

# *Diversity and Innovation: Progress and Exploration of Domestic Art Movies in 2016*

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**Abstract:** One defining feature of domestic movies in 2016 is the outstanding performance made by art movies. In general, these art movies improved the overall quality of Chinese movies and the aesthetic appreciation of Chinese viewers. While highlighting the values of art and thought amid the commercial or entertainment movies, the art movies aroused public concern for domestic movies. Domestic art movies in 2016 are characterized by a close link between their art form and avant-garde style and their realist approach, affinity to the people and thought-provoking insight. Such characteristics enabled them to make new contributions to the development of realism. Some exhibited the producers' relentless exploration and pursuit of innovation, vividly demonstrating the diversity of contemporary art movies. For example, some delivered an impressive modern interpretation of traditional Chinese aesthetic philosophy—"the extraordinary lies in the ordinary;" some had a novel camera expression and unique space-time composition; some established an in-depth connection between laughter and critical thinking by combining comic and tragic elements; some rendered innovative presentations by integrating modern style with ethnic culture; and some adopted ideographic means to enhance the significance of art movies. At present, however, Chinese art movies still lack a grand spiritual vision, with their themes to be further enriched and their concepts and expressions to be better integrated. Domestic art movies need to be endowed with more profound significance.

**Keywords:** art movie; art form; realist approach; exploration and innovation; spiritual vision

**D**ifferent from commercial movies which attach great importance to storytelling, art movies focus on spirit connotation and cinematic forms innovation. With unique artistic features, they are at the frontier of a country's movie

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industry. One defining feature of China's domestic movies in 2016 is the outstanding performance made by art movies. Compared with 2015, there were a larger number of art movies with better quality got more media attention. This indicates that aspiring movie makers enhanced their loyalty to and passion for art movies despite fierce market competition. Some of their creations, listed below, demonstrate the progress and exploration made by domestic movies.

### 1. The close link between “art form and avant-garde style” and “realist approach and affinity to the people”

Domestic art movies released in 2016 are characterized by a close link between their art form and avant-garde style and their realist approach, affinity to the people and thought-provoking insight. Among the attention-raising art movies, there were some with innovative art forms and impressive themes, which were close to the reality and the daily lives of ordinary people. Meanwhile, their progress in character building reflected the people-oriented principles during their pursuit of individualistic expression.

The first art movie that attracted media attention in 2016 was *Song of the Phoenix*, which depicted the challenges facing musicians who play the suona horn (Also called laba or haidi: A Chinese double-



*Song of the Phoenix*

reeded horn.) and their commitment to this folk art. The movie raised public concern over the value orientation in cultural protection. The protagonist, Master Jiao, represents numerous rural artists who live on and are also committed to traditional folk arts. He was simple and unadorned, yet at the same time shrewd and narrow-minded. Also, there were a variety of characters with distinctive and sophisticated personalities. For example, Tianming, Jiao's apprentice, was an innocent, hardworking and ambitious young man who had strong passion for, and great loyalty to, art. In the context of the market economy, some members of the suona ensemble stuck to their performing cause, while others swayed. This movie unveiled folk artists' perseverance and hardships in the inheritance of ethnic and folk culture. Meanwhile, it also showcased the clashes between material indulgence and artistic ideal in an open cultural environment, and the opposite stances and attitudes of Master Jiao and his apprentices towards art, life, society, conscience and commercial interests. Tough and harsh, those are the real challenges that Chinese culture and Chinese society once faced, or are facing. Through simple and unadorned movie techniques, idealized rural artistic ecology and uncolored acting, this movie criticized money's erosion of souls in the cause of artistic inheritance. Sweating and bleeding to complete the *Song of the Phoenix* before passing away, Master Jiao thus became a symbol of artistic ideals and shed an unflattering light on contemporary society. This movie provoked viewers' reflections on artistic conscience and social problems attached to cultural development.

Another seemingly plain movie *Soul Mate* unveiled the positive impact of social reform on the spiritual growth of teenagers through a depiction of ordinary life. A first glance of this movie may leave the impression of a rather plain story about the growing-up of two primary-school friends,

*I Am Not Madame Bovary.*

Qiyue and Ansheng. As time went by, their varied family backgrounds led to their different choices of education and career, forming an objective contrast between the two lives “inside and outside the system.” The story was set in a more stable and tolerant environment in the wake of the increasing opening-up of society and the decay of traditional system. Under such circumstances, teenagers could have a diversity of life choices while those seemingly firm and warm relations in traditional sense, such as friendship, kinship, love, marriage and family were without exception adversely affected with the proceeding of social reform and opening-up and the diversification of lifestyles. Their lasting friendship, originating in childhood, survived the impacts of the changing economic environment. The one leading a stable and well-off life “inside the system” began to dream of a more adventurous life; while the one struggling “outside the system” became more and more longing for a stable and cozy life “inside the system.” In their own way, the two girls strove to achieve free development. However much their lives changed, the two kind-hearted girls managed to maintain their lasting friendship, which is the most touching part of this movie. The movie came with an open ending with three possibilities. First, having given birth to a daughter, Qiyue left a word to Ansheng before disappearing from the hospital. Second, having given birth to a daughter, Qiyue died from uncontrollable postpartum bleeding. Third,

having given birth to a daughter, Qiyue went abroad and led a happy life. The third ending, supplemented with a pure and bright piano concerto, forged an ideal artistic conception and highlighted the value of free development. The two leading actresses, Zhou Dongyu and Ma Sichun, truthfully and vividly interpreted the inner world of their ordinary roles and their turbulent triangle relationship with the male protagonist. They managed to do so without any spectacular techniques, which is rare and commendable. What makes *Soul Mate* extraordinary is the fact that it revealed the impact of social reform on personal growth from a very plain perspective.

Equally plausible is another movie called *I Am Not Madame Bovary*. The real value of this movie lies in its profound significance and critical awareness expressed in an avant-garde approach, which is by no means common among domestic art movies. In this sense, such an approach is exactly its contribution to the cause of art movies. The movie tells a story about a rural woman named Li Xuelian, who appealed to the higher authorities for help over a small family dispute and eventually attracted the attention of both the Central Government in Beijing and local authorities. Her experience exposed certain problems in current social management and political ecology. This story, absurd as it may seem, was a miniature of society and highlighted an ordinary farmer’s fight for individual dignity and civil rights. In a way, Li Xuelian became a synonym

for justice fighter. On the other hand, in dealing with Li's case, some grass-root officials, being worldly-wise, chose to "play it safe," take no action at all, or react willfully, triggering a range of absurd and funny follow-ups and incurring much criticism. Such critical significance behind a plain little story is rarely seen in art movies. Of all recently released domestic art movies, few can confront reality and uncover deep-seated social problems like this movie did. The movie managed to make breakthroughs in the profoundness of real-life reflection and the form of artistic representation. It accurately captured and exposed real issues, revealing some deep-seated problems concerning Chinese people's ever-increasing claims of rights and legal protection in a more advanced society, the relationships between governance and care, stability and reform. The story developed in an easy and fluent way. Its comic feature hidden behind a melancholy tone gradually unfolded in a true-to-reality narration.

The movie *Tharlo* may give the first impression of being plain and boring but exhibited a great pioneering spirit and a strong appeal. It reflected the impact of the Cultural Revolution on the Chinese people and depicted the pathetic life of a lower-class laggard. The movie began with a Tibetan herdsman, Tharlo, reciting *Serve the People* in front of the camera. This 5-minute close-up long-take truthfully recorded Tharlo's fluent recitation from beginning to end. Such a recitation could not be more common during the Cultural Revolution. When the camera shifted to the audience—an old policeman of today, however, it turned out that this story was not set in the past, but present. Following that, the movie revealed more about Tharlo, introducing him as a Tibetan orphan working as a herdsman and that he remained single at middle age. In a better living condition, he could wear a leather jacket and ride a motorbike. Still, his house looked quite shabby. When he was once in town for business, Tharlo

met a girl working at a hair salon, through whom he got to know Karaoke and pop songs. He mistook such an encounter for true love and gave a total of over RMB 100,000 earned from selling sheep to the girl. Unexpectedly, when he woke up from a drunken stupor, the girl had already disappeared, taking away all his money. The movie ended with a scene in which Tharlo stood alone beside his motorbike at the side of the road. Tharlo's story was a little sad, which exposed a variety of real-life issues. Long takes were frequently adopted to express the slow elapse of time in Tharlo's life. There was even a water pouring shot lasting for tens of seconds. Such long takes managed to deliver an impression of underdeveloped life and reflect the imbalanced development of regional economies. Tharlo's misfortune demonstrated a clash between modern civilization and traditional Tibetan culture and indicated how culture should be inherited and absorbed. Meanwhile, it also showcased the diversity of modernity. While bringing about convenience and happiness, modernity is also accompanied with various temptations and moral issues. Most important of all, the movie provoked a reflection of Tharlo's impoverished life. Tharlo's ability to recite classic essays is key to tracing his personality development. On the one hand, such an ability was a manifestation of his simple and unadorned passion for those "classic essays." On the other hand, it also revealed the fact that extraordinary memory was almost the only thing he boasted. Over time, there was barely any improvement in his literacy and competence, as opposed to the tremendous progress in social development. The society is in progress, which requires more capable talents. It was a pity that Tharlo could only give play to his good memory in mechanical recitation. In the context of modern culture, changing moral fashion, as well as declining natural economy in a deteriorated natural environment, his simple, unadorned and traditional

mindset was insufficient to cope with real problems and protect himself. After all, one could not solely rely on a simple and unadorned character to make a living. And his only audience, the old policeman, could not give a proper explanation of his confusion. This indicates that there is an urgent need for both laborers and officials to improve their competence at this new development stage. Under such circumstances, the vulnerable group, implicated by social and historical conditions, should strive for joint progress through competence improvement. While showing profound sympathy for Tharlo, the movie exhibited the historic limitations of his personality and the humanistic concern he received at the new development stage.

For an art movie, the key to success lies in its relationship with viewers, the viewers' acceptability, which relies primarily on its artistic presentation (characteristics, profoundness and unity in spirit and form), rather than entertainment (a key performance indicator of other movie genres). A combination of novel form with a strong realistic basis is likely to make satisfactory performance and enhance viewers' acceptance. The abovementioned movies all featured a novel form and attachment to real life. Thanks to this, they managed to attract widespread attention. It is worth mentioning that these movies made a new contribution to the development of cinematic literary realism. More specially, they helped to raise the aesthetic representation of realism. Influenced by a changing era, contemporary realism is different from critical realism and socialist realism. With China transiting from the age of revolution to the age of construction, the cultural function of realism is faced with a transition from social mobilization to more diversified aesthetic representations. This requires enhancing the role of realism in aesthetic creation and cultural construction and creating more artistic images with unique features of the age. By improving our aesthetic forms, the ideology of

literary works can be truly instilled into people's minds and thus realize innovative development. In this regard, there were successful cases like *Song of the Phoenix*. They managed to forge new figures in contemporary Chinese society. Through a vivid depiction of the figures' internal and external activities—a skill that the realistic approach is most known for, these movies rendered a soul-stirring aesthetic effect. Daring to confront reality, they were of thought-provoking critical significance and embodied strong humanistic pursuits. Furthermore, they exhibited an open and active attitude towards artistic expression while pioneering modern forms without abandoning realism. Without exception they made positive contributions to the enhancement of ethnic characteristics and popularity of Chinese movies. This is exactly the connotation of modern realism development.

## 2. Persistent pursuit of reform and innovation

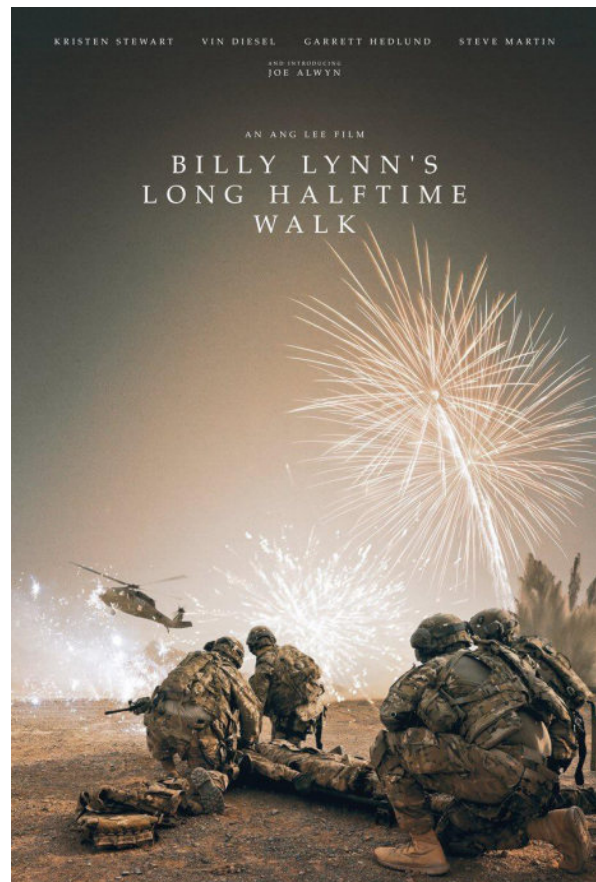
Pursuit of reform and innovation is the defining feature of art movies. Without new forms of artistic expression, art movies would have no chance to survive. For art movie innovations, content innovation is the most essential and is also the most extensive and difficult type. A truly great movie must have a touching plot and a profound ethos, which respectively concerns cinematic literariness and humanity. It is true that the theme of a movie is not a yardstick of its artistic value. Even so, it has become a universal rule that an art movie should endow a minor theme with much-in-little significance and fun. However, the “nobody” or marginal man in some art movies do not have “much” or “extensive” significance, for which their literary value is in doubt. There are also art movies striving to highlight their significance, only to expose the protagonist's isolation from their story. To tell a good



story of China and promote the Chinese spirit, art movie makers need to further expand the space of artistic expression, free their minds, broaden their horizons, and properly deal with the relationships between individuals and society, big and small, form and meaning, and classic and secular culture.

Form innovation is an iconic feature of art movies. A movie without an individualistic form cannot be deemed as an art movie. Form innovation must be of artistically constructive significance, which means it can bring new artistic capacity to a movie. Each innovation in technology, approach or concept is supposed to enhance cinematic representation. For art movies, the core significance of cinematic form is to facilitate aesthetic expression. Cinematic form, supported by various aesthetic carriers, should render the content and ethos of a movie and combine the two into an organic whole. Pursuing form innovation for the sake of form innovation itself should be guarded against. The movie *Gravity* won Mexican director Alfonso Cuarón the 86th Academy Award for Best Director in 2014. The 14-minute long take at the beginning of this movie received unanimous praise among both professionals and viewers. The scene started with a grain-sized bright spot, which was gradually rolled from far to near and from small to large. Eventually, the screen presented a full picture of an astronaut flying through space. Abounding in suspense, anticipation, thrill and magnificence, this long take brought cinematic content, perspective, composition and production into an organic whole.

Such a high integration could not be achieved without technological innovations. Currently, new technological innovations are coming into being in the movie industry. Thanks to the new production and viewing experience brought about by VR and AR technologies, computer-based content generation has facilitated unprecedented realms of representation, allowing for the adoption



Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk

of later-stage visual means in real shooting. Director Ang Lee's 120 FPS project *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, brought viewers a brand-new aesthetic experience and prompted movie makers to rediscover the importance of truthful cinematic representations. To cinematography, technology is not just about form, but also concerns aesthetic style, cultural visions and lofty spiritual pursuits. It helps to raise culture to a new height. Advanced cinematic technology is adopted to create spectacular scenes and build figures, images and artistic conception. In 2015, two movies, *Monster Hunt* and *The Ghouls*, brought the Chinese movie revolutionary cinematic technology and technological aesthetics. Computer-based creation generated new artistic images; and technology was perfectly combined with literariness,

modernity and nationalization. Consequently, satisfactory artistic effects were achieved. The combination of advanced technology with human wisdom can continue to enhance the capacity of movie creation.

In 2016, Chinese art movies experienced a variety of explorations and innovations. Two touching movies, *Song of the Phoenix* and *Soul Mate*, displayed aesthetic style featuring “the extraordinary in the ordinary” and “the profoundness in plainness” with concise forms. For viewers who were used to dramatic and sensational entertaining genre, such art movies were conducive to raising their aesthetic appreciation. More specifically, *Song of the Phoenix* frequently used simple and straightforward illustration to highlight a sense of reality, vividly representing real life-like rural scenes, details, characters and their inner activities. Through a range of real life-like scenes and comparisons, the movie could touch viewers deep inside. The other movie, *Soul Mate*, gave full play to the two leading actresses’ simple and sincere performance, through which the protagonists’ innocent teen-age years, exuberant youth and sincere friendship were vividly presented. In this way, the impact of social reform was seamlessly blended into the characters’ development. For movie production, verbal description was in most cases something to be avoided. In movies like *Kaili Blues*, *Cock and Bull* and *Crosscurrent*, there were quotes from novels and poems. Among them, *Soul Mate* was arguably the only movie with natural and fluent verbal descriptions. Moreover, its same-name novel was skillfully integrated into the movie plot and story development. In other words, all the chapters of the original novel were perfectly integrated into the movie’s structure. The movie used the protagonist Ansheng’s voice-over of some passages in novel to drive plot development, gradually unfolding the childhood and teen-aged years of the two protagonists. The three endings

echoed the “to-be-continued” call of the original novel and had the estrangement between words and screenage completely eradicated.

The movie *Kaili Blues* had a distinct awareness of reform. In a simple and unadorned approach, the movie recalled the coming-home journey of an under privileged rural man who had been away from home for years. This movie was about a farmer’s nostalgia, which is quite a rare theme. There was an over 40-minute long take forming unique time-space representation as the protagonist traveled across “time stream,” “emotion stream” and “life stream.” Alternating between past and present, poverty and development, and truthful depiction and artist’s perspective, the movie combined a poetic language with avant-garde cinematography and thus made ordinary screen age extraordinary. The movie also combined a farmer’s search for emotional root with the great change taking place in rural area, creating a rare optimistic tone in the end.

Combining an avant-garde form with mainstream values, *I Am Not Madame Bovary* made a diversity of explorations to express spiritual connotations in a unique form. Its uniqueness first was the square and round shape, which once triggered extensive debates. Many movie professionals, including the director himself, have provided their own interpretations of that special composition. Some associated the “round shape” with the landscape painting album of the Song Dynasty, while others related it to the protagonist Li Xuelian’s life environment. Regarding the “square,” the fact that it was adopted in Beijing-based scenes, “square” in the movie probably signified “rules.” The square and round-shaped composition was a daring experiment, which tried to bring significance to its cinematic form. Nevertheless, the implication of this formal composition turned out to be far less significant than expected. No inherent link between the composition and the content could be

traced. It is difficult to imagine that the round shape represented the smooth and evasive officials at the local government level. In fact, being in the center of the screen, the round shape was prone to distract viewers' attention from the movie itself. This was against a key purpose of cinematography—to fully engage viewers in the world created by a movie. To viewers, it was the full frame at the end of the movie that symbolized the protagonist's return to a normal life and her breaking away from previous entangled social circles. Full of dramatic, tragic and comic elements, the movie echoed joy, sorrow and absurdity in real life, and at the same time enhanced its critical significance through certain exaggerated depictions. For example, the orchard man (played by Fan Wei) made fun of Li Xuelian's suicide attempt, which vividly de-constructed the grief. In a seemingly ridiculous approach, the movie criticized the negative attitude towards life. Alternating between tragic and comic scenes outperformed other cinematic techniques in neutralizing the tragic tone of this movie. The music of this movie was well matched with its characters and plot development. Every time Li Xuelian appealed to the higher authorities for help, Chinese drum-based passionate percussion music rang out. When she eventually gave up her appealing attempts and began a new life, a long and sentimental cello concerto pervaded the air, well-coordinated with her helplessness. The different music genres precisely echoed Li Xuelian's emotional ups and downs.

*The Donkey*, combining absurd drama elements with a realistic approach, profoundly ridiculed various social evils concerning officialdom, culture and human nature. Its plot structure featured strong theatricality and criticism. Although there were only a few characters in this movie, theatrical conflicts faced almost all characters, each of whom became a classic representative of negative meanings such as ugliness, coldness and scheming. Their conflicts



*The Donkey*

were designed to drive plot development. There was barely any depiction of a real life-based multifaceted personality. The only exception emerged at the end of the movie, where its theme song *I Want You*, with a gentle and fluent melody, neutralized the cold tone of this movie in a detached manner. Its strong color of criticism also reflects a strong concept. In this sense, *The Donkey* can be regarded as an ideographical concept movie. In general, concept work is more capable of serving theatrical purposes. When it comes to cinematography, however, its dialogue-based form of expression inevitably deprives a movie of its primary reliance on rich images. It has been an invariable rule that ideographical expression cannot be achieved without rich images.

The movie *Tharlo* featured simple and plain screenage, one-after-another long takes, infrequent setting changes, a back-and-white documentary-like effect, as well as a still perspective. It vividly highlighted the slow pace of the protagonist, Tharlo's life and the environment in which he lived. In a slow and plain tone, the movie craftily took



advantage of various props and details to adjust its cinematic atmosphere. Examples included a little lamb, which kept Tharlo accompany, and his favorite double-bang firecracker. The little lamb kept in his satchel signified loneliness, companionship, kindheartedness and tradition; while the double-bang firecracker was associated with modernity. The sound of firecrackers at the end of the movie symbolized a released soul in a lonely world and at the same time neutralized the dull atmosphere. Quiet and slow as the movie might be, there was no lack of dynamic and lively elements and rich connotations. With all dialogues in the Tibetan language, it strove to highlight cultural clashes, reflection, protection and re-integration.

### 3. The integration of art movie with other commercial genres

Further integration of art movies with other commercial genres has become a new trend for the development of art movies. *Three*, *Cock and Bull* and *The Wasted Times* were among the most influential Chinese crime/gangster movies in 2016. The three movies feature an art movie-style mode of representation, which is both mass market-oriented and modern. While enhancing cinematic expressiveness, such a mode of representation can also help to better promote a commercial movie by properly integrating high culture with popular culture. Therefore, it can facilitate a successful in-depth combination of art movie and commercial movie.

The movie *Three* centered on the mental fight between the police and the criminal. Abundant psychological descriptions brought this criminal genre movie an artistic air of “fierce in calmness.” In the thrilling criminal investigations, there were many psychological clashes among the police, the criminal suspect and the doctor. All those aspects,

including the intense psychological activities of the three parties, the unfolding crimes, the police’s dilemma between “standing to duty and abiding by law” and “going beyond the limits,” the police’s hunting down the suspect and the doctor’s insistence on saving the injured suspect, came together to form a huge tension. And the psychological clashes became a driving force for plot development. In addition, the movie also touched upon social issues such as the doctor-patient relationship and the hardship of mainlanders in Hong Kong, which significantly enriched the plot. For example, there was a patient jumping from a building to protest a surgery failure, only to find himself cured by the suicidal attempt. This case created a black humor effect for the movie. Another example was a fierce gun-battle where there was a non-representational depiction of running doctors and nurses in slow motion. Such an approach was to showcase their desperate wish to protect patients. Due to such enrichments, there were not many gun-battle scenes. Instead, the movie was focused on social concerns, human nature depictions, and strong “rule-by-law” atmosphere. Therefore, it could flow unhurriedly like an art movie.

Though as a crime movie, *Cock and Bull* was presented in a very artistic way, full of entertaining, social and ethnic elements. Both the movie title and five subheads are culture-loaded and exhibit characteristics of Chinese novels with chapter titles, which are in stark contrast with its modern narrative structure. Revolving around a murderer-chasing suspense, the movie began with a probe into several people’s life and gradually presented some clues, each of which was intermittent and overlapped with others. Based on those clues, the real murderer was eventually revealed. Such a suspense construction and deconstruction had a style of its own, characterized by intense suspense, black humor and modern thriller element. The movie managed to represent

the intensity of murderer chase, create characters wavering between the reality and imagination, and unveil the social problems and standard of values behind crimes. In doing so, it delivered a mixed effect of thrill, absurdity, comedy and serious drama. Skillfully combining cinematic structure, style, modern performance and ethnic customs into a whole, the movie became an aesthetic enlightenment to viewers. By virtue of its abovementioned merits, *Cock and Bull* was able to stand out from a number of crime movies in 2016 to become an art movie with a unique style.

*The Wasted Times*, combining the representation techniques of gangster movie and art movie, is a masterpiece. On the one hand, the movie unfolded a picture of local gangsters and middle-class people in Shanghai in the 1930s. On the other hand, set in the Chinese People's War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, the movie depicted the suffering and revenge of individual national bourgeoisie in Shanghai. There was no lack of gripping plot and wonderful performances. Its story gradually

developed at a calm yet thrilling pace. It is fair to say that this movie was a breakthrough in the "Anti-Japanese War drama" genre. This should primarily be attributed to its unique cinematic perspective. By depicting the national bourgeoisie's life in Shanghai, the movie revealed the truth that "when the nest is overturned, no egg stays unbroken" and the indomitable will of the Chinese people. With all dialogue in the Shanghai dialect, the movie created a rich, leisurely and comfortable world with characteristics unique to the Republic of China period. In this almost surreal world, artists were busy daydreaming; mob bosses remained calm and confident amid drastic social unrest; Japanese spies appeared in sweet music-pervaded places; and Japanese soldiers practiced intimidation, bribery and assassination. Those intertwined plots enabled dramatic turns in story development, provoked thrills in plain depiction, and created a mixed gangster movie genre under the guise of an art movie.

Such integration brings commercial movies



*The Wasted Times*

more diversified forms of artistic representation, higher-level aesthetic appreciation, more entertaining value and greater influence.

#### 4. Creation limitations and spatial expansion

From the overall development landscape of Chinese movies in 2016, art movies have their quality improved and their aesthetic level raised, highlighting the value of arts and ideas amid numerous commercial and entertaining works, and prompting viewers to pay more attention to domestic movies. Yet, in terms of content, art and technique, Chinese art movies were faced with huge challenges from other world-class rivals. Given that, there is still room to improve and innovate.

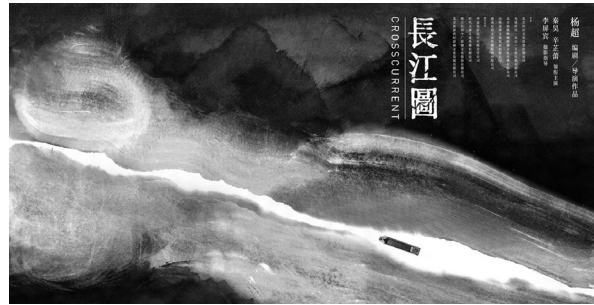
First, the spiritual vision of Chinese art movies is still very much restricted. Art movies are supposed to be with profound connotations. Most Chinese art movies, however, still lack such a grand spiritual vision. There is no doubt that the production crew of *The Wasted Times* was experienced and skillful. Even so, they were criticized for their “tunnel vision.” As the movie approached the end, there was a scene of revenge, in which a lackey, disguised as a KMT soldier, killed the underage son of the presumptuous Japanese spy right in front of him, leaving him falling apart. Such “tit for tat” revenge could not be more shocking. Focusing on gangsters’ revenge without paying due attention to legal basis and the Chinese people’s rescue of numerous Japanese orphans at that time, the movie, though capable of justifying itself in its character design, somehow lacked the humanistic caring supposed to be the due for art movies. The movie came to an end with Mr. Lu passing the Customs of Hong Kong, implying his going abroad. This scene further belittled the spiritual vision of this movie. Its ending was in stark contrast with that of the South Korean movie

*My Way*, in which a war-ridden Korean young man chose to return good for evil, giving the last survival chance to a Japanese soldier who happened to be his former classmate and bullied him in childhood. Such an ending broadened the spiritual realm of that movie and forged a lofty image of Korean people. Moreover, in *The Wasted Times*, there was a lengthy portrayal of Japanese spies’ torture of the imprisoned protagonist Xiaoliu (played by Zhang Ziyi) to increasingly faster modern music. For viewers, such a scene meant severe psychological torture. Artistic representation of human suffering requires the guidance of correct values and artistic sense. The movie *Someone to Talk to* expressed a major spiritual ideal: To find someone to talk to. This was supposed to be a touching theme and the movie was full of vivid depictions of real life. However, the fact that this movie was only based on an excerpt of the original novel significantly weakened its story plot, resulting in a failure to “copy” that vivid, typical and profound estrangement from the novel to the screen. Instead, efforts were made to depict gimmicks such as the male protagonist stalking his wife who secretly dated someone else. Because of that, the movie could not reveal the hidden reason for “no one to talk to.” Its weak story plot could not afford any profound thought. The movie did not go into the very bottom of real life, but deliberately avoided real issues in a tough society. Given that, it could hardly fall into the category of realistic movie even though it targeted real life. Art movies play a crucial role in the domestic movie industry. Considering the mass commercialization and entertainment orientation in the movie market, art movies can hold their crucial position only by giving full play to their advantageous spiritual vision. Relevant professionals should strive to “extend their vision, deepen their understanding, follow the most advanced trend of all human beings, conduct in-depth exploration of our inner world, and confront the actual living

status of the Chinese people.”<sup>①</sup> They should inject even grander spiritual visions and even more sincere artistic emotions into movie production. Only by doing so can we shoulder the great responsibility of leading the Chinese movie industry into a better future and win more viewers.

Second, the content of art movies needs to be further enriched. So far, the content and characters of art movies remain scarce and shallow. There are not many truly charming depictions of major historical events, social problems, higher bonds of union, prominent figures in history, and contemporary heroes or role models. This has a lot to do with the limited vision of Chinese movie literature, and reflects the creators' ideological and social awareness, as well as artistic pursuits. Art movies do not necessarily have to focus on “marginalized people” or “little emotional appeal.” In fact, many classic art movies, such as *A Beautiful Mind* and *The King's Speech*, exhibited a grand spiritual vision and delivered a shocking impact on viewers. Directed by Ann Hui in 2014, *The Golden Era* successfully built the images of a batch of left-wing Chinese writers such as Lu Xun, Xiao Hong and Ding Ling during the Anti-Japanese War period. It showcased an art movie's ambitious exploration of heroic figures in a critical era. At a time marked by a fully developed economy, art movies should attach more importance to sincere feelings, social concerns and the pioneering spirit. Only by doing so can they expect to satisfy viewers' inner needs. In recent years, it has become more and more difficult to find truly touching fictions and documentaries. Amid all the hustle and bustle of modern society, movie makers should set higher artistic ideals and values in order to enrich representation content with profound significance.

Third, cinematic concept outweighs narration.



Crosscurrent

The relationship between spirit and narration is of great significance for art movies. It has been accepted by more and more movie makers that the production of art movie of good quality requires relentless efforts in narration, story-telling, as well as the combination of spirit with narration. The movie *Crosscurrent* received mixed echoes, which is probably due to its weak narration caused by excessive conceptual expressions. From beginning to end, the movie unfolded a boatman's experience (i.e. what he saw and what he thought) during his water trip. Its plot was primarily facilitated by the boatman's verses and poems, which contained substantial philosophical expressions. Admittedly, there were concrete depictions of the relationship between the boatman and an unknown woman, the eco-system along the Yangtze River, smuggling by water, huge navigation locks, desolate landscapes, and deserted cabins. Yet it lacked a close narrative thread to link them together, leaving symbolic meanings in doubt. Deliberately pursuing a poetic charm, there are too many conceptualized monologues in the movie. Viewers could not immediately associate what they saw with those profound philosophical implications, which virtually isolated the boatman's image from his surroundings. Full of drama, *The Donkey* successfully created an absurd and ironic comic

<sup>①</sup> From Remarks at the Opening Ceremony of the 10th Congress of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles (CFLAC) and the ninth Congress of the Chinese Writers Association (CWA) by Xi Jinping, 2016, *China Literature and Art Criticism*, 12th issue, P12.



effect. Yet at the same time, it failed to overcome some obvious conceptual problems and stage-performance characteristics, for which its cinematic expressiveness was not that satisfactory. Besides, the movie was primarily driven by combative dialogues between characters and there were not many screenage variations, which was exactly a feature of a stage play. Art movies need to be endowed with a profound spirit. Such a spirit should be based on easy and fluent narration and conveyed in a vivid and aesthetically appealing manner.

Fourth, there is certain aesthetic distance in cinematic form. Art movies tend to attach great importance to form innovation and representation of the creators' artistic individuality. While bringing about artistic novelty, such a focus can also distance art movies from viewers. For art movies, non-processed depiction of ordinary real life is often the preferred approach of representation. Such an approach advocates truthful representation of daily life and plain manifestation of the story's real meaning without highlighting any dramatic scenes or conflicts. Indeed, it is a tradition of Chinese literature to unveil human relationships and social

changes through depictions of a plain and ordinary life. Views like "the extraordinary in the ordinary"<sup>①</sup> and "adding legendary flavor to a story with a plain theme from ordinary life"<sup>②</sup> commonly found in the novel comments of the Ming and Qing dynasties, are regarded as the herald of the Chinese literary belief that "real profoundness lies in plain life." Such a tradition has a far-reaching impact on novels created by renowned Chinese writers, including Lu Xun, Ba Jin and Lao She. However, such artistic plainness should be based on the artists' deliberately chosen perspective and should by no means be rendered randomly. When it comes to the representation of plain life, modern art movies are different from their traditional counterparts. Nonetheless, they still need to be invested with certain value orientations and moral significance. Failure to do so may turn such a depiction from plain to boring and trigger aesthetic fatigue. Formal representations should value the aesthetic acceptance of viewers. After all, to further popularize art movies and expand their niche market into the mainstream, we need to bridge the aesthetic distance between artistic forms and viewers.

(Translator: Wu Lingwei; Editor: Jia Fengrong)

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① From Preface to *Amazing Tales*, 2nd Series by Shuixiang Jushi, "Writers create distorted and sensational stories purely out of curiosity and fail to realize that the extraordinary lies in the ordinary", quoted in *Selected Works on Chinese Novels of All Dynasties*, published by Jiangxi People's Publishing House, in 1982, on P 259.

② From Preface to *Amazing Tales* by Ling Mengchu [Ming Dynasty], in *Selected Works on Chinese Novels of All Dynasties*, published by Jiangxi People's Publishing House, in 1982, on P 256.