

The Shaping of National Image in Belarusian Films

GAO XIAODAN

Belarusian State University, Belarus

dannn9661@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Film creation is a cultural product that plays an important role in the formation of national cultural soft power. During the Soviet period, the central government maintained control over film production, and film creation in Belarus followed in the footsteps of the Soviet Union. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Belarusian films have lost the guidance of the highest Soviet ideology and the support of a strong political economy. And Belarusian film creation has been in a period of depression and confusion. This period persisted until the emergence of a group of new film directors in recent years, upon which Belarusian films have regained international attention. At this stage, how to transform and develop Belarusian cinema is the key issue to be explored. It is recommended that film production and quality to be increased and developed into mature film production for seizing international film market share. Comprehensive and in-depth survey of foreign markets need to be made to discover viewing habits of different audience groups. For further development Belarusian films need to be actively and comprehensively disseminated and to grasp the international dynamics in dissemination strategies, follow the laws of artistic dissemination and carefully consider film education.

Keywords: Belarusian film; film history; national image; national film; film history; Soviet Union

INTRODUCTION

For a long time, intercultural communication in Belarus has been in a state of calm and silence. According to the cross-cultural communication expert Edward Hall's cultural distinction, Belarus belongs to a typical weak cultural context, that is, a culture that is a mixture of multiple cultures and is fused in constant conflict and compromise, such as American culture. By contrast, a culture with a long history is a strong context culture. According to this definition, Belarusian culture is a generally accepted cultural factor, and falling into self-talk in cross-cultural communication is not easy. However, interestingly, in the same weak cultural context, the cultural output and cultural construction results of different countries are markedly different.

For example, The United States is a typical weak cultural context. Its diverse cultural background makes its values deeply universal and is peddled silently around the world through film exports. At the same time, the US uses cross-ethnic and cultural ties, absorbs and integrates excellent materials from all over the world and then uses its industrial system and American way of thinking to re-wrap the different commercial influences of various countries and nations so that they can be exported to all parts of the world that provide resources. All these steps have invisibly increased the influence of the US in countries with different cultural backgrounds and has reached the textbook level of success from the transmission of values to commercial values.

Belarusian culture, which is also in a weak cultural context, has neither effectively used localised historical information in film and television creations to form Belarusian values with good interaction nor has it efficiently accommodated cross-ethnic and cross-cultural themes of other countries. Therefore, constructing internal cultural identity and external national discourse power in the entire film industry is impossible. Some special reasons for the awkward

current situation of the Belarusian film industry can be learned from the two historical nodes of its birth and the halfway transition.

HISTORICAL SITUATION OF BELARUSIAN CINEMA

The study of the history of Belarusian cinema in the 20th century demonstrates that its relationship with the Soviet Union cannot be avoided, that is, the concept of Soviet cinema and Belarusian cinema must first be clarified.

Soviet films are “the sum of films in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics from November 7, 1917, to December 22, 1991”. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, its films became history. This definition is based on the fact that literary and artistic creation during the period of the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic after the October Revolution of 1917 has begun to have a communist colour, so historians of films are usually included in the common category of Soviet films. Belarusian film refers to the sum of all films created by the Belarusian people in history. Its official birth came in December 1924, when the Belarusian government decided to establish the "Belarusian State Film Studio", which became the beginning of Belarusian cinema as an independent art (Mo, 2018).

However, in the research process of Belarusian film, the use and understanding of this concept will cause some problems. The main reason is that the connotation and extension of Soviet, Belarusian and even Russian films have undergone many changes. This change is caused by their complicated historical relationship. To put this relationship simply, the concept of set-in mathematics can be cited. Soviet films in the Soviet era were sets, while Belarusian films and Russian films were subsets. From a comprehensive perspective, this relationship needs to be elaborated from four dimensions.

First, during the Soviet period, Belarusian cinema was a part of Soviet cinema. At this specific historical stage, the concept of Soviet cinema was greater than that of Belarusian cinema.

Second, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russian cinema was the main heir to its film mantle, and academic circles and readers often equated the two, but mentions of Belarusian and Ukrainian films were minimal.

Third, Russian cinema is the main component of Soviet cinema, plays a leading role in its development and has had a decisive influence on Soviet and Belarusian cinema. Therefore, in the Soviet period, Belarusian films can be said to have existed and developed under the huge influence of Russian films, and this influence will long continue to exist in the future.

Fourth, Belarusian cinema only existed after Belarus joined the Soviet Union and continued to exist and developed independently after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. That is, Soviet cinema was the mother stage of the development of Belarusian cinema. From the perspective of the length of time of development, the concept of Belarusian cinema is greater than that of Soviet cinema.

Therefore, Belarusian film was attached to one of the most powerful political bodies in the world at the beginning of its birth, and its cultural industry must be nurtured in a strong Soviet spirit. According to the theory of the Soviet Union: "The typical is the basic scope of party spirit in realist art. The typical problem is a political issue at any time. This incisively explains the characteristics of realist art, and specifically points out that literature and art should be completed with socialism. Characters who educate the people must create typical characters with distinctive personalities." (Li, 2002) In addition, every Belarusian film worker living in the Soviet Union can be said to have read “How Steel is Made” and “Chabayev” and has also undergone the baptismal education of the “October Revolution”. During World War II, “rather die in struggle than live in slavery” was the belief of the Soviets under the cruel acts of fascism. The cultivation of the Bolshevik Party and the infinite love for Soviet power made Belarusians

absolutely loyal to Moscow. Historical experience, a developed economy and excellent education meant that Belarusian film workers did not need to experience the painful temper of blood and fire and inject highly saturated rebellious initiative and class struggle into film.

One of these is most unique. History and historical memory often present two different faces: history is based on the objective "past," while historical memory tends to selectively and purposefully construct and narrate the "past" according to current ideas, interests and needs (Zhang, 2015). Especially after World War II, when the Soviet Union and the Western world started a "war of memory" around a series of issues in World War II, the shaping of historical memory became the central idea of all filmmakers' creations.

So, in the Belarusian films of the Soviet period, almost no films featured the chances of war and the illusions of other countries. Especially in the films of the Stalinist period and before, the protagonist is habitually portrayed as the "karisma archetype", i.e., the original and sacred discourse model that represents the central value system and is charismatic in a given society, acting as a model with its own unique charm and becoming a pivotal or central structural element in the social structure. It is also a powerful vehicle for the implementation of moral conflicts (Lukacs, 1995). This requires the heroic figure in the film to overcome his own defects and historical limitations and become a "super figure" that transcends reality. Even in a movie like "The Brave Five" (Пятёрка отважных), the five children who participated in guerrilla warfare also had autonomous combat capabilities. They went to concentration camps to release Soviet prisoners and blow-up enemy ammunition depots without the guidance of adults. This narrative represents a conscious loyalty to Soviet power. Similarly, in "Signs of Trouble" (Знак беды), Stepanida, who lives in a village, is far away from the city and higher education but is deeply influenced by the political manifesto and began silent resistance when the Germans invaded. In the end, facing the invaders, he would rather burn down with his hut.

Women and children to soldiers in films are following the ethics of hating enemies and loving comrades. Responsibility to the country and the nation and dedication to fighting is not only the basic characteristics of patriots but also the psychological state of the entire nation. For a long time later, the films of the Great Patriotic War in Belarus showed the spirit of the times and war morals of the masses of all walks of life. At the same time, victory and defeat in battle, national psychology and actual contradictions are all discussed. During this period, the films produced in Belarus could be naturally equated with Soviet films, whether in terms of narrative structure, creative techniques, values, beliefs and national and national images.

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the fading of history in the golden age of Soviet cinema, the film artists of Belarus after independence consciously withdrew from the macroscopic national narrative. Like most art forms, such as literature, music and painting, movies were also caught in the creation bottleneck of ideological reflection and self-cognition contradictions. Regrettably, Belarusian films remain silent in the international film world today. From the macroscopic film culture industry to the microscopic individual creation, signs of breaking through the limitations of national discourse are difficult to see. Regardless of the failure of the overall film market's guidance or the imperfection of film education, this limitation is a pity for the people who have filmed the great work "Go and See by Oneself" (Иди и смотри).

DISSEMINATION STATUS OF CHERNOBYL-THEMED FILM AND TELEVISION WORKS

The creation status of the subject matter of Chernobyl is a classic example of the Belarusian aphasia for the coding of international national languages. First of all, the central city of the Chernobyl disaster "Pripyat" is located in Ukraine, but Ukraine is not the worst affected. Due to the weak and variable low-level winds at that time, with 8-10m/s southeasterly winds at

1500m, the contaminants were deposited mainly in the northwestern part of Belarus, Russia and Ukraine. However, 2/3 of the radioactive fallout was in the territory of Belarus, which suffered much more than Russia and Ukraine (Hu, 1994). According to expert assessments, Belarus' economic losses in 1986-2015 were \$235 billion, equivalent to the fiscal budget of 32 1985 years (Shi, 2012).

As the most affected country by this disaster, the production of film and television on the subject is barren. This negative state of dealing with cross-cultural communication is obviously detrimental to changing the weak position of one's cultural exchanges. Movies, documentaries and TV dramas, as cultural carriers and means of communication, have the task of shaping the image of the country and the connotation of the nation. In the current situation of a huge "cultural deficit", effectively using these means to participate in cross-cultural communication is imperative.

Among the currently available materials, only documentaries, literature or professional academic research can be used to understand the Chernobyl disaster from the perspective of the Belarusians. The preservation and dissemination of major disasters in the form of documentaries is the customary practice of most film creators, and it is also the simplest and most orthodox method. Therefore, the current Chernobyl-themed film and television works are mainly documentaries, relying on the form of real records to systematise and symbolise the form of collective memory. This kind of collective memory is not only a "social construction" of the past history of a country and a nation but will continue to be reconstructed in memory and reflection in the future. This step is often the first one in preserving evidence for the important historical facts of the nation. Regrettably, in terms of film creation other than documentaries, Belarus is currently under the voice of the US, Russia, Britain, Ukraine and even Israel and Poland.

Since the accident in 1986, the production of Chernobyl documentaries has never been interrupted. With the development of Chernobyl tourism, people are no longer satisfied to discover the only truth, in turn encouraging film creators to gradually shift their attention to film creation and even TV series creation. Then, Chernobyl became the creative intellectual property of other countries such as Russia, Ukraine, Poland and the US. This business operation concept has emerged with the rise of the Internet. It uses popular literature, games, animation and videos to adapt and carry out a series of creative operations and derivative product development. Such IP development has advantages and disadvantages. When the well-known Chernobyl theme is used for development and operation, it will inevitably be accompanied by critical aesthetic and consumer judgments. However, in the current state of the Belarusian film industry, whatever is created on this subject is a positive response to the competition for the right to speak about this disaster.

The miniseries "Chernobyl", launched by HBO in the US On May 6, 2019, revived people's curiosity and enthusiasm for Chernobyl. The plot is mainly adapted from the tragic oral history of Chernobyl. The show shows the story of the Chernobyl nuclear accident that occurred in the Ukraine in the Soviet Union in 1986 and its aftermath through a combination of fiction and reality. With the slogan "What is the price of lying?", this miniseries not only gained popularity and recognition from fans during its original runtime (from its premiere on May 6 to its finale on June 3) but also has an on-demand rate exceeding 50%. The audience breakdown of "Chernobyl" is as follows: 35% are linear (the proportion of equal growth), 13% are fans and 52% are from other platforms. The last number is record-breaking; HBO has had no other TV series that has contributed more than 50%. In other words, "Chernobyl" broke the record held by "Game of Thrones". Given this momentum, it was the recipient of many awards, including the Golden Globe for Best Limited Series and Best Supporting Actor.

Dating back to the 1990s, just a few years after the Chernobyl accident, the US had already started creative work on this subject. In 1991, the film "Chernobyl: The Last Warning" was

filmed. The film was not excellent in all aspects and the box office and word-of-mouth were not satisfactory, because, at the time, Hollywood had no interest in Chernobyl. In the past 30 years, several documentary documentaries were filmed, including “The Heart of Chernobyl” (2003), “Rescue Chernobyl” (2006), “Echoes of Chernobyl” (2011), “Chernobyl Theater” (2015) and “Chernobyl Babushkas” (2015), many of which have a rating of 7 or more on IMDB.

Russia’s creative work on Chernobyl can be traced back to the 1987 documentary “Chernobyl: A Chronicle of Difficult Weeks (1987)”. Since then, productions on this subject matter are also dominated by documentaries. In 2014, a sci-fi TV series called “Chernobyl Forbidden Zone” was broadcast in Russia, causing heated discussion. It uses the plot device of a time machine and other science fiction elements plus the butterfly effect to speculate and interpret other possibilities of disasters from different perspectives. Many people imagined that if they could travel back to before the disaster, they would definitely change the course of history with their own ingenuity. This drama tells us that if this delusion is truly realised, the timeline of the entire world will change accordingly. All things will not only develop for the better, and just as Marx predicted that the spiralling historical developments would not change. Such a plot not only satisfies the illusions of a considerable part of the audience about the different consequences of the Chernobyl disaster but also resolves the horrible history of “talking but not speaking” through Russian romance.

At present, the frequent cross-cultural communication environment of various countries in the world brings opportunities and challenges for the Belarusian national voice. On the one hand, globalization brings the phenomenon of cultural homogenization, and national cultures face the loss of their own individuality at any time in the common Internet environment, as scholars say: “The communication characteristic of the globalization era is to compress the world into a plane without locality by means of communication that eliminates the time gap”(Chen, 2001). On the other hand, a “cultural rebound” is also occurring in the globalisation of communication, namely, the phenomenon of the struggle of native culture (or national culture) to foreign culture. As the American sociologist Roland Robertson pointed out, “Global capitalism promotes both cultural homogeneity and cultural heterogeneity and is restricted by both cultural homogeneity and cultural heterogeneity” (Robson, 2000).

Therefore, in the context of globalisation, the interaction between cultures must be a two-way process. Given such strong cultural output from the US and Russia, perhaps Belarus could not completely ignore this output, nor would it be completely satisfied with the voice of other countries. The movie “Forbidden Zone” released in 2020 can already reveal the motivations of Belarusian film creators. Although it is difficult to succeed as a creative work from the beginning, Belarus is awakening its cultural consciousness about the right to speak in the context of intercultural communication. These factors are possible opportunities for Belarusian film and television works to participate in cross-cultural communication.

At the moment, Belarusian films are facing the dual situation of low domestic quality and insufficient international dissemination. On the one hand, the so-called Belarusian “new movies” after 2010 have made breakthroughs in commercial and artistic qualities, and “phenomenal” films such as “Crystal Swan” appeared. After years of silence in the international film industry, it has finally attracted the attention of mainstream film festivals. On the other hand, the small splashes of Belarusian films in the international art film world cannot attract a large audience, and the general trend of collective aphasia remains. Since the 1990s, no blockbuster work like “Go See It Yourself” has been released. Undoubtedly, the reality of aphasia in the international film industry cannot be fundamentally reversed in a short period. This awareness reminds Belarusian filmmakers that they should face up to the unchangeable “cultural deficit” dilemma in the short term and demand Belarusian films. Workers strive to build strategic thinking that effectively breaks through this dilemma,

“inspiring creation internally and promoting and disseminating externally”. In particular, the internal stimulating creation is aimed at the workers who have been engaged in the film industry and higher education on film.

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES OF BELARUSIAN FILMS

The first step to address the dilemma is to resolve its own contradictions, that is, the “structural adjustment” of film creation. At present, the international film market, especially mainstream Western audiences, has no demand for Belarusian films. This lack of demand is extremely common in countries other than mainstream film-producing countries. Mainstream film-producing countries are in a different situation. For example, all non-English films are “foreign-language films”. This label is attributed to the distribution of art theatres and entering the mainstream theatre market in North America. In the current North American film market, American films themselves account for 92% of the share, European films account for 6%, and only 2% of the market share is left for other countries such as India, Japan, South Korea and China to compete (Phoenix, 2003). Look at the global movie market share. In 2014, the global box office was \$37.5 billion U.S. dollars, of which the domestic and overseas film markets were 10.3 billion U.S. dollars and 14.6 billion U.S. dollars respectively, accounting for 66% of the global market share (Liu, 2015). The market for Hollywood movies is by no means limited to North America. As the most representative movie production country, the attitude of audiences from all over the world towards American movies is generally accepted, and the demand for viewing movies is fixed.

The fight for share in the international film market looks like an economic game, but it is actually a “dark battle” of national values. Hollywood, led by the US, is undoubtedly the biggest winner, but such cultivation of audiences from all over the world to appreciate Hollywood movies is by no means a self-publishing behaviour of the market. As early as the 1920s, the U.S. government had incorporated Hollywood films into its national strategy, analysed in detail the viewing behaviour and aesthetic tastes of audiences in various countries and established a detailed evaluation standard and judging system for the foreign dissemination of American films. The flexible and tolerant American film has since entered the film market of various countries smoothly and remains invincible to this day.

Returning to the long-term strategy for the development of Belarusian film, structural adjustment is an effective method that must be used for reference. This method involves two steps. The first step is to increase film production and quality. The development of a mature film production system and the formation of a sufficiently efficient film business system are the bases for seizing international film market share. The second step is not only to consider whether it can be exported to other countries and the box office in overseas markets but also to consider the overall cultural significance, that is, whether the Belarusian culture has been effectively spread overseas. At the same time, these two steps need to be advanced from both the current film industry practitioners and the current film education.

Conducting a comprehensive and in-depth survey of foreign markets in different countries and regions is necessary. According to the data analysis on the viewing habits of different audience groups, diversified creative strategies are adopted to develop differentiated marketing methods. Belarusian filmmakers are fully capable of relying on the national history and using dramatic events such as the Patriotic War and Chernobyl to culturally recreate and satisfy different aesthetic habits, while effectively grafting the national discourse. From the perspective of the commercial operation of movies, this stage is the initial one that most national movies need to undergo.

However, for a sound national and national film system, the education of filmmakers is more strategic. From a cultural perspective, soft power is more important than the box office.

Efficient communication of the national culture and national ideas in cross-cultural communication is the key to the internationalisation of local films. No structural adjustment and cultural consciousness have occurred in the overall process of creation, so the international film world has responded with silence. What Belarusian films currently need to do is not only improve the quality and output but also think about transcoding the national language internationally in film education, diversify the expression of the national language and use expressions that can be generally accepted by different countries.

A healthy and complete film market requires the coexistence of commercial films and independent films, and each releases its own discourse system. This aspect should be handled with care in Belarusian film education. In cross-cultural communication, one type of film can always attract the attention of domestic and foreign filmmakers, that is, the independent film of the new generation of directors. These films are often born in the early stages of production by young filmmakers, without large capital investment from film companies and with independent production methods and narrative pursuits. Independent filmmakers in various countries generally focus their attention on the marginal figures of society, including thieves, problematic youths, sex workers and working people. After 2010, films such as “Higher than the Sky”, “Galas”, “Counting Oranges” and “II/II” are all made by young Belarusian directors using their personal perspectives and unique life experiences to tell the cruel and realistic problems in society. Although obtaining market returns in mainstream international cinemas is difficult for such films, an important part of the international distribution of films is the possibility for foreign audiences to see the ambiguity and integrity of a country and nation.

For Belarusian current and future filmmakers, improving the domestic creative environment to make it more tolerant and active, exploring the expression of national languages, adjusting film teaching thinking and creative concepts and gradually exploring the national film model are potential solutions.

Under the globalised cultural system, Belarusian films have the opportunity to rebuild their own national discourse system, innovate traditions and transform the excellent experiences in line with the globalised background. However, the worry remains that Belarusian films will remain in a state of aphasia in the turbulent international film market in the future and will not adapt to the ever-changing film market and film concepts. Therefore, Belarusian films must not only change from one-sided and passive acceptance of the cultural dissemination of other countries' films to active and comprehensive participation in dissemination but also to grasp the international dynamics in dissemination strategies, follow the laws of artistic dissemination and carefully consider film education. How the national discourse will be structured is the long-term strategy for cultural development.

REFERENCES

- Chen, W. (2001). The globalization background of cross-cultural communication. *International Journalism*, (2), 11-14.
- Hu, Z. (1994). The Chernobyl accident and its impact and lessons learned. *Radiation Protection*, (5), 321-335.
- Li, D. (2002). *History of Chinese Film Criticism*. China Film Publishing House.
- Liu, Y. (2015, January 7). China Becomes an Engine of Global Movie Box Office Growth. *People's Daily*.
- Lukacs, G. (1995). *History and class consciousness*. Commercial Press.
- Mo, Z. (2018). *The first decade of Belarusian cinema (1920-1930)*. Theatre House.
- Phoenix, E. (2003). Experts Talk about Dealing with Hollywood: Chinese Movies Have "Going Out" Anxiety. http://ent.ifeng.com/movie/special/dayingxianghlh/detail2013_03/25/23497346_2.html

- Roland, R. (2000). *Globalization—Social Theory and Global Culture*. Shanghai People's Publishing House.
- Shi, L. (2012). The impact of the Chernobyl nuclear accident on the ecological environment of Belarus. *Environment and Sustainable Development*, 37, (01), 93-96.
- Zhang, Q. (2015). The Soviet Union's Patriotic War and Historical Memory. *Foreign theoretical developments*, (6), 119-127.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gao Xiaodan (1996) is a student in Belarusian State University, Belarus. Her research interest is on the country's film history and development. She is interested in crime movies and female imagery in Southeast Asia. In addition, she hopes to further study the expression of LGBT group's right and feminism in movies, and the dissemination of such movies.