

“Generalized Age” Tendency in Film and Television Transmission

Looking through the Decline of the Children's Play

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Abstract—As a unique type of play, children's play in China began to decline from 1980s. What's the reason for it? With continuously prominent spectacle phenomena in film and television art, children audiences become precocious, worrying, panic and anxious. The boundary between children and adult has become blurred. The phenomenon of “generalized age” has fulfilled the prophecy of “the disappearance of childhood” raised by Postman, and at same time it warns people: the homogenization and entertainment phenomenon of TV are becoming more and more serious, and its educational function and cultural function have gone completely. This should cause our reflection.

Keywords—*children's play; children audience; “generalized age”*

I. THE AESTHETIC PSYCHOLOGY OF CHILDREN AUDIENCE ON TV

Children are always loyal TV audiences. It primarily comes to the psychological characteristics of children. Some child psychologists, with Jean Piaget as representative, believe that there are four basic elements to promote the psychological development of children. First is maturity, namely, the growth of the organism. Second is practice and acquired experience, including physical experience and logic experience. Third is social experience, including social interaction and social transfer. Fourth is the process of balance, namely the internal mechanism of individual's self-regulation^[1]. The psychological maturity of children is a complex and diverse process. However, the emergence of television has broken the balance of children's education in the past. Its attraction to children is something unmatched compared with other forms of communication. This attraction mainly comes from two aspects: first, television is easy to be accepted; second, television is full of novelty.

As is known to all, TV is “gladly accepted”. It is an important reason for its wide spread. In Postman's words, “the skill for watching TV is very basic, so we had never heard of any disability in watching TV”^[2]. This enables TV easily attract a number of special audiences - children. According to statistics, children under the age of 6 averagely watch TV about 2 hours every day. Children at school averagely watch TV about 1023 hours every year. This data far exceeds the

time for reading (900 hours). This is undoubtedly due to the unique aesthetic style on television. In the process of TV transmission, all kinds of information are vividly showed to people in the form of image and sound. “More than 80% of human's perception of the outside world is accomplished by visual sense and auditory sense”^[3]. So, the sound and picture information rightly is more likely to be accepted by children than second-encoding word symbols in books.

So, scholars pointed out that TV can “promote children's mental development”. Since 1980s, a number of empiricism scholars, such as Bob Hodge and David Tripp, have demonstrated the positive role of TV in developing children's intelligence from the point of “modality”^[4]. They proposed “very young children have considerable ability to express the ‘internal’ modal characteristics of TV animation which is the ‘unreal’ form characteristics (such as, the two-dimensional image, color quality, quality of drawing) of these animations. When they are 9 years old, they have already known the ‘external’ (real-world) modal characteristics. They can use ‘grammar’, which is basically the same with adults, to decode TV programs”^[5]. Thus, they concluded that watching TV can give children “the experience of the development of conversion skills”. Since then, scholars, with Susan Newman and Messinger Davis as representative, have followed Piaget's “schema”^[6] concept to describe the expansion and development of TV transmission to children's knowledge system. They thought “watching TV has many similarities with reading written texts. The same factors of two processes are to activate readers' expectations and ‘schema’ knowledge or psychological ideas. These factors guide the processing of audiences/readers in development of a series of events”^[7]. The construction of above theories has the same origin with Piaget's formal operational stage^[8]. And then a new field of “psychology of children audience” was opened in television theory circle.

Indeed, for children, TV perhaps is like the extension of Lacan's “mirror image stage” that baby complements “self” definition from the mirror image, and children supplement the understanding of the world from TV. If properly utilized, television can become not only the best playmate in the childhood stage, but also can be a good friend to help children understand the world and society.

II. CHILDREN'S PLAY: A PIECE OF PURE LAND THAT IS DYING

In 1960, our first children TV play "Liu Wenxue" was put on stage. Since then the concept of "children's play" has been produced. And they are two arguments, "children coming first" and "only for children" in the academic circle. Seen from the name of "children's play", it is a type of play classified from the perspective of the audience. So, the creation of children's play should be carried out "only for children". Otherwise, the writing intention of this type is shaken, and the concept becomes blurred. On the history of early Chinese TV, TV series for children had written a glorious page. The first generation of TV workers, with Guo Qing and Cai Xiang as representative, had created a series of classic children's play works. From 1960 to 1966, "Beijing TV Station had broadcast a total of 36 children's plays, accounting for 40% of the total number of TV plays over that period"^[9]. Subsequently, after ten years of the Cultural Revolution, "CCTV had broadcast 8 plays in 1978 and children's play accounted for half of them. In 1979, it broadcast a total of 7 children's plays, accounting for one third of the total number of TV plays in the year. In 1980, it broadcast a total of 23 children's plays, accounting for one sixth of the total number of TV plays in CCTV"^[10]. In addition, we set up "Flying Goddess Award" and "Golden Eagle Award" respectively in 1980 and 1983. Both of them have special award for "outstanding children's play", which gives some support and encouragement for the creation of children's play.

In such a good environment, we has produced a large number of outstanding children's play director and works, such as, "Good Uncle" (in 1980), "The Littles" (in 1982), "Footprints on Windowsill" (in 1985), "Transferred Student" (in 1984), "Inner Answer Sheet" (in 1986) and "Three and One" (in 1988) directed by Fu Min; "Hometown" (in 1980), "Where Are They Going?" (in 1980) and "Big Bird in China" (in 1984) directed by Xu Jiacha; "Affandi and Children" (in 1980), "Dad, I Will Return" (in 1986), "Our Team" (in 1988) and "Return to RS City" (in 1991) directed by Wang Mingyu; "Travel of Small Jiajia in Garden" (in 1983), "One Day of Small Jiajia" (in 1985), "Small Jiajia's Worries" (1986) and "World of Paopao" (in 1987) directed by Zhang Huijuan; "Robber's Daughter" (in 1984), "The Sun Has Seven Colors" (in 1986), "Lai Ning" (in 1990), "Mohai Xinlei" (in 1991), "Flowering Youth" (in 1992), "Pocket Money" (in 1993) directed by Jin Ping, and so on. These works not only achieved good ratings and received a number of awards, but also have been recognized by the concerned industry and the academic circle.

But unfortunately, since the late 1980s, with the deepening of reform and market competition, excellent creative teams continue to flow to emerging themes. In 1980 the number of children's plays and the number of adult's plays accounted for half each. The proportions of them respectively were 1.5% and 98.5% in 1987"^[11]. In the first half year of 1994, "the number of TV plays for approval was 213 series (1016 episodes). The children's play accounted for 4.23% (14 series and 43 episodes), decreasing more than 50% compared with the number of children's plays for approval in the same period of 1993"^[12]. In addition, the first prize and third prize of Flying

Goddess Award for long and short children's play were vacant in 1994. In 1995, the first prize of Flying Goddess Award for short children's play was still vacant. The "Golden Eagle Award" for outstanding children's play was vacant in 1994, 2000, 2001, 2011 and 2012. In the face of this dismal condition, the circles took to the woods by claiming of "making little money". Yet, the academic circle still stands on the ground of children's play that is about to be captured through signs and cries.

After 1980s, the cries for the fate of children's play never stop in Chinese academic circle. "May children's play be like blossomy flowers!" "Provide more and better spiritual food for children". "Don't rob children's play anymore!" However, the desperate cries are so weak and unbearable in the flood of reality. People did not like what we expect to save children's play. Especially since the beginning of the new century, the creation of children's play has no good to praise. In the ten years from 2001 to 2010, "the broadcast number of children's plays was less than 300, far behind the standard of "keeping 600-series annual output"^[13] announced by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television. In recent 20 years, there were some excellent works, such as, "Little Dragon Man", "Home with Kids" and "Happy Planet". But these successful examples are few after all. In general, children's play has been gradually marginalized. Not only in China, children's play has moved toward decline in the whole world. In recent years, the global TV markets are mostly dominated by the spectacle and complex play types. In the United States, the professional plays with crime, justice and medical industries as creation themes occupy the highest market share. In the UK, a "new crime play" blending horror, suspense, spy and a variety of elements is on the rise. In Japan, "Taiga play"^[14], as flagship brand of NHK, still fills in the TV screen. In South Korea, the family ethic play, full of love and flavor of life dominates. With rich TV programs and the strong onslaught of entertainment tide, children's play has gradually faded out of people's field of vision. Perhaps some people will say that it is really worth us to ponder.

III. "THE DISAPPEARANCE OF CHILDHOOD": THINKING TRIGGERED BY "GENERALIZED AGE"

We have to admit that the TV is a very "real" medium which has "a natural business-logic-governed heteronomy"^[15]. Market guidance and change of audiences' taste can greatly affect the development trend of TV. On the surface, the situation of "making little money" makes many TV workers leave children's play this unpopular theme at arm's length. The selection of ratings and market competition seem to be the most direct causes of children's drama to be declined. But what is puzzling is that: why the early children's play can attract a lot of audiences and get the success of business and art, and in today's society, the children's play lost the living space? This is actually related to the problems of the macro context of the contemporary society.

First of all, the medium of television has a strong conformity tendency. Any television program from the planning stage often carries the same ultimate goal that is: "the pursuit of sensational things"^[16]. The result of the blind pursuit is "homogeneity" of program. Just like people's ridicule,

“today's TV program in China only has two forms: ‘lighting-off’ and ‘revolving chair’. Groups of different occupation, different identity, different gender and different age are watching the same program. The aesthetic unity and conformity make TV programs drop into the modeling mire, and finally lead to the convergence and fusion of audience. The film industry also has such a situation. Looking at contemporary world filmdom, the spectacle movies with science fiction, suspense, action as themes dominate. The popularity of 3D technology reinforced the pursuit of people on audio-visual stimulation. We have entered into a visual era of “spectacle flooding”. Take a look at the best selling movies: “Afanda”, “Transformers”, “Iron Man” and “Pacific Rim”... The audiences of these films can even cover any groups over 4 years old. In order to expand the scope of the audience, “the spectacle” rise to be the first priority in creation. It also used the structure of “decentration” in narrative of the film. As a result, the younger trend and planarity of plots prevail, and the audiovisual spectacle and thrill dilate. To the extent that the spectacle has become “the support of narrative, rather than the dependency of narrative”^[17]. The transmission of “generalized age” is undoubtedly the most expected result of the producers. But the “dumping” production is a disaster to culture and aesthetics.

Rousseau ever said: “reading is the curse of childhood, because books teach us to talk about things that we know nothing about”. But the harm of television is more than that of books. If we treat watching TV as a skill, children have become a “master”. They are good at watching TV, and easy to accept everything on TV. Therefore, unknowingly the phenomenon of “generalized age” strongly erodes the boundary between “children audience” and “adult audience”. The group of children audience has begun to become more and more blurred. But more worrisome would be the aesthetic tendency of “generalized age”. Children have more choices to see films and programs. They may no longer need “children’s play” to entertain themselves. In the face of the impact of all kinds of new things in television, “children” become precocious, worrying, panic and anxious. The boundary between children and adult become blurred.

In fact, shortly after the birth of television, a group of scholars have examined the negative effects of television on children from the perspective of criticism. Bourdieu have sharply pointed out that “TV is a communication tool with little independence”^[18]. Postman also bluntly said “electronic media cannot keep any secret, which creates a serious challenge to the rights of adult and children's curiosity”^[19]. Sociologists D Alexander also criticized that “TV is a distorting mirror”^[20]. All kinds of critical theories have sharply pointed out the negative impacts of TV on children. Some people even began to question the negative impacts of the new media represented by television. But this only represents the idea of condescending elites. The status of TV is more firmed than that we imagine. According to the survey, television is still the highest used medium. “In our daily life, the subsequence of eight common media is TV, Internet, books, mobile phone and PHS, newspapers, movies, radio and magazines according to their use frequency. The proportion of TV audience accounted for 65.9%, with the largest share”^[21].

The dependence degree of children audience is higher. According to statistics of CSM Media Research, “young children from 4 to 14 in China averagely spend 6154 minutes on TV play every year. The time used surpassed that on any subject”^[22]. It shows that children are still the most loyal audience, rather than far away from TV. But because of the conformity and generalized age of television programs, they have to watch the programs same like adults.

Through gradually declining children’s play, we should reflect on contemporary Chinese and world film and television industry. With flush entertainment programs and excess spectacles, people are immersed in Utopia built by “entertainment”. At the same time, a silent “counter-enlightenment” perhaps is operating. “We can find water everywhere, but no drop is drinkable. In the sea of information, we can find nothing useful”^[23]. These predictions maybe have come true: all information invades our mind and soul under the banner of “culture” or “knowledge”. It eventually brought the numbness and spiritual decay. “Technology itself was deified, and the political process has been downgraded. The adults’ minds gradually shrink, and childhood gradually disappears”^[24]. The decline of children’s play is simply a beginning. Perhaps after a number of years, the current popular programs would also be faded and disappeared. This is a dangerous signal.

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