The Spatial Production and Underlying Writing of the Film "Black Dog"

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Abstract. From the perspective of Lefebvre's "three-dimensional space" theory, this paper explores the relationship between the production of multiple Spaces and the expression of ideological content in Guan Hu's the film "Black Dog". As a film with the characteristics of new Western cinema, "Black Dog" fully reproduces the diverse natural features of the vast and majestic west in terms of material space presentation, and meticulously showcases the industrial elements and urban architecture of the northwest towns. In the social space, metaphorical symbols are used to express the traces left by The Times on industrial towns, focusing on the situation of marginal towns under the wheel of history, and exploring the issue of good and evil in social morality. In the spiritual space, with delicate strokes, the inner and outer speechlessness predicament of the marginalized people at the bottom is depicted, completing a tender portrayal of the marginalized people at the bottom, highlighting a strong humanistic sentiment.

Keywords: the film "Black Dog"; Space production; film space; Underlying writing

1 Introduction

Space is an essential element of a film, and the production of space in a film is directly related to the presentation of the film's content and the expression of its theme. In his book "The Production of Space", the French theorist Henri Lefebvre creatively proposed the theory of "three elements of space", namely "spatial practice", "representation/representation of space" and "expressive space". Early theorists only regarded space as an abstract object and explored the concept of space from a physical perspective. On this basis, Lefebvre believes that these three parts contain three separate and corresponding elements, namely "the perceived", "the conceived" and "the living". When the "ternary space" specifically refers to a certain relationship, it can also be used to explain the relationship existing among the "spiritual space" and the "material space" and the "social space". [1]After delving deeply into and criticizing traditional concepts of space, Lefebvre developed his unique definition of space. He divides space into three major categories: natural space, social space and spiritual space, and endows space with multiple dimensions such as sociality. Under this concept, space has transcended its

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original physical meaning and extended its production principles and meaning to the social and personal spiritual aspects. Lefebvre's "triple space" theory provides useful insights for studying the production of space and the expression of thought content in film.

Film, as a form of visual art, does not merely rely on the linear flow of time in its narrative, but conveys profound social and cultural significance through the construction of space. Director Guan Hu's new work "Black Dog", which made its debut at the Cannes International Film Festival in 2024 and has drawn much attention, was shot on film, presenting a rough visual feature while also revealing the unadorned rough edges of reality. The camera focuses on Erlang, a "returnee" released from prison in a northwest town, and the black dog with a "wanted letter", depicting the redemption journey of a man and a dog. It presents a plain and restrained realism style. The film focuses on the construction and presentation of the material space in the northwest region; The film presents the reality of the "lost" northwestern industrial town, restoring the old town environment while conveying the changes of history and times, and exploring the good and evil in society; The redemption and companionship of the marginalized man and the marginalized dog delicately present the spiritual space of the protagonist Erlang, filled with the director's concern for the marginalized people at the bottom of society. "Black Dog" continues director Guan Hu's focus on the fundamentals and makes breakthroughs in the production of film space. The film presents the field of the northwest space in a natural and realistic way on the level of spatial production, showcases the "voiceless" state of the former industrial town, and builds the spiritual space of the marginalized figures at the bottom.

2 Space Production and Cinematic Space

The French theorist Lefebvre's criticism of Marxist theory and the space of capitalist society from the perspective of space opened the theoretical curtain of the "spatial turn". Influenced by Marxist theory, Lefebvre believed that space was the product of social history and the domain of the production and reproduction of social relations, and thus he put forward the important concept of "social space". Based on this important concept, Lefebvre integrated, extended and expanded it, and then proposed the "triple space theory". The "ternary space theory" refers to the space of spatial practice, spatial representation and representation, where spatial practice can be called the "perceived object", that is, the natural and material part of space; Spatial representation can be called "the conceived object", that is, the space bound together with the relations of production and the "order" strengthened by those relations,[2](51) which is an abstract space. The space represented can be called a "living thing", that is, a conceived, conceptualized space, a dominant space created by scientists, planners, social engineers, etc. according to the conception, a conceived form of spatial expression, "it contains the trajectory of emotions, the place of activity, and the situation experienced.[2](64)" The space of representation "is sometimes encoded and sometimes unencoded and is associated with the hidden or secret aspects of social life,[2](51)" the spatial practice, spatial representation and the space of representation should be closely linked "so that the 'subject' - that is, the

individual within a particular social group - can methodically move from one domain to another.[2](62)" In Lefebvre's theory of space production, "the practice of space" corresponds to the natural space, emphasizing materiality and physical reality; The "representation of space" corresponds to the spiritual space, emphasizing conceptualization and ideology; The "representational space" corresponds to the social space, emphasizing the combination of social practice and symbolic meaning. These three constitute Lefebvre's "tripartite proof" of space, independent of each other yet interconnected and interpenetrating.

The film is not only a restoration of material reality, but also a construction of social culture, and it has the significance of cultural representation. Fictional feature films have a certain degree of "simulation", and their production purpose is not to record and reproduce reality, but to satisfy the audience's fantasies about the world, with commercial functions and purposes. Although there are many expressions in the history of cinema that tend to be realistic, there is still an element of fiction at their core. But fundamentally, the simulation of film production involves a strong sense of subjective imagination, that is, subjective projections always distort the object. [3] The film space is a multi-dimensional complex that includes the material space, the social and cultural space, and the personal spiritual space, and the content presented in different dimensions varies greatly.

3 Physical Space: Reality, Loss and Geographical Space

Space production, as the material existence of reality, is the manifestation of human production practice, that is to say, space first takes on a physical form. [4] In the the film "Black Dog", Director Guan Hu adopted the film shooting method, focusing the camera on the vast Gobi Desert and continuous mountains in the northwest, presenting the natural environment of the northwest region in a documentary way. This not only enhanced the authenticity of the film but also matched the "lost" tone of the film. In terms of the presentation of physical space, the film uses plain and restrained shots to show the real, vast natural scenery of the northwest region and the lost urban Spaces of the past.

Early Chinese western films such as "The Old Well" and "The Yellow Earth" depicted the natural landscape of the western region with its crisscrossing gullies and endless mountains, which laid the foundation for subsequent Western films to present the natural landscape of the west. The the film "Black Dog" features the characteristics of "new Western films" in both production and narrative, continuing the realistic creative tradition of Chinese western films and presenting the natural landscapes of the western regions vividly and thoroughly. The film begins with a panoramic panning shot, like a scroll slowly unfolding, with sandstorms, Gobi and distant mountains forming a landscape, presenting a vast and desolate natural picture of Northwest China. The presentation of this natural space not only provides a rough geographical narrative background for the film, but also reflects the environment in which the characters are situated and their living environment. Such natural scenes and symbols are repeatedly presented as the male protagonist, Jiro, approaches the border of Chixia Town. In the

film, the police lead Erlang to the border of Chixia Town. In the crisscrossing mountains, overgrown with wild grass, the desolate natural landscape is repeatedly presented. The director uses a panoramic approach to show the relationship between man and nature. In the crisscrossing and deep mountain gullies, the man shrinks to a black dot. This shot design not only shows the vastness and boundlessness of the northwest, but also sets the tone for the film's narrative.

Apart from the natural landscapes, the the film "Black Dog" devotes a considerable amount of space to depicting the once prosperous but now declining industrial town - Chixia Town. In the film, Erlang returns to his hometown of Chixia after being released from prison, and the camera follows his journey to take a panoramic view of the town. The empty streets bear the marks of what once lived there, the houses of the town are now only "demolished", the deserted theater, the dilapidated zoo and the broken railway tracks together form the "lost" spatial style of Chixia Town. A sense of historical stagnation is conveyed through every detail, such as abandoned buildings, abandoned industries, railway tracks for transporting energy and oil pipelines, all of which have a sense of being forgotten and marginalized after their glory. [5]The dilapidated streets of Chixia Town, the abandoned tourist attractions, the deserted grand theater, etc., are all the result of the physical space being affected by social changes. These scenes indicate the former prosperity and the present decline, and show the changes of the physical space in social and economic development.

4 Social Space: Metaphor, Good and Evil, and Traces of the Times

Lefebvre proposed that historical space serves as the basis of representational space. [2](75)Space is the product of society. Social space is not the same as the superposition of material and spiritual Spaces. Social space is closely linked to The Times and is the carrier and abstract symbol of the hidden aspects of social life. The film space not only serves as a material narrative backdrop, but also as a vessel that accommodates the relationship between society and human nature, as well as the traces left by history. In the narrative of the the film "Black Dog", the director has created multiple metaphorical symbols that carry meanings and endowed them with multiple layers of meaning at different levels.

The film has a certain documentary function, and the presentation of The Times can fight against forgetting. The street scenes in "Black Dog" precisely reproduce the characteristics of The Times, presenting to the viewers the ups and downs of ordinary people's lives under the rolling wheels of the era. Chixia Town is a microcosm of the declining industrial town in the torrent of The Times, and it also bears the deep imprint of The Times. Lefebvre points out that historical space is in a transitional period, a time when absolute space dies and abstract space emerges. Through abandoned buildings, abandoned industries, railway tracks and oil pipelines, every detail conveys a sense of historical stagnation, and all these details have a pain of being forgotten and on the verge of loss after their glory. The application of these elements marks both the industrial age and the fragility of modern civilization. The film is set in an era with little

electronic intelligence, and Erlang first sees the scene of the "Lost Dog Revelation" in a place marked by The Times. Also characteristic of The Times is the wandering dance troupe, which doesn't have a fixed venue for their performances but keeps moving around in small towns and villages. This setup of the troupes represents a special group of displaced and displaced people who were constantly present in the past.

Instead of focusing on the elaborate reproduction of The Times and places, Guan Hu chose to view history as a narrative trap to implicitly reflect the current practical problems and to think about the complexity of human nature. In the film "Black Dog", through the interpretation of the symbol "dog", which is full of metaphorical and symbolic meanings, unique cultural and social connotations are injected into the spiritual implications behind it. In traditional culture, dogs are regarded as people's loyal friends, and the image of "dog" symbolizes loyalty and companionship, which has a direct correspondence with the cultural value of "goodness". In the movie, these stray dogs gather together to form a group because of the abandonment of the town's residents. The film begins with a pack of dogs sweeping from the mountain top towards a normal bus on the road, causing the bus to overturn; In the town, dogs have also become a major safety hazard in people's lives and in the town's business attraction. The meaning of "kindness" represented by dogs in traditional culture has been deconstructed, and dogs have shifted from positive roles to negative "evil" values. In the film, in the face of an overabundance of dogs, local people led by Uncle Yao form a dog-catching team, seemingly Shouting slogans of justice, but in reality, this group of people are engaged in the business of selling dogs behind the scenes. Although they appear to be "enforcers" of local security and development on the surface, they are actually "lawbreakers" who illegally resell dogs.

5 Spiritual Space: Silence, Reconciliation and the Circumstances of the Lower Class

Human beings extend outward in the process of interaction and communication to form society, and inward in the innermost part is the beating soul and emotions. The movie space serves as a vessel, carrying the function of emotional expression. The the film "Black Dog" continues director Guan Hu's previous focus on the underprivileged and marginalized. The camera adopts a low-profile perspective to depict the underprivileged and their spiritual dynamics. The opening of "Black Dog" points out the environment in which the protagonist Jiro lives and his awkward social position. The similar situation of the black dog makes it form a mirror contrast with Jiro. In a lost place, both the man and the dog face the predicament of being speechless.

Using space as a metaphor for a character's situation is a common way of expressing meaning for director Guan Hu. In the film, Erlang frequently appears in the police station setting due to his release from prison. His appearance is often accompanied by framed scenes such as fences, window frames, and guardrails, which confine Erlang in a limited and closed environment, suggesting his closed, depressed, and restricted social situation. His criminal history makes it impossible for him to defend himself in such a social situation, and thus he falls into a silent position. The inability to fit into

society and the lack of self-identity have trapped Jiro in a corner, unable to extricate himself from the quagmire of his heart. In terms of practical function, the family space is considered to have the function of sheltering from the wind and rain; From the perspective of spatial metaphor, home, as a symbol of the soul's resting place, is a spiritual space where people can entrust their emotions. Jiro's home is a pure land where he can cast aside all prejudice and discrimination. When Jiro enters the house for the first time, the director sets the camera behind the transparent window, which divides him, using metaphorical visual language to externalize his deep sense of strangeness and estrangement, and visually convey his emotions. He is speechless in society and unable to fully express his thoughts and emotions in the family, thus falling into the predicament of being speechless both inside and out.

Jiro, like the black dog, has a glorious past and the same lost situation. In such an environment, the man and the dog have a basis for mirroring each other. Unlike previous animal-themed films, the black dog in "Black Dog" no longer brings healing to the protagonist as a pet. "When animals become characters, I want them to be independent of each other and even confront each other," Director Guan Hu said in an interview.[6] Erlang and the black dog "got to know each other through a fight", and their encounter originated from the animal's instinctive possession of territory. After that, Jiro wanted to catch the black dog in exchange for a reward, but was bitten by it instead. The situation of the black dog reflects Jiro's survival predicament at this time. This setting is like a pair of down-and-out versions of "Jiro God and the Dog of the Sky", where Jiro, as a marginalized vagrant in society, is caught in an awkward situation of "legal/illegal" and "guilty/waiting to prove his innocence" along with a stray dog mistakenly believed to carry the virus. [7] In the process of spending time with the Black Dog, Erlang reconstructs his own identity, reawakens the "wolf-like spirit" hidden within him, and reconciles with society, with his father, and with himself.

6 Conclusion

The introduction of spatial production as a theoretical concept into the field of film has presented new paths for the development of film criticism and guided film creation. The the film "Black Dog", as an art film that gained attention at the Cannes International Film Festival, although its story-telling tends to be cliched, has made a significant breakthrough in the artistic production of space. The"Black Dog" coincides with Lefebvre's theory of "three-dimensional spatial production" in terms of spatial expression. The underlying writing shows a strong sense of compassion and humanistic spirit. "Black Dog" has achieved significant improvements in both the artistic production of film space and the basic writing. This film may not be a good feature film, but it is definitely a good one, providing a good example of space production and low-level theme writing for future film creation.

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