

Landscape Construction and Town-style Consumption

-- An Analysis of Wuzhen Theatre Festival

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Abstract: There are abundant artistic practices on Wuzhen Theatre Festival, which has been held for four consecutive years. Wuzhen, as a famous tourist attraction of China, is integrated with cultural and artistic atmosphere, so Wuzhen Theatre Festival has become increasingly more popular. In this paper, this festival will be analyzed from the perspective of landscapes, performances, publicness, classes and cultural symbols of the town. In this town, a “kingdom of the absurd” is annually presented by learning from arts and putting up artistic performances to host the annual festival like a “mental feast for all people” by virtue of consumerism. Meanwhile, it is because of the festival that Wuzhen, as a spatial symbol, has become a vivid representation of “the society of the spectacle” called by Guy-Ernest Debord who is a French philosopher. In terms of performances, tourists can be physically closer to have more intuitive theatre experiences in person. However, an invisible wall is constructed between classes under the conditions of commodity economy. Although dramas are placed inside “nutshells of capitals”, these arts are inherently contradictory and aggressive that some self-reflexive breakthroughs would be made on Wuzhen Theatre Festival.

Keywords: Wuzhen Theatre Festival, landscape, consumption, installation arts

1. INTRODUCTION

The annual Wuzhen Theatre Festival, jointly initiated by Chen Xianghong, Huang Lei, Lai Shengchuan and Meng Jinghui, was hosted by Cultural Wuzhen Co., Ltd. In May 2013, it was the first time that Wuzhen Theatre Festival was organized with the theme of “reflection”, arousing great concerns and gaining lots of favorable comments. In 2014, the second Wuzhen Theatre Festival was “imbued” with better atmosphere, held under favorable circumstances. In 2015, “inheritance” became the theme of the third anniversary of the theatre festival. The fourth Wuzhen Theatre Festival was hosted from 13th to 22nd October 2016 when 22 repertoires and approximately 80 dramas of 13 countries and areas such as Germany, France, Russia and Japan were performed. It could be even said that an unprecedented amount of performances were put up that year. At present, scores of special domestic and foreign repertoires are

annually performed to present classical works of dramatic arts. Meanwhile, arenas are set up to organize performance competitions for young people, in order to boost youthful and pioneering vigour of the theatre festival. What's more, Wuzhen Theatre Festival was honored as "the most influential theatre festival in China" [1]. In this paper, the author will more or less reflect on Wuzhen Theatre Festival that has aroused growing concerns in terms of landscapes, publicness, classes, and cultural symbols of the town.

2. LANDSCAPES AND PERFORMANCES

If attention is focused on Wuzhen - the area where Wuzhen Theatre Festival is held, this impressive town in the south of the lower reaches of the Yangtze River offers reliable spatial support to the kingdom of the absurd. In blue flagstone alleys and on black-awning boats, there is a wide variety of artisans and craftsmen, ranging from masters in tea houses and blacksmith to aborigines who sell agricultural products. Thus, people can appreciate primitive customs of the ancient riverside town Wuzhen. Nevertheless, these artisans and artisans don't simply live on their own artisan crafts. They have been integrated with red walls, green piles, blue stones and small bridges into a tremendous moving installation art. "Performers" can share profits with companies of different scenic spots from tourists' appreciation of their performances. As performances become a part of residents' everyday life in Wuzhen, these naturalist dramas make Wuzhen Theatre Festival dramatic and intertextual, because residents' routine performances are integrated and ritualized into a grand cultural and artistic festival. Wuzhen Theatre Festival is like a mixed installation of cosplays performed by the old town's residents and drama troupes home and abroad. Thus, Wuzhen has attracted more attention, while tourists pay attention to the landscapes of the "ancient China" within the town and performances of the theatre festival full of cultural and artistic atmosphere. In order to further receive tourists' attention, scrolls with words of "100-year dramas and 100 celebrities" were even hung all over the Xizha Street. This society of the spectacle is annually ornamented by these dramatic visual symbols, the implications of which are also compulsorily defined by coders. "Consumerism requires creating extensive camouflages and illusions as well as occasions and opportunities that penetrate into everyday life. The illusionary image consumption misleads people and impacts their understanding." [2]Therefore, Wuzhen Theatre Festival has successfully created an illusionary space for people and developed virtual artistic ideals demanded by people. Thus, Wuzhen has become "the society of the spectacle" called by a French philosopher known as Guy-Ernest Debord, who says, "all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles" [3]. Therefore, in such a visual world composed of spectacles, images and symbols, tourists, as subjects of spectacles, must yield and adapt to the installation arts fused by the spectacles and cosplays. In addition, they shall try their best to convince themselves that they have captured the so-called "arts" of theatre festivals from a kind of moving visual gaze and consumer logics after their wandering like window shopping in Wuzhen.

3. THE FOURTH WALL AND CLASS BARRIERS

Tourists do not purely appreciate spectacles and gain tourist experiences from them. Modern scenic spots more or less organize some projects that tourists can take part in, in order to enrich their localized experiences. For instance, there is divination and deciphering in temples, weaving or knitting activities in farms. Such interactions between audiences and aesthetic processes have been also seen in the history of dramatic arts. In 1887, *Jacques Damour*, adapted by the Theatre Libre according to Zola's novel, was performed in Paris. Afterwards, Jean Genet proposed the notion of "the fourth wall" to highlight that audiences' perceptions were true [4]. From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, small theatres emerged in Europe as a new form of arts and made continuous attempts to break through the fourth wall. They did not only shorten their physical distance from appreciators, but also interacted with their audiences concerning performances. Compared with small theatres, Wuzhen Theatre Festival pushed the fourth wall to a greater extent. For example, *The Life Attitude of Two Dogs* that he performed together with Han Pengyi on the third Wuzhen Theatre Festival, is an enduring comedy that is often performed in China. It was performed as a special play in the part of the "New Environmental Vision". It was the first time that the drama was performed outdoors. Without the echo of ceilings and walls, they felt a little uncomfortable and always worried that the audiences couldn't hear their lines. As a result, they had no choice but to turn the volume up. Besides, an "ancient town in China" is available for sightseeing as a part of the theatre festival. In this ancient town, various repertoires of several hundred groups of artists from five continents are performed on wooden houses, stone bridges, alleys and even black-awning boats of Xizha Scenic Spot. Some dramas are performed "in a flash" among the crowds like performance arts. On the fourth Wuzhen Theatre Festival, strong smells of wine and ping pong balls that were thrown at the audiences in performing a drama named *Daji (Big Chickens)* offered physically closer and more intuitive embedded dramatic experiences to tourists.

However, lots of logics about capital consumption are hidden behind such publicness and sense of participation. In the early period of its establishment, Wuzhen Theatre Festival devoted to developing into "avignon" of China, whereas their origins are completely different. Avignon is one of three major dramas in the world. It was a practice of "popular dramas" created by the French playwright Jean Vilar in 1947. In essence, it is a cultural objective for shying away from bourgeois of Paris and artistically influences the masses of villages in Avignon [5]. To take part in the Wuzhen Theatre Festival, the consumption capacity shall correspond to aesthetic standards of the middle class: RMB120 admission ticket for Xizha Scenic Spot, RMB100 admission ticket for invited dramas, RMB600 for one-night stay inside a private guesthouse and the cola uniformly sold at RMB30 in all scenic spots prevent the classes that don't have corresponding consumption capacity from participation. The celebrities who have appeared in the "Town's Dialogue" (an official activity) over the past festivals have potentially attracted their fans to rush from distant places to consume there. Thus, it is clear that

Wuzhen Theatre Festival is a paradox of publicness and sense of participation. As it has constantly broken through the fourth wall of dramatic techniques, it has created an isolated and intangible wall among different classes under the conditions of market economy.

4. SYMBOLS OF THE SMALL TOWN IN THE SOUTH OF THE YANGTZE RIVER

“Young people of small towns” are mentioned extremely frequently in modern Chinese movies, but often given discriminatory labels of identities. Furthermore, they are reckoned as core forces that decide box office results of movies. The *Tiny Times* series, directed by Guo Jingming, is a movie about “mythologies for migrating to cities” in the course of globalization and urbanization. This movie depicts and conceives a lot about luxury and enjoyment of urban civilization. Metropolises are defined to be under luxurious atmosphere. Accordingly, backward countryside sceneries, regardless of the “jolting a sedan” in a wedding of Gaomi of Shandong Province or “praying for rain with waist drums”, have become the “other” space for presenting wonders and developing folk customs in works of China’s fifth-generation film directors such as Zhang Yimou’s *Red Sorghum* (1988) and *The Yellow Land* of Chen Kaige. As buffers between metropolises and villages (which belong to a binary opposition), towns have been explored and favored by the six-generation directors of China as alternative and artful space. To avoid grand narratives, this image space is artistic with individualized traits. For instance, in Jia Zhangke’s movie named *Still Life*, a young woman of the lower class said in some poetic words, namely “in the south of the farther south” when the coal miner Han Sanming asked her (i.e. His ex-wife) about her daughter who had been lost for years. In the *Roadside Picnic* directed by Director Gan in 2016, we can also see an old doctor who was used to listening to Li Taixiang’s song called *Farewell*, a middle-aged literary man who liked chanting poems that audiences of the first-tier cities can’t understand and a virtual place named “Dangmai” that seemed as though it could be only seen in indie pop movies in a town of Guizhou Province known as Kaili. It seems these towns have certain kind of parasitic relationships with the literary and artistic atmosphere. These relationships originate from the nostalgia that has been deeply rooted in people of this agricultural society for thousands of years and the middle class’s weariness for mythologies in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. It may be said that towns, which connect the unsophisticated countryside with urban civilization, has been always labelled by urban middle class’ dissimilated mentality of retiring from the world and “nostalgic” ecological consumption.

As an imaginary and materialized symbol, the small town in the south of the Yangtze River has become a place for people to create wealth owing to its eternal independence. In a remote and infamous town, there would be a lack of corresponding profound histories that the artistic atmosphere would be evidently isolated from the land. However, talents and beauties in the south of the Yangtze River as well as scholars’ unforgettable dreams by the Qinghuai River endow Wuzhen that has become a tourist resort with histories and cultures which can be shaped. Thus, this town has gained the humanistic support like the theatre festival. Therefore, Wuzhen,

the small town in the south of the Yangtze River, is fully integrated with the theatre festival. In an era of visual cultures, the annual theatre festival for presenting the kingdom of the absurd has been evolved by consumerism into a “mental feast for people”.

5. CONCLUSION

The small towns that frequently appear in novels and movies, including the symbolic *Xiangchunshu Street* written by Su Tong who is a well-known Chinese writer, *Daicheng* written by Lu Nei who is a writer born after 1970, “Pingle Town” that has the favor of Yan Ge who is a writer born after 1980, towns like Fenyang or Fengjie in films of China’s sixth-generation directors, and even the Tinglin Town in the movie *Duckweed* that is directed by Han Han who is a young writer of China and became a hit of cinemas during the Chinese Spring Festival in 2017, the joys and sorrows that happen in these small cities and towns, and various aspects of life have proven that towns are inherently ideal habitats of literatures and arts. Nevertheless, capitals would be submerged in cultural practices that are really established in local areas and dedicate to cultural renaissance. As a result, these local cultures and spatial arts compose huge visual installations. As they are progressively evolved into specimens for tourists to appreciate, Wuzhen Theatre Festival will be a vivid presentation of “the society of the spectacle”. In particular, “the veil between virtual landscapes and realities will be immediately pierced when one looks at the distinct boundary between the inland river of the scenic spot and the grand canal outside the town on the Wangjin Bridge in the northwest at the west gate of Wuzhen [6].”

On the fourth Wuzhen Theatre Festival of 2016, Danish Theatre Republique performed *Hamlet* in Wuzhen, the Tiger Lillies, a band from the United Kingdom, said, “I could live in a walnut shell and feel like the king of the universe” in their performance, which was a famous saying of Shakespeare. Thus, we are supposed to have some opportunistic expectations. As tourism economy developed and areas strove to undertake cultural projects, the theatre festival has been put inside the “nutshells of capitals”. Nevertheless, dramas are essentially contradictory and aggressive, so perhaps they would make some self-reflective breakthroughs. They may not only realize their own situation, but also would represent the process in front of the audiences in the near future.

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