

Analysis of Movie "2012" in Kantian "Sublime Theory"

Xiuyuan Shi

Shandong University of Arts
Shandong University
Jinan, China

Abstract—As a disaster film, "2012" depicted the doomsday of human world, and showed us how the new "Noah Ark" drove people to the new era and got reborn. The movie, like a manly – planned great work, reconstructed Kant's analysis in his "sublime" theory: the disaster as the fatal end of all human beings and the uncontrolled natural rules; the "ark" as the symbol of modern civilization; the salvation and people's struggling for lives standing for the demonstration of "human power and spirits"; the survived as the witness of "the sublimity". Therefore, we might say "2012" is a great work to manifest human force and reason, but also a work showing a Kantian "sublime" tone. While, what the movie wanted to tell us is more: today we must re-examine the relationship between man and nature and find our "right" way towards future.

Keywords—analysis; movie; "2012"; kantian; sublime

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Disaster, Death, and Natural Rules

The main plot as a disaster film "2012" is: there are abnormal solar activities, the earth's interior energy balance was collapsed, and the Mayan prophecy was coming true, human mankind would face the 2012 crowning calamity, the end of the world. And the movie depicted how the main characters in the movie survived. In 2009, an American scientist discovered a mysterious and shocking truth: the solar surface storm was having a lethal effect on the earth, but this did not attract much attention. Until 2010, scientists knew and acknowledged the fact that the world was dying out. And they have opened a huge program of self-salvation that humanity has never had so far..... Next, a lot of things happening around the world, on the west coast of the United States there are many "small earthquake", and there appeared many signs of crack in the world. Even so, people were still living as usual, unaware of the impending disaster. Jackson, the film's protagonist, was driving his two children to Yellowstone National Park for a holiday, only to find that the lakes that have had good memories had dried up, and that the area had become a restricted area. Being confused, he accidentally met Charlie at a camp near Yellowstone. Charlie told him that because of long-term predatory destruction of the natural environment and human resources, the earth's own balance system had collapsed, mankind would face unprecedented natural disasters. But some countries had built "an ark" in secret to avoid this disaster. Jackson thought he

was crazy, just laughed and walked away. On the second day, however, the disaster happened. A strong earthquake, a huge volcanic eruption, turned the familiar home into a world of purgatory. In other parts of the globe, all kinds of natural disasters had happened on an unprecedented scale.

Being "weird and lonely", Charlie was the human world's "prophet". When criticizing wantonly all kinds of evils, the unbridled greed which brought disastrous consequences to the environment that we were depending on, he seemed to be an "adjudicator" and he declared the inevitable arrival of human's disaster and death. Although this disaster is "human made", but as the consequences of the "inevitable", it is the punishment from nature, and works as the "rules" of nature – when violating the rules of nature, we will be punished by nature inevitably.

The "2012" disaster was so "disastrous", that any place on earth, anyone in the world was without exception, this was more like the description of human's doomed death; the film repeated showing desperate people in prayer before God, and the Vatican Cathedral collapsed as symbolic images which seemed to illustrated philosophers' prophecy -- "God is dead"; Only few people around the world were able to know the world's "secret" and was likely to survive; before this unavoidable "death", people must keep this highly confidential information and must not betray --- this was a hypothesis which the movie had preset for us, because we could not imagine the consequence that when people got acknowledged the coming of the "end", what chaos and confusion the world would be fallen into. And this "irrational" chaos" out of control would not be arranged in the film. The inevitable "death" and the choice of human beings who represented the most rational and civilized achievements of the world was the keynote the movie expected to discuss.

B. Back to Kant

With these presuppositions, we were back to Kant's theory. Kant spent ten years on the renowned Three Critiques (1781~1790). Kant started his critical philosophy in the great historical background of the enlightenment after the renaissance. The victory of the French political revolution in 1789 heralded the victory of the bourgeois revolution in Western Europe, and it also marked the victory of the bourgeois Enlightenment in the early eighteenth

Century. This also acknowledged Kant the triumph of enlightenment and reason (with its essence as the discovery of man, the development and perfection of man's self-consciousness), and made him more determined to the advocate for human reason. Kant was taking "human being" as the starting point and the purpose of advocating rational of human being, as his words: my interests were not only in the emotional things, and not in super sensation, but in all human made knowledge, actions and beliefs. To explain the essence of man's freedom and to realize the ultimate goal of human beings is the exploring direction of Kant's life. Kant's transformation to this direction under the influence of Rousseau also shows his philosophical task. "I am a seeker by nature; I thirst for knowledge, I keep moving forward, and I am happy with inventions. There was a time when I believed that this was the true dignity of human life, and that I despised ignorant masses. I have learned to respect and thought of me far less useful than the ordinary workers, unless I believe that my philosophy could restore the common rights of all of them." (cf. Huang 2005)

Kant's critique of pure reason is to test the cognitive ability of human being, he examined how human beings in accordance with their own time and space conception and perception category structures and arranges materials from the perceptual world, and forms a "phenomenon", and this process is a process of Nature legislation. The critique of practical reason is to solve their own behavior norms and moral standards, is to shake themselves off the shackles of the phenomena and rise to a higher level of morality, which is Human legislation. (Chen 2002, 51) The critique of judgment is the "emotional bridge" connecting the intellectual and rational world. We need to reach a rational understanding of our own, undergoing the bridge of "aesthetic", and the bridge is extended from the analysis of "the beautiful" to "the sublime".

The social and cultural background of Kant's metaphysics is the process of continuous nature disenchantment, and the occurrence of the European Renaissance and the French Revolution as well as the demonstration of human power which science and technology. In the film, the collapsing statues, the prayers of the helpless and the despair of the believers seemed to have the foresight of the "death" of God, due to modern civilization. Under such background, how does the power of man manifest itself? Or how will we build our own Noah's Ark?

II. WHAT THE ARK REPRESENTS

A. *As a Symbol of all Civilization, Especially Modern Civilization*

In the Bible, *genesis* recorded that after witnessing human beings fighting, looting endlessly, God was very sorry and decided to destroy all his creatures and animals, the insects, and the birds in the air. But he was reluctant to destroy all creatures, and hoped that a new generation of human and animal could repent and start a new era to build an ideal world. In the end, among all sinful human, the Noah had been chosen in God's grace. God told them seven days

later the mass destruction would happen and asked them to make an ark by the gopher wood. Noah did what God had told him. Seven days later, the flood had come, and the water was great, and all the mountains on the earth were drowned. In July 17th, the ark stopped on Mount Lara, this is the origin of the legend of Noah's ark.

In the film, the symbol of the "great ship" in the film was self-evident, but it was the ark that saved mankind that brought us the controversy. There are always people talking about the values of the movie: Why were politicians from various countries, capital predators and industry elites selected? Isn't that still taking money as the supremacy of rights? I oppose it. The huge "Noah's Ark" represented and was built on resources of all kinds, wisdom, manpower and money from all over the world. In the face of a predictable "disaster", we built up an ark which can make human beings survive and reproduce, and it was the most massive redemption, and it represented the most advanced development of science and technology, all human wisdom and civilizations. On the ark, among billions of human beings, few were selected and survived, who were the elites from all walks of life, the inherited "excellent" genes and merits of "transcendental ability" that made us better than other species through millions of years. Our democratic ideas, political civilization was represented by the country's politicians and political figures, which was completely expressed through dialogues and negotiations between scientists and politicians; The super-rich men were on behalf of the material and money, but the rich men were also the most controversial part. The film suggested that it was necessary for us to have "material" support, but it was necessary at most, not primacy ones, the Russian tycoon's death had made the footnotes.

"The ark", as a symbol of human civilization, the computers' flashing screen, the complex functions of ingenious innovations and powerful control center were showing to us a highly condensed picture of modern civilization. At the end of the movie, this ship, on behalf of mankind's "modern civilization", was almost out of control, although it was gigantic and advanced, and represented the most advanced science and technology, but when "she" was discovered rolling forward straightly, not able to turn back, all human beings were stuck into abnormal fear and utmost regret Where was the ark heading that should had saved our lives? The movie "2012", directed by Roland Emmerich served us a very grand visual feast: the ruins of Los Angeles in the roar of the collapse on that day, subsidence and annihilation of Washington in a flood, Eiffel Tower being knocked down, Rome Cathedral disappearing in an instant collapse, Golden Gate Bridge getting fractured, the flood rushing to Himalaya mountains..... It was like an apocalyptic landscape. This force of nature, which brought us fear and despair, had found its source in Kant's "sublime theory".

B. *The Interpretation of Kant's Theory of Sublime*

Kant's theory of sublime analysis is divided into: the mathematical and the magnitude, with its purpose of emphasizing the moral strength of the subject (super emotional strength), the inner spirit in the sublime is the

aesthetic transcendence in confrontations, it transcends the specific things in the world of phenomena, leading to the moral metaphysical world, and make people understand the free and unlimited, so as to enhance people's sense of morality. The contradiction in the sublime is the "non-form" characteristic of nature." But notable differences between the two also strike the eye. The beautiful in nature concerns the form of the object, which consists in limitation; the sublime, by contrast, is to be found in a formless object insofar as limitlessness is represented in it, or at its instance, and yet it is also thought as a totality: so that the beautiful seems to be taken as the presentation of an indeterminate concept of the understanding, but the sublime as that of a similar concept of reason. "

The form does not refer to the object itself does not form (which is unlikely), but to force or infinite objects (corresponding to the mathematical sublime or mathematical sublime) as the broad boundless, endless sky, mountains, vast sea, boundless desert, volcano eruption, roaring waves etc. Infinite and unlimited power is "totally great", "no contest", no form not the actual measure (that will become the intellectual judgment rather than aesthetic judgment), but relative to the aesthetic subject of intuitive ability.....The non-formal feature of the object brings the aesthetic subject into a relation with the object in opposition, which is different from the peaceful and harmonious relationship between the subject and nature in the aesthetic judgment of the United States. The natural forces of the seas, storms, volcanoes, and deserts that are terrifying and may bring disaster to mankind. "Our imagination is violent, but it is only judged to be more noble." (Guyer, 2002, 128)

All these incidents such as the erupting volcano and flood the storms in the movie just resembled Kant's sublime theory in that they were definitely formless limitless and made people shocked and terrified. But how these horrified scenes and tragedies could make the sense of sublime? By Kant

"likewise the irresistibility of its power certainly makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical powerlessness, but at the same time it reveals a capacity for judging ourselves as independent of it and a superiority over nature on which is grounded a self-preservation of quite another kind than that which can be threatened and endangered by nature outside us, whereby the humanity in our person remains undemeaned even though the human being must submit to that dominion. In this way, in our aesthetic judgment nature is judged as sublime not insofar as it arouses fear, but rather because it calls forth our power (which is not part of nature) to regard those things about which we are concerned (goods, health and life) as trivial, and hence to regard its power (to which we are, to be sure, subjected in regard to these things) as not the sort of dominion over ourselves and our authority to which we would have to bow if it came down to our highest principles and their affirmation or abandonment. Thus, nature is here called sublime merely because it raises the imagination to the point of presenting those cases in which the mind can make palpable to itself the sublimity of its own vocation even over nature." (Guyer, 2002, 144-145)

When disaster struck, people on the ark seemed to be in a safe place, they witnessed the flood, witnessed the power of nature and human's disability and insignificance, in this context of "self-protection", people felt a kind of independent ability in nature and had a strength in their minds. Therefore, as Kant said, the sublime is not in any natural matters, and is still in our mind. If people can realize the advantages over nature inside us and furthermore realize it outside natural, so aroused in the hearts of emotion, are called sublime. The people on the ark who survived the force of nature had outgrown fear, saw the blue sky and white clouds again, it is the new era. Human beings seemed to overcome the fear, and therefore, a powerful force in their hearts and self-respect feelings rose, and, this is Kant's sublime. So we might say "2012" is a great work to manifest human force and reason, but also a work showing a Kantian "sublime" tone.

III. WHAT CAN WE EXPECT — THE "SUBLIME" REASON IS THE WAY OF HUMAN'S SELF-SALVATION

A. *What Else Sublimity Prompt*

Of course, in Kant's life during the twenty-first Century is unable to foresee the human world, and to foresee that the so-called "rational" is so highly provocative, the development of science and technology is so speedy, and most importantly, our living environment has so greatly damaged. It is even the era of stepping toward self – destruction by the human - centered thoughts. However, when we returned to Kant's Sublime Theory, we marvel at its foresight and new implications for the survival problems mankind facing today.

Sublimity has created the way, for human beings in the plight of modern civilization, of aesthetic transcendence and fulfillment of life freedom and pointed out a direction for the development of modern aesthetics. Comparing to the beautiful, sublimity is a metaphysical aesthetic pursuit, and an approach to the true existence of human spiritual life. Kant's moral concept (morality) provided a sheer scale of human spiritual life, on this scale of "the sublime", aesthetic judgment in moral emotions have gone beyond the pressure and fear the object brought us, and then made us realize the great power of personality, so as to enhance the people's aesthetic soul. (cf. Huang 2005)

The so-called doomsday prophecy, although with the passage of time, it proved itself wrong, reflects the bewildered heart of human being. From "tomorrow" to "2012", natural disasters and ecological environment problems have shown in the movie, they are more like the demonstration of human spirit's crisis than that of artistic imagination. Human beings are facing a great ecological disaster, which is the inevitable result of human society's development in the past two thousand years, especially in the last three hundred years. It is entirely caused by human beings themselves..... The ecological problem facing the human earth..... It is not only a technical problem or a scientific management problem, but also an ethical problem, a philosophical problem, a question of belief, and even a poetic one."(cf. Huang 2008)

IV. CONCLUSION

As a spectator we could interpret the “sublimity”. Before the interpretation, we should say a bit words off the point, thanks for the modern technology, which brought us feel personally immersed in the scene: Los Angeles in the roar of the collapse, subsidence, annihilation in a flood in Washington, Eiffel Tower was knocked down at Rome Cathedral..... All of the terrifying sights are undoubtedly put our audiences in a “safe” place, we see the movie, experiencing the horrifying magnitude of natural disaster, we feel the power in our minds, we reflect in our mind the spiritual morality and the responsibility, we construct a “spectator - sublimity” in our minds, and this might be what the director had supposed to convey to us. Roland Emmerich was just making a wake-up call for humans before the move. "I'm going to tell people in movies that how stable situation people are now in and what kind of disaster they're going to face. It's very necessary, '9 11' is an example," Emmerich said. During the filming of "Tomorrow" and now the "2012" and other films, Emmerich puts New York, Los Angeles and other iconic metropolis in the epic disaster, he did so to raise awareness of global warming, the lack of government administration. In an interview with reporters, he said that "2012" is a more complete and ultimate destruction, "I like to describe any virtual disasters city suffered and that will make you alert, vigilant"

We may make a prediction of the ecological path in today's tough situations. Back to reality today, the movie "2012" reacted, from many aspects, some problems existing in today's world; the movie is closely linked with the real life: global warming, environmental degradation, economic crisis, conflict and war, and so on, it seemed that we caught trapped in this environment dilemma today. At the end of the movie, before the tsunami destroying Buddhist temple on the Tibet Snow Mountain, the "monk" sounded the final alarm for the rest of the world. And, finally the "Noah's Ark", carrying the human civilization, would hit Himalaya Range in the second, but at the last moment, the ship finally stopped, slowly drown back, and finally human beings got salvation, a new era had come..... Therefore, today we must re-examine the relationship between man and nature, people and the environment, and abandon the anthropocentrism, to re-examine and form a re-definition of man and nature, only through an ecological dimension can we find our only way out, and this is the reason makes the movie “2012” count.

REFERENCES

- [1] Huang Huajun, “Kant's theory of Sublime and its modern significance” *Journal of Zhanjiang Normal University* 26 (2005): 29-35.
- [2] Chen Yan, reflections on the trend of anti-rationalism, a review of modern western philosophy and aesthetics, Shandong University Press, 2002.
- [3] Immanuel Kant, edited by Paul Guyer, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- [4] Huang Qiao, “Born in Misery - the Meaning of Life in the American and European Disaster Films.” *Film literature* 21(2008): 41-44.