

The evolution and development of "slow film" aesthetics in China: time, meditation and poetic expression

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Abstract: As a unique film aesthetics, slow film has experienced the process of development from introduction, imitation to localization. By sorting out the changing trajectory of slow film aesthetics in China, this paper focuses on the three core dimensions of time, meditation and poetic expression, and discusses how Chinese slow films absorb and draw on Western aesthetics while combining Chinese philosophy and aesthetic tradition, to form a unique aesthetic style with Chinese characteristics.

Key words: slow film; variable development; core analysis

1 Introduction

Slow film aesthetics originated in Europe in the 1990s, which is a film style relative to the fast-paced narrative of Hollywood commercial films, highlighting a slow pace, calm observation, real time experiences, and a meditation on everyday life. This aesthetic pursuit creates a quiet and poetic atmosphere in the film, through the blank space, depiction of details and open ending, which triggers the audience to think about the propositions of life, society and existence. Since the beginning of the 21st century, European directors represented by Bella Tar, Verashagu and Kieslowski have pushed the maturity of slow film aesthetics, which emerged in major international film festivals. Therefore, the slow film aesthetics have become one of the important trends of the global art film creation, providing a new aesthetic paradigm for film creators around the world.

2 Time power: the unique presentation of time experience in Chinese slow films

Temporality is one of the core dimensions of slow film aesthetics. Chinese slow films show their unique charm in presenting time experience. Especially in creating a quiet and long sense of time flow, Chinese slow films skillfully integrate the oriental aesthetic tradition to create a fascinating poetic time.

2.1 Quiet and long: the sense of time flow in slow movies

Chinese slow films are good at creating a quiet and long time experience through the deliberate passage of time. Directors immerse the audience in a distant flow of time either through the constant gaze of long shots, or through the repetitive, cyclical everyday details. For example, in Diao Yinan's *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, the camera records the simple daily life beside the train track in a nearly static state. The pace of the film is very slow, but it contains the texture of time

changes. The frequent slow vision in Bi Gan's films, such as the figure of the heroine at the end of *Gravity*, engraves a long and distant sense of time in the hearts of the audience. This quiet and long time experience comes from the pursuit of "aftertaste" and "artistic conception" in oriental aesthetics, which is the unique point that distinguishes Chinese slow films from the Western "boring aesthetics". Directors are good at taking advantage of this slow and long time flow to open up contemplation on the nature of life and awaken an unforgettable understanding of time. As Wang Xiaoshuai said, "I hope the slow film evoke people's feelings of the original time, just like listening to the babbling stream, enjoying the changes of the seasons, so that the audience can immerse themselves and feel the temperature of time."

2.2 Cyclic: slow motion captures the rhythm of nature and life

Chinese slow films attach great importance to capturing the cyclical changes of all things and the rhythm of life in the world in film language, so as to reflect the endless circulation of time and the circulation of life. Directors have a keen insight that the change of day and night in nature, the changes of the four seasons, as well as the birth, aging, death, joys and sorrows, all contain some kind of everlasting periodic rhythm. They skillfully integrate this periodic rhythm into the narrative structure and image style of the film, creating a poetic space and time full of philosophical implication.

On the one hand, Chinese slow films are good at meticulously depicting the periodic changes of natural scenes through long shots and slow-paced montage, such as the rise and fall of tides, the life and death of flowers and plants, the cycle of wax and wane of the moon. The directors present either a panoramic view of the four seasons, or the repetition of the details, and transform these natural periodic rhythm into the internal logic of the film structure and rhythm, thus creating a long and repeated time artistic conception. In this kind of artistic conception, the joys and sorrows of individual lives seem to be small and short, while the endless rotation of life and effect of nature show the eternal power.

On the other hand, Chinese slow films are also good at capturing the repetitive events and subtle changes of individual lives in the long river of time through the details of the characters' daily life, so as to reveal the sense of fate of the joys and sorrows in the world. Directors often choose the elderly, children and other groups in a specific stage of life as observation objects, through their monotonous, repetitive but full of life tension daily fragments, such as the morning routine, fireworks, to reflect the smallness, resilience and warmth of individual life in the flow of time. At the same time, Chinese slow films also focus on the ups and downs of characters' destinies, capturing the rituals of life's turning moments such as marriage, funeral, separation and reunion, highlighting the sense of destiny and human brilliance of individual life in the current of time [1].

3 Meditation: the philosophy and reflection triggered by Chinese slow films

Meditation is another prominent feature of Chinese slow cinema. The directors are good at using the slow pace of the video narratives, which triggers the audience's in-depth thinking on the ultimate propositions such as the meaning of life, social reality and the development of civilization. Especially in terms of exploring the meaning and value of individual life existence, Chinese slow films show a unique depth of philosophical thinking and humanistic feelings.

3.1 Life thinking: exploring the meaning and value of individual existence

Chinese slow films often focus on the living state and inner world of ordinary individuals. Through the detailed description of the daily life of the characters and the subtle capture of psychological changes, the audience can think about the value of individual existence. With the slow and quiet camera language, the directors depict the confusion, hesitation, difficulties and struggle of the characters in the changes of the times. Through the fate of the characters, they reveal the fragile, helpless but stubborn and tenacious nature of the individual life. The characters are either nostalgic for the past, trapped in reality, or looking forward to the future, in the seemingly monotonous life experience, but there are hidden rich and complex emotional tension, revealing the dignity and meaning of individual life.

For example, Jia's works often focus on the survival of the people at the bottom in the great changes of the times. With a calm and restrained image style, he captures the difficulties and confusion of the characters in the face of the uncertain fate, and highlights the dignity of life in the perseverance of the characters, triggering the audience's deep memory of the individual value. For example, most of the characters in Wang Xiaoshuai's movies have ideals, but they helplessly sink in the worldly dust. With a distant and poetic tolerance of space and time, the director depicts the struggle and redemption of the characters in the suffering, and shows the meaning of life in the waste of time. For another example, Zhang Lv's documentaries often record the joys and sorrows of ordinary people at different life stages with leisurely and silent images, triggering the audience's empathy and thinking about human life experience [2].

3.2 Social observation: the presentation of the dilemma of modernity and the struggle of human nature

In addition to triggering the audience to think on the meaning of individual life, Chinese slow films are also good at revealing the alienation of human nature and the spiritual difficulties in the process of modernity through the keen insight into the social reality, so as to trigger the audience's deep reflection on the dilemma of social development. With a slow and calm image narrative, the directors tell the tension between man and nature, man and society, man and self in the development of modern civilization, presenting the survival scene of individuals being squeezed and struggling in the flood of modernity.

Chinese slow films often focus on ordinary people in the vortex of social change, especially the vulnerable groups in rural areas and urban fringe. With concise and restrained video language, the directors meticulously depict the drastic changes of their material life and spiritual world in the process of industrialization and urbanization, which not only shows the drift of the characters in the current of the times, but also shows the tenacious struggle of human nature in the dilemma of alienation. On the one hand, the film truly and sadly reproduces the survival plight of the people at the bottom of the modernization process, such as the loss of land, the estrangement of family affection, the dark side of the development of modernity; on the other hand, the film can miss the old days, or fight against the unfair reality, or look forward to a better future, thus highlighting the dignity and value of human nature in the state of alienation.

Through the detailed presentation of individual difficulties and the deep depiction of human struggle, Chinese slow films trigger the audience to deeply reflect on the social reality. The directors deconstruct the disadvantages of modernity with oriental wisdom, and explore the way to solve the human dilemma of good and evil, thus highlighting the humanistic spirit of slow film aesthetics to face the reality and care for human nature. This not only injects deep realistic concern into Chinese slow films, but also provides a highly thought-provoking and powerful philosophical background for this film aesthetic school, making it radiate vigorous vitality in the current era of humanistic reflection [3].

4 Poetic expression: the oriental aesthetic characteristics of Chinese slow films

If the meditation is the outstanding characteristic of Chinese slow films in the spiritual core, then the poetic expression is its unique pursuit in the aesthetic form. Chinese slow films are good at drawing nutrition from the traditional aesthetics, creating a poetic artistic conception of "full of words and endless meaning", giving people a huge imaginative space and rich aesthetic experiences. Among many aesthetic techniques, the creation of artistic conception can be called the epitome of the poetic expression of Chinese slow films, which is mainly reflected in the film through blank space, implication, aftertaste and other ways.

4.1 Creation of artistic conception: blank space, implication and aftertaste in slow movies

"Artistic conception" is an important category of the Chinese traditional aesthetics, which emphasizes the transmission of specific emotions and connotations through artistic images, and the pursuit of the artistic expression effect of "meaning in words". Chinese slow films attach great importance to the creation of artistic conception. Directors are

good at using concise and implicit image language, which contains infinite poetic space in the limited lens and pictures, and guides the audience to understand the philosophy of life. "White space" is an important way to create artistic conception. The directors follow the aesthetic principle of "simplicity and comprehensiveness, blank and natural", and often use still life close-up and long shots to leave the audience room for imagination in the dialogue and plot explanation. In the film, there are often long scenes of the characters gazing, being silent, using simple and obscure images to convey the complex feelings of the characters. "Suggestion" is another important means of creating artistic conception. Directors make good use of symbolic metaphors and other expressions to convey the implication with implicit and euphemistic images, giving people endless reverie. They either use images throughout, as a metaphor for the current situation of life and the change of the times; or reflect the emotions of the characters with natural scenery, to show the joys and sorrows of the world and the good and evil of human nature. The management of "aftertaste" is also an important way to express the artistic conception of Chinese slow films. The directors set an open ending at the end of the film, leaving the audience with endless imagination; or use a faraway back to metaphor the fate of the individual, triggering the thinking of the meaning of life; or use imagery to express the state of mind of the characters, giving people a sense of long, lingering feeling that is thought-provoking [4].

4.2 Symbolical metaphor: the poetic use of natural images in slow movies

Another prominent poetic expression feature of Chinese slow films is that they are good at using symbolic metaphor to skillfully associate natural images with the fate and emotional changes of characters, so as to convey profound philosophical connotation and poetic beauty. The directors have inherited the traditional Chinese lyric art of "blending scenes and integration". They are good at capturing the poetic connotation of natural scenery and cleverly echoing the theme of the film, creating an oriental aesthetic conception of "painting in poetry and poetry in painting". On the one hand, the directors express their feelings with the scenes and use the natural scenes for the inner emotions of the characters. They capture the poetic character of the scenery, and form associations with the emotional changes of the characters through their form, texture, color, sound and other characteristics. They use the changes in the scenery and the rhythm of the scenery to show the joys, sorrows of the characters, and lead the audience to feel the inner world of the characters personally. On the other hand, directors express their aspirations with scenery, comparing natural changes with the changes of the world to convey the philosophy of life. They either use the stormy waves to metaphor the suffering of life, or symbolize the struggle of human nature, triggering the thinking of life through the poetic expression of natural scenery, highlighting the unique metaphysical pursuit of slow film. It is worth mentioning that the directors are also good at using the traditional Chinese poetic image system, such as "landscape", "romantic", "flowers and birds", to express life philosophy, reflecting the slow movie's promotion of classical aesthetics and highlighting its distinctive characteristics of oriental aesthetics.

5 Conclusion

This paper discusses the oriental aesthetic characteristics of Chinese slow films from three aspects of time, meditation and poetic expression. By deliberately delaying the rhythm of images, calmly paying attention to the reality, creating artistic conception and poetic natural scenery, Chinese slow films build a unique aesthetic style, reflecting the inheritance of traditional culture and the exploration of modernity. In the context of globalization, Chinese slow films, with their unique aesthetic charm, inject oriental wisdom and poetic charm into the world films, showing the diversified expression power of film art. This kind of film aesthetics with oriental implication and humanistic care will promote the world film art to a more rich and profound realm.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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