

# Symbolic Tension in Contemporary Chinese Urban Film: Culture, Space and Community

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## Abstract:

**Film semiotics is an important theory produced in the modern film period, and urban film closely responds to the process of contemporary Chinese urbanization. Borrowing the theory of film semiotics to analyze Chinese contemporary urban films, it can be found that typical cities have formed a unique symbolic tension, referring to urban culture, and having multiple symbolic elements sets to interpret the new imagination of the city. Urban film and film semiotics should jointly promote the poetic integration of various classes in the city, construct an urban emotional community, and form emotional resonance and spiritual progress.**

**Keywords: Urban film; Film semiotics; Space; Urban community.**

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## Introduction

In the last ten years of the 20th century, the process of urbanization and film industrialization in China has entered a period of rapid development. Films have entered the homes of ordinary people. Cities have become the main living space for most people. Urban space and citizen's life have become the important visual field of film lens. So, for Chinese films that turn to narrative cities, from the perspective of film as an art carrier, what symbols can be used to refer to urban culture in urban films? What are

the representative symbols of urban culture and space? In the process of urbanization in China, how do urban films interpret the new imagination space? This article uses film semiotics and combines the representative urban films in contemporary Chinese film circles since the late 1980s and early 1990s to try to analyze the above problems. This article uses film semiotics and combin

es the representative urban films in contemporary Chinese film circles since the late 1980s and early 1990s to try to analyze the above problems. Since this period, it has not only been the peak of urban film creation by the fifth generation of directors, but also the pioneering period of the sixth generation of directors and "New urban films."

## Urban Film and Film Semiotics

As one of the most complex and rich cultural forms that emerged in the 20th century, the city is currently one of the most important social relations and political and economic units. The relationship between the two is the most attractive theme and the richest. Starting point for challenging discussions (Lin,2004). In other words, films originated in cities, and urban development is shaped by films. Films and cities have achieved each other's achievements. Therefore, to explore the starting point of Chinese urban culture, the evolution of Chinese urban films cannot be avoided.

Chinese urban films can be traced back to the 1930s. Many films that reflect the lives of citizens have appeared on the film scene, such as *Angels on the Road*, *Urban Scenery*, and *Myriads of lights*. These films delicately portray city life, showing a commercial atmosphere. And deeply criticize the social reality. From the 1950s after the founding of New China to the eve of the implementation of the reform and opening policy, influenced by the ideological form of "de-urbanization" and the protection of agricultural values, the modern meaning of "city" was once obscured/repressed, such as *Sentinel under the Neon Light*.

Since the 1980s, China has entered a transitional period. The development of urban film and the process of urbanization in China correspond to each other. Films have reflected China's new cultural symbols and imaginary spaces, films and cities have begun to interact. But what can really be called "urban films" should have started in the 1990s. After 1992, after the economic leap after the reform and opening up, the economy of Chinese cities developed rapidly. Cities coexist in construction and destruction, and urban people are suffering from a 'shock' experience much greater than that of Baudelaire (Wang, 2005). Many important awards in the film industry were born during this period, such as the first China Golden Rooster & Hundred Flowers Film Festival and Changchun Film Festival. 1992 was China's first true "film year" (Wang, 1993). Urban films are no longer "reproductions" of real life, but rather create "image spaces" of real China.

Following this focus, since the late 1980s and early 1990s, contemporary Chinese urban films have begun to construct their own narrative space, focusing on urban families and individual emotions, psychology and spiritual adjustment. In the meantime, there is both the grand perspective of the fifth-generation director and the marginal perspective of the sixth-generation director. In the new century, on the one hand, cities are still being infiltrated and influenced by farming culture. On the other hand, after China's

accession to the World Trade Organization, a real "urbanization" has emerged, and urban films based on culture and space have become the mainstream. At this time, the perspective of Chinese urban films has shifted from the rural poetry and national fables constructed by the fifth-generation directors to the modern cities of vicissitudes. The sixth generation of directors has become the backbone of urban film transformation, focusing on marginalized groups in society, preferring low-cost production, referring to modern life, and a variety of creative forces bursting out, showing profound humanistic care. Correspondingly, foreign academic circles have begun to develop a symptomatic reading of Chinese urban movies. Urban images are a cultural mirror image and textual reflection of the changes in the material and emotional dimensions that have emerged with the process of urbanization in China (Luo, 2018).

Looking back at the emergence and evolution of Chinese urban films, it can be found that it is not like many western urban films, which describe urban crimes and describe genre films in depth. In the continuous decentralization and fragmentation of the cultural tide, the core issue of contemporary Chinese urban films has always involved the subject of people. And considering life from a spiritual level, the city is usually the main narrative space, showing that the general subjects of society have their own imaginations about the city. This "rasterized" imaginary space is full of different material and cultural landscapes (Wu, 1997). In its birth and evolution, it can not only express the urban style, show the urban space, but also respond to real life. It also has unique symbols and multiple signifiers.

Ernst Cassirer said that people are "animals of symbols", people can actively use symbols to create culture. The film scene not only records, but also influences the transformation of the social and cultural space represented by modern cities (Clark, 2004). Undoubtedly, from the perspective of the research object of contemporary Chinese urban film, there is this

kind of symbolic innovation, intertwined urban cultural symbols and space symbols, which form the urban image/imaginary space in the film.

Therefore, the use of film semiotics to analyze contemporary Chinese urban films has strong applicability. On the one hand, film semiotics is an indispensable part of modern film theory. Based on the research paradigm of rationalism, it has interdisciplinary characteristics and emphasizes scientific and rigorous semiotic methods to explain film. It can try to escape the personal experience of the research object. In the superposition of explicit and invisible symbols, the "symbolic meaning and expressive essence" of the film symbols mentioned by Christian Metz are explored to interpret urban films rationally. On the other hand, semiotics is a subject that studies the system of signs, denotation and denotation (Stam,1997). In the process of symbolizing the research object, the urban "reality" and "imagination" space can be fully expressed. This process is to distinguish the cultural symbols of typical cities, to "disenchant" the urban space, to find a new emotional space for the city, and to move towards the key to the construction of the urban "community".

### **Emerging cultural symbols**

The film was born in the modern city of Paris. The factories and trains that the Lumière brothers aimed at are also unique symbols of modern cities. Movies and modern cities are both products of modern technology. The encounter between movies and cities establishes a rhythm that echoes the rhythm of the times (Zhang,2007). It is the interaction between the movie and the city, urban films not only document and reflect on urban life, but also actively influence modern urban culture. The development of contemporary Chinese urban film is inseparable from the transformation of modern society, urbanization and globalization. At the same time, in multiple contexts, urban culture and space interestingly outline "life" and "world", and speak of "reality" and "future".

Contemporary Chinese urban film and urban

culture constitute an interactive and imaginative relationship, rather than a simple reflection/being reflected relationship. This complicated relationship provides a rich space for the development of related topics (Chen,2008). Interaction and imagination promote people's perception of the city. Perception and experience splicing people's understanding of the city. Different cities in the same era, different eras in the same city, through different urban cultural symbols, are catalyzed by the power of film language into a new urban cultural identity. The real use of film myths is still big cities(Biro,2003).In other words, among the numerous contemporary Chinese urban movies, big cities must be selected as typical samples. Beijing, the cultural and political center of China, and Shanghai, the economic center, make us clearly feel the multiple urban impressions, which are the most suitable cases for in-depth description of urban films.

Taking Beijing as an example, China's first film Dingjun Mountain was born here, and established its important position in Chinese movies for more than 100 years. Film space constitutes urban culture, and urban culture influences film creation. As an ancient capital, Beijing has its own multiple cultural traditions, which are mutually constructed with film creation. Contemporary urban films present a multi-dimensional urban culture to Beijing. Firstly, Beijing in the contemporary film space is the Beijing of civilian culture. It does not show the majesty and imposing manner of the royal architecture, but places its focus on the common people's space like courtyard houses and Hutong (胡同), showing the gentleness and tranquility of Beijing. In Neighbor, the Tongzilou (筒子楼), which has an uncomfortable environment, has formed a pleasant interpersonal relationship. The public bath in Shower, which is quite symbolic of the times, can not only take a bath, but also communicate with neighbors. The bath becomes a space that exposes the body and the soul, and has a humanistic representation of the highest

good is like water (Wang,2005). Secondly, Beijing in the contemporary film space is the Beijing of memory culture. The city itself has human memory, and films are cultural containers of memory, such as *In the Heat of the Sun* and *Sunflower* use images of the military compound, Chang'an Street, Tiananmen Square, etc. to show that a generation of The memory of Beijing city. Thirdly, the city of Beijing in the contemporary film space is the Beijing of modern culture. In the process of Beijing's modernization, the architectural symbols of the "cement forest" replaced the ancient architectural symbols of the imperial city, and the memory of the traditional city was dispelled. At the same time, it highlights the living culture in the modern urban space and presents the new culture of alternative people, which has become a new direction for the film to show Beijing culture. *Beijing Bastards* uses documentary techniques to focus on the lives and fortunes of special people in Beijing. The traditional Beijing symbols such as Hutong (胡同) and Siheyuan (四合院) that were destroyed in *100 Flowers Hidden Deep*, the traditional "homeland" mentioned by Mr. Feng no longer exists. The Liu Ye (六爷) in *Mr. Six* is the symbol of the narrow and benevolent spirit of old Beijing. The generational gap between Liu Ye, Xiaobo and Xiao Fei is the confrontation between tradition and modern Beijing culture.

Shanghai, with the development of Pudong (浦东) in the 1990s, entered the forefront of urbanization early and is the center of China's economy. It can be said that Shanghai is a better point of view to examine the evolution of people's mentality and emotion during the transition period. Generally speaking, our understanding of the city is not static, but mixed with other related things, partial and one-sided impressions. Every sense organ in the city will react and become an impression after synthesis (Lynch,2001). Shanghai, a contemporary urban film space, uses symbols to present a dual impression of urban culture. First of all, old style alley, garden houses and other symbols constitute

the impression of old Shanghai, such as the accurate restoration of Shanghai's old-fashioned houses in *Shanghai Women*, and the old-fashioned alleys in *City of Trance*, reproducing the traditional culture and civic atmosphere of old Shanghai. The second is the new impression of Shanghai shaped by emotions, money and opportunities. For example, in *The Longest Night in Shanghai*, a female taxi driver in Shanghai is used as the protagonist to express the emotional changes and confusion of people in modern cities. The individual anxiety and emotional confusion of Shanghai white-collar workers in *Park Shanghai* reveals the sadness and positivity of young people. In *A Beautiful New World*, Zhang Baogen, a young man in a small town, sees Shanghai as a symbol of realizing dreams and wealth, and a new symbol of hope in Shanghai. From the two narrative methods of urban films, one uses the city as a background, and the other integrates the whole city into the film's structure and images (Lin,2006). It can be seen that Shanghai is not only placed in the narrative reality background, but also integrated into the film's deep ideology to construct the old and new Shanghai impression.

How Beijing and Shanghai use film symbols to shape the current urban culture can be explained and summarized using the urban space symbol system. Mark Gottdiener and Alexandros ph. Lagopoulous (1988) used signification (符指) and signifier (特征) in semiotics to explain the four levels of urban space, namely, the decomposition of urban symbols. Specifically, referred and signifier use urban entities and forms, combined with material elements in urban space to present the spatial form of urban films. The contemporary urban film space is catalyzed by symbols. Beijing presents the urban culture of common people, memory and modernity, while Shanghai highlights the urban culture that mixes new and old impressions. However, the last level of "non symbolic ideology" can only be touched through in-depth text narrative analysis. The perspective of urban space culture research can

communicate the presentation of real space and the presentation of deep-seated ideology through the images presented in urban films.

### **Multiple space symbols**

Modern Chinese films in contemporary China weaken the grand narrative, pay attention to the warmth of ordinary people, and gather a variety of symbols from real life, which are reflected in urban films. Many "objects" construct the film space. With the help of symbols with different aesthetic styles and value orientations, the space embraces people's perception of the city, jointly constructs the real space and the imaginary space. The characteristic of the film is not that it can reproduce the imaginary world, but that it is the imaginary world from the beginning, and it is the imaginary world constructed as a signifier (Metz, 2006). Interpreting the space symbols of urban films, we can understand that the film space is not real, but the imagination itself. The symbols of the real space are only the symbol of appearance, and the space behind the imagination is the ultimate direction.

The real space and imaginary space of urban films are inseparable and closely related. Generally speaking, some representative symbols, streets, factories, office buildings, etc. can construct physical spaces, outsiders, urban youths, etc. can construct typical character spaces, and mobile phones, networks, etc. can construct media spaces. These specific symbols aggregate the multiple spaces of urban films, from reality to imaginary signifiers, metaphors for warmth, power, and marginal spaces. The symbols of the real space map the symbols of the imaginary space, and the imaginary space uses the value to represent the symbols of the real space. Therefore, analyzing the typical spatial symbols in several groups of urban movies can better contemplate the symbols of multiple imagined spaces.

Let's first look at the signs of physical space. Streets are often the appearance or starting point of urban life experience, symbolizing the overall pattern of the city, and are the primary visual stimulus for entering the city from the

countryside (Lin, 2016). However, the factory is often the first place where many outsiders enter the city to make a living. For example, in *Weaving Girl*, when women textile workers first arrived in Beijing, they saw the streets and buildings of the prosperous city; in *24 City*, Jia Zhangke focused on the old factory that became the real estate project, using the life experience of the workers as a metaphor for the factory the decline. In particular, the Chinese city films in the new century portray typical characters such as laid-off workers and famous agricultural workers. More and more films are devoted to the marginal spaces in the city, calmly thinking about the various problems of urbanization. For example, the portrayal of typical group portraits in *Orphan of Anyang* and *Unknown Pleasures* shows the humanistic care in contemporary Chinese urban films. Finally, among the symbols of media space, the network brings convenience for information exchange, but also brings new problems to the protection of personal privacy in the city. The mobile phone, as a product of modern technology and a symbol of modern lifestyle, extends the space for human activities and constructs a media space that spans regions and even cultures (Chen, 2009). For example, in *Caught in the Web*, the media space constructed by the violence of the media in the city expresses the impact of the new space on people; in *Cell Phone*, the mobile phone connects the city and the countryside, and has also become a symbol of strict adherence to an emotional transition. Therefore, we can also make an imaginative connection of the above three spaces in the film, and observe a combined imaginary space: people work hard in the city, and the convenient physical space temporarily relieves the anxiety of survival, but the vague and complicated real life. In particular, the marginalized people's space is at a loss, and they fall into the anxiety of identity. At the same time, the media space is pervasive in the entire society. How to effectively write oneself and soothe individual emotions has become a new demand of urban people. It is true that urban

space symbols are not limited to the above-mentioned types. Reality goes back to the signifier of imagination. Multiple urban space symbols can be grouped together to reflect on new problems in the city. Urban films may become the Mission of the city's real space and imaginary space. "Mixture" (弥合) to promote equal exchanges among all classes in the city.

Generally speaking, the use of multiple spatial symbols in contemporary Chinese urban films, especially strong symbolic symbols, is a metaphor for the modern experience of urban people in the new era and expresses the emotional interaction between people. It is commendable. Just like Metz's discussion on the ontology of film images, movies are no longer confined to the story outlined by the image in front of the viewer, but try to penetrate the symbolic world of those graphic symbols and reach the spiritual world of the people behind it (Nie,2014).The film records the typical spatial symbols of the city, with the help of the "imaginary signifier", that is, the ideographic function of the symbol, through the appearance of the symbol, and deeply describe the imagined space of the city.

### **Conclusion: Towards an urban emotional community**

In summary, contemporary Chinese urban film is a mixed concept, a symbolic community of both culture and space. As a cultural symbol community, it is not only related to the interpretation and expression of urban culture, but also cultural reflection on urbanization, with emphasis on the construction of urban culture. As a community of spatial symbols, it refers to the physical space and spiritual space of the city, including urban customs and daily life of citizens, thus forming a common source of emotion between the city and the citizens.

In the tide of globalization, whether it is the popularization of instant communication tools or the spread of smart cities. The movement of film images across material and electronic networks also relies on the interaction of the social or

political ecology composed of producers, distributors, and receivers (Ivakhiv&Adrian,2008). Through urban films, there are more possibilities for the construction of communities between individuals and individuals, and between individuals and groups. Cities are no longer simply gathering places of economic and geographic significance, but condensing places of human emotions and spirits in a perceptible space. Because of this, Manuel Castells pointed out that identity is the source of people's meaning and experience. Only recognition can construct people's emotions towards the city. Urban films, as an intermediate medium, express deep urban cultural symbols in the space of the city's imagination, traverse the appearance of multiple symbols in the city, promote the emotional freedom and equality of urban people, and boost the city The poetic resonance of the class builds an urban emotional community, forming emotional resonance and spiritual progress.

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