

Space Production and Its Art Representation

Taking "Big Talk on Journey to the West" as an Example

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Abstract—Space theory is an important concern of Western Neo-Marxism. In works of literature and art, space theory and its framework of interpretation explored the struggles among the various social forces brought together by analyzing the physical space constructed in literary works, and creatively explored the deep meaning of the text. The production of any space is the production and reproduction of social relations. The complexity of spatial issues is manifested through the "spatial matrix" and its connection with society and politics. Film, as a microcosm and sublimation of real life, reflects the conflict of interests and cultural control behind the image spaces. From the perspective of space production, this article analyzes why the theme of "Big Talk on Journey to the West" is gradually deepened under the promotion of space and explores its unique cultural connotation and its root causes. Through analysis, we can see that each space in the movie represents different discourse forces and the producer of space has the ultimate power of control. However, the missing sense of belonging of Hong Kong residents is just the hotbed of fictional space and identity puzzlement represented by the "Journey to the West".

Keywords—space theory; Neo-Marxism; "Big Talk on Journey to the West"; space production; Hong Kong

I. INTRODUCTION

Space is an important category that contemporary Western Neo-Marxism pays close attention to. It is no longer just a "place" in the eyes of geographers, but an important resource that carries the expansion and competition of capitalist capital. In the field of humanities research, the space problem is manifested in its close relationship with society, economy and politics. Lefebvre, the French philosopher, is acknowledged as the first person to promote the "space turn" in modern cultural studies. For the first time, he clearly made space jump out of the fixed framework of the opposite of time and became an important target of social criticism. Space is not a static background and container, but a product of socio-political economy. Space itself involved in the production of goods, but also involved in the process of the history. Space production is not the production of matter within space but the space itself as a production object. Space has become the focus of chasing interests and a bloody battlefield.

In literary and artistic works, space is no longer just the background of the story, but an important medium for

participating in plot promotion. Space can promote the development of the story, and the transformation of space represents different social forces. Lefebvre first put forward the theory of "social space" in *the production of space*, arguing that social space and social production are dialectically unified. The formation of space is the result of social processes. Space is also a place where social activities and forces are generated. It is itself a powerful element of social production. The traditional western humanities and social sciences consider space as static and solidified. In *the production of space*, Lefebvre sought to correct the simple and erroneous view of space in such political theory, arguing that space is not only the context behind the evolution of social relations; on the contrary, numerous social processes take place because of space, and these social spaces overlap and permeate each other. We know the space includes three parts: the physical space, psychological space and social space. In his opinion: "The areas we are concerned with are: first, physical, which includes nature and the universe; second, spiritual, which includes logical abstraction and formal abstraction; thirdly, social, that is the logical epistemological space that we care about, space for social practice, space occupied by sensory phenomena, including products of imagination, such as design, symbolism, utopia, etc."¹ Social space shows the connection between space and human practices, and social processes are closely related to different kinds of space production, so "space production" is essentially political. The space projected in literary and artistic works is therefore also a subsidiary of the political economy with special significance.

Social space has its complex characteristics: we often face not one kind of social space, but a lot of spaces, with no limit and a wide range of social space. In the course of the production, growth and development of space, there is no space ever to disappear, and it is a law or rule that connects social space. Various social spaces permeate one another and add themselves to another space. Space seems to have a separate appearance; in fact, there is a vague continuity among them. The places of social space are different from the places of natural space. They cannot simply be tied together, and they may overlap with each other and be combined. A particular space can both be regional and

¹ Henry Lefebvre. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell 1991.p.11.

national, and its regional nature is not annexed by nationality. All the space runs through a variety of trends. The complexity of social space, including relatively fixed points and continuous flow, some mutual infiltration, some collide with each other, and even contradict each other. The important focus of the new Marxist space theory in literary criticism is to reveal the complex social relations afterwards by analyzing the material space in the text.

In the humanities, the reaffirmation of the concern of space has changed our understanding of social history and criticism. Likewise, the spatial organization in society, including the separation of villages and cities, has also been given due attention. The restructuring of globalization has accelerated the confusion of space. For example, the rapid industrialization of the Third World and the de-industrialization of the First World go hand in hand, changing their mutual geospatial space as well as our way of understanding such space. People's awareness of the environment in which they live is blurred. Advances in science and technology bring people a totally different experience of time and space. In the 20th and 21st centuries, the advent of air transport, telephone, television and space travel, computers and the Internet has dramatically changed the perception of people about where they are and the awareness of overcoming physical distances through technology. David Harvey calls this situation "space-time compression" in modern and post-modern societies. In the process of capitalism, "the objective qualities of space and time are revolutionized, so much that we are forced to, sometimes, use a very radical way to change the way we represent the world to ourselves."² Changes in the real world will inevitably bring about people's spiritual perception of the response. The world that artists and thinkers portrayed in their works is a manifestation of reality. They have challenged all aspects of our traditional understanding of us and our world. The spatial turn in the study of literature and culture is a reasonable response to this confusion and a tentative exploration of new spaces and representations.

II. THE CONSTRUCTION OF SPACE IN THE "BIG TALK ON JOURNEY TO THE WEST"

"Big Talk on Journey to the West" takes the "Westward Journey", one of the four famous classic novels of China as the prototype, and follows the original main story lines and characters of the story. However, it adds a lot of postmodern plots: Sun Wukong (a monkey, but is appointed by Avalokitesvara to protect Monk Tang to fetch the Scripture in the West, so he becomes one of the followers of Monk Tang and becomes a monk too) is entangled in the love affair with several girls, and Monk Tang and Avalokitesvara go down the altar, are endowed with "shortcomings" just like mortals. The movie's plot seems complicated, in fact, it is very simple. Only because of its time and space staggered, the story has gained a three-dimensional characteristic. Its main line is that 500 years ago, Sun Wukong was punished by Avalokitesvara to reincarnate 500 years after for his

conspiring attempt to murder Monk Tang with Ox demon king (a monster with the face of an ox, who believes that one can live forever as long as to eat Monk Tang). 500 years later, he, as a mortal, fell in love with Bai Jingjing (the white Bone Demon acted as a woman), because Bai Jingjing kills herself with an unknown reason, he wants to return to the spot where she dies by moonlight treasure box, but it brings him back to 500 years ago, in this space-time travel, he encounters another emotional entanglement. It is this emotional entanglement that let him recognize his true identity, and ultimately sacrifice personal love in difficult choices, put on the hoop, to return to fetch the Scripture in the West.

From the point of view of time, the whole story is a process from the beginning to the end and then back to the beginning. In the process of time travel with the help of the moonlight treasure box, and finally back to 500 years ago, the clues of time become obscure and almost invisible. The incarnations of the dead and the intervening are interspersed with each other and the wandering of the past, the present and the future are mutual staggered. There is no clear sequence of natural time. Some space also repeated, however, each appearance represents a different control forces. The order of the story was chaotic, the cause and effect reversed, can only be distinguished by space. This idea of spatial positioning is not only reflected in the depiction of specific locations, but also in characterization of emotional and psychological activities, and the construction of each space is actually a struggle of different forces. As the space for social relations changes, Sun Wukong eventually moves to the path of fetching the Scripture in the West as arranged by Avalokitesvara. The following paragraphs will analyze the important space associated with the fate of characters in the movie: Pan Si-dong, and reveals its role in deepening the theme.

The main space for people's activities in the movie is related to their own destiny, because everyone lives in a particular space matrix. Behind the formation of this matrix is the gathering of various social forces, because "different spatial forms are determined by different human practices."³ For the film protagonist Sun Wukong, Pan Si Dong is a very important space in which his identity has been changed. 500 years later, he is called the Zhi Zunbao, he encounters Bai Jingjing and her sister (a spider monster) who come here to wait for Monk Tang in Wu Yue Shan. He falls in love with Bai Jingjing, in a fight Bai is badly injured, in order to save the poisoning of Bai Jingjing, he broke into the Shui lian dong Cave (Pan Si-dong 500 years ago), in which the spider monster lives, but is trapped in the hole. He inadvertently finds a moonlight treasure box that allows time to pass through. Bai Jingjing thought he changed his mind and committed suicide sadly. In order to remove the misunderstanding, Zhi Zunbao wants to return to the moment of her death by using the moonlight treasure box. According to Harvey's space matrix, at this time Pan Si-dong, in absolute terms, is the territory of the spider. Relevant spatial

² Harvey David, *The Condition of Postmodernity, An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Changes*. Blackwell, 1990.p. 240.

³ Yan Jia, "David Harvey and the Tradition of Marxist Literary Criticism" in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. 2011(6).p.18.

point of view, for Zhi Zunbao, it is the site of antidote; for the Ox demon king, it is place to compete for the Monk Tang with the spider monster; for Bai Jingjing, it is a sad old site. However, for the "Gods" who produce this space, this is the place where Zhi Zunbao found the moonlight treasure box so that pave the way for him to go back and forth to meet Zi Xia (an immortal, who Sun Wukong really loves). In order to test whether Sun Wukong has changed his mind after 500 years and take on the task of fetching the Scripture in the West, Avalokitesvara and Buddha Tathagata decide to give him a wonderful love to see whether he can give up. Therefore, they create Bai Jingjing, Spider monster, Ox demon king, all acted as passers-by to participate in the episode. It can be seen that the production of each space is a production of certain relationship; it is a struggle between different forces.

So he traveled back to 500 years ago, "met" Zi Xia smoothly. For them, the encounter is the beginning of the identity dislocation: Avalokitesvara arranges Zhi Zunbao to travel back to the time and place where Zi Xia appears; Zi Xia gives him three nevi, he then becomes Sun Wukong; he inadvertently pulled out Zi Xia's sword, thus, Zi Xia believes he is her Mr. Right. Sun Wukong is not willing to accept his own destiny despite Avalokitesvara's warning in his dream repeatedly, instead, he bent on finding Bai Jingjing with the moonlight treasure box. At this point, Pan Si-dong, from absolute space, is the domain of Zi Xia, who now call herself fairy of Pan Si; from related space, Sun Wukong thinks this is the location of the moon treasure box. Zi Xia recognized Sun Wukong as her destiny, but she does not know that his fate changes just because of her appearance. The real purpose of constructing this space is to allow Sun Wukong to accept its own destiny. This is the beginning of his "scheduled" course. After some twists and turns, he finally realized that the one he truly loved was Zi Xia, the appearance of Ox demon king who wants to marry Zi Xia against her will, just serves as a catalyst for prompting him to become Sun Wukong, only this can he defeat Ox demon king so that to save the Zi Xia. In doing so, he has to cut off personal love affair and protect Monk Tang to the West.

Pan Si-dong is actually a transfer station. Here, Zhi Zunbao becomes Sun Wukong, destiny tests him in this space, let him finally lay down the secular heart and transform to a Buddha (Monk). In fact, his route is set beforehand for a long time: a person gives him three nevi → put on the Diamond Ring → defeat Ox demon king → protect Monk Tang to the West. Only he himself did not know, the fate of the network has long been rolled out. This space has always contains a contest of different forces, from Zi Xia, Spider monster to Ox demon king, everyone wants to achieve their goals here, only the "protagonist" -Sun Wukong being push around. Everyone is a pawn, should follow the established route. Because the exists of this space is to fulfill the ultimate purpose of the final constructor. Bai Jingjing, Zi Xia, Ox demon king are all old forces who are enemies but "destiny". As for Sun Wukong himself, he has to obey the arrangements.

Shui Lian Dong had repeatedly appeared in the dream of Zhi Zunbao. In this illusory space, someone (Avalokitesvara) was talking to him, prompting him to find someone who

gave him three nevi. So, this is a space with highly suggestive illusion, where "immortals" remind him of his true identity. When Sun Wukong finally recognize the truth and accept the fate of the arrangement, Pan Si-dong transformed back to the Shui Lian Dong which is exactly the way that repeated in his dream, and there are his diamond ring and gold hoop await for him too. At this time the absolute space and related space are clear for all people: Zhi Zunbao turns into Sun Wukong, "destiny" finally defeat rebel. As the space theorists have seen, the formation of each space is a combination of innumerable social, political, economic and cultural factors. The producer of this space has the final say in the domination of this space. For the owner - "citizens", they have but no real choice of right.

"The organization of space is a product of society that results from purposive social practices." ⁴ The space produced by society is a built structure. The construction and organization of each space have the purpose and interests of the producers behind them. Space has always been influenced and shaped by historical and natural factors. It is not a simple "container", it is actually full of all kinds of ideology. In "Big Talk on Journey to the West", each appearance of space represents the change of the identity of the characters in the movie. Each space also represents the control of social forces on the fate of the characters, and the theme of the movie is gradually revealed under the shell of the comedy. Harvey's space matrix also fully illustrates the complexity of the space issues. The appearance of each space reflects its specific meaning and represents the voice of each "discourse force." As Harvey said, "The purpose of the space problem lies in: looking at the various social forces it brings together through the analysis of the physical space that people construct." ⁵ Studying "Big Talk on Journey to the West" from the perspective of space can deepen the theme by analyzing the construction intention of space.

III. REALISTIC REFERENCE TO IMAGE SPACE

In Baudrillard's "Four-Stage Image Theory", the space for "Big Talk on Journey to the West" belongs to the category of "imagery" and is a kind of "fictional" or imitative thing of replacing the "real" one. It does not relate to any reality, is purely its own "simulacrum". ⁶ According to Jameson, "the simulacrum is a copy of something without the original, which is one of the main features of postmodernism, such as the transformation of reality into images." ⁷ Although it is an expression of space without source, we can still see through the creator's own inner experience and cultural position through these spaces.

⁴ Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies, The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, Verso, 1989. p. 79.

⁵ Yan Jia, "David Harvey and the Tradition of Marxist Literary Criticism" in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. 2011(6).p.18.

⁶ Ji Guibao, "Baudrillard in Post-Modern Context" in *Postmodernism and Politics of Geography*. Bao Yaming edited, Shanghai Education Press, 2001. p.95.

⁷ Ji Guibao, "Baudrillard in Post-Modern Context" in Bao Yaming edited *Postmodernism and Politics of Geography*. Ibid. p.96.

Therefore, what is important is not the spatial landscape itself, but the intention behind this spatial representation.

In the "Big Talk on Journey to the West", what we see is the rebellious personality, "mortalized" immortal, the tragedy of love in a comedy atmosphere. The dialogue in the movie is even more surprising: modern vocabulary, English, Cantonese, mixed in this costume martial arts film. These apparent changes, which were then referred to as "nonsense" at the time, were transliterated from Cantonese, stating: "Something inexplicable or unexplainable has been made. In Stephen Chow's motion picture, it is a language game and deliberate taunts; a subversion of rules and logic; a kind of contempt for communication and narrowing of authoritarianism."⁸ In short, "nonsense" means no reason and no constraint. In laughter curse, Stephen Chow ridiculed the authority of the fairy, the value orientation of sacrificial justice and the traditional concept of martial arts. So, this movie has always been regarded as a classic subversion to classics. In the 1990s, Hong Kong films already had commercial intrinsic attributes, massive and modest production would inevitably make the film carry on a postmodern "collage" feature. This production strategy is to use the image to convey the pleasure of consumption. "The reason why such works as "Big Talk on Journey to the West" can easily deconstruct the 'grand narratives' such as nationalism and ultimate care are actually related to the urban and commercial aspects of Hong Kong. Behind 'deconstruction' is the citizens' emotional expression of values (pleasure-seeking in time)."⁹

To sum up, this is not a real comedy movie. "Big Talk on Journey to the West" is the transitional trial of Stephen Chow. The film was released as a New Year celebration film, but it is not only cast for the audience to laugh for fun but just more for Stephen Chow to express the frustration and grief in the face of unknown fate. Rebellion as Sun Wukong, he, after all, can't defeat the destiny, despite his helpless situation and painful heart; he has to shoulder the task of protecting Monk Tang to the West. In surface, the film does not make any sense and is far away from reality. In fact, it is full of Stephen Chow's intention: to express the reality of Hong Kong people through the helplessness of Sun Wukong and his uncontrollable destiny. The "prompt pleasure-seeking" sentiment expressed by their films is, in fact, a confusion facing the coming "return of 1997". Ever since China and Britain signed the joint statement on the issue of Hong Kong and finalized the date of return, over the 1990s, most of Hong Kong films revealed the "confusion and uncertainty before the handover of the power."¹⁰ "Big Talk on Journey to the West" was released in 1995, in which the return of Hong Kong to China would be only two years away. Hong Kong people's mindset may be confused, just like the film's "Sun Wukong". However helpless and confused, they

have to accept. The sense of not belonging of Hong Kong people has existed for a long time. The once popular culture of time travel, including the nonsense culture prevalent in the Mainland due to the popularity of "Big Talk on Journey to the West", is a typical feature of Hong Kong's culture." This is in line with Hong Kong's position in the post-Cold War and post-Cold War framework of the "enclave" state, which is the uncertainty of the sense of history and space without ownership."¹¹

In the image space of "Big Talk on Journey to the West", each of the different spaces represents the change of identity of protagonist. Zhi Zunbao has always been confused about who he is. He traveled to the space where he did not belong to and acquired another identity. The fate of people in different space also reflects the uncertainty of the identity of the subject. In the process of passing through time, the spatial processing of the interlacing of reality and imagination further increases the difficulty of recognizing a person's identity. This confusion is also the question of Hong Kong people's identity. The "simulacrum" space constructed in the movie seems to be divorced from the reality, but it is also out of a kind of confusion about the reality and the evasion of the future. There are always referential and projective relations between the film's image space and the social space. "The inextricable links between these images and the real space are not always one-to-one correspondent, but they are always closely related to a particular society and its historical context."¹² In fact, none of the literary and artistic works exist in a vacuum and are objective and neutral, and they always express the creator's cultural position and value judgment.

IV. CONCLUSION

Harvey, in his *Postmodern Condition*, focuses on geospatial issues and discusses the art of literature and cinema in specialized chapters, adding a new dimension of interpretation to space theory. From his analysis, we can find another critical thinking of Harvey: "The changes in aesthetics, art and culture are regarded as the material way of social production. The representation of changes in political-economic relations is regarded as the expression of changes in people's inner feelings brought by these changes."¹³ "Big Talk on Journey to the West" is a portrayal of the changes in the psychology of Hong Kong caused by the changes in social relations. It breaks the original clues of time and replaces the traditional narration with time-space crossing and "nonsense" style. In avoiding the time at the same time, the transfer of space gives the audience a new space-time experience. The deep meaning of narration is to reflect the psychological changes of Hong Kong people in real life through the fate of the protagonist in the film. In the movie, the fate of the characters is decided by the change of the

⁸ Lie Fu, "Hong Kong Cinema Overview of the 1990s" in *Contemporary Cinema*, 2002(2). P. 64.

⁹ Liu Hongyu, "The Post-modern Space of Hong Kong Films in the 1990s" in *Journal of Beijing Film Academy*, 2004(4).p.5.

¹⁰ Lie Fu, "Hong Kong Cinema Overview of the 1990s" in *Contemporary Cinema*, 2002(2). p. 63.

¹¹ Li Lei, "Four Classical Works in Consumer Culture Times" in *Literary Theory and Criticism*, 2012(3). P. 31.

¹² Liu Hongyu, "The Post-modern Space of Hong Kong Films in the 1990s" in *Journal of Beijing Film Academy*, 2004(4).p.7.

¹³ Yan Jia, "Dimension of David Harvey's Geography and Space Imagination" in *Journal of Sichuan Normal University*, 2013(11). p. 77.

space. In reality, the change of the sense of spatial belonging also makes the people's mind full of uncertainty and confusion.

As Soja declared, space has always been neglected, and historical determinism has spread in the critical consciousness of modern social theory, which often resulting in the stifling of people's sensitivity to social spatiality. This sensitivity can take care of social existence and allows it to be actively placed in space and time in an apparently historical and geographical contextualized context. The dialectical understanding of the relationship between space and social existence, liberate space from the background; to look through the convergence forces behind the social, economic and political relations, are important issues what the contemporary Neo-Marxist space theory set to solve. This article takes space as the starting point, starts with the construction of space to explore the social forces that come after it and the influence on the characters in the play, and provides a new perspective to the thematic analysis of "Big Talk on Journey to the West". As Professor Yan Jia said: "Although the modernity of Western capitalism has emerged to the transition to 'post-modernity,' the critical weapon of Marxist theory has not lost its effectiveness and edge and it can still be used to dissect various seemingly dazzling and controversial urban space and literary phenomena." ¹⁴ Western Neo-Marxist space theorists represented by Harvey and Soja returned to classical Marxism, insisted on political and economic criticism and explored the essential reasons behind the problems of "modernity and post-modernity" in all kinds of cities. Their thinking has always provides us with critical calm in this numerous and noisy world and provided inspiring references for us to see the essence of social issues through noisy and complicated literary and artistic works.

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¹⁴ Yan Jia, "Literary Experience of Modernity and Spatial Renovation of Metropolis" in *Jiangxi Social Sciences*, 2007(8).p. 78.