

Discussion on the Representation of Geo-Culture in Films in the Context of Modernity

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Abstract: In local film creation, creators often encounter the problem of how to coordinate geo-culture and modernity. In modern-day society, due to globalization, it is difficult to preserve the local traditional culture and lifestyle. Therefore, in film creation, the impact of modernity brought by globalization on local culture should not be overlooked.

Keywords: Geo-culture; Modernity; Across localization; Deterritorialization; Identity anxiety; Cultural self-consciousness

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1. Geo-culture and image space in films

1.1. “Across localization” and “deterritorialization”: The making of image space

Globally, the development from Hollywood to independent production in the United States has improved the local narrative in the United States. In non-Western countries, the perfection of film technology has enriched the subject matter and aesthetics of films, which no longer reflect western values alone. In China, we can also appreciate film creations with local characteristics by directors such as Yimou Zhang, Zhangke Jia, Hu Guan, and Ye Lou. In these films with obvious local characteristics, it is not difficult to identify that there are some foreign “transplantation” spaces that are different from the original environment. In the film “Once Upon a Time in America,” Chinatown, which is related to the Oriental image, appears in the environment as a refuge for men. However, this does not affect the audience’s judgment of the regional attribute of the story. Here, with immigrant attributes, Chinatown appears as a general attribute of the American society and constructs the expected American image of the audience together with other landscapes. In Zhangke Jia’s film “World,” the audience experiences the real Chinese story from landscapes all over the world. Furthermore, in disaster or science fiction films, such as “2012,” “Train to Busan,” and “The Wandering Earth,” or in urban films, such as “Pretty Woman,” “My Sassy Girl,” and “Love in Puff,” highly similar modern scenes can be seen, such as high-rise buildings, roads, overpasses, schools, and hospitals. These spatial symbols with the original regional or cultural factors removed make large cities showcase the trend of “deterritorialization” in the process of modernization. However, in these films, we can still identify their locality through landmark buildings, language, the behavior of the characters, and so on.

From the above analysis, the pure and closed geo-culture no longer exists. In that case, the geo-culture created in the film must be an imaginative construction through the extraction of cultural spirit and connotation. It is difficult to separate its display from modernity. The imaginative construction of culture is the most typical embodiment in Ang Lee’s films. Facing the current situation of global discretization of

contemporary Chinese, Ang Lee crossed regions and countries in his films, linked the Chinese societies scattered all over the world through language and culture, as well as established the imaginary community of “cultural China.” In order to realize these points, Ang Lee disregarded the diversity of Chinese culture, diluted the local color of regional space, and implanted unified cultural standards into different time and spaces. From the United States to Taiwan and Xinjiang, the Chinese in Ang Lee’s films live in a traditional symbolic order dominated by Confucianism and Taoism ^[1]. Among them, the stern image of a Chinese father in Ang Lee’s films has become a cultural symbol.

1.2. Spectacle and modernity of image space

“Deterritorialization” and “across localization” do not mean that the local attribute of geo-culture should be nullified. It is still possible to appreciate the local characteristics in the environment of “deterritorialization” and “across localization.” Film itself is a product of modernity, so the first countries to devote themselves to film production are also countries with a high degree of modernization. Countries that have established their own status in the history of film-making have not excluded their own modernity, but they continue to enrich the film art in subject matter and aesthetics. Today, even Asian countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, India, and Thailand are showing highly modern lifestyles in their films. However, we can still identify their regional characteristics through the language, behavior, humanistic values, and aesthetic concepts in those films. In the film “Xiao Wei” shown at the 2018 Pingyao Film Festival, it tells a story of a modern-day Guangzhou family. Although the film shows a completely “de-territorialized” space (buildings, roads, clothing, schools, and other scenes are what every modern city in China looks like), the audience can still sense that it is a story about “Guangzhou.” Unquestionably, dialect plays an important role in shaping local culture, but there are many life details outside dialect. The uphill and downhill slopes, narrow old residential buildings, messy vegetable markets, large stalls downstairs, huge banyan trees, densely vegetated hills, as well as dense residential areas dictate the audience’s impression of Guangzhou ^[2]. Although modernity makes culture seem to be assimilating, we can still find the particularity of geo-culture in a highly modern area. This is because the process of modernization faced by each region is not a process of overall acceptance, but rather a practical process of integration and transformation of local culture and foreign culture.

However, it can be seen that many film creators reject modernity. Especially concerning films in ethnic minority areas, this situation is more common. On the one hand, the image of ethnic minorities, as the focus of frontier imagination in ethnic minority films, is constantly imagined and explained in the creation of different historical periods. It is an essential artistic element to construct the unity, integrity, and richness of the nation state ^[3]. It is undeniable that there is an urgent need for people today to find a spiritual pure land. However, when pinning this imagination on geo-culture, creators do not only exclude the modernity of geo-culture, but also symbolized and marginalized the characters in the real environment.

In Pema Tseden’s films, his resistance to this “other” context can be clearly appreciated. In the film “Soul Searching,” he deconstructed the images of snow-covered mountains, magnificent grasslands, and towering temples in the impression of ordinary audiences from the perspective of a car with a realistic approach and replaced them with desolate landform, gray towns, muddy roads, dilapidated rehearsal rooms, dark and vulgar dance halls, etc. This shooting technique avoids the landscaping and symbolization of the Tibetan environment and transforms the real environment and characters into narrative themes. Similarly, it can be seen that the director did not shy away from the problem of modernity in the film but instead, he used modern scenes to serve the theme of the film: at school, students cannot recite Tibetan poems; in the ballroom, a singer playing an electronic guitar questioned the values of “Zhimei Gengden.” The director used these “deterritorialization” spaces to demonstrate the impact of traditional Tibetan culture in reality.

2. Geo-culture and identity in films

2.1. Expression of identity anxiety of geo-culture in films

The balance between tradition and modernity in the film creation of geo-culture reveals the anxiety of the creator's identity in geo-culture. Under the influence of western colonial expansion, there are very few non-western civilizations that actively accept modernity. To a large extent, the so-called "modernity" is forcibly exported to all parts of the world under the discourse of western centrism. This inevitably leads to the exclusion of non-western cultures in the face of modernization. How to distinguish between western civilization and modernity and how to create balance between modernity and tradition are issues that every geo-culture undergoing the process of modernization have to face.

Under Zhangke Jia's lens, we see the dilapidation and desolation of cities as well as towns under the impact of modernity in addition to the loss of people in the torrent of the times. In Pema Tseden's films, individuals lose their personal beliefs after being washed by modernity. At the 2019 Beijing Film Academy graduation, the short film "Looking for the Cow (Eye in the Sky)" portrayed how surveillance camera as a modern equipment broke the traditional living rules of people in Tibetan areas.

To some extent, the identity anxiety reflected in the creation shows that the individual in geo-culture has changed from a symbolic character to an active narrator. However, identity anxiety should not be the main concern in geo-cultural creation. Creators should strive to dig out more narrative themes rooted in local culture and complete the transformation from identity anxiety to cultural consciousness in their creations. Otherwise, in the debate between localization and modernization, film is likely to become a tool to fight against modernity. Jinhua Dai once said, "To successfully pass through the narrow door of 'going into the world,' they must agree with the scrutiny and choice of the western art film festival judges; they must agree with the standards and dimensions of the judges on films and the cultural expectation of the West toward the East ^[4]." Although the film festival is paying increasingly more attention to multiculturalism, when the identity anxiety of geo-culture in the face of modernity has become the favorite topic of the film festival, creators may be vigilant about whether they unconsciously "turn themselves into others" while catering to the "taste" of the film festival.

Without doubt, the blending of culture and the disappearance of the purity of local culture are issues that should not be neglected in the context of globalization. However, if creators can break free from identity anxiety and focus on the ideological essence of local culture, they may be able to make more contributions to the diversity of world culture.

2.2. Another idea of geo-culture in films – from identity anxiety to cultural consciousness

The unprecedented dissemination of film makes it a powerful weapon for cultural output. The production of film represents a country's cultural productivity and reflects the country's position in a globalized world system. In non-western countries, the creation of films has basically experienced a process from catering to the west to identity anxiety and finally cultural consciousness. In Japan, China, South Korea, India, Iran, and other countries favored by western film festivals, films either start with realistic themes, focusing on the social problems of their own countries and exploring the trauma brought by colonialism to their own countries, or through the imitation of the west, integrating their own local characteristics into the western narrative system. After experiencing the identity anxiety between tradition and modernity as well as local and western along with the maturity of the film system, countries also have more cultural consciousness. The result of cultural consciousness is that countries can calmly face their own modernity and have more diversified choices in film types and themes. The western world can also see more unique cultural attributes of geo-culture from these films.

Japan is the first non-western country to intervene in film creation. In addition to the samurai spirit, Japanese films have created a delicate and emotional narrative technique different from the west through the care for family and kinship as well as the combination of western long-shot film theories. Therefore, in the process of cultural collision between the east and the west, Japan not only enriched its films in subject matter, but also established its own school in the film industry because of its unique oriental aesthetic characteristics. Chinese films, mainly Hong Kong martial arts films, have transformed the shooting method of Hollywood action drama and exported Chinese cultural thoughts such as Confucian spirit and chivalrous concept through martial arts films. Iranian films have exported their own Islamic values. In the film “Taste of Cherry,” the director’s discussion on life and death has attracted the attention of the western world. In Kusturica’s films, “The Time of the Gypsies” and “Black Cat, White Cat,” the gypsies were optimistic and free within the nation under suffering; their calmness and even banter on death were completely opposite to the tragic tradition of mainstream Western values – the solemnity of facing death. In addition to establishing their own unique genre in musical films, Indian films have explored the possibility of mutual communication between different religions and cultures based on the diversity of domestic religions, nationalities, and languages in recent works, such as “Peekay.”

Although some countries have mastered the right to speak in film narration, more geo-culture needs to be invested in film creation to realize cultural diversity. The successful cases of geo-cultural creation from identity anxiety to cultural consciousness are very enlightening to the creators of geo-culture. In the situation of globalization, geo-culture caters to strong cultures in order to be recognized (in films, it is shown as the consideration of the “taste” of the film festival and the imitation of Hollywood), thus resulting in the lack of stories. Especially when the western world brings other geo-cultures into its own narrative system, cultural homogenization becomes more obvious. For example, in Hollywood films such as Aladdin, Kung Fu Panda, and Mulan, the audience did see cultural wonders, but its narrative mode and values are hardly a copy of Hollywood.

Therefore, under the influence of globalization, the focus of geo-cultural resistance should be internal, ideological, and of cultural homogenization rather than external homogenization (i.e., modernization, homogenization of architecture and clothing, etc.). Only when geo-culture breaks away from identity anxiety, seeks for its own cultural value in modernity, and realizes cultural consciousness can it resist the homogenization of cultural thoughts. Creation based on local culture should not be trapped in the sadness and anxiety of the extinction of its own culture, but rather directly oriented to the life of the local people, looking for the unique local way of life and way of thinking, so as to re-establish the uniqueness of its own culture and values.

3. Conclusion

Nowadays, faced with the monotony of stories in films, many people are saying that the world has told all the stories that can be told. However, in exploring geo-culture, we can find that there are many unexplored stories. There are also many folk stories, which can show rich and colorful cultural ideas and lifestyles of the place. How can there be a “story drought” when so many stories have yet to be told? However, the homogenization of a large number of themes and narration in films is really a problem worth thinking about. The homogenization of film narration is not because of the lack of stories, but rather the homogenization of ideas. In the process of learning from Hollywood or catering to the “taste” of film festivals, creators of geo-culture tend to forget on how to tell a vivid story based on local life experience. In the process of catering, creators constantly flatten their own cultural thoughts and create in the existing mode, thus inevitably resulting in the lack of themes. This is actually a reflection of the cultural imperialism of powerful countries. The world needs diverse cultures. Therefore, as a powerful medium for cultural communication,

films should give more space to show geo-culture and allow people to see the vivid and colorful life in all corners of the world.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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