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Innovative Visual Expression in Contemporary Chinese Animated Films: A Case Study of White Snake

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Abstract: In recent years, Chinese animation films have begun to move towards revival, and a large number of domestic animation works with traditional styles have been loved by audiences. These animated film works integrate contemporary expression on the basis of traditional aesthetic style, which makes Chinese animated films gain recognition again. In the process of the development of domestic animation films, one should think about how to reflect contemporary spiritual values with excellent national elements. This paper discusses the innovative expression of Chinese traditional art style in animated films from three aspects. By studying the audiovisual approach of the animated film *White Snake* released in 2019, this paper finds that the film's unique national characteristics of picture expression inherits and carries forward the essence of traditional culture on the basis of traditional aesthetic style. It concludes that Chinese animation films should adhere to the road of innovation and development in the future creative process, and organically combine traditional culture with contemporary aesthetics.

Keywords: Chinese animated film, audiovisual language, cinematography, White Snake.

1. Introduction

In recent years, a number of excellent domestic animated films have achieved high box office revenues and good ratings. Visual elements, as the main narrative art medium of animated films, integrate traditional Chinese aesthetic styles into contemporary popular popular styles. These animation films have cleverly combined the Chinese style, which is mainly characterised by the pictorial nature, with the Western style, which emphasises on the accumulation of spectacle, and derived new popular styles from the expression of traditional visual elements, and combined with the rhythm of movement, which is very much of national characteristics and animation tension, to create a contemporary animation aesthetic spectacle with unique Chinese characteristics. Domestic animation films have gradually got rid of the lost, barren, uninteresting and low-children's creativity under the influence of other countries, and have recovered the cultural charm with national uniqueness.

Existing research on Chinese animation film mainly focuses on traditional Chinese aesthetics [1]. Some scholars believe that Chinese animated films express traditional art through a unique visual language that meets the aesthetic characteristics of today's picture visual language [2]. By studying the presentation and production process of Chinese animation films, it is found that Chinese animation film creators attach great importance to aesthetic and cultural expression, and integrate traditional Chinese cultural elements into their films through advanced technology. A unique animation aesthetic

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style with Chinese characteristics has been created, thus showing the artistic beauty of Chinese animation films. Such animated films not only show Chinese culture, but also open up new ways for Chinese culture to be shown abroad. It creates a unique animation aesthetic style with Chinese characteristics, thus showing the artistic beauty of Chinese animation films. This kind of animation film not only shows Chinese culture, but also opens up a new way for Chinese culture to be shown to the outside world, which helps international cultural exchange.

This paper discusses the innovative expression of Chinese traditional art style in animated films from three aspects, namely character modelling, scene atmosphere and camera language, with reference to Chinese animated films that have been well received in recent years, and taking White Snake as an example. The paper further analyses the influence of Chinese aesthetic style on animation films and the shortcomings in the development of Chinese animation films at this stage, with a view to providing reference for the sustainable development of Chinese local animation films.

2. Character Image Design

The stylistic design of the characters, as the most important part of the overall stylistic design of the film, is the basis of visual style [3]. Looking at the post-screening reactions of various animated films, it is not difficult to find that the character images in the films tend to be more deeply rooted in people's hearts compared to the film plots, and also play a more important role in visual publicity. The character image should become the focus of conveying traditional cultural style and the key to future development.

2.1. Classic Character Images Followed

White Snake is a Chinese animated film released in 2019, produced by Chasing Light Animation and Warner Bros. The film is based on the Chinese folklore 'White Snake', which tells the story of the love between Bai Suzhen and Xu Xuan, the predecessor of Xu Xian, 500 years ago. The story of the White Snake first originated in 'Bo Yi Zhi', a collection of legendary novels of the Tang Dynasty written by Shen Shu Zi [4]. In the subsequent evolution, the image of White Snake was gradually fleshed out, not only with the name Bai Suzhen, but also with the appearance of the sidekick Xiaoqing.

In the animated film *White Snake*, the image design of some of the characters in the traditional classic is used. For example, the modelling of White Snake basically continues the traditional image of the familiar White Snake, with a pretty face, pretty eyebrows and almond eyes, matched with the eye make-up of the Qing Yi in the opera, with the corners of her eyes slightly raised, revealing her aura. The light and elegant snow-like dress is thin and flowing, with long black hair and jasper hairpin, showing the elegance and grace, which fits the image of a classical Chinese beauty.

In addition, the portrayal of Xuan in Figure 1, Xu Xian's past life in the drama, is a reference to Linghu Chong in Jin Yong's novels. Linghu Chong is the main character in the Laughing Pride of the Wanderer. Linghu Chong is a jianghu man who is famous for his mastery but lives an open and unrestrained life, disdaining rituals. In the hands and feet, revealing his true nature, from the bones of his romantic spirit of chivalry. Linghu Chong chivalrous and honest, unrestrained. In order to reflect the characteristics of Linghu Chong, in the costume colour, the choice of blue as the main colour, combined with the character styling design, the use of clothing under the clothes system clothing. The overall silhouette of the costume is loose style in pursuit of pure and unrestrained style.

At the same time, the asymmetrical design has something in common with the spirit of martial arts. The so-called spirit of martial arts is the spirit of chivalry, which is not bound by the world's laws and rituals, and dares to do something. And symmetric design is to break the inherent rules and people's impression of a thing to rebuild. 'Chivalry' contains the spirit of romanticism, the spirit of chivalry, dare to break the rules, and then retired, for the fame and fortune is not important, to get rid

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of the shackles of fame and profit, break the inherent rules, embodied in the spiritual freedom of the passionate writing and the supreme pursuit of freedom from the world. The asymmetrical silhouette design expresses the spirit of martial arts in a figurative way, which gives the work an artistic value and a social and cultural value at the same time.



Figure 1: Xu Xuan.

Therefore, Xuan's image is a reference to the character of Linghu Chong, which not only makes it easier for the audience to empathise with the character, but also pays homage to the classic. In addition, at the end of the film, Xiao Bai meets Xu Xian in the West Lake in the smoky rain, which is a tribute to the traditional White Snake Legend and a replica of Xu Xian's classic scholarly look.

2.2. Innovative application of traditional elements

Baoqingfang master is the most impressive character in the film. The character boldly uses the classic Chinese colour scheme of red and green, inheriting the charm and cunning of the fox demon from the classical Chinese legend while incorporating the modern audience's aesthetic interest in 'contrariness'. Whether it is the original or the Shanghai Fine Arts Film Studio's adaptation of the puppet animation 'The Mirror's Edge', the two sides of the countryman have a double face of kindness and viciousness and insidiousness (Figure 2). One side of the Baoqingfang master is a delicate young girl who is beautiful; the other side is a cunning and treacherous thousand-year-old fox demon. The costume design of this character adopts the embroidered clothes of traditional Chinese costumes. A red shirt and green dress with an alluring and sexy body, hair tied into pills on both sides, holding a big pipe and a fox pendant on the waist, make this character more dramatic.



Figure 2: Baoqingfang master.

The design of the villains in *White Snake* is also based on traditional Chinese culture, and the characterisation is rigorous. The master of the country and his disciples are in the image of Taoist priests, who are in high positions but do no harm, and in order to cultivate demonic arts with rhetoric

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to compel the emperor to go on a snake hunting spree.In the Tang Dynasty, alchemy and taking elixirs was a popular social trend, and Taoism in the Tang Dynasty was very powerful, with many Taoist temples and believers, and the wind of seeking immortality and learning Taoism spread to all levels of the society, and Taoism could be seen in all fields of politics, economy, culture and social life in the Tang Dynasty. The Tang Dynasty emperor also often gave his subjects stalactites and other drugs, local officials to pay tribute to such drugs to invite honour and favour [5]. It also hints at the important position and role of Taoism in the civil disobedience of the late Tang society.

The mounts, magic weapons, clothing patterns and team banners of the Guoshi school all use the crane as a visually presentable element. In ancient times, the crane was the second most auspicious bird after the phoenix, and was regarded by Taoism as a symbol of immortality, representing longevity and wealth. For example, the Taoist priest's magic weapon is the golden crane decoration on his clothes. His mount is a three-headed bird designed by the crane-based character image Media On Tao Media On Tao, which also references the image of the ancient beasts in the ancient book 'The Classic of Mountains and Seas'. The film fully demonstrates the mystery of Chinese Taoist culture, giving the audience a visual shock and at the same time, a glimpse of the fantasy and magnificence of traditional Chinese culture.

3. Scene and Atmosphere Design

The opening of the animated film 'White Snake' expresses the severance of Bai from the real world when he goes off the rails through the form of 'ink + CG', which is an abbreviation for Computer Graphics. CG is an acronym for Computer Graphics. CG technology requires computer software to draw graphics, including two-dimensional or three-dimensional graphics, and ultimately display them on a computer screen.From the early 2D animation production software to the current 3D modelling and animation software, CG technology provides a powerful tool and platform for animation production. Through CG technology, animators can easily create virtual scenes, characters and props, and realise complex animation effects and movements [6]. The CG in the film is a reversal of the past more emphasis on the performance of three-dimensionality and real details of the characteristics of the film, become light write up, whether it is the protagonist of the white flowing, or landscape background of the ink and mist, CG animation for the expression of the Oriental meaning of the picture are amazing.

The story takes place in the Late Tang Dynasty, and the creators spent a lot of time studying the architecture, costumes, and folklore of the Late Tang Dynasty, and expressed the Chinese style through the ink and water elements to the fullest. In addition to the Chinese ink and wash style, White Snake has also been carefully designed in terms of imagery in the set design.Chinese paintings emphasise the beauty of mood, using very little ink and brush to express feelings and scenes, thus triggering the viewer's own thoughts.

In the film, for the presentation of the cultivation scenes of Xiaobai and Xiaoqing, a lot of ink is used only in the pond and peach blossoms, and the whole scene is not presented completely. However, it is this kind of white space technique that makes each audience draw their own 'cultivation place' in their mind. The white space breaks the fourth wall of the theatre, introduces the audience to the play, stimulates the audience's imagination, guides the audience to think deeply about the mood conveyed by the atmosphere created by the scenes, and to explore the hidden information of the scene space, breaking through the artistic effect of the picture itself. The white space in the film is mainly reflected in the lens, composition and other aspects of the director and the staff of the various departments around the theme of the film intentionally, the white space in the screen in the film reflects the theme of the idea at the same time contains the director's subjective imagination and unique creative approach, but also makes the film presents a unique implicit and infinite richness of meaning [7].

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However, since it is an animated film that advocates the use of traditional culture, it is all the more important to examine the images appearing in its film. The production team should conduct strict historical verification to avoid arranging random scenes for the sake of the plot, which may lead to the creation of something out of nothing. For example, when Bai and Xu Xuan were boating on the lake, a rattlesnake spirit suddenly appeared and killed the boatman, which was a typical mistake imposed for the sake of plot. Because the rattlesnake originates from America, it is almost impossible for it to exist in the wild environment of China. Animated films are extremely rich in visually presented elements, which is both a benefit but also a misstep. Because of the many choices and inclusiveness, the visual aspect of animated films sometimes has the misconception of presenting for the sake of presenting, thus affecting the quality of the picture as well as the delivery of the content.

4. Lens Language Design

Through a large number of panoramic shots and large scenes, the film shows complex spatial relationships with an open view, bringing an immersive viewing experience to the audience. Since the conditions of the camera will not be restricted in the animated film, the whole film uses a large number of following shots, and a large number of free-moving high-camera shots to convey the speed and state of the picture, bringing the audience a newer and more exciting visual experience.

The most impressive part of the play is the Special Jade Workshop (Figure 3). The clever camera design brings out the surface imagery of this scene in the best way possible. The Special Jade Workshop is the workshop of the demon world for making weapons. The camera follows the movement of the characters and reveals the mysterious and unpredictable aspects of the Baoqing Workshop, such as the secret room under the water surface, the flying scrolls, and the mysterious drawers where books are hidden, and so on. The Special Jade Workshop is a world of duality, with its inner walls composed of countless ever-changing Rubik's cube shapes. The floor is designed as a Bagua formation, while the desks and screens are intricately classical, and box-like trains float through the room. At first glance, it appears to be an ordinary room, but when flipped, a much larger world is revealed behind it. This depiction embodies the concept of Yin and Yang from Chinese traditional culture as presented in the show [8].



Figure 3: Baoqingfang.

5. Conclusion

White Snake is a new interpretation of the classic story through changes in the graphics as well as the story. Such innovative changes have helped domestic animated films break away from the creative chains of being lost, barren, uninteresting, and lowbrow under the influence of other countries. Although the overall narrative is relatively thin and the details are not carefully examined, it is

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undeniable that the film inherits and carries forward the excellent traditional culture through its unique modern aesthetic style.

The film provides an important experience for the development of Chinese animation film, and also proves the correctness of the point of view that 'Chinese animation film needs Chinese expression'. However, in the future development, creators need to be able to inherit traditional culture without being bound by it. Only by adapting to the development of the times and absorbing modern aesthetic elements can China create animation films with national characteristics and characteristics of the times, and carry out a new chapter of animation films.

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