See the Rough Road of Science Fiction Films in China from “The Wandering Earth”

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Abstract: When it comes to the most exciting thing about domestic films in 2019, there is nothing more than the popularity of “The Wandering Earth”. The 4.6 billion box office achievement also marks the first time that domestic science fiction films surpassed Hollywood science fiction films at the box office, and is one step closer to the international science fiction film production standard. It is undeniable that in the past ten years, China’s film and television industry is developing by leaps and bounds. Thanks to its lasting and stable development and achievements, the Hollywood model has gradually become a benchmark in the film industry, and our domestic film industry is also catching up with Hollywood. However, China has Chinese characteristics, and foreign countries have foreign cultures. It cannot be said that because there are not many mature science fiction films in China, the hematopoietic ability of Chinese science fiction films is completely denied.

Keywords: Chinese science fiction films, Production standards, Hollywood model, Special effects technology, Superhero films, Fictional landscapes, Film talent education, Emerging science fiction writers, Creativity,

1. Introduction

How has science fiction films evolved? Before the word “science fiction” came into existence, early science fiction appeared only as an element in a variety of productions, including science romance novels, thrillers, conjuration films, comic shorts, fantasy, science dramas, horror films, and more. These cannot be regarded as science fiction works in the strict sense, but they have had a profound impact on the classification of science fiction.

2. About Science Fiction Films

The origin of “science fiction” in the true sense can be traced back to Mary Shelley’s novel “Frankenstein”. Since then, such bizarre stories, which are based in part on science, have often been brought to the big screen. With the invention of early special effects technology, science fiction films were born.

2.1 The Origin (1895-1940)

In 1895-1897, Georges Mérieux filmed “The Machine Butcher” and “The American Surgeon”, a mix of fantasy, supernatural, science, horror, and more. By 1902, his “Journey to the Moon” was more of a science fiction film in the true sense. These works announced the birth of science fiction films. Since then, a large number of bizarre works about the crazy experiments of scientists have appeared, which is also the anxiety of people about the development of science at that time. Robot-themed science fiction films also reflected the reflections and concerns about human reliance on machines in that period.

The era of endless literary and artistic works with self-reflection as the core must be an era of relative peace and rapid social development. Only in a stable social environment will people reflect on themselves. Therefore, at the beginning of the 20th century, with the start of the First World War, no one was in the mood to reflect. The tension of the war, the sluggish economic development, and the precarious life forced the audience to seek comfort in the films.

After 1918, a large number of feature films with the theme of space exploration were pushed to the big screen. These works are based on advanced spaceships sailing into outer space, and describe the stories that happen on other planets—stories that have nothing to do with the earth and human society. This psychologically provides the audience with a good middle ground, allowing the audience to briefly escape from the reality of suffering. Since this time, the advantages of science fiction films have gradually emerged, and the object of expression has gradually shifted from humans to the “other” in fantasy. The shocking special effects have strengthened the audience’s sense of separation from their own lives. The film breaks away from the quirky talk and begins to take shape.

2.2 The Golden Age (1950-1980)

All literary and artistic works reflect the real situation of the current society in various aspects. In the 1950s, World War II was over, and everything was left to be done. The Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union is intensifying. The space race and nuclear weapons made a terrifying appearance in human history. At the same time, American society was shifting toward “suburbanization,” and Hollywood faced declining audience numbers, rising production costs, competition from television, and growing teenage audiences. In order to win more audiences, a large number of rough, stunning, and bizarre science fiction B-level films have been produced. The influence of science fiction films among teenage audiences is growing.

However, everything has two sides. The space race also contributed to the development of US space technology. In particular, the successful landing of American astronauts on the moon in 1969 greatly inspired the American people—even the people of the world. People began to have confidence in space technology, as if they could fly out of the Milky Way to conquer aliens soon. During this period, there were many science fiction works in which humans and aliens coexisted harmoniously, and even ruled over aliens. Represented by George Lucas’ “Star Wars”, these science fiction works show
humans and aliens living together. Their social system is also American-style capitalism, and even the aliens are quite fond of speaking English.

This is an uncompromising golden age in the history of science fiction. A large number of excellent works emerge in an endless stream, with a variety of styles and styles, but they all reveal more or less confidence in the human system and tolerance for alien civilizations.

2.3 The Era of Commercial Blockbusters (1980-2000)

Since the mid-to-late 1980s, with the rapid advancement of digital technology, the arrival of an industrialized information society, and changes in consumption concepts, science fiction films have gradually moved closer to mainstream audiences from the previous subcultural phenomenon. Between 1970 and 1977, serious adult-themed science fiction films, as well as art science fiction films, began to proliferate. For example, the blockbuster dystopian science fiction film “A Clockwork Orange” was the highest-grossing science fiction film in the early 1980s, and it is still regarded as a masterpiece. It is an important milestone for science fiction films.

However, the development of the film industry during this period actually had the greatest impact on science fiction films. From the late 1970s, the influence of technological change on cinema began to gradually increase, which was the Industrial Light and Magic era of George Lucas and Spielberg. The “Star Wars” series under the background of this strong industrial development completely changed the narrative and aesthetics of Hollywood science fiction films during this period.

It can be said that starting from “Star Wars”, “New Hollywood” films have such characteristics: linear narrative, a lot of action, flat characters, gorgeous special effects. And the Alien series was as successful as the Star Wars series. Later James Cameron’s “Terminator” (1984), Spielberg’s “Jurassic Park” (1993), Kevin Reynolds’ “Waterworld” (1995), Luc Super blockbusters such as Besson’s “The Fifth Element” (1997) and the Wachowski Brothers’ “The Matrix” (1999-2003) brought science fiction films into the mainstream audience and became Hollywood’s most profitable nations commercial blockbuster.

2.4 The Era of Pan-science Fiction Films (the 21st Century)

After entering the 21st century, science fiction elements have been widely accepted by society. With the development of the Internet and the rise of video games, science fiction exists in every corner of social life. The traditional science fiction films purely focusing on the theme of “future possibilities” have been reduced, replaced by science fiction action films. Superhero films with science fiction elements are all the rage. The audience’s aesthetic needs have changed from a purely external world to “embedding a bizarre sight into a realistic space”. Because, it’s very interesting that the future described in science fiction films many years ago has actually been realized now. The development of special effects technology and motion capture technology allows the audience to easily see any amazing fictional landscape, and the spectacle attribute of science fiction has weakened.

3. The Budding Period to the Development Period of Chinese Science Fiction Films

With the popularity of “The Wandering Earth”, my country’s science fiction films have taken a step closer to the international science fiction film production standards. It is undeniable that in the past ten years, China’s film and television industry is developing by leaps and bounds. In fact, as early as a few decades ago, the buds of Chinese science fiction films have already begun to appear.

3.1 Chinese Science Fiction Films Since the Founding of New China

The real development period of Chinese science fiction films should be from the 1980s to the present. Due to the passing of ten years in China, many artistic creations were forced to terminate, and it was not gradually resumed until the 1980s. Chinese science fiction films have been bumpy and almost interrupted. There is neither the hotbed that Hollywood films have, nor the solid soil for rapid development, let alone the modern film industry. Nowadays, the country is prosperous and the people are strong, and in the prosperous times, the film, which is one of the most important means of modern mass communication, has gradually stepped onto its stage.

In fact, the first science fiction film since the founding of New China should be “Little Sun” produced by Shanghai Science Education Film Studio in 1963. It tells the story of a group of children who love science, who imagines to create a small sun to change the cold winter climate. film. Although it is essentially a science and education film, the science fiction elements in it, such as manned spaceflight, controllable nuclear fusion and other super-era concepts have proved that it is an out-and-out science fiction film. Since then, domestic science fiction films have gradually emerged, and a series of science fiction films have appeared, such as “Dead Light on Coral Island”, “Dislocation”, “Thunderbolt Babe” and “The Atmosphere Disappears”. Chinese people have always been imaginative, and the seeds of science fiction films have long been sown in the vast land of China. Even in the special period tormented by the war, there will still be films like “Sixty Years Later Shanghai”. The film envisages the world decades from now. Although it seems to us now that the ideas of video calls and maglev trains have all been realized, to people at that time, it was nothing short of whimsical. However, this does not mean the rise of science fiction films in our country. In fact, science fiction films don’t have to tell the story as well as story films and comedy films. The set of scientific theoretical system and the grand background that it has built not only reflects the production level of the domestic film industry system, but also involves the education and training of relevant film talents.

Since modern times, with the emergence of a group of cutting-edge science fiction writers such as Liu Cixin, people have seen the future of Chinese science fiction. However, the process of adapting science fiction to science fiction films is not so easy to achieve. The growth of an excellent science fiction film requires not only the prosperity and development of the domestic film industry, but also the silent contribution
of relevant outstanding film practitioners. It is best to describe it as ten years of sharpening a sword.

3.2 Status Quo of Chinese Science Fiction Films

Many people call 2019 the first year of Chinese science fiction films because of the emergence of the phenomenal film “The Wandering Earth”, but there are also shoddy films such as “Shanghai Fortress” and “Interstellar Wandering”. Looking at the Chinese science fiction film market, it seems that there are not many excellent science fiction films. The entire science fiction film market is still mixed. To investigate the reason, we have to talk about the background of science fiction films in China.

Wu Yan, president of the World Chinese Science Fiction Association and director of the Science Fiction Creative Research Center of Beijing Normal University, said: “Chinese science fiction films are still in the early stages of catching up.” This is also the most intuitive summary of the status quo of my country’s science fiction films, and it has also become a point of view recognized by the industry. The production of science fiction films has always been regarded as a touchstone for the development of a country’s film industry. An excellent science fiction film must have rigorous scientific logic. Hollywood science fiction blockbusters benefit from the development of the US aerospace and technology industries. For example, “The Martian” has received strong support from NASA in the United States. According to the data of the Mars rover, the topography of Mars is restored as much as possible, which is refreshing. Known as a Hollywood classic, “Interstellar” invited Kip S. Thorne, the 2017 Nobel Prize winner in the United States, to build a grand theoretical foundation for it.

“The Wandering Earth” is no different. The concept of giant planetary engines and dunes that appear in the film is the result of years of silent research by Beihang University, which provides a feasible theoretical support for the film. We are gratified to find that China’s science fiction film market seems to be on the rise recently, but the development needs to face up to its own series of problems. Just learning from Hollywood does not conform to the domestic science fiction film market. At the root, it is necessary to find out the crux of restricting development from oneself.

As a science fiction film, “The Wandering Earth” will inevitably be compared with other films of the same type, such as “2001: A Space Odyssey”, “Independence Day”, “2012”, “The Day After Tomorrow” and so on. You can see similar shadows in “The Wandering Earth”—the destruction of familiar landmarks, extreme weather around the world, conflicts and reconciliation between family members... Actually, you don’t need to be too demanding. The quality of Western science fiction films is also uneven. The rise of Chinese science fiction films has just begun, and there is still a long way to go.

3.3 Difficulties in Chinese Science Fiction Films

Although “The Wandering Earth” has achieved great success in a short period of time and has also driven China’s “science fiction fever”, Liu Cixin himself believes that this phenomenon is only a short-lived carnival. For a long time, China’s science fiction film market has not caused much trouble. It can be seen that a mature industrial system and a sound film production team must be supported behind science fiction films. And these, for the current Chinese science fiction films, will take time.

According to Yien Entertainment Consulting data, the growth rate of Chinese science fiction films from 2018 to 2019 was single digits, ranking behind documentaries, and drama films are still the leader in the Chinese film market. However, the box office of science fiction films far exceeds that of other genres. We can find that the audience’s expectations for science fiction films are still very high, which is why there is a lot of room for future development of Chinese science fiction films.

The future of my country’s science fiction films is huge, but there are still many problems. The first is that the creativity of science fiction films is not enough, that is, the atmosphere of science fiction literature is not enough. This leads to fewer science fiction IPs and fewer adaptable science fiction films. There is no shortage of science fiction writers in our country. According to the Chinese website, the largest literary gathering place in China, 150,000 science fiction novels have been created, including completed and serialized ones. Even though there are a large number of them, very few are qualified to be adapted into films.

3.4 Chinese Science Fiction Films Based on Cultural Differences Between China and the U.S.

In terms of cultural differences between China and the United States, China is an ancient civilization, and its five-thousand-year history has brought us countless creative inspirations. Therefore, we will find that Chinese films and TV series with themes of history or myths and legends account for more. On the other hand, in the United States, the history of the founding of the nation for hundreds of years is almost a history of war, and the sense of crisis is widely circulated in American society. Therefore, vigilance against possible dangers in the future has become the biggest attraction of American film culture export. The difference in cultural awareness has opened the gap between Chinese science fiction films and the world, but this does not mean that Chinese science fiction films have no hope of development. In the minds of people in the industry, there are three mountains in front of Chinese science fiction films: originality, screenwriting, and technology. China has too little experience in science fiction films, and it is too obvious to copy Hollywood’s traces in creation. On the one hand, the domestic science fiction film market is relatively chaotic. The creators artificially added some elements to make science fiction nondescript and challenge the audience’s tolerance. On the other hand, domestic audiences are accustomed to the special effects of Hollywood blockbusters, resulting in improved tastes, while the technology of domestic special effects teams cannot keep up.

World science fiction films need science fiction films with Chinese characteristics. The reason for the fire of “The Wandering Earth” is that the core of this film is the local Chinese culture, the passion for the homeland, and the
dedication to home. This is completely different from the individual heroism abroad. If the original capabilities of domestic science fiction films are further strengthened and a few more IPs such as “The Wandering Earth” are released, China will definitely have a place in the science fiction film market in the future. With the continuous increase of my country’s comprehensive strength, the concept of a global community with a shared future has been proposed, allowing the world to understand the inclusiveness of the Chinese nation. The same is true in the film industry, we also need to use films to transmit Chinese culture to the world. Fortunately, we have seen that Chinese culture is blooming all over the world, and more and more people identify with Chinese culture, which provides conditions for the rise of Chinese science fiction films.

4. Conclusion

Chinese science fiction works have always been very niche, and rarely appear in the public eye. In order to popularize it to general readers and audiences, it is necessary to present the settings in the work in a way that they can understand and accept. “The Wandering Earth” is such a successful domestic science fiction film, adapted from the novel “The Wandering Earth” of the same name by science fiction writer Liu Cixin. It embodies the core of China’s story, telling that in the near future, the rapid expansion of the sun will threaten the earth—the space where human beings, animals and plants depend on, and the only remaining 3.5 billion people will work together to push the earth away from the solar system and go to Proxima Centauri looks for a new home. films made in this way are both entertaining and commercial, and the audience will undoubtedly buy it, because they can understand the meaning of the film and are more likely to resonate emotionally with the characters in the film.

However, to be called science fiction, it must be a fantasy based on science. To be clear, though, science fiction is not the result of academic research. science fiction creators, including science fiction authors and filmmakers and directors of science fiction films, are not scientists, so there is no need to delve into the subtleties and unreasonable aspects of it. Being too critical will only lose the original fun of watching films, which is not worth the loss.

Here is a quote from Liu Cixin: “Hollywood has been shooting for a century, but there are actually only a few American science fiction films that can really be called classics. So let’s look at Chinese science fiction films with a normal mind.” Chinese science fiction films take time. In the next few years, science fiction films may grow explosively, and China’s film market will usher in a baptism.

References