

Thinking on Theoretical Concept and Construction of Chinese Film Theory

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Abstract—Chinese film industry has made rapid progress in the past decades. However, compared with the blowout development in practice, Chinese film theory has obvious vacancies and lags behind. This paper analyses the particularity and generality of film theory by sorting out the concept and function of theory and extending it to film theory. On this basis, the author tries to analyze some characteristics and problems in the development of Chinese film theory.

Keywords—theory; Chinese film theory; view of theory

I. INTRODUCTION

Theory is not only the spiritual core of science, but also the guiding ideology to support the construction of a discipline. For a long time, due to the differences between natural sciences and social sciences, the conceptual interpretation and functional orientation of theories are different. This difference has its advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, the misunderstanding of theory is not conducive to the communication between disciplines and the qualitative definition of some interdisciplinary concepts, and to hinder the dissemination and promotion of knowledge to some extent. On the other hand, it is the difference of theoretical interpretation among different disciplines that ensures the independence of interdisciplinary development, and is also conducive to the deepening of concepts and the accuracy of disciplinary theory.

As a comprehensive art, since the film was born in 1895, it has also produced numerous complicated theories along with the growth trajectory of practice. It is these theories that guide the film from its original juggling and spectacle to a social science with the functions of narration, documentary, expression, communication of civilization and so on. The concept of theory and film theory complement each other, contain and be included. Because of the strong practicality of film application and its close combination with industry and technology, the renovation is relatively fast. The rapid progress of a large number of practical foundations and practical technologies has directly led to the synchronous expansion of film theory. However, at the same time of the birth of many theories, theorists' understanding of the theory, the historical view and the practical view of the theory has appeared obvious misunderstanding deviation. Under such circumstances, the necessary conditions and distinctions of

the theory of articulate argument are of guiding significance for the removal of falsehood, preservation of authenticity and purification of film theory.

II. THEORY AND FILM THEORY

A. Theoretical Dividing Line

The importance of theory is obvious to any discipline. It is the qualitative cornerstone of the development of all concepts in any discipline. However, our understanding of the theoretical concept has not been clear for a long time. Theory, known as doctrine theory or doctrine, is the hypothesis demonstration of human beings for natural and social phenomena according to known empirical experience, knowledge rules and factual verification. The theory must be validated and summarized by conventional or inferential methods, deductive methods and other scientific methods in accordance with historical logic.

Because of the differences in the nature, starting point and angle of the subject, the understanding of the theory is also different. The Harper Collins Dictionary of Sociology defines theory as "a set of hypotheses or propositions connected by logical or mathematical statements. It explains a certain field or a certain kind of phenomena of empirical reality. In a less stringent sense, any abstract and general statement about a field of reality can be called a theory, which usually refers to the elaboration of general concepts." [1] From this statement, we can see that the definition of theory in the Harper Collins Dictionary of Sociology of the United States starts from the generality and abstraction of theory, which is a broad definition, focusing on the source and purpose of theory.

Different from the broad definition of theory, the narrow definition of theory focuses on the different functions of theory according to the nature and research focus of different disciplines. Lin Yifu, a contemporary economist, said in "On Economic Methods": "Theory, whether economic theory or other social science theory or natural science theory, is a simple logic system of causality between quantities behind the phenomena to be explained. The so-called explanatory phenomena refers to the process that the "cause" of theoretical explanation goes through what mechanism, and produces the "effect", which is the phenomenon we observe. In-depth speaking, "to be a scientific theory, there must be

two consistencies. Firstly, since any theory is a logical system of causality among several specific variables, the internal logic of the theory must be consistent. Only the internal logic of a theory is consistent, it can be proved that several variables of the theoretical model are causal. Secondly, the logical inference of the theory and the phenomena to be explained must be consistent, that is, the external reasoning of the theory and the economic phenomena. [2] Lin Yifu's definition of theory obviously belongs to a narrow theoretical view, emphasizing one of the functions of theory: explanatory phenomena. On this basis, theory and inference are distinguished.

China's understanding of theory is influenced by the Marxist concept of practice, which combines theory with practice closely, and holds that theory is a hypothesis or proposition which is connected by logic. It is not only a comprehensive grasp of real events, but also a powerful tool to guide practice in the field of social science. The most typical view of practice with Chinese characteristics originated from Mao Zedong's Theory of Practice (on the relationship between knowledge and practice — the relationship between knowledge and action). The theory of practice holds that human cognition originates from practice, including two successive stages: perceptual knowledge and rational knowledge. "The characteristics of the two stages in the process of cognition are perceptual in the lower stage, and theoretical in the higher stage. Sensation only solves phenomenal problems, while theory solves essential problems." [3] China's Marxist view of practice is formed in the context of long-term Marxist political view, and it also represents the research methods of social science and natural science in China. This concept pays attention to the source and purpose of theory, emphasizes the close relationship between theory and practice, but neglects other functions of theory, such as explaining phenomena and predicting the future.

B. The Concept of Film Theory

What is the meaning of explaining phenomena and predicting the future? In his book "The Logic of Science in Sociology", Wallace argues that there are two functions of theory in the process of science. One is to explain the generalization of known experience, and the other is to predict the generalization of unknown experience. Testing provides the most objective, accurate and sensitive rules for measuring whether hypotheses are consistent with research results. For this test, both hypothesis and research results must be expressed in quantitative form. [4]

As the most typical applied social science, film theory comes from the highly refined experience of countless film theorists in the long course of film development, and is constantly being tested by practice. Whether it is Hugo Münster's film psychology, Bazin's film theory or Montage school, all of them have solid knowledge background, strict logical framework and reasonable value construction. For film, any set of mature film theory is not only to explain the past experience and reality, but also to provide interpretation, guidance and evaluation of the transformation of the real

world and macro-control and prediction of the future development of the film market.

Film science is different from other disciplines, and its knowledge focuses more on value selection and meaning generation. Film belongs to social science. It is an art, must conform to aesthetic norms and respect the development method of social science. At the same time, it is a technology closely linked with the progress of natural science all the time. Phonograph, color film, digital projection, 3D imaging, 4K technology... every technological progress has a direct impact on the growth of the film. Therefore, for the film, the traditional theoretical concepts are obviously not fully applicable. In a sense, film theory should be based on the meaning of the film. According to different perspectives and different emphases, various theories are produced. Some theories are based on the meaning of audience-film interaction, such as film psychology, film reception aesthetics, film communication theory, etc. Some theories focus on the relationship between film creator and film ontology, such as Montage theory, film documentary theory, film ideological criticism theory and so on.

III. CHINESE FILM THEORY

Since the birth of Chinese film, it has also gone through a hundred years. Up to now, Chinese films have made rapid progress in terms of the number of films, the level of production, the construction of cinema lines, the cultivation of audiences, film reviews and so on. With the great leap in the volume of the film industry, as an art, the theoretical construction of the film shows obvious defects and shortcomings.

From the birth of early Chinese films to the early days of the founding of new China, Chinese film workers (most of them film theorists come from literature, painting, poetry and other fields) are still trying to explore and summarize a lot of film concepts with theoretical depth in the absence of technical means and theoretical experience. Due to the constraints of economic conditions, political factors, social environment and other factors, the development path of Chinese films is not smooth, many concepts lack practical testing, and there is no logical framework for the establishment of a system. Generally speaking, these concepts are not formed completely, and they can not be called the theory of built-up film, but more are the summary and criticism of practical experience.

A. Photoplay Views

Films were first called "movie theatres" in China. As the name implies, "film" and "drama" are taken as analogous references, and Chinese early films are deeply influenced by civilized drama and traditional drama. In August 1896, movies were introduced to Shanghai city. The earliest film review article in China was a short article entitled "Watching American Movies and Dramas" published in Game Daily on September 5, 1897. Since then, publicity posters and newspaper reviews have generally regarded movies, the novel foreign products, as "photoplay".

From 1910 to 1920, the traditional film theory in early China persisted in the photoplay view closely related to drama, literature and art, and advocated the concept of film based on social and educational functions. This aesthetic system will be the dominant trend of Chinese film theory for a long time. [5] Starting from the relationship between film and drama, photoplay view pays attention to the educational function of film, highlights the conflict of plot and drama, and neglects the authenticity and documentary function of film. In the development of film theory in the 1920s, photoplay view can be regarded as the dominant thought throughout. Many filmmakers, adhering to the photoplay view, pay attention to the formal beauty and educational significance of films, and have created many "dramatic films". At the same time, the photoplay view pays attention to storytelling and plays a prominent role in the creation of scripts. Xia Yan emphasizes the importance of script creation and vivid visualization of film creation in *Several Questions of Writing Movie Plays*, and puts forward the view that the purpose determines the creation. He believes that the creation of movie scripts should be revolutionary and utilitarian, and emphasizes the conflict of plots and dramaticity of films.

The birth of photoplay view is a prominent achievement in the theoretical research of Chinese film. At the same time, it clearly shows the drawbacks of one-sidedness, narrowness and over-metaphysics. There are left-wing writers' artistic views, Hollywood melodrama theory, Confucianism, technology and economic level and other influences. Generally speaking, the photoplay view is more like an inductive guiding ideology than a theoretical construction of controlling the overall situation. With the development of film, we see many limitations and shortcomings soon.

B. Soft Film Theory

In the 1930s, China was confronted with severe national and class struggles. As a powerful propaganda tool of mainstream consciousness, movies were endowed with unprecedented strong enlightenment and political propaganda significance. Against this background, a group of intellectuals who received western education and were deeply influenced by western film theory and Hollywood commercial film put forward the concept of "soft film". These intellectuals include Ye Lingfeng, Mu Shiyong, Liu Naou and other scholars of the new sensation school, as well as some critics, such as Yao Sufeng and Huang Jiamo. They call for the film to return to the visual, abandon too many literary elements, criticize the film as a complete political tool, and advocate the film as a pure art for research. One of the most representative views is Liu Naou's "ice cream theory", which compares the movie to "ice cream for the eyes, sofa chair for the soul". Once the concept of soft film was put forward, it was promoted to an ideological level, and was strongly criticized by left-wing writers and patriots. In *"History of the Development of Chinese Films"*, Cheng Jihua said that "the soft things advocated and sought after by the soft film theorists attempt to kill 'the life of Chinese movies newly born. They advocate 'making soft films with absurd and lustful pleasures' [6].

In fact, the proposal of soft film was soon overwhelmed by the mainstream artistic concept advocated by the left-wing writers in the historical context at that time. Objectively speaking, soft film is a regressive exploration of the artistry of film and the audio-visual language noumenon of film in China. The concept is more like the cap given by the patriots when Liu Na'ou, Mu Shiyong, Huang Jiamo and others publicize European art movies, Western film theory and Hollywood commercial genres in China. Whether it is the debate on the soft or hard, or the debate on artistry and education, it is a debate about the film's ontology and function. Both of them have strong limitations of the times. In today's view, there is no right or wrong choice for the meaning of the film. Apart from ideological criticism, soft film is only a failed attempt to forcibly land western films. Moreover, the soft film only lasted a few years in the public's vision from birth to disappearance. Many ideas of the "New Sensation School" have not been put into practice, or even have no chance to influence the theoretical circles. Liu Na'ou and others focused more on introducing western film theory, but did not build a complete set of theory according to the actual situation of China. Soft film lacks the support of logical knowledge system, practical test and overall construction, so it can not be called theory.

C. Ideological Views of Criticism

During the Cultural Revolution, the high-pressure control of ideology reduced the film to a tool for political service. This omni-directional control peaked between the 1960s and 1970s. During this period, the film critics were also influenced by the left-leaning political tendency. For the ideological criticism of films such as *Biography of Wuxun*, after careful reading and deconstruction of the film's text, the content of the film was regarded as the expression of the creator's subconscious political views. Meanwhile, in France in the 1960s, the left-leaning political tendency of "Cahiers du cinéma" and "Film Power" led to a change in film theory and critical methodology. As a means of expression, film belongs to the superstructure of ideology. It is criticized as the appearance of ideology in terms of the imaging mechanism, creation process, theme and form of film performance, and even the way of projection. Quickly, this way of seeking the spiritual core of film in the interaction among text creation, social environment and political orientation to reproduce reality has attracted wide attention in the West, and has developed into one of the most dynamic film theories in the 20th century. In the theory of ideological criticism of film, film is called the most powerful ideological state machine. It is not only subject to ideology, but also constantly produces such ideology. During the Chinese Revolution, the special political environment made ideological criticism fully applied to film creation and commentary, which was in line with the trend in the film theorists at that time. Unfortunately, in the 1980s, when western ideological criticism theory was gradually completed and introduced into China, Chinese ideological criticism remained at the methodological level and did not rise to the theoretical level. Due to the change of political tendency caused by social change, the localization of Western ideology criticism theory in China focuses on the

dialogue between Chinese ideology and western hegemonic ideology, ignoring many complex film interpretation issues. In a word, although the theory of film ideological criticism in China started earlier and had originality, it was deficient and failed to shape up.

D. De-dramatization

After the reform and opening up, in view of the abnormal creation of movies caused by political factors for a long time, many film scholars in China have rethought, appealed for the divorce of movies from drama and literature, and advocated the independence of film art. On the other hand, due to the influence of "photoplay theory" and "synthesis theory", which have been the mainstream ideology for long time, the relationship among film and literature, drama, even poetry, painting and other arts has been an indisputable fact. Many film scholars have criticized the possibility of pure film and strongly advocated the view of film "synthesis theory". Nowadays, the debate on the independence of film art in China is still going on, but the core topic of discussion — the discussion on the film noumenon, is not original in China.

As early as the birth of the film, Italian poet and film theorist Giotto Canudou defined the film as the "seventh art" of poetry, painting, music, sculpture, drama and dance. German Gestalt psychologist and film scientist Rudolph Eindharn also made a detailed artistic characterization of the film from the perspective of Gestalt psychology. However, China lags behind the West in the study of the independence and comprehensiveness of movies, and the theoretical tools used in them are all those that have been used in foreign countries for decades. Viewing the results today, it is an academic controversy of film theory, but is far from the theory. Moreover, up to now, no one has come up with an overwhelming and comprehensive view.

IV. THE VIEW OF CHINESE FILM THEORY

Although there is no complete film theory system in Chinese films, there are still many representative film theory viewpoints and concepts. These concepts are more or less mixed with the embryonic theory. To sum up, the so-called "theory" of Chinese films belongs to a kind of imperfect methodology summarized by the filmmakers in transforming the world without powerful tools. They generally have the following characteristics:

A. Pan-interpretation

One of the important functions of theory, interpretation, refers to the basic understanding of the real world and the interpretation of empirical reality. Interpretation and induction is the most important function of natural science. The primary task of theoretical disciplines is to explain the world and seek the law, which belongs to the explanatory disciplines. However, it is not enough for some applied disciplines to have explanatory function. The primary purpose of applied disciplines is to transform the world and belong to constructive disciplines. Correspondingly, the knowledge born in theoretical science has a distinct explanatory nature, which can help us better understand the

world; and the knowledge generated in applied science should be more constructive, so as to guide us to transform the world. Therefore, for applied science, such as film, its theory should not only have explanatory function, but also be constructive and predictive on the basis of grasping reality and the present.

Many film theories in China have the characteristics of explanatory interpretation, which is mainly manifested in the fact that many film theories only make a rough summary of the current disciplinary basis and historical context. This summary has strong limitations of the times. Whether it is the "photoplay view", "soft film", or "hard film", once the era is updated, social progress, these film concepts based on specific context will become obsolete. One of the drawbacks of over-interpretation is that it ignores the source of discipline theory and does not explore the purpose and function of theory, resulting in the lack of theoretical integrity. The foresight of a theory is directly related to the future development of the theory, the logic of theoretical research and the results of practical test. Because of the excessive emphasis on interpretation and neglecting the predictive function of theory to the real world, Chinese film theory generally does not have lasting vitality, and most of them are short-sighted.

B. Superficial Conceptualization

The development of Chinese film theory is restricted by many factors, such as economy, politics and so on. It is congenitally insufficient. It was born on the basis of the mature foreign theories and was influenced by the existing experience. The understanding of theory, the concept of film, and the induction and prediction of the future are all too perceptual and direct. Many theories only stay in the superficial analysis and induction of some film phenomena in the current historical context, lacking sufficient knowledge background support and follow-up excavation, which makes Chinese film theory generally present an obvious idealistic, fragmented and superficial feature.

These theoretical viewpoints are scattered in periodicals, articles, speeches and seminars of different locations, periods and theorists, and there is no master clearly putting forward a set of theories that can be tested by practice. Many Chinese film theories have only the rudiment of theory. Some are the localization thinking of western film theories, and some are the criticism and guidance with theoretical color for the development of Chinese films in a specific period. However, they are generally characterized by the limitations of the times and the fragmentation of ideas.

There are many reasons for theoretical conceptualization. Social environment and economic level, as external factors, directly restrict the development of film theory in the context. Internally, Chinese film theory lacks the spirit of positivism of western natural science, comprehensive grasp of the overall situation and rigorous logical and scientific thinking. Many film concepts are based on the perceptual opinions of a certain film phenomenon at present, lacking the rational induction process to make the concept rise to theory. It lacks the theoretical system of construction system, clear

theoretical framework, logical structure and teacher-student relationship.

C. Internalization

There is always a certain rule to follow in the development of any new discipline. When it develops from inside to outside to a certain node, it is necessary to turn from outside to inside, combine with other disciplines, and seek a new theoretical trend at the intersection. This is true for music, painting, sculpture, even mechanics, chemistry, microbial engineering in natural sciences. Looking back at China, the trend of theory is always stuck in the film noumenon in the field of film, and there are still debates on the issues of film ontology and film synthesis. China's film theory has not been on the road of cross-discipline, but has been stuck on the issue of film ontology creation for a long time.

As early as the birth of the film, western film scientists generally focused on the film ontology, artistic nature, and narrative methods. The famous Montage theory, Bazin's series of theories, author theory and so on, all revolve around the creation of the film, and carry on the analysis inside the film. After the 1960s, the research focus of film theory has been gradually transformed. To some extent, it changes from the theory of creation to the theory of acceptance. Whether it is film psychology, film semiotics, film feminism or other theory, the deconstruction of the film is the main task. The popularity of interdisciplinary research has led to the film starting to jump out of the scope of ontology and turn to psychology, semiotics, sociology, communication, feminism and other social disciplines for help. Through the intersection and collision of different disciplines, innovative points are created, and different perspectives and theoretical frameworks are used to interpret films from the outside to the inside in order to find new directions for the development of films.

Looking back at China, almost all the theoretical research focuses on the noumenon of the film, the art rules and creative skills of the film from the point of view of the creator. On the other hand, this trend also reflects a long-standing drawback of Chinese academia, that is, the space for academic communication is too small, and the foresight of theory is too narrow. The "circle" of each discipline is relatively closed and independent, which directly leads to the unidirectional development of the discipline. The same is true of film theory. It is self-confident and always seeks development in ontology theory, resulting in the lack of fresh impetus for the progress of film script creation, technological innovation and film criticism. The progress of theory is also generally sluggish, and it is difficult to make new breakthroughs.

It has been nearly a hundred years since movies entered China. While we affirm the rapid development of film practice, we should also see that, due to the long-term absence of Chinese independent film theory, Chinese movies are always restricted to the West, and in a situation of imitating learning, making an overall judgement on the basis of one-sided viewpoint and walking behind the scenes.

Chinese one-sided pursuit of breakthroughs in film volume ignores the pursuit of film art. Utilitarian pursuit of progress in film practice make people forget that film theory is the most powerful tool to guide practice.

V. CONCLUSION

Today, we are in the best of times. The state's support for films has reached an unprecedented height. In the era of big data, the convenience and rapidity of information exchange make interdisciplinary communication and integration better. The discipline construction of film theory in China is also in full swing in major universities. In addition, the number of films and the number of viewers doubled every year, resulting in a lot of practical experience. These conditions have never been experienced by Bazin, Griffith, Eisenstein and others. It should be said that film theory is in a golden age of time, geography, people and all. The author believes that in the future, the Chinese film theory circles will be able to get rid of the stale and bring forth the fresh, and walk a truly independent road of discipline, guiding the practice of film to open up a new world.

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