

Analysis of Ghetto Youth's Aesthetics and Features in Youth Films

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Abstract: This paper aims to adopt Timothy Shary's attitude which assumes youth film as a genre itself to argue that ghetto youth as one of the subgenres of teen films has its own aesthetics to critically reveal the hidden aspects of class issues through comparing Lawrence Lau Kwok-Cheung's *Besieged City* with Fruit Chan's *Made in Hong Kong*. Although ghetto youth is treated as low culture because of its subject, it involves concerns of high culture as well. Both films deal with high culture concerns under the cover of popular ghetto youth. Another feature of ghetto youth is that this kind of film often applies certain values, activities, territorial space, styles and art effects to significantly differentiate from the "parent culture", which is the dominant mainstream culture. Through these rituals, these youth sub-culture films project and reflect distinguished "solution" to the social problems posed upon them. Ghetto youth's sense of rootlessness in the adult society represented in both films is significantly associated with the condition in postcolonial Hong Kong. Youth films arise as a means of collective solutions to the problems in the society. Thus, the subgenre of ghetto youth is never innocent. It is not only about the puppy love and the immature fighting, but also about the rebellion, the conflict and the imaginary solutions. It is worthwhile to explore the hidden aspects and untold stories in ghetto youth although it often presents "the unpleasant matters" that people rarely talk about such as the anxiety of the repressed lower class, the sense of alienation, marginalization and rootlessness neglected in the dominant "parent" culture.

Introduction

"Youth is transitory and transitional, fleeting and fragmentary" [1]. Because of its uniqueness, the group of youths and its culture has attracted considerable critical interests. But it is undeniable that youth culture is elusive since most of them are represented by adults. As a result, youth culture, as "a mediated culture that one has continued to re-present itself in terms of the product it buys and the art that defines it", is never easy to be studied [1]. According to Erik Erikson, youth is portrayed in terms of its difference from a standard human being, "a symptom, an emblem, and a sign that something has gone wrong in the culture" [1]. The stereotypical and extreme examples misinterpreting the diversity of youth in teen films confirms Erikson's quip. However, through the seemingly unfair adult gaze, there are an abundance of representations that reveal the ghostly and hidden aspects of social issues, such as class, gender and race, so on and so forth. In this paper, I am going to adopt Timothy Shary's attitude which assumes youth film as a genre itself since it has distinctive styles and concerns varying from adult movies, and then to argue that ghetto youth as one of the subgenres of teen films has its own aesthetics to critically reveal the hidden

aspects of class issues through comparing Lawrence Lau Kwok-Cheung's *Besieged City* with Fruit Chan's *Made in Hong Kong* [7,8].

Ghetto Youth: the Subgenre of Teen Films

Teen films, or youth films, is a genre targeting at youngsters where the plot is based on special issues of teenagers such as rebellion, alienation and the conflicts with parents or institutions. But normally, like what have mentioned in the introduction, the genre itself also engages with representations of social problems such as gender, class, and race. Timothy Shary has confirmed the significance of studying genre by saying that "genres can be considered as a metaphorical way of addressing social problems" [2]. And he argued further that through examining subgenres could get more detailed understanding of film genres and the social commentary they tried to make [2]. In this sense, ghetto youth, as one of the subgenres of youth films, addresses thematically and ideologically on the youth-related subjects, themes and motifs. But one of the most striking aspects of ghetto youth is that it directly addresses on the life of lower class teenagers, the group that often be marginalized and alienated by the mainstream society. The term "ghetto" is used to describe the part of the city where members of minorities live because of the oppressive social, legal or economic burden. While the term "youth" refers to a specific period of life between childhood and adulthood. Therefore, through analyzing the word respectively, it is obvious that, as the combination of "ghetto" and "youth", the subgenre of ghetto youth does have strong associations with the issue of class and rebellion.

According to the definition, both *Besieged City* and *Made in Hong Kong* are good examples of ghetto youth overall, since they strictly follow the formula of ghetto youth by turning the focal point towards the subject of repressed lower class youngsters, and revealing the hidden social problems under the cover of youth films. In the case of *Besieged City*, Lawrence Lau Kwok-Cheung continued to look at youngsters' life in the New Territories town and how their lives get stuck after he directed *Spacked Out* and *Gangs*. Ling is a hard-working high school student who lives in Tin Shui Wai, a relatively undeveloped area of Hong Kong. One day, he is informed by the cop that his younger brother Jun is now in a coma after allegedly murdered Panadol, and then tried to committed suicide. Ling is later threatened by other gangsters to hand in the drug Panadol used to possess. In order to find out the drug, the good student Ling starts to trace Jun's recent past, digging out the secret and another underworld he never knows. While in *Made in Hong Kong*, one should not expect to experience the familiar metropolis of Hong Kong with high buildings and well-dressed elites, but be prepared to explore the forgotten city space such as public housing estate and the graveyard with marginalized youngsters – abandoned Moon, diseased Ping, mentally disordered Sylvester and ghostly Susan. All their deaths intertwined with each other, suggesting hopeless and bleak destinies of lower class people. Through joining the journey with these ghetto youth, the spectator is induced to offer the realistic answer to the popular genre, the feeling of loss, economic inequality, the urban alienation, and what does it mean to be young and to be abandoned in the adult world [3]. Youth film, as one form of subculture, "arise as attempts to solve certain problems in the social structures" [4]. "Youth is not in itself a problem, but there are problems created" [4]. The problems created in ghetto youth subgenre can be the bleak class division between low and high class, can be the urban alienation, and the paradoxical handover of Hong Kong, etc. Therefore, in a general sense, both *Besieged City* and *Made in Hong Kong* are typical ghetto youth films because they treat youngsters living in the ghetto as subjects, and try to see why they suffer again and again in the cycle of lower class life, and other hidden social problems rarely mentioned in the mainstreamed society.

High Culture Concerns in Ghetto Youth

Although ghetto youth is treated as low culture because of its subject, it involves concerns of high culture as well. In Gans's article in which he developed the typology of "taste culture" and "taste publics", he pointed out that one of the most striking features of high culture was that it often focused on the character

development, and dealt with the issue of alienation and the conflict between individual and society [5]. Nevertheless, both *Besieged City* and *Made in Hong Kong* deal with high culture concerns such as individual's alienation, under the cover of popular ghetto youth. In *Besieged City*, the gangster Jun leaves home and is involved with issues of drugs and murders. Through flashback, the audience is introduced his family life and traumatic personal experience. When the father beats young Jun because of the interrupting horse race on television, the mother has no reaction because of her morose mental state. Even the older brother does not help him out since he is busy studying hard in order to get away from the ghetto Tin Shui Wai, where is filled with various kinds of nightmares. It seems that nobody in the family cares much about the young Jun, so he just leaves the unhomey family and searches for another home. So, the audience gradually digs out the fact that it is the feeling of emotional alienation in the family drives Jun to leave home, and to join a gangster, not just because of the physical abuse. Even in the case of Panadol, she is raped by her father while the older sister does not offer help. The parallelism between these two families including the domestic alienation and the similar reasons becoming gangsters leads the audience to realize that alienation is a universal problem existing in every family, especially in the lower class.

In the case of *Made in Hong Kong*, Fruit Chan applied the high culture concerns such as marginalization and class division as well. Autumn Moon narrates past stories happened between him and other marginalized youngsters even though he was dead. His voice-over functions as "an eerie dead man's voice", taking the audience to go through "a series of death trip" with him [3]. Both ill Ping and mentally disabled Sylvester have no control over their own lives. While Susan jumps from the rooftop since she sees no hope in the love relationship with her teacher. All of them are rejected and marginalized by the adult world. Despite of the subject of marginalization, Chan also deals with the issue of class division. In the death trip, the audience thus gains an opportunity to discover the defamiliarized Hong Kong by flowing through the forgotten spaces such as corridors of public housing estates. And there is a class division involved like the contrast between high buildings and trapped bleak house in *Besieged City*. Moon looks out of the window, watching the well-off housing in the new town and murmuring to himself at the same time. Following Autumn Moon's subjective point of view, audiences thus gain an opportunity to stare the prosperity from a low class housing, to observe the familiar city through an unfamiliar lens. From what have mentioned above, it is undeniable that both filmmakers do touch upon the social problems that high culture concerns in the ghetto youth films.

Resist Through Rituals

According to Stuart Hall, teen films are "the subordinate culture in relation to the dominant middle-class or bourgeois culture" [4]. The dominant bourgeois culture, for him, is like the "parent culture", while the teen films are more of the youth sub-culture exhibits a distinctive enough structure and shape to make them different from that dominant "parent culture" [4]. They apply certain values, activities, territorial space, styles and art effects to significantly differentiate from the wider culture. Through these rituals, these youth sub-culture films project and reflect distinguished "solution" to the social problems posed upon them by their class position and social experience [4]. In this sense, both *Besieged City* and *Made in Hong Kong* succeed in following this convention of youth films as they do have certain activities and territorial space which is excluded from the mainstreamed "parent" culture. For instance, it is notable that the ghetto youth in both films have their own community in the forgotten space, where violence, drug use, and sex are all going on. Esther Cheung argues that gang society is represented as "*Jianghu* in a modern and urban setting", an imaginary ideal world for the marginalized who is rejected by the "normal" society [3]. Furthermore, the gangsters or killers in these films are all caught in a state of homelessness [3]. Thus, they would love to have their own space to form a community, in which they can gain the collective identity, the sense of root, home and belonging.

In *Besieged City*, when Jun is accepted by Panadol and her gang, he writes his name on the wall, with other names around. When the gangsters gather abusing drug and raping Panadol's sister, Lawrence Lau adopts the swinging projector to create the illusionary atmosphere. In the darkness, the fluorescence

names are shining and covering the taboo-breaking issues in the “parent” culture and society. Writing names on the wall is a kind of ritual declaiming that one has become the member of a community while the wall covered with names suggests that this group of ghetto youth has the absolute subjectivity to occupy the space. Additionally, when depicting the underworld of the youth gangsters, Lawrence Lau uses mirror as the ceiling, and his camera frequently tilts upward to gaze at the mirror ceiling. Through the reappearing upside down reflection, it seems that Lau intends to convey the youngster’s wish that one day they can feel the sense of belongingness in the upper mainstreamed world like what they have gained in the underworld. Similarly, in *Made in Hong Kong*, Moon, Sylvester and Ping also own this kind of territory although it is a graveyard, a space for the dead. In the film, Fruit Chan used long shots to capture both graves and public housing estates, which strongly suggests that graves have close association with one’s home. They are lining up one next to the other, densely distributed, with a person or family, occupying one little space in “a crowded matrix” [3]. Ironically, these teens can only gain the sense of root in the ghostly graveyard.

Ghetto youth’s sense of rootlessness in the adult society represented in both films is significantly associated with the condition in postcolonial Hong Kong. When the sovereignty is transferred from Britain to China, Hong Kong people are silenced and they have no right to control their past, present and future. Facing the unpredictable future caused by the social change, the lower-class people are even more anxious since they are the group which lacks capital and power. Thus, through the subgenre of ghetto youth, the directors tend to cry out that sense of anxiety, rootless and helplessness of low class in the moment of transition. According to the Stuart Hall again, youth culture is the social group most immediately encapsulates the essential features involving social changes [4]. Youth films arise as a means of collective solutions to the problems in the society. In other words, most directors try to offer the imaginary solutions to the problems in the social structure under the cover of youth films. Since the context of both films is postcolonial Hong Kong, they are engaging the handover more or less. “The new Hong Kong cinema deserves attention because it has finally found a worthy subject – it has found Hong Kong itself as a subject” [6]. Although some critics might not be interested in such a subject, Steintrager argued further that actually we could learn from this unworthy subject - “the subject that in its very abject reveals the horrific joy and sadistic miseries of identity formation in the postcolonial order” [6]. The article does not directly analyze ghetto youth, but it can still be used to dig out the significance of this subgenre. It is worthwhile to explore the hidden aspects and untold stories in ghetto youth although it often presents “the unpleasant matters” such as the repressed lower class, the sense of alienation, marginalization and rootlessness neglected in the dominant “parent” culture [6].

Conclusion

In conclusion, ghetto youth, as one of the subgenres of youth films, has its own aesthetics that differentiate the dominant “parent” culture by dealing with the high culture concerns and applying certain activities, territorial space and values. It arises as filmmaker’s attempts to solve certain social problems under the cover of ghetto youth, a significant group which engages with both class issue and transitional period between childhood and adulthood. In this sense, *Besieged City* and *Made in Hong Kong* fall into the category of typical ghetto youth films. Both films explore the issue of alienation by depicting youngsters’ alienated relationship between their families, and representing the sense of rootlessness and the desire for collective identity by occupying their own territories. Although ghetto youth belongs to the low culture category because of the subject of youth, it focuses on high culture concerns such as the character development, and deals with the issue of individual alienation and the conflict between individual and society. It is worthwhile to look into what is behind the hidden aspects of social issues represented in the subject of postcolonial Hong Kong. Youth films arise as a means of collective solutions to the problems in the society. In other words, most directors try to offer the imaginary solutions to the problems in the social structure under the cover of youth films. From what have mentioned above, the subgenre of ghetto youth is never innocent since it is not only about the puppy love and the immature fighting, but also about the conflict, the rebellion and the imaginary solutions. Thus, youth is not in itself a problem, but there are

different problems in the social structure created, which induce us to think about them and to try to solve them.

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