The Philosophy of “Crime and Punishment” and “Existentialism” in Woody·Allen’s Film

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Abstract—As an independent film director, Woody·Allen’s strong sense of self and distinctive personal style can be found in his film. Although the absurd plot in his film makes us laugh out loudly, sentimental and tragic philosophical thought is shown behind jokes. “Crime and punishment” and “Existentialism” are often discussed in his film, and many leading characters in his film have contradictory factors, which seems to be the reflection of him.

Keywords—*Existentialism; Life and Death; Crime and Punishment; Black Humor*

I. A SHARP INTELLECTUAL – WOODY· ALLEN

Woody · Allen, formerly known as Allen Stewart Konigsberg, is a Jewish artist, who has been a contemporary screenwriter, director, actor, writer, talk show host, critic, composer and clarinetist in America. Having many titles, what he shows us most now is his film works. He is known as “The most outstanding comedy genius after Chaplin” and is called “The only intellectual in American film industry” by prideful French. In his film career of more than 40 years, Woody· Allen produces 43 films, which makes him worthy of the name of productive director.

His film is full of philosophical meaning and truth of life, and it often takes Manhattan in New York as the background, takes death, sex, morality, existentialism and other philosophical propositions as the theme for discussion and has strong American modern intellectual style, witty, humorous, delicate and sentimental. He is always talking without stop before the camera and often plays the stubborn role with sensitive nerve, however, most of the time, he writes the screenplay. Having rich imagination, the main characteristics in his film are shown as humorous dialogue and unique postmodern critical and satire perspective. He often uses the humorous element of comedy to describe a tragedy in the film in order to achieve the state of “Laugh with tears”. His different understanding of life and philosophy entitles his works with the appearance of tragic consciousness. The tragedy Woody shows us mostly brings us profound thinking and his opinion of existentialism doesn’t make people sad to cry bitterly. As a philosopher telling a story, he means to let us know some truth instead of winning the applause and praise.

Most part of Woody· Allen’s film embodies a kind of philosophical connotation. Through description and show of various interesting and embarrassing things in life, the philosophical proposition he wants to describe is shown. He uses humorous appearance to wrap philosophical problems and builds a unique bridge between the viewer and philosophy.

II. “CRIME AND PUNISHMENT”

Some broad philosophical questions, like “what is the meaning of life, life and death and what is love”, are interpreted in Woody· Allen’s film with an unconventional approach, which forms the unique philosophical feature of his film. Since Woody Allen himself is a materialistic existentialist, his film shows more about “Crime and punishment” and existentialism.

In his film, Woody· Allen often carries out in-depth discussion on “Crime and punishment”, which is the expression of human’s original sin and the meaning of life in Christianity and is mostly embodied in Dostoevsky’s existentialism novel – Crime and Punishment in literature. The novel discusses the “Crime” of human from a religious perspective and describes “Punishment” from the perspective of humanism. The “Crime and punishment” in Woody· Allen’s film and Dostoevsky’s existentialism novel are of the same nature, in fact, they both are about self salvation in human nature. Starting from Woody · Allen’s Crimes and Misdemeanors in the middle of his film career to the later London Trilogy – Match Point, Cassandra’s Dream and Scoop, “Crime and punishment” is discussed.

If criminals kill people, should they be punished? In his film Crimes and Misdemeanors, Woody tells a story about a doctor murdering his mistress, but later, the doctor fails to subject to legal sanction. Match Point has the same story line. No legal sanction means no punishment? Of course the answer is negative. These two movies of Woody Allen are both tragedy, which is mainly reflected in that the murderer fails to subject to legal sanction. The story doesn’t have a happy ending, however, because the leading character always suffers from compunction, which is the way of punishment. In Cassandra’s Dream, another film of Woody, the two main male characters kill people due to the so-called future development and they both die, which is a positive response to punishment.

All these fully show Woody's discussion on "Crime and punishment". In his opinion, punishment on criminal doesn't have to be legal and moral, and it can be self salvation completed through self guilt or repaying sin with life.

III. INFLUENCE OF EXISTENTIALISM ON WOODY· ALLEN

Woody· Allen is deeply influenced by existentialism, psychoanalytic theory of Freud and other modern western thoughts, thus his film expresses a lot about the view of existentialism. Existentialism is one of the major schools of modern western philosophy, which is a kind of humanism theory and regards any irrational consciousness activity of isolated individual as the realest existence. Existentialism is people-centered, has respect for human personality and freedom and thinks that human live in a meaningless universe and the existence of human is meaningless, but human can create themselves on the basis of existence and have a wonderful life. In the opinion of existentialism, all existence, including the existence of human, is accidental. But it is not to say that things in universe are out of order and have no rules and laws or that the law discovered through research on the material world is entirely unreal and can't be trusted. It just means that there is no prefixed thing, both for human and the material universe.

The core idea, like "Life is suffering and the absurd choice" in existentialism is always shown in Woody· Allen's film. The film *Hannah and Her Sisters* revolves around the perplexing life of three sisters in New York, their husbands, lovers, parents and offspring. Eliot, Hannah's husband, falls in love with his wife's sister, but he can't bear to leave his wife, which brings Hannah and her husband pain. Hannah thinks that he loves another person and her sister decides to leave him. The entanglement brought by love makes these people eager to stay close to each other while they are afraid of hurting each other, but in fact, they are hurting themselves. In the film, all life is very awkward and people are deeply troubled by various problems. Until the end of the film, the problems have not been solved. Their life is the same as in the past; they all give up themselves and obtain the balance on the surface after the compromise of life, showing the view of existentialism.

And as Woody· Allen's another film *Small Time Crooks*, its leading character is originally a thief and he doesn't commit serious crimes, which makes him very distressed. When New Year is coming, he and his several partners decide to rob a bank. They rent a shop opposite the bank and name it as a cookie shop. Then they dig a tunnel in the basement to rob the bank. The tunnel reaches to another shop and their robbery fails. However, their cookie shop becomes more and more famous and it even becomes listed as a famous enterprise. A thief accidentally becomes a boss, which shows the absurd uncertainty of life in existentialism. The story is humorous and he pays great attention to the philosophical connotation shown by humorous means in his film. These elements of comedy become an indispensable part of Woody· Allen's film

philosophy. His clever use of this kind of humor brings audience into the thinking of philosophical problems.

Woody· Allen is absolutely not an academic philosopher and he never admits himself as an intellectual, because he really doesn't make it to high school. In his novel and film, the bookish argument on eternal statement is often made fun of, because those scholarly intellectuals make philosophy and other knowledge high-sounding to show that they are enigmatic. Woody· Allen generally shows us those people's curious questions about philosophy, such as, what is morality? Is there objective difference between right and wrong? What is the meaning of life? Is there a god? Is philosophy the truth? The final distillation of lust, and so on.

Woody· Allen's film is humorous. He makes philosophy popular and easy to understand to be accepted by the public, which is his unique philosophical view. He shows the philosophical proposition which seems to be complex and makes people stay at a respectful distance from it to the public in a funny way. Objectively, he is more like an unconventional philosophy teacher, telling us that philosophy is not serious and making our attitude towards philosophy cynical, just like him. He is like the humorous teacher who never gives "serious" lectures but makes us love the subject a lot in our class when we are young. He is spreading philosophy in another way and discussing such-and-such questions.

IV. CONCLUSION

Woody· Allen's film works conduct in-depth discussion on philosophy, "Crime and punishment" and existentialism. He conveys his humanistic spirit through discussion on "Crime and punishment" and conveys nothingness of life and optimistic life value through reflection of the core view of existentialism. He is not a serious philosopher and the philosophy in his film is covered with a humorous coat. He shows the public those complex philosophical questions in a very easy way. He brings us into his film with funny language and black humor to feel his philosophical view and thought.