

The Anti-Corporate Film's Nostalgic Inclination

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Abstract: As a niche genre within the yet-to-be-systematized film landscape, anti-corporate films serve the purpose of exposing and critiquing the prevailing inequities in society, particularly the exploitation of capital on the masses. These films often revolve around narratives of capital oppressing human rights and the struggles of ordinary individuals attempting to rebel against colossal corporations. They provide a platform for denunciation and irony aimed at the prevailing dominance of capital. The debate between irony and nostalgia is continuous within this context, yet both evoke unexpected dual emotions and agency. Nostalgia in anti-corporate films explicitly presents an inappropriate present juxtaposed with an idealized past as binary spatial symbols, ultimately portraying a utopian vision of the future.

Keywords: Anti-Corporate Films, Nostalgia, Capital, Ideological Critique

1. Introduction

Anti-corporate films, also known as anti-capitalist films, often portray capital's collective entities in the form of corporations and companies. While anti-corporate films are considered a subgenre under crime, suspense, and war films, it is not a popular research topic in China and abroad. Nevertheless, anti-corporate films represent a powerful voice in critiquing the injustices of modern capitalist society. According to Louis Althusser's theory of the ideological state apparatus, cinema has become a vital stage for cultural power competition, with ideology being one of its fundamental forces. Chinese scholar Wang Xiaosheng suggests that Althusser's theory of ideological critique mainly encompasses the idea that ideology is ahistorical, that individuals have illusory reflections of their living conditions, the material existence of ideology, and how ideology questions individuals as subjects.[1] Therefore, when the underprivileged individuals in film challenge powerful corporations with vast disparities, it is akin to a form of questioning and resistance on a personal level.

Among all film genres, anti-corporate films can be seen as a covert rebellion force. They exist within the workings of capitalism, yet they continue to fight for the interests and rights of the underprivileged. This paradoxical coexistence should not be overlooked or abandoned by film researchers. Therefore, in this paper, the focus will be on tracing the origins of anti-corporate film genres, the application of nostalgic theories, case analysis, and exploring the emotional significance of nostalgia in anti-corporate films.

2. Origins of Anti-Corporate Films

In the United States, the understanding of the term "corporation" initially referred to loosely

organized groups that registered with the state government for common goals. The government would register the number of operations, total capital, operational directions, and tax expenses of these corporations. Shareholders had unlimited responsibility, and they could not own or have ownership in another company, so corporations would not engage in activities beyond their initial goals. After the end of the Civil War, the 14th Amendment to the Constitution required that no person's life, property, or freedom could be deprived by the government without due legal process, with the intention of protecting the rights of African Americans from infringement. Unfortunately, the final outcome did not align with the intention. Capitalists seized the opportunity, advocating that corporations were formed by individuals, and the government should ensure the interests of corporate individuals, respecting their life, property, and freedom. As a result, between 1890 and 1910, a total of 307 lawsuits were filed under the 14th Amendment, with as many as 288 of them initiated by corporations, while only a meager 19 were filed by African Americans. Subsequently, corporations were granted the legal status of "persons," introducing the concept of "corporate personhood." This meant that the actual controllers of corporations were no longer held accountable for all corporate actions, and limited liability significantly reduced the risks and responsibilities of operating a business.

In fact, the operation of corporations serves a single purpose: to attract more capital and generate profits for shareholders. As immortal "entities," corporations possess the capabilities of legal proceedings, capital transactions, and financial borrowing, yet they are not required to adhere to the moral principles of natural persons. Corporations are artificial legal structures that, in accordance with the law, prioritize the interests of their owners above all other concerns, including public welfare and the natural environment. Firstly, to minimize costs, capital seeks cheap labor globally, giving rise to a new era of capital exploitation. Secondly, the latest "enclosure movement" provides corporations with legalized means to seize natural and social resources. Finally, the emergence of chemical products brings unprecedented synthetic possibilities. Today, it is evident that synthetic chemicals, which permeate our work and living environments, have the terrifying potential to cause cancer, congenital disabilities in newborns, and genetic mutations. Paradoxically, the corporations responsible for these consequences often play a role of willful blindness amid the brewing crisis. The legal status of "corporate personhood" and the limited liability system enable corporations and capitalists to easily address such issues through financial compensation without facing criminal liability. Chinese scholar Bindian Lu once proposed in his research: "Within the framework of accountability, even though social agents are subjugated entities, they mistakenly recognize themselves as free, central subjects constituting the world. Exploitative and oppressive production relations continue to be produced and reproduced within this mechanism. Ideology binds individuals and social structures together, resulting in self-denial, thereby enabling the stability and perpetuation of an exploitative and oppressive social order." [2]

Therefore, when corporations have gained the ability to impact socio-economic, cultural, natural, and individual aspects of society beyond government and legal oversight, the potential for subversion arises for private purposes. Consequently, in the Western world, particularly in Hollywood films, corporations/companies are often depicted as universal forces of evil, becoming the collective "villains in the imagination." This perception is tied to the imagination of the wealthy and leftist ideologies, reflecting a lack of trust in the capitalist corporate system and a loss of identity in modern society. Nostalgia naturally emerges in such an atmosphere.

3. Exploring the Sense of Belonging in Nostalgia Theory

The term "nostalgia" is derived from the Greek words "nostos" and "algia". It initially emerged in the field of medicine. In 1688, Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer first coined and used the English word "nostalgia" in a medical paper to refer to a condition known as homesickness, [3] which many Swiss mercenaries experienced during the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). Medical records of that time

described symptoms of nostalgia similar to depression, including hallucinations, nausea, vomiting, insomnia, prolonged sadness, fear, and a slight tendency towards suicide. The best treatment or cure for this condition was the act of “nostos.”

In anti-corporate films, nostalgia often serves as an adaptive mechanism that arises in response to a crisis of self-continuity caused by environmental disruptions. It frequently manifests as a collective identity within the human subconscious, carrying universal communal values. The cold operation of capital and the profound transformations of modernity lead to collective anxiety and disruptions in continuity. This, in turn, guides us to reconnect with traditional values and social experiences that are mature, reliable, and familiar. Nostalgia is the quest to regain a sense of belonging, serving as an adaptive response to the loss of such belonging.

The fundamental goal of nostalgia construction, as a response to the lack of belonging, is to regain a sense of belonging. [4] Its fundamental strategy is to construct idealized social connections in a symbolic space-time far removed from reality. This is achieved using three specific strategies: “alienation,” “idealization,” and “identification,” each of which serves as a form of defense, construction, and compensation. [4]

Specifically, the alienation strategy chooses to critically imagine a dissolution of real threats in a process where the present environment is never truly absent. In anti-corporate films, there is often a binary opposition constructed between the “idealized past” and the “real present” to emphasize the feelings of loss and anxiety that the modern capitalistic environment brings to individuals. The present environment is often defined as a massive, cold, and unfeeling entity, devoid of nature, morality, or purity. In contrast, the idealized homeland is imbued with purity, nature, and humanity. For example, in “The China Syndrome,” the destruction caused by a massive nuclear power plant disrupts the natural landscape, resulting in irreparable damage. In “A Civil Action,” the innocent faces of young children are presented to highlight the evil tactics of capital. In these films, nostalgic characters often appear with a desire to escape reality and yearn for a life they desire, but the path to the utopian haven they seek is often elusive.

The idealization strategy is prevalent in various discourses and identity constructions. On one hand, it manifests as a certain characteristic of the “subject itself,” which is often recognized by the present reality. In anti-corporate films, protagonists frequently possess a heroic spirit of pioneering, courageously challenging the powers that be, despite their modest backgrounds. On the other hand, idealization is also evident in the objective, the immediate environmental context, and social connections. Individuals engage in collective projection and rational imagination to construct nostalgic objects that represent their homeland and the past. It is a way of evading the subject’s fragmentation brought about by capital.

Characters in these films often have high expectations of a harmonious, orderly, and affectionate social bond. They do not limit themselves to personal emotions such as family and love but aspire to establish a universal emotional connection among humanity, reflecting their expectations for an inclusive and harmonious social order. It also signifies a return to traditional ethical values. Through the process of integrating into a human destiny community, individuals reaffirm their self-subject values and the meaning of continuous existence.

In the end, these anti-corporate films compensate for the individual’s sense of belonging in reality, redefining their self and the value of life. [5] They allow the homeless, living in a state of chaos and disorder, to return to the imagined utopia of gliding peacefully across a tranquil lake.

4. Emotional Appeals of Nostalgia

These compensatory strategies not only address issues related to nostalgic objects, values, and identity, but they also make essential emotional evaluations of human existence beneath the nostalgia’s origins. These responses to evaluations are often positive. To some extent, it is the sense of belonging,

existence, and happiness associated with the “golden age” of the past that characters in the film experience. The image of corporations, once representing the forces of uncontrollable destruction, is now subject to reflection and aversion. Why individuals or groups can take various forms of resistance in these films is an exploration of the pursuit of these three emotions. It reflects human nature, first, as a restoration of a harmonious, stable, and familiar environment and, second, as a narrative tool in the characters’ ongoing quest for safety, love, belonging, and respect.

It is precisely due to these fundamental human emotional needs that we often witness in anti-corporate films the protagonist assuming the role of a lone hero. Even when they have the support of only a few individuals, they are determined to challenge the seemingly invulnerable authority of big capital, engaging in what appears to others as futile endeavors. However, such acts of bravery on the screen are repeatedly embraced by audiences and the market. It’s not just because these heroes dare to expose the wickedness of capital or because their stories are based on real events; it’s primarily because these films attempt to uncover the underlying theme of serving the interests of the common people. They awaken the innate human longing for essential identification.

While these anti-corporate and anti-capitalist films may seem to rebel against capital, they are undeniably products of capitalism and reflect a tendency toward capitalization. Even though the films often feature explicit dialogues that directly criticize corporate and capital wrongdoing, they ultimately present a persuasive and educational approach to the ideal operation of corporate capital. Capitalist society, through such films, reconstructs the subject in line with modern expectations, utilizing the nostalgic modern emotional experience. The films lead people to re-imagine a utopia where they can find continuity in a fragmented world, invoking reflection and criticism of the issues of urban space and homogenized spaces in modern industrial civilization. Furthermore, these films unintentionally exhibit a subjective admiration and appreciation in their portrayal of externalized capital. For instance, “The International” presents close-ups of the sleek, cold weaponry, while “The Constant Gardener” showcases the magnificent architecture centered around political institutions. These capital products that cause harm to individuals are presented in the films with a flowing artistic style, giving the impression that they are displaying art, thus revealing that the essence of anti-corporate films is not as pure and socially reflective as initially constructed.

Due to this process of “capitalizing on anti-capitalism,” characters who seek safety and a familiar environment must face the changes and conflicts in reality. Anti-corporate films appear to tell people that the power of fear stems from humanity’s innate need for security. Their aim is to eliminate dangerous elements, but in the end, they only serve to resolve and reconcile the contradictions of reality, allowing characters to experience some form of compromise or win-win situation with capital. This approach is not meant to fundamentally oppose companies and capital but to reconstruct the capitalist society subject through repeated attempts to idealize and counterbalance capital.

Once the capital subject has been reconstructed, anti-corporate films continue to reappear in a cyclical manner. Social changes continue to unfold, and development inevitably brings corresponding conservative thoughts and challenges for the future. In the past, an idealized “golden age” was imagined and emotionally projected by people. Now, people reflect on modern life and conduct various introspections. In the future, perhaps the reconstruction of capital in the present has been achieved, but there may be a new round of imagining the “golden age.” The incongruities in these three temporal dimensions will make individuals from different eras feel a sense of insecurity regarding uncontrollable capital society once again. After the film ends, the audience, even if moved by the actions of the hero, will unconsciously ponder whether such events will continue to occur around them and adjust their perception, leading to a negative attitude of resistance and rejection toward these events.

5. Conclusion

The nostalgia trend in anti-corporate films has, to some extent, transcended the individualized and emotional realm, evolving into a socialized and collective temporal and sociocultural landscape. [6] It can be said that the crisis of identity in modern individuals is rooted in the disconnection between tradition and contemporary life. It's not that the past dominates the present or disrupts it, but rather exerts a powerful influence and even a formative function on the present. The influence and construction of the past's imagination on the present occur simultaneously, and the past even reciprocally impacts our lives today, leading to interpretations and regulations regarding the latter. [7] While anti-corporate films do bring a certain degree of critical analysis and satire with significant outreach to challenge the unfair dominance of capital over individuals in society, relying solely on this aspect for societal awakening is undoubtedly inadequate and unreasonable. Currently, research on anti-corporate films as a cinematic genre and the theories of nostalgia within these films is limited and underdeveloped in China. However, in the context of the increasing global influence of capital, the nostalgia trend within anti-corporate films is becoming an area of study that holds greater research value. It is a subject worthy of scholars' attention and investigation.

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