



Francis Ford Coppola: The Path to Becoming a Cultural Leader

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Abstract: Francis Ford Coppola, as the core master of the Hollywood film industry, has achieved remarkable achievements both artistically and commercially. The classic films such as *The Godfather* and *Apocalypse Now* carry his personal values and cultural connotations. Based on Coppola's growth experience, this essay analyzes the relationship between his film creation and his cultural identity, family background and educational experience through text analysis, in order to explore the unique artistic charm of Coppola's films.

Keywords: self identity, immigration, cultural values, New Hollywood

1. Introduction

Starting from the creation of stage plays, Francis Ford Coppola successfully completed the transformation in the new Hollywood ideological trend through the production of B-grade films. The philosophy and discussion about human nature contained in his films opened a new era of Hollywood genre films. His unprecedented attainments in film technology were his experiments as a pioneer. Due to the rise of various film trends, his creation was not hindered by his academic educational background. This promoter of the New Hollywood film movement emerged from the matrix of the old system and integrated his unique social consciousness and rational spirit into the film text. This makes his films more contemporary and realistic compared with those of the same genre. In order to realize his artistic ideal, Coppola always put the artistic connotation of film before the commercial form. Coppola's philosophical thinking and attention to social reality in his films emphasized the need for the connotation of the film. Meanwhile, Coppola's tireless exploration of film technology has become the spiritual motivation for the film creators.

2. Childhood experience and artistic creation

Childhood experience is an aesthetic phenomenon deeply rooted in works of art, and it is also a subconscious factor influencing the formation of artistic personality of writers. Many of the images in the film that lack understanding motivation are actually concentrated expressions of the writer's childhood experience. Swedish director Bergman in autobiography book *Magic Lamp* tells the story about the fragmented family circumstances of his childhood, like infidelity, abortion, auto-sadism and so on. These fragments haunted his mind and were projected in various identities in his films. However the films of Miyazaki Hayao, who is the best Japanese animation master, contain lots of emotional element such as friendship, child interest, and kindness. The natural scenery of clear water and blue sky in the films *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Cat's Gratitude*, *Howl's Moving Castle* and *City in The Sky* originated from his positive cognition of the meaning of life and the beautiful expectation of harmonious coexistence between man and nature. The formation of this artistic conception was related to his happy childhood. It's the same for Coppola. He was stricken with polio in 1949 at the age of 10. "I was in bed for almost a year and no other child wanted to be in my company: everyone was afraid of contagion" (Cowie 23). After nearly a year of self-cultivation, Coppola returned to school, but he was self-abased due to his lameness. Coupled with the school teachers deliberately give him a hard time, his pain of being discriminated has been lingering for years. It is not difficult to find that the main characters in Coppola's screen scripts are portrayed as solitary victims of autism.

In *Apocalypse Now*, the insane colonel Kurtz with its bloodthirsty cruelty governs the local residents, but in his heart there is a crisis of the lack of a sense of trust and doubt on the reality of the world. He closed himself in the spirit of building his own kingdom. When the captain Willard finds him, he waits quietly for the captain's assassination to free himself from the bondage of self-contradiction and the fear of human hypocrisy. In the movie *Jack*, Jack has repeatedly revealed his desire for childlike innocence, but his appearance as a "freak" and the slander of gossip have left him with a sense of inferiority and fear. This kind of psychological contradiction that cannot reconcile himself makes Jack have to accept reluctantly and painfully of the "alternative kind of identity". Coppola has experienced similar emotional confusion, but fortunately, he has turned his need and desire for childlike pleasure into the interest in film.

3. Immigration and identity

Italian immigrants were the largest group of immigrants from European countries to the United States in the late 19th century. William Bloom once pointed out that “identification is an inherent and unconscious requirement for any individual. Individuals seek to identify themselves to gain psychological security, but also to maintain, protect and consolidate their identity to strengthen this security, which is essential for personality stability and mental health”(Le 332). As a result, what immigrants have to face is not only how to work and live, but also self-consciousness and self-reflection of identity. What they need is a reasonable explanation of identity, so as to eliminate the psychological contradictions generated in the foreign social and cultural environment, promoting the integration and reconstruction of the two cultures.

As a director and screenwriter, Coppola is more in line with the cultural values of the Italy psychologically and insists on not being assimilated in his artistic expression. Both the father and grandfather of Coppola, who originally lived in southern Italy, set out to immigrate to the United States at the beginning of the 20th century, and actively participated in various activities of American society as Italian immigrants. In this process, they gradually accepted modern civilization and the mainstream of American public values. “Southern Italians also came to the United States with deeply rooted regional or local characteristics, but isolated rural life shaped their unique values and behavior patterns. Southern Italians have a strong family concept, which maintain a strong attachment to each other.” This tradition has two characteristics: one is cohesion, stability, continuity and strength; the second is to expand frequent contact between family members, especially the cousins. These two characteristics make Coppola’s films embody a special quality of Italian family concept and emotional connection. On the one hand, although Coppola was born in Detroit and grew up in an Italian family, he was influenced by Italian traditional culture since childhood. These kinds of national characteristics flowing in the blood will not be gradually lost due to the process of “de-territorialization”. Instead, as a kind of national yearning feelings, it has become an indispensable expression symbol in his artistic creation. “On a personal level, Coppola loves Italian taste and has Italian habits” (Cowie 35).

Through Coppola’s films, we often see the expression of traditional family culture and ethnic customs. In *The Godfather*, the lost sense of belonging and drifting identity suffered by Italian immigrants for a long time were expressed. While receiving American education and participating in social life and work, Coppola had to unconsciously identify with the values of American society, such as the enterprising attitude towards life, the patriotic sentiment of selflessness, fearlessness and honor, and the creed of justice, freedom and equality. Michael Corleone, who spent his life fighting for the nature and transformation of his family, Tucker, a car manufacturer with great dreams and no fear of judicial power, and Rudy Baylor, who fought corruption for justice are all portrayed as “independent knights” with a spirit of adventure, perseverance and social conscience. The blending of the two cultures is embodied in Coppola’s film world. It was under the influence of these two cultures that Coppola matured and highlighted the binary dialogue between Italian national tradition and American modern values in his film art.

4. Social responsibility and political insight

The political and cultural factors in the social environment are of great significance to the formation of artistic personality. While at Hofstra University, Coppola was already a key member of the university community. The unfocused individual social anxiety gradually evolves into group consciousness in the process of clustering. Student organizations have always maintained a strong sensitivity to the country’s social environment and political life and become the subject of critical reflection and calls for innovation. Coppola’s participation in the community activities in the school gave him a high degree of social responsibility and political insight, which was reflected in the subjective thinking of his creative process.

In the 1960s, the black liberation movement in the cities of the north of the United States was on the rise, which led to armed insurrection. The black people’s violent struggle swept through more than 160 cities, shook the reactionary rule of the American monopoly bourgeoisie, and became the “most serious domestic crisis” in the United States for more than 100 years. In 1968, Coppola shot the musical *Rainbow Fairy*, which was set in the 1940s McCarthyism and the American civil rights movement. It reflected Coppola’s position on civil rights and social conscience. The stubborn racism represented by the southern senator in the story was a representative description of the social tensions of the time. The American Mafia, which originated in Sicily, reached its height in the mid-20th century and was dismantled by the FBI in the 1970s and 1980s. They were engaged in assassinations, illegal trade and even drug trafficking. Although the organizational structure has been broken up and divided, its brutal invasion and persecution of the lives of the American public gradually infiltrated into the mainstream culture of American society. Inspired by Mario Puzo’s novel, Coppola admitted that his film *The Godfather* carried a positive celebration and tolerance of mafia life, but this just showed Coppola’s realistic understanding of human nature. While criticizing the darkness of American justice and the fearlessness of mafia forces, it also reflects the current life of Italian immigrants in the United States. After the end of the Vietnam war in 1975, Coppola did not participate in anti-war

demonstrations and other activities. Instead, he spent three years in the Philippines, and created the Vietnam war film *Apocalypse Now* under the suspicion of others, which expressed the anti-war sentiment with unique film language.

5. Cultural leader of the new era

While studying for a master's degree at UCLA, Coppola encountered Hollywood B-movie king Roger Corman. "Roger trained us like an engineer" (Coppola 13). In a very short time, Coppola became the best assistant that Corman had ever trained, working as an editor, production assistant, a second director, a writer, and a recording assistant. Since then, Coppola began his training in the mainstream Hollywood production system and created works such as *Dementia*, *Grown Up*, *Romantic Lovers* and *Rainbow Fairies* under the help of Corman. At this stage Coppola mastered the star effect and studio system, dramatic storyline, stereotyped characters, middle class values and other common characteristics of Hollywood genre films which are basically attached to the classic Hollywood formula.

In the 1960s, the New Hollywood movement came in, George Lucas, Spielberg, Martin Scorsese, David Lynch, Kubrick and other young people emerged in the Hollywood film industry. They created *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Easy Rider*, *Taxi Driver*, *Blue Velvet* and other works reflecting the culture of the times. They were paranoid, rebellious, aggressive and impulsive, but full of revolutionary ideals and the spirit of struggle. Coppola became the backbone of the creation of New Hollywood films. However, his academic background and early creation process in the Hollywood system made his works only inject some unexpected twists and turns into the classic genre at first, that is, the so-called revival and revision of the traditional mode. In 1962, he took the first feature film *Dementia*. This film, which focused on depicting family disputes, followed the style of suspense film. However, it was not mature enough in psychological deduction, and tried to integrate individual perspectives into the frame of genre films to make innovations. Although it was considered a failure in comments, it still achieved success at the box office. In the New Hollywood era, "many filmmakers work in the shadow of stable genre formats, sacred classic films, and formidable directors. In many ways, the New Hollywood is defined by the Hollywood tradition" (Bordwell 17). Coppola directed *The Godfather* in 1972. Influenced by the anti-system, anti-mainstream, anti-classic and anti-drama of the New Hollywood movement, the image building of the anti-hero in the film, the exploration of the spiritual world, the highly condensed life and the profound understanding of human nature all reflect Coppola's new sharp humanistic views under the influence of the New Hollywood.

In the transition period from the 1970s to the 1980s, the New Hollywood has matured and completed its historical mission. During this period, Coppola completely broke away from the dormant period of independent consciousness in terms of production fund accumulation and identity recognition, and shot his film *The Conversation* with strong personal color. As early as Coppola's *The Rain People*, it had been heavily influenced by European films with its half-hidden opening, sudden flashbacks, and full exposure symbolizing the passing of time (Menne 101). These techniques were all homage to *Persona* by Ingmar Bergman. He has always been extremely fond of Antonioni's *Blow-Up*. *The Conversation* was influenced by this film to some extent. The theme of the film first intends to discuss the psychological level of human privacy crisis and reveal the dark side of human nature, while also blending in realistic rational criticism of social morality. The film was nominated for three Golden Palm Awards at Cannes and the American Academy Awards in 1974. Coppola went on to write *The Godfather II* (1974), *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *Rumble Fish* (1983).

6. Conclusion

Human history is fertile soil for artistic works, which requires creators to have a strong sense of social and historical responsibility and a broad vision. Leaving aside the film itself, Coppola's real greatness is his ontological concern for being a "man in history". Human beings are the creators of history. Whether they are heroes of salvation or evildoers, Coppola sees them as real individuals full of contradictions and two sides. In his films, human nature can be transformed into a philosophical reflection on the meaning of life. His courage to defend the artistry and personal orientation of his film has kept him on the stage of world film history.

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