



Distanciation and Empathy: on the Transformation of the Fox Spirit Symbol in Animation from the Perspective of Female Consumption

Anni Wei

Hubei University of Technology, Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China
Email: 1372736864@qq.com

Abstract. This paper adopts the "distanciation" and "empathy" theories proposed by German dramatist Bertolt Brecht as its analytical framework to interpret the transformation modes, innovative directions, and research objects of the fox spirit—a traditional Chinese cultural symbol—in contemporary animation against the backdrop of female consumption. The study finds that traditional fox spirit images such as Daji and Yingning were products of the male gaze, designed to evoke emotional empathy among male audiences and ultimately drive male consumption. In the contemporary context of rising female consumption power and growing female consciousness, animation creators have reconstructed the fox spirit symbol by drawing on Brecht's theory of defamiliarization. They have appropriately reduced the image's inherent seductive traits and endowed these characters with diverse, multi-dimensional personalities. In doing so, it effectively caters to contemporary female audiences' consumption demands for "independence," "emotional freedom," and "cultural identity," ultimately realizing the value increment of traditional cultural symbols.

Keywords: Distanciation Effect; Emotional Empathy; Female Consumption

1 Introduction

The fox is one of the most vivid and imaginative images in the Chinese mythological and supernatural system. Its anthropomorphized form, the fox spirit, has evolved into a complex cultural symbol through thousands of years of literary accumulation and continuous shaping in folk tales. From the nine-tailed fox prototype in Shan Hai Jing (Classic of Mountains and Seas)]^[1]—such as Ren Shi and Xin Shisi Niang—who were both immortal and demonic, and embodied both loyalty and affection; and further to the highly sexualized, stigmatized fox spirits in Ming and Qing novels—represented by Daji and Yingning—who were condemned as "femmes fatales" in the moral discourse such as Figure 1, every transformation of the fox spirit image has accurately reflected the gender power structure, ethical values such as Figure 2, and unconscious collective aesthetic of a specific historical period. In essence, the evolutionary history of the fox spirit is a microcosm of the history of gender concepts in Chinese society.



Fig. 1. Master Bao Qing



Fig. 2. Fox Scholar

2 Theoretical Lens: Brecht's Distanciation and Empathy and Their Translation in Consumer Culture

Brecht proposed his renowned theory of the distanciation effect as the core of his aesthetic system. Its essence lies in the following: "To defamiliarize an event or a character means first and foremost to strip away the familiar, taken-for-granted qualities of that event or character, thereby fostering a sense of freshness in the audience^[2]."sign—Brecht aimed to create a sense of distance between the stage and the audience. This forced viewers to break free from habitual, subconscious perceptions and adopt a calm, critical mindset to reflect on the social relations and historical laws underlying the events depicted. Fredric Jameson hailed Brecht as "This theory has also been widely applied in the field of cultural consumption^[3]. In consumer society, as Jean Baudrillard noted, products that rigidly adhere to tradition and excessively rely on evoking empathy will lead to the "dissolution of meaning" due to a lack of novelty, resulting in audience fatigue. Conversely, products that overemphasize distanciation will exceed the audience's cognitive capacity, leading to incomprehension and ultimately failing in the market. Therefore, successful cultural products must strike a delicate balance between familiarity and strangeness. As Yang Xiangrong (2005) pointed out in his analysis of defamiliarization, the essence of this technique lies in creating something that is "both unexpected and reasonable". This balance is dynamic, evolving in response to changes in the audience. Specifically, in the creation of visual symbols, it aligns with the visual perception theory that emphasizes the need for "formal complexity" to express abstract concepts and the tendency of realistic images

to move toward "pure form". If an image is overly concrete, it becomes difficult to discern which of its features convey the creator's intended meaning; if it is overly abstract, the designer must contextualize the image for the audience to interpret its message correctly. As a result, most visual symbols draw on familiar objects to ensure effective communication between creators and audiences.

3 Deconstruction and Reconstruction: Three Dimensions of the Fox Spirit Symbol's Transformation in Animation

3.1 The Visual Dimension: From the "Gazed-Upon Seductive Body" to a "Diversified Site of Bodily Politics"

Traditional fox spirit images are paradigmatic examples of Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power. Their visual design prioritizes sexual attractiveness to cater to the male gaze: willow-leaf-shaped eyebrows, phoenix eyes, cherry-like lips, a slender waist, and smooth, fair skin, paired with flowing, revealing clothine moral warnings for male viewers. In this context, the fox spirit's body was objectified, reduced to a signifier of male desire^[4]. In contrast, contemporary animated fox spirit images have evolved in diverse directions:

Neutralization and Desexualization: For instance, September in Fei Ren Zai is a nine-tailed fox who has practiced cultivation for over 200 years. While retaining her nine tails and fox ears, her visual design portrays her as a "second-year middle school-style" girl dressed in casual shirts and shorts. The plot incorporates a wealth of comedic elements to achieve a distanciation effect, while also using relatable humor and down-to-earth daily scenarios to narrow the distance with the audience and evoke empathy.

Empowerment and Complexity: Master Bao Qing in White Snake: The Origin is an original character not found in the classic text, drawing on the archetype of a ten-tailed white fox. Her unfamiliarity to audiences creates a sense of defamiliarization such as Figure 3, yet her pivotal role in helping Bai Suzhen and Xu Xian fulfill their destined love resonates deeply with viewers. Her dual-faced design—half-human, half-beast—and her characterization as a Infantilization and Cute Stylization: Fox Spirit Matchmaker blends ancient and modern elements, adopting an episodic narrative structure to present a series of poignant love stories with distinct character designs and personalities^[5]. The original creator, Xiao Xin, explained the rationale behind the characters' costumes: costumes would primarily feature ancient-style elements^[6]. The most recognizable traditional costume features that contrast with modern clothing are undoubtedly the cross-collar and wide sleeves—two elements that were among the first to be abandoned for the sake of convenience in the history of clothing development." Thus, the fox spirit characters are primarily dressed in cross-collar such as Figure 4, wide-sleeved garments, with subtle variations tailored to their individual personalities, creating an overall impression of mystery and elegance. Tushan Susu, with her cute, naive, and clumsy traits, exemplifies this cute stylization—a gentle form of distanciation-

tion that creates freshness through contrast while evoking the audience's protective instincts.



Fig. 3. Daji



Fig. 4. Fox Spirit Matchmaker

3.2 The Narrative Dimension: From "Functional Objects of Desire" to "Agential Narrative Subjects"

*In traditional narratives—whether the tales of scholars encountering beautiful fox spirits in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* or the stories of fox demons bringing ruin to nations in *Investiture of the Gods* such as Figure 5—the fox spirit's The revolution in contemporary animation lies in shifting the fox spirit from the position of the "other" to that of the "narrative subject"^[7].*

The shift in narrative subjectivity and the redirection of plot focus allow female audiences to immerse themselves in the fox spirit's perspective such as Figure 6, experiencing the world, making choices, and bearing consequences through the character. This narrative experience resonates with contemporary women's struggles to claim subjectivity and take control of their own life trajectories in the workplace, family, and society at large. The fox spirit's struggles, confusion, and growth in the story mirror the lived experiences of female viewers themselves.



Fig. 5. September



Fig. 6. The Legend of Sealed Book

3.3 The Connotative Dimension: From "Fixed Moral Symbols" to "Dynamic Carriers of Meaning"

*The meaning of the traditional fox spirit symbol was confined within a binary framework of desire and morality^[8]. She was either a fox spirit who defied conventions to pursue true love (as seen in some tales from *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*) or a fox demon who indulged her desires and brought chaos to the social order (like Daji). Her symbolic meaning served an explicit function of social edification. Contemporary animation has actively opened up and enriched the fox spirit symbol, transforming it into a dynamic carrier of meaning that reflects various aspects of modern life^[9].*

The diversification of the fox spirit's connotations has freed the symbol from the binary constraints of moral judgment, allowing it to explore more complex, diverse, and human-centered themes. When female audiences consume these narratives, they gain not only entertainment but also the opportunity to engage in critical reflection on the society they inhabit. This precisely fulfills Brecht's advocacy for art to inspire rational thinking rather than indulging in unreflective emotional catharsis^[10].

4 The Strategy of Balance: Distanciation and Empathy as a Precise Industrial Calculation

This paper argues that the successful transformation of the fox spirit image is not driven by a desire for critique alone, but rather by a need to satisfy consumer demands within the context of consumer society. A complete break from tradition—"pure dis-

tanciation"—would sever the symbol from its cultural roots and alienate its core audience; conversely, a lack of innovation—"pure empathy"—would render it unable to stand out in a fiercely competitive market^[11]. Therefore, creators have widely adopted a strategy of "familiar defamiliarization"^[12]:

Retention of Core Cultural Symbols: Almost all modern fox spirit images retain the most iconic species-specific features—fox ears and tails^[13]. These serve as "empathy anchors" that trigger the audience's initial recognition and emotional connection to the fox spirit archetype. Even *September*, the most modernized fox spirit character, retains her fox ears and tails^[14].

Adoption of Traditional Cultural Elements: Master Bao Qing's classical makeup, costumes, and smoking pipe are concentrated embodiments of traditional fox spirit imagery, yet their placement within a new narrative context infuses them with defamiliarized meanings^[15].

Cultivation of Emotional Connections: Regardless of how their appearances evolve, fox spirit stories ultimately tend to return to emotional themes such as growth, the pursuit of love, and the fulfillment of promises. For example, despite its fantastical setting, *Fox Spirit Matchmaker* is fundamentally a story about love and memory, commitment and devotion; *Fei Ren Zai* focuses on themes of friendship and companionship^[16]. These emotional cores transcend temporal boundaries. Female audiences, on the one hand, seek characters that challenge conventions and represent new forms of femininity to satisfy their demand for distanciation and their desire for novelty and excitement, thereby achieving differentiated consumption of the symbol^[17]. On the other hand, they hope to find emotional sustenance and a sense of self-belonging in these female characters, satisfying their need for empathy^[18]. By mastering this tension, the animation industry has effectively captured the female consumer market^[19]. Thus, the transformation of the fox spirit symbol serves as an excellent case study for observing how China's animation industry adapts to social changes, promotes traditional culture, and responds to modern demands^[20].

5 Conclusion

In summary, driven by the perspective of female consumption, the fox spirit symbol in Chinese animation is undergoing a transformation influenced by Brechtian aesthetics^[21]. Through the distanciation effect, this transformation dismantles the male gaze, desire projection, and moral shackles that have long constrained the symbol^[22]. Simultaneously, by fostering new emotional empathy, it infuses the fox spirit with narrative momentum rooted in independence, diversity, and modernity^[23]. Through reconstruction in three dimensions—image, narrative, and connotation—the fox spirit has evolved from a monolithic symbol of the "other" into a space for projecting the diverse desires, anxieties, fantasies, and subjective aspirations of contemporary women^[24].

References

1. Brecht, B. (1964). *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Translated and edited by John Willett. New York: Hill and Wang.
2. Jameson, F. (2018). *Brecht and Method* (Trans. Chen Yongguo). Beijing: China Renmin University Press.
3. Yang, X. R. (2005). Defamiliarization. *Foreign Literature*, (3), 56-62.
4. Cheng, Q. (2020). A Study of Female Images in Chinese Animated Films. *Film Literature*, (15), 102-105.
5. Eve S A ,Faure D J ,Jullien A , et al.Consumer preferences for Camelina oil: impact of sensory perceptions and information disclosure on acceptance of an unfamiliar oil coming from a minor crop[J].*Food Quality and Preference*, 2026,135105722-105722. DOI:10.1016/J.FOODQUAL.2025.105722.
6. Baudrillard, J. (2014). *The Consumer Society* (Trans. Liu Chengfu & Quan Zhigang). Nanjing: Nanjing University Press.
7. Mulvey, L. (2005). Visual and Other Pleasures. In Q. Wu (Ed.), *The Pleasure of the Gaze: Psychoanalysis of Film Texts* (pp. 1-17). Beijing: China Renmin University Press.
8. Wu S .What “Digital Literacies” Must Journalists Have? Unpacking How Journalists Define and Practice News Literacy, Data Literacy, and Algorithmic and AI Literacy in the Digital Age[J].*Journalism Studies*,2025,26 (14):1765-1782. DOI:10.1080/1461670X.2025.2547302.
9. He Y ,Saito R T ,Ekawa H , et al.Artificial intelligence pioneers the double-strangeness factory.[J].*Nature communications*,2025,16(1):11084-11084. DOI:10.1038/S41467-025-66517-X.
10. Graham T ,Ackbarali T ,Kowalski K , et al.Uncovering practice gaps in the management of mantle cell and diffuse large B-cell lymphomas amidst advances with Bruton's tyrosine kinase inhibitors[J].*Blood*,2025,146(S1):8106-8106.DOI:10.1182/BLOOD-2025-8106.
11. Nie, X. R. (2020). *Introduction to Animation*. Shanghai: Fudan University Press.
12. Gonzalez L J ,Ammakola Y ,Motkar A , et al.Collaborative outreach and education for management of bi-specific antibody treatment side effects in Relapsed/Refractory multiple myeloma (COMBAT-RRMM) [J]. *Blood*,2025,146(S1):6427-6427. DOI:10.1182/BLOOD-2025-6427.
13. Tripney N .Theatre is a laughing matter: the comedians crossing over into drama[J].*The Stage*, 2025,(31):1 6-17.
14. [1]WEI F .Early Cinema, Attraction and Estrangement: Revisiting Bertolt Brecht’s Interpretation of Mei Lanfang[J].*Theatre Research International*,2025,50(2):188-203. DOI:10.1017/S0307883325000021.
15. Maagerø H L .The Canon in Contemporary Theatre:Plays by Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Brecht inContemporary Directors’ Theatre[M].Taylor and Francis:2023-12-09: DOI:10.4324/9781003361558.
16. Bano T .The Threepenny Opera[J].*The Stage*,2023,(34):24-24.
17. Murphy J .The Good Person of Szechwan[J].*The Stage*,2023,(12):18-18.
18. Sarah C .The Operatic Roots of Performativity: Bodies Decontextualised in Butler, Brecht and Busoni[J]. *Cambridge Opera Journal*,2022,34(3):309-337. DOI:10.1017/S095458672200026X.
19. Jon H .‘Time and space in the depiction of workers’ leisure in;Mother Krause’s Journey to Happiness, People on Sunday;and;Kuhle Wampe;’[J].*Studies in European Cinema*, 2022,19(4): 362-379.DOI:10.1080/ 17411548.2020.1848098.

20. David B .‘Brecht in Practice’: Critical Reflections on Staging Drama Dialectically[J].Contemporary Theatre Review,2021,31(3):266-285.
DOI:10.1080/10486801.2021.1928653.
21. Samworth G A ,Battrell R J ,Lange M E , et al.Availability and use of fibrinogen concentrate in labor and delivery units in North America with the Society for Obstetric Anesthesia and Perinatology (SOAP) center of excellence designation: a study survey (2023).[J].International journal of obstetric anesthesia,2025,65 104833.
DOI:10.1016/J.IJOA.2025.104833.
22. Biswas G C ,Biswas G G .Ab/uses of Brechtian techniques in South Asian commercial films[J].COGENT ARTS & HUMANITIES,2021,8(1):
DOI:10.1080/23311983.2021.1948650.
23. Kaur L ,Blackburn J D ,Griffiths A , et al.Exploring Caregivers’ Perspectives on Dementia Diagnostic Pathways and the Implementation of Artificial Intelligence (AI)-Based Screening: A Qualitative Study[J].Alzheimer's & Dementia,2025,21(S4):e099304-e099304.
DOI:10.1002/ALZ70858_099304.
24. Wu S .What “Digital Literacies” Must Journalists Have? Unpacking How Journalists Define and Practice News Literacy, Data Literacy, and Algorithmic and AI Literacy in the Digital Age[J].Journalism Studies,2025,26(14):1765-1782.
DOI:10.1080/1461670X.2025.2547302.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

