Change Of Chinese Theory Essay, Research Paper

Western film theory is generally subdivided into classical theory and contemporary theory. Contemporary theory consists of a theoretical system, which employs psychoanalysis, ideological critique and feminism to interpret cinematic forms. It originated in the mid-sixties and flourished in the 1970s. It was first introduced to China in the early 1980s and brought in as a complete theoretical system a few years later. Peaking in the late 1980s, it should have taken up an important position in the development of China’s film theory.

Classical film theory had developed very slowly in China, and by the end of the 1970s it had acquired the following features:

?It was a theory about social politics, not about art or cinema, and frequently used as a tool in political struggle, directly serving the politics of the day.? (Ke 66)

Mikroulis 2

?Its artistic theory was insipid, simple and ossified, consisting merely of theories about production transplanted from philosophical dogmas. China had been closed for a long time, and there had been little international exchange, borrowing or debate. Therefore, widespread assimilation of the scholarly achievements of foreign film theory had been impossible and numerous lacunae and defects existed.?(Ke 66)

Toward the end of the 1970s China chose reform and opening to the outside world. Major changes in film theory were inevitable in order to adapt to the needs of social reform and cinematic innovation and to enrich and improve theory itself. Importing foreign film theory and changing Chinese cinematic concepts were also inevitable. The adoption of any film theory by society is not random but socially and historically determined. A society invariably adopts theories suitable for social development independent of any individual’s will.

Mikroulis 3

As contemporary film theory was being given a cold reception, making up for what had been missed in classical theory proceeded on a grand scale and along the following lines:

? Establishing cinematic concepts by exploring the specificity of the cinema, making cinema an art form independent from others, and distinguishing film theory from general art theory to turn it into an independent field.

? Beginning to focus on cinematic forms of expression and artistic techniques in an attempt to break away from outdated methods centered on the Soviet montage theory, and beginning to use original forms to express fresh contents and feelings.

Almost all these efforts to catch up on classical film theory provoked heated debates within the Chinese film world. There were both conflicts and compromises with the old theoretical system. Both sides attempted to devise an authoritative and socially accepted theory that would direct film production and criticism. In the absence of

Mikroulis 4

common ground, struggles both open and covert broke out between the left and right.

The gap between traditional Chinese film theory and classical foreign film theory was considerably narrowed as a result of these efforts to catch up. However, different social conditions mean that no Western theory can be brought in unchanged, and because of the speed of their introduction, the essence of many theories was not fully understood. Superficial understandings, out-of-context interpretations, misreading and even misrepresentations were unavoidable. Practice had yet to show whether these theories suited Chinese circumstances, and whether they could become a part of a dominant theory. But as the pace of China’s reforms and opening to the world increased, classical Western theory found itself unable to satisfy the intellectual needs of China’s film theorists. The film theorists were already casting their gaze toward the outside world again.

In the summer of 1984, contemporary Western film theory entered China again, this time through the unusual

Mikroulis 5

method of inviting American film scholars to Beijing to run a summer session on film theory. Although unprecedented anywhere in the world, such a method of disseminating contemporary film theory suited the organization of the Chinese cinema studies world. The two Chinese scholars responsible for this event were Cheng Jihua and Chen Mei.

Cheng and Chen had been invited to give a course on Chinese films in 1983 by UCLA. It was well-received. In the course of extensive contacts with American scholars, they came to feel deeply that Chinese film theory was so ?narrow, ossified and monolithic that it precluded academic dialogue with foreign countries.? A number of American film scholars also wished to see for themselves the enormous changes taking place in China. Thus a daring program for academic exchanges began to take shape. When Cheng Jihua and Chen Mei returned to China, they successfully applied to the Ministry of Culture, then in charge of film, for the China Film Association to run a summer session on film theory and invite American scholars to lecture. The two main criteria for the invitees were “academic expertise”

Mikroulis 6

and “friendliness toward the Chinese people.” Lecture topics were fixed through negotiations between the China Film Association and the American scholars.

Ke, Hu. ?Contemporary Film Theory in Film.? 1995: Dangdai

Dianying, (65-73).