

Characteristics, Problems and Prospects of the Development of Barrage Film

Yun Sang

Communication University of China, Nanjing, 210000, China

Abstract: As an organic part of online films and TV series, barrage is characterized by instant interactions, originality, and content sharing, conducive to easing the boredom of watching films in cinemas, reducing the burden caused by the traditional film distribution system, and promoting the recreation of audiences. However, there are many problems faced with the development of the barrage film such as disorder of emotions, misinterpretation of texts, cultural interruption, and lack of innovation. It should be related to the audience, the system of the industry, the cultural characteristics, and traditions of the sector. Therefore, in order to promote the development of the barrage film, major breakthroughs can be made through three aspects, including the choice of movies, the overview of experience, and the innovation. Besides, it is necessary to focus on the technical advantages of traditional cinemas, promote the subjective consciousness of audiences to integrate into the film, and encourage the creation of original and high-quality films, optimizing the structure of China's film industry and promoting its continuous prosperity.

Keywords: Film industry, Barrage, Barrage film

With the rise of Web 2.0 and the advent of the social media at the beginning of this century, the digital society and online culture have changed the expressive content and form of films. In addition, emerging forms of films, especially interactive film, desktop film, and barrage film, which transcend the traditional film narrative have come to the fore. The barrage film is not a new concept as the places to send barrage were set on either side of the screen when the Chinese animation *The Legend of Qin* was released in 2014. Audiences could send comments immediately to share their experience with those watching the film together with them in the cinema. However, such an innovation didn't receive widespread application, and is also different from the barrage film mentioned in this paper, with the former shown on traditional screens, while the latter through online video sites. Compared with the short rise and fall of the barrage film, the hidden risks of China's cinema chain have existed for a long time and have attracted a lot of attention. There is a root cause for films which are represented by *Lost in Russia* being released on online video sites rather than at cinemas.

1. Innate Problems of China's Film Industry

After more than a century of development, the film sector which integrates the performance art, the visual art, and the auditory art and other art forms has become a relatively stable industrial model. Film was introduced to China not long after its birth, and took its root in China as an exotic, becoming an important way for people's entertainment. In recent years, with the global popularity of the Internet, its derivatives such as video websites, online videos, and the barrage culture have developed rapidly and rocked the traditional film industry.

In addition to the common problems often mentioned by scholars such as the quality of scripts, filming, and special effect technology, China's film industry is still confronted with other shared issues including the changing aesthetic habits of audiences, the single medium of cinema, and loads of heavy assets. As the industry becomes more mature, the division has also become more detailed, and this is also true of the film industry. Coupled with the increasingly personalized aesthetic preferences of today's audiences, traditional film types and forms of playing cannot satisfy their needs. There is no doubt that the "dark environment, quiet atmosphere, fixed seats, unified facing"[1] can help the audience immerse in enjoying the film and thinking deeply, which is suitable for suspense, sci-fi, crime and other films that require continuous concentration or movies supported by 3D, VR and other professional technologies. However, considering the one-way communication of films that "a small number of producers deliver information to a large number of consumers",[2] coupled with the dark and depressing environment of

cinemas which to some extent limits the audiences' emotional interaction, the viewing process has become "didactic". This is not only not in line with modern people's fragmented time and frequently jumping attention, but also does not apply to some themes of the film such as the comedy, action, love, animation. Moreover, as an offline entity, the cinema essentially belongs to the traditional store economy, "relying on space and time to make operational decisions, which is a basic 'asset-heavy' and conventional business practice, with obvious obstacles to development and greater operational risks." [3] The unpredictability of box office receipts has always been a large problem affecting the film industry. Coupled with the fixed costs of housing rent, staff salaries, property management fees, equipment maintenance, etc., the burden on the film industry is undoubtedly intensified.

Apart from these shared problems, China's film industry also faces its own issues in terms of the distribution system, copyright protection and asset operation, which are particularly evidenced by the fixed share of box office, the mechanism of theatrical window, and salary proportion of actors. These involve both the conflicts of interests of multiple parties and relate closely to the common problems. Therefore, it is imperative to refine the existing category of films according to the demands of the audiences and features of the films themselves, so as to make reasonable use of the playing conditions in cinemas, use more media to promote films, and relieve the burdens on traditional cinemas, which are also the precedent and innate driving forces for the development of barrage film based on online video platforms.

2. Generation Features of the Barrage Film

In recent years, theoretical studies of the barrage have emerged in the academic community. In general, the barrage can be defined as "comments that are sent to the video page one by one and at a certain speed with the help of certain network technology. The content, font, color and font size of the text can generally be freely set by the sender." [4] As mentioned above, the barrage film studied in this paper is not shown in traditional cinemas but on online video sites, with the integration of "barrage plus online premiere". Such an integration can provide a certain reference for China's film industry to solve its chronic problems. From the perspective of online premiere, its positive significance is mainly shown in three aspects:

First, it reduces the expenses of venues, equipment, and labor, which further alleviates the "asset-heavy" dilemma of China's film industry, and lowers the costs for audience to watch films, expanding the range of audience and strengthening the promotion of films. Second, the gradual universality of online premieres can help break the monopoly of traditional cinemas on films, window periods and the share of box office, and promote the healthy and sound development of the film industry. Take *Lost in Russia* as an example. Its online premiere not only enhanced the reputation of Xu Zheng, the film's director and its producers, but also brought a large amount of traffic for Bytedance, the investor of the film. At the same, it satisfied consumers' demands of watching the film. It could be said that it "shot three hawks with one arrow". Third, the economic and social benefits brought by the online premiere can promote the technological upgrading of online video platforms, providing a better experience of watching for audiences.

The expressive forms of traditional films will be greatly enriched as the barrage integrates into the barrage film with its interactivity, immediacy originality, and etc., thus refining the existing category of films and utilizing the resources of cinemas in a more targeted manner. In this way, the double harvests of watching films both in cinemas and online can be realized to ensure the prosperity of the film industry. From the perspective of features of barrage, its positive significance is mainly shown in five aspects:

First, the interactivity of the barrage is in line with modern audiences' demands for the expression of emotions, which is conducive to relieving the boredom in the traditional process of watching films. Such an interactivity is expressed in two aspects: the audiences' interaction with the film and the audiences' interaction with the barrage. The former allows the receiver to have the same status as the sender, thus improving audiences' sense of existence and identity. And the latter fulfills people's needs to express emotions and communicate.

Second, the immediacy of the barrage allows the comments to be more targeted. Comments made by audiences in different time and space and with an eye on different details are the timely feedback that producers and investors are eager to receive, which not only allow them to grasp the reputation of the released films at the first time, but also help them improve their business level, thus ensuring the quality of the films.

Third, reproducibility. If the film is considered as the original, then the barrage changes the original

content through language and symbols (such as the adaptation of characters' lines, addition of emojis, integration of hypertext content, etc.) to produce a new meaning. Therefore, some scholars have pointed out that "in fact, no matter what form the barrage take, it has created a different kind of cultural product as long as it is intertwined with the original work, all of which is of deconstructive significance. And in this way, every audience who sends their comments becomes a producer of a new cultural product." [5] Such a reproducibility enriches the expressive content of films, expands their demonstration space and even extends their life expectancy, allowing old films to be reborn. For example, *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* released on television in 1994 became popular again because of the barrage sent during Zhuge Liang's argument with Wang Lang.

Fourth, the nature of sharing. As is mentioned above, audiences who send the barrage have the need to vent their emotions and conduct communications, and they also share their opinions through the barrage. Christian Metz, a French film theorist, believes that "when watching the film in a dark environment, the audience is not subject to any surveillance by the characters on the screen or other audiences, but enjoys the sadistic, controlling pleasure of dominating the films." [6] However, due to the limitations of the venues, audiences can neither share their real-time feelings, nor feel such a sense of "controlling", and even produce a "suffocating" experience. While the barrage film based on online platforms provides a space for audiences to share their emotions and perceptions, through which people can not only express their opinions but also find confidants with similar interests, thus gaining a strong sense of identity.

Fifth, transmission. Compared with the transmission model of traditional films released in cinemas dominated by high investments, subjectivity and singularity, limited transmission, and business logic, that of the barrage is characterized by low investments (mostly zero input), objectivity and diversity, multi-level transmission, and symbiosis of elements. Most audiences send comments are driven by their interests, and such spontaneous behaviors are non-utilitarian in nature. That is to say, the audiences' behavior of sending the barrage itself is a kind of communication. Meanwhile, they send the barrage to vent their emotions and express their opinions, and they want to get responses and recognition in most cases, coinciding with the communication. Therefore, barrage is an organic part of the film and television industry. Active communication of audiences of the barrage film is conducive to promoting the film effectively, enriching the communication concept and path in this field, and improving the efficiency of communication.

3. Current Dilemma for the Development of Barrage Film

As an innovation of model of watching films, the barrage film has a number of advantages such as the low threshold, flexible production and playing, interactivity, and immediate sharing, alleviating the burdens on the film and television industry and improving the efficiency of resource utilization to some extent. However, it is also confronted with some dilemmas, including the four following aspects:

First, according to the data of a research institute, audiences tend to consider the barrage as a channel for "roasting" in most cases. [7] The reason for this is that young people in today's society are amusing themselves to death. Individual needs and desires are anonymously expressed through the barrage, while the behavior of watching the film has become a game of finding details to roast. However, under the conflict between such a game experience and the traditional etiquette of watching the film, it's hard to have interactions offline. It may disturb other audiences or depress those who have resonance when lots of individuals echo some certain scenes and barrage. The revelry caused by roasting through the barrage allows the audience to immerse themselves in the deconstruction of the entertainment of serious works of art, undermining the ceremony of appreciating art works and making the realistic and historical meaning of the film ignored by the audience.

Second, as a kind of interaction, the barrage may have nothing to do with the film itself, which can lead to the overlook or misunderstanding of the original information of the film during the communication. Hence the conflicts between the film's nature as a medium and its artistic nature. As an art, the film asks the audience to appreciate its connotations on their own and have an emotional resonance with the producers. However, with the advent of the barrage, the film becomes a communication platform for entertainment to provide the audience with an immediate channel to express, and vent their feelings and emotions, making the artistic nature of the film squeezed by the amusement of the barrage. Besides, its emergence allows the audience to receive both the film text and the barrage text, so that "a barrage film composed of the film text, the barrage text and the perception of audiences is born after they reproduce the film text through the barrage". [8] The action of sending the barrage and

the emergence of the barrage have led to the frequent diversion of audiences' attention and self-entertainment, which to a certain extent subvert the traditional concept of film watching and shake the value of films and the social function that they are supposed to play.

Third, as a kind of subculture, the barrage itself is evolving, and there was even the "art of barrage". [9]However, the Japanese site Niconico and the domestic sites such as Acfun and Bilibili which are all famous for the barrage are now transforming or making changes. In addition, the upgrading and improvement of online technologies and video players, as well as the influx of new users have all led to the vanishing of the feast-like trend of creating barrage in the early stage. Instead, the barrage has become a simple interactive roast. Whether this is the result under the influence of the development of the cultural industry or an interruption in the cultural evolution is still a problem that needs further exploration.

Fourth, although the public opinions formed by the barrage encourage the audience to participate in the discussions about the plot development, characters, and conflicts immediately, there is still a lack of innovation in terms of the ideas, technologies and practices of the forms of the barrage, communication methods, and interaction channels. Under these conditions, most of the emotions vented by the audience are superficial, don't last for a long time, and don't generate empathy. Moreover, it is difficult to maintain the heat of the topic, and the audience can easily jump between different emotions and meanings with the appearance of different barrages. Though the audience can choose to playback or pause, it will undermine the watching experience. The innovation of the barrage film has a direct bearing on its development in the future. It is necessary to adopt more targeted and personalized technologies to fulfill the diverse needs of the audience, thus establishing itself in the film and television industry and taking a leading role in the competition of diversity.

4. Prospects of the Barrage Film

As is stated above, the barrage film is not a new concept. Its temporary popularity is due to its own characteristics, such as immediate interactions and personalized expressions, which are not suitable for the cinema, rather than to a lack of vitality. What's more, the transfer of films from cinemas to online video sites didn't come out of nowhere. Therefore, the study and practice of the barrage film cannot only focus on "reducing the burden" on the film and television industry, or the supplement for cinemas. Instead, the study and practice should focus on the common challenges faced by China's film and television industry and personalized problems confronted by the barrage film, with a combination of the generation features of the barrage film, promoting the innovation and in-depth study of the barrage film and strengthening the high-quality development of China's film and television industry. Therefore, studies on the strategies of the development of the barrage film should start from different perspectives, combining the part-whole relationship between the barrage film and the film and television industry, and the diachronic and synchronic relationship between past experiences and realistic needs. Specifically, major breakthroughs should be made in film selection, experience overview and creative innovation.

Film selection refers to allocating different films to different cinemas according to the features of the cinema and the barrage film, rather than for the barrage its own sake. For example, a light comedy such as *Lost in Russia* doesn't require professional technology such as 3D and VR, but also the constant concentration from the audience to understand the film plot. It is therefore suitable to be selected as a barrage film. However, suspense or sci-fi films including *Inception* and *Transformers* either require the audience to be highly focused and are not suitable for spoilers or need the support of professional viewing technology to show its twisted plot and visual advantages with the support of cinemas. And these are suitable to be chosen as the barrage film.

The overview of experiences means that it is necessary to overcome the potential risks of the barrage culture, to avoid aesthetic alienation, excessive vulgarity, and rampant roasting in its practice, thus promoting the professional development of the barrage film. Both the barrage film practiced in cinemas in the past, and the current one at the online sites with the function of sending barrages put the barrage sent by the audience on the screen only as an addition to the film, which cannot affect the plot, resulting in limited interaction between the audience and the film. A professional barrage film should make the barrage a part of the film, integrating audiences' intent into the plot, thus highlighting the immediate interactivity of the barrage film. In this regard, the recently popular episode 13 "iPartment Falls in the Barrage" of "iPartment Season 5", can provide a reference, in which the audience can change the plot and the ending through their own choices, making the will of the audience represented by the barrage truly an organic part of the film.

Creative innovation specifically refers to achieving breakthroughs in the conceptual framework,

technical means, industrial market and other aspects, further consolidating the status of the barrage film as a cutting-edge innovative practice in the film and television industry. In addition, it can be used as an innovative demonstration point for China's cultural industry, effectively linking multi-dimensional elements such as the Internet, cinemas, audiences and markets. Take Bilibili as an example. As one of China's major video platforms, Bilibili has, to some extent, ushered in a new era for barrage in China and sparked people's attraction to barrage. However, Bilibili hasn't set up an exclusive channel for sharing barrages, so audiences can't share their interest in barrages on other platforms. Therefore, the "Internet Plus" technologies should be utilized to spread the barrage in a more targeted and convenient way, further expanding the living space for the barrage film. Meanwhile, the reproduction of the barrage, especially its connection with the film and television industry are still the problems remaining to be solved for the development of the barrage film. Undoubtedly, China's film and television industry is now putting an emphasis on "content", and the multi-purpose space created through the barrage film has yet to be exploited. For example, the high-quality barrage can be sorted out as a supplement to the main plot, and the suspense setting and the bonus scene can be improved. In addition, the "new bud" plan can be launched to reward audiences who send creative barrages and encourage such creation, thus enriching the content production team of China's film and television industry.

5. Conclusion

Barrage film can not only relieve the burden of the film and television industry, but also contribute to the structural improvement of the film industry. To promote the development of barrage film, we should not only make use of open online platforms, give play to the innate features of barrage culture, and promote its own professional growth, but also focus on the technologies and viewing advantages of traditional cinemas, achieving development both online and offline.

References

- [1] Yan C. (2016). *Barrage Film: Another Sample of Reflection*. *Film Art*, (6):67-72
- [2] Poster M. (2001). *The Second Media Age (Fan, J)*. Nanjing: Nanjing University Press.
- [3] Xiang Y. (2020). < *Whose Cheese Has Lost in Russia Moved?*> - *The Development Pattern of China's Cinemas in the Era of Digital Creativity*. *Art Criticism*, (3):88-95
- [4] Li J. (2019). *On the Encoding and Decoding of "Barrage" from the Perspective of Youth Subculture*. *Media Forum*, (2); 42-44
- [5] Zhu X. (2018). *The Invasion of Youth Subculture Barrage into "Mainstream" Platforms: A Cultural Perspective Based on the Birmingham School in the UK*. *Hundred Schools in Arts*, (4): 60-65
- [6] Hu X. (2005). *Outline of the History of Western Film Theory*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- [7] Guo Y. (2014). *Barrage Films Trigger Social Roasting, the Bigger the Topic, the Greater the Benefit*. <http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2014-0904/13504203921.shtml>.
- [8] Liu X. (2018). *The Demand of "Existence" and the Carnival of "Roasting"- Analysis of the Psychology of the Audience of Barrage Film*. *Contemporary Cinema*, (1): 151-154.
- [9] Wang Y. (2020). *The Leaping Subtitles - From Graphic Expression of Meaning to Media Interaction*. *Journal of Beijing Film Academy*, 2020(11): 27-35.