

From Deconstruction to Representation

-- On New Historicism

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Abstract

The concept of New Historicism, formally put forward and interpreted by Stephen J. Greenblatt in the 1980s, has gone through more than 40 years. In literary research, new historicists emphasize breaking the disciplinary boundary between literature and history, synthesizing all kinds of texts, so as to reconstruct the literary and cultural context. Influenced by Foucault's view of power, this theory focuses on the "marginalized" materials in historical narration, especially anecdotes. After being translated and introduced into China, it has a significant impact on Chinese literature and film creation.

Keywords

New Historicism; Historical Text; Literary Text; Chinese Literature; Chinese Film.

1. Introduction

In the 1980s, literary discussion was led by debates over theory, especially over the status of language in the United States. Scholars queried generally the referential value of language, and the ability of language to construct or deconstruct meaning.

Some critics at University of California at Berkeley were changing their concern to the concrete particularities of history. They chose to fulfill the explanation of the context of literature through more creative methods, especially through those anecdotes, instead of amassing facts.[1] Stephen J. Greenblatt was a leading critic of this viewpoint, and he named this literary history "the New Historicism".

Many New Historicists including Greenblatt were affected by Michel Foucault and cultural anthropology. They raised the view that modern society exerts control society operates through "subversion and containment". [2] Therefore, New Historicists pay close attention to the margins and conflicts rather than center and resolutions. Besides, history is regarded as textual, constructed and self-contradictory from Greenblatt's view. According to his argument in *Practicing New Historicism* (2000), anecdotes are the same important. He attempted to research on anecdotes in order to be extremely closer to touch the real, and recreating the social and cultural negotiations of the concrete particularities of history.

Therefore, this article is going to demonstrate how New Historicism treats the relations among history, literature and text, as well as the deconstruction and representation of Chinese literature, especially contemporary literature, and film after the theory was translated and introduced into China.

2. Interpretation and Deconstruction of New Historicism

What should be interpreted first are: why we deconstruct, and what does New Historicism deconstruct. In the following, three aspects are demonstrated. First is the coming up of the viewpoint of "Historical Text". According to New Historicism critics, history is regarded as an existence previous to historical text, as well as the basis of producing linguistic sign. [3] History is presented through language. In other words, language can be a window for human beings to understand history.

In addition, historians are writers who deploy the traditional devices of narrative to make sense of raw data, to organize and give meaning to their accounts of the past. Hayden White studied the characteristics of language from exactly this perspective. Furthermore, his study contains how the historical narrative forms and the regulation of its expression, along with how historical text is constructed through the language of narrative subject and the transformation of historical events.

Hayden White pointed out that historical discourse is self-interpreted through three aspects, which are formal argument, plot and ideology. Formal argument includes formalism, organicism, mechanism and contextualism. The plot includes tragic, comic, romantic and ironic. In addition, ideology includes anarchism, conservatism, radicalism, liberalism and so on. [4]

This viewpoint provides for narrative discourse a basis of text deconstruction and certainly feasible methodology. Each aspect includes four or more possibilities. According to this article, this has a similarity to permutation and combination. In a word, identical historical affair can be chosen through various combinations and emerges extremely different historical texts.

Based on this, New Historicism critics don't believe that history gives its readers a privileged access to the real or the truth. They consider that multiple interpretations can generate multiple corresponding histories. However, what should be emphasized simultaneously is that history does not equal to text and fiction. This is reminded by critics; otherwise, historical nihilism will emerge.

Influenced by the theory of "New Historicism", in the field of novel creation, Chinese writers reconstruct the previous era and social context, not to reproduce the objective existence of history, but to express the resistance to the unitary narration (political narrative) of the past, to seek personalized and diversified expression. However, it makes history far away from reality, and developed into fiction and imagination.

Second, there is an issue between literary and non-literary texts. Greenblatt advocated cultural poetics, which refers, through deconstruction of the antagonistic situation between literary and non-literary texts, to reconstruct the cultural context at that time. This view is helpful for critics to break through the distortion of historical narrative caused by the control and suppression of power in a certain field at that time. History and society can be objectively reconstructed from a broader perspective.

Third, there exists the concern for margin and conflict elements. New Historicism critics are generally interested in marginalized episodes in history, especially the anecdotes of those emperors. This is related to "modern society exerts control society operations through subversion and containment", proposed by New Historicism critics. Nevertheless, the joint of scattered and trivial information is skeptical that may render something far-fetched. The rationality extent of choosing, joint and understanding material, seems to be determined by the personal ability of individual critic, but not a certainly object standard.

Ever more to the point, New Historicism does not only emphasize the chasing of how power mechanism operates, but also declare that this indeed demonstrates the ideology of the era the researchers are living in. Stephen Greenblatt has held this viewpoint. This reflects the distinct subject consciousness of those New Historicism critics, and the spirits of critical and self-

questioning. That is because the deconstruction of the old power system is likely to lead to the emergence of a new power discourse system.

3. Representation and Reconstruction in Literature

The Journal of New Historicism is called Representations. As Greenblatt said, the literary work is a player in the competition among various groups to gain their ends. In other words, the literary work is a stage that numerous groups are scrambling for, and provides for New Historicism critics a platform where they can explore the operating regulation of power mechanism, query literary classics and rewrite the history of literature.

Because of its uniqueness, New Historicism criticism was translated and introduced into China in the 1980s, which has aroused the attention and discussion of scholars and writers in the field of literature. [6]

3.1. The Relationship between Literature and History

New Historicism emphasizes on breaking the boundary between literature and history. However, in China, there exists a view of "no separation of literature, history and philosophy" in a long period, especially when it comes to ancient Chinese works. Taking *Zhanguoce*, *Zuo zhuan* and *Shiji* as examples, they were all written by historians, and emphasized the objective explanation of historical facts. These works can not only be researched in aspect of history subject to explore the authenticity of historical facts, but also from a literature perspective to research on the artistic characteristics of language.

Besides, historians take collecting historical materials largely into consideration, and emphasize "taking history as a mirror". In this case, the New Historicism query text, as well that multiple interpretations can generate multiple corresponding history is boycotted by some of those historians. Those new changes occurred in the area of history research, infer to the impacts of discussion on technology and tax policy to a historical process in China from "Macro-history" perspective, which is under the background of globalization. Compared to the relationship between Chinese literature and history, New Historicism theory are more likely to be demonstrated in Chinese literature history and the creation of Chinese New Historicism fiction.

3.2. Rewriting the History of Chinese Literature

New Historicism critics are concentrating on the operating regulation of power discourse, as well as the marginal factors suppressed by power. In this case, the original structure of literature history writing is being broken. Specific to the history of Chinese literature, the literary value of "red classic novels", such as *Red Sun* and *Entrepreneurial History*, and political lyrics, which once occupied a large space in the history of contemporary Chinese literature, will be reevaluated. These works are focusing on the ideological propaganda functions of literature and emphasizing the massive reforms and era of revolution and political ideological discourse appears frequently.

New historicists propose to explore and deconstruct the ideology behind the text by integrating literary text and non-literary text, which provides more materials for deconstructing the original writing methods and rules of contemporary Chinese literary history. Meanwhile, rewriting contemporary Chinese literature history makes the evaluation standard more diverse. Rewriting the history of contemporary Chinese literature will make the evaluation criteria of literary works more diversified. In addition to considering the social value of literary works, it also takes into account the aesthetic value of literature. The attention to the marginal factors also makes feminist novels, Internet novels, Chinese novels in Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, and overseas Chinese novels included in the framework of the new history of Chinese literature.

3.3. The Creation of Chinese New Historicism Novels

From the research of Chinese scholars on New Historicism, it is generally considered that New Historicism has a great influence on the creation of Chinese new historical novels. Wang Yuechuan, a Chinese scholar, pointed out that the New Historicism theory and Croce's philosophy of history have played a positive role in the creation of New Historicism novels. [6] Specifically speaking, typical works, such as *Red Sorghum* by Mo Yan, *To Live* by Yu Hua, *Bai Lu Yuan* by Chen Zhongshi, *Qiqie chengqun* by Su Tong and so on, are respectively adapted to films by the 5th generation directors and won international prizes, which is worth noting as well.

Differing from the concern on the reality of historical facts and focusing on hero-like character of history writing, New Historicism fictions demonstrate diverse and even subversive characteristics. In the expression of theme, New Historicism novels break down the ideological power discourse on purpose, especially the political discourse and unificated political dominating psychology. The creation of New Historicism fictions subverts the former massive narratives of nation and country, and changes into partial narratives of family or individuals. The authors emphasized the diversified viewpoints to history, and made the era as no more than an existence background of the characters. The writers concern more about the fate of the marginal and vulnerable groups, and depict the scenes of folk life. In *Red Sorghum* by Mo Yan, the customs of folks in Shandong Gaomi are largely described, such as marriage and wine producing.

In depicting the characters, New Historicism fictions are also different from the creation ways of former time. In the previous literature creation, such as red classic novels, there existed an obvious opposition of positive characters and negative ones. In details, positive characters were described to be noble, moral and brave; while negative characters were despicable, mean and evil. New Historicism novels broke this fierce opposition. Marginal individuals are chosen to be main characters, for instance, bandits, landlords and prostitutes. These ordinary individuals' destiny was being tracked in the novels under the background of violent evolution. Taking *To Live* by Yu Hua as an example, its main character Xu Fugui was a young master in a family of landlord. He lost its wealth in gambling, and started his poor life. He was forced to be a labor for national army in the way to ask for a doctor for his mother. Afterwards, he was made to be captive by liberation army. His son was unfortunately dead during Great Leap Forward campaign after he returning to his hometown. In the dust of the era, all his family was leaving him. What was at least last, are only the old poor character Xu and his ox. Characters are described not into either positive or negative, but deeply inside his mind and inner conflicts.

Generally speaking, although the New Historicism novels are similar to the New Historicism theories in questioning the authenticity of historical texts, but the former tends to the fiction and imagination of history, which is different from the theory's emphasis on the reproduction of history to touch the real. For readers, the writer's pursuit of multiple historical perspectives and his multiple fictions and imaginations of the same period in history may lead to the loss of historical authenticity. Especially for those readers who are absent to certain historical events, they are passively receiving diverse interpretations and fall into confusion and powerlessness, which leads to a sidestep or avoidance to pursue the real history of the past. Instead, they shift the focus to the present that we can feel personally, and participate in the construction of the future world.

In this circumstance, Chinese science fictions are rising gradually. From the perspective of "New Historicism", different from the reconstruction of the past in the new historicism novels in the 1990s, Chinese science fiction extends history to the reconstruction of the past and imagination of the future world. The description of space also extends to multiple space-time and outer space. Specifically, the protagonists of Chinese science fiction are mostly intellectuals and the story describe the protagonists saving the earth in a disastrous living environment.

As Greenblatt said, "the literary work is a player in the competition along variable groups to gain their ends." [3] With the development of mass media and globalization, the medium of film was chosen as the field of contention for new power discourse. Film culture also reflects the construction and change of new ideological discourse.

4. Representation and Reconstruction in Film

4.1. Rebellion of Chinese 5th Generation Directors

Mostly like the development of New Historicism fictions, film creation was developing also in this track. Take characters building in a film as an example, the characters shown in the films in 3rd generation's works can be obviously divided into 2 groups, which are absolutely positive and the opposite, absolutely negative. This process can be seen as a similarity or expansion of literature. In film *Heroic Sons and Daughters* by Wu Zhaodi in 1964, it can be figured out that the main characters are depicted to be hero or heroine, and they contribute their life in the righteous war against imperialism. Relating to film processing, the light used to depict the character were mostly front positive light, and shooting angles chosen could demonstrate the strong image of these characters. Also, in *Zhang Ga the Soldier Boy* by Cui Wei in 1963, there were negative character like the translators or the enemy, they were dressed and performed tricky and mean, which obviously express the dark side which is also the only side can be perceived to the audience. In this case, former film creation following the dramatic and dualized creation principle, especially in the seventeen-year film period, can be regarded to the propaganda or embodiment of political or ideological functions.

Afterwards, more and more film creators are starting to focus more in the marginal individuals or affairs. In the 4th generation's creation, aesthetic and artistic factors are playing important roles. In addition, some marginal topics were emerging in their creation, such as *Woman-Demon-Human* by Huang Shuqin, which contains and compound feminism and immerse phantasm to demonstrate the individual status of a woman.

With the development in literature regarding to New Historicism, Chinese film has been developing to the 5th generation creation. Undoubtedly, the films emerged related to the 5th generation revealed a strong relevance to a rebellion to the previous. (Hu & Gu, 2010) Narrative viewpoint changed from an omniscient perspective to individual or inside, which links to the fate or destiny to relatively little people rather than a grandiose narration with political discourse; besides, a deep dig into the internal conflict in characters rendered a more complete image with multiple and complicated attributes. As mentioned in the previous, *To Live* by fiction author Yu Hua, was adapted to film by director Zhang Yimou. Together with such many other adapted works, those films were all showing a rebellion to the history construction, but generating diverse scenes. Also, in those films with more artistic attributes, film languages were also using to demonstrate an overturn. For instance, in *Red Sorghum* by Zhang Yimou, it can be seen that color red is largely used; furthermore, *Yellow Earth* by Chen Kaige set a questionable ending for the story rather than describe the army as almighty, and use such many extreme long shots to demonstrate the yellow earth which can be regarded as a barrier to show how suffocative the atmosphere brings; which refers to a referential meaning or a symbol of the author himself.

What is worth mentioning, though some of these works were adapted from original fictions, some plots were still processed differently compared to original fictions; such as the ending of *To Live*. This might be also a specific characteristic of film which is a popular media and art.

4.2. Development of Chinese Science Film

With the development of Technology and Science, Chinese science film started showing up. In recent years, *The Wandering Earth* by Guo Fan, adapted from original and homonymic fiction

by Liu Cixin, meant a great step to construct special national science film. The gradual rising of science film might be generated in the impact of an absence of previous period of creators or audience, in other word, the author started reconstructing the coming future rather than chasing such reality of the passing time. The censorship is also an affecting factor that make time-travel and future theme more popular in cinema or television.

Compared to the past science film, *The Wandering Earth* started to demonstrate a relatively complete future system and some particular national characteristics, thus it can be regarded as a very new beginning of Chinese science films. The specific characteristics shown in Chinese science films which differ from western science film can be demonstrated in several aspects.

First is the character setting in the story. Still taking *The Wandering Earth* as the instance, the main character is set to be pilot or high-level intellectual; while in western science film such as *Captain America* or *Spiderman*, the main characters all turned or changed to hero by accident, but originated to be ordinary man.

Secondly, the social value in Chinese science films and western films also differ. One plot in *The Wandering Earth* depicted a scene that a group of people with different nation and country involved in a pushing activity to remedy the unfavorable circumstance. This scene demonstrated collectivism from Chinese nation. Also, self-sacrifice and self-contribution are as well represented in this work. Nevertheless, western science film indicated more heroism or individualism; which demonstrated largely in those hero films such as Marvel production. Ever more to the point, there exists a concept of community with shared future for mankind in *The Wandering Earth*, which also shown in the plot mentioned in the above.

Thirdly, feminism has already shown in the western film works, such as *Lucy* by Luc Besson, *Wonder Woman* by Patty Jenkins. While in Chinese science film, female character as heroin has not shown up yet, or to say, has not made such large impact as in the western film works.

There are still common points of both Chinese and western science films. Specifically, family concepts exist in films under both contexts. Still in *The Wandering Earth*, the conflict and reconciliation of father and son was embodied in this future story. Moreover, it can be seen in many family topics in western science films, for example *A.I.* by Stephen Spielberg.

In a short conclusion, history construction in a future context shows relatively largely diversity in a global scale. With the present or historical culture background or value, new history is being constructed and represented in future theme and science films. New history writing in films in future or totally fictive period is generating its national attributes in China from a perspective of contemporary society.

5. Conclusion

New Historicists pay attention to historical, literary and non-literary text as well as marginal factors, breaking the boundaries between disciplines, especially between literature and history. It helps to reconstruct the historical and cultural context of the past era by integrating all kinds of texts. New Historicism critics have analyzed the different forms and strategies of various narrative subjects when interpreting the same historical event, such as ideology and plot, to reveal how power discourse operates. History is regarded as textual, constructed and self-contradictory. Meanwhile, New Historicists emphasize that history does not equal to text and fiction, otherwise, historical nihilism will emerge.

Since the theory was introduced into China in the 1980s, it has a significant impact on Chinese contemporary literature and the creation of the fifth-generation directors. Chinese writers and directors reconstruct the previous era and social context, not to reproduce the objective existence of history, but to express the resistance to the unitary narration (political narrative) of the past, to seek personalized and diversified expression. In general, the protagonists are mostly marginal characters, and the content of the story depicts their destiny in the changing

eras. However, it makes history far away from reality. For readers, the writer's pursuit of multiple historical perspectives and his multiple fictions and imaginations of the same period in history may lead to the loss of historical authenticity. Especially for those readers who are absent to certain historical events, they are passively receiving diverse interpretations and fall into confusion and powerlessness, which leads to a sidestep or avoidance to pursue the real history of the past. Instead, they shift the focus to the present that we can feel personally, and participate in the construction of the future world. This is reflected in the emergence and popularity of Chinese science fiction and films.

As Greenblatt said, "the literary work is a player in the competition along variable groups to gain their ends." With the development of mass media and globalization, the medium of film was chosen as the field of contention for new power discourse. Film culture also reflects the construction and change of new ideological discourse. Chinese science fiction extends history to the reconstruction of the past and imagination of the future world. The description of space also extends to multiple space-time and outer space. Specifically, the protagonists of Chinese science fiction are mostly intellectuals and the story describe the protagonists saving the earth in a disastrous living environment. In this case, the spirit of self-sacrifice and self-contribution in Chinese culture is reflected again.

In general, New Historicism has a profound impact on Chinese literature and film creation, writers and directors have boldly subverted and reconstructed past historical narratives. With the attention to the present and the future, the creation of science fiction and films will construct a new history in a broader space. However, it also reflects the current ideology and core values.

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