

Aesthetic Comparison of Chinese and Western Disaster Films

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ABSTRACT

The frequent occurrence of natural disasters and the lack of a spiritual have become major issues for human reflection. As a means of human expression, art and aesthetics should assume the responsibility of saving the crisis of the human body and mind. As one of the typical types of Hollywood, disaster films should convey deeper cultural connotations. However, the Hollywood disaster films with commercial spirit as the core and image technology as the pillar are not enough to inspire human reflection. There are obvious differences in the aesthetic expression of disaster films between China and the West. Both Chinese and Western cultures provide valuable ideological resources for the world to deal with ecological crises. This paper will compare the different development of disaster films in China and the West, and find more ways for the future development of the two cultures. This research is helpful to understand the aesthetics of humans and nature and plays an irreplaceable role in the mutual learning of Chinese and Western aesthetic thoughts.

Keywords: *Disaster Films, Aesthetic Culture, Chinese and Western, Cultural Differences.*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Definition of Disaster Films

The disaster film is a film genre whose central plot is a large-scale disaster caused by nature, humans, or imaginary extra-terrestrial beings to human society, including natural disasters, accidents, terrorist attacks, or global disasters [1]. Disaster film, with its exciting plot, thrilling scenes, incisively and vividly disaster landscape, profound and profound cultural expression, has become a type of commercial film and art film, is one of the most popular film types of the majority of audiences, The disaster film, as a natural disaster film, should reflect the conflict between nature and human beings [2]. Thomas Schatz, a genre researcher, says that the narrative framework of any genre is rooted in a predetermined system [3]. Disaster films could be broadly divided into realist disaster films and science fiction disaster films. The former is artistic fiction based on real-life, while the latter is artistic fiction based on existing facts and scientific principles. These films can also be divided into horror and science fiction films. They overlap because they both reflect the conflict between nature and human beings, and the conflict between nature and human beings caused by human's intention to conquer nature with high-tech means. When the audience watches disaster movies,

what they see on the screen is a variety of disaster scenes, and what they feel is darkness, sand, stones, and disaster scenes of the earth-shaking. Of course, disaster film is a genre that reflects the conflict between nature and human beings, showing the struggle between human beings and disasters. It always begins with the threat of death and ends with a massive death scene. It does not focus on one country or one nation, but on the disaster of the whole human race, death and life, involving the philosophical level of ultimate concern for the fate of human beings on earth.

1.2. Development of Chinese and Western Disaster Movies

The development of American Hollywood disaster films experienced two major developments, the first in the 1970s and the second in the 1990s, which were closely related to the political, economic and cultural backgrounds. Especially after the 1990s, various activities themed on ecological crises began to lead humans to think about their place in the universe and the relationship between man and nature. Hollywood disaster movies have developed rapidly and achieved lasting box office results worldwide in recent years. At the same time, the emergence of digital virtual image generation technology just provides convenience for the shooting of

disaster films. Facing the subtle survival crisis in the films, human beings begin to rethink the relationship between humans and nature. In real life, with the progress and development of science and technology, human beings are becoming increasingly aware of the tragic price paid for the pursuit of development. According to the top 10 Hollywood box office figures from 1996 to 2022 [4], disaster movies are always on the top of the list: *Independence Day* in 1996 earned \$817 million at the box office, *Titanic* in 1997 earned \$1.842 billion, *The Day After Tomorrow* in 2004 earned \$544 million, *2012* in 2009 earned \$283 million, and *Godzilla* in 2014 earned \$500 million at the box office, as well as *Green Island* in 2020, etc. During this period, the scope of disaster films continued to expand, and disasters such as windstorms, fires, and earthquakes, which could not be reproduced in the past due to technical limitations, could now be put on the screen to meet people's imagination of disasters.

The release of these films in China set off a disaster film boom. After entering the 21st century, Chinese film production has improved. With the improvement of the film industry system, the creation of disaster films in this period has been closer to Hollywood-style big scene films. The artistic creation of disaster films has become increasingly mature. Especially in recent years, films such as *Hero of Fire* (2019), *Captain China* (2019), and *Wandering Earth* (2019) have gained box office success. Taking this opportunity, the creation of disaster films presents a new aesthetic tendency, which plays a positive role in the genre creation and creative promotion of Chinese disaster films and marks the brand of The Times.

2. MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS THEORY IN DISASTER FILMS

Human beings must pursue high-quality survival and development after meeting the needs of life, which can be said to be the fundamental and driving force of all human activities. Artistic acts understand the value and ultimate significance of life by presenting individual human life. Besides material life, human beings also have deeper spiritual needs. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a motivational theory in psychology that includes a five-level model of human needs, often described as a pyramid hierarchy. Looking up from the bottom of the hierarchy, these are physiology (food and clothing), safety (job security), love and belonging needs (friendship), self-esteem and self-actualization. This five-stage model could be divided into deficit needs and being needs. The first four levels are usually called deficit needs (D-needs) and the fifth level is referred to as growth or being needs (B-needs) [5]. As an aesthetic activity, disaster movies are consistent with Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Disaster films use audiovisual language to express grand scenes and satisfy people's inadequate needs. The artistic time, space and social

values expressed by disaster films can meet people's needs for survival. Therefore, from this perspective, disaster films are popular because they meet the need of audiences.

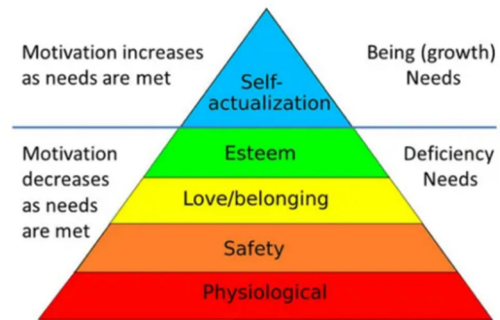


Figure 1 Maslow's hierarchy of needs

2.1. The Audio-visual Feast of Disaster Film

As a kind of film and television art, disaster films pursue the effect in the form of expression and need to infect the audience with grand images. With the help of digital virtual image generation technology, the charm of disaster films has been fully played. Firstly, disaster films create film and television spectacle, making the audience feel an unprecedented sense of reality. Zettl (2016) believes that modern cinema is a feast for the senses, the strong stimulation of sound, light, and colour. [6] Disaster films make great efforts in space and motion, using space to create a moving point of action and the cooperation of light and colour to form the film's unique artistic shock. Secondly, disaster films create excitement and tension to entertain the audience. Metz (1991) believes that the advanced stage of visual culture represented by the film could express inner experiences and inexplicable feelings that are difficult to explain in a thousand words [7]. This feeling is hidden in the innermost recesses of the soul and can never be expressed in words that reflect only thoughts. Although various disaster stories are shown on the screen, once we enter this strange world, we find ourselves again, and these stories are metaphors for our lives.

In disaster films, the audience is put into situations of experiencing happiness and fear, and searching for answers to life. Compared with traditional society, the fast pace of modern society has brought about great changes in people's mentality. The oppression of the material world has made modern people more anxious and need a channel to vent their discontent, and they do not like to appreciate and ponder quietly. As audio-visual art, the irreversibility and appreciation of its pictures doom it to appeal to the senses and stimulate people's emotions at present. Disaster films can satisfy audiences in many ways.

2.2. The Deficiency Needs

In the movie *The Day After Tomorrow*, a snowstorm hits the world and brings disaster to the whole human race. Ecological disasters have frequently made newspaper headlines in recent years. Since 2019 there has been hardly a peaceful place: coronavirus hitting the world, fires and floods in Australia, locust infestations in Asia and Africa, global floods, and so on. These tragedies related to human behavior have finally made it impossible for humanity to ignore the power of ecology any longer. The punishment of nature to human beings is a wake-up call to respect the universe and reflect on their shortcomings. In today's highly developed science and technology, science and technology have brought unbreakable benefits to human beings, but the ensuing deterioration of the ecological environment.

Over the years, nature has punished human beings more and more frequently and seriously, forcing them to reflect on their arrogance towards nature in various ways and means. The rise of disaster films is one of the ways for human beings to reflect on it [8]. Filmmakers focus on growing environmental problems, both natural and manufactured, and the fear of disaster and the idea that humans must take action have made disaster films recognizable. A good film must be one in which the audience leaves all the shock in their minds at the end. The disaster film plays an enlightening role in ecological consciousness to some extent. It gives a vivid lesson to humankind, urging them to face up to our slowly depleting planet. Therefore, the disaster film asks us to reflect on our place in the universe and our common destiny from a philosophical perspective. Disaster films make people consciously aware of the current existential crisis. While watching disaster films, human's spiritual life is so enriched that they can experiment with life with no or little loss, but absolutely no danger. Human beings are attracted to disaster films because they have resonance and sympathy for the emotional oscillations expressed in the films, which cause the audience to reflect on the common destiny of humankind.

2.3. The Being Needs

Genre film has a certain modern psychological contradiction and sublimation of value, which can unlock a certain mass psychological code and develop and emerge in free communication. Tasker and other scholars regard genre cinema as a contemporary myth [9], whose aesthetic mode combines formal preferences and social emotions, character relationships, and narrative functions. Although today's high technology can predict the suddenness of a disaster, the scale of the destruction still takes humanity by surprise. Disaster movies cater to the emotional needs and aesthetic psychology of the audience. When the audience comes out of the theater with the doomsday scenes in their minds, they will enjoy

the excitement and comfort brought by the safe aesthetic experience and imagine how they should face the disaster and feel the weakness of human beings in front of nature. Disaster films successfully convey the common psychological contract and value orientation of all humankind, and perfectly express the eternal value of human life and the sense of harmony between man and nature.

The disaster film is an aestheticized picture of destruction, in which the audience experiences the tragedy of death, pain and the pleasure of life sublimation. Through the film, viewers contemplate the individual's place in the universe and life care. The film plays a different role in technology, and Benjamin (2020) points out that films are the product of the combination of art and technology, and the artistic quality of a film is crucial [10]. The film is the most influential art discipline today. As a contemporary art integrating time and space, auditory and visual effects, rationality and sensibility, affinity, cultural transmission power, ideological influence and artistic expression are unmatched by other art categories. It also requires films to take up the responsibility of reflecting on the problems of the times and defending spiritual beliefs under cover of light and shadow.

3. THE AESTHETIC VALUE OF DISASTER FILMS

3.1. Finding the Meaning of life

Individuals do not experience the meaning of life in ordinary life, and with the destruction of previous values and meanings by modern society, humans often have a sense of emptiness. Nietzsche (1984) fundamentally denied the supreme value of the Western world, and God as the supersensible world that exists and determines everything, completely disintegrated and lost any vitality [11]. Nietzsche (1984) proposed the transhuman philosophy, which is the preservation and strengthening of the powerful human, and he also saw the existential crisis of man behind this phenomenon, so he focused on and pondered the theme of man's existence, values and destiny. When human life encounters resistance, it is also when the vitality and energy of human life can be released to the maximum. At this time, all the actions of life are to avoid death by any means possible. When the Titanic hit an iceberg and everyone ran away, it was a common reaction from the passengers and the audience. The audience rejoiced at the survival of the people on board and lamented the death of the people on board. Under the threat of death, life shows its weight.

The meaning of human life is found in the struggle to find a way to continue living after death. This is emphasized in Maslow's theory that human life is the product of the human pursuit of eternity. The individual is merely a vehicle for completing the process of life

extension and of course humans want to extend their lives by taking care of their bodies. Still, no one has achieved immortality in this way. Humans wish to live longer by taking care of their bodies, but no one has yet achieved eternity by this means. The value of life lies in death which illuminates the meaning of life.

3.2. Reflection on the Need for Survival

As human beings have a deeper understanding of objective things, they can increasingly avoid natural disasters to ensure their survival. In this sense, disaster films are taking up combating global climate change and allowing humans to reflect on their actions and social impacts. Only by putting humans and nature in an equal position and abandoning the wrong values of dominating and harnessing nature, can we ensure the coordinated development of social systems and ecological systems. Nature is the treasure house of resources and the foundation of human existence. An important sign of constructing a harmonious society is coordinating the harmonious development between man and nature. Traditional considerations tend to regard nature as the object of transformation and conquest, especially under the drive of economic interests. Under the extensive economic growth mode, the growth of GDP is mostly supported by the consumption of resources, making the relationship between man and nature often in a state of tension. The concept and practice mode of non-ecological modernization is the fundamental cause of ecological environment deterioration. The rapid development of modern society is mainly based on industrialization and technological progress.

However, while industrial and technological development has brought prosperity and happiness to human beings, it has also brought various potential threats. Through the development of green technology, humanity will embark on the modernization road of sustainable use of resources. The disaster film is to focus on the fate of human beings with a strong sense of foresight, the position of earthlings in the whole universe, and how human beings can make rational use of science for the benefit of human beings, instead of relaxing self-discipline in the use of science and technology and bringing disasters to human beings.

4. AESTHETIC COMPARISON OF CHINESE AND WESTERN DISASTER FILMS

Disaster film is popular with people for their unique charm. Its real intention is to discuss the relationship between man and nature. Zhang(2012) points out that Chinese culture has a long history among world cultures, while western culture started with democracy and then drove human progress [12]. As for aesthetic culture, many European scholars began to study aesthetics as

early as the 18th century, which can be said to be the origin of human aesthetic culture. Western culture attaches great importance to individual characteristics and people's freedom and rights, while Chinese aesthetic culture develops late. The aesthetic reflected in movies is often team collectivism and focuses on the spirit of unity and cooperation.

4.1. Humans and Heaven

The theory of the relationship between man and nature is the basic point. The unity of man and nature and the separation between man and nature are the core of Chinese and Western culture. From disaster films, we can find the change in human concepts. Disaster films have begun to abandon the influence of anthropocentrism in the past and focus on the harmony between man and nature and between people. From an aesthetic point of view, both Chinese and Western disaster films have their characteristics and it is an important part of the world's film culture. In Chinese culture, the focus of cinematic artworks is on the higher spiritual. In Western culture, the focus of cinematic artworks is to understand the inner meaning of work from the surface and focus on the logic and hierarchy of the work. The film is an important carrier of cultural transmission and inheritance. The differences in aesthetic connotation and aesthetic form between Chinese and Western films also show the diversity of regional cultures.

4.2. Philosophy

Western culture originated from ancient Greek civilization, and the prosperity of navigation promoted commerce and trade from the sea. The development of commerce promoted the individualism of the Westerners, and the family ties were not strong, so the ancient Westerners became independent very early on. At the same time, man's status was confirmed in ancient Greek philosophy, which advocated individualism. This concept is like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, human beings understand and transform nature; on the other hand, the development of industry makes human beings destroy the natural environment faster, thus causing an ecological crisis. China is a country with an agricultural culture. Human beings follow the laws of nature and rely on the land to satisfy people's life. Therefore, residents did not separate themselves from nature in ancient Chinese civilisation. At the same time, the farming culture did not require people to migrate frequently, and people often lived in fixed dwellings, thus forming the Chinese family lineage. In traditional Chinese thought, the thought of "existence determines thinking" occupies an important position, which is contained in the development of Thousands of years of Chinese history, and also reflected in the aesthetic culture and aesthetic thinking of Chinese films. In China, movies focus more on the celebration of virtue.

It can be seen that the origin of aesthetic thought in Chinese and Western films is very different, which also leads to the great difference in aesthetic culture and aesthetic thought expressed in the films of the two countries. At present, the question of human existence faces a dilemma. On the one hand, human existence is inseparable from nature and must be claimed and obtained from it; on the other hand, the various laws set by human beings on nature put human beings in the hat of anthropocentrism.

4.3. Religious

Religion is an indispensable part of any human cultural fabric. We habitually call western culture "Christian culture" and Chinese culture "Confucian culture". Aesthetic culture is influenced by religion in its creation and development. Specifically, the aesthetic culture of western films is mainly influenced by Christianity, among which the concept of redemption occupies an important position. In the West, many movies reflect religious ideas. These movies reflect the idea that faith is salvation. Redemption itself is a battle and a struggle between human dignity and humanity. The film 2012 combines Mayan prophecy with the myth of Noah's Ark, which can be seen as a deep mark of religious consciousness in Western culture. The aesthetic culture of Chinese cinema is mainly influenced by Buddhism, which has two main points: one is to liberate the soul from the body, and the other is to guide people from suffering to happiness. Unlike Christianity, Buddhism believes in karma, leading people to pursue happiness and avoid disaster. The concept of karma has become an important narrative model, reflected in films such as *Thunderstorm*, in which the experiences of the characters reflect this idea.

5. DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE AESTHETICS OF CHINESE AND WESTERN CINEMA

The film, as a culture, is profoundly affecting human culture. It not only changes human aesthetic concepts, but also promotes the dialogue of civilization. Analyzing the Eastern turn of Western philosophy, we can see that both Chinese and Western disaster films have their profound cultural imprint. The success of Hollywood disaster film lies in that it surpasses the audience's expectation horizon, satisfies the audience's aesthetic demand, and realizes the perfect combination of artistry and commerciality. The film was born under the historical condition of western technical rationality, and has long-term film aesthetic theory resources. *Avatar* reminds us that destruction has always been in the wilderness, far from the cities, and does not point to the distant future. It also shows extreme imagination, speaks to the beauty of the ecological earth and recalls the good times the earth should have had. However, in China, the film has always been used as a

political and religious tool, as a textbook for propagating national ideology. It does not pay attention to the marketability and commerciality of film. The key problem of domestic disaster films is how to transform the aesthetic aspect of the unity of man and nature into disaster consciousness. Through the comparison of Chinese and Western film aesthetic cultures, it can be seen that there are obvious differences in the origin of world outlook, artistic expression, language aesthetics and other aspects, which are closely related to religion and filmmaking methods.

Western disaster films have their unique style as a genre film, while Chinese disaster films have always been the weakness of Chinese films. According to the standards of western disaster films, there is still a big gap between us. However, as a form of expression, it is important to convey the cultural connotation of the film. Culture cannot be simulated and copied. From this perspective, disaster films need to find their positioning from the intermingling and differences of cultures. The history of disaster films is a history of dealing with the relationship between humanitarian crises and natural crises. Relying on either culture is not enough to deal with the occurrence of disasters. Chinese films should learn marketing strategies from The Hollywood film market, from planning, creation, publicity, and marketing to the development of film derivative products, to achieve a complete industrial chain combining artistic and commercial films. The successful operation of a film depends on how to fully exploit the respective potentials of film artists and film business people through various operational mechanisms so that artists can realize or partially realize their artistic exploration with the help of the film industry, while people in business can realize their economic interests with the help of film art [13]. The aesthetic ideal of the unity of heaven and man, the pursuit of human self-perfection, the harmony between man and the universe and nature, etc. are the oriental colors and Asian complexes that distinguish us from the West and provide a broad cultural platform and rich aesthetic nourishment for the development of Chinese disaster films.

The practical significance of this paper is to study the cultural differences between Chinese and Western disaster films, find some effective reference experience for the development of Chinese disaster films from the successful experience of western disaster films, and, more importantly, re-understand the relationship between man and nature, and improve the disaster awareness by improving the common living environment, It is of great significance for China to learn advanced western film technology and for the future development of Chinese film. Chinese aesthetics has its rich connotation and nourishes the development of film and other arts. At the same time, the complementarity and communication between the basic ideas of Chinese and Western cultures, the exchange and integration, and the promotion of new

civilizational ideas are the sources of power for the human to confidently deal with ecological disasters and get rid of spiritual difficulties.

6. CONCLUSION

Most researchers believe that disaster films are economically commercialized and have little artistic value. This research avoids this critical path and examines disaster films as a cultural and aesthetic phenomenon. Disaster films are more in line with the human feeling of death, and the audience can enjoy the film while venting their fears. At the same time, it allows the audience to experience the comfort of being saved and stimulates the audience's sense of redemption. The disaster film can be a cultural response to the disaster faced by human civilization. The direct consequence of the disaster is death, but it can wake up human life from the numbness of sinking. By watching the characters destroyed by the disaster, the audience can experience the value of their own lives from the standpoint of the dead, thus arousing human concern for survival. It can be said that the artistic quality and artistic vitality of the disaster film come from the artistic content with satisfying the desire for human life as the core. It contains the ultimate concern for human destiny, the questioning of the true meaning of life, the questioning of life's existence, the revealing of the value of life and the challenge of the spiritual limit.

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