A Reappearance of Yesterday

- Analysis of Storytelling Strategy in Nostalgic Cinema

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Abstract: In the context of globalization, the public's demand for nostalgia has increased. Cinema has an advantage in conveying nostalgia by using visual and auditory stimulation and has become the main medium for nostalgia in modern society. In this paper, the first part is about nostalgia and nostalgic cinema. Depending on the subject that triggers the nostalgia, nostalgic cinema is simply divided into three categories. The reasons for the demand for nostalgia are discussed, which are related to the interval between reality and tradition, commercialism, and modernism. The other part is about the storytelling strategies of nostalgic cinema. Storytelling strategies of contemporary, nostalgic cinema are analyzed from the perspectives of color, frame, diegetic sound, and motif, respectively. Specific movies are used for analysis, data study, and cross-subject study are used in this paper. With the constant updating of information technology, views on the future direction of nostalgic cinema research are presented at the end of the paper.

Keywords: Nostalgia, Storytelling, Cinema, Consumerism

1. Introduction

The term nostalgia is of Greek origin and made up of Nosos, return to the native land, and Algos, suffering or affliction [1]. The concept of nostalgia is unstable and has changed over time in physical, psychological, and cultural sensibility terms. It was first proposed in 1688 by Johannes Hofer, referring to a physical state of moral pain associated with separation from their native land or a fear that they would never return. After Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that music acts as a memorial sign, the concept of nostalgia was expanded in the 18th and 19th centuries [2]. Nostalgia, as a psychological suffering, was considered to be closely associated with memory. In more recent times, nostalgia is most commonly defined as a state of mind associated with the past rather than homesickness [3]. It became a socio-cultural condition and became commercialized.

Nostalgia is often expressed in cultural works, such as novels, paintings, and films. The film is one of these media that can rely on the visual and auditory construction of virtual space and time. Representative modern films include *The Grand Budapest Hotel* and *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*. Modern cinema with nostalgic aesthetic elements provides people with a sanctuary for emotions and memories. Therefore, cinema with nostalgic aesthetic elements can reshape the temporal and spatial aspects of the past for audiences in virtual space [4]. They can either recreate the past or construct collective memories of the past [3].

In previous research on nostalgia, scholars have analyzed nostalgia from anthropological, psychological, and sociological perspectives. In Roland Robertson's *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture*, methods for the study of nostalgia are proposed, in which theories of nostalgia focus on the interpretation of nostalgia. It includes the mechanisms of nostalgia, its social effects, and its shaping and influencing on the way of life of human beings, as well as the psychological, sociological, historical, and philosophical studies of nostalgia. In Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia*, many different cultural gestures and modes of nostalgia reflected in various forms of nostalgia are examined.

In this paper, the definition of nostalgia will be illustrated, and the characteristics and classifications will also be analyzed. Meanwhile, the reasons behind the emergence of modern films with nostalgic aesthetic elements will be explored. Some specific modern films, such as *The Grand Budapest Hotel* will be used as an example to analyze how nostalgic aesthetics are manifested in contemporary film storytelling.

2.   Nostalgia and nostalgic Cinema

Tracing the history of the term nostalgia, it began as a physical definition, and even though the term has developed over time with different fields of interpretation, most common notions of nostalgia retain a morbid undertone. This is because nostalgia had been taken as a negative and spatial term associated with separation from home and homesickness [4]. Until the late twentieth century, nostalgia had been fully interpreted as a temporal term linked to past time [5].

Nostalgic cinema is narrowly defined as several films about the past and a particular era in the past. The films contain a set of images to be consumed, often marked by music, fashion, hairstyles, and vehicles [6]. But nostalgic film is not classified as a film genre but simply as an aesthetic style in which nostalgic elements are included in a collage of films that imagine or recall, reconstruct, and recreate a past time with the help of these representational symbols of history.

Nostalgia has been categorized into two main types: restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia. As Boym describes, restorative nostalgia "emphasis on nostos (returning home)" and focuses on the desire to "rebuild lost homes and patch up the memory gaps." It is founded on a reaffirmation and return of tradition and the search for an authentic past. While reflective nostalgia "dwells in algia (aching), in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance.". Its focus is on the emotions triggered by memories rather than on reconstructing the past. Reconstructing the past is futile, and the past will always be separated from the present. Reflective nostalgia emphasizes meditation on history and the passage of time [3]. On this basis, in nostalgic cinema, nostalgia is used as the main aesthetic element to express a sense of longing for something that has passed away, the bleakness of a golden age gone by, or a love/hate relationship with the past.

3.   Categories of nostalgic cinema

Nostalgia is historically triggered by spatial and temporal separation from "homeland." As the meaning of nostalgia becomes progressively more complex, it is difficult to clearly distinguish whether nostalgia is triggered in cinema with nostalgic elements due to specific time or space. However, depending on the relevance of the geographical and period characteristics of the specific symbols, nostalgia cinema can be simply divided into three categories.

The first category is nostalgic cinema, more relevant to specific spatial constructions. Although the locations reproduced in cinemas with nostalgic aesthetic elements remain characteristic of the era, the unwinding of storytelling is mainly associated with a particular regional culture and civilization. For example, in the 1990s, films set in Shanghai in the 1930s and 1940s sprung up, such as *Lust, Caution*, *Eighteen Springs*, and *Shanghai Grand*. Shanghai's leap from an almost abandoned swamp

to the largest metropolis in the Far East can be said to have thrived on immigration [7]. People came to Shanghai because of the drive for profit and wars. During the first half of the 20th century, Shanghai housed all kinds of people from all over the world, from vagabonds, peasants, and dancing girls to tycoons, diplomats, and intellectuals. As a result, the complex environment and prosperity of Shanghai at that time are presented in the cinema. Signs such as nightclubs, International Settlement, cinemas and the Bund, old cars, tricycles, crowd chaos, and student activism are presented to form a typical old Shanghai and inspire nostalgia for Shanghai's regional character.

The second category is nostalgic cinema, which is more relevant to temporal characteristics. Nostalgic films often evoke nostalgia through individual memories of a specific era. The 1920s and 1960s were the golden age of Hollywood, leaving behind many classics that formed the classic Hollywood film style. Meanwhile, the economy of the United States entered a boom in the 1920s, known as the Roaring Twenties, ending in the Great Depression [8] and returning to the golden age of capitalism after World War II [9]. With the rapid economic fluctuations, dreamers face opportunities and challenges, and Hollywood's film industry has created many famous stars and classic images with the rapid development of technology. The traditional images of cowboys and Marilyn Monroe can easily evoke nostalgia for a time of dreams, extravagance, innocence, and ideals. In *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*, Quentin presents the popular film, architecture, and costume elements of the 1960s, with various movie posters on buildings, drive-in theatres in the moonlight, crowds partying at Playboy parties, and the Beatles wandering the streets. The Hollywood of the Golden Age is not just an objective historical fact but a utopian dream made up of countless influences that have become the spiritual home of countless Hollywood film audiences of the time.

The third category of nostalgic film has its emotional triggers based on a specific group of people, such as Taiwanese youth films. It is not associated with a specific era or place objectively but with the collective memory of a specific group of people. Youth is a timeless subject of nostalgia for almost all individuals, and it is usually portrayed as chaotic, confused, fickle, and pure [10]. Most people have experienced campus life. In Taiwanese youth campus films, the beauty and regret of youth, the struggle for the future, and the determination and confusion of love are shown in a nostalgic way by tracing and showing youthful campus life.

4. The reasons behind the emergence of nostalgic cinema

4.1. The interval between reality and tradition

In an unprecedented way, modernity has thrown us out of the orbit of all types of social order, thus shaping its state of life [11]. This means that traditional values, modes of thinking, social rules, and practical things are transformed or disappear in modern society. The disappearance of dialects from all over the world, the recent reforms in East Asia, and urbanization as part of modernization mean the loss of traditions, more and more distant homelands, and past times, all of which are objects of nostalgia. Davis argued that in times of social instability, people may seek community nostalgia because "it acts to restore, at least temporarily, a sense of socio-historic continuity" [12]. Some experimental work to date has examined the relationship between the desire for system stability and communal nostalgia [13].

For example, after the American Civil War, literature such as *Gone with the Wind* expressed nostalgia for the white Southerners' life in the past, rejecting the profit-related elements of it, the Civil War, and social reforms that led to the collapse of the traditional way of life, the sudden disappearance of the life that had been taken for granted one day, the identity provided by the past that was no longer applicable to the present, and the need to establish an expression of identity and to acquire a cultural identity. The need to establish an identity and acquire a cultural identity arises. In the context of globalization and modernization and the accelerated pace of social development, this need has

become even more widespread and urgent. Amid the collision and conflict between reality and the past, nostalgic literature, nostalgic songs, and nostalgic films have been created to recover a sense of identity and continuity in one's development. Nostalgia becomes a product of criticism or confrontation with this social interval, and the film art's device of reproducing time and space becomes a reliable carrier of nostalgia.

4.2. Nostalgia consumed as a commodity

Nostalgia is closely related to consumerism, and the viewpoint of "consumed nostalgia" is put forward [14]. It describes when people find identity and meaning in a specific commodity, but when these things disappear, they feel threatened by their ego and selfhood, and their desire to retrieve them forms a nostalgic impulse. In a consumer society, the explicit demand for nostalgia brings about a massive supply of nostalgia.

Printed cultural products such as books transmit information through words and require consumers to interpret the information received through personal imagination, while movies transmit information through direct visual and auditory stimulation. Contemporary culture has changed from graphic culture to visual culture, and the focus of modern nostalgia has also shifted to visual cultural products [15]. Nostalgia is materialized and symbolized through concrete images and pictures. By restoring a past era in a scene, nostalgic films package the "past" as a commodity for consumption and entertainment, leading the audience to re-experience the atmosphere of the past, and nostalgia becomes imagery of consumer culture in cinema. This nostalgic consumption has become a kind of emotional consumption or emotional consumption, and this kind of nostalgic emotional consumption has received a lot of attention from film creators and is used in film creation.

4.3. Postmodernism

Postmodernism advocates the dismantling of the sublime and the deconstruction of meaning. Nostalgia is seen as an ideologically charged response to the changing cultural landscape of postmodernism [16]. Compared with historical films, nostalgic films don't focus on delivering historical facts but rather replace any "older filmic storytelling" with "breathtaking images" [16]. Postmodernist nostalgia, instead of genuine reflection and questioning of the meaning of history, has become a purely imaginative collage, imitating an era by piecing together archaic fashions. Thus, Postmodernist nostalgia fulfills the desire of the modern man by consuming the imagery of the past. Gramophones, vintage cars, vinyl records, and cheongsams have all become objects of postmodern nostalgic consumption.

5. Strategies in nostalgic cinema storytelling

5.1. Colours

The storytelling of films containing nostalgic elements often uses color to recreate the characteristics of the era, thus triggering nostalgia. Early films used Orthochromatic film, which was more sensitive to specific colors and eventually rendered in black and white [16]. The early years of cinema were marked by decades of black-and-white cinema, which became an iconic sign of the times until the 1970s, when color film became more widely available and less expensive, and color cinema slowly became more popular and less of a monopoly of the major studios [17]. Black and white cinema as a historical symbol of the middle of the last century, has become a strategy for nostalgic storytelling. In the 2013 Polish film *Ida*, director Pawlikowski not only returned to history with the 4:3 ratio but also chose to present the film in black and white, showing the historical background of Poland after World War II in the last century. The black-and-white images reflect the relationship between history

and the legacy of the characters, combined with a modern composition that takes the audience back in time with a strange perspective, illustrating the unfinished gloom of history and the slow pace of time and restoration.

The use of faded filters is also one of the storytelling strategies of nostalgic films, which reached its peak in France at the beginning of the 21st century and has been described by some critics as "sepia cinema," referring to the polished quality acquired over time by old photographs, most obviously in the composition of the images and their somewhat faded color [18]. A large number of French films of the 21st century with nostalgic elements choose faded colors for their picture presentation, for example, *War of the Buttons* (Christophe Barratier 2011) and *A Very Long Engagement* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet 2004). Because of its association with old photographs, this image can visually guide the audience to establish a connection with the concept of 'the past.'

The object to which nostalgia points is fixed and static, but the interpretation of this object is subjective. The past will always be glorified and rationalized, thus becoming the natural home of society. The word "home" always leads one to associate it with warmth and stability, hence the heavy use of warm yellow soft light in many nostalgic films. Warm light usually gives a sense of warmth, health, and comfort and is used to reconstruct the past in films that amplify the glorification of fond memories of the past.

5.2. Frames

Full shots and wide shots are often used in nostalgic cinema to depict scenes objectively and realistically from the past. These shots include the costumes of the main characters and the scenes they are in, which reflect the characteristics of a specific era. In *The Shape of Water*, yellowed walls, old theatres, neon signs, and laboratories are all set in the 1960s and 1970s, during the U.S.-Soviet arms race, and the protagonists are dressed in clothing that was popular at the time. Moreover, the scenery shots are often used as a means of time-shifting in nostalgic cinema, accounting for the background setting of the story.

The long shot is also an excellent method to convey nostalgia. By using long shots in cinema, the continuity of time and space is emphasized, providing the audience with a deeper emotional experience. Long images are used frequently in *La La Land*, a film set in the golden age of Hollywood in the 1950s and 1960s, with vintage settings and costumes. The long shots of the hero and heroine dancing together for the first time in the twilight are a subtle way of showing the understanding between them and the change in their emotions. Similarly, in campus films, long shots are often used to indicate the delicate changes in the youthful feelings of the hero and heroine, to move the audience and make them feel emotionally connected.

5.3. Diegetic sound

Sound in cinema is important to storytelling, sometimes complementing the content and influencing the rhythm of the film's storytelling. Music is an important part of diegetic sound; it is not only necessary for atmosphere creation but can also be a reminder of a specific era. The use of these iconic pieces of music acts as a construction of past time and space, and the music in nostalgic cinema has the advantage of appropriately triggering nostalgia. The music of The Beatles, for example, is representative of the 1960s, and in the film *Once Upon a Time in America*, many melodies from the Beatles' composition *Yesterday* appear. The music chosen for the nostalgic film, meanwhile, not only allows the audience to recognize the region and era in which the story takes place but also conveys a strong sense of nostalgia and a distinct sense of the times.

The use of dialects in the film serves to evoke nostalgic feelings triggered by specific regions. Dialects, which are variants of languages, are associated with regions or societies [19]. Dialect is

often used as an identity label in nostalgic cinema. The Gwangju dialect was used extensively in the film *Gorgeous Holiday*, set during the Gwangju Incident in South Korea, where the film's military forces opened fire on unarmed university students and citizens protesting against the dictatorship, spilling blood. The citizens of Gwangju mobilized themselves and held on to the city hall until the tanks came in, and the people holding on to the city hall all ended up dying heroically. This is a nostalgic film of the era of the fight for ideals against tyranny, with the dialect as a realistic presence, synonymous with the region and its characteristics. The use of dialects also allows the cultural characteristics of the region and its customs to be expressed naturally.

5.4. Motifs

The use of motifs is one of the most used storytelling strategies in nostalgic cinema. As the past fades into memory, leaving only words behind, concrete images become a representation of history and a vehicle for nostalgia. In nostalgic cinema, motifs that mimic the past can trigger collective memories, such as clothing, transportation, daily use items, etc. Just like when it comes to the Republic of China, people always think of cheongsams. When it comes to Hong Kong, people always think of crowded neon signs. When it comes to the American West, people always think of cowboys. When it comes to medieval Europe, people always think of knights. These iconic images are nostalgic objects, a collective memory that can be replicated and shared, leading to the same nostalgic motifs repeatedly used in cinema.

6. Conclusion

Globalization has intensified the tendency of nostalgia in various ways [13], and the past has become the object of consumption of cinema, and the audience is immersed in a strong nostalgic atmosphere with the development of the plot. The development of information technology is still accelerating, and all kinds of technology are updated more frequently compared to the past. In such a high-speed development society, the interval with tradition is increasing, and identity has become an urgent need for the masses. As a mainstream nostalgic medium, how will cinema change in the modern era of increasing demand and technological innovation? How the combination of AR, VR, and other technologies with stronger immersion and movies will affect the development of nostalgic movies is a direction that can be explored in the next research.

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