

On the Aesthetics of Eastern Cinema

As I am on the plane heading back to America from Shanghai, I am witnessing majority of the passengers engaged in viewing films. I see that people are either watching Hollywood or Chinese industry films. And it comes to my mind to compare and contrast the cinematic aesthetics of the East and that of the West.

The most prominent characteristic of Eastern cinema is the concentration on the rhythmic movement of images that evoke the states such as mood, feeling, and emotion rather than evoking those states through the means of storytelling. One can get the clear sense of the Eastern cinematic aesthetics through the works of the Eastern cinema masters such as Wong Kar Wai, Iwai Shunji, Andrei Tarkovsky, Kenji Mizoguchi, Hayao Miyazaki, etc. Relying on the screenplay (a common saying that, “everything is within the text”), on the other hand, is the most prominent characteristic of Western cinema, which relies mostly on the subtext underneath the text – working the directors, actors, cinematographers, etc. under the subtextual procedures in order to supplement the story of the film that they are working on. Such pragmatic filmmaking perhaps derives from Western theatre being deeply rooted in the Shakespearean mindset and the dominance of Hollywood. In short, much of the aesthetics of Western cinema is defined by the British tradition of theatre and the American practice of cinema as industry. Unfortunately, the dominance of Hollywood mode of filmmaking in the West (and in other parts of the world) has made the world cinema irrelevant. That is, in other parts of the world, filmmakers and viewers are, in most cases already have, adapted fully to the Western cinematic aesthetics governed by Hollywood and subtextual theatre.

However, what remains in the Eastern cinema is still relevant. Many film audiences and filmmakers claim (judging by the Hollywood standard of what cinema is) that Chinese filmmakers do not know how to tell a good story in film. It is true that the Chinese filmmakers are struggling in the storytelling department. For me, however, this is a great sign because it shows the remnant of *the* aesthetics of Eastern cinema, which is based upon the rhythmic movement of images rather than storytelling. It is not that Chinese filmmakers do not know how to tell good stories. It is rather that the reliance on subtext and assorted linguistic approach to cinema, to art and philosophy, is still foreign to the Chinese filmmakers and the audiences. Thus they are still Easterners. The traditional Chinese poetry, for example, rely on the arrangement of images that embody the emotional meanings in temporal rhythm rather than the use of personal pronouns featured heavily in the Western poetry that suggests the protagonists’ journey, bringing forth drama.

What is very much concerning is that the Western filmmakers come to China and “teach” filmmaking; they teach the Hollywood mode of filmmaking as the golden standard. Hollywood has already won over Japan and Korea long ago, and as a result the film industries in Japan and Korea have become irrelevant to talk about even though their sales for domestic films are relatively high.

The Chinese filmmakers must be strong. They must not submit to the Hollywood way of filmmaking. If China falls to the Hollywood dominance, then it is over for the Eastern cinema, which is approaching very quickly. Easterners must preserve the Eastern aesthetics of cinema by filming honestly how they see life through cinema. The West is the West and the East is the East, as a man is a man and a woman is a woman.

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Flying past Japan