

Self-reflection, Anti-genre Style and Meta-film Aesthetics: Nomads among Chinese New Power Directors -- A study on director Wei Shujun's aesthetic style

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Abstract: Wei Shujun, a post-90s director, stands as a prominent representative of China's emerging filmmaking force. His distinctive visual style and profoundly introspective narrative approach have culminated in a singular meta-cinematic aesthetic. Through the portrayal of the life trajectories of youth in small towns and the existential challenges of modern individuals, he delves into resonant topics such as youth, cinema, and societal ills, while articulating profound philosophical perspectives on youth, life, and a self-critical examination of the film industry.

Key words: Wei Shujun; Anti-type narration; Nomadic syndrome; Meta-cinema

Born in Beijing and graduated from the Communication University of China in 2016, Wei Shujun, a post-90s director, made his film debut with "Duck Neck" in 2016. In 2018, he won the Special Prize in the short film Competition of the 71st Cannes Film Festival with "On the Border", marking his third accolade at Cannes in five years. Subsequently, his work "Striding into the Wind" was shortlisted in the official section of the 73rd Cannes 2020, attracting attention again. In 2021, he won the Best Director Two-week award at the 74th Cannes Film Festival for his work "Ripples of Life", adding yet another feather to his cap. Last year, "Only the River Flows" was selected into the One Kind of Attention section of the Cannes Film Festival, and with its eye-catching performance, it was nominated for the One Kind of Attention Award. While Wei Shujun has garnered numerous accolades and labels such as "Cannes' darling" and "prodigious director," it is his unwavering audacity — the courage to self-mock and the unflinching introspection — that truly sets him apart. When Pingyao International Film Festival awarded him the "Fermu Honor · Best Director", he commented: "Wei Shujun's creative attitude is relaxed and teasing, and it is a kind of filmmaker's self-reflection."

I. Nomadic syndrome: the protagonist who runs away under "nomadic thinking"

With the rapid development of the market economy, people's lifestyles have undergone significant transformations, and various pressures stemming from survival have evolved into societal generalized anxiety. In this context, an increasing number of film and television works focus on the "small town youth" who are rushing about for life, the hometown that cannot be returned to, the people at the bottom who are in a sad situation, and the youth who used to show their dreams. Hoping to achieve imaginary reconciliation of anxiety while appropriately reflecting reality. In Wei Shujun's films, the remote "small town" and the wandering "teenager" are his authorial signatures.

1. Wandering youth

In the short film "On the Border" (2018), in order to leave the town for South Korea, the Korean teenager Hua Mingxing rides a motorcycle to ask his father for passage. In the process of looking for his father, he meets a female hair salon attendant who also wants to leave, and the two embark on a journey to help Hua Mingxing find his father. The film concludes with the escaping youth forced to stop at the border. The youth's desire for the outside of the small town drives his departure, the motorcycle serves as his weapon, his father represents the constraints of rules, and the border is the boundary of his dreams. Although the film does not mention rules explicitly, it demonstrates their constraints everywhere: winning in mahjong requires following the rules, going abroad is possible but must adhere to the father's condition of studying in a Han Chinese school, roads are for smooth travel but have boundaries. The youth lives in a realistic society filled with rules, and the director intends to express the philosophy of life through the failure of the youth's escape, that adhering to rules is essential for navigating life and handling situations.

2. Nomads

The "Nomadic syndrome" shown in director Wei Shujun's film can be seen through Deleuze's "nomadic philosophy". Nomadic thought refers to a kind of external thinking in order to get rid of strict symbolic restrictions. It takes the war machine as the medium, and has the characteristics of extroversion, three-dimensional (space, operation and emotion) and mobility. Nomadism in film is not only reflected in the film itself, but also reflected in the hero of the film. Take Hua Mingxing, the hero in the film "On the Border", for example. As an abstract "nomad," his "wandering" corresponds to the flow of desire, specifically the desire to play football in South Korea. He uses his motorcycle as a war machine to blaze a trail. In the process of movement, he first breaks through his father's control. After realizing that he cannot rely on his father to achieve his escape, he rides his motorcycle alone to the border. Obviously, the youth's escape ends in failure, which also forms an intertextuality with Deleuze's "lines of flight" in post-structuralism. "Flight" already suggests escaping from rigid territorialization; hence, lines of flight can lead either to a plateau of creativity and desire or a dense forest of death and destruction. Although the youth does not reach his ideal destination in the film, this does not imply that he is disciplined by society. Through the protagonist in the film who resists discipline and longs for the distant horizon, Wei Shujun showcases a "nomad" with "universal vitality" to the audience, thereby achieving an

imaginative dissipation of real-world anxiety.

II. Anti-type narrative: Variation of “small form”

Director Wei Shujun used genre elements from road movies in his earlier films, “Duck Neck” (2016), “On the Border” (2018) and “Striding into the Wind” (2021). For example, “Duck Neck” the three main characters in the film embark on the road of “escape” on a Harley motorcycle, “On the Border” the teenager in the film hopes to escape from the town to South Korea on a beatenup motorcycle, and “Striding into the Wind” the hero Zuo Kun in the film buys a second-hand jeep and roamed the streets of the city, also carrying the director and actresses to the grassland. All of these films are full of elements of road movies, but the reason why they cannot be called genre films is that road elements are just a carrier, carrying the reflection on the journey of youth.

1. The origin: Variations of “small forms”

In his theoretical work on film philosophy, “Cinema 1: The Movement-Image” published in the early 1980s, French philosopher Gilles Deleuze introduced the concepts of “large form” and “small form” in the three chapters focusing on action-images. Under the theoretical framework of Deleuze’s action-image theory, the emergence of small forms significantly altered the rigid, unchanging forms and expressions of meaning associated with large forms, serving as a prerequisite for the emergence of anti-genre films.

In Wei Shujun’s films, through the presentation of characters’ wandering states, gestural body language that is not directly related to the plot, scattered narratives that break through the intuitive behavioral logic structure, and the intuitive impact of pure audiovisual means on the senses, he deconstructs and even subverts the fixed action chains driven by perception. In his early works, Wei Shujun exhibited innovative anti-genre forms of expression.

2. Construction: Anti-genre characteristics

In terms of plot setting, Wei Shujun deliberately downplayed the dramatic conflicts in the film, and did not arrange formal plots to solve the conflicts, or even let the protagonists in the film do nothing. In the film “Striding into the Wind”, Zuo Kun and his friends steal the test paper written by Zuo Kun’s mother and leak the questions to a high school student. After the incident, they see the reporters blocking the mother’s door, but nothing is done. In the expression of the film space, the director deliberately avoided the local landscape, although once through a long shot to show the hero driving or riding on the road, but the geographical space change is small. In the first half of “Striding into the Wind”, the protagonist rarely drives out of Beijing, and when he does go to the grassland, he is put in a detention center because his driver’s license is suspended. The concern for values in Wei Shujun’s film is more antitypic. The characters in the film have no clear value goals and no function to achieve them. The hero’s heart and spirit are not healed, sublimated and grown in the film, and he does not successfully find himself in the final ending.

III. Meta-cinema aesthetics: the overlapping of film and reality

“Meta-cinema” is a form of film that directly references, borrows from, or involves other films. In recent years, meta-cinema has exhibited a new trend, evolving from merely being “films about films” to being “films about reality.” In the works of director Wei Shujun, through the exposure of film interfaces and the intertwining of characters’ identities, meta-cinema is crafted into a unique form of expression, constructing a realistic significance that transcends the story itself.

1. Exposure of the film interface

“Interface” is a concept that originated in the 14th and 15th centuries and was widely used in the computer field in the 1960s due to the rapid development of computer technology. The film medium can be thought of as three spatially connected interfaces: the recording of the camera, the editing of the film, and the projection of the screen. The essential feature of a meta-film is that it exposes the cinematic interface. In Wei Shujun’s films, visual elements such as the camera and screen can often be seen, which separate the viewing of the audience from that of the camera. For example, in “Striding into the Wind” and “Ripples of Life”, the film set where the film was filmed is directly exposed to the film, and in “Only the River Flows”, the camera, film and the cinema where the protagonist Ma Zhe works are burned up. All these elements can be called the media interface in the film, through which the inner reality is highlighted. In the film “Only the River Flows”, Ma Zhe’s office is on the stage of a theater. If the big screen is regarded as a screen interface, Ma Zhe sometimes enters the painting and becomes the object to be gazed at, and sometimes creates a painting to lead the audience to gaze at others. This kind of treatment by the director symbolizes Ma Zhe’s erratic mental state, and the audience also enters the thinking world framed by the director through the transformation of viewpoints. Similarly, in “On the Border”, the window of the hair salon where the woman works is like a movie screen. Hua Mingxing watches the people in the room through the window, and the audience also shifts their viewing Angle from the protagonist to the screen world within the screen.

2. The intertext of the characters’ identities

Huang Tianle believes that meta-films have three forms of performance: Intermediality, intermediality and self-reference. In Wei Shujun’s films, the identities of the protagonists are often related to the film industry. For example, in “Duck Neck”, both the hero and heroine are students of the film Academy; in “Striding into the Wind”, the hero and the people around him are also students of the film academy; and the screenwriter in the third segment of “Ripples of Life” is played by the screenwriter himself. Through the intertext between the identity of the characters and the identity of the director, Wei Shujun completes the self-reference.

In the film “Striding into the Wind”, the retractive direction of “meta-consciousness” highlights the theme of “growth” and shows

the crisis of legitimacy in the “classical” sense. The dislocation of the camera creates a rich and imaginative dialogue field, which breaks through the traditional system and presents a chain of fiction and frantic self-memory. Reflection, inquiry and speech are the critique of the unconscious modernity of the protagonist’s way of growth. However, in “Ripples of Life”, the director directly uses ordinary actors and lets the scriptwriter act himself in the play. This way of acting himself connects the film in two senses, forming internal and external linkage. Through the words of the scriptwriter and director in the film, it refers to the current situation of the film and television industry and reflects the reflection on the film industry through the language of banter and humor.

Epilogue

Wei Shujun is like a “nomad” in the film industry. From the original “Duck Neck” to the present “Only the River Flows”, his work sequence presents a kind of “fluidity”, which is not only reflected in the maturity of his works, but also in his exploration of visual style and technology. Admittedly, it is true that Wei Shujun’s works also exhibit some shortcomings, such as a lack of control over narrative rhythm and neglect in portraying the protagonist’s character, resulting in a favorable reception but not high sales in his early career, his practice of meta-cinematic aesthetics and reflection on youth, life, and the film industry have transcended a single perspective. By focusing on the survival predicaments of ordinary people, he has endowed his films with profound yet not oppressive realistic qualities. In today’s film market where box office sales are the measure of success, Wei Shujun has consistently maintained a delicate portrayal of characters’ inner worlds and ordinary lives, finding a balance between artistic sentiment and realistic significance. With a calm sense of responsibility and adherence to art, he has assumed his due social responsibilities, leaving the audience with boundless strength and emotion.

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