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China's Internet Movie and Its Industrial Development¹

Internet movie is a new form of art industry in the age of new media. According to Marshall McLuhan, the content of any medium is always another medium. "The content of writing is speech, just as written word is the content of print and print is the content of a telegraph."² Similarly, we can also logically say that the content of Internet movie is movie. In other words, what we usually call "Internet movie" is the extension of movie in the network media. Since the new century, Internet movies have made rapid development in China, and attracted widespread attention from all social circles. At the same time, it is worth deep and careful studies in academic circles.

Specifically speaking, the development process of Internet movie in China has gone through three stages: Internet short film, micro film and Internet big movie, which also constitute three main types of Internet movies.

I. Internet Short Film: UGC and Parody of Traditional Film

Internet short film is the initial type of Internet movie. It usually refers to videos with plot and story made by netizens (unprofessional film maker) and uploaded to the Internet autonomously. It is a typical UGC (User Generated Content) product in the era of Web 2.0. Specifically, it is formed by adapting traditional movies, recombining their fragments as material, and adding dubbing. As computers become cheaper and cheaper, and the functions of various software become more powerful and easier to use, changing dubbing, subtitles, editing and other works can be accomplished by ordinary computers and some simple software, such as Photoshop, a technique for image re-creation, which makes it possible for non-professionals to make Internet short films.

¹ This paper is supported by the Major Projects of the National Social Science Fund of China (18ZDA282)

² Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man*, Gingko Press, Hamburg 2003, p. 19.

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Internet short film reflects some characteristics of grass-roots culture and usually takes “parody” as the main creative method. The earliest Internet short film in China is *Dashiji* (2001) and the most famous representative one is *A Murder Case Triggered by a Steamed Bun* produced by Hu Ge in 2005.

Parody, also known as humorous imitation, is a borrowing and reproduction of other works, which thus constitutes a special intertextual relation between the new and the original. The borrowed work is usually classical, or is known to the general public, and the new version humorously subverts the text. *A Murder Case Triggered by a Steamed Bun*, is an obvious parody of the film *Wuji* (*The Promise* 2005), directed by Chen Kaige and of the TV program “Chinese Law Report”, shown on China Central Television. It uses the report form, but its plot is based on *Wuji*, and the film pretentiously includes two irrelevant advertisements in order to subvert and exaggerate *Wuji*’s storyline. This led to a related copyright lawsuit: Chen Kaige accused Hu Ge of imitating his work and infringing his copyright. At the time, the case became a major social issue, many netizens publishing their opinions of the case. In fact, Chen Kaige’s copyright lawsuit was neither supported by law, nor by public opinion. An anonymous blogger pointed out that *Wuji* was itself an imitation and plagiarism of Gustave Flaubert’s novel *Salammô*.³

In comparing *Wuji* with *Salammô*, we easily conclude that Chen’s film is really an imitation and reproduction of the main characters and stories of Flaubert’s novel. For example, the heroine Qingcheng in Chen’s film is clearly based on *Salammô*, General Guangming on Matho, the slave Kunlun on Spendius, Duke Wuhuan is an echo of Hamilcar, and *Wuji* city stands for Carthage. In addition, Chen’s film contains many visual references to the ancient Greek writer, Homer. For example, Qingcheng’s first appearance on the walls of *Wuji* is reminiscent of Helen’s appearance on the walls of Troy, and the chase between two snowmen calls to mind the chase between Achilles and Hector.

From the perspective of intertextual and intermedial theory, *Wuji* and *A Murder Case Triggered by a Steamed Bun* lack in any kind of independent meaning, and easily plunge audiences into a dialogic (in Mikhail Bakhtin’s sense) network of

³ Unknown. “Is Qingcheng from *Salammô*?”, www.qingdaonews.com/content/2005-12/16/content_5735880.htm, December 16, 2005.

textual and medial relations that move from imitation to parody. During World War II, Bakhtin submitted a dissertation on the French Renaissance writer Francois Rabelais, in turn an important influence upon Flaubert. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin studies the interaction between the social and the literary, advancing the notion that parody and laughter in fiction has an impact upon power structures. Heteroglossia as the manifestation of the public exercise of the freedom of speech has a positive value for the art of film. Paradoxically, after the recognition of Flaubert's influence and with the parody exercised in *A Murder Case Triggered by a Steamed Bun*, the film *Wuji* achieved greater box office success throughout the country.

Like *A Murder Case Triggered by a Steamed Bun*, Other Internet short films also have the characteristic of parody. For example, *Separation in October* is edited and collaged from the former Soviet film *Lenin in 1918*. It tells the story of CCTV News Commentary Department in an extremely ridiculous tone. Once the film was broadcast, it immediately triggered a strong response on the Internet. It is through the ways of parody that many Internet short films win the favour of netizens.

Internet short film is not for profit, let alone commercial operation, but it already has three parts that constitute the upstream and downstream of the industrial chain. Among them, netizens are producers, websites are broadcasters, and audiences are viewers. The problem is just that these three parties are not linked in the way the industry operates. At this time, the production scale of internet short film is small, the creation cost is high for individuals, the quality of short film is uneven, and there is no complete system with production, supply and marketing. From the point of view of industrial development, these are typical characteristics of industrial sprouting period. Anyway, the basic pattern of industrial development of Internet movies has been established in the period of Internet short films, which also lays a foundation for further exploration of profit model.

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II. Micro Film: PGC and Conspiracy with the Market

Micro film refers to short videos that are viewed and played on a network platform for less than half an hour. Micro film has complete story plot, and is usually produced by professional team which is mainly different with Internet short film. In the initial stage of Internet short film, the netizens uploaded video con-

tent to the website voluntarily, and the video content needs the media platform to disseminate, and then a video website came into being. However, with the passage of time, the drawbacks of UGC mode gradually emerge, mainly manifested in: the ownership of copyright is vague, the quality of content is uncontrollable, and the content homogenization is serious. In order to solve the drawbacks of UGC mode, video websites began to explore the PGC (Professionally Generated Content) model, to seek broadcast content, and to buy off copyright and resources from professional film and television production companies.

From the perspective of profit model, micro film mainly receives financial support through advertising implantation. There are three kinds of advertisements: embedded advertisement, patch advertisement and sponsor support. It is also because of the realization of investment that the various elements of the industry can be combined. Micro films, which have gained capital injection, have embarked on the road of commercialization. Producing, broadcasting and watching movies constitute a top-down industrial chain, which completes the industrialization operation of network movies that could not be realized in the period of Internet short films.

Conspiracy with the market is the biggest characteristic of micro film. The ninety seconds of the micro film *Imminent* (2010), starring Daniel Wu is the typical conspiracy with the market. Essentially an advertisement for the Shanghai GM Company, Wu plays the role of a spokesman for a new model of Cadillac, successfully ditching his opponents in a race. Full of stunts, car chases and explosions, the entertaining aspects cannot disguise the film's real marketing purpose, especially when scenes from it were screened at the 2010 Guangzhou auto show.

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According to Henry Lefebvre, everyday life is the intersection of “illusion and truth, power and helplessness; the intersection of the sector man controls, and the sector he does not control”.⁴ Lefebvre also argued that in the mid-twentieth century, everyday life had been changed into a zone of sheer consumption shared by everyone, regardless of class or specialty. Focusing on the everyday life, commercial advertisement, as a main production form in the consumption culture, is just a conspiracy between art and market, pursuing “the aestheticization of everyday life”, as Mike Featherstone wrote in *Consumer Culture and*

⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *The Critique of Everyday Life*, Verso, New York and London 1947, p. 40.

Postmodernism. For Featherstone, the aestheticization of everyday life mainly refers to the rapid flow of signs and images that saturate the fabric of everyday life in contemporary society. The centrality of the commercial manipulation of images through advertising, the media and display, performance and spectacles of the urbanized fabric of daily life therefore entail a constant reworking of desires through image.⁵ This increasing dominance of exchange value not only obliterated the original use-value of things and replaced it by abstract exchange value, but it left the commodity free to take on an ersatz or secondary use-value. As a result, a Cadillac becomes the aesthetic sign of the city's upper classes, characterized by exquisite taste and success, rather than just a means of transport.

The micro film *Imminent* was regarded as the birth of China's micro film industry, linked to Shanghai GM's Cadillac marketing department. It represents the market conspiracy behind this industry. Similar strategies were used in the micro film *Old Boy*, advertising Chevrolet, *Watching the Ball* which featured Canon, and *4 Nights' Curious Talks* supported by Samsung. The conspiracy with the market has become a convention within micro films, and those who violate this convention will definitely be excluded from the micro film field.

Turning to *The Only Choice* and *Chills*, these are typical examples of the inter-textual and trans-medial conspiracy. The first is a micro film, the second a longer one, both co-directed by Liang Lemin and Lu Jianqing almost at the same time in 2012. The cast is also roughly the same, starring Aarif Lee as Zhang Guobiao, the chief director of investigation at Hong Kong ICAC. This micro film clips directly to the original film lens, and its story is added to the original, almost as an official prequel of it. In addition, collusion between the micro film and the HTC Corporation opens up the precedent of shooting micro films on phones. In this way, the micro film *The Only Choice* is both propaganda for the movie *Chills* and advertising and marketing for HTC phones. This is not just a trans-media conspiracy but also a market conspiracy—a win-win situation for commercial interests.

Many Chinese micro films have transmedial and intertextual characteristics, just as we illustrated above. Actually, *A Murder Case Triggered by a Steamed Bun* is also intertextual and intermedial. But it is an intertextual and intermedial

⁵ Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, Sage Publication, London 2007, pp. 65–6.

parody. The difference between parody and conspiracy is that the former is a kind of conflict and ironic relation between the new text and the original text, but the latter is a kind of consistent and accordant relation between the new and the original texts and between the different mediums. The intertextual and intermedial conspiracy which is shown in most of China's micro film in the early second decade of this century has the same end: the market. So the conspiracy between art and market has a general impact on the production of China's micro film and on China's cultural production in general during this period.

The economic impact of micro film is huge. First shown in October 2010, *Old Boy* was clicked by more than 50 million people in a very short time. Supervised by Hang Kong's famous director Peng Haoxiang, *4 Nights' Curious Talks* also achieved great success, with a clicking rate rapidly exceeding 200 million.

The reasons for the popularity of micro films are their low costs and legal void with a lack of supervision on the part of government departments. The potential benefits attract many companies, such as Volkswagen, Samsung, Canon, Colgate, Budweiser and many others.

At the same time, the rapid development of the micro film also brings a variety of problems such as low creative levels, poorly produced works, lack of narrative skills, bad performances and, in general, low professional standards. As a result, more and more people distrust the artistic level of micro film products, with negative public opinion affecting the industry's sustainable development.⁶

III. Internet Big Movie: IPGC and Media Convergence

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Internet Big Movie is a concept proposed in 2014 by IQIYI, one of the most famous online audio-visual company in China, to describe a new type of film "that is online distributed with a broadcast time of more than 60 minutes and produced professionally with a complete story".⁷ Its main characteristic is "Media Convergence". Both Internet short films and micro films are all uploaded to the

⁶ Hong Yin, "Micro Film: New forms of art in the age of the Internet", *The Journal of Film Art*, 4 (2014).

⁷ Xianghua Yang, "The Present, Past and Future of Internet Big Film", *China Art Daily*, April 7, 2017.

network after the completion of film production. Therefore, they are only the combination of network and film which cannot reach the degree of media convergence.

Media convergence, as an academic category, was first proposed by Ithiel De Sola Pool, a professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the United States, which means that various media show a trend of multi-functional integration. Chinese scholars points out, there are two main forms of media convergence: one is the integration and merger of media industry across fields, to form large-scale cross-media groups, to build core competitiveness, and to cope with the fierce market competition; the other is the integration of media technology, that is, the combination of new and old media technology to form a new means of communication, or even a new form of media.⁸

Internet big movie is the development of micro film. But it is wrong to think that it is simply an extension of time in micro film. In addition to the length of time, there are some more important features of Internet big movie, which distinguish it from micro film. First, most of Internet big movies have their own website, that is to say, the video website does not need to purchase the copyright of the film from the other film company, and it independently produces the films. Even if it cooperates with a professional film company, it must have the initiative. So, it is IPGC (Internet Professional Generated Content) product. Second, Internet big movies no longer rely mainly on advertising, but through the membership payment model, IP industry chain development model and online and offline enterprises joint cluster business model to make the profits. "Compared with the industrial structure in the period of micro film, the industrial chain in the period of network big film is more and more closely linked. The three links of production, publicity and screening revolve around the product of Internet big movies, forming a community of interests sharing risks and profits".⁹

Internet big movie is a new form of art industry in the era of the new media. In terms of projection time, microfilms are usually shown for less than 30 minutes;

⁸ Jian Meng and Yuanke Zhao, "Media Convergence: Cohesion and Creation of a New Media Society", *Journal of International Communication*, 7 (2006).

⁹ Jia Wei & Zhenglin Luo, "From Network Short Drama to Network Big Film: On the Formation and Optimizing Path of Network Film Industry Chain", *News Enthusiasts*, 3 (2019).

big online films are shown for 60 to 90 minutes, while traditional films are projected for more than two hours. In addition, there are more important differences between Internet big movie and traditional film.

According to Walter Benjamin, film is the art in the age of mechanical reproduction which appeals directly to its audience. The mechanical reproduction cannot assure its authenticity, and its uniqueness as a specific object belonging to a specific artist at a specific time and space, therefore it loses its “aura” and “exhibition value begins to displace cult value all along the line”¹⁰. However, Internet big movie is the art in the age of digital reproduction which has many differences with the traditional movies.

Internet big movie is not simply a combination of the Internet and movie. Internet participate in the whole process of film behavior, occupying a dominant position, and being the driving force of film from planning, production, dissemination to consumption. Compared with cinema-line movies, it relies on the platform of Internet, which not only brings convenience for viewers to watch movies without entering the cinema, but also avoids the risks and shortcomings of cinema-line movies affected by the off-peak season. Because of the application of big data and its distinct interactivity, the broadcasting platform can adjust the types and themes of movies in time according to the clicks and feedback from the audience, and launch more personalized new works in order to enhance user experience and stickiness, highlight the characteristics of the website and accumulate popularity.

Internet big movies have their own special narrative style. The lens language is more inclined to the use of montage, and less use of long lens and depth-of-field lens. In the aspect of narrative of the story, Internet big movies pay more attention to the interesting of the narrative, and try to avoid grand narrative. In terms of acceptance, it gives full play to the advantages of Internet narrowcasting communication, transmitting video programming to a niche audience through relatively inexpensive means like streaming video over high-speed connections, so that it takes into account the broad audience of different aesthetic preferences,

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, in: D. Townsend (Eds.), *Aesthetics: Classic Readings from Western Tradition*, Peking University Press, Beijing 2002, p. 289.

keeps more in line with the viewing habits of mobile small screen in terms of theme, type, audio-visual language, etc., and converts the passive audience of traditional cinema into a participatory audience. In terms of communication effect, if the traditional film pays more attention to win the audience through the classical narrative mode and visual wonders, then Internet big movie is good at gathering empathy through hot topics and stimulating network hot discussion to expand communication efficiency. Through these methods, the Internet big movie restores the “aura” of the film art to a certain extent, which we might understand as the identification of the work of art with its unique space and time. In addition, Internet big movies often employ famous movie stars as the starring roles, which to some extent restore the cult value of art in the meaning of Benjamin, which was displaced in the age of mechanical reproduction. In the age of digital reproduction, one of the most significant aspects of current artistic production is the development of digital technology that allows photograph to be rearranged so that dead actors appear in contemporary films, and produces such faithful and infinitely reproducible reproduction that existing notions of copyright are becoming obsolete.¹¹

As regards to the industrial operating mode of the Internet big Movie, IQIYI website pioneered the platform of online declaration for Internet big movies. Everything from application cooperation to online broadcasting can be carried out on the platform. The required company qualifications, copyright declarations and poster media requirements are clear at a glance in the platform, which facilitates the independent operation of the partners. The results of the audit are timely fed back to the partners through the platform for timely revision of specific opinions. The partners only need to log on to this platform, and then they can see it. The introduction of this platform not only greatly shortens the communication process between the partners and the video platform, but also greatly improves the operational efficiency of both sides.¹²

In these ways, Internet Big Movie has made rapid progress with the development of China's Internet Audiovisual Industry in recent years. In 2014, *Adults*

¹¹ Dabney Townsend, *Aesthetics: Classic Readings from Western Tradition*, Peking University Press, Beijing 2002, p. 284.

¹² Minfen Huang & Guowei Wang, “Thoughts on China's Internet Big Films and Their Industrialization”, *Fujian Forum*, Humanities and Social Sciences Edition, 4, 2017.

2, *Erlonghu Hao Ge* (later removed because of vulgar content), *Tree Lives*, *Hooligans* and other films won good box office. In 2015, *Taoist Monks Going out of the Mountains*, *Mountain Gun Entering the City*, and *Siping Youth* (later removed because of vulgar content) emerged as the masterpiece of the Internet movies. According to the data released by IQIYI, there were more than 300 blowouts in 2014, 612 blowouts in 2015 and 2500 blowouts in 2016.¹³ By 2017, the number of Internet big movies had increased by 4.2 times and the market scale had increased by nearly 20 times.¹⁴

Although in 2018, the total number of online movies declined (the number of new online movies in the whole year dropped by about 20% to 1526 compared with 1892 in 2017¹⁵), we still have reason to believe that China's Internet big movies will have good prospects in the future. This is because there are enormous network audio-visual users and big market scale of the Internet audio-visual industry in China.

According to the statistics of *Research Report on the Development of China's Internet Audio-visual Industry in 2019*, the scale of China's Internet video users has reached 725 million, accounting for 87.5% of the whole Internet users, and the market scale of the Internet audio-visual industry has reached 88.8 billion Yuan by December 2018¹⁶. The enormous network audio-visual users provide a strong driving force for the development of internet big movie. As long as it can eliminate some unfavourable factors of development, such as similar topics, rough production, lack of professional evaluation, China's Internet big movie will inevitably present more and more exquisite works.

¹³ Dantatv Data, "IQIE Annual Box Office List of Internet Big Movies from 2014 to 2016", <http://mini.eastday.com/mobile/170116194931047.html>.

¹⁴ IQIYI, "Development Report of Internet Big Film Industry in 2017", http://www.360doc.com/content/18/0118/18/28093736_723132630.shtml.

¹⁵ Si Chen, Xinyang Zhang, & Xiaoyi Ma, "Research Report on Chinese Internet Video Excellence in 2019", *Media*, 7 (2019).

¹⁶ China Association of Network Audiovisual Programming Services, *Research Report on China's Network Audiovisual Development in 2019*, <http://www.100ec.cn/index/detail-6510524.html>.