

Shadowplay (*ying xi*, 影戏)

In a chapter of *Chinese Film Theory: A Guide to the New Era* (edited by George S. Semsel, Xia Hong, and Hou Jianping), Chen Xihe, summarizes the Chinese theoretical research into film during the New Era by analyzing Hou Yao's book *The Making of a Shadowplay Script* written in 1926. Chen concludes that China does have its own film aesthetics, which provided the ground for a unique cinematic tradition in China. Shadowplay aesthetics "is an expression of the Chinese soul and spirit, and closely related to the traditional Chinese culture-spirit" (203). Shadowplay is a core concept of a film aesthetics that sees the "shadow" as a means of presenting a story: "The basic understanding of the relationship of shadowplay to film is that play is the origin of film, but shadow is its means of presentation" (193). While Western film theories take the concrete image and shot as a starting point (for example montage aesthetics),

the Chinese take image as the means of presenting story; Westerners take story as one element of film. The Chinese pay attention to the dramatic and literary characteristics of story; Westerners pay attention to the characteristics of montage (editing) and the long take (shot). The Chinese study montage and the long take only in the sense of how to present story; Westerners study story only in a limited or technique sense. Fundamentally speaking, these differences reflect two different cultures and thinking methods. (189)

As a result, Chinese film aesthetics cannot be classified into the Western categories of formalism or realism. The shadow play aesthetics is a "function aesthetics" while Western film aesthetics is a "substance aesthetics." The former takes the ethical and political spirit as its core, whereas the latter takes the scientific spirit as its core. "The Chinese understand film material as the various problems of life and aspects of social activities; the Westerners understand it in terms of its basic substance and possibilities" (200).

Further Chen distinguishes two formal levels called drama and image: "Drama refers to the level of narrative structure, and is often called *interior form* by Chinese film artists. Its stylistic principle is dramatization. Image refers to the level of cinematic language, and is often called *exterior form*" (201).

Chen wants to see film as a drama in the first place. "Exterior form is secondary and subordinate. In terms of content, shadowplay aesthetics concentrates highly on the social

function of film and demands that film communicate specific, ready-made ideologies of ethics or politics. In terms of the relationship between form and content, it absolutely emphasizes content over form, and insists that form obey content. Consequently, the fundamental nature of film as a whole is that of an educational tool” (203).

As examples of shadowplay Chen names *Story of an Orphan Saving His Grandfather* (孤儿救祖记) by Mingxing Production (1923); *A Forsaken Woman* (程大嫂) by Hou Yao (1925); *The Xi'an Incident* (西安事变) by Cheng Yin (1981); *At Middle Age* (人到中年) by Wang Qiming and Sun Yu (1982); *The Herdsman* (牧马人) by Xie Jin (1981).

Thorsten Botz-Bornstein

Sources:

Chen, Xihe. “Shadowplay: Chinese Film Aesthetics and their Philosophical and Cultural Fundamentals” in *Chinese Film Theory: A Guide to the New Era*, ed. by George S. Semsel, Xia Hong, and Hou Jianping. Trans. by Hou Jianping, Li Xiaohong, and Fan Yuan. New York: Praeger, 1990.

Chen, Xihe. “Shadowplay: Chinese Film Aesthetics and Their Philosophical and Cultural Fundamentals,” *Contemporary Film*, Spring 1986.

Hou, Yao. *The Making of a Shadowplay Script*. Nanjing: Taidong Press, 1926.