

Postmodern Representations and Reflections in Hong Kong Urban Cinema: A Study on the Works of Heiward Mak Hei-Yan

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Abstract. In the new millennium, a discontinuity of postmodern elements began to surface in Hong Kong commercial films. However, young director Heiward Mak Hei-yan integrated postmodern elements into her works, which are primarily urban films, inheriting and developing the postmodern tradition of Hong Kong cinema. She does this primarily by shaping marginal urban landscapes and crowds, capturing the less noticed aspects of Hong Kong city, and demonstrating the anti-grand narrative characteristic of postmodernism. By establishing a postmodern perspective on love, she breaks and "rebels" against traditional romance films, not just merely glorifying the myth of love, but emphasizing the questioning of the eternal view of modern love. Simultaneously, she illustrates the dilemmas of postmodern alienation to portray the contemporary postmodern mentality and cultural symptoms of Hong Kong people in this unique geographical location. Her urban films reflect her positive thinking about urban romance, life, and mental state in a postmodern context, providing the possibility of parallelism between commerciality and postmodernism, and offering insights for the development of Hong Kong cinema.

Keywords: Hong Kong Cinema; Postmodernism; Urban Film.

1. Introduction

Postmodernism originated from modernism and rebelled against it. It critiques and deconstructs the way of thinking characterized by subjectivity, rich sensations, wholeness, centrality, and identity that emerged during the process of modernization [1]. Hong Kong, with a long history of being colonized by Britain and continuing the capitalism system with an individualistic focus after its return, becomes a ground for postmodern currents. Economically, Hong Kong serves as a free port for international trade, gathering diverse voices, and its mixed population inherently possesses both order and disorder. Ideologically, Hong Kong has a long-term void of values concerning the nation, ethnicity, and history, leading to a sense of "rootlessness" among its people. Hence, postmodern currents — decentralization, anti-authority, anti-hierarchy, diversity, inclusion, heterogeneity, flat structure, anti-grand narrative, and a fusion of styles — are more likely to form in Hong Kong [2].

With the fertile soil for the development of postmodernism, postmodern cinema has become one of the distinct film genres in Hong Kong: the fragmented narratives in Wong Kar-wai's films, the "nonsense" style of Stephen Chow's comedies, and the no longer invincible heroes in Johnnie To's stories all construct the city of Hong Kong through postmodern elements. However, entering the 21st century, particularly with the signing of CEPA (Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement) between Mainland China and Hong Kong in 2003, a large number of mature Hong Kong filmmakers went north to shoot films. To cater to the mainland or expand the market, they turned to shoot grand narrative films, resulting in a discontinuity in the postmodern elements in Hong Kong commercial films. However, Hong Kong, situated in the coordinates of the post-colonial era and post-return era, often finds that grand narrative films are at odds with the question of individual identity among Hong Kong people. Therefore, today, the postmodern predicament of Hong Kong people is still stark, and there is an urgent need for the medium of film to present and reflect on this phenomenon.

In Hong Kong, some new generation directors have inherited and developed Hong Kong's postmodern tradition in their works, and Heiward Mak Hei-yan is one of the more important ones. Most of Heiward Mak's works are urban films set in Hong Kong. She integrates a lot of postmodern elements into commercial films with her close personal experience with the youth group and her

delicate observation as a woman, telling stories about the post-industrial era of spiritual desolation in Hong Kong. Born in 1984, Heiward Mak personally experienced the historical change of Hong Kong's return. She started her film career in 2005 by participating in the preliminary assistant director and screenwriting work of "Men Suddenly in Black 2". In 2008, she directed her first feature film "High Noon" and was nominated for Best New Director at the Hong Kong Film Awards. Since then, her self-directed and self-written "Ex" was nominated for Best Adapted Screenplay at the 47th Taiwan Golden Horse Awards; as the screenwriter of "Love in a Puff", she won the Best Screenwriter Award at the 30th Golden Statue Awards; subsequently, her directed "Diva" and "Fagara" were released in 2012 and 2019 respectively. Heiward Mak's films focus on minor characters in the tide of the current era's postmodernism. However, research on her works in recent years has been relatively scarce, mostly limited to the attribute of romance films, and fewer researchers treat postmodernity as a characteristic of her films. The author will use postmodern theory to sort out and analyze Heiward Mak's works, to interpret the commonalities and individualities of postmodern elements in her works, to refine the unique postmodern aesthetics in her urban films, and to deepen the understanding of Hong Kong society, ideology and popular culture indirectly. (It should be noted that although Heiward Mak participated in the production of "Love in a Puff" as a screenwriter, the author can see her consideration of postmodernity in the script writing, so it is also considered as Heiward Mak's main creative work for analysis.)

Heiward Mak's urban films depict postmodern marginal landscapes, showing the people and scenes in the shadows behind the bright exterior of Hong Kong city. Through the shaping of minor characters, she reflects postmodernity; she explores how consumerism and the redistribution of masculine and feminine qualities affect the postmodern concept of love; simultaneously, she presents the postmodern dilemma of alienation in the vortex of "absurdity-search-absurdity". From this, we can see her contemplation of urban culture.

2. Postmodern Marginal Landscape

The postmodernity in Heiward Mak's films is manifested in her depiction of the margins. In many commercial films from Hong Kong, focus on marginality is either scarce or usually achieved by amplifying a certain marginal narrative through crime films to satisfy the audience. In contrast, in Heiward Mak's films, she subtly depicts the margins through the lens of a female perspective. While placing delicate emotions in the narrative of romance films, she discretely portrays the margins. At the same time, she avoids leaning towards art films or amplifying the anxiety of the margins, expressing a certain appropriate marginality in commercial urban films. The term "margins" refers to social groups that are in a subordinate position, excluded by mainstream society, and struggle to express themselves within the mainstream [3]. Hong Kong's unique geographical position makes it an intersection of modernity and tradition, chaos and order, presenting a multitude of marginalized groups, phenomena, and landscapes.

Heiward Mak's depiction of marginalized groups follows two approaches. One is the portrayal of true marginalized groups, and the other is the writing of marginal behaviors of ordinary people. Her debut work "High Noon" falls into the former category, where the male protagonist Lu Zerong is a "bad student" who is detained at school every day. At school, he is abandoned by teachers; at home, his irritable father and newlywed stepmother make him feel like a redundant person in the family. Lu Zerong and his friends, these "bad students", are not mainstream in the school and struggle to express their frustration and confusion during adolescence among classmates, teachers, and family. As a youth film, "High Noon" does not showcase the vigor of youths but the sorrow of the growth of unsociable young boys. On the other hand, most of Heiward Mak's works restructure the concept of the "margins". The focus is not on marginalized groups in the traditional sense, but by allowing ordinary people to engage in marginal behaviors, the audience is introduced to overlooked corners of the bustling city of Hong Kong, showcasing the less-noticed backlit areas of the city. In "Love in a Puff", Cherie and Jimmy are lower-tier employees with decent jobs and relatively stable incomes,

they are not truly marginalized. However, with the implementation of Hong Kong's smoking ban, non-smokers became the "mainstream" of society, and smokers like Jimmy and Cherie became relatively marginalized in Hong Kong society, becoming a group excluded by mainstream society. It is because Jimmy and Cherie step into the margins that they meet and get to know each other, and love begins to sprout in the postmodern city.

When portraying urban landscapes in urban films, Heiward Mak often chooses not the bustling urban streets, but marginal spaces where character relationships are elevated. According to Lefebvre, the essence of social space is a kind of social relationship [4]. As Gonggong said in an interview record, "the comprehensive smoking ban has created some good things, there are more places to smoke near the company". Therefore, in marginal spaces such as deserted back alleys, where people rarely stay, office workers who originally had no intersection built new social relationships here, and the ambiguous relationship between Jimmy and Cherie also got elevated in these marginal spaces like quiet small alleys, silent parking lots, and narrow toilets at late-night. In "Ex", the beautiful memories of Chen Junping and Zhou Yi in the remote mountainous area represent their frustrated but pure past, contrasting sharply with their alienated state in the spacious apartment. The deserted railway, the dim tunnel at night, and the sea where the water meets the sky, also witnessed the lonely and wandering figure of Lu Zerong in "High Noon". The combination of marginalized or relatively marginalized characters and marginal landscapes aligns with the anti-grand narrative characteristic of postmodernism, and is a prominent feature of the postmodern landscape constructed by her.

3. Postmodern View of Love

Romance is the main theme of Heiward Mak's urban films, but unlike many commercial films that glorify the myth of love, she, to some extent, breaks and "rebels" against traditional romance films. In the context of postmodernism, she demonstrates the consumerist attributes of love, questioning the eternity and essence of love. At the same time, she breaks down the stereotypical masculine image in a patriarchal society and emphasizes the evolution of both male and female individual images. It is precisely this new expression of gender images that shapes the unique postmodern view of love in her works.

With the continuous advancement of Hong Kong's productive forces and production relations, consumerism has become a significant representation of contemporary consumer culture. To fill the spiritual void, some people are extremely eager to form new emotional connections, but under the influence of consumerism, they also pursue "speedism" in their emotional lives, showing the fast-food and gamification of feelings. In "Love in a Puff", the smoking friends humorously narrate Jimmy's embarrassing experience of being betrayed by his ex-girlfriend, turning his major emotional setback into a joke that everyone talks about. This makes the concept of "love", which originally represents pure beauty, vague and sloppy. The characters are afraid to touch deep connections, showing the opposition between the consumerist and fairy-tale views of love. Perhaps it is under the influence of this setback that Jimmy and Cherie began to be ambiguous. After his feelings were consumed like commodities by his ex-girlfriend, the doubts about self-consciousness born out of it caused him to be exiled. This is also his surrender to the consumerist love where true intentions are hard to distinguish. In "Ex", Chen Junping and Zhou Yi are indecisive between ex-lovers and current lovers. R and her boyfriend in "Diva" break up and get back together due to conflicts at work. Their floating feelings are hard to land, actually questioning the authenticity of pure love. The sense of emptiness in people's hearts in the postmodern city is infinitely magnified, and the attribute of "escaping responsibility" that postmodernism possesses, escaping responsibility for oneself and escaping responsibility for others, makes them even more difficult to find a place where they can settle down. The protagonists are always in a state of "on the road": the ending of "Love in a Puff" is that during the process of buying cigarettes together, the two confirmed their relationship, but because the car broke down and stopped on the road, they are still on the road, not knowing where the future will lead; in "Ex", after leaving several ex-lovers, Zhou Yi finally picks up her suitcase and walks

towards the distance alone... In Heiward Mak's view of love, every love affair seems to be a "short break" on the journey of life.

The elimination of traditional love relationships in postmodernism also indirectly shows the upgrade of individual subjectivity — especially female subjectivity. In Heiward Mak's urban films, she breaks down traditional patriarchal culture and demonstrates a conscious sense of subjectivity through expressions of postmodernism such as decentering and anti-authority, not dwelling on gender differences, expressing equality, diversity, and inclusiveness of gender images. In the concept of modern order, people usually think that the father image in traditional concepts is tall and mighty, the husband image is upright and upright, and the characters presented in the film are usually as the head of the family, the faithful lover and other images. But in Heiward Mak's works, the masculine and feminine qualities break through tradition, men do not necessarily represent masculinity, and women are not necessarily the spokespersons for femininity: in "Ex", Chen Junping is as entangled as Zhou Yi with the shared memories of both, his hesitation, entanglement, and indecisiveness are contrary to the traditional image of a faithful man; Cherie is three years older than Jimmy, she is a competent and generous "older sister", in their intimate relationship she takes the initiative, while Jimmy is more introverted, shy, and passive. Therefore, when Cherie decides to change her mobile phone package for Jimmy, Jimmy starts to avoid the feelings between them because of Cherie's seriousness. It can be said that in Heiward Mak's works, she demystifies the "sacred" male image in a male-dominated society, discards the stereotyped macho male characters, and pays more attention to the individual development of both sexes. It is her subversion of traditional gender images that returns to the new expression of gender relations in postmodern love.

4. Postmodern Alienation Dilemma

The existentialist Camus defined "absurdity" as the broken and conflicting relationship between humans and the world: "In a world suddenly deprived of illusions and light, humans feel like outsiders. This exile is irreparable, as nostalgia for the homeland and expectations for the heavenly homeland have been stripped away. This separation of a person from his life, of an actor from his background, is precisely the sense of absurdity [5]." Because the protagonists explore the margins and love, but cannot find the results they want, they are more likely to fall into the dilemma of alienation between people and people, and people and society. However, the protagonists in Heiward Mak's works often realize that they are in this predicament, and then actively seek ways to solve it; after searching up and down, they find no answers, and then fall into new confusion. In general, the protagonists in her works show a process of "absurdity-search-absurdity".

The protagonists in Heiward Mak's works usually have subjectivity. After discovering their loss and the world's loss, they strive to find their true selves in an attempt to escape their current dilemma. In "Diva", although J is a diva, she does not want to be surrounded by paparazzi, harassed by fans, she just wants to be a "person" and does not want to be a "commodity" in the hands of the agent, so she has a rebellious personality and chooses to follow her inner voice to choose a blind masseur with poor social status as her boyfriend. In "High Noon", Lu Zerong is faced with a sudden young stepmother and young brother at home, feeling distance and unfamiliarity, thinking that he is an outsider at home, so he chooses to divert his attention from the family and actively place his emotional outlet in brotherhood like hands and feet. Although facing the death of his father, the Ouyang sisters in "Fagara" did not fall into regret and sadness, but chose to run the hot pot restaurant left by their father to make up for the regret of the lack of father-daughter affection. The proactive behaviors of the above characters, from "detecting absurdity" to "beginning to search", all show their various efforts to escape their current alienation dilemma.

However, after the characters' diligent searching, the lack of results deepens their sense of absurdity about the world, and they fall into the vortex of "absurdity-search-absurdity". Sartre expressed the estrangement, isolation, and strangeness between people as "otherness", and the characters in Heiward Mak's stories usually live in this "otherness". The rampant materialism of

consumerism has squeezed and eroded people living in spaces filled with "things", and people who traditionally use "emotions" as a guide to life have been negated, so the human search for absurdity appears to be more conflicting. In "High Noon", the teenagers exchange their own piece of meat for a grain of rice from Lu Zerong, they don't care about the loss of material, and they establish a pure friendship. However, subsequent betrayals by brothers, death of friends, and broken relationships shattered this friendship — emotional people lose all around, and Lu Zerong has to re-recognize this world, and is forced to grow into an adult in a suit and leather shoes. In "Ex", Chen Junping was young and spirited when he scolded his boss for asking him to be a ghostwriter; but when Zhou Yi reencountered him, she found that he was persuading others to be ghostwriters, and the person who searched the hardest became the defender of the current system, finally becoming what he once hated the most. However, Heiward Mak chose to stop at tasting the absurdity, and there is still the possibility of the protagonist setting off to search again. The expression of the existential dilemma of characters in urban films in Heiward Mak's works enhances the film's structure of consciousness with romance as the main theme, and questions about the environment of modern human life.

5. Conclusion

In Heiward Mak's works, whether from the perspective of marginal landscapes, views on love, or self-existence, they all present a rethinking of postmodernism. However, unlike some traditional postmodern films that deconstruct love, shatter meaning, and blur morality, Heiward Mak does not let the protagonists in the story stagnate completely in postmodern confusion and dilemmas. She is still trying to find some kind of reconciliation. Unlike the excessively stream-of-consciousness, form-focused, and marginalized films at the beginning of the century, this kind of handling is increasingly favored by the general audience and film festivals globally. Films like "The Shape of Voice" and "Green Book", which have achieved great success in many film festivals, also first place the protagonists in a postmodern predicament, but do not overly emphasize the fragmentation of the protagonist's individuality and the alienation between people, but focus on gradually eliminating alienation through the characters' initiative, achieving a certain degree of reconciliation with the predicament. From this, it can be seen that how to break free from the shackles of the postmodern city and achieve a compromise between art films and commercial films is not only an artistic change on a global scale but also a global issue.

At the same time, there are also limitations in Heiward Mak's works. She prefers to write about the margins, and the characters in her stories usually focus on their own dilemmas and small loves, sometimes with relatively niche topics, resulting in a limited audience. Besides, although she explores loneliness, alienation, and eternity, philosophical topics in her films, she only stops at tasting certain specific situations and does not go deeply into pursuing the meaning of human existence, questioning self-worth, and other ultimate issues, which further reduces the universality of her films worldwide. In addition, the postmodern preference for collage, fusion, and other editing methods leads to a relatively fragmented rhythm in her works, which does not perfectly match the viewing mode of the general public. In the final analysis, the shortcomings in Heiward Mak's works may also be the areas where Hong Kong's small and medium-sized films need to improve in the 21st century. Heiward Mak has found a certain balance in artistry and commerciality, but this balance is still unstable and still needs to be cultivated and developed.

Regardless, Heiward Mak's works have shown her active thinking about urban love, life, and psychological state in a postmodern context, and have provided the possibility of parallelism between commerciality and postmodernism. Through the carving of popular commercial themes such as love and youth, supplemented by a postmodern perspective to explore the psychological state of characters to resonate with the audience, she has, to some extent, realistically presented the current psychological and cultural symptoms of Hong Kong people in image form, providing insights for the development of Hong Kong cinema. It is believed that Hong Kong films will eventually show a balance between commerciality and artistry, achieving both box office and word-of-mouth success.

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