

Mapping “Historical Consciousness” in Films of 5th generational filmmakers namely Zhang Yimou’s *To Live* (1994), and TianZhuangzhuang’s *The Blue Kite* (1993–1994), and Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine*

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I take a closer look at some of the works of 5th generational filmmakers namely Zhang Yimou’s *To Live* (1994), and TianZhuangzhuang’s *The Blue Kite* (1993–1994), and Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine*. While analysing these films I also make an inquiry into the presence of critical sense of history and historical consciousness in these films. My methodology works through tracing cinematic representation of ‘grand-narrative’ of Threeepisodes – Hundred Flowers Campaign, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Finally my paper also looks into the visual reconstruction of the national memory through reference to the political history of Chinese revolution.

1. Introduction

The Fifth Generation filmmakers, mainly composed of the class of 1982 from the Beijing Film Academy, are well known for their emphasis on personal style and language as well as their political and cultural commentaries.¹ For the first time in modern Chinese cinema, they insisted that film be viewed as an object of aesthetics and the filmmakers themselves as artists, and commented on the totality of national culture and history at an allegorical level.² Their films speak mainly about the past of China and its recent history from having been there and firsthand experience that they had about Cultural revolution. Their films reflected the anxiety of their going up of years during cultural revolution and through their films they had a critical outlook at these grand historical events and their impact on people. In my paper I will look for the historical consciousness and idea of the representation of past in these three films. Before I discuss all the issue I would like to highlight the plot of these films

To Live is an epic film directed by Zhang Yimou and is based on the novel by Yu Hua of the same name. Film is about the life of Fugui, a gentry turned shadow puppeteer, whose family life is shown through a succession of social and political changes during three episodes – Hundred Flowers Campaign, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Film looks at the lives of the ordinary Chinese people, through its two main characters, amidst three generations of upheavals throughout Chinese politics of the 20th century. Film had many moments where critical portrayal of various policies and campaigns of the Communist government is depicted .

The Blue Kite is a 1993 drama film directed by Tian Zhuangzhuang. The story is told from the perspective of a young boy Tietou, literally meaning 'iron head' growing up in the 1950s and 1960s in Beijing. Three episodes – Hundred Flowers Campaign, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution.

¹ Xudong, Zhang, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms: Cultural Fever, Avant-Garde Fiction, and the New Chinese Cinema* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), 215-305.

² Ibid.

Farewell My Concubine is about two boys who grow up in a torturous Beijing Opera training house. In the film Shitou, stage named Xiaolou is trained to play the hero and the other (Douzi, later stage named Dieyi) his lover, the latter falls in love with his friend. Film explore the complex relationship and the emotional struggle of these three characters When Xiaolou marries the prostitute Juixian (played by Gong-li) a life-long emotional struggle begins among three. Their lives takes different turn during these political events starting from the period of war of resistance against Japan to the Cultural Revolution.

Historical consciousness and representation of past

These directors through their work visits these period and tries to locate historical meanings using their personal memory and makes an attempt to situate their films within these grand narrative. Search for history via personal memory helps in locating these 5th generation film directors and their film making within a broader perspective of historical awareness. In a way Fifth Generation filmmakers position themselves as historiographers and as a participants in the Cultural Revolution. They rely on collective memories and traumatic experiences of the subject to chart out historical meaning. Looking into grand narrative of history through memory becomes central focus for them. Use of mise -en-scènes in their film critique grand narrative of cultural revolution at an allegorical level. In short Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), Zhang Yimou’s *To Live* (1994), and Tian Zhuangzhuang’s *The Blue Kite* (1993) takes a critical look at China’s social-political history as grand narrative through epic events and visual images.

Critique Of Meta narrative of History and Nationalism

As agents and products of history, films and the world of films stand in a complex relationship with the audience, with money and with the state, and this relationship is one of the axes of its history³. Marc Ferro argument about the role of the

³ Ferro, Marc , *Film as an Agent, Product and Source of History*, Journal of Contemporary History, Vol. 18, No. 3, Historians and

audience, money and the state in the evolution of the cinema makes a crucial intervention in the craft of 5th generation filmmakers about growing relationship between films and filmmakers. As a matter of fact, these three crucial films released 1990s after infamous Tienan square event which forces us to think about the technique and the style of these film makers and their motivations about film as an art-form. As the film as an art cannot be separated from the cultures where they come from or the audience at which it is aimed primarily so there is always a danger of misrepresentation of past at an allegorical level. Since these films had release outside mainland China especially in U.S and various prestigious film Festival creates an impression that these filmmakers fed on tropes of orientalism and their willingness to succumb to the market forces. Film Critic of Mainland China also brings up this issue to critique 5th generational filmmaker and their overt reliance on melodramatic version of past for catering to western audience. Although their concern is genuine but relegating the work of 5th generation filmmakers and narrowing their work to be catering to western sensibility can be problematic.

It is in this light Robert Rosenstone argument about film as a source of history comes to our mind. According to him historical epics brings to the screen a wealth of authentic historical detail and helps in humanizing the past. Each film propose an interpretation of its subject and their perspective on political commitment within personal and historical category⁴. Although It can be argued that the 5th generation filmmakers' and their filmic narratives weaves critique of hyper ambivalent nationalism of Chinese State. At he heart of critical portrayal of ambivalent nationalism in their films comes from 5th generation's experience of growing up during cultural revolution.

As these young directors visits the traumatic past through their own memories they seek to show an alternative history through collective memories of the public and in this way they make valuable contributions to historiography of these grand narratives. Their emphasis on memory reconstruction through the mis-en-scene helps in shaping many critical aspect of historical consciousness in these films. However According to – Martin Heidegger there is a limitation on reliance of memory for reconstruction of past events as using one's existence and experiential methods is inauthentically historical and is loaded down with the legacy of a 'past' that can become unrecognizable as it seeks the modern and therefore there is a danger of modernist interpretation of historical narratives (*Die uneigentlich geschichtliche Existenz dagegen sucht, beladen mit der ihr selbst unkenntlich gewordenen Hinterlassenschaft der 'Vergangenheit', das Moderne*).⁵

In the second half of my paper I explores briefly the histories represented in some popular Chinese film, with a

specific focus on Zhang Yimou's *To Live*. Based loosely on the novella of the same title by the contemporary mainland author YuHua, *To Live* looks back at events of thepast through plight of fugui family and some ordinary people from the late1940s to the 1970s (the period after the peak of the Cultural Revolution. According to film scholar Ray chow "The people, popular resistance, and the relationship between such resistance and political governance are some of the issues Zhang Yimou examines in his film *To Live*⁶. Ray chow argues in his essay about the construction ofnational identity under communism guided by "the people" and their"resistance during Cultural Revolution (mid-1960s to mid-1970s). He locates Zhang Yimou film *To Live* in the evolving melodramatic mode. According to him film articulates the ideals of the Communism via the trope of "thepeople. Through portrayal of never ending suffering of fugui and his family Zhang drives the narrative through melodrama and sentimentalism. In short Zhang Yimou explore suffering of people as an alternative political language. As Zhang's film is based on the novel of same name but their is a difference in the medium ofrepresentationfrom literarywriting to film. The major change introduced by Zhang Yimou is use of first-personnarration that is departure from Yu Hua's novel. It adds biographical element and personal memory to the narrative.

Use of Melodrama

According to Peter Brooks, the ideological function of melodrama is to respond to a time of historical transition and social crisis. Because the previously cohesive values and order are in trouble, melodrama comes in as a "symbolic act" to ease anxiety and give a semblance of order.⁷Zhang, like all good popular artists thrives on the importance of popular appeal and make ample use of melodramatic elements to tell a moving and entertaining story on the screen. He uses melodrama and its excess to profound effect. Film takes a reflective outlook of cultural revolution by focussing on the family tragedies in "*To Live*" to demonstrate how individuals were treated as pawns in Mao's progress in these grand narratives of history. Film sentimental tone shows that ideology is no comfort in the face of personal anguish and there is no permanent escape from the great tragedy and suffering through these tumultuous event. Zhang Yimou critique overt sense of ambivalent nationalism by infusing humor into misery that helps to present a more "philosophical" outlook to all the survivor. Several scenes in the movie shows Survivor' s sheer will to live on, even in a subhuman existence, against all odds. Although the trauma catches up with the humor but overshadows it at experiential level.

Film Makes the use of visual and sound effect to highlight parallel imageries of dying and living in cinematic way. It juxtaposes the condition of Fugui and longer during long'er way to execution owing to the fact that he has inherited the landlord status from fugui. In this scene horrifying cries of Long'er goes unheard due to slogan shouting of the rally and get replaced by the sound of five shots that sends fugui shuddering on the verge of collapse. When the scene cuts and fugui asks her wife

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⁴ Rosenstone, Robert. "History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History The American Historical Review 5 (1988): 1173-85.

⁵ Heidegger, Martin, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1986, 391, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson as *Being and Time*, New York: Harper & Row, 1962, 444.

⁶ Chow, Ray, *We Endure, Therefore We Are: Survival, Governance, and Zhang Yimou's To Live*, 1996, *South Atlantic Quarterly* Volume / Issue, 95 /4, page 1039 - 1064

⁷ Wang, Ban. *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China*. Stanford University Press, 2004. xi, 311 pp.

about his present class and state, it is quite clear that Zhang's is blending humor and irony into narratives into misery. These Film makes self reflexive view of public action and violence. In this regard, the scene in which the father publicly punishes the son in *To Live* can be read and associated with the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, which was watched by the entire world in June 1989. In both situations, demands for social justice lead to protests and demonstrations, Like Fugui under the pressure of public attention, the Chinese authorities reacted by striking out at the children who had embarrassed them, crushing them with tanks and gunfire. According to Ray Chow day, these acts of violence continue to be justified in terms of sustaining peace and prosperity that is, of restoring social order in contemporary china.⁸

Another important aspect of *To live* and *Farewell My Concubine* is the Use of Traditional theatre in its narrative. Chinese theatrical and folk performances find frequent representations in contemporary films, most notably in the works of the "Fifth Generation" directors. In these films, tropes of theatre is employed to draw parallels with social and political upheavals of twentieth-century China. However, to what extent traditional theatre can represent the Chinese nation and what this type of discourse ultimately achieves remain a highly contested subject.⁹In Zhang Yimou's *To Live* (Huoze, 1994), the narrative follows the life of Fugui, a shadow puppeteer, after loosing his status through gambling resort to the art of puppetry for making a living. Although in the beginning art of puppetry for fugui was of purely aesthetic interest. But After losing his sheltered, aristocratic life Fugui has to turn to puppetry to making his new living as a performer in his shadow puppet troupe. In short there is a transformation in the nature of pursuit of art. Now same art begins to serve an economic function. Further in the film It is suggested that, in order to survive, art has to betray its aesthetic origins and adapt itself to different economic and political conditions. Fugui in "*To live*" makes many compromise and surrender to changing nature of upheavals. Use of theatricality amply captures the changing role of his. On the other hand, In Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* the "state of the art" is dramatized through the tension between Juxian, a reformed prostitute, and Dieyi, a beautiful and narcissistic jingju artist. Most importantly through use of world of theatre Zhang chooses to convey the spirit of living in most challenging times while Chen says farewell or giving up of practice of pursuit of theatre.

In the next part of my paper I discuss Tian Zhuangzhuang's *Blue Kite*. Tian's approach to filmmaking based on looking into and finding historical meanings through private and unabsorbed experiences. For him private experiences surpasses collective experience and memory. In other word collective experience at its traumatic core takes the form of individual memory. Chen uses idea of Public remembrance to depict a political event like the Cultural Revolution. He feeds on private memories of bodily suffering and mental anguish. For him theme of public remembrance is

further explored in formulation of discursive narratives under the rubric of historical knowledge. *The Blue kite* blends traumatic experiences as historical experience into narrative structure, which follows the major periods in contemporary Chinese history. Although the film more about private and individual experience but it also works at collective level. A good example is the episode of the Red Guards entering into the private space

The Blue Kite presents the Cultural Revolution and other political events as historical trauma. The film implies a new historical consciousness in representing traumatic history. Chen Kaige reminds us that in order to know the present one needs to remember the past. It treats historical wounds not as something we have left behind and recovered from. Therefore Film overt message lay in remembering the Cultural Revolution and other similar calamities for a way of better understanding of past and ourselves.

Conclusion:

From closure examination of these films it can be concluded that Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine*, Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Blue Kite*, and Zhang Yimou's *To Live* function in melodramatic convention. These films through the visual imagery and mis-en-scene examine the Chinese culture and history by drawing from the individual's relation to history. There are ample reference of idea of historical consciousness in these three films. On a broader level Historically sensitive films of the fifth generation contribute towards building of critical historical consciousness. These films helps in capturing the idea of History and gives ontological meaning to personal history which can be further used to map the historical consciousness.

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