

Great strength lies in Reality——A Review of the Film *Manchester by the Sea*

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Abstract

The film "Manchester by the Sea" focuses on the ordinary life of small potatoes, and gives expression to a sensible reality with refreshing power. This paper investigated its realistic aesthetic style in aspects of its performance object and narrative structure based on the screenplay; in addition, the author also analyzed the coordinated and unified film style from image, music, scene control and other microcosmic angles.

Keywords

Manchester by the Sea, Realistic Aesthetics, Narrative Structure.

1. Introduction

The film *Manchester by the Sea* directed by Kenneth Lonergan and starring Casey Affleck, Michelle Williams, etc. won the Academy Award for Writing Original Screenplay and Best Actor in the 89th annual Academy Awards ceremony at a stroke, and thus has attracted great attention of film fans. The film tells the story of Lee Chandler who went back to the seaside city Manchester where he used to live to make arrangements for a funeral and look after his teenage nephew after his brother Joe Chandler dies. The film, which will be released in China in recent days, is certain to set off a new wave.

2. Organization of the Text

The film starts with Lee's journey back to Manchester, and narrate the complete story as well as brings back the past by things he saw and his chat with old friends, interweaving natural realistic style with metasomatic flashback. It created a slow but refreshing emotional power through exquisite depiction of character's inner emotion and description of real life moments.

As a film themed in morality and ethics, it has the obvious image style of de-Hollywood and Europeanization. It captured the life episodes of ordinary people and revealed inescapable suffering through the vicissitudes in their lives. All problem faced by the protagonist—passionless work, loss of loved ones, divorce, and inharmonious family relationships, etc., are common problems for the ordinary people. The writing techniques such as choosing daily life reality and the ordinary people's life experiences as the subject matter, weakening plot structure, using natural light, traveling shot, sequence shot to record the actual events, were created by the Italian Neorealism after the Second World War. By using flash-backs, the film demonstrated a complete event to the viewers, and made clear Lee's painful growing process; the hidden sorrow is in stark contrast with the previous happy life. A plot that can cause compassion should express "the change of someone from good fortune to bad, and it must not be due to villainy but to some great flaw in such a man as we have described" [1]. Due to Lee's carelessness after he is drunk, a fire burns down his house and takes the lives of three children, and his wife cannot release the great pain from the bereavement and has left him. The protagonist has lost his beloved family members overnight and escaped from Manchester with guilt. He becomes a handyman in another city and makes a living in pain. The narration of life and death, affection, love, family, marriage, ethics in the film generates a strong resonance among audiences, and the tragedy of the protagonist can even provoke the compassion of people who have nothing to do with him.

The director (and screenwriter), Kenneth Lonergan's exploration of the play and the inner world of the characters are unique. The story in the film is only a glance at the real life from the perspectives of both characterization or narrative structure. The inharmonious relationship between Lee and his 16-year-old nephew Patrick is the contradictory focus of the narrative, and as this storyline advances, Lee's wife Randy, his sister in law Elise, Joe's partner and Patrick's friends appear successively. Each of the characters has distinct and realistic characteristics which have played certain roles in the foreshadowing and extension of the plot. The opening scenes such as snow removal, pond maintenance, light bulb installing, toilet dredging and Lee's conflict with people in the bar show, on the one hand, his situation, and depression and difficulty of his life on the other hand. He seems to be swayed by some force and lives like a walking corpse and running flesh. When he went to the hockey area to pick up his nephew, the first thing he saw is the fight between Patrick and his classmates, which reveals that Patrick is at the age of rebellion and thus paves the way for the conflict and communication between the two in the future. Although many years ago, Lee and Patrick spent a playful, intimate period at sea, time passes, and a sense of strangeness is haunting the two after many years when Lee meets Patrick who is now even higher than Lee. Self-centered Patrick seems to feel no pain for his father's death, but in fact, he tries to relieve the sorrow caused by his loved one's death by meeting with friends, playing rock music, and dating with girls. In contrast, Lee has to arrange his brother's funeral and deals with nephew's guardianship while enduring tortures of painful memories. Many conflicts appear since both of their mood cannot be released, and become increasingly fierce. People of different ages and identities have different ways of releasing anxiety: as an adult, Lee can only vent through violent means, such as fighting, while underage Patrick distracts himself by noise and dating, etc. The director's characterization of figures is beyond appearance, he shows the audiences Patrick's collapse when he sees the frozen chicken in the fridge as well as his toss and turn the night before his father's funeral; all these details enrich the characters and reflect the alienation concept of the younger generation on family affection and love. It is easy to see the director's painstaking discovery of the personality and life details of different characters, which makes the characters real, natural, credible, just like a prototype of life. Audiences can thus "see" themselves in the story as the plot develops, and reach spiritual purification and sublimation to some extent.

It is necessary for a narrative film based on characters to show the evolution of characters' traits. Lee and Patrick have their own views on some issues, and are like two parallel lines that would never converge. As the drama unfolds and the conflict escalates between the two, the film adds a lot of living details in the process when the two start getting along. They slowly understand and tolerate each other, and make concessions through memories and discoveries. The true impetus of this change, i.e., the hidden power of family relationships, originates from people's inner heart, and has natural and real power. Lee thinks of his brother and young nephew's care and support when his world is dark after the funeral, and the scene when his brother even buys new furniture for his only rented house. The strength of affection touches him. He goes back to the former working place to pack everything, and decides to accompany his nephew in Manchester. This is Lee's first concession. At the same time, Patrick feels really down when he receives an email from his step-father after his meeting with his mum. Then he refuses to meet with friends and stays alone, and bursts into tears when he sees the frozen chicken (reminding him of his father's body in the freezer). Lee is at lost when he sees this. He has thought that his nephew never feels anything about his father's death, but now he knows that his nephew is releasing his pain in a different way. After this, he makes a second concession, that is to change the engine of the ship, and the conflict between the two is alleviated for the first time. However, it hasn't lasted long before a second strike comes after a short period of relaxation. Lee has encountered his ex-wife Randy on the way (it is the first serious conversation between the two for years after their divorce), this discourages him from returning to his hometown while he is still hesitating and makes him want to give up nephew's guardianship. He goes back to the pub and vents again with a fight. He is badly injured this time. Patrick sees the photos of the three lost children when he goes into Lee's room after his injury, and suddenly he starts to understand Lee's behaviors and ungente expression. He makes a concession and gives up his persistence in the guardianship. The

conflicts between the two come down for the second time (and, of course, it is because of Patrick's growth). The alternation of tension and relaxation reflects the healing power of families and softness of human nature.

Good movies reflect reality and dreams. Audiences always unconsciously expect a happy ending. Since Lee is bound by guilt, the audiences expect that he will get some sort of redemption at the end of the film, and change his depressed life. Psychologically speaking, Lee's sense of guilt is the main force to drive the plot development; but the director does not follow the audiences' expectation and adopts a more realistic approach. The painful suffering is hard to forget, and can only fade as time goes by. In the end, Lee, Patrick, Randy, and Elise who all have had great sufferings make the most efforts within their own abilities. Lee attempts to grab the police's gun to commit suicide (he fails) because he feels guilty for the trouble he caused after he is drunk; after this, he escapes Manchester under the help of his brother and manages to lead a life; the sudden death of his brother leads him to arrange the funeral and settle his nephew's life. Despite the twists and turns, he finally gets away from the painful Manchester (decides to come back to visit his nephew often), and his nephew becomes part of his life and gives him hope and motivation. Randy and Elise have had an unhappy marriage. Although Randy has formed a new family, she feels guilty about Lee, and the encounter with Lee gives her a chance to say sorry and release her inner depression. Elise, who no longer drinks, has started her new family, too, and lives a stable life with religious beliefs. After all these, Patrick also finds George who is going to adopt him, and learns how to understand and tolerate. At the end of the film, the warm scene (Lee and Patrick are playing balls on the road) indicates the relaxed state of the two men and the real reconciliation of their relationship after all.

The film adheres to the aesthetic concept of documentary and objectively reflects the real moments (from real life) of the performance subjects, and takes the life of ordinary people as objects. The subject matter has the immediacy of reality, reveals the uncertainty (changes) that exists in reality. It has achieved the same result as the aesthetic style of the Italian Neorealism. Andrew Bazin's belief that "the film seems to have used every means provided by technologies on its subject matter. After that, an invention of accelerated montage or change of style of photography is then not enough to impress the audience. Films have unknowingly entered the age of drama, I mean: the reversed primary and secondary relation between content and form"; "Today what we value is the subject itself and thus every technique tends to be hidden and apparent in front of the subject" [2]. It is still instructive for the subject matter of films in modern times. Likewise, the narrative structure of the film is also authentic; time in the context of a full real-life event is reversible, and character's guilt drives the development of story, which is as real and true as life. Here, divorce, death, quarrels are all phenomena in real lives and make the film harmonious and natural. For example, when Lee is looking for a job in Manchester, the director uses ellipsis. He firstly shows two specific working scenarios and slowly changes it to the streets and sea level in Manchester, briefly indicating the process of Lee in the whole day. It is just because of the authenticity of the object and the narrative structure that the film becomes a reasonable "asymptotic line of the real life" [3], and unconsciously touches the tender and sensitive heart of the audience.

In order to match the direct truth of the subject and the plain narrative, the film uses appropriate and skillful camera position, natural landscape conversion, as well as natural and realistic photography and lighting to make the characters close to life and highly featured. The panoramic, vistas and even grand vision of the charming scenery in the seaside city reveals an image that preserves the authenticity in a fictional film to the audience. The scene when Lee and Randy encounters each other is impressive. Simple shooting technique, bright and soft natural light, as well as the touching performance of the characters, make the scene become one of the key shots in the film. The conversation scene is completed by positive and negative shooting methods, and there are only panoramic and close-up landscape changes. The director revealed in the interview that two cameras were used when filming the scene, and simplification of technique makes the audience's perceptual process less restricted, which reproduces the normal form of the complete action, and forms a potential form of expression. In order to create a realistic aesthetic style, the director uses a lot of

sequence shot to conceive and photograph; for example, Lee's walking scene (walking out from the lawyer's office, from the funeral parlor), and multi-purpose continuous shooting has been used to make the time process respected and to guarantee the unity of time and space; following shot from different angles and the fixed shot also make the two's emotional changes real and natural, and make audiences feel very close and reasonable.

The film also adopts a natural and reasonable principle in terms of music. The music includes the sonata of an opera called Messiah, tracks from Massenet and music from Lesley Barber. Kenneth explains the music in an interview: "the music is not related to the characters and plots in the film, but rather to depict the eternal charm of the world around us, sometimes cold and heartless and sometimes heartwarming". Music mainly accompanies the main character's memory, or is used for the opening to show the charming scenery of the seaside town and the past happy life of the hero; or is used for Joe's funeral to render the sad atmosphere; or for the scene where Patrick teaches his girlfriend to sail the boat (Lee sits on the rail at the stern, smiling a long-lost smile against the sea breeze) to express his contentment. Music is accompanied by the different emotions of the characters, and is sometimes sad and sometimes happy, both rendering atmosphere and emotion, and reflecting the ambiguity and polysemy of reality.

3. Conclusion

Manchester by the Sea does not break away from real life and make the ordinary people and events in daily life full of spiritual value, and reveals the appearance of souls. It displays the tortuous life of an ordinary man, and becomes extremely touching through the objective statements and subjective description of life and death, affection, friendship, love, family, marriage and ethics. The director's natural control of narrative structure, meticulous depiction of characters, skilled realistic way of camera application, as well as the actors' adaptive and characteristic performance recreates the essence of life, and has written a poetic folk song with soothing rhythm and documentary aesthetics.

References

- [1] Aristotle. Poetics. (Commercial Press, China, 2012) p.98.
- [2] Andre Bazin. What is Cinema? (Culture and Art Publishing House, China, 2008) p.98.
- [3] Andre Bazin. What is Cinema? (Culture and Art Publishing House, China, 2008) p.307.