

Performance Style under the Traditional Realist Director Concept of Chinese Films in the 1980s

-- Physical Temperament of the Times

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Abstract: The scar performance culture of Chinese films in the 1980s was the first performance culture form of realist dramatic performance after the return of the director's concept of realism. The reflective performance culture of Chinese films is one of the important performance cultures of Chinese films in the new era that emerged on the basis of scar performance culture. The humanitarian performance culture of Chinese films under the concept of traditional realist directors promotes the liberation of individuality and the release of human nature. The performance culture of Chinese films during this period was demonstrated through physical movements infiltrated with humanitarian aesthetic qualities.

Keywords: Chinese Film, Dramatic, Humanitarian Performance Culture, Physical Movement, Realist Performance Culture, Scar Performance Culture.

1. Introduction

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, China was opened a new historical chapter by the Reform and Opening-up. China has been emancipating the mind and seeking truth from facts. And all walks of life, including film, had been brought order out of chaos. Under the extreme ideological trend of the "Cultural Revolution", the passionate performance aesthetics characterized by "three highlights", "stylization", and "conceptualization" can no longer meet the expression of the political discourse of the times and the audience's real expectations for performances. In this way, the return of traditional realist performance concept is imperative. At the same time, in the process of restoring the realist tradition in the performance concepts of Chinese film directors in the new era, the original dramatic performance elements of realism can no longer adapt to the current social development needs and changes in aesthetic consciousness. Therefore, modernist elements such as stream of consciousness and expressionism were absorbed, thus enriching the form of realist dramatic performance in Chinese films under the concept of traditional realist directors.

2. Physical Movements and Scar Performance Culture

Scar performance culture is the first performance culture form of realistic dramatic performance after the return of the concept of realist directors. It uses intellectuals and cadres under the background of the "Cultural Revolution" as characters to tell their tragic experiences in life, and then accuses the crimes of the "Gang of Four" and exposes the historical trauma under the "Cultural Revolution". Representative works of Chinese film scar performance culture under the traditional realist concept of directors include *Troubled Laughter* (1979), *The Trill of Life* (1979), *Evening Rain* (1980), *Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (1980) etc. In *Troubled Laughter* (1979), the composition of dramatic performances at the level of non-essential characteristics of physical movements is mainly reflected in the following

points.

2.1. Logic and Sequence of Actions

The logic and sequence of actions are the way to recognize the logic and sequence of emotions. The action logic of scar performance culture is full of cruelty, which is rooted in historical helplessness. At the same time, it is in this cruel action logic that emotional pain can be recognized. In the scene where the male protagonist Fu Bin slaps his wife in the mouth in *Troubled Laughter* (1979), the breaking point of the action is that the wife "do you have the nerve to talk about the country and the people?" This sentence hurts his concern for the country and the people. At this moment, it not only conveys Fu Bin's emotions of fatigue, tension, hardship, and despair, but also expresses his spiritual core of deep worry about the current situations of the nation. By venting his unbearable concern for the country and the people under difficult circumstances, he personally indicted the "Cultural Revolution" for ruthlessly distorting the life trajectory of intellectuals and cruelly persecuting their emotional world.

2.2. Actions in the Prescribed Situation

The actions in the prescribed situation are derived from the actor's real feelings in the prescribed situation. Physical movement is one of the important expression methods for actors to create characters and shape their personalities. It requires actors to present themselves naturally based on experiencing the inner feelings of the characters. "If there is no real inner emotional experience as a basis, it is difficult to achieve this sense of reality by relying solely on the actor's skills in controlling facial muscle movements." [1] In *Troubled Laughter* (1979), in the scene where Fu Bin pretended to be sick, when the nurse exposed the fact that he was pretending to be sick and humiliated him, the muscles in his cheeks twitched twice. This subtle movement was a reaction to the nurse's severe rebuke, and it naturally and truly reflected his panic and shame. During the "Cultural Revolution" period, intellectuals lied in pursuit of truth, which was undoubtedly the greatest irony of life and the greatest absurdity in the world, and it was undoubtedly a

ruthless slander of human nature. During this period, the characteristics of scar performance culture were fully revealed.

The scar performance culture of Chinese films under the concept of traditional realist directors mainly aims to create the image of intellectuals. They are members of the general population of society and appear on the screen as human beings. The collapse of the intellectual class in the film is not only a tragedy for the intellectual group, but also a tragedy for the country and a scar on history. The emergence of intellectual images in Chinese films during this period was, on the one hand, an indictment of the persecution of intellectuals during the “Cultural Revolution”, and on the other hand, it was also a declaration that intellectuals had regained their right to speak after the “Cultural Revolution”.

3. Physical Movements and Reflection on Performance Culture

The reflective performance culture of Chinese films that emerged based on scar performance culture is one of the important performance cultures of Chinese films in the new era. Reflective performance culture and scar performance culture have the same environment in which they occur. The stagnation of national development and social progress caused by the “Cultural Revolution” gave rise to the connotation carrier of reflection on performance culture, and the social thinking trend of emancipating the mind prompted reflection on the operating mechanism of performance culture. Reflective performance culture has the characteristics of scar performance culture. It reflects on the causes of social and historical tragedies, sums up lessons, makes evaluations, explores the historical positioning of individual life, and reflects on its own historical value. In *Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (1980), the composition of dramatic performances at the non-essential level of physical movements is mainly reflected in the following points.

3.1. Physical Tasks and Character Actions

The line between physical tasks and character actions “runs smoothly” [2]. In the scene in *Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (1980) where Luo Qun gives a cotton coat to his wife Feng Qinglan, Luo Qun, played by Shi Weijian, helps his wife unbutton and undress. This shows the warm relationship between the distressed couple in every detail. When Luo Qun looked at his wife’s torn wool vest and shirt, he couldn’t help but touch her shoulders with distress. He felt unspeakably sad. He put the wrapped cotton coat on the table and asked his wife to open it by herself. Seeing her hesitation, Luo Qun said “ze” – “nao” (onomatopoeia) and urged his wife to open it. She opened it and looked, it’s a cotton coat. Then she looked back at Luo Qun reproachfully, and Luo Qun smiled. The action lines of Luo Qun and Feng Qinglan perfectly and freely create the worldly true love between the husband and wife. Comparing it with the implicit political rights and wrongs, the invisible writing of the political victims of the film’s tragic characters is completed. In this way, we reflect on the relationship between secular emotions and political ethics in moral evaluation.

3.2. Physical Tasks and Movements Suitable for Life

In *Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (1980), during a scene in which Feng Qinglan was pulling a cart to carry the seriously

ill Luo Qun in the wind and snow, she suddenly stumbled and stopped the car for fear of alarming her husband. He tucked the quilt tightly. Luo Qun opened his eyes and saw that his wife’s spectacle lenses were blurred by the wind, snow and breathing, so he took them off for her distressedly, put them on his chest to warm, wiped them clean, and put them on his wife again. The above series of physical actions are actions performed by actors based on themselves in a prescribed situation. This expresses the sincerity and depth of the relationship between Luo Qun and Qinglan under the harsh environment of the “Cultural Revolution”. This is also an important discourse written invisibly by the tragic character political victim. The meticulous and life-deep physical movements between the husband and wife in this scene foreshadowed the physical movements of the characters in the death scene of Feng Qinglan. In a scene when Feng Qinglan was dying, she wanted to take one last look at Luo Qun, but the audience only saw her mouth moving. What exactly she said could not be heard clearly, even if Luo Qun came close to her. Luo Qun understood what she meant after years of living together through thick and thin as a couple in need. He took his wife’s glasses from under the pillow and put them on her. The wife was relieved and passed away quietly. This series of physical movements not only reproduces the deep love between husband and wife, but also makes the heroic characters of the times closer to secular life. Then it completes the creative intention of showing and reflecting on the national and social tragedy in the individual tragedy of life.

The reflective performance culture of Chinese films under the concept of traditional realist directors, represented by *Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (1980), uses physical tasks and character actions that conform to the norms of realist dramatic performance to create images of political victims who are rich in the tragedy of the times. These roles are “based on the script and life as the source, after in-depth exploration of the character’s personality, character relationships and prescribed situations, combined with the actor’s own conditions, and the result of hard creative labor”. [3] Reflective performance culture projects the historical and political destiny of the country into the destiny of individual life, and reflects on individuals, society and history from the political, philosophical and cultural levels with a serious and profound attitude.

4. Physical Movements and Humanitarian Performance Culture

The humanitarian performance culture of Chinese films under the concept of traditional realist directors promotes the liberation of individuality and the release of human nature. The performance culture of Chinese films during this period was demonstrated through physical movements infiltrated with humanitarian aesthetic qualities. After the “Cultural Revolution”, China began to struggle to break away from the constraints of ideas and the shackles of culture. Chinese film performances under the concept of traditional realist directors, while calling for the return of realism, began to delve deeper into performance. During this period, Chinese film performances adhered to dramatic performance methods, emphasizing the “human” performance of the characters. In this way, while the actors’ physical movements are full of realistic logic such as life-like and authenticity, they gradually break away from the shackles of the passionate performance aesthetic concepts of “Cultural Revolution” movies. Physical

movements are no longer purely slogan-like tools for preaching and propaganda of political consciousness, but a logical carrier to express the beauty of human nature and promote human touch. Chinese film performances under the concept of traditional realist directors use the physical movements of ordinary people, and on the basis of adhering to the authenticity of performances, express the affirmation of human dignity and value, and praise the power of human nature and the spirit of humanism. Chinese film humanitarian performance culture is a restoration and abstraction of the real living conditions of ordinary people in a specific historical period and political environment.

4.1. Return of Character's Physical Movements to "Ordinary People"

The humanitarian performance culture of Chinese films under the concept of traditional realist directors emphasizes returning the character's physical movements to "ordinary people". In *Troubled Laughter* (1979), the cultural significance of Fu Bin's physical movements lies in the fact that they endow the physical movements with the attributes and character of ordinary people. The film has no legendary stories of heroism, no words and actions to promote political awareness, and no "benchmark hero" who stands out from the world under the "Three Prominences". "This story describes neither gods nor ghosts, but an ordinary person, just like you, me, and him in life." [4] The subtitles at the beginning of the film make it clear that ordinary people are the objects of character creation. The image of Fu Bin comes from life, and his character creation needs to have a basis in life. Fu Bin's physical movements must have a psychological basis that conforms to the logic of life, so that he can demonstrate the humanitarian performance culture based on the reality of character creation. The foundation of humanistic performance culture of physical movement lies in the reality of character creation.

The false body and the sincere heart are Fu Bin's real living conditions during the "Cultural Revolution". The creation of characters in this situation will make the performance more intense and make the humanitarian performance culture more expressive. The dilemma is not only Fu Bin's distressed, confused, angry, and anxious mental state, but also a true portrayal of the mental state of intellectuals of that era. In the film, Fu Bin pretends to be ill as a protest against the political environment at the end of 1975. Although this kind of resistance shows a false physical movement, it is a kind of sincere inner persistence. This false physical movement is presented as a contradiction between action and heart. It seems absurd but has an inevitable logic of the times. It is the normal state of ordinary people's living conditions under the political background of the "Cultural Revolution" and is the product of the abnormal development of political consciousness. The film directly confronts Fu Bin's dilemma, and directly expresses his distress and struggle under the logic of life, demonstrating the pity and sympathy of humanitarian performance culture for people in distress.

Fu Bin's false body in *Troubled Laughter* (1979) presents the image of a real, ordinary person. Fu Bin's false body has a moral basis that conforms to mainstream values. It is a helpless choice to abide by people's sincerity, conscience and other natures. In the real world, people who are detached from life do not exist. Similarly, in movies, it is difficult for false characters to infect the audience. Fu Bin does not have a heroic body in *Troubled Laughter* (1979), but his false body

defends humanism. Fu Bin is one of the ordinary people during the "Cultural Revolution". He sticks to his pure heart and firm beliefs with specific actions, which makes him appear real and natural. Because this conforms to the character logic and psychological logic of ordinary people. When summarizing his experience in creating the role of Fu Bin, Li Zhiyu said, "It is necessary to find Fu Bin's psychological basis for these actions. Because if the actor cannot find the inherent necessary connection between the various actions of the character he plays, the reasonableness of the character will be lost. A through line of behavior cannot be established, and it is mainly through this that the audience understands the thoughts and personalities of the characters in the play." [5] In this way, an ordinary person who is close to them, close to life, and close to reality is presented to the audience.

4.2. Emphasis the Personal Emotional Expression of the Character's Physical Movements

Chinese film humanitarian performance culture under the concept of traditional realist directors emphasizes the personal emotional expression of the character's physical movements. The movie *Troubled Laughter* (1979) is based on the blueprint of life and takes the "Tian'anmen Incident" on April 5, 1976 as the background. It tells the story of a young man and woman who met and fell in love. The concept of film performance is generally a realistic drama performance concept, which attaches great importance to the creation of typical characters and regards the creation of personal emotions of characters as one of the important expression techniques of humanitarian performance culture. Love, family affection, and friendship are the basic components of human relationships in the world, and they enrich the texture of life. This is contrary to the concept of anti-human nature in "Cultural Revolution" movies. In *Troubled Laughter* (1979), "class feelings" are replaced by individual emotions, and political consciousness is hidden under the expression of humanitarianism. The personal emotions of Zheng Changhe and Xu Shanshan's physical movements have become the main objects of film expression, and the actors' physical movements serve to express the love between the characters. Humanistic performance culture is demonstrated through individual emotional expression of physical movements, thereby making the film's performance natural, life-like and real. *Troubled Laughter* (1979) abandoned the heroic and class-based expression of the character's emotions in the concept of passionate performance in "Cultural Revolution" movies. Instead, it conveyed the political themes of the times and promoted the humanitarian spirit in the performance of the delicate love affair of the hero and heroine. Chinese films under the directors' concept of traditional realist use the personal emotional expression of the character's physical movements to complete the combination of individual destiny and the destiny of the times. In this way, the film highlights the humanitarian performance culture and takes a solid step towards exploring the life-oriented film performance and the film-oriented life.

4.3. Emphasis the Physical Movements of Characters in Small Environment

The humanitarian performance culture of Chinese films under the concept of traditional realist directors emphasizes the physical movements of characters in small environment.

In *Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (1980), the big political background of the “anti-rightist struggle” is placed in the background, and the foreground of the film is a small environment full of human touch. In the film, Feng Qinglan’s care for Luo Qun is ubiquitous and meticulous, and the humanitarian performance culture is concretely demonstrated by the physical movements of the two people in the small environment of their emotional life. In the scene where Feng Qinglan pulls a trolley to deliver Luo Qun, who is seriously ill, in the open wilderness, the cold wind is fierce and the snow is falling, she is crawling with a heavy load. At the same time, the singing all over the mountains and plains in the film is a eulogy for the love between the two and a tribute to Feng Qinglan’s human beauty. The film highlights the spirit of reflection in praising humanitarianism and emphasizes the eulogy of human beauty, which is an important directorial style of Xie Jin. At a certain period, although society gave Luo Qun a humiliating experience, he still maintained confidence and love for his country and nation. This style is also evident in his film *The Herdsman* (1981). By revealing Xu Lingjun’s psychology and praising the hearts of Li Xiuzhi and Guo Bianzi, the film expresses the director’s praise of the beauty contained in the national character. Placing characters in a small environment is conducive to life-like and authentic expression of physical movements. The *Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (1980) creates a small environment full of human touch between Luo Qun and Feng Qinglan. In this warm small environment, the dark and cold political environment disappears, and the physical movements full of humane feelings become an important element of humanitarian performance culture.

Under the realistic performance concept of Chinese film directors represented from 1979 to 1980, humanitarian performance culture has a life-like and film-like concrete presentation with the help of physical movements. Chinese film performances based on the concept of traditional realist directors promote a humanitarian performance culture with the emotional physical movements of ordinary people in

small environment.

5. Conclusion

Dramatic performances use physical and verbal movements with strong motivation to create typical characters. They are performance elements composed of non-essential characteristics of dramatic performance aesthetics after the return of realist performance in Chinese films under the concept of traditional realist directors. Chinese films in the 1980s used performance cultural elements such as time and space, sad characters, and tragic stories to highlight performance cultural connotations such as trauma, reflection, and humanity. The scar performance culture, reflective performance culture, and humanistic performance culture of Chinese films under the concept of traditional realist directors were born in the historical context of China’s Reform and Opening-up, and spoke to the political discourse of this period.

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