

On the Ontology of Taiwanese Films in the Post Declare Martial Law Ended Period

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In addition to describing the social reality of Taiwan's political and economic chaos, Taiwan's films after the lifting of martial law also try to explore the ultimate significance of human existence, showing the color of ontology. Under the influence of postmodern culture, Taiwan films adopt non-linear narrative methods such as fragmented, time countercurrent or psychological time, emphasizing people's instant experience and expressing modern people's anxiety and social absurdity. In addition, the film highlights the gridding and deformed space, so as to highlight the interpersonal alienation and survival dilemma of modern cities. Taiwanese films also reflect the impermanence of fate, the nothingness of existence, and the absurdity of society through the death of characters. It is also coupled with the existential view of "living to death" and "others are hell".

Keywords: lifting martial law, Taiwan film, time, space, death

Taiwanese films in the 1990s depicted the current situation of Taiwan, which was characterized by the declining trend of the world and chaos, criticized the misplacement of values and the disorder of disciplines in modern society, revealed the crush of heterogeneous civilizations on atomized urbanites, and showed that people had no way to escape. In addition to revealing the negative consequences of modernity on society in terms of epistemology, the film also presents postmodern characteristics. However, different from the Western postmodernism, which advocates planarization and deep disappearance, Taiwan films touch on existentialism. Through thinking about time, space and human death, the film explores the ultimate significance of human beings in terms of ontology and endows the film with rational color.

Time: Nonlinear Narration

Corresponding to the fragmented and fragmented lifestyle of postmodernism, the narrative of fragmentation, time compression, lengthening or reverse reflux has replaced the linear narrative, and narrative literature has got rid of the shackles of linear narrative. The same is true of Taiwanese films in the post martial law period. In Taiwanese films, not only are films with a longer time span replaced by films that focus on instant time experience, but even films with a time length deliberately break the linear structure of time in the narrative process and replace them with time-space confusion, ancient and modern crossing, and blurred boundaries

between the past, present and future, resulting in the blurred effect of history and imagination, reality and fantasy, and the integration of reality and fantasy, giving people a sense of chaos and disorder.

Just Live One Day for You (1993) shows from the film title that modern youth do not care about eternity, but about the emotional direction of a moment. The change of modern people from pursuing eternity to infatuation with instant experience pleasure is related to people's postmodern view of time. Zygmunt Bauman pointed out that the modern concept of time is a concept of time that rises linearly until the end. Under its domination, people believe that the false happiness is short-lived, and eternity is the real happiness. Society encourages people to suppress themselves as the only way to the end of eternal happiness. In the modern era of mobility, the combination of technology and consumption makes people pursue the maximization of profits. Time, especially speed, is valued. Therefore, time accelerates to an instant. It no longer gives space value, and continuous experience of instant happiness becomes the safest happiness. In the rapid operation of society, people can only seize the moment in front of them. No one knows what will happen in the next second. Human beings cannot see the end of the future. The instantaneous replacement of eternity in post-modern society means the end of linear narration, the disappearance of grand narration, and the nonlinear narration of fragmentation and time-space disorder on the stage.

The film starts from a busy day in Taipei. Chen Zhifeng, who works in a KTV, met Miss Tang, the mistress of the boss of the underworld, and picked up her diary left in the coffee shop. Since then, his curiosity about Miss Tang has changed into a strong admiration. The real time of the subsequent events is hidden, and the obvious time mark in the film is the date recorded in Miss Tang's untrustworthy diary. Although this date tells the audience what happened on a certain day of a month, it is not directly related to the main events described in the film. It eliminates the importance of time in linear narration. At the same time, this time is cut in the form of voice over in which Miss Tang herself does not appear, resulting in the dislocation between the narrative time and the event time. Due to the absence of time, the emotional/psychological basis of Chen Zhifeng's crazy love for Miss Tang was not shown in the film. The focus of the film turned to Chen Zhifeng's efforts to approach Miss Tang and witnessed the kidnapping case directed and acted by Miss Tang by mistake. In order to save the kidnapped Miss Tang, Chen Zhifeng drove around the Taipei viaduct desperately. In the vast traffic flow, the whole Taipei was like a huge machine, and people involuntarily got involved and followed it. Through Chen Zhifeng's unreasonable behavior in order to get Miss Tang's love, the film highlights the character's postmodern psychological instant experience and the significance of modern people's existence. At the end of the film, all kinds of irrational speculation from Taiwan media and citizens about the sudden explosion pushed the idea of the film to a climax, that is, it tortured the way and significance of modern people's existence through the fate of individuals, clarified the historical significance of individuals in the connection with the whole society, and satirized the collective fear and anxiety that Taiwan society was unable to avoid in the 1990s, with absurdity and humor on the paper.

Moonlight Boy (1993) directly condenses the changes of decades in one day, and solidifies the growth of individuals in the memory of the day when a 15-year-old boy accompanied his sister to Zhongshan Hall to participate in the singing competition. The film uses a supernatural world that looks like reality and fantasy to force teenagers' spiritual gaps and emotional confusion in the real world. *Flying Hero ADA* (1994) not only adopts the postmodern hybrid technique of combining reality and surreality, history and the present, magic and

realism, but also allows ADA, who is addicted to lightness skills, to learn martial arts in real society and the legendary historical stories of martial arts masters of the “Red Lotus Society” under the authoritarian rule of the Kuomintang in the 1950s dictated by Uncle Mao, which eliminates the continuity and certainty of event time, and makes ADA live in a fragmented time crack. Terrorists ended the single end of linear time with an open ending, changing the characteristics of single line forward, irreversibility and vector of time. In these films, time does not show its cruelty as time flies. The narrative techniques of dreams, ghosts and magic deconstruct the irreversible physical facts of the past, present and future of linear time. The stagnation of time and the confusion between ancient and modern suggest that postmodernism has doubts about linear and technological time.

The mechanical and rigid life in modern society deprives people of the fun of life, and breaking away from the oppression of instrumental rationality has become the core appeal of postmodern culture. Breaking through the shackles of linear time and allowing people to indulge in Carnival narratives in irreversible time has become a joke of postmodern literary and artistic works on the cold time. It shows that people are trying to break away from the ruthless confinement of modern linear time view, reflecting people’s ideal way of survival and expressing their meditation on it.

In addition to the countercurrent of time, Taiwanese films sometimes simply cancel the sense of time and let the external physical time solidify or simply transform it into the character’s psychological time. For example, Cai Mingliang’s *Cave* (1998) cuts off the connection between the character and the external world, and the character is enclosed in an old apartment. When the space is compressed, time is also compressed with it, resulting in the delay of narrative time. Sometimes Cai Mingliang also emphasizes the existence of time, but it is a changed psychological time, which is a kind of “imagined time”, rather than “real time”. In essence, time is still regarded as an empty signifier, which is difficult to give people a continuous and stable practical feeling. In *What Time is It over There* (2001), the time difference between Taipei and Paris disappears due to the psychological imagination of the characters, and the imaginary time replaces the real time: mother gets up at midnight to cook and thinks it is father’s time. Xiaokang slowly dials the clock again and again and feels the time synchronization with that of Xiangqi who is far away in Paris. Xiangqi who wears Xiaokang watch feels the mysterious connection with him in the dark night of Paris. Here time is separated by space, and time becomes the abstraction and nothingness to capture and feel in a closed psychological space. In Taiwanese films, we can not see the past, present and future of the characters (even if there are subjective hallucinations of the characters, the future exists in imagination). Peeping, excretion, masturbation, bathing and transvestism, which are extremely private and trivial “small histories”, have been repeatedly written by the film. Correspondingly, the complete plot of the film has been abandoned, and the beginning and ending of the film no longer strictly follow the “logos centrism”, often with unprovoked starting and ending. Because the film does not pay attention to the temporal order of causes and consequences, and focuses on describing the fragmented life fragments of the characters, the concept of time required by the traditional linear film has been removed, and the fragmented and fractured time has been removed. It is just coupled with the way of human existence in the post-modern society.

Space: The Plight of Human Existence

Oswald Spengler believed that the outward expansion of the survival boundary is the embodiment of the will to power. Michel Foucault proposed that power is omnipresent in the space of daily life. It is possible to monitor

and discipline in closed spaces such as hospitals, prisons or schools. In a word, modern society is a spatialized society and a disciplinarian space. The space scene in *Young Nezha* vividly annotates Foucault's view. In the film, Aze, Abin and others are drunk and staggering or sitting or lying on the desolate construction site. At this time, the camera moves slowly from the outside of the barbed wire surrounding the construction site. Aze and others are divided by the barbed wire and tightly wrapped inside. This symbolic scene clearly shows the situation of urbanites being imprisoned and separated by modern society.

The space scene of people being separated and juxtaposed in Taiwanese films is a portrayal of the grid living space of modern cities. The city's crisscross streets, rows of buildings and apartments, bars and hotels seem to give people a diversified, three-dimensional and hidden spatial structure, but in this grid space, people are separated into atoms, and people can't surmount the barrier when looking at each other. In modern society, the public is coerced by loneliness and indifference. Taiwanese films focus on the alienation of individual atomic people. In *Long Live Love* (1994), the empty houses that the sales lady showed the homeowner and the urn sold by Li Kangsheng, a salesman of the spirit bone tower, hide unknown urban individuals in each space, "strongly highlighting the alienation and indifference brought about by the fragmented urban space" (Li, 1998, p. 35). The image of the hole in the hole due to the rupture of the upper and lower floors of the apartment metaphorically refers to the interpersonal relationship in modern cities: people in a unit space are eager to communicate with others in another unit space, but mutual distrust and suspicion hinder the occurrence of communication, and people are increasingly shrinking in their own closed space. Cai Mingliang imprisoned a man and a woman in a dilapidated building isolated from the outside world with an unknown epidemic situation, separated from the concept of social attachment, symbolized the isolated building as an isolated island (symbolizing Taiwan's Island geography?), and then abstracted the island landscape to the observation of modern human living conditions.

The expression of the loneliness and depression of modern urbanites and the inability of human beings to control their own destiny thus presents two directions in the space of Taiwanese films. A kind of slightly surreal film that mainly shows the narrow space of the city by Cai Mingliang. He likes to use the methods of symbol and hint; One is a realistic/modern film that uses the motion and angle of the lens with the help of shooting skills to show urbanites' progress and retreat in the unpredictable world. It is good at subjective spatial deformation. Cai Mingliang used a low stand to shoot narrow, closed post industrial urban space: either cramped, small and humble toilets/kitchens, telephone kiosks, telephone dating centers, inns, crowded night markets, overpasses, closed and surrounded apartment corridors and elevators, rising and falling escalators, abandoned construction sites, unfinished bare man-made parks, naturally disappeared here. The narrow space, the oppression and the separation of nature have suddenly increased the tension between people and society. With the image of the cage in which the characters wander from one closed space to another, as well as the endless rain, gurgling sewage, cervical pain and other strange phenomena in the film, the film depicts the isolation of human individual spiritual space and the lonely and helpless prisoners under the control of mechanical and monotonous modern society.

In the latter kind of film, the squeeze and aggression of urban space on people are realized through the rapid movement of the lens and montage. In *Super Citizen* (1995), there are many aerial shots of Taipei. The film was filmed from a bird's-eye view of Taipei City: high-rise buildings cut into the space of Taipei one after another. The execution ground for political prisoners was turned into a youth park. The Lion Grove commercial building was located on the police headquarters where political prisoners were imprisoned. The former military justice

department of the police headquarters has become the Lailai Hotel today. These shots are taken from high altitude at a faster speed and appear in the film as fast montage clips. The shots give people tension and pressure with rapid movement. “Here, the introduction of the story location did not use the establishment shot common in Hollywood movies, but through a group of numerous and broken images at a dizzying rate. Although the director did not explain other viewpoints of this group of images except the camera viewpoint, the nightmare scenes and distorted images seemed to imply a ‘madman’ view of the city” (Sun, 2008, p. 154), the director surveyed the rapidly expanding urban space from the perspective of a ‘madman’, and the apocalyptic nature of Taipei City spontaneously emerged.

In addition, there is “electronic space”, which is the product of high technology. It is both real and imaginative, which is what Jean Baudrillard called simulacrum. It is a space where matter and imagination coexist. The telephone dating space and message call in *Young Nezha*, the KTV, the sausage family’s wireless phone, computer network, mobile phone, Bbcall and other communication equipment in *Just Live for You* shorten the distance between people. However, the essence of electronic space “cuts off the already crowded space in the city, reduces the normal interaction between people, and deepens the sense of loneliness and alienation” (Li, 1998, p. 34). In a sense, it shows that the electronic media has strongly intervened in the urban society of Taipei, making people live in the virtual and real world, and adapting to the mix of postmodernism.

Jameson believes that postmodernism is to transform the time narrative of modernity into the space narrative of postmodernism, and that space really has the priority of theme. “In postmodernism, time has become space anyway” (Jameson, 2000, p. 61). Taiwan’s films cancel/dilute the sense of time and highlight urban space. The fragmented, superficial and hybrid narration of the films depicts “the ‘postmodern’ experience of Taipei metropolis, and the main style presented is generally ‘postmodern’ form” (Lin, 1995, p. 84). Although postmodern films no longer pay attention to grand narration and promote the Spiritual Banner of enlightenment and sublimity, it also has the significance of “ontology”, that is, to give the ultimate thinking of human existence (ontology), in addition to the reference of experience from the epistemological level. Taiwanese films ask about human existence and the ultimate meaning of life, explore the true nature of life and expose social absurdity. For example, Yang Dechang’s film uses “postmodern critical spaces” to show the powerlessness of human beings as creators of urban space (Yang, 2007, p. 6). Cai Mingliang, Wanren, etc. discussed the dilemma of human existence in modern cities through alienating and unfamiliar image modeling of urban closed space: human beings always live in an isolated world, and are in worry and fear. No matter how he struggles, he can not escape the world’s manipulation.

Death: A Way of Human Existence

Taiwanese films touch on the issue of death from different angles, including both passive death (killed or accidental death) and active death (suicide). They reflect the living conditions of the bizarre Taiwanese urbanites living in the 1990s, and reveal their essence of existence—the original sense of nothingness and absurdity of existence, suspicion between people, and depression and metamorphosis of people. The death narrative of Taiwan films reveals the way of urban people’s existence, which shows a philosophical tendency very similar to the Western Existentialism’s inquiry into the essence of human existence.

The killing of film characters such as *Young Man, Ann!* (1993) and *Dao Wen* (1989) by the underworld may only expose the casual human life of Taiwan gangs and the anomie of the society at that time, which does not seem to be related to the philosophy of human existence. However, the film has touched on the thinking of human fate. *Farewell to the South, the South* (1996) continued the torture of fate, even with a strong fatalism color. In order to prevent his girlfriend from living a worried and fearful life, Xiao Gao, the leader of the underworld, tried to quit the Jianghu. When he worked hard for this goal, when the myriad of things came to an end and seemed close to the goal, Xiao Gao's car fell in the rice field for no reason. The fragility of life and the unpredictability of fate are quietly diffused in the freeze frame at the end. Through Xiao Gao's travels in the urban and rural areas, the film exposes Taiwan's black money politics and social pathology. As long as *Just Live One Day for You*, it also involves the keywords of gangster, death and fate. Miss Tang never expected that she would fall into the kidnapping case planned by herself and become a meat ticket to be slaughtered. Moreover, the development of the situation was completely out of her control, and the outsider Chen Zhifeng was also involved in the coming storm—an urban black hole related to money, power and sexual disorder. Miss Tang, Chen Zhifeng and Bao Ge, who dominated the storm, were reduced to ashes in the violent explosion.

Dao Wen also refers to the wanton slaughter of ordinary people in the underworld. However, while describing the manipulation of fate on people, it also wants to show the courage of people to die when facing death. In the film, his father blocks the fatal knife for Hui to save him from being killed by Mouse Chuan's men. After the tragic death of his father, Hui suddenly realized that in a society where God has died, only fearless death can exist freely, and only fearless can we live on our own. In the hopeless situation of survival, Hui didn't abide by his father's dying will and lived by himself. He broke into the tiger's den alone to avenge his father. Heidegger believes that death is "the existence of death". Only when we first enter into death, will determination become possible. This is "the first to death" or "the existence of death". It was in the face of death that ah Hui put all his eggs in one basket and survived in a disorderly and abnormal society. Only by going first to death and taking responsibility bravely can human existence be true.

In addition to the concern about fate and the survival attitude towards death through death, Taiwan films also show the survival picture of "others are hell" advocated by existentialism through death. The terrorists describes the distrust between people and embodies Yang Dechang's Sartre—style existentialism. When Li Lizhong was plotting against his colleagues, he was disturbed by a ridiculous phone call, which made his original step-by-step life go smoothly. Not only did he not get the position he had dreamed of for a long time, but his wife left him. Under a series of blows, he was in a trance and finally shot himself. Real life is inconceivably consistent with the script written by Li Lizhong's wife Zhou Yufen. Is it true or false? Zhou Yufen was awakened by the nightmare that her lover was covered with blood and died of a gun explosion. She looked at her lover who was sleeping beside her. She could not distinguish whether the scene just now was a dream or a reality. "Reality and illusion, existence and nothingness were easily confused and displaced" (Zhang, 1999, p. 33). The multiple endings of the film refer to the impermanence, contingency and suspicious living conditions of life. In long live love, Xiaokang committed suicide by cutting his wrist. Unexpectedly, the wound on his wrist condensed and Xiaokang did not die from excessive blood loss. He had to continue to live in this lifeless and caring cold society. The film directly describes the living situation of Taipei urbanites in a black humor way, and reveals the mental state and paradox of people in Taiwan's social and cultural context.

Most of the characters in Taiwan movies are playing with the perverse society to die. The sudden abnormal death reflects the hardship and helplessness of human life in such a morbid and more unpredictable society. The meaning of human existence is touched in such a context. Even in some movies with surreal meaning, we can see the exploration of human survival state. For example, in *My Beauty and Sadness*, if Du Lili's death from falling from a building was just an unfortunate accident caused by the contradiction between her mother's strict family rules and the girl's dim sexual desire, and did not have metaphysical thinking about death, then when Du Lili accidentally found that she often saw in her dream that the scholar who was affectionate with her actually appeared in real life, she doubted the reality as Nanke's dream. The blurring of the boundary between reality and dream in the film dispels the virtuality of dreams. Dreams and reality, reality and dreams are intertwined to create a special effect of "Zhuangsheng Xiaomeng fan butterfly".

Epilogue

Western existentialism is the emotional response to the drawbacks of Western modern civilization, which reveals the anxiety, depression, depression and other pessimism of Western society. The social chaos in the post martial law period has put Taiwan's urbanites in the same situation as the Western world, which provides a realistic soil for the film creators to think of existence. Therefore, when criticizing Taiwan's society's disordered codes of ethics, indifference of human feelings, and the inability of human beings to live poetically, the film's symbolic and symbolic abstract expression of human's Existential Dilemma and alien fear naturally shows some similar characteristics with existentialist philosophy. This is particularly evident in directors such as Cai Mingliang and Yang Dechang. However, the film is not a rational external development after all. The vividness and sensibility of the story are the premise of the film narrative, so as to attract the audience. The disadvantages of Taiwanese films are exposed when they show rational aesthetics. The allegorical space and scene in Cai Mingliang's films have become the advantages of the film, and inevitably become its disadvantages at the same time. Unfortunately, Taiwan's films have embarked on such a narrow path.

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