

Humor of “Small Potatoes”

The Study on Zagreb School of Animation from Bordo Dovnikovic

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Abstract—In the middle of the 20th century, when the Disney animation dominated the world, the public had become accustomed to the narrative mode of Disney animation and the aesthetic standard of mainstream commercialization. The former Yugoslavia had a city named Zagreb, and their animations just like a warm wind blowing from southeastern Europe, stood out with its unique warm, humorous style, and was famous by its variety of animation styles. Zagreb school of animation began to enter the audience's sight. This paper through the study on Pioneer representative of Zagreb school of Animation-Bordo Dovnikovic's personal work style, tries to analyze the humor wisdom of "small potatoes" behind Zagreb school of Animation works. In the simple stories, artists use their unique creativity and imagination to make rational thinking and humor, use exaggeration, satire, absurd and other humorous means to compose ridiculous and joyful works. It seemed easy, humor and laughable, but in fact it led to the heavy thinking of social status at that time, their unique and noble personal charms decided that the Zagreb school had an indispensable status and historical significance in the development history of the world animation. At the same time we should also combine with China's animation situation, take a look at the Zagreb school of animation and see what is worthy of our learning.

Keywords—Zagreb School; Bordo Dovnikovic; humor; animation; politics

I. INTERPRETATION OF THE "SMALL POTATOES" HUMOR IN ZAGREB SCHOOL

Everyone who has seen the Zagreb animations will like their humor, but exactly what kind of artists could create this kind of humor? Lin Yutang in Discussion *On the Humor* said: "In fact, humor and irony are very close, but irony may not be the purpose. Irony always tends to be sour, after the sour and spicy state of mind is removed, then it will be humor. Humor is a bystander which just be cool and stand far away, always brings tears with laugh."¹ Zagreb school's humor is this kind of thinking mode which simplifies what is complicated and full of wisdom and ambition. They are calm and gentle, was not enslaved by war life. It can easily resolve all kinds of embarrassment and difficulties, with a humorous attitude to live a better life. If you want to truly grasp the humor of a nation, you must know and understand the whole life of the nation. The humor of Zagreb animated film is the enrichment of Yugoslav people's life attitude, which is they still maintain

¹ From Lin Yutang's "Humorous life" [M]. Beijing Drama Publishing House, 2002. P76

a unique and noble personality charm and optimism life attitude when they face the suffering. They displayed the real life of "small potatoes" with exquisite ideas to the audience.

A. Bordo and His "Small Potatoes"

Bordo said: "I think my audience is the protagonist of my movie because the audience like my movie, my movie is about their lives."² Most protagonists of Zagreb's animations are characters, and in a few cases are symbolic animals, themed by respecting the real life, showing the trivial matters around them and the feelings of ordinary people. The audience is also ordinary people, so they will have a strong resonance for the characters' feelings and experiences.

Of course, ordinary small potatoes also represent Bordo himself, the hero in his works *Second-class Passengers* has nobody to care about him, the steward did not come to check on him when it's snowing, letting him buried in the snow. This role is lonely, and nobody care about him except a dog. The inspiration for Bordo to create the film is his personal experience, when he took a train through Annecy Switzerland, he saw a lot of passengers come and go, and he did not know who they were or where they were heading to. The train was full of strangers, on the trip he saw a lot of things, and although these are small things, it is the beginning of Bordo's creation, and then the next step is how to enrich the idea. The film's screen style still used stage style, and only with one simple machine unit, you could see the hero with no characteristics entered the coach, and then you could see his life, see him talking to other passengers, including politician, astronaut, steward, policeman and football player, but all these people do not care about him; at last the hero ran out of patience with that politician and directly threw him out of the window, and killed him at the last stop of his trip.

Bordo's short film *Ceremony* is different from the tone of his other works, and the film has a huge drop between the two emotional poles. In the screen were still five small potatoes without features, patiently changing different postures, and voice-over seemed never satisfied with their poses. The audience thought they were taking photos and the other voice is the photographer, until they finally got the position which satisfied the over-voice and a gunshot, everyone fell down to the ground. So it was the course to shot the prisoner from the beginning. What should we say? A cruel reality Bordo could

² From the "Zagreb, Once The Animation Paradise" of "Special Program for Tour of World Film"

also express with comedy form, he really likes to observe life from a strange or satirical point of view, so he can always find comedy from life.

B. The Expression Form of "Small Potatoes" Humor

1) *Reference to silent film:* French Jacques Tati was one of Bordo's most favorite film directors, also for silent film, but he is different with the US comedy master Charlie Chaplin. Jacques Tati's performed roles are mostly on behalf of the middle class ordinary people. His performance was implicitly moderate, his films did not have compact, strong comedy conflict, his film spirit almost spiritual connected with new realism, expressed with a simple, similar to life way. It seemed to be a kind of longing for past slow and leisure time, but just in such a tender feelings, a faint smile has been unconsciously diffused. The animations of Bordo and Zagreb school to some extent perpetuated the mildness of Jacques Tati's artistic work, the character image was no longer the center of comedic comedies, the true sense of humor is resulted from the collisions between characters and the world around them.

In the film *Learn to Walk*, Bordo largely borrowed the skills of silent film, silent film lines are less and very weak. If it wants to display humor, it must rely on the actor's rich body language combined with exquisite music, so as to achieve the emotional integrity of the plot. *Learn to Walk* on the one hand inherited Tati's exploration of sound, on the other hand extended the exploration in the animated film. When he performs humor, it does not need humorous lines, does not need chase, but only relies on the warm performance.

Bordo has his own unique techniques on the character performance process, the screen of *Learn to Walk* only has simple empty background, and the character's shape is only a simple outline, without any decoration, so the character's performance became the key. The actions of the characters are not expressed like the US animation's chase instead of dialogue, but the very daily yet very vivid performance skills are used to express the character relationship, emotions, and then push the plot and create a sense of humor. In the short film, the hero met some adults while he was walking, they all taught what they thought was the right way to walk to the hero, everyone's method was different, when he accepted all the four ways of walking, he was already walking in a very strange way.

Bordeaux has a number of relatively clever designs for character performance, such as the second adult the hero in the *Learn to Walk*, might have a foot problem so he dragging his feet to walk, but he asked the hero to walk like him. In order to show his compulsive, he waved hands when he was not satisfied, after a moment he touched the hero's head, and finally took out a textbook, the hero has nothing to do but dragged his feet to walk like him. Finally to the fourth person, before he entered, the screen through a strong shock told the audience that this is certainly a man of status and position. Sure enough, a two-bearded military officer-like man came out, his powerful mental aura was showed with no doubt. He educated the hero and patted his head like a leader, the hero of course was very reluctant; military officer's forced

demonstration directly shocked him down, the officer stamped with his toes to made the hero stand up, directly hung him upside down, and then placed him on the ground and shook his hand "friendly", pinching until his whole body trembling. When he saw the hero was still not convinced, the officer fired a shot to the sky, and frightened the hero right away so he walked as the military officer requested. The officer also awarded him a medal, which implied the historical background that Yugoslavia was controlled by other people. These simple actions fully expressed the officer's strong sense of oppression on the hero and never gave up until achieved his purpose.

Bordo was very detailed and very humorous on character's actions, neither exaggerated deformation, nor made all manner of quips and jokes. He was good at finding comedy elements form ordinary actions, and also cleverly expressed his political complexes, and strongly combined laugh together with spirit, so that the characters were full of vitality and also more intriguing at the same time. The film also reflected Bordo's view of life and his wisdom spirit toward life.

2) *Reference to the Comics:* Zagreb school are from different areas, there are architects, writers, cartoonists, illustrators, although the works are independently created by directors, but the screen style and subject matter have been influenced by the Eastern European comics, so the characters have more similar shapes. Comic style is about humor, but the well-timed perform humor is not easy, especially in conjunction with the action and plot of the animation, to achieve the "unexpected but reasonable", which would be more difficult.

Nedelko Dražić is the most thought-provoking philosopher director in Zagreb school. In 1965 according to his own comic, he adapted and produced *Elegy*, a short film of 3 minutes and 40 seconds to win the Honor Award of 1966 Venice International Film Festival and the Best Experimental Animation Award of 1971 Philadelphia Film Festival. This short film's shot still followed the most common shots in Zagreb animations, with a strong stage style. There was a special point for *Elegy's* beginning, the black screen opened from the middle to the left and right slowly till the half screen, in order to highlight the hero who was locked in prison, it was just like the door opened a seam to both sides, and formed a vertical composition screen, only left the middle wall which locked the hero, providing us a very simple and intense visual feeling. The simpler is the picture, the more attractive for people to continue to focus on the story. From the hanged hands and chin on the window of the locked hero, you would know that he was bored and lifeless. At this time from the ground grew up a small red flower, the hero suddenly saw a little life, as if to give him a hope, so he watered the flower carefully and helped it catch worms. Director only through his head and hand exposed outside fully expressed the interaction between him and the flower. Because the window had railings, the hero's hands were always exaggerated out very long, which was very funny while showing his love for the flower. The first small turn, bad weather led to the death of the flower, the hero was devastated, but the director would still give us hope, as expected, the spring came and the flower grew out again, just as the audience and the hero were full of joy, the

sound of chain-open came in and the hero walked away from the window and left the screen. The audience may guess the hero must get free, and at this time the screen opened up to both sides, feeling the door was completely open, the screen changed into horizontal composition, the hero also dressed neatly appeared in the screen. After he was freed, he might be very reluctant that little red flower, right? We guessed this but accidentally found out the hero leisurely stretched out, the falling bag just smashed the flower, and later the hero found that, but he was just gave a side glance, do not care a nut, he was just immersed in the joy of freedom and walked away cheerfully. The director only through such a simple screen expressed the humor of plot reversal and the deep theme, with details, with actions.

3) *Not subject to physical laws*: The reason why animation is good is because compared with the true natural narrative, it is not bound by physical laws or subject to objective reality. So it becomes more humorous and more expressive, it does not need to imitate life but interpret life, higher than life.

The film *Piccolo* is a plot of quarrel between ordinary neighbors, Toussaint Ucotik uses humorous language to make things that may not happen in reality become surprise and natural, thus making people laugh. Such as the director wanted to express the close relationship between the two neighbors, a house opened two windows. On the left a small man, on the right was a big man. Suddenly it was raining like wrung water from a towel, the small man's house was leaking, the big man climbed up his neighbor's roof and smartly "cut" the rain with a scissor, then stopped the leaking; birds sang in the tree beside the small man's house, and the big man leaned over to listen. In order to be friendly, the small man generously moved the tree with the bird beside the big man's house, and the birds sang happily. Here the rain is free to be cut, the tree is also free to move, things that can not happen in reality could happen in the animation according to people's wishes, expressed with a more humorous way, the director explained life with a strong imagination and brought happiness to audience.

C. The Source of "Small Potatoes" Humor

1) *"Hot" humor in "Cold" world*: Zhang Huilin used "the suffering small potatoes" to refer to Yugoslavia's epitome of hardships who had been under the "cold war" shadow for 30 years, and in order to maintain their independence and integrity, spared no expense to "resist against the whole with individual" and marched alone.³ Yes, the small potatoes created by Zagreb school are always ordinary and moderate. harmlessly living in the ups and downs, turbulent "cold" world, they experienced the hardships of life but still maintained their own lifestyle, protected their complete personality and right freely and independently, and integrated optimism spirit and love of life into the creations. Humor is always contradictory, in order to be humor in a suffering "cold" world, there must be a "hot" emotional burst, and

³ From the periodical Zhang Huilin's *Suffering small potatoes and "Active" Blank - one of the interpretations of "Zagreb school"*. [J]. "Chinese Animation"

Zagreb's "hot" humor is motivated just in the specific "cold" world. The deeper is the political influence on Yugoslavia, the weaker is the attention from "small potatoes" to the politics; they did not directly express politics, but with a joke, more lively way to express the political influences with a tender and "hot" humor way. After we laughed at the plot and actions in the animation film, we would make reflection for a long time because of its profound theme.

Zagreb's masterpiece *Good-Neighborhood* is a film based on the "cold" world, implying a distrust of the "neighbor" Soviet Union and the fact that the Yugoslav people are afraid of their freedom being threatened. The film is directed by Nedellko Draque, only one and a half minutes long. The whole film has no dialogue, only three shots: the first shot is painting a house on a piece of gray paper, and there are lights from the window, zooming in lens. The second shot, in the relaxed music and white background, a comic figure, fat body, topless, around a large towel, looks like just finishing the bath, his mouth keeps humming no-word minor, he washes face, brushes teeth, washes mouth, shaves, makes a show of himself, actions are from life but the animation design is very exciting, expression is also very relaxed and happy, then, this fat Mr. puts on evening dress, brushes hair, looks in the mirror, sprays perfume, all dresses up like he is going to a grand banquet or visiting a girlfriend. The third shot, the car room of that house, has its door opened, and also the engine sound of the car is heard, with two lights of the car shot out; I think a beautiful car is coming out. But in fact a genuine tank is coming out instead, a line of words "Way to your neighbor" appears and the film is over. If you do not understand the history of Yugoslavia, you may not be able to understand this unexpected end, why is the tank? But at the time, people around the world knew their country's situation, all applauded for the film's clever conception. Clever people will know this is Stalin's hegemonic act, but also a reflection of the behavior of some people in real life. The film uses humor but implicit comic contrast technique to show us that period of sad history.

Around 1966, people became obsessed with Kafka, and many animations of living themes began to appear. They merely had complete storyline, but were filled with bold experimental methods to reveal the sense of alienation in an industrialized society through abstract images.

The Horse Trainer is the masterpiece of Nedellko Draque. It is a tribute to the potential of industrialization, but also expresses the treats of modernization for human life, it must be controlled. The first thing that catches the eye of the audience was a mechanical horse made up of a wide variety of metal parts. A man struggled to climb the back of the horse, the horse began to ran, and he constantly waved the horsewhip to whip horseback, so that the horse could run faster; at first, the hero felt difficult because it is bumpy, but he barely maintained, later the horse became more manic, until the hero directly fell to the ground. The story began to turn, the crazy mechanical horse did not stop, but also turned back to chase the hero, and trod the hero under its foot, the flattened hero rickety stood up, re-adjusted the machine parts of the horse; the miracle happened, the mechanical horse changed into a brilliant white horse, also grew a pair of beautiful big wings on its back, the hero re-climbed to horseback, flying into the sky

with white waving wings, gradually disappeared in the distance. The *Diary* has similar theme, its creative inspiration is derived from Dragie's long trip in New York in 70s. The picture looks very abstract very intense, and in order to show the rapid development of the world economy at that time and a high commercial prosperity scene, he used the dazzling signs and neon lights on the towering skyscrapers to show the visual and psychological impact to the audience (See Fig. 14). Letters on Signs were overwhelming on the face, heaping into a mountain, buried people under it. Then a ship full of high-rise buildings quickly sank in the sea. The flood of letters combined into a cube, and people sat on top of the cube alone, facing the storm, facing the risk of being overturned at any time, which indicated human beings would be swallowed by the cold industry.

Diary and *The Horse Trainer* both reflect the real social themes at that time, oppression of modern machinery and industrial civilization to human. In *Diary*, he through humorous modeling conversion, rich imagination, visual symbols full of metaphor, expressed his concerns about the fate of mankind, concerns about the rapid development of social industrial civilization; while the "mechanical horse" symbolizes the rapid developed modern civilization, the rapid economic development and commercial high-speed prosperity, and the growing material desire will eventually become a human hazard monster and lead to destruction. However, the director also expresses the need to control this phenomenon, and the human outlook is still very optimistic. It can be figured out from the film that at last after experienced difficulties and failures, the hero finally climbed onto the horse and flew into space with the horse.

2) *Humor comes from love*: From Zagreb school's animations we could see the love and noble taste inside artists. For good and bad things in the world, they could find interesting place as long as they observe with heart. Lao She said: "Humor is a funny attitude that treated equally."⁴ This attitude is valuable, the essence of humor is derived from love, like a gentle rain, is from heart, this positive and humorous life attitude will bring happiness to themselves and others.

Home Is the Best showed all kinds of details for a middle-aged man's bored, passionless life. The director described the hero's get-up and put-up-shoe action very properly. Alarm sounded, the man blankly looked the slippers away from the bed, also disordered; the composition and perspective relationship at this time became very exaggerated; the hero kept upper body still, reluctantly got slippers with his feet; such simple action, expressed the internal monologue of hero, making his numb, bored and passionless life absolutely clear; he secretly hid in the cabinet to light up cigarette, spitted out smoke in the drawer, showing the middle-aged man's depressed but helpless emotions with humorous actions, to make people want to laugh. After his wife went to work, her daughter went to school, middle-aged man accidentally saw their cat became bigger and took him to drink and dance; at first he did not dare to do, but under the cat's urge, he soon relieved to start carnival, wanton smoking and dancing or even

⁴ From Liu Chengyan's "Humor Theory of Lao She". [M]. Guangxi Nationalities Publishing House.1989. preface.

smashing things to release the mood. Just a few minutes' *Home Is the Best* is also a portrayal of most of us, not very satisfy, full of boring life, all of them make the audience have a strong resonance.

Life, like this, is always mixed with helplessness and depression, it can not always wonderful. People have to experience ordinary or even mediocre life. Some people live on without faith, become more and more numb; and some people are able to make them full of love, find out fun from the ordinary life. Zagreb animation directors belong to the latter, they may be forced to experience the oppression and sufferings caused by fate, but it makes them love their ordinary mediocre little life even more, they could find creation inspirations out from the most trivial things, sharply captured the details that we do not care about and then exaggerated and enlarged them.

II. CONCLUSION

The reasons of Zagreb animation school's success are two, of which on the one hand there is the support of socialist planned economy, and on the other hand there is capitalist liberal and free consciousness. Due to the influence of European art atmosphere, it created a simple, pure animation with independent spirit. In the exploration of animated films, it lets us know that animation humor can be obtained not relying on lines, not relying on chase, but only relying on the warm performance of "small potatoes". Bordo with his passion for animation, observed the ordinary "small potatoes" life from a unique perspective. In the context of the "Cold War" history, Zagreb artists have unique and noble personality charm and an optimistic and open-minded heart. They love life and are happy to explain life, whether it is mediocre or about politics of life, all could perfectly express the life of "small potatoes" with the "hot" humor. Zagreb school of animation from the animator's accomplishment to their works have a lot of things worthy us to learn, including their bold subject choice and delicate thinking as well as their great admiration of free creation. In-depth study of the representative works of Zagreb school of animation not only can make us learn their humorous creative thinking, but also know more about their carvings of profound meaning for the animation, so as to make us pay more attention to realistic themes and focus on the details when we produce animation films.

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