

2023

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Recommended Citation

Guang, Yang (2023) "Flavor Amidst Plainness: An Examination of the Subjectivity of the “People’s Films” From the Perspective of Classical Aesthetics," *Contemporary Social Sciences*: No. 3, Article 8.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.19873/j.cnki.2096-0212.2023.03.008>

Available at: <https://css.researchcommons.org/journal/vol2023/iss3/8>

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Flavor Amidst Plainness: An Examination of the Subjectivity of the “People’s Films” From the Perspective of Classical Aesthetics

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Abstract: The “People’s Films,” when examined from the perspective of classical aesthetics, present a unique visual style that creates artistic conceptions through sparse filming and deliver a scenery-based ideology through background shots, contributing to the overall aesthetic taste dominated by plainness. Chinese national aesthetic tastes, distinguished by implicitness, symbolism, and ethereality, have the magical power to present charming conceptions via plain and simple scenes, thus endowing the “People’s Films” with natural, plain, and harmonious frames that are unique to China. Behind the silent and plain scenes are representations of personal cultivation and essential values cherished by the Chinese people, which are achieved via the momentary presence and entirety of scenes photographed in the films, delivering an internal transcendence of people’s consciousness.

Keywords: plainness, classical aesthetics, the “People’s Films,” subjectivity

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.19873/j.cnki.2096-0212.2023.03.008>

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This paper is a phased achievement of the 2020 National Social Science Fund Art Project “History of Chinese Film Thought (1905-1949)” (Project No.: 20BC035).

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The Dual Pathway Between the “People’s Films” and Classical Aesthetics

Connotation and Denotation of the “People’s Films”

Terms such as “Populace,” “Mass,” and “People” emerged as early as the 1930s when researchers began to study leftist movies. Sun Shiyi once advocated, “Attention should be paid to the lives of the working masses living in the lower classes, a group that is often overlooked and despised by the general public, since their lives hold the greatest universality and should never be ignored. Only by showing the life of the working people in the lower classes can a film realize its function of criticizing life and reflecting on the times” (Sun, 1926). Under the influence of Marxism-Leninism, the “populace” depicted in literary and artistic works characterized by poverty and suffering was gradually transformed into “people” possessing heightened class and ideological awareness. That was in line with Lenin’s conception of “tens of thousands of working people” and “working masses and exploited masses” (Lenin, 1982, p. 330). The origins of the “People’s Films” in Chinese film history can be traced back to the establishment of the Yan’an Film Group in 1938 (Hong, 2020, p. 197). The portrayal of “people” in films drew its basis from Mao Zedong’s speech at the Yan’an Literature and Art Symposium in 1942. He emphasized that literature and art should serve the people, particularly workers, peasants, and soldiers (Mao, 1991, p. 855). It can be seen that the connotation of the “People’s Films” during this period centered on the proletariat and the people and served the workers, peasants, and soldiers. Unlike the old films or old films produced before the founding of the People’s Republic of China, new films show the struggle and the working life of the broadest masses. They are generally presented to the broadest masses, owned by the people, and produced and shown to the people according to their will and needs, which are warmly welcomed, loved, and supported by the people (Inaugural Statement for New Film, 1951, p. 7). In other words, the “newness” of the “People’s Films” is manifested in its new forms, ideas, service groups, and cultural systems. On this basis, the “People’s Films” evolved from an abstract concept to a subjective practice, and artistic video practices, such as prioritizing certain subjects, shaping typical characters, and highlighting positive characters among all characters, which gave birth to the concept of “people’s aesthetics.” Therefore, it is necessary to explore the connotation of the “People’s Films” by paying attention to the focus on the “people’s character” in early Chinese film history and new concepts and forms of the practice of “people’s aesthetics” in the new era and taking into full consideration different themes and paradigms from a future-oriented perspective to seek exceptional breakthroughs in the overall connotation of the “People’s Films” while looking at the big picture.

The Relationship Between “Plainness” and Subjectivity in the “People’s Films”

Chinese classical aesthetics is a set of grand theoretical systems formed by integrating the outlook of the Chinese people on the universe, life, and beauty. It is a study regarding life sentiment

and mental cultivation, and also a study of pursuing the coexistence with nature as advocated by Taoism and emphasizing feasibility and the practicability of actions. From a temporal perspective, it encompasses various aesthetics originating from the pre-Qin period (221 BC), the Han Dynasty (202 BC–9 AD, 25–220 AD), the Northern and Southern dynasties (420–589 AD), the Sui Dynasty (581–618 AD), the Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD), and the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (907–979 AD) in ancient Chinese history. From a school-specific point of view, it includes aesthetics advocated by Confucianism, Taoism, the Zen School of Buddhism, and others. From the perspective of basic categories, it covers different categories such as “Qi” (artistic conception), “Li” (reasonability), “Zhong” (moderation), “Dan” (plainness), “Wei” (flavor), “Miao” (subtlety) and “He” (harmony). The involvement of classical aesthetics in Chinese films is manifested in the saying, “One’s own will can only be settled if it conforms to the Tao, and the words of others can only be accepted if they conform to the Tao,” which emphasizes the importance of a writer’s pursuit of Tao in delivering his aspirations and ideals and accepting others when writing. It also pays attention to morality and personality cultivation as demonstrated in propositions of “a gentleman (that is, a virtuous person) should have the same moral character as jade” and “without the acquired learning of benevolence, justice, and morality, human nature cannot show its beauty,” as well as the expression of emotions manifested in the proposition of “emotions arising between men and women should be subject to the restriction of rites.”

The concept of “plainness” can be traced back to Lao Zi’s doctrine. According to the *Tao Te Ching*, music and dainties will make the passing guest stop (for a time). But though the Tao, as it comes from the mouth, seems insipid and has no flavor; though it seems not worth being looked at or listened to, the use of it is inexhaustible. Lao Zi believed that the perception of melodious music and delicious food was only a short and direct stimulus, and only the Tao was presented in a special way featuring plain and light flavor and was ready to embrace various possible changes. “Plainness,” as an essential element that is constantly evolving and developing in traditional Chinese culture, embodies the Chinese people’s pursuit of the golden mean and nature of life. It also represents the natural and detached creation and reading realm pursued by literary and artistic works, as is said in a line by an ancient Chinese scholar that “the most difficult thing in writing a poem is to keep it natural and plain throughout history.” As an open concept, “plainness” signifies “blandness” and “obedience to nature” behind magnificence and grand vigor, showing the intangible with the visible and expanding from the finite to the infinite. Amidst this empty keynote, the subjects or characters can fully express themselves and integrate themselves into the given scenes, creating a sense of “plainness” and pursuing balance and vacancy amid the constant transitional changes of everything between heaven and earth. At the same time, it also constructs certain “environmental fields,” “behavioral fields,” and “psychological fields” between the subject and the object to enhance the presentation effects of texts or films.

When examining the subjectivity of the “People’s Films,” in most cases, the focus is on the films themed on heroes or history. This paper intends to trace the sublime subjectivity of the “People’s

Films” from symbols such as green pine and cypress, blue sea and sky, and rosy sunshine, or extract it from the passionate and dedicated behavior or emotions of the characters. However, research on the subjectivity of the “People’s Films” often ignored the interpretation of “non-mainstream” films. From the perspective of either the natural landscape, physical movements, or sentiments of expression, the ethereal, beautiful, tragicomic, and absurd elements in “non-mainstream” films are also an inseparable part of the subjectivity of the “People’s Films.” The subjectivity of the “People’s Films” should not be confined to the heroic spirit and the strong enlightenment behind it, but it should pay more attention to the collectivist belief held by the masses, that is, the pure pursuit of truth and faith. Therefore, the “People’s Films” should also include “non-mainstream” films, such as *This Life of Mine* (1950), *The Family* (1956), *The Shop of the Lin Family* (1959), and *Early Spring in February* (1963) into the scope of analysis, thus enriching the depth and breadth of the subjectivity of the “People’s Films” from the perspective of ordinary workers, peasants, and soldiers.

Specifically, the relationship between the subjectivity and the “plainness” of the “People’s Films” is mainly reflected in the following aspects. At the value level, it seeks to present doctrines advocated in classical aesthetics, such as the harmony between man and nature and the Confucian cultivation spirit in the film images, striving to reveal the common value that connects the individual, the collective, and the revolution through the “plainness” of the scene. At the ideological level, by analyzing the scenery-based ideology via scenery shots or the “structural blank” brought by certain symbols, the “People’s Films” focus on exploring the artistic images carrying obvious collective characteristics and the emotional attitudes of the working class. At the aesthetic level, “plainness,” as a kind of artistic conception, constructs a special style unique to the Chinese nation to present the camera language, mise-en-scene, and performances of actors in a film through an implicit, symbolic, and ethereal manner. At the sensory level, “plainness,” as an emotional experience, plays a vital role in constructing images at the audiovisual and perceptual levels. Particularly, in the mental view, “plainness,” as a technique, provides viewers with an immersive experience through the changes of sound and images to transform the overlapping and engaging images of the physical world as well as the transformation of the strong and weak and the visual and practical into a long-standing spiritual pursuit.

Power of “Plainness:” Ethereality and “Scenery-Based Ideology”

“Emptiness” and “plainness” are closely related. Blank-leaving is a technique commonly used in artistic works, which is also known as “jade-like blank,” describing the blanks left in artistic works as empty and clear as jade, via which the illusory emotions can be delivered in a physical manner, thus showcasing the flowing of emotions and the essence of life. The blanks in Chinese classical paintings and calligraphy feature emptiness and simplicity and are free of stereotyped frameworks, which makes them full of vitality and attractiveness (Zong, 1994, p. 51). It is an important element used to construct the artistic conception of a work and also the expansion of images in a work. The use of the blank-leaving technique in artistic works has its origin in both the nature-based philosophy of Taoism

and the concept of “emptiness” pursued by the Zen School of Buddhism. As Lao Zi said, “The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name. Conceived of as having no name, it is the Originator of heaven and earth.” The blank-leaving technique used in films inherits the classical aesthetics of the idea of “harmony between man and nature” and emphasizes “making use of the various contrast relationships of the scenery depicted in the images, such as sparse and dense, far and near, invisible and visible, hidden and exposed, short and long, convex and concave, bright and dark, and dynamic and static, to create ‘structural blanks’ by taking advantage of these ‘vacant,’ ‘ethereal,’ and ‘profound’ virtual scenes and construct a visual situation that produces artistic conceptions” (Liu, 2008, pp. 151–152). “Emptiness” in the film refers to a kind of pure and clear atmosphere, which is all-embracing and full of freedom, often connected with people’s consciousness and spirit. Therefore, “‘emptiness’ is neither a technique nor a purely rational concept, but pertains to a result, an image, and a realm” (Jin, 1989, p. 147).

At the end of *The Family*, a film adapted from Ba Jin’s novel of the same name, there is a scene describing Gao Juehui, the third young master of the Gao family, leaving his home to participate in the revolution in Shanghai. In the scene, Juehui stood on the bow of the boat, looking at the mountains far away against the backdrop that the sun hid in the gloomy sky while mist-covered waters nearby reflected his skinny figure. Well-arranged blanks can significantly enhance the artistic conception of an artistic work or film. “Through the ingenious spatial arrangement, a poetic scene will then be constructed where characters and sceneries harmoniously coexist in both spatial and temporal dimensions. This can be achieved through the use of multi-layer and multi-perspective shots” (Zong, 2011, p. 133). The aesthetic connotation of “emptiness” is formed mainly under the influence of the philosophy advocated by the Zen School of Buddhism. This philosophy emphasizes the understanding that everything is interconnected and that the self is just a temporary manifestation of karma. By focusing on karma, heart, and nature, one can attain a more profound understanding of the world and themselves. In the film, Juehui left home and abandoned his 18 years of feudal life in the Gao family, and behind him were the mountains and rivers amid the gloomy weather. In front of him, he saw an unknown journey. At this moment, the faint silhouette of mountains and rivers merged with the emptiness in his body and mind. This ethereal scene completely captures a sense of “plainness,” aimed at rejuvenating the spiritual realm of humanity amidst emotions that are neither sorrowful nor joyful, and neither angry nor delusional, and then a world is formed where individuals and nature coexist in harmony. This mirrors the distinct aesthetic significance of human subjectivity, highlighting emotions over material entities. Furthermore, it fosters a collective consciousness of “self-discovery” during tumultuous times.

At the end of the film *The Shop of the Lin Family* directed by Shui Hua, the blank scene not only signifies an open ending, but also embodies the Confucian principle of “writings are for conveying truth.” As Boss Lin and Widow Zhang fled in a small flat-bottomed boat across the misty river, along with the money of Mrs. Zhu, the image of “the unmanned boat drifting across the wild river” paired with the juxtaposition of sound and visuals, connected Lin’s numb and stunned expression with the

heart-wrenching cries for help from people at the bottom of society. The ruthless law of the natural world, where larger creatures prey on smaller ones, pales in comparison to the atrocities committed by humans during times of war. Although “emptiness” may be considered the natural state of things, in this context, it is imbued with a distinct class consciousness. Here, the ethereal scene can be seen as a moment of calm before the storm of war and conflict. It represents the appeal of moral goodness and human ethics, providing a symbol of hope and harmony in a world that is often discomfiting and chaotic. The concrete imagery is infused with the power of abstract contemplation, allowing the subjectivity of the “People’s Films” to transcend into a realm of otherworldly emptiness that exists both outside and within it.

In the “People’s Films,” the concept of “emptiness” is not only a philosophy regarding the creation of artistic conceptions but also a visual technique that accentuates emptiness through scenery shots, thus delivering a “scenery-based ideology.” W. J. T. Mitchell believes that “landscape does not merely signify or symbolize power relations. It is an instrument of cultural power, perhaps the central tool of power that is (or frequently represents itself as) independent of human intentions” (Mitchell, 2017, pp. 1–2). The use of scenery shots that embody ideological color can shape people’s subjective consciousness, highlighting the beauty of national culture and evoking a sense of home and country through the natural landscape. In the film *The Grass on the Kunlun Mountains* (1962), there is a scene where Lao Hui recounted his tale of a profound connection with the Kunlun grass. This particular type of grass is depicted in the film with great symbolic and lyrical details, as its beauty is captured through long shots and fixed positions that serve as picturesque frames for the natural landscape. Despite the strong wind, heavy rain, and harsh cold that it endures, the resilient Kunlun grass still stands straight on the mountain. The film *Living Forever in Burning Flames*, adapted from the novel *Red Crag*, depicts the bravery of Jiang Zhujun and Xu Yunfeng as they sacrificed their lives for the revolution while traversing amidst the green cypress trees in the mountains. The use of natural imagery with the pine and cypress trees emphasizes the noble character of the revolutionary martyrs. In *Bitter Herbs* (1965), there is a metaphor that “although bitter herbs are born with bitter roots, the flowers they bear are fragrant,” which signifies the winding and progressive nature of the revolutionary struggle. The Pearl River and Lingdingyang are shown several times in the film *The Opium Wars* (1959) as nationalistic symbols, representing a crucial passageway for opium destruction in Humen county, Guangdong province, and signifying the impending crisis of foreign invasion. The river also symbolizes the isolating and helpless situation of Lin Zexu and Guan Tianpei, as is said in a well-known line from Wen Tianxiang’s poem “Sailing Through a Lonesome Sea,” which reads, “By Horror Shoal for the horror I groan; On Lonesome Sea for my lonesome I moan.” Following the heroic sacrifice of Guan Tianpei, the naval commander, red smoke billowed into the sky, while the natural surroundings of the blue sea and the setting sun accentuated the splendor of his martyrdom with a truly “magnificent” display. The scenery shots elevate the true essence and elegance of natural imagery, achieving the “translation” of ideology. These shots are endowed with the typical characteristics of “People’s Aesthetics” through the merging of life philosophy from classical

aesthetics and the scenery-based ideology.

In discussing the perceptual thinking of artistic images, Li Zehou stated that “perceptual thinking is a process of personalization and essentialization” and also a “process of typification” (Li, 1959, p. 104). Artists not only need to have a “strong emotional response” to life, but also need to know “how to genuinely adopt the emotional attitudes of the working class, peasants, and soldiers” (Li, 1959, p. 109). Zheng Junli designed scenery shots based on “people’s feelings” when filming *Nie Er* (1959). “The function of scenery shots in a film clearly extends beyond depicting the setting in which the characters are situated. This represents only the most fundamental and rudimentary use of such shots. Scenery depictions are most effective when combined with depictions of people, as writing about scenery ultimately entails writing about the human experience. The scenery in a film is definitely what the human eye perceives. It goes beyond just subjective shots and should evoke emotions that resonate with the characters. The feelings elicited from the scenery ought to complement those drawn from the characters’ experiences and actions, merging them seamlessly into one cohesive whole. Such scenery shots are most effective in a film” (Zheng, 1979, p. 309). Therefore, when Xiao Hong and Nie Er performed the song *The Singsong Girl Under the Iron Boot* on the Yangtze River, in order to deepen the artistic conception of “listening to music on the river,” Zheng Junli drew inspiration from scenic depictions in ancient poetry. He specifically incorporated imagery from famous verses like Bai Juyi’s *Ode to a Lady’s Pipa Play*, where he described the autumn moon shining over the river waters and Qin Guan’s *Riverside Daffodils*, which depicted green mountaintops reflected in the stream as a singer completed her song and disappeared. During the final moments of the song “the dancing girl is destined to be homeless,” Jiang Ou, a hopeless dancing girl, appeared in the scene, accompanied by scenery shots of the setting sun, shimmering sails, and meandering river, evoking a sense of helplessness that echoed the famous line from Du Mu’s poem *Mooring on River Qinhuai*, that is, “A singsong girl, not knowing the bitterness of a conquered kingdom, still sings Flowers of the Backyard on the river’s other side.” The “plainness” of the “People’s Films” is also reflected by way of incorporating “poetry into the scene” to highlight the feelings of worrying about the country and love for the people.

The Charm of “Plainness:” Coexistence of Virtuality and Realism with Formal Grammar

“Vacancy” is an eternal element in Chinese classical aesthetics. Zhuang Zi wrote in the chapter “Tian Dao” (the way of heaven) of the *Zhuangzi*, “Vacancy, stillness, placidity, tastelessness, quietude, silence, and doing-nothing are the roots of all things” (Zhuang Zi, 2016, p. 132). That is to say, vacancy, stillness, placidity, and tastelessness are the essence of heaven, earth, and human morality. Liu Xie inherited the idea of vacancy and stillness from Zhuang Zi’s philosophy in the chapter of “Shensi” (spiritual thought) of *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, which reads, “When conceiving a literature work, one should attain a state of vacancy and stillness in thought, so as to

purify the mind and elevate the spirit” (Liu, 1958, p. 494). According to Liu, achieving a pure and genuine artistic conception requires a peaceful and uncluttered state of mind. This can only be attained by removing any mental distractions or impurities that may hinder the clarity of thought. In the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317–420 AD), literati incorporated Neo-Daoist philosophy (Xuanxue) into their poetry and considered a calm and peaceful approach to life as the epitome of refined and exquisite artistic expression. According to the chapter “Miucheng” (profound precepts) of *Huainanzi*, “One should adopt a mindset that values accomplishment and productivity over material pursuits and pleasures to live a plain but cheerful life.” In other words, the true value of “vacancy” lies in how to transform it into a spiritual pursuit. “Vacancy” is a concept in Neo-Daoist philosophy, representing the intangible that exists beyond the material world and complements the tangible. In artistic creation, artists can use the state of vacancy to transcend the constraints of the material world and enter deeper spiritual realms, thus creating more profound and sophisticated works of art. It is also a state of mind in artistic creation. Artists need to let go of their utilitarian mindset and immerse themselves in their works, observing nature and settling their inner selves. Only in this state of vacancy can artists truly understand the essence of life and transform it into the soul of their works, so that they can experience the essence of “being silent in simplicity and perceiving subtle changes.”

“Ge” (separation) is one of the ways to show reality via virtual approaches but not completely turn to reality. In his book *Poetic Remarks on the Human World*, Wang Guowei employed the categorization of “separation” versus “non-separation” to differentiate artistic conceptions among literary works. According to Wang, an artistic conception that is “separated” is akin to “viewing flowers through the fog,” resulting in an unclear and indistinct image. Conversely, an artistic conception that is non-separated is like “opening up one’s ears and eyes,” where each word stands out clearly, and the image is vivid and lively. Verses such as “On the pond of the Xie family and besides the Nanpu Riverbank, I recite lamentable poems and speak out my deep sorrow” and “Leaves falling from the tall willow tree and dreary songs by Cicada both tell the coming of autumn” are regarded as works with separated artistic conceptions, both delivering the emotions of the poets by depicting surrounding sceneries. Other verses are classified as “non-separated” works. For example, “The sky is like a wide yurt, covering the vast field in all directions. Beneath the blue sky stretches endless grassland. Wind blowing over, the grass bends down and flocks of fat cattle and sheep come into my eyes” (Zhu, 2010, p. 273). “Virtuality” is to construct a “non-separated” scene by a “separated” means to create an artistic conception that integrates virtuality and reality and combines physical objects with spiritual pursuits. According to the film *Early Spring in February* adapted from the novel *February* by Rou Shi, one of the Five Martyrs of the League of Left-Wing Writers, Director Xie Tieli creatively drew on the ingenuity of Chinese hand-scroll paintings and used painting frames and windows to create a “separated” space, thus enhancing the implication and fun of the scenery in the dynamic and static comparison. In contrast to traditional hand-scroll paintings that extended from right to left, Xie Tieli set Rou Shi’s portrait at the left third of the picture against the backdrop of a boat deck. As the portrait changed with the light, the shot of Rou Shi’s portrait was transformed

into that of the window of the boat. The enclosed space was then opened, and the light entered the cabin, which was the same as the scene when Wuling fishermen found the Peach Garden, that is, “The mountain has a small hole as if the light is shining through.” Outside the window, a lively and vibrant Jiangnan landscape stretched far away, with the old Chinese eight-character book captions appearing gradually on the deck of the ship, creating a flat plane perspective. The dream-like scene depicted in the Peach Garden seems to be staged. Xie tried to show a meaningful philosophical concept through “separation.” The peaceful and enjoyable scenery outside the window and the noisy interior space of the boat that was full of goods seemed to be two separate worlds. Scholars who participated in the May Fourth Movement, represented by Rou Shi, illuminated the darkness in the cabin with the light of freedom “outside the window” with their strength. Xiao Jianqiu, the main character, gazed upon the beautiful scenery across the river from the outside of his cabin, a place of solitude and peace. Stretching his arms, he allowed his mind to wander and daydreams of the adventures that lay ahead, while the villagers inside the cabin were still sleepy. That was a moment to wake people from their deep sleep, a moment when dreams and daydreams collided.

“Yuan” (far) is a special condition of turning reality into virtuality and “defining the physical objects by attaching spiritual implications to them.” Guo Xi, a painter during the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127 AD), created a composition method for landscape paintings, highlighting lofty, profound, and horizon-wide approaches in his paintings. Han Zhuo, another painter in the Northern Song Dynasty, also put forward the theory of “broad, distant, and secluded approaches.” “Yuan” is a technique to “construct an image, a mind, and an emotion” (Duan, Zhang, & Deng, 2012, p. 78), which is often generated into a higher-value movement in the “People’s Films.” In a scene at the Longhua Pagoda in the film *Nie Er*, when Zheng Leidian told Nie Er that he would go to Jiangxi province, they stepped out of the pagoda and fixed their eyes in the distance while holding the handrail. At that moment, a magnificent picture stretched before their eyes, featuring the rising sun, a light mist, the river running through Huangpu Beach like a ribbon, verdant fields, and towering buildings. This landscape represented the two characters’ wonderful visions of the new world, and signified their spiritual wanderings toward the things that were coming but had not yet arrived. As director Zheng Junli put it, “This scene can inspire people’s great aspiration” (Li, 2016, p. 409). The beautiful scenery of the Huangpu River symbolized the internal reflection of the two people’s physical and mental activities. The vision of the revolutionaries from a distance was the combination of the objectification of the object and the subjectification of the image. As a technique used to create higher artistic conceptions, “far” leads from the finite to the infinite. In the integration of vision and imagination as well as the body and the mind, characters are allowed to wander in a spiritual world and imagine the promising future that is waiting for them to explore, as recited in verses such as “When one meditates in silence, he imagines life a thousand years ago; As he quietly changed his facial expression, his eyes seemed to see thousands of miles away” and “When poets conceive or create an artistic work, their thoughts can be galloping without the limitation of time and space.” Xu Fuguan argued, “When one spiritualizes the material things in an unconscious manner while materializing

his own spirit, an artistic conception featuring lasting appealingness and rich artistic conceptions will then be created” (Xu, 2001, pp. 232–233).

“Virtuality” also leads to the issue regarding the relationships between substance and spirit and between similarity and dissimilarity. Fang Xun, a painter during the Qing Dynasty (1636–1912 AD), said, “To imitate the ancients, the first is to avoid being too different. The second is to avoid being too similar. Too many differences indicate the failure to follow the ancients’ law and essence, while too many similarities will enable the imitator to lose his own style” (Fang, 1959, p. 52). Inspired by this, actor Zhao Dan once said when shaping the image of Nie Er, “It should be neither too sober nor too engaged” (Zhao, 1983, pp. 127–128). According to Zhao Dan, the relationship between substance and spirit followed the law of the unity of opposites. “It is not appropriate to merely emphasize physical forms while ignoring spiritual implications. Likewise, it is impossible to only deliver spiritual implications without the support of physical forms. If too much attention is paid to spiritual implications, then the physical form will be undermined (Zhao, 1983, p. 120). Therefore, Zhao Dan strived to recall the moments he spent together with his friend Nie Er to add details to the screen.

“Plainness:” Spiritual Expression and Transcendence of Subjectivity

As early as the pre-Qin period, Chinese classical aesthetics, based on the theory of Tao and spirit, regarded the “absence of observer” as the highest level of aesthetics. According to the chapter “Qiwu Lun” (the adjustment of controversies) of the *Zhuangzi*, “Heaven and earth and I are born together; the myriad things and I are one.” This means that one should eliminate the differences between things and the self and integrate the sounds of nature, earth, and humans to prompt the self to return to the physical world of nature. In *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Zi also described the great beauty and the great goodness, arguing that “Loud is its sound, but never word it said. A semblance great, the shadow of a shade.” Wang Bi, a metaphysical scholar during the Southern and Northern Dynasties, also explained Tao, the ultimate principle that underlies and unites all things, saying, “Tao has no shape, no image, no sound, so it can reach everything and interpret everything.” Wang Fuzhi once regarded “wu” (nothingness) as the infinite vitality of artistic works. “The most wonderful thing in the world is nothingness, which is the fundamental base of everything.” According to *Huainanzi*, elements such as “intangibles,” “silence,” “odorlessness,” and “colorlessness” are the origin of all things in the universe, that is, “Somethingness comes from nothingness, and all physical objects come from Tao.” From an aesthetic point of view, “Tao is invisible, and it is everything you find with your eyes. Also, it has no sound, and it is everything you hear with your ears.” The “plainness” in “the People’s Films” is reflected in the application of varied “forms” and “sounds” to explore the spiritual world of characters, thus strengthening the aesthetic perception of images. This is achieved by employing the sound and image of films as physical media. The “nothingness” of sound in the film usually embodies the character’s escape from the physical world to seek spiritual transcendence. By improving physical fitness, characters intend to achieve the harmony and unity of their inner and outer world to achieve

the spiritual state of “being free of restrictions imposed by knowledge, desire, nonego, and ego to pursue infinity” (Peng & Liu, 2013, p. 26).

As is said, “In silence, one can hear the resonance of harmony.” Silence is a special sound behind extreme “plainness.” Michel Chion, a French film artist, pointed out that “Sound in films mainly consists of human voices (referring to the spoken parts) ... Other sounds (music and stereo) are merely accompaniment” (Chion, 2014, p. 49). Although the human voice is silent, it contains meaningful harmony. It uses silent dialogue and its associated monologues, voice-over/narrational “aphasia” to “compel” image composition, lens motion, and musical sound, thus achieving more powerful tensions than audio dialogue. Verses such as “My mind is boundless, connected with the people living on this vast territory. From the surface silence, I hear the bugle of revolution” and “The cicadas’ singing makes the forest quieter, and birds’ singing makes the mountains more secluded” both convey the artistic conception that silence is better than sound. There is a silent shot of nearly 50 seconds at the end of the film *Captain Guan* (1951). Close-ups such as soldiers of the Eighth Company staring at the front, and the fast movement of the hands of the clock, together with the sound of the drums, show the sense of pressure and tension.

“Stillness” is sometimes a state in which the subject has not yet been formed. It implies the power for self-change and development of the subject, which is filled with complex fields of different values. “Stillness” represents a state of waiting, a kind of self-precipitation after experiencing a variety of inner struggles and activities. As Su Dongpo said, “After deep thought, real skills are not illusions. It is necessary to be not averse to emptiness and stillness in order to make the poem ingenious in rhythm. Stillness is the fundamental base of understanding the change of everything while emptiness can accommodate everything.”

Béla Balázs, a Hungarian film theorist, once said, “Sound distinguishes visible things from each other, while silence brings them closer to each other, greatly reducing their differences” (Balázs, 2007, p. 217). The sound of silence does not trace the essence of things, nor does it focus on depicting the emotions of the characters, but it is embedded in the process where things begin to appear. Through a momentary presence, it fills and enriches the emotion and wholeness of the film. As the saying goes, “When quiet and natural voices run into your heart, the whole world becomes eternal and beautiful, and time will be forgotten, resulting in the indistinguishableness of the past or future.” At the end of the film *This Life of Mine* under the direction of Shi Hui, when “I” walked to the east of Zhiqiao Bridge again after a lifetime of ups and downs, it was snowing, with bodies of the starved lying everywhere, accompanied by the abrupt cessation of the voice-over. Under the dim street lamp, the youth period when “I” served as a constable was as clear as if it were yesterday ... The urban landscape of the old city with a sense of history was reproduced in the silent voice, and the silent recall constituted the atmosphere and charm in the image. The former outlined the natural snowscape, creating a cruel era of “on the roads are bodies frozen to death.” The latter was the “soul” to enhance the artistic form and theme sublimation of the film, which together contributed to the creation of an artistic conception where one could reflect on the history of thousands of years and be open-

minded in filming. “Stillness” is the presence of “my” thinking of life after experiencing ups and downs in life, and the reflection, recall, and other emotions presented by it are more about the subject wandering between consciousness and unconsciousness. It strengthens and deepens the historical connection between “I” and the object, and disasters in history, the turmoil of society, and confusions about life all become the transcendence of “my” inner consciousness. “I” finally knew clearly about society before dying, and the empty and still attitude of life delivered a helpless but clear and beautiful artistic conception. Through the silent “plainness,” the transcendence of subjectivity can be achieved. It is the mediating moment when the self continuously retires and returns to nature. It is also the transcendental moment when the subject perceives the absolute truth in the void of everything.

Conclusion

Classical aesthetics is still a valuable database for us to explore the characteristics of the “People’s Films.” To study the subjectivity of the “People’s Films,” it is necessary to pay attention to the “people’s character” in the “non-mainstream” films. The technique of “plainness” should be employed in the “People’s Films” to enhance the aesthetic conception of the film through the use of the blank-leaving technique and scenery shots. Moreover, attention should be paid to the integration of the scenery-based ideology in the film to shape a unique discourse form of the people by using a combined approach that integrates virtual and realistic techniques as well as physical forms and spiritual implications. In this way, we can promote further development of the “People’s Films” and achieve the harmonious unity between the external environment and inner emotions of the film. Only by appreciating the subjectivity of the “People’s Film” dialectically can we integrate the artistic images and spiritual implications into the life of people and provide resources for people to keep vitality and pursue balanced development.



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(Editor: Yan Yuting)