

A Writer's Odyssey: Dream Within a Dream of the Modern Don Quixote

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Abstract: Lu Yang, a young director who have successfully created surreal nested double dreams through his new works, *A Writer's Odyssey*. This movie focus on the individual's survival anxiety in the real world, including a profound introspection of reality. From the perspective of Žižek-style path of film interpretation, audiences, on the one hand, could gain more than audiovisual pleasures within the absurd illusions, on the other hand, would encounter and experience the unescapable enslavement from capital, which is the deepest fear of modern people. The way of traumatic writing turns the new director, Lu Yang, into a Modern Don Quixote, who are trying to achieve his dream of making our world better through the dream within a dream in the movie, *A Writer's Odyssey*.

Keywords: *A Writer's Odyssey*; Research on directors; Psychoanalysis

1. Introduction

The director of *A Writer's Odyssey*, adapted from the short story of the same name by Shuang Xue Tao, Lu Yang creates a fantasy world where reality and fiction are linked: Li Mu, a big capitalist, discovers that his state and fate are directly related to the role of the Redmane in the popular online novel *Godslayer*, and in order to save his life, he decides to hire a murderer to assassinate the novelist to interrupt the subsequent plot of the novel and eliminate the threat. Through the Aladdin Group to collect users' information and analyse big data, he finally choose Guan Ning as the most appropriate murderer to assassinate the writer of *Godslayer*, Lu Kongwen. Li Mu made use of Guan Ning's daughter's trails to push Guan to assassinate Lu, but got his retribution at the end of the movie.

Lu Yang, as a contemporary intellectual, believes that the core of the trauma of social authenticity lies in the existence of an "Big Other" in the real world that people are powerless to confront, based on his observation of the present national character. The small individual, under the divine order, can never confront the established order evolved by the "integration between god and human". Therefore, while Lu Yang cares about the hidden worries and pressures brought by the "Big Other", he also tries to eliminate the terrifying "Big Other" in people's hearts in a surreal way, but it is only a dream within the dream of the modern Don Quixote.

2. Don Quixote's Dream Within a Dream: A Double Surreal Visionary Reference

The "Don Quixotic dream-within-a-dream" in *A Writer's Odyssey* refers, firstly, to the process of Guan Ning and Lu Kongwen's challenge to the "Digital Big Other" and its spokesman Li Mu in the "near-future world", which is entirely a Don Quixotic illusionary dream. The second is Lu Yang's attempt to gain spiritual satisfaction against the "Big Other" through the dream-making method of *A Writer's Odyssey*, which is also a Don Quixote-style fantasy. The two layers of dreams are interrelated and nested, enacting a modern Don Quixote's fantasy journey on the screen.

Turgenev referred to Don Quixote as a knight who faithful to truth and faith, and self-sacrificing. However, with the rapid development of the times, chivalry has long since become a historical relic, and Don Quixote can only live in the noble tradition of fantasy. Cervantes, who also creates the world of illusion, tries to release his characters from the repression of reality and the bonds of spirituality, and achieves a hero with melancholy. Lu Yang, like Cervantes, interprets the social problems in reality through dreaming, making intertextual connections between reality and illusion and gazing at them. Lu Yang, while representing the game between ordinary people and capital, takes care of the human nature lurking under the deep anxiety. He deconstructs the reality of "godslay",

which is also a kind of deep-seated anxiety, and at the same time represents the reflection on the exploitation of capital and the call of the spirit of “godslay”.

According to some scholars, *A Writer's Odyssey* is a film similar to *The Matrix* and *The Truman Show*, in which the story unfolds in the unreal, and the real reality will be revealed after the characters have dispelled the fog of illusion. However, *A Writer's Odyssey* is slightly different from such films in terms of creative setting. The “reality” space in the film is also virtual, and there is some kind of hypothesis, just as *Inception* sets up to enter other people's dreams, *Zoom* sets up three people from different realms to be influenced by each other in their creation, and *Dark City* sets up that human world are manipulated by alien creatures. The “near-future world” in the film *A Writer's Odyssey* is also a dream-like fantasy. Characters have otherworldly avatars and strong connections between fiction and the otherworld. Such settings have long been detached from the real discourse system, making the so-called “real world” a virtual dream world with surreal nature. This represents that the film is not a dual narrative of reality and surreality, but a dual variation of a surreal dream within a dream.

According to Žižek, “Cinema is not about realizing unfulfilled dreams, but about showing how people can live in reality by dreaming”^[1]. The two viewpoints correspond to the protagonist Guan Ning and the novelist Kouwen in the first-level dream of *A Writer's Odyssey* and the “Godslayer” in the second-level dream created by the novelist, which are essentially the expression of the creator's deepest wishes and a deep desire under the illusion. The creation of *A Writer's Odyssey* is a screen illusion carefully designed by the director: by dressing up in a variety of ways to show the breakthrough from illusion to reality, the relationship between the real world in which Guan Ning lives and the world of fiction created by the novelist, the theater audience and the film itself, is connected, forming a consciousness stitching of multiple mirroring sets of layers.

In terms of textual setting, the film uses double references to characters with many details to portray the intertwining of the “near future” reality of the first dream and the second dream of the fictional world. The identities of Redmane and Li Mu are both superiors and correspond to each other. The object of the first dream “Godslayer” is the capitalist represented by Li Mu, and both Li Mu and the Aladdin Group are the dramatic condensation of digital capitalism. In the mythical story of Aladdin, the god of lights is omnipotent in fulfilling people's wishes, echoing Li Mu's holographic projection of the image that benefits all beings at the launch of the Aladdin Group. The “god” in the second level dream world is the Redmane representing the supreme royal power, and the Redmane worshipped by the faithful corresponds to the huge projection of Li Mu's speech. As mentioned above, the film corresponds to the identity of the “false gods” in the double dream world through the double reference of the set of dreams.

The film's cinematography, sets and post-production facilitate the interplay of two surreal dream spaces. For example, the film deliberately blurs the stylistic features of the buildings to outline the background of the overhead period, and “blurs” the intersection of the real world and the fictional world. These settings make the reality in the film appear as a faked reality, constituting an intertextual connection between the real and unreal worlds in the film to project the magic of the surreal world.

3. The dramatic expression of the vision of reality: confronting the digital Big Other and facing the core of trauma

Lu Yang sets the film in a near future where the capital has mastered cutting-edge technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data and biogenetic engineering, which is in line with the natural science field where Žižek concentrates his dialogue. At the same time, he injects chivalry into the narrative theme of the film, breaking the confinement of the digital machine represented by Li Mu in the near future of “godslay”.

Li Mu, the capitalist, and Redmane, the false god, hegemonically create a set of symbolic coordinates. Li Mu integrates capital and technology so that symbols of signifier specify the content of people's thoughts in the social sphere, and uses digital intelligence technology to invade the reality of individuals' lives to instrumentally reconstruct the ideology of inequality and the “Big Other”^[1]. The giant slogan “Resculpting Time, Creating Dreams” erected at the headquarters of Aladdin Group, and Li Mu's holographic speech emphasized that “Time is the final problem for humanity. we are resculpting time”. Under the attractive semblance of “improving efficient through time resculption”, capitalism has achieved the dominant practice of the exploitation of public. As a result, these inescapable fears of being stared at, which was upgraded from the anxieties of the people in and out of the screen, staring at them and having an insight into their inner illusions in a cross subjectively approach.

With the development of technology and the coming of the digital age, under the control of power, the “Big Other” carries out inner technological domination and sensory colonization. Data is wealth, and the digital platform organization is the force that drives the expansion of technological power from the network to society, becoming a monopolistic intelligent system with super-integration

ability and reconstructing the “Big Other”, and the digital machine becomes the latest incarnation of the “Big Other”.

The latest achievements of the technological revolution represented by artificial intelligence, big data and biogenetic engineering have become part of the political game and global competition. China is inevitably affected by the digital trend, how to resist the new digital “Big Other” and maintain ideological independence, it is also the director’s concern and desire to discuss and convey the “godslay” issue in the current domestic cultural structure.

Therefore, the film focuses on the interpretation of “godslay” in the Chinese cultural context. Carl Jung believed that mythological archetypes are the embodiment of the collective unconscious, and the essential differences in the relationship between gods and “godslay” in Eastern and Western cultures are determined by the different ways in which different peoples perceive the world and nature. The “humanization” of the gods is an important feature of ancient Greek mythology. In the West, in the “godslay” in the change of power, people with great power is able to kill God. However, in traditional Chinese mythology, people are often “deified”. With the development of feudal dynasties, Han Confucianism, represented by Dong Zhongshu, tied divine power to royal power and put a heavy spiritual shackle on the consciousness that was difficult to break. Under thousands of years of lasting and powerful transformation, the ordinary people’s imagination of authoritative power has greatly exceeded their own sphere of influence, making the “Big Other” alienated into a greater “Big Other” that the ordinary people are powerless to confront. In such a cultural context, the film sets up a dream world of “godslay”, which is essentially a confrontation with the traditional feudal system that has evolved to build the “Big Other”. With the development of the times, the reality in the film is a “near-future” world, where big data, artificial intelligence and bio-genetic engineering and other technology-generated mutations are disturbing, and the digital other, manipulating by the logic of capital, becomes the hidden force that dominates the development of society.

These two reflect the desires and anxieties of the majority of the nation. On the one hand, they reveal the deeper reasons for the folk martial arts fever, and on the other hand, they respond to the inevitable root of the social tensions triggered by child-related public opinion in China. The accumulation of powerlessness in reality over a long period of time creates a trauma with the characteristics of the times and the nation, which is rooted in the heart and subconscious of the Chinese people at present, and can only be imagined in an illusionary world through supernormal capabilities, linking the three dimensions. However, this resistance is only an imaginary satisfaction, a temporary solace, a contemporary Don Quixote’s dream within a dream.

4. Conclusion

The film is a double-layered dream space, in a realistic vision of the dramatic way to express the “godslayer” at the same time, so that the audience in the theater to encounter the horror of the real world. Although the film’s protagonist has completed the “godslay” in the illusionary dream, but the “Li Mu” outside the screen did not get the proper sanction, whether it is Guan Ning and Kong Wen living at the bottom of society or seemingly Li Mu at the top class of society, they are all stuck in the spider web, although they struggle with all their might, but they could not escape ultimately.

So the film is ultimately just a dream that provides temporary satisfaction, and under the strong operation of capital logic, there is hardly a rebirth of classical chivalry. The director uses a technique that hangs outside of reality and bridges it in reverse, showing the social problems of the world, tearing the wounds of humanity. Lu Yang, in some ways, as well as a modern Don Quixote.

References:

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