

A Formal Analysis of Audio-video Montage in Modern Chinese Movie, *My Memories of Old Beijing*

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My Memories of Old Beijing, from the perspective of contemporary Aesthetics, explores the position of people in the multicontext-overlapping society, including pre-modern, modern, post-modern eras, by the mechanism of Audio-video Montage. Its aesthetic significance lies in its representation of one way to revolt against fate in the course of Chinese modernization, its effective change of realistic people's emotional structure, and hence one modern form of tragic humanism.

Keywords: *My Memories of Old Beijing*, Audio-video Montage, Aesthetic form

My Memories of Old Beijing, a Chinese contemporary film, published in 1980, created a profoundly expressive Nostalgia Utopia through special combination of vision and audio (Audio-video Montage) method. It translated the idea of Nostalgia from individual's emotion into profound aesthetic intrinsic emotional structure; the movie displayed how the ordinary Chinese fight against their fates, which suggested a living condition that mixed the way of production and social life from pre-modern, modern, and post-modern eras. Thus it formed its own aesthetic style.

Audio-video Montage

In Chinese academia, cinecism is usually based on the theoretical framework of the relative separation of audio and vision, although no one can deny the relationship among audio, vision and film. People have a tendency to use "audio belongs to vision" as the logical starting point, and there is no new research method that aims to discover the discourse characteristics of audio and vision. It can be said that there is obduracy in the criticism of content, but it does not care about "how to shoot", the formal expression of artistic works, particularly the expression of less attention to the aesthetic style of contemporary Chinese movies. From the Gestalt aesthetic and psychological point of view, sound (by audio media) and image (by video media) exist respectively in different forms in terms of material property and emotional feeling. They fuse together to become a new, independent, and complete form at the same time. The idea of "Gestalt" is independent from any part of it, and it is better than any part (recognized). Meanwhile, the "Gestalt" has relationship to its own component and each part is related to each other. They are independent but also interact with each other, which does not belong to whichever. The article defines the "Gestalt" as "Audio-video Montage".

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“Audio-video Montage”, in fact, can be seen as a kind of Montage, which plays a very positive and unique role in the production of movies and has unusual aesthetic significance. After all, if a film is a simple reproduction of the usual combination of sound and image, its banality will surely make it inartistic. For example, if we use the general single lens language to remake the movie, *My Memories of Old Beijing*, as much as possible to retain the protagonist, little Ying’s life story. Then we can only get a story frame: Xiuzhen and her daughter were killed by the train; Little Ying’s new friend “thief” was arrested; Mother Song lost both of her son and daughter; Little Ying’s father died; little Ying parted from Mother Song etc.—all traditional old Beijing’s stories in the initial stage of modernization. Although this kind of structure can arouse the audience’s emotional excitement, the theme has no essential difference from the reality. This emotion is primitive and unitary, thus it is not a universal emotional structure. In the movie, *My Memories of Old Beijing* directed by WU Yi-gong, after the severe depressive story theme was polished (montage combination) by the song *Farewell*, its aesthetic effect is completely different. Director WU Yi-gong showed the heartbreaking parting with melodious scenes: the visual images are mixed with LI Shu-tong’s song, *Farewell*, to form a different Audio-video Montage, that is, Little Ying’s experience of different partings in her childhood is mingled with that song. Thus, a special period in the process of modernization was visualized and stylized to become a classic. Then, is the aesthetic form based on *Farewell* of any social significance?

A Formal Analysis of Audio-video Montage in *My Memories of Old Beijing*

The lyric of *Farewell*, written by LI Shu-tong, is simple and deep, and its melody is melodious, making prominent the traditional Chinese artistic expression mechanism: echo². At the beginning of the movie, the low-spirited melody of the Sheng and the new flute was played with the appearance of old buildings in Beijing and captions on the screen, with the effect of classical charm and nostalgia. This expression could easily arouse the audience’s emotional excitement for its high degree fit for the audience from the perspectives of aesthetic psychological level and modern conflict. However, this “excitement” does not have any special aesthetic significance, it is just a daily sensibility perception. The movie begins with a soliloquy given by the heroine-character, Little Ying, “peregrinators miss those scenery, characters in the city of Beijing and their hazy and sacred childhood”. When the heroine grew up, her deep homesickness was palpable; in fact, this is just her memory of childhood, not her really-experienced childhood. Now that her real childhood was full of pain, why did her childhood become “hazy and sacred” many years later? That’s because, only after the dilution of the pain, the protagonist can be in a transcendent state of mind which is similar to “recalling the past with pangs in the heart” to reflect on various problems about the modernization. This transcendental aesthetic point of view plays a similar role of the Audio-video Montage in the movie. In other words, the melodious artistic form of *Farewell* dilute the pain in the process of modernization in China, audiences were able to achieve a detached view of aesthetics. When it comes to the emotion, imagine how can a little girl who experienced separation from her beloved ones forever four times in so short a period of time stand the pain,

² Since *Book of Songs*, China has adopted an art form which is easy to remember and conducive to the sounding of the “heavy and complex” sustenance of the past good times cherish to express the feelings of the tradition, it can be said that because of “echo”, the form has the function of enhancing the lyrical effect and artistic appeal of the poem, so as to promote the popularization of *Book of Songs* in the Zhou Dynasty.

which adults not necessarily can. However, the “Audio-video Montage” created in the movie for one moment is in reality, next is in the past; now is far, then is near; once is fixed, later is flowing, transforming the painful life experience into affectionate pathos and giving audience a light, subtle, calm and mild feeling. The song, *Farewell*, transmits us the social structure and emotional structure deeply hidden in the blending era of agrarian age and early modern age, producing an aesthetic effect of “fade-out” by the rotation of audio and video. In the movie, the montage of video narration and audio presentation by the song *Farewell* appeared seven times, which has different forms and meanings. Academically speaking, the seven montages share one form: parting with childhood, happy moments, beloved families and friends. It is believed that thanks to the use of the montage image, the movie, *My memories of old Beijing*, is no longer a peregrinator’s sad recollection of the past, but her dream for a Utopia, which is made possible with Audio-video Montage of LI Shu-tong’s *Farewell* by beautifying the childhood and the past and weakening the cruelty and ruthlessness of the real world in the background of beautiful and innocent childhood. *My memories of old Beijing* is an emotional Utopia elaborately constructed by the director WU Yi-gong. In the philosophical sense, it is a place lighted by a young heart, where the mad man and the thief shine the glory of human nature.

In fact, in the art of movie, the essence of diluting the emotions of the subject matter in the form of art is an artist’s control mechanism of the work, or a director’s aesthetic deformation mechanism of the real material. In *My memories of old Beijing*, when Little Ying was discharged from hospital, sat with her parents in the carriage, her father’s words brought her memories of Niu-er and Xiuzhen (in the hospital, 40’20’), then the melody of *Farewell* sounded, sad and indifferent, as if it ran out from Little Ying’s glittering black eyes. The use of Audio-video Montage here introduces the pain which ordinary people can not bear to the track of aesthetics. If the director does not “have a control”, perhaps the audience will be horrified and unable to accept the death of both the mother and the daughter. Then, the childhood events that could be aesthetically enjoyed would become uncontrollable cry and art will become news. Later, when Little Ying left the thief in the wasteland, the song, *Farewell*, sounded again. Little Ying and the lonely thief, hunkering in the grass, look at each other and are reluctant to part. The trembling tone produced by stringed instrument plus the mute fades away, quiet and elegant atmosphere full of the whole scene. It can also be said that “the aesthetic deformation mechanism of “Audio-video Montage” weakens effectively the thief’s identity. We not only felt the helplessness Little Ying felt, but also sensed what she could not felt, a kind of sublimed feeling. The moment the sense of beauty was touched intensely and the moment we felt sorry for that Little Ying had to experience parting again, we think about and explore seriously the metaphysical question: the position, destiny, and value of individuals, in the blending era of agrarian age and early modern age. The question is a projection of the puzzle in Little Ying’s heart, that is, why is her new friend a thief but a warm and kind good boy. In the movie, by creating an Audio-video Montage of *Farewell* in a rotating way, the cruelty of death and parting is further beautified, arousing people’s sympathy, compassion, care and love, so that we can communicate with the protagonist. In the minute of aesthetics, the protagonist’s individual pathos was transformed into an emotional structure of social significance. Meanwhile, the protagonist’s individual thoughts and feelings have also been transformed into a collective culture of nostalgia. Therefore, individual concerns have been connected to the fate of others. This kind of cultural nostalgia is often detached from the reality of childhood, hometown, and old friends, subliming into one sort of unbifurcated feeling for the “losers” in the cultural change or in the

social conflicts. Apparently, it is something more profound than the real profit and existence, a new emotional structure inconsistent with social values or customs. Hereto, the term “Nostalgia Utopia” turns out to be attractively realistic. It can not only solve the contradiction and sufferings in the real life, but integrate complicated social historical memories with emotional discourse, referring to a “future better time”. Hence, the new aesthetic concept produced by Audio-video Montage can be defined as “Nostalgia Utopia”, which can be an important category to analyze and understand the process of Chinese modernization with positive social significance.

It is also important to point out that the emotional sufferings in *My Memories of Old Beijing* (1982) were diluted by the relaxing formalization mechanism, and a painful and quiet Nostalgic Utopia was constructed. This movie had a very distinct Chinese aesthetics of “lingering rhyme” (the sound in the void or the voice in the crack of time and space), with the image centering on narration to shape reality, and the sound focusing on expressing feelings to model the soul. Yet, the function of this Audio-video Montage can only create artistic conception at present.

The Aesthetic Significance of Audio-video Montage in in *My Memories of Old Beijing*

From the perspective of modern Chinese tragic ideas, it is believed that the movie, *My Memories of Old Beijing* mainly aroused the audience’s sympathy, so as to express the sadness of parting with the beautiful childhood (here it symbolized the irrational society). According to Aristotle’s tragic view, tragedy, as an aesthetic form, was mainly caused by hero’s individual behaviors. The irreparable consequences caused by the hero’s own faults often arouse people’s feelings of “pity” and “fear”, which could be purified by tragic conflicts. “The Oedipus King” by Sophocles, the great Greek tragedian, can certainly prove Aristotle’s ideas, and the movie, *My Memories of Old Beijing*, depicting the childhood experiences of an ordinary little girl in the 1930s in Beijing, also substantiates Aristotle’s tragic theory to a great extent, and brings about the life of ordinary people in contemporary society. In the movie, it was unexpected for Little Ying to see the tragic experience of Xiuying and her daughter’s being run over by the train and the thief’s being caught. What aroused the audience’s pity for the little protagonist is that her kindness was the direct cause of these results. When the audience feels as if Little Ying is being teased by fate, it is the adjusting mechanism of Audio-video Montage that prevents the emotional spread of the audience’s heartache. With the director’s careful job, every time the emotion reaches its climax, different versions of the song *Farewell* will appear, either in the form of single melody or the new montage effect of the lyrics. This way, to some degree, constrains the audience’s feelings and reminds the audience that they are watching the movie so that it encourages the audience to observe the society and themselves and think about its meaning with their own reason.

The aesthetic significance of “Nostalgic Utopia” in *My Memories of Old Beijing* lies not only in the experience of Little Ying’s childhood, but also in the dilution mechanism of Audio-video Montage, which represents a way of people’s resistance to destiny in the process of contemporary Chinese modernization - dilution. Just as LIN Hai-yin, the author of the novel, said, “...let the actual childhood pass and the soul’s childhood live forever.” The movie dilutes the oppression and despair in the real life through the artistic and graceful form mechanism, and washes away the tragic memories of the past. Correspondingly, the tragic implication of nostalgia in *My Memories of Old Beijing* is also manifested by dilution. The “Nostalgic Utopia”

constructed by the movie has more inherent and deeper universality than ordinary people's emotional world. The specific personal parting sorrow is promoted to an abstract cultural nostalgia, and the audience's single, primitive and irrational emotion of pity has also been transformed into a rational aesthetic emotion—tranquility and grief. The aesthetic significance of this “mixed emotion” lies in that it leads us from tragic heartache to question the current life and gain a deeper understanding of the position of ordinary people in the overlapping of different stages of society. This sensation and understanding enable us to experience the emotional structure in multiple contexts with a more sensitive aesthetic attitude, and at the same time, to take a more cautious attitude towards modernity, to dilute the suffering of fate with a more cordial love and compassion, to affirm ourselves in the cruelty of tragedies and to make ourselves strong enough to take sufferings for granted and to face the severe reality bravely and calmly.

Notes

① Since *Book of Songs*, China has adopted an art form which is easy to remember and conducive to the sounding of the “heavy and complex” sustenance of the past good times cherish to express the feelings of the tradition, it can be said that because of “echo”, the form has the function of enhancing the lyrical effect and artistic appeal of the poem, so as to promote the popularization of *Book of Songs* in the Zhou Dynasty.

② lingering rhyme is a concept that the author used to summarize the aesthetic style of contemporary Chinese arts. Please refer to WANG Jie, *Researches on Aesthetic Illusion: An Introduction of Modern Aesthetics*, Peking University Press, 2012.

③ Eagleton viewed Nietzsche as the great philosopher of tragedy in Counter-Enlightenment. “To him, tragedy is the most important criticism to modernity.” Please refer to Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: the Concept of Tragedy*, translated by FANG Jie, Nanjing University Press, 2005.