

In The Heat of the Sun: The Questioning of National Identity

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Abstract

This essay aims to analyze In The Heat of the Sun combined with Deleuze's time-image, which overturns the traditional understanding and conceptions of this film. By presenting the indiscernibility of virtual and actual in this film, a unique representation of history and reality have been reflected within this film, which has a tendency to question the national identity of Maoist China. This standing will be further explained through three main parts: the ambiguity of imaginary and reality; the exploitation of personal history and the smashed masculinity of this film.

Keywords

Deleuze; Time Image; History; Masculinity; Film studies.

1. Introduction

In The Heat of the Sun (yangguang canlan de rizi, 1995) is a film that subverts the national identity and blurs the mass memory of cultural revolution, with the use of the first person narrative. According to Braester (2001, p.350), this film acts as a milestone in the history of Chinese cinema and people tend to compare this film with Red Sorghum (Hong gaoliang, 1987), in which the director Jiang Wen plays the male lead. Both film have received extensive international attention, this film won the best male lead at Venice Film Festival and the other won the Golden Bear award in the 38th Berlinale Film Festival. In this essay, Deleuze's time-image will be applied to analyze the indiscernibility of virtual and actual in this film, seeking to explain the further social background behind this film. The argument of this essay is that the unusual narrative of this film attempts to deterritorialize the national identity of Maoist China. This argument is mainly developed through three parts: the indiscernibility of imaginary and the reality, the exploration of the individual memory and the shattered masculinity identity in this film.

2. Organization of the Text

This film is set in the 1970s in the middle of the cultural revolution, when the public were emerged into the national frenzy. In contrast, these kids in the film were the lucky generation of that period since they avoided the fate of other young people - being sent to the countryside. The kids in this film are the generations of the army officers, who are the contributors of the People's Republic, in other words, they are the privileged generation throughout that period. As Williams (2003, p.93) suggests, 'It is a film about reflections, reflections of the past, of memory, and of youth', the reflections are recounted through the narration of the older Xiaojun (played by Jiang Wen). Through his narration, we enter into his inner memory and his adolescence period, which is a totally different pattern from the normal representations of cultural revolution, when numerous people were under desperate trauma and pain, like what presented in Farewell my concubine (1993) and The Blue Kite (1993). However, this film focuses more on the personal life of Xiaojun, his first love, gang life and growth process. When

people emerge in the nostalgia and memory of older Xiaojun, he shatters his memory and doubts himself:

My emotions changed my memories, which have in turn played with me and betrayed me. It got me all mixed up to the point where I can't distinguish between true and false. Now I suspect that the first time I met Mi Lan was fabricated. Actually I never met her on the road... I was never that familiar with Mi Lan. I never got familiar with Mi Lan.

This kind of indiscernibility fits into the Deleuze's crystal-image. According to Deleuze (1989, p.73):

The indiscernibility of the real and imaginary of the present and the past, of the actual and the virtual, is definitely not produced in the head or the mind, it is the objective characteristic of certain existing images which are by nature double.

In that sense, the innate indiscernibility of present and past, actual and virtual may indicate that we cannot guarantee which one is more correct-our memory or the reality. As memory is selective, because we tend to select the perfect, complete and ideal version of ourselves, so the memory is not necessarily true. Meanwhile, to some extent, our memory constitutes our own version of history, and due to the socio-economic discrepancies, people perceive history from different points of view, so the history is also multifaceted. This partly explained the unusual focus of this film, as the characters in this film are the lucky generation in that period, when the teachers were deprived from the right to teach and adults were devoted themselves to class conflicts. Therefore, for them, they did not need to go to school and enjoyed pure freedom, and they had enough space and time to express desire and experience sensitive and romantic adolescence, so it was definitely the brightest and best period in their life.

Based on Deleuze's oeuvre, Martin-Jones further explains Deleuze's ideas and forms his own argument: the time-image is an afterbirth of historical transformation or reforms, and the directors tend to use the 'jumbled, fragmented, multiplied or reversed film narrative' (2008, p.1) to re/deterritorilize the national identity. In this film, the subversive narrative is the indication of decoding and reinterpretation of the authority. According to the China's official, the cultural revolution is defined as a 'manifestation of the people's struggle against the Gang of Four under the leadership of the authentic core of the Communist Party (Lu, 2004, p.539). Just as Martin-Jones suggests:

By establishing national identity as stemming from certain historical origin' often diverse people are provided with a sense of continuity that erases the differences between the past and the present. (2008, p.34)

Thus, this official explanation functions as a clue that gives people a sense of emotional continuity and lays a conclusion to the national trauma. While this kind of conclusion does not fill the emotional gap of the public as many directors have a tendency to shatter or break this masquerade, In *The Heat of the Sun* is one of the examples. It is based on a popular novel- *Wild Beast* (dongwu xiongmeng), which is written by a household writer and scripter - Wang Shuo. Unlike other writers in China, their work serve for the communist party and they work in the official system, while Wang Shuo, as an independent writer, works for outside the system and his work that is famous for his subversive and a threat to the authority.

Although the official's explanation has given people an explanation and motivate an emotional continuity or forgetting, it seems like too cursory for the public and they attempt to shape their own stances. As the work- *Failure of Charisma: The Cultural Revolution in Wuhan* suggests, the Gang of Four was once the leaders of communist party, and in this movement, people were actually fighting against themselves-the public and the citizens of the country. This movement is indeed a national frenzy because of the blind admiration and follow of Maoist communist party.

Apart from the sensitive cultural revolution, this film also involves the reform era, when the Chinese government started to work on modernization. Since 1990, the state promoted a nationwide project to 'renew city neighborhoods by replacing dilapidated buildings with new apartment blocks' (Ren, 2011, p.99). This kind of modernization comes at the sacrifice of traditional identity and memory. Just as the film presents:

Beijing has changed so fast. In twenty years it has changed into a modern city, and I can find almost nothing the way I remember it. Actually the change has already wrecked my memories so that I can't tell the imagined from the real.

According to Raymond (1985, p.297-8), 'When locations were physically transformed, the individuals living in those places experienced a sense of loss and crisis in their own identity and patterns of daily life'. This kind of identity-loss always accompanies with big reform or transformation. Just as Deleuze suggests, the World War two are the dividing line of the World's cinema, and thus dividing the movement-image and time-image. However, as Deleuze mainly focus on European and American examples, so this dividing line isn't accurate in other countries, but it is a creative taxonomy. Time-image is a way to present the a transformation of national identity.

Thus, following the logic, I would like to argue that not only the World War Two, but only the cultural revolution and the reform era contribute to the conversion of Chinese national identity. In the next part of this essay, I will analyze that how national identity is deconstructed or deterritorialized with the detailed analysis of *In the Heat of the Sun*.

Firstly, the exploration of the individual memory is a fundamental way to reconstruct the national identity or mass memory. In some sense, history is not entirely like what presents in the history textbook, where everything finds its place, while the history is much more personal as people tend to perceive the history from their point of view. For most people, the cultural revolution is a national trauma or taboo, while in the director eyes, it was 'like a rock and roll concert with Mao as top rocker and the rest of the Chinese as his fans. China's new cultural scene' (Williams, 2003, p.95). As the director tends to use a black humor to describe this movement, it is no wonder that he would shatter people's memory or imagination of this event. Therefore, the exploration of the character's memory is partial and unreliable as the character recounts the story or his memory as a bystander from a distant emotional distance. Just like the female lead -Milan (played by Ning Jing), in Ma Xiaojun's memory, she is wearing a red swimming suit in the color photo hanging on her bedroom, while actually, Milan never has any color photos and a red swimming suit. In this film, only two people have color photos-Milan and Mao. In that case, since for Ma Xiaojun, both Milan and Mao are the imaginary figures in his life, familiar but distant, a perfect space for him to fantasize their relationship. According to Anderson (2003, p.6), the nation is 'an imagined political community', in this film, Chairman Mao is romanticized by Ma Xiaojun, which to some extent, compares Xiaojun's love to Milan with the public's love to Mao at that time. Mao like Milan, is a household name among the gangs, but they do not actually know her/him, so Mao and Milan is an illusive collection of images and imagines. Thus, Milan in this film is not a simple figure that bears Xiaojun's desire and fantasy, she is a signifier of the leader of communist party, supported and fantasized by people. This kind of romantic comparison and filter deterritorializes the national identity, which always emphasizes the painful and miserable part of the nation.

In addition to the ironic comparison of Milan and Mao, the falsifying narration of this film also deconstructs the national identity, which reverts the traditional narration and denies the whole narration. In the restaurant, when Ma Xiaojun and the leader of the gang- Liu yiku celebrated their birthday, Ma and Liu have a quarrel and fight against each other, while when Ma uses the broken wine bottle to stab Liu, Liu did not hurt and the scene remains frozen, with the narration of the older Xiaojun:

Haha!... Don't believe any of it. I never was this brave or heroic. I kept swearing to tell the story truthfully, but no matter how strong my wish to tell the truth, all kinds of things got in the way, and I sadly realize that I have no way to return to reality.

Reflected from the narration, it seems like the narrator-older Xiaojun and the younger Xiaojun in the memory are separate ones as he does not control his memory and feelings. The distorted memory of older Xiaojun seems like he just retells the story of another person who just accidentally shares the same memory of his adolescence. This kind of distortion may be explained by Deleuze's double self. In Deleuze's crystal-image, the preserved past and the passing present coexist, "it shows the present and a past that 'is', rather than the present and a past that 'was'" (Martin-Jones, 2008, p.59). Therefore, the time splits into two parts-present and past, in that case, a subject also splits into two, the present version and the past version-'the actual I in the present and the virtual I in the past' (Martin-Jones, 2008, p.60). Just like this film, both younger and older Xiaojun coexist in this film and maybe in Xiaojun's mind. As the line suggests, maybe one version of Xiaojun tries to recount the story based on truth while the another version fabricates the whole story. One version of the subject engages in the story, the other version of the subject think above the story and narrates as an onlooker.

After watching this scene, the audiences start to doubt their belief of truth. In the beginning of the film, the narrator attributes his memory distortion to the rapid transformation of Beijing. However, in my opinion, it is not the truth itself is doubtful, it is just our will or belief of truth has changed with the development of modernization, it is an era that everything could be changed, so does the memory. In the past, the Maoist communist party pay attention to the congruence of people and even the mind, while the advent of modernization sacrifices this kind of congruence and highlights diversity. Therefore, people's thought of truth has altered and become more personal. This kind of diversity reflected in the interesting color use of this film which symbolize the essence of crystal-image. Unlike other traditional films, this film uses the color to show the past and uses black and white to show the present. Many people may think this kind of color use fits with the title of the film, the past embodies the brightest and happiest period of life. However, his kind of color use resonates with Deleuze's crystal-image. Since the past is preserved and it remained true or false in our memory, while the present stands for the past and the present and even the future, the present is passing, and when we sense the time, it is passing and it has already become the past. In that sense, the past is relatively clear in our memory, while this does not guarantee its authenticity, by contrast, the present is obscure and waits for another process of emotional creation, fabrication and distortion.

In the final part of this essay, I mainly focus on the query of masculinity and authority of this film, which is a complete overturn of national identity and authority. In this film, Ma xiaojun inherits his father's job-defusing the bomb, Xiaojun is adept at unlocking doors. It is this kind of skill that allows him to intrude Milan's home and prompts his obsession of Milan. In his first intrusion to Milan's home, he accidentally encounters his teacher, Mr Hu and spies him through the telescope. He watches Mr Hu flirting with a female teacher and masturbating in front of a wall. This kind of spy shatters the traditional relationship of students and teachers, in which teachers always take the position of surveillance. In spying, Xiaojun turns into a spectator, the dominant power of the gaze and symbolizes power and control above the object. This kind of spy and intrusion is an embodiment of the permeation of Maoist communist party into people's daily life. With the skeleton keys, Xiaojun can enter into an enigmatic fantasy world, where he can become his true self. However, more and more mysteries and knowledge come in front of him with the keys, but there is no more truth, only more memories that are oscillating between reality and imaginations.

Another question of masculinity lies in Ma Xiaojun's worship to heroism, which is a symbolic way to deterritorialize the national identity. Throughout the cultural revolution, the heroes are those moral models of Model Plays (yangbanxi), while in this movie, the heroes in this film, are

those people who fight cruelly-hooligans, which is definitely a great satire to the authority and national identity. During the Maoist period, heroism is closely linked with the national identity, as those heroes in the films at that time always remain high fidelity to communist party and the selfless contributors to national construction. However, in this film, for Xiaojun, the heroes in his eyes are his father and the leader of the gang.

His father- an army officer, who fought in Korean War and gained many achievements in the war, while in the cultural revolution, was assigned to pacify the domestic conflicts caused by class conflicts. This means that the national apparatus is not only used for national defense, but also used for fighting against the public, the so-called the enemies of the public, while these enemies are indeed the citizens of this country. Apart from the duty of the whole army is put in the question, and the achievements that Xiaojun's father made in the Korean War are also been queried by Xiaojun's mother, she doubts that his father had been hidden in a cave so that he could survive in the ruthless war. His mother's words challenges the masculinity and the authority of male discourse world, breaking the narcissistic illusion of the male narration and national identity.

However, his mother's words does not stop Xiaojun's admiration to his father and he still regards his father as a hero and mimics his behavior. When Xiaojun uses his keys to enter a fantasy world, his father's world is his first option. He wears his father's medals and imagines himself as a soldier like his father in front of the mirror. According to Williams (2003, p.97), 'For Xiaojun, the mirror is like a cinema screen, he projects himself into fictional worlds'. But I think, apart from the mirror, the memory of Xiaojun also functions as a mirror, as he tends to select or even fabricate what he wants to highlight in his world-the more ideal, complete and perfect version of himself.

This kind of narcissism fits with Lacan's mirror-stage. Xiaojun's alternative selves resemble the reflection of the young child famously promoted by Jacques Lacan (1977), deceived by misrecognition of its shadow into an overinflated opinion of its abilities. This is reflected when Xiaojun and his friends came to revenge and fight another members of gang, who hurt one of their members, Xiaojun used the brick to smash a boy's head, who remained unclear whether he was the culprit. In that sense, who is the culprit is not so important for Xiaojun, he just wanted to release the superabundant power and strength, building up his status among the gang. While, ironically, it turned out later, that boy was not the culprit and Xiaojun was afraid of being revenged for a long time. Xiaojun's conceit derives from his narcissism and a misunderstanding of heroism, to whom, heroism is a sign of male hormone and superficial power. It is interesting to note that during the fighting, the director uses the Internationale as the soundtrack- the anthem of communism, which is a total destruction of national identity. This implies that the foundation of the communist party is obtained through violence and much like a gang fighting, one gang is communist party, the other is the capitalism. This kind of satire resembles the beginning scene of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), which implies the origin of human beings from violence, who can use the tools to fight and invade. Ironically, for Xiaojun, an immature little boy, who have not entered the society, have learnt used the violence to attain the power and status.

However, this kind of narcissistic narration or identity may be historically rooted. During the cultural revolution, chairman Mao was definitely the dominant power and remained the absolute leadership, in that sense, those male citizens living in this country have been castrated to some extent. In order to keep the emotional balance, they tend to attain the emotional satisfaction in other ways: the tense relationship between father and son, the mimicry of the father, the resort to violence. Therefore, Xiaojun's cult on his father and the leader of the gang is a reflection of this kind of emotional compensation, in this national frenzy, everyone is under control in Maoist period, so Xiaojun's heroism alludes to violence and strength, a revolt to the power and authority.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, there are multiple angles to analyze this film-psychoanalysis, gender, ideology and so on. However, applying Deleuze's time-image to analyze this film attempts to link the visual representations of this film with the national identity. In the era of the transformation, the analysis of Deleuze has a significant influence on Chinese cinema, providing a new way to perceive the Chinese cinema and national sentiment. The subversion of masculinity and the indiscernibility of reality and memory are the fundamental ways to deterritorialize the national identity, not only to the Maoist communist party, but to the communist party at the reform era. This kind of subversion is a way to release the national anxiety, tension and loneliness.

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Filmography

2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) dir. Stanley Kubrick, America.
 The Blue Kite (1993) dir. Tian Zhuangzhuang, China.
 In the heat of the sun (1995) dir. Jiang Wen, China.
 Farewell my concubine (1993) dir. Chen Kaige, China.
 Red Sorghum (1987) dir. Zhang Yimou, China.