

The Effect of Abstractness on the Popularity of Films and Theatre Among Generation-Z

Jing Hong

Chiway Repton School, Xiamen 361000, China

ajoannahong821@gmail.com

Abstract. This essay begins at looking at three common factors previous researches have mentioned including capital market, medium and cultural capitals and then evaluates their limitations on affecting the popularity of films and theatre. Then the essay discusses the element of abstractness in films and theatres and identifies it as the main factor by analysing its effect on popularity in terms of psychology and contemporary education system. The writer also does a survey about the preferences and habits of watching films and theatres to provide data for analysing, which targets on 212 young people aged 14 to 25.

Keywords: Abstractness; popularity; film; theatre; Generation-Z.

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, there is an explosion of information happening especially among young people, the Generation-Z, a group which is defined as people who are born between the mid-to-late 1990s and the late 2010s. [1] This new generation has grown up being exposed to the internet and visual images. In the meantime, film industries have remained prospering exponentially alongside, which had already overtaken the market of theatre in the last century. According to the result of my survey, nearly half of Chinese young people aged 14 and 25 never go to theatre, while in stark contrast, only lower than 2% of them never watch movies.

What are the causes of this wide gap between the popularity of films and theatre? What are the main factors that determine the preference of young people in 21st century? This aspect can be extremely important to study as young people will be the main audience and consumer group in the future and therefore it is concerned with the future development of films and theatre.

When talking about the comparison of films and theatre, previous studies had looked deep into their similarities and differences in terms of the technique, form and aesthetic values, but have not specifically focused on abstraction and how does it act on the popularity of films and theatre among young people, especially the new Generation-Z. Plus, the reform of theatre and films in the 21st century have not been put into much consideration as well.

2. Capital Market

John Storey believes that the power of capital market contributes to the consuming habits of people as they use mass production and mass marketing to direct people to buy their goods, they hold that popular culture did not emerge until the Industrial Revolution.[2] This indicates an obvious distinction between popular culture and other culture as it can be regarded as a commodity to be sold in the capital market. This idea can be originated from Frankfurt School, which had contributed to our current understanding of popular culture. In their theories of culture industry, Adorno and Bernstein firmly believes that the film, as the centre of cultural industry, is similar to the manufacturing industry, and the core of popular which is only established on capitals and consumerism. [3] Regarding theatre, even though it was widely enjoyed by people in every class and included small-scale commercial trade in Ancient Greek and Rome, the purpose of drama was mainly political and religious.

Therefore, theatre might not be considered as part of the culture industry until the Middle Age and Renaissance when theatre had already become commoditized since professional theatre companies

and actors started to emerge. Most importantly, American theatre industry, the Broadway in particular, prospered in the 20th century and many commercial plays and musicals came along with. By the excellent marketing and advertising skills Broadway Industry employed, the revenue of which even surpass the movie versions adapted by Disney,(Musical *The Lion King* sits at the top of the list of highest-grossing musical, with a gross of \$8.2 billion worldwide, which is greater than the box office. [4] By contrast, the adapted version of *The Lion King* (1994)only achieved \$1.08 billion and *The Lion King* (2019) had revenue of \$1.67 billion, the sum of the two still could not compete with the musical version in Broadway. [5,6]) This is an evidence proving theatre as a main part of the culture industry and capital market.Despite of its higher revenue, considering that the ticket prices for theatre are often higher and the overall number of performances and attendance was limited (the number of performances of *The Lion King* in Broadway is only 9195 and the average attendance of show is only around 1000. [7]), therefore this data still cannot illustrate that theatre is more popular than films, however, it does demonstrate that this wide gap between the popularity of theatre and films is not mainly resulted from the capital market.

3. Medium

Medium is one of the most obvious distinction between films and theatre; traditional theatre requires stage or its equivalent for performance [8] while films can be presented on any media, especially in modern time, the common use of mobile devices provide multiple ways for people to watch movies. In my survey, statistics shows that over half of the respondents prefer watching movies at home through TV or mobile devices rather than go to the cinema. Furthermore, this trend becomes more significant due to the outbreak of pandemic. In 2020, Chinese movie ‘Lost in Russia’ is only available online rather than released in the cinema, even though it was a huge shock to the film industry, it is noted that it was viewed more than 600 million times in less than 3 days. This demonstrates how medium is significant for the popularity of films. Susan Sontag also added that ‘cinema is an object and theatre is a performance’[9] and this suggests that every stage work is a once-in-a-lifetime show that cannot be preserved and disseminated. But unfortunately, one thing can not be ignored is that many theatre companies these years had uploaded their stage works on social media or recorded them in tapes, CDs and DVDs, for instance, “National Theatre Live” (NTL). This creates medium for theatrical works to be appreciated more conveniently, however according to the result of my survey, this still did not change the fact that young people are less willing to watching theatrical plays no matter through which medium, which means we that the medium is not a significant obstacle that impede people from watching theatrical plays.

4. Cultural Capital

Cultural capital shows the requirement of intelligence, education level or certain skills in producing and consuming cultural products, which is often being considered when it comes to formation of the popular culture. Holt N. Parker states a theory to distinguish popular culture, common culture, elite culture and high culture by forming a four-dimensional table as shown below.[10]

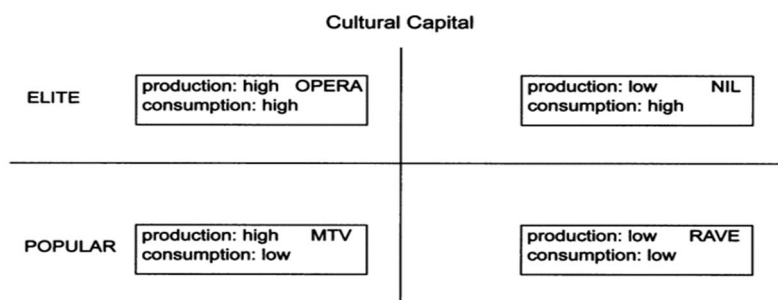


Fig. 1 Cultural capital

From this diagram we can clearly see that it considers theatre, such as opera, as belonging to the first dimension which requires high cultural capital both in production and consumption. This category is called elite culture, which symbolizes high social status and good artistic tastes, and it is often enjoyed by upper classes. On the other hand, films (mostly commercial films) might belong to the 'popular culture' category. This suggests that film production requires high capital while the consumption is in reverse. That is to say, the audience of films is not required to have a high education level. However, this is not thorough in some respects. The cultural consumption of movies is not necessarily to be low. Despite the fact that the audience of movies used to be lower class compared with that of theatre in the early stage, the movie audience became rich and had chances to get education as the economy prospered after the war. In the meantime, the previous upper classes tended to enjoy watching movies as entertainment as well. [11] Moreover, different forms of films and theatre might have different level of cultural demands and hence have different level of popularity, it is hard to generally conclude them in one category. We need to separate them and see which common element might result in this distinction, so this guides me to explore a new concept – abstractness.

5. Abstractness

“Abstractness of a category implies that it would be less informative about specific situations, less verifiable and more disputable than concrete terms.” [12] This is a common technique used in art, including films and theatre, to convey multiple meanings and ambiguity through an image or a token, which can produce a high level of aesthetic value.

5.1 Abstractness in Films and Theatre

Between 1875-1945, the modern drama had been through stages including realism, departure from realism, the post-modern experimental theatre,[13] from which we may infer that this shift from realism to its contrary might be concerned with the invention of films as it is argued that films set scenes in reality or based on reality rather than a stage and so the life-like effects it produced made it soon surpassed the theatre.

Furthermore, during the 21st century, films companies have dedicated more on upgrading sound and visual effects like Dolby Surround, 4K resolution and 3D effects to increase the sense of reality of the scene in order to attract more audience. Meanwhile, theatre started to make a bold reform in the 21st century. As Grotowski brought out a question about the essence of theatre, saying that “One must ask oneself what is indispensable of theatre.”[14], his words has guided many artists in the 21st century to break the conventional limits of stage and innovate new forms of theatre like performance art, environmental theatre. All these changes only make theatre become more abstract.

According to the survey I have done, it shows that musical and melodrama are the most popular categories of theatre, compared with other forms that contain more abstract expression on stage. Meanwhile, drawing upon the top 5 box office of movies in the world in 2021, most of them use linear narrative that is easier for the audience to comprehend [15] Most importantly, even though many films have skillfully employed the technique of Montage, which rebelled linear narrative and required comprehension of abstraction and imagination to relate two messages to form an understanding of the movie, it is still argued that movies are always less abstract than theatre. Bazin and others their book ‘*What is Cinema*’ proposed that the physical presence of actors and incapability of restoring reality on stage, [16] for instance, it is impossible to present a forest on stage but only use a few woods as symbols. This set obstacles for people to believe in the story performed in the theatre, as if the theatre forms an illusion that requires reciprocal awareness of the audience to participate actively in the show and take and process the abstractness so as to be able to understand and be influenced by the story. This concept is called “suspension of disbelief”, which is often discussed in terms of literature.

On the contrary, the core of movies provides it with a sense of space, which enables audience to be taken into another ‘real’ world passively. However, we can not ignore that there are many avant-

garde or experimental movies existing, which attempt to break the traditional boundaries of realism by avoiding using cohesive narrative and plots but applying surreal imagery to establish a certain atmosphere and create effects. This kind of movie sometimes are even less popular than theatrical plays and the audience of it can be extremely niche.[17]Therefore, we can conclude, if we want to study the core reason that affects the popularity in films and theatre, we should not generalise the terms but see each different genre of films and theatre separately and then we will find out that common factor resulted in the lack of popularity either in films and theatre is abstractness.

5.2 Tendency to Avoid Abstraction

Costanzo, an Art teacher, used to describe this phenomenon, she points out that “the junior high demand for realism surprises [her], for the students are at such a curious, questing, rebellious age”[18]

5.2.1 Lack of education on processing abstract information

Firstly, the reason can be justified by the lack of education on processing abstract information, which is an obstacle for them to appreciate abstract elements in theatre and films. Abstract information differs from what we normally perceive in real lives and Witkin believes that people often use two cognitive mechanisms to process abstract information, which are also known as “typification” and “individuation”. [19] He gives a specified illustration of the whole process: as the stimulus flow is detected by people, it requires them to reorder the information individually and to identify the higher order structure, which gives each person a unique and personal understanding of an abstract thing. Although Witkin states that individuation and typification represent different level of abstraction, I consider them as collaborating together to perform the analysis of abstract messages. According to his theory, in order to reorder the information, people need to typify it relying on two separate ways: senses and experience; and I believe this is the place in which lies the differences between high and low abstraction level instead. For example, in theatre when we see two trees on the stage, we need to use our experience to typify trees into a large concept like a forest or an orchard, and then we need to use our senses to feel what effects this setting has created to us and how does this effect add to the plot and even themes of the play. However, the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) subjects being taught in most schools weighed too much in the curriculum of most schools; taking the United States as an example, \$3 billion of education budget was spent on STEM programs [20] while only \$80 million goes to the art education programs [21]). STEM subjects could not cultivate students this ability to process abstract information since they only require logical thinking scheme rather than ‘typification’ and ‘individuation’. This reliance on logics provides a more realistic and contextual thinking mechanism that might prevent them to achieve a high level of understanding on abstraction to some extent. Thus, the distinction in habitual thinking scheme can justify why Generation-Z, often aged between 14-25, have less tendency to appreciate abstraction in both theatre and films. There is another suggestion showing that “people traverse a psychological distance by using abstraction”[22] and this responds to the fact that abstract information will create a sense of alienation that distances the audience and hence disinterests them to some extent. In conclusion, to appreciate a more abstract work requires people to change their habitual thinking scheme while reordering and reflecting information internally, it is more difficult compared with directly obtaining the natural perception in a more realistic work, given that most people have the tendency to avoid complexity especially when they are doing leisure and entertainment activities.

5.2.2 Tendency to process visual images

Secondly, young people in Generation-Z have the tendency to process visual images than verbal or written texts and according to André Bazin, he sees the text, the script of a play, as the essence of theatre [23], while this does not necessarily apply to all films, which relies more on visual images on the screen. Visual images often give specific details of an information and leave little space for imagination. On the contrary, verbal language can only refer to a broad object and need to be processed to rebuild in an individual’s mind, and hence it is more abstract. By looking at the form of

theatre and movies, it is obvious that movies employ a flow of visual images showing a specific occasion, and this stimulation will be detected directly by the audience. As for theatre, due to its limitations of space and time, the plots of drama are mostly driven by the verbal lines of actors and are highly based on the literature text, which is also why theatrical plays have monologues sometimes in the form of a sonnet, a poem or just dramatic verse as its special and crucial element in order to lead the audience into the character's inner world and complete their understanding of characters and plots, while most movies using camera as a complete objective perspective can hardly achieve that but use actions or dialogues that are often restricted in a limited length to convey the same meaning. Given that this new Generation-Z are exposed in an explosion of visual images, they are used to being stimulated by visual information as they are processing video, pictures, posters, and etc every day and everywhere. This also accounts for the formation of habitual thinking system to avoid abstraction to a large extent. Even though the stage designs can be seen as visual images, they are frequently presented by a token to project and symbolize a broader picture of an occasion, which is also highly abstract and requires individuation and typification.

5.2.3 Difficulties in interpreting reviews

Lastly, there are difficulties in interpreting their reviews of abstract artworks. As it is shown above, the feeling and thoughts evoked by abstract works are individualised and depending on individual sensation, which means that there might be an intangible barrier of language for people to share common reviews to discuss. Furthermore, a study has shown that people can memorize artworks that represent lower abstraction level with greater precision than a more abstract work. [23] This is to say, the story or meaning the audience acquires from an abstract work is often obscure and lack of details, which further prevents the audience to discuss. Considering that the social platform becomes nationwide or even worldwide for Generation-Z, a group that grows up with the spread of internet and needs discussion as an integral part of their healthy social life, this widened social platform makes them feel more need to be confirmed by the outside world and hence encourages them to follow the hottest topics that the majority is discussing. Hence, it is uncommon for an abstract art to appear in the top topics on social media and so the influence of which is largely reduced.

6. Summary

It is certain that there are many factors including capital market, medium and cultural capital involved in affecting the popularity of films and theatre, but as discussed above they are not the most crucial ones. First, the marketing technique and advertisement used by capital market can stimulate the demands of their products to some extent, this can promote the popularity, but its power is limited as it is established on the existing popularity foundation. Thus, the capital market is not the main cause. Second, the medium distinguishes films and theatre in terms of their forms, but their medium merges as the multimedia and internet develop, which means that its effects on the popularity has already been minimized. Third, the cultural capital required for films and movies has changed over periods of time and it shows no direct links to popularity.

These discussions then lead to the main focus of this essay – Abstractness, as the major factor that has the most influence on the popularity of films and theatre. Due to the limitation of time and space and physical presence of actors in the theatre, it requires more imagination to comprehend these symbolical information and hence contains more abstract elements than films. Moreover, the habitual experience-based thinking scheme established by aging and the environment filled with visual images makes process makes processing abstract information harder for Generation-Z. Also, there is a barrier for young people in Generation-Z to share common reviews for an abstract art as their feelings may be too personal and indescribable, and hence this lack of discussion will lower their interests. Stemming from the fact that there are so many obstacles for Generation-Z to appreciate abstract elements of art, which are mostly involved in theatrical work, it is therefore significant that abstractness plays the most crucial role in affecting the popularity of films and theatre among Generation-Z.

As for the future prospect of films and theatre, our current education system applied on Generation-Z need to provide more trainings on using senses to acquire abstract information rather than only emphasizing on intellectual trainings. Further studies can focus on the training methods of employing senses in processing information and cultivating imagination since these are the main ways for students to comprehend theatre and other abstract forms of art.

Appendix 1: A Questionnaire of the Popularity of Films and Theatre Among Generation Z (14-25 years old) in China

Table 1. The Frequency of Watching Plays (Including Online And In Theatre)

Frequency	Proportion
Once a day	2.36%
Once a week	8.96%
Once a month	17.92%
Once in a half year	18.87%
Once a year	8.96%
Almost never	42.92%

Table 2. The Frequency of Watching Movies (Including Online And Cinema)

Frequency	Proportion
Once a day	7.55%
Once a week	37.26%
Once a month	34.43%
Once in a half year	17.45%
Once a year	1.42%
Almost never	1.89%

Appendix 2: A Questionnaire of the Popularity of Films and Theatre Among Generation Z (14-25 years old) in China

Table 3. Young People's Preferred Medium of Watching Movies

Ways	Proportion
Cinema	46.23%
TV	22.64%
Mobile Devices	31.13%

Appendix 3: A Questionnaire of the Popularity of Films and Theatre Among Generation Z (14-25 years old) in China

Table 4. Young People's Favourite Form of Theatre

Form	Proportion
Musical	25.69%
Play	20.41%
Opera	14.22%
Dance	14.22%
Experimental/ Avant Garde	8.72%
None	16.74%

References

- [1] June, Sophia "Could Gen Z Free the World From Email?". The New York Times. ISSN 0362-4331
- [2] Storey, John. Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction. 4th ed., University of Georgia Press, 2006, p.10
- [3] Adorno, Theodor, and J. Bernstein. The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture (Routledge Classics). 2nd ed., Routledge, 2001, p109
- [4] Information on: www.forbes.com/sites/leeseymour/2017/12/18/the-lion-king-is-making-more-money-for-disney-than-star-wars/?sh=21c462021ff0.
- [5] Information on: www.boxofficemojo.com/release/rl3321923073.

- [6] Information on: www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0110357/?ref_=bo_se_r_1.
- [7] Information on <https://www.broadwayworld.com/grosses.cfm>
- [8] Mandal, Somdatta. "DRAMA/THEATRE AND FILM: THE DYNAMICS OF EXCHANGE | Semantic Scholar." Semantic Scholar, 2014, p.3
- [9] Sontag, Susan. "Film and Theatre." *The Tulane Drama Review*, vol. 11, no. 1, The MIT Press, 1966, pp. 31.
- [10] Holt N. Parker. "TOWARD A DEFINITION OF POPULAR CULTURE." *History and Theory*, May 2011, Vol. 50, No. 2 (May 2011), p. 161-62.
- [11] [Mandal, Somdatta. "DRAMA/THEATRE AND FILM: THE DYNAMICS OF EXCHANGE | Semantic Scholar." Semantic Scholar, 2014, p.6
- [12] [Burgoon, Erin M., et al's essay "There Are Many Ways to See the Forest for the Trees." *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, vol. 8, no. 5, 2013, p.2.
- [13] [Edwin Wilson, Alvin Goldfarb, *Story Theatre (Inset 9th Edition)(Chinese Edition)*, Fei Sun, Beijing United Publishing Company, 2016, p.73.
- [14] Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre (Theatre Arts (Routledge Paperback))*, Theatre Arts, Theatre Arts Book, 2001, p.32.
- [15] Information on: <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/year/world/2021/>.
- [16] Bazin, Andre, et al. *What Is Cinema? Vol. 1. Second*, University of California Press, 2004, p.96.
- [17] Information on: <https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-experimental-film-definition/>
- [18] Costanzo, Nancy "Introducing Abstraction to Junior High Students." *Art Education*, vol. 34, no. 1, 1981, p. 37.
- [19] Witkin, Robert W. "The Psychology of Abstraction and the Visual Arts." *Leonardo*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1983, p. 202.
- [20] Information on: <https://dbknews.com/2021/03/04/federal-education-textbook-civics-social-studies/>
- [21] Information on: <https://www.arts.gov/about/news/2019/more-80-million-arts-funding-awarded-across-nation>
- [22] Amit, Elinor, et al. "The Use of Visual and Verbal Means of Communication Across Psychological Distance." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2012, p.2.
- [23] Bazin, Andre, et al. *What Is Cinema? Vol. 1. Second*, University of California Press, 2004, p.94.
- [24] Koroscik, Judith S., et al. "The Effect of Verbal Contextual Information in Processing Visual Art." *Studies in Art Education*, vol. 27, no. 1, 1985, p. 21.