

“American Dream” Evolution in American Western Films

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Abstract. American western films mainly include two important expression modes: western film and gangster film. The development and evolution of the two modes manifest the changes in mainstream ideology of American society and social value under historical background to some extent. This paper systematically studies and analyzes obvious transformation of western films from 1950s to 1990s and fundamentally reveals the evolution route of gradually enhancement of individualistic value and weakening of national speaking right in “American dream”.

Introduction

In social history, “American dream” expresses a firm belief which can be accepted by the public in American society. It as an eternal theme in American literature development is widely valued by culture research circle and shoes differential development connotation in different periods and among different classes of people. In American western films, the theme of “American dream” is common. Social mainstream ideology and values reflected in these films guide overall values of social masses. Further, world culture research circle deepens cognition of “American dream”.

Connotation of “American dream”

“American dream” is a special cultural term which appeared in a special historical period in American society. Its emergence and development are inevitably supported by corresponding cultural and historical background. Since the fleet led by Columbus discovered American Continent in global navigation in 1492, a large number of European people immigrated to American Continent and explored with dreams. Puritans in British society also conformed to era development, spread and built new paradise in America where cultural thought relatively fell behind. Meanwhile, since native population in American Continent did not build a independent and uniform country, expedition people from Europe could reclaim the land in the whole continent at will. Thus, possession of land which could not be achieved in old world of European society came true in American society^[1]. Till the period of American Civil War, there was still large-area land to be reclaimed in the west of America, which made immigrants with “American dream” devoted to western construction in batched and promoted the emergence of cultural connotation of “American dream” to some extent.

“American dream” is core guidance of national spirit in the whole American society and also manifests national cultural character of American society. It is life dream that social masses want to achieve in era development and construction. For a long time, under the ideological guidance of researchers, “American dream” has gradually developed into a social behavior belief. In American social life, anyone will certainly gain corresponding harvest through hard work and even become the upper class in the society. In American western films, different protagonists hold different dreams and finally realize their dreams through continuous exploration and development. This shows significant value of “American dream” in individual struggling.

“American dream” evolution in American western films

“American dream” directly manifests mainstream ideology of American society and social values. Western films and gangster films in American western films carry large quantities of mainstream values of American society in cultural spirit. Thus, changes in western films with era development to

some extent reflect the changes in social mainstream values, and naturally show “American dream” evolution.

Western films highlighted national speaking right and social public ethics before 1950s

“American dream” development in conformity to God’s will

Ethical consciousness in religious ideology is the herald of American national overall awareness. Even gradual development and formation of capitalist social ethics system basically derived from religious ideology and behavior norms of European immigrants. In westward movement, the public had to use force to defend their personal safety and also needed uniform values to maintain internal unity. In relatively laggard ideology, the immigrants settling in the west of America further yearned for religious ethic thought they followed in European civilized society, i.e. abstinence, fairness, justice, benevolence, persistence and braveness etc.^[2]. Just because such religious ethic thought stressed asceticism of Protestantism, primitive accumulation of capital society was promoted. Emerging bourgeoisie in American society accumulated and actively used wealth within the proper range, and defined it as God’s will at religious consciousness level. In other words, it is believed that God's will made the people with dreams sharply increase wealth. Thus, the people gaining corresponding social wealth further affirmed the powerful function of religious ethics in survival and development. This generated important influence on development of “American dream”.

American western films containing “American dream”

American western films produced before 1950s actually depicted social order established on the basis of national laws was maintained or challenged by the public. They were also the outward manifestation window for American core value system and social general ethics. Value orientation and judgment ability of protagonists in western films to a large extent declare publicly the judgment attitude of social mainstream ideology and social ethics to the good and evil. Meanwhile, American western film creation has distinct modeling feature. Tough cowboy image, pioneering spirit and tough guy image of bandits in western films have “male deity - redeemer” meaning in religious ideology in literary sense. They can effectively mobilize social spirit worship of people watching films. Under such ideology, protagonists in films bear the duty of God’s spokespersons inwardly. Although they do not formally participate in religious affairs, they can maintain collective interests of the mass, praise the virtue and punish the vice in real life. They seemingly convey benevolent thought of God to the mass, surpass general heroes in certain ideology and are deified.

Western films construct a characteristic world where male group established maintained and broke social rules. In *Scarface* of 1932 version, the protagonist Monty – the leader of the gang was finally killed by the sergeant after showing his love to his younger brother. In *Stagecoach* of 1939 version, The Ringo Kid redeemed himself by good service and finally got freedom. This shows religious and idealized benevolent thought. It can be seen that the main content of western films is deep exploration of human emotions of the male. The films gradually improve good and evil values of traditional religious society and national ideology. “American dream” shown by male heroes is based on powerfully national speaking right.

Impairment of national speaking right and social public ethics and transformation of male psychological culture

New wave movement of European society imposed subversive impacts on American film creation. In western film creation, national speaking right was gradually weakened. The key object of creation thought fell to social individual spirit. For instance, large quantities of Vietnam War films mainly complained destruction and dissimulation of human nature caused by wars. Meanwhile, under social influence, film modes and types are gradually fused. The significance of types and modes started to weaken. In this period, western films were inundated with introspection of the collapse of “American dream”. In the era when national ideology could not correctly guide individual dreams, every one started to actively explore and establish individual “American dream”.

Subversive transformation and development of religious ethic idea

In the late 1950s, protagonists in western films began to pursue breakthrough of specific religious disciplines. The film *Bonnie And Clyde* depicted bandit image in cities and was in completely the

opposite side of social religious ethics. *The Godfather II* of 1974 version expressed breakthrough and impact for social religious ethic through positive and negative space-time. In the film, male deity image in 1950s tended to disappear. The characters of male figures gradually became richer and more profound. Both heroism and various character defects (contradictions and inanity after crazy slaughter) could be found in films. These exactly showed social individuals gained self-value realization breakthroughs after abandoning abstinence thought in traditional religious ethics. In western films of this period, authority of social religious ethic thought was gradually weakened. In other words, divinity in social collective thought gradually disappeared. Godfather-type god in individual team appeared formally. Individualized, diversified and autonomous development tendency became increasingly obvious.

Transformation of American western film type and social value evolution in 1950s-1990s

Firstly, social ethic contradiction between social guards and those guarded

The film *High Noon* shown in 1952 formally lifted the curtain of transformation of American western film type. The greatest breakthrough of *High Noon* is that it depicted a group of silent residents in a small town and an isolated and helpless sergeant in the face of justice. The film proposed doubt about religious ethics in traditional western films and questioned the following: whether those guarded in traditional films could have sufficient courage to sacrifice for the justice after personal interests and collective interests conflicted? Whether just religious ethic system proposed in male deification society could develop stably? Whether social heroes deserved sacrifice for those guarded? *High Noon* paid attention to subtle changes of human individual emotions under the function of external environment from micro perspective, deeply analyzed and explored general weak points in human nature. The change in such creation thought and creation type has milestone significance in film development history and “construction of “American dream””.

Secondly, international relation between cowboy individual image and group image the west area is highlighted.

Sergio Leone initiated “macaroni western film” form with strong personality development feature in creation. “Armed escort” series of films he created pushed violence thought and ritualized beauty in American films to new development level and broke through fixed creation mode of western films under the influence of traditional religious ideology^[3]. For example, *Once Upon a Time in the West* rated as a classic in American film industry described the fighting between the cowboy and flies before cowboy fighting at the beginning, which shows exquisite fighting skills of the cowboy from the site. In western films in his period, national speaking right and the speaking right of social collectivity were greatly weakened. The authority of laws and overall social morality were hidden or dispelled in films. Film creation generally narrated fighting stories between bandits and heroes in the west area with the help of audio and visual habits in American western film form. In such films, social heroes saved the whole regional society by virtue of individual strength and then maintained normal operation of moral system in this independent world. At this time, “American dream” really got rid of constraint of national mainstream ideology and was injected with new thought of individualistic heroism.

Thirdly, bandit image and group were established again

Re-establishment of bandit image and group is mainly reflected in two levels: firstly, heroic elegy of opposing heroism was shown. *Bonnie and Clyde* shown in 1967 is an important breakthrough for social western gangster film creation and marked the birth and development of new Hollywood film form. This film not just successfully shaped male and female robbers with bright personality and depicted the figures wonderfully. The film mainly eulogizes heroic destruction and overturned success and happiness in “American dream”. After this thought was overturned, the dream of the figures in the film was to pursue correct social life values and finally enjoyed the ideal life state. Secondly, ethic system for human ethnic group with the main content of fidelity was constructed. *The Godfather* shot in 1972 challenged the authority of national law at the beginning. The boss of funeral parlour complained tearfully to the godfather and hoped he could gain justice legally, but the godfather remained unmoved and even satirized him to seek legal help. In this film, we see two sets of social ideology systems. One set is ideology system based on American national laws in which

defects had appeared, while the other set is moral system self-defined by Corleone family which surpassed laws. Corleone family utilized all kinds of conveniences of American society and finally achieved “American dream” of the whole family. The two kinds of independent social ideology systems overturned social core values with the authority of laws. Different from general “American dream”, Corleone family controlled wealth and then mastered social rights and maintained social position and social image of the whole family in American society from originally pursuing money during construction of “American dream”.

Conclusion

From 1950s to 1990s, mainstream ideology and core values in American society gradually experienced the development process of weakening of national peaking right and enhancement of individual values. Western films also experienced the transformation from specific pattern to individual pattern. All kinds of social values contained in the films evolve as era development. During researches of western films, “American dream” evolution tendency showed obviously. It is the true reflection of development and change of social mainstream ideology. It can be seen that in the 21st century, powerful “American dream” limited by society in traditional society gradually evolved to pursuit of social individuals for higher-degree social development level within certain value affirmation range.

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