

Film as Art: From Art Theory to Film Theory

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Abstract: This article uses the introduction of the book *Film as Art*, the definition and interpretation of the concept of “film,” the connotation and extension of “film art,” the necessity and possibility of “film art” research, etc. to analyze China’s important theoretical issues in the development of film theory are sorted out and reflected on. The article believes that in the context of globalization, the development of Chinese film theory faces many theoretical issues, such as the independent character of the theory itself, the relationship between theoretical research and creative practice, and the influence of socialist literary and artistic thought with Chinese characteristics on contemporary Chinese film creation and theoretical research. In this regard, the article puts forward some corresponding countermeasures. This article believes that only by adhering to the development path of socialist literature and art with Chinese characteristics and taking film as art as a basic principle can we promote the prosperity and development of Chinese film theory in the new era and can we better play the important role of Chinese films in the world cultural field.

Keywords: Film; Art theory; Film theory

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1. Preface

As an independent art, film is both an artistic practice and an art theory. Film theory is an important part of the development of film. The study of film theory is a basic understanding of film’s art form and an important reflection of film creation practice. If Chinese film theory wants to develop, it must adhere to the development path of socialist literature and art with Chinese characteristics and treat the film as art. Only in this way can it better play the important role of Chinese films in the world cultural field ^[1].

2. Introduction

The issue of film as an art appeared as early as the early 20th century. For example, the British philosopher Peter Whitehead touched upon it in “Aesthetics,” and the early 20th-century art theorist Roland Barthes analyzed films from philosophy, sociology, and psychology perspectives. He believed films are an “imaginable reality” and an “imaginable art.” In 1916, the British philosopher Ian Bloom published his “Film: A Theory,” in which he regarded the film as a “pedagogy art.” Rudolf Arnheim was a German-American art and cultural

scientist and the president of the American Academy of Arts and Culture. He has made important achievements in film research and has published many papers. He is the author of “Form and Content of Film,” “Symbols and Symbolism in Film,” “Introduction to Film Theory,” and many other publications. He was a famous contemporary American film theorist and critic. *Film as Art* is a landmark work of Arnheim from art theory to film theory. It proposes some important concepts such as “form and content,” “form and style,” “image and symbol,” “moment and eternity,” etc., all of which have had a significant impact on film theory and film history. It is also a book of important reference value for film theory researchers, film lovers, and film industry practitioners. As French-Swiss film theorist Jean-Luc Godard said: “To truly understand art, we must first understand the techniques it uses.” Researchers and film critics worldwide have praised *Film as Art* since its publication. The book covers a wide range and profound content, involving not only the combing and analysis of the development process and current situation of contemporary film theory but also the investigation and analysis of the development process and current situation of film theory in Europe and other regions ^[2].

3. Definition and interpretation of the concept of “film”

“Film “ is a comprehensive art introduced to Shanghai, China, at the end of the 19th century. It was first called “electro-optical cinema” and later called “films,” but it gradually evolved from an artistic attribute into an industrial product. Therefore, the study of “film” cannot ignore its industrial attributes. The film is a mechanical product. The characteristic of this mechanical product is that it uses a fixed film or video disc to record images. Its shooting, production, and projection all require a set of standardized processes. The film production process is mainly divided into four links: material collection, material editing, scene production, and picture synthesis. These four links are the basic process of film shooting. Therefore, the difference between films and other mechanical products is that films are industrial products, and their production needs to follow strict procedures ^[3]. At the same time, the word “film” itself is also an artificial word, which is defined in “*cihai*” (large-scale dictionary and encyclopedia of Standard Mandarin Chinese) as “a comprehensive art that uses electricity and light to record and reproduce reality.” The concept of “film” should be understood in a broad sense. In a narrow sense, “film” is considered an industrial product. If machinery and art are two different concepts, then the film products that appear in industrial society should be viewed as an overall concept rather than two separate areas. When the word “film” appears as an industrial product, it reflects an industrial production method and industrialized production process. Therefore, the word “film” can also be understood as the “product” or “product series” produced in industrial production methods and industrial production processes ^[4].

4. Development of art theory

Although film is an art, in today’s film research, many people regard film as a purely material product or industrial product rather than an artistic creation. This understanding seems reasonable because, from the perspective of artistic creation, film is indeed an industrial product. When examining films solely as industrial products, a misunderstanding arises ^[5]. Introducing this notion into art research reveals a flaw, as art is not a tangible product and thus cannot be categorized as an industrial one. In contemporary film studies, the focus should solely be on considering film as an art form, given its creation by human beings. Only through this lens can film theory be viewed as art theory, offering improved theoretical support and guidance for Chinese film creation and theoretical research ^[6].

5. The connotation and extension of “film art”

The study of film art requires a basic definition and interpretation of films and a basic classification and categorization of films. Studying “film art” aims to scientifically and reasonably classify the concept of “film” to interpret and better understand the art of film. In this process, films have to be classified and graded artistically. There are three main ways. The first is to divide films into silent films, talkies, feature films, and other types based on different image expression forms or technical means. Second, according to the different content or meanings contained in the work, the films are divided into dramas, documentaries, art films, and other types. The third type is based on the different relationship between the form of the work and the artistic connotation. The films are divided into art films and commercial films^[7]. In addition, films can also be divided into feature films produced by professional workers, entertainment films produced by commercial companies, documentaries watched by audiences, and online films produced by Internet companies, etc., based on the communication channels, media, and audience of the works. Here in this study, only “art” and “commerce” are used as the distinguishing criteria^[8].

5.1. Film as art

The concept of “art” first appeared in the ancient Greek period and was summarized by the French writer François Rabelais in the 18th century as art that “expresses beautiful images in people’s minds.” In this sense, “art” can refer to any beautiful thing or process, either an external manifestation of the material world or an internal manifestation of the human spiritual world^[9]. With the development of society and the improvement of human thinking ability, art gradually shifts from external form to inner essence, from the real world to the inner world, and becomes a subjective spiritual activity. In this sense, art is not only an objective existence corresponding to the natural, social, and spiritual world but also a subjective aesthetic experience resulting from the interaction and communication between human subjective spiritual activities and objective reality^[10].

5.2. Business and art

“Business” and “art” are largely synonymous, and both words in film and television production mean the same thing. However, business and art have always been in two different contexts for historical reasons. To comprehend issues from one context within another, a middle ground, that is, the space between “business” and “art,” becomes essential^[11]. This middle ground is neither completely separate nor static. This middle ground is between art and commerce and is both the juncture and the transition point. In this sense, commercial and art films belong to film art. However, if films are divided into two types, purely commercial films, and purely artistic films, these two types of films will have fierce conflicts. In the history of contemporary films, many classic art films have been marginalized due to the opposition between business and art.

5.3. Art in films

As an art form, film also has attributes common to other art forms. In this sense, film is not a pure art category but a comprehensive art that integrates multiple art categories. Film can be regarded as pure video art because it can express content or meaning with the help of various video technology and expression methods, and it has unique attributes that other art forms do not have, such as audio-visual language, narrative structure, and narrative logic, narrative style, etc. These attributes give films characteristics that other art forms do not have. These characteristics make films vastly different from other art categories and thus make films special as an art form^[12].

6. The necessity and possibility of research on “film art”

In a “modern” aesthetic framework, the film is regarded as an “art.” The theory of film art is to strive to find a method that can examine and explain from the perspective of “art.” A method of examining and investigating from a different perspective to obtain conclusions that meet the requirements of “art” in film research. Within such an aesthetic framework, the evolution from “film is an art” to “film as an art” delineates a developmental trajectory from “art research” to “film theory.” As a discipline, film theory has a history of more than a hundred years in Europe. It is based on aesthetics, takes film as its object, and takes film research as its purpose, forming a theoretical system with its characteristics. At present, a new historical stage is unfolding. On one hand, the world’s film industry and film market are developing rapidly, and various new theoretical ideas are constantly emerging. On the other hand, under modern technological conditions, the expression of film art has undergone tremendous changes. Film theory must respond to this. Therefore, in this case, film theory research is faced with a new topic: how to maintain the inheritance and development of traditional film theory while adapting to changes in the creation and acceptance of modern film art. The issue confronting us today is how to perceive the relationship between film and other art forms amidst the array of new situations currently unfolding. There is now a view that film is a “non-art” art, which is a misunderstanding. On the surface, film seems to be just an art, but it is an “art” in itself because all the forms of expression it has are artistic. Therefore, film theory has to break this misunderstanding and put the film back into the framework of art for inspection and research. From the perspective of artistic ontology, film is a “non-art” art. This mainly means that films do not have aesthetic characteristics independent of other art forms. According to common views, films are “synthetic” art that “synthesizes” various art forms such as painting, sculpture, and drama. With its unique narrative and modeling methods, this special way of expression cannot be regarded as an “art” in the eyes of ordinary people ^[13].

6.1. Art and film theory and practice: two different film research paths

The study of film as art is mainly carried out through the intrinsic nature of film as art, the relationship between film art and other arts, and the performance of film art in the real world. It is also the theoretical research surrounding film art and creative practice. Whether discussing the connotation and extension of film as art, the necessity and possibility of film as art, or the relationship between film as art and other art forms, they all focus on three core questions, including “What is film,” “What is art,” and “Why film studies are needed.” Therefore, although the research paths are different, both at the theoretical level are intended to promote Chinese film theory development better.

6.2. Art research: Discuss the intrinsic nature of film and the necessity and possibility of film as art

In the field of art, there is a theoretical question about “art research”: What is art research? How does it differ from “art theory” as a discipline? The “art theory” mentioned here refers to a series of studies on film, art, architecture, photography, and other art categories established in the art field in the West since the end of the 19th century. If “film theory” is “film research,” it contains at least two aspects of meaning. The first is the study of film itself, that is, how to discover its own existence and development laws from the film medium and to further explore its role in the history of human civilization; the second is to study film as an art, that is, to explore how film and other art categories are connected and influence each other. In the West, “art theory” as a discipline emerged at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century and reached its peak in the middle of the 20th century. During this period, the film became the “explicit study” of Western art theory, established a large number of theoretical works on film, and produced many important film theory writers and critics, such as Béla Balász, Galvano Della Volpe, Gilbert Cohen-Séat, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, André

Bazin, Siegfried Kracauer, Alexandre Astruc, and Rudolf Arnheim. After entering the 1970s, with the failure of traditional art theory research methods and film development, the research on art theory in Western art theory circles entered a new stage. During this period, modern art theory based on positivist methodology began to emerge, triggering a series of major discussions on the nature of art, art and people, and other issues ^[14].

6.3. Film theory: thinking around the two core questions of “what” and “why”

The author of *Film as Art*, Arnheim, understood film theory as a discussion of the intrinsic nature of film as art, the necessity and possibility of film as art, and the relationship between film as art and other art forms. Mainly, it included discussions on the question “why” triggered by the question “what is,” as well as the creative practice surrounding film art. In this sense, Arnheim discussed how to conduct research on film as an art and how to promote the development of Chinese film theory. Both research paths are, to a certain extent, aimed at promoting the development of Chinese film theory.

6.4. “Concept” and “form”

Film concepts and forms are inseparable whole, interdependent, and mutually restrictive. However, from the history of the development of film art, the introduction of film concepts precedes the emergence of film forms; that is, there has been a relationship between “form” and film form from the beginning. The contradiction between “ideas” from the French Impressionism or French Avant-Garde led by Abel Gance, as well as the Soviet Montage theory proposed by Sergei M. Eisenstein in the early 20th century is a typical contradiction between “formal concepts” and “formal characteristics.” As an art form, the film needs to express complex and ambiguous objects, multiple oppositions, and contradictory relationships, and these complex objects and contradictory relationships are developed with the director as the center, so these complex objects and contradictory relationships need to be director’s concept to unify and summarize. The film concept developed on this basis is centered on the director. It is formed by the director selecting and tailoring content, characters, plots, themes, etc., so it has become a “concept” centered on the director ^[9]. There are contradictions and conflicts between this “concept” centered on the director and the “form” centered on the work. This contradiction and conflict promotes the development of film art from early montage to later stages. A series of historical development stages, such as montage, from early sound films to late silent films, from early films to late films, from single films to multi-type films, and from early artistic creation to later artistic creation. This contradiction and conflict make a unified relationship of opposites between form and concept. In this opposition, the characteristics of “form” and “concept” are full of tension, contradictions, and conflicts.

7. Summary

Within the context of globalization, understanding the challenges encountered in the advancement of Chinese film theory, and fostering theoretical research and creative endeavors in Chinese film while upholding the path of socialist literature and art with Chinese characteristics are imperative issues that demand serious consideration and resolution. Embracing Chinese film as art as a foundational principle and seamlessly integrating practical concerns with theoretical contemplation can offer fresh perspectives and approaches for contemporary Chinese film studies, thereby contributing significantly to the global film industry.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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