

Constructing Memories of the Northeast and Calling Forth the Spirit of the Times: A Symptomatic Reading of "The Long Season"

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Abstract: As an interpretive methodology, Althusser's concept of "symptomatic reading" provides an epistemological approach for deciphering the elusive meanings behind cinematic works. Building upon this framework, this paper examines the popular short drama "The Long Season," a hit in mainland China in 2023. The study aims to decode the "silent discourse" that the director intends to convey behind the overt narrative presented in the story. "The Long Season" achieves a re-articulation of "new Northeastern memory" and evokes the contemporary consciousness of "truth, goodness, and beauty" through its genre-blending of suspense and comedy, innovative storytelling from a paternal perspective, and the tragic displacement within its plot structure.

Keywords: Symptomatic Reading; The Long Season; New Northeastern Writing; Ideological Interpellation.

1. Introduction

"The Long Season," a sensational short drama from mainland China in 2023, has captivated a vast audience, with its Douban rating rising from 9.0 upon release to 9.4 after the final episode. Hailed by netizens as "starting strong and finishing stronger," this web series has garnered widespread acclaim not only from the public but also from official channels, earning a place in the National Radio and Television Administration's list of outstanding audiovisual works for 2023. This phenomenal show offers viewers a heartwarming portrayal of Northeastern China, distinct from its traditional industrial image, and highlights the inherent goodness in ordinary people as they navigate the vicissitudes of fate to achieve self-redemption (McCormick, 2003).

2. Symptomatic Reading

"Symptomatic reading" is a textual interpretation method proposed in 1965 by the French philosopher and renowned Marxist Louis Althusser. Althusser emphasized the epistemic autonomy of theoretical texts, arguing against viewing texts as direct reflections of reality (Goodwin & Griffin, 2017). Instead, he advocated for uncovering the "silent discourse" behind the "manifest discourse." This method treats the text as a pathological document marked by various symptoms, where readers can start with the text's blanks, silences, and ruptures to explore the ideology and unspoken deeper motivations of the author and their society. This paper employs the fundamental approach of ideological critique in film studies, applying symptomatic reading to "The Long Season" to analyze how the work rearticulates Northeastern memory and evokes the contemporary consciousness of "truth, goodness, and beauty" (Nowak, 2018).

3. The Multidimensional Construction of "New Northeastern Memory"

3.1. Innovation in "New Northeastern Writing" through "Suspense + Comedy"

The current representation of Northeastern China in the realm of Chinese literature and art emphasizes two main aspects: the "comedic Northeast" and the "scarred Northeast." Firstly, the "comedic Northeast" image is a collaborative creation of official discourse and popular social media. On the stage of CCTV's Spring Festival Gala, a platform for showcasing the national image, skits featuring Northeastern characteristics have remained a staple for years. From Zhao Benshan's 1990 skit "Blind Date" to the 2024 skit "Guests at Our Home," the strong Northeastern accent has always been associated with the region's humorous and witty character (Kendrick, 2019). On social media platforms where users share their daily lives, humorous videos with distinctive regional features, such as "catching geese," "eating frozen pears," and using "outdoor refrigerators," have garnered high engagement. In the winter of 2023, "Southern Potato" popularized "Erbin" literature, further boosting Northeastern tourism and reinforcing a stereotype of Northeastern people as straightforward and hospitable. Secondly, the "scarred Northeast" image is constructed by elite narratives and the tides of industrialization (Kang, 2018). As the "eldest son of the Republic," the Northeast made significant contributions to the construction and development of New China. However, during the industrialization and state-owned enterprise reforms of the late 20th century, the region experienced mass layoffs, rewriting the destinies of a generation. From an elite perspective, the Northeast, characterized by its industrial heritage and historical trauma, is depicted with a sense of melancholy and oppression, as seen in works like "Tiexi District" and "The Piano in a Factory." Contrasting with traditional depictions of the Northeast, "The Long Season" innovatively blends elements of suspense and comedy,

merging the traits of both "comedic Northeast" and "scarred Northeast (Sadjadi & Ahmadirad, 2018)." It infuses a resilient and optimistic attitude into the historical memory of scars. The series features Northeastern actors such as Fan Wei and Qin Hao, and the dialogues are rich in the inherently comedic Northeastern dialect (Kang, 2018). Expressions like "eat and drink, don't worry about anything" vividly portray the lively image of the comedic Northeast through everyday, life-like language. "Our redemption is not 'out of history' but 'within history.'" Despite incorporating comedic elements, the film remains rooted in Northeastern history, using traditional industrial landscapes to anchor collective memory. Most of the story's scenes are set in familiar industrial landscapes such as dilapidated factories, abandoned plants, and railways. These settings construct a historical space that awakens collective memory, where the experiences of a generation of workers and their descendants, who lived through the wave of layoffs, are revisited and reinterpreted, making modifications and reconstructions to the original collective memory (Sadjadi & Ahmadirad, 2018).

3.2. The Parental Perspective Awakens Self-Directed Emotional Healing

In the portrayal of the "scarred Northeast," many works tend to adopt an intergenerational perspective, with the younger generation narrating the stories of their predecessors. These narrators, often youthful "second-generation" individuals, witness, scrutinize, and reflect on the experiences of their parents and themselves from an elite standpoint (Montag, 2017). This narrative approach carries a detached emotional restraint and a contemplative tone, akin to narrating a "belated story," making the trauma particularly poignant and casting a gray shadow over history. However, "The Long Season" takes a different approach by presenting the story through the perspective of the "first generation," those who personally experienced the wave of layoffs. This narrative choice portrays the middle-aged protagonists' attitudes toward life after accepting the vicissitudes of fate (Xiao, Zhang, & Wang, 2024). Despite enduring life's hardships, they embrace their destinies with a humane warmth, ultimately reconciling with themselves. This storytelling from the parents' perspective unfolds the narrative through their own understanding of fate. The "first-person + present tense" narration allows the audience to experience the ups and downs of fate alongside the characters, conveying a life attitude that is both penetrating and authentic (Zhang, 2018). Through the firsthand accounts of these individuals, the narrative not only resonates with the real experiences of the audience but also encapsulates the process of emotional self-repair in those who endure trauma. The characters achieve self-rescue within the story, and this experience of self-recovery extends beyond the narrative, inspiring viewers to undertake their own emotional healing after experiencing trauma (Lee, 2000).

3.3. Tragic Displacement Weakens Historical Trauma

In the 1990s, with the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy and the development of the socialist market economy, enterprise reforms focusing on decentralization and profit-sharing were initiated nationwide in China. On August 3, 1986, the Shenyang Explosion-Proof Equipment Factory declared bankruptcy, becoming the first state-owned enterprise in New China to do so. The Northeast,

primarily composed of state-owned enterprises and workers, was profoundly impacted by the waves of reform and opening up (Earle, Parmar, & Phillips, 2023). The region was enveloped in the anxiety and helplessness of laid-off workers and bankrupt enterprises. The documentary "Tiexi District" presents a heavy and realistic portrayal of the laid-off workers in the Northeast, capturing their complaints, idleness, and even instances of violence and pilfering factory items for sale to supplement their household income (Mitter, 2003). In contrast, "The Long Season" skillfully shifts the collective social tragedy into personal fate tragedies, thereby mitigating the impact of historical suffering on the audience while still addressing historical issues. In the drama, the protagonists Wang Xiang and Gong Biao also face the "layoff wave," a common blow to Northeast workers due to social transformation. However, the series deliberately emphasizes personal factors contributing to the layoffs. For instance, in explaining Gong Biao's layoff, the drama introduces a subplot where the promising university student impulsively assaults the factory director, highlighting his personality and diverting the cause of the layoff to personal actions. Similarly, when addressing the layoffs at the Huagang Factory, the narrative avoids focusing on the state-owned enterprise reforms and instead attributes the factory's revenue decline to corruption and collusion between the director and a Hong Kong businessman (Mitter, 2003). These plot choices diminish the tragic undertone of the "layoff wave," directing the audience's attention to individual destinies that transcend the era, thereby softening the scars of history and reconstructing the memory of the Northeast (Finlayson, 1996).

4. The Ideological Call to "Truth, Goodness, and Beauty"

4.1. From "Reflecting Reality" to "Half a Meter Above the Ground"

Director Xin Shuang, when discussing his creative intentions, stated, "We aim to tell not just the story of an individual's life, but the life story of a generation. The Northeastern people I know are usually cheerful and optimistic, and I hope to convey this attitude through the show." This emphasis on real-life experiences led the director to cast Northeastern actors with inherent comedic appeal. The meticulous production team spent six months growing a cornfield to authentically recreate the old Northeastern landscape. Details such as Gong Biao's socks with holes after removing his shoes highlight the commitment to realism (Walsh, 2009). This dedication to reflecting reality offers viewers a thoughtful space imbued with local value (Močnik, 2014). As a rare gem among recent domestic dramas, "The Long Season" not only constructs a warm, yellow-hued memory of the Northeast but also imparts a romantic spirit that transcends reality (McMillan, 2016). The relentless march of history has made layoffs a relic of two decades past. The "first generation" of laid-off workers is gradually reaching old age, now secured with pensions and other benefits, while the "second generation" has largely forgotten the pains of their predecessors, becoming the pillars of their families and embodying the forward-looking spirit of perseverance. Xin Shuang, in an interview, described his creative approach as "half a meter above the ground," explaining, "I do not pursue a photographically realistic style; I want it to be beautiful and feel right, yet with a touch of distance from reality." Focused on conveying the themes of

"truth, goodness, and beauty," the director deliberately avoided the harsh and bleak symbols often associated with the Northeast. Instead, he offers a narrative where warmth and pain coexist, providing the audience with empathy and healing (Kasmer, 1990).

4.2. From "Stories of Redemption" to "Experiences of Self-Rescue"

Despite the tragic fates of many characters in the drama, the final episode of "The Long Season" provides a poignant and redemptive conclusion. Wang Xiang, having endured countless hardships, dons the red sweater given to him by his deceased son. On the once-familiar railway tracks, he encounters a vision of his younger self driving a train. Waving to his younger, spirited self, he repeats three times, "Look forward, don't look back." This moment symbolizes Wang Xiang's acceptance of the truth about his son's death and his acknowledgment that he is no longer the "most exemplary cog in the old era." The director's choice to end the series with this romanticized image, juxtaposing the elder Wang Xiang with his younger self, illustrates a personal reconciliation with trauma and implies that those clinging to the past can finally let go. In the closing scene, Wang Xiang sees the season's first snowfall, a long-awaited sight, as he stands in the embrace of his adopted son Wang Bei. This snowfall gently falls on the story's protagonists, signaling the end of the long autumn burden borne by a family, a factory, and a generation. For film and television narratives, "the important thing is to tell the era of myths, not the era that myths recount (Dolar, 1993)." "The Long Season" was filmed between December 22, 2021, and April 7, 2022, premiering on Tencent Video's X Theater on April 22, 2023. This production period holds special significance for both the Chinese people and the global audience, much like the layoff wave that once swept across the Northeast. As the world emerged from the grips of a global pandemic, many experienced profound loss, job uncertainty, and an existential questioning of self-worth. While some chose to move forward numbly, swept along by the tides of time, others remained trapped in past traumas, forgotten by history. "The Long Season" tells the story of an individual ensnared by fate and the times, ultimately finding reconciliation and self-redemption (Backer, 2017). The self-rescue experiences distilled from this narrative resonate deeply with audiences who have faced similar layoffs, reactivating a dormant socialist collective culture and political heritage (Fiske, 1998). This shared memory, imbued with resilience and forward momentum intrinsic to the Chinese spirit, offers a framework for understanding the present and constructing the future. This "Chinese-style redemption," characterized by a warm and optimistic realism, guides viewers out of the pandemic's shadows, helps them shed historical pains, and ultimately achieves the ideological call to "truth, goodness, and beauty." As viewers watch Wang Xiang rescue himself from the brink of drowning in the river of fate, they too gain experiences of self-rescue, striking a chord of resonance with the characters. As a milestone in the history of domestic drama, "The Long Season" connects the historical narrative within the screen to the realities outside it, achieving a multidimensional reconstruction of "new Northeastern memory" and an ideological call to "truth, goodness, and beauty" in the context of changing times. This finely crafted work, rich in both the texture of life and suspenseful intrigue, exemplifies the innovative path of Chinese television in the post-pandemic era, revealing the

"silent discourse" of film development behind the "manifest discourse" of audience feedback (Fiske, 1998).

5. Discussion

The discussion section of this paper delves into the multifaceted ideological and cultural significance of "The Long Season," a groundbreaking Chinese drama that has resonated deeply with audiences and critics alike. By employing a symptomatic reading approach, we aim to explore the underlying themes and societal reflections present in the series, particularly focusing on how it rearticulates Northeastern memory and evokes the contemporary consciousness of "truth, goodness, and beauty." "The Long Season" stands out for its innovative portrayal of Northeastern China, which diverges from the traditional industrial narrative. The series masterfully blends elements of suspense and comedy, creating a "New Northeastern Memory" that is both resilient and optimistic. This approach is a departure from the conventional dichotomy of the "comedic Northeast" and the "scarred Northeast," offering a more nuanced and layered representation of the region's identity. The use of suspense and comedy not only serves as a narrative device but also as a cultural commentary on the resilience of the Northeastern people (Pitt, 2012). It suggests a collective memory that is not solely defined by historical trauma but also by the capacity for humor and hope in the face of adversity. This rearticulation is significant as it challenges and expands the conventional discourse surrounding Northeastern China, providing a more holistic and humanizing perspective. The series' focus on the parental perspective, particularly the "first generation" who experienced the layoff wave, offers a poignant exploration of self-directed emotional healing. This narrative choice allows for a more intimate and authentic portrayal of how individuals cope with and ultimately reconcile with their past (Pitt, 2012).

The "first-person + present tense" narration immerses the audience in the characters' emotional journey, fostering a sense of empathy and shared experience. Moreover, the series' emphasis on personal fate tragedies over collective social tragedies serves to soften the historical scars while still addressing the underlying issues. This approach allows for a more palatable exploration of historical trauma, making it accessible and relatable to a broader audience. "The Long Season" encapsulates an ideological call that transcends the narrative itself. The director Xin Shuang's creative approach of being "half a meter above the ground" reflects a desire to present a beautiful yet realistic portrayal of life, one that is grounded in the experiences of the people but also aspires to a higher ideal. This approach aligns with the series' overarching themes of truth, goodness, and beauty, offering a narrative that is both redemptive and inspiring. The series' conclusion, which provides a redemptive and hopeful ending, serves as a metaphor for personal reconciliation with trauma and the possibility of moving forward. This narrative arc resonates with audiences who have faced similar challenges, offering a framework for understanding and navigating personal and collective trauma (Kukla, 2018).

6. Conclusion

"The Long Season" is a testament to the power of storytelling in shaping cultural memory and promoting ideological values. Its innovative approach to depicting Northeastern China, its focus on emotional healing and self-

rescue, and its ideological call to "truth, goodness, and beauty" make it a significant cultural artifact. As a milestone in the history of Chinese drama, it not only connects the historical narrative within the screen to the realities outside but also achieves a multidimensional reconstruction of "new Northeastern memory" in the context of changing times. The series exemplifies the innovative path of Chinese television in the post-pandemic era, revealing the "silent discourse" of film development behind the "manifest discourse" of audience feedback, and ultimately, offering a beacon of hope and inspiration for audiences navigating their own journeys of self-discovery and healing

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