforms into a platform architecture where users produce content and algorithms distribute it, the production subjects, operating mechanisms, and control methods of landscapes all undergo structural changes, and landscape theory must be updated accordingly.

Based on this, this article proposes the concept of "algorithmic landscape": The algorithmic landscape refers to the image order constructed by the platform algorithm through the selective distribution of visibility. Its core feature lies in that what content can become a landscape, in what form it is presented, and for whom it serves are all determined by the coupling of the algorithm system and the platform system [4]. Compared with classical landscapes, the algorithmic landscape has three structural differences: The production subject changes from a few institutions to a vast number of users, and the role of the algorithm shifts from "content provision" to "visibility allocation"; The operation mechanism changes from one-way dissemination to a real-time feedback loop, and user behavior data is constantly rewritten by the algorithm; The control method becomes more concealed, and the selection logic of the algorithm is difficult to be directly observed by the outside. Compared with adjacent concepts such as "algorithmic culture" and "algorithmic power," "algorithmic landscape" shifts the analytical focus from the power control of algorithms over individuals to the overall image order produced by algorithms and its aesthetic form.

3.2. Visibility paradox

Before conducting the mechanism analysis, it is necessary to introduce the theoretical resources of visibility research. Thompson proposed the concept of "new visibility," indicating that mediation has made "being seen" no longer dependent on common presence, and visibility has become a social resource that can be contested and manipulated [5]. Based on this, this article proposes the "visibility paradox" as a judgment that runs through the entire text: In the platform era, the process by which the countryside gains visibility is also the process by which its experience is rewritten as a landscape; Visibility and distortion are not a sequential relationship but two aspects of the same process. The paradox consists of three levels: The authenticity paradox—the more refined the rural image, the closer it conforms to the preferences of traffic flow, and the more likely it is to detach from real experience; The subjectivity paradox—the more the creator submits to the algorithm logic, the more likely their expression will deviate from their own experience, resulting in self-landscapeation; The interest paradox—commercial monetization brings economic benefits while incorporating rural culture into the reproduction chain of consumerism.

4. Production logic: Triple mechanism loop

4.1. Technical mechanism: Algorithm's screening and amplification

The starting point of the formation of the algorithmic landscape is the screening and amplification of rural content by the recommendation algorithm. The algorithm sorts the content in real time based on behavioral signals such as completion rate, interaction rate, and stay time, objectively favoring saturated images, fast-paced editing, and distinct emotional triggers. The algorithmic architecture of different platforms varies: Platforms like Douyin, which are strong recommendation-based, adopt a centralized traffic pool distribution, and the content is highly adapted to the explicit preferences of the algorithm; Platforms like Kuaishou, which are social distribution-based, retain the logic of attention and private domain traffic, and the visibility allocation is relatively dispersed. The screening of the algorithm generates dual effects: Rural content gains recognition through its unique regional landscape, which is the technical basis for the rise of rural short

videos; However, to adapt to the algorithm preferences, producers tend to use filtered images, template music, and standardized narratives, compressing the richness of rural experience into predictable content types, and the algorithm's preferences gradually internalize as the self-discipline of the creators.

4.2. Aesthetic mechanism: Aestheticization of rural experience

The amplified rural content further undergoes aesthetic processing by the aesthetic mechanism. The core of the aesthetic mechanism is the decontextualized aestheticization transformation: Specific experiences such as labor, residence, diet, and folk customs are transformed into visually pleasing images that conform to traffic aesthetics—aerial shots turn rural landscapes into accessible scenery, warm color filters create a soothing atmosphere, and the labor process is edited into a visually narrative rhythm. Labor is no longer a livelihood practice accompanied by sweat and risks, but becomes a "pastoral performance" with aesthetic value; Rural life becomes an "atmospheric background" detached from context. The more aesthetically processed the content is, the easier it gains dissemination advantages, as it aligns with the imagination needs of viewers for "healing" and "escape." This is accompanied by an asymmetry in viewing power: Gazing is not a neutral viewing, but carries specific expectations and power relations, and the objects being gazed at are often reshaped according to the imagination of the gazer. The definition of rural aesthetics actually lies in the hands of the platform algorithms and the urban aesthetic subjects. The refined rural imagery that conforms to the tastes of urban middle-class people is continuously magnified, while the hardships of agricultural production, the presence of rural residents, and the decline of rural areas are difficult to enter the landscape system.

4.3. Business mechanism: The closed loop of landscape and realization

The third ring of the triple mechanism is commercial realization. When the rural content gains stable visibility, its landscape value can be transformed into commercial value: the refined rural scenes become the "atmospheric endorsement" for agricultural products and cultural tourism products, and the rural image is translated into an orderable experience commodity. The business mechanism and the algorithm and aesthetic mechanism form a closed loop: the algorithm amplifies high aesthetic content, and high aesthetic content is more likely to be realized, and the realized revenue is transformed into the incentive for continuous production, thereby strengthening the supply of content that conforms to the preferences of the flow. This closed loop upgrades the landscapeization from an individual's choice of content style to a systematic production model maintained by the platform, merchants, and creators, and also poses a crisis for rural landscapes to be incorporated into the mainstream capital system [2].

5. Consumption shift

The direct consequence of the closed loop of the triple mechanism is the consumption shift of rural landscapes. At the content level, pastoral songs and slow life narratives satisfy the emotional consumption demands of urban audiences, and watching rural videos becomes an emotional experience purchase behavior; at the commodity level, the landscape becomes the entrance to physical consumption, agricultural products and local delicacies gain dual endorsements through landscapeization, and live-streaming e-commerce further shortens the distance from "image" to "order"; at the industrial level, rural landscapes and the cultural tourism economy are deeply bound, and the "check-in" culture extends landscape consumption from online to offline spaces. The essence of the consumption shift is the transformation of rural aesthetics from

cultural expression to economic resources: it brings tangible economic opportunities to the countryside and also means that the success of rural culture in entering the consumption system makes its production more subject to market demand logic, and the multiplicity and locality of rural experience are more likely to be continuously simplified.

6. Visibility paradox: The dual consequences of empowerment and incorporation

Based on the above analysis, the impact of algorithmic landscapeization on the countryside presents a structural paradox of empowerment and incorporation. Empowerment is manifested as the expansion of expression rights, the creation of economic opportunities, and the expansion of cultural dissemination; however, empowerment does not uniformly benefit all creators, and the content that can enter the realization system is concentrated in commodifiable themes, while documenting the real dilemmas of the countryside and critical content are difficult to receive the same traffic, with a significant income gap between top and long-tail creators. The incorporation aspect is reflected in three levels: real experiences are decontextualized and processed, and the hardship of labor is concealed; creators constantly adjust their expressions to gain visibility, and identity recognition gives way to the logic of traffic, forming self-landscapeation; rural culture is incorporated into the aesthetic standards and consumption logic of the platform, and the differences and autonomy of local culture face homogenization and dilution.

Empowerment and incorporation are not two independent processes, but two sides of the same mechanism: it is the desire to be "seen" that drives rural groups to participate in landscape production, and it is the "seen" way that reshapes the self-expression of the countryside. This paradox is not unique to rural content, but is particularly sharp in this object located in the disadvantaged position of the urban-rural structure. It should be noted that the paradox does not mean the complete loss of rural subjectivity; resistance exists in at least three possible paths: external intervention by platform governance, such as improving algorithm transparency and providing traffic preference for real rural content; strategic practices by creators, such as dialectic narration, documentary recording, and complete presentation of the production process; alternative interpretations by the audience, such as recognizing "pastoral filters" and the continuous demand for real rural images. These paths are conditional and difficult to fundamentally change the overall pattern of visibility distribution, but the identification of the paradox still provides a theoretical basis for institutional intervention.

It is necessary to further clarify that the triple mechanism is not a static structure but a dynamic system that continuously evolves along with the platform strategy. The algorithm has shifted from the early traffic pool model to interest-based recommendations, and then to e-commerce recommendations oriented towards conversion efficiency. Changes in preference structures constantly rewrite the conditions for landscape production; creators adjust their content strategies in real-time based on data feedback, making the landscape exhibit new characteristics such as reflexivity and internalization. Compared to the situation in the traditional media era, where visibility distribution was relatively stable and feedback loops were lengthy, the landscape in the algorithm era unfolds in a real-time, fluctuating manner that can be tracked by data. The paradoxical reproduction mechanism thus becomes more concealed and efficient. This also suggests that the analysis of algorithmic landscapes must maintain temporal sensitivity to platform mechanisms, not only examining their structural logic but also paying attention to their dynamic evolution, in order to avoid simply understanding cultural production in the platform era as a translation of traditional landscape criticism.

7. Conclusion

This article takes "algorithm landscape" as its core concept, starting from the three mechanisms of technology, aesthetics, and business, to analyze the production logic and consumption shift of rural aesthetics on short video platforms, and reveals the visible paradox contained therein. The basic judgments are as follows: First, the visibility of rural areas on short video platforms is constructed by the selective allocation of the algorithm system. The concept of algorithm landscape advances the landscape theory from the era of mass media to the era of algorithms. Second, the production of rural aesthetics follows a closed loop of "technology–aesthetics–business," and the three elements mutually feedback and self-reinforce. Third, this production process constitutes the visible paradox. While rural areas gain expression opportunities and economic benefits, their real experiences, the subjectivity of the creators, and cultural autonomy face the risk of being undermined. Empowerment and recruitment occur simultaneously in the same process.

Regarding the applicable boundaries of the concept: The explanatory power of the algorithm landscape concept is based on the dominance of algorithm recommendation in distribution. For content ecosystems dominated by social relationships, its applicability is correspondingly weakened, and it is more suitable as an ideal concept for identifying the tendency of landscapeization. This article is a theoretical speculative study, and the judgment is based on concept deduction and literature synthesis. It awaits verification through empirical research. The basic structure of the visible paradox—the occurrence of obtaining visibility and being rewritten by landscapeization in the same process—has cross-platform universality due to the visibility distribution logic of the platform economy, but its specific manifestations vary depending on the platform algorithm architecture and cultural context. Future research can advance in three directions: platform comparison, field investigation of creators, and audience acceptance research to test and correct the explanatory power of the above concepts.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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