

# The Image Culture as Vernacular Modernism

Li Ke

Graduate School of Intercultural Studies, Kobe University, Kobe, Hyogo, Japan

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**Abstract:** The Vernacular Modernism proposed by Miriam Hansen has exerted a great influence on film research, but the definition of this concept itself in film research is not accurate. This paper attempts to explore Hansen's complex reflections on the modernity of cinema, the integration of film theory and film history from Hansen's two papers which have built the theoretical system of Vernacular Modernism, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism" and "Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Film as Vernacular Modernism". Furthermore, with the help of Hansen's empirical research on classic Hollywood films and early Shanghai films in two papers, the basic meaning of Vernacular Modernism and its representation of non-identity are determined, and the possibility of dissolving this non-identity is analyzed. Finally, this paper analyzes the relationship between Vernacular Modernism and Critical Theory through the understanding of the book, *Cinema and Experience*, thus to rethink and reexamine Hansen's Vernacular Modernism, explain the inherent Critical Theory hidden under the non-identical appearance of vernacular modernism, and reveal the sociological significance of the concept of Vernacular Modernism.

## 1. Introduction

The concept of "Vernacular Modernism" is one of the most important concepts in the film theory system of Miriam Hansen. Fashion, design, advertising, architecture, urban environment, photography, broadcasting, film and other phenomena are produced and consumed in large quantities. The cultural practices that both express and spread modernity experience are called Vernacular Modernism by Hansen. Hansen's theory of Vernacular Modernism aims to solve two complementary problems: "first, how does film research help us to understand modernism and modernity; second, whether and how can the perspective of modernism aesthetics help us to understand film history and reconstruct the theory of electronic film" [1] 242. Once put forward, Vernacular Modernism had a great influence. In 2002, an international conference was held at the University of Chicago on the issue of Vernacular Modernism, which attracted many famous film scholars to participate in, and then the research and application of Vernacular Modernism was not in the minority. Focusing on the concept of image culture as Vernacular Modernism, this paper attempts to start with Hansen's two original papers on the theoretical system of Vernacular Modernism, the feeling of mass production: classic film as Vernacular Modernism and fallen women, rising stars, new horizons: silent film in Shanghai as Vernacular Modernism, this paper discusses Hansen's complex thinking on the topics of film modernity, the combination of film theory and film history, and with the help of two papers, Hansen's Empirical Research on classic Hollywood films and early films in Shanghai, to determine the basic meaning of Vernacular Modernism and the representation of its nonidentity, and to analyze the possibility of eliminating this nonidentity.

## 2. The Style and Interior of Vernacular Modernity

In "the feeling of mass production" and "fallen women, rising stars", Hansen discusses the image culture as Vernacular Modernism from the impact of classic Hollywood films on early Soviet films and the female images in early Shanghai films. The criteria or characteristics of Vernacular

Modernism reflected in the two articles can be summarized as follows:

First, the modernity style reflected by the film appearance. Hansen thinks that one of the reasons why the early Soviet films completed the transformation between the old and the new (from the traditional Russian narrative way like the linear causal narrative based on montage) between 1918 and 1924 is that the Soviet films imitated the classic Hollywood films. In other words, it was because of the introduction of Hollywood's continuous editing technology that formed the montage aesthetics of the Soviet films, which contributed to the transformation of the old and the new, that Hansen thought it had the modernity that could be widely spread. Therefore, the modernity here does not involve the specific content of film expression, only refers to the classic Hollywood narrative system, which has changed the original film language of Soviet films, that is, a new film language.

In the context of the early Shanghai films, the form of modernity is reflected in the appearance of these films, that is, the visual consciousness of the films. For example, "amazing art deco set, theater architecture and poster design, theater program introduction and fan magazine style" and so on [2] 14. Hansen believes that these imaginary or fictional visual worlds incorporate the appearance of modernism into the visual consciousness, and provide more extensive consumption and more common and daily functions through the reproduction and mass production of this external image [2] 14. In other words, through the act of watching movies, people can simulate the modern technology and modernity experience provided by movies, and at the same time satisfy people's curiosity about new things, graft and spread this modernity into real life. At this time, modernity still refers to the modernity pattern reflected by the film appearance, such as the new aesthetics and life style displayed through the modernity media and the things closely related to the modernity technology and modernity experience in the process of social modernization.

Specifically in Hollywood films, Hansen believes that the imitation of the Soviet Union films on Hollywood films is not only reflected in the imitation of the narrative system, but also in the imitation of the bottom stream of classic Hollywood films - adventure stories, detective stories, slapstick comedies, melodramas, horror films and other "vulgar" films. With the help of Yuri tsivian's study of two kinds of Americanism [3], Hansen emphasized the importance of the undercurrent of classic Hollywood films. "If the former pursues formal standards such as narrative effectiveness, coherence and motivation, the latter cares about the external appearance, including: the sensory and material aspects of American films; the use of outdoor environment; the attention to action and stimulation, body stimulation and juggling gimmicks; Their rhythm, frankness and easiness, as well as their paranoia and preference for situations "[1] 244. The experience brought by the material and sensory conditions can make the audience break away from the closed narrative structure of montage aesthetics, the first consistent and logically complete story, inspire the audience's independent thinking and reflection, and extend the experience gained from the film to the real life. Hansen thinks that the reason why film scholars put classic Hollywood films and modernism on the opposite position is that they neglect that classic Hollywood films not only have classical narrative system, but also the above characteristics similar to "attractive films" proposed by Tom Ganning.

### **3. The Representation of the Nonidentity of Vernacular Modernism**

When discussing the image culture as the Vernacular Modernism, the difficulty lies in the difference between its comment frame and standard. This kind of nonidentity is reflected in the separation of "vernacular" and "Modernity". On the one hand, Hansen tries to replace the tradition of "advanced modernism" with the concept of Vernacular Modernism, weaken the importance of modernity on the ideological level, and emphasize the modernity potential on the superficial level of film appearance performance (this is the real intention of vernacular); But on the other hand, he is unwilling to give up the possibility of "Reflexivity" of films, emphasizing that popular films can produce the same effect as advanced art, and constantly close to the standard of "advanced modernism". However, as a film criticism concept focusing on cinematography, the persistence of "vernacular" and "Modernity" (especially the high-level modernity related to the inner side of

human spirit) is often not realized synchronously, but leaves a gap of nonidentity. For example, in view of the early Shanghai films, Hansen once made the following discussion:

In my opinion, Shanghai films in 1920s and 1930s represented a unique Vernacular Modernism, which originated from the complex intersection with the United States and other foreign models, while at the same time absorbing and changing the popular and modern traditions of Chinese drama, literature, painting, print culture [2] 13.

The second nonidentity of Vernacular Modernism lies in the uncertainty and multiplicity of its evaluation criteria. As Daniel Morgan pointed out, it is very difficult and hasty to define whether a movie is a Vernacular Modernism according to some characteristics of the movie [4]. When we try to use Vernacular Modernism for film research, the closer we are to the film itself, the more we will find that the basic judgment conditions of Vernacular Modernism will change accordingly. On the one hand, under different criteria, a certain feature of the film itself may be modern or not at all modern. This leads to the fact that Vernacular Modernism cannot accurately evaluate whether certain types of films and individual films are modern or not; on the other hand, Vernacular Modernism has some criteria that almost all films meet, which leads to the fact that Vernacular Modernism can almost evaluate all types of films and specific films.

This is not to say that it is necessary to comprehensively consider all the standards of Vernacular Modernism to judge whether a movie is Vernacular Modernism, but the problem is that even if we consider each standard independently, there will still be some serious problems left. For example, almost all films are called Vernacular Modernism because they conform to one of the standards (the new aesthetics and life style displayed through the modern media are closely related to the modernity technology and modernity experience in the process of social modernization). Because the film itself is a kind of modern media, a new embodiment of aesthetics and life style, a kind of modern technology. This means that almost all types of films, even the contradictory cinematic characteristics, can be included in the scope of Vernacular Modernism, which is most obvious in the early Shanghai films called Vernacular Modernism.

#### **4. Possibility of Nonidentity Resolution**

In the following, I will first look for the possibility of dispelling this nonidentity in some previous studies related to Vernacular Modernism. First of all, Daniel Morgan's views on the concept of Vernacular Modernism are worthy of reference. In his opinion, to judge whether some films are Vernacular Modernism, it is necessary to examine individual films one by one more carefully [4]. In other words, the solution inspired by Daniel Morgan's idea is not only to focus on the specific objects, classification, practice, style and other symbols embodied by the larger classification of a film, but also to carefully consider how these symbols are used. One by one examination of the details of a film can avoid the thought of the first representation of nonidentity, focusing on whether the details of a film have both “vernacular” and “Modernity”, and to a certain extent, it can also solve the uncertainty of the evaluation standard of the second representation of identity. It is no longer a rash judgment of whether it is Vernacular Modernism based on the characteristics of some films, but the performance of its vernacular modernity in the one-to-one correspondence between film works and social, cultural and historical context.

However, it is worth noting that when Hansen raised the concept of Vernacular Modernism, he hoped that it could cover all kinds of cultural practices that both expressed and spread the experience of modernity, and could be applied in the film history and the broad field of film theory. For example, Hansen once mentioned that the reason why he did not use “popular modernism” and chose the word “Vernacular Modernism” with slightly vague semantics was that the word “popular” was “overdetermined” by various political and ideological factors [1] 243. In other words, Hansen's choice of the word “vernacular” is likely to avoid the Marxist theory of class ideology, which contains the word “mass”, so that the concept of Vernacular Modernism can show a richer aesthetic, social and political meaning. However, Daniel Morgan's view that Vernacular Modernism as a critical concept is limited to the detailed comments on individual films has greatly weakened the scope of application and ideal effect of Vernacular Modernism.

## 5. Siegfried Krakauer: the Opposite of Berlin and Paris

When judging whether a movie is Vernacular Modernism according to its own characteristics, the second kind of nonidentity is the uncertainty and variability of its evaluation criteria. In other words, the closer to the film itself, the more the albinism modernism will lose its identity and cannot make an accurate evaluation of the film. But if we do not pay attention to the characteristics of the film itself, to the relationship between the film and the society, or turn the “cinematic characteristics” which can be called Vernacular Modernism into “non-cinematic characteristics” or “external cinematic characteristics”, then this kind of nonidentity is not a problem. For example, when we consider the social significance of films, vernacular modernity is no longer symbolized as the symbols of modern scenery and modern life style in films, nor only refers to the modernity experience brought by all modern media and modern technology, but has a deeper meaning.

According to Siegfried Krakauer, the modernity of the 20th century is determined by the outline of mass production, mass consumption and emerging mass society. From this point of view, the definition of Vernacular Modernism, the phenomenon of mass production and mass consumption, and the cultural practice of both expressing and disseminating modernity experience, is Hansen's inheritance of Siegfried Krakauer's view. In addition, Hansen himself mentioned in his paper that “what is rich in modernism is that although the dramatic conflicts in these films can be expressed in traditional language, they cannot be solved by the restoration of traditional social order, no matter whether the film ends with supporting revolution or not.” [2]14. In fact, this point can be supported by Hansen's interpretation of Siegfried Krakauer in critical theory. Krakauer describes a variety of modernity, in which Berlin's modernity is in contrast to Paris's modernity, which is “a modernity that erases all memories” [10] 67. It is “modern, new things” that erase the memory of Berlin. “Berlin is on its way now, and is devoting its ambitions to full modernization [...] Whether it is the appearance of the square, the name of the company, the shop or other places are constantly changing. However, it is only in Berlin that this change has fundamentally deprived the memory of the past. The modernity of “Berlin uses the modernity of technology to create a new mythical timeless nature like a monument”.

## 6. Kruger and Nagert: the Public Sphere in the Perspective of Social Experience

The focus on the significance of film sociology is also reflected in Hansen's inheritance of Kruger, a new generation of scholars of critical theory, and Nagert's public domain theory: Hansen not only discusses the possibility of constructing a public domain that can accommodate women in early American films [5], but also combines her concept of vernacular modernism with the typical sociological concept of the public domain of films. The Vernacular Modernism explains the specific content of the public domain of the movie, and the public domain of the movie is the carrier of the Vernacular Modernism. According to Kruger and Nagert, film has gained the status of “public domain” by absorbing the raw materials of daily life, presenting individual experience, and interacting private experience with public experience. This exchange based on personal experience and common experience is the public domain formed by film itself and also the public domain existing in people's brain [6]. The construction of this public domain benefits from the functions of movies: creating fantasy, creating material sensory experience, breaking the language barrier [7] [8], making movies have unlimited cognitive potential and the ability to stimulate the audience's independent enlightenment [6]. Kruger's and Nagert's theories not only inherit the connotation of classic publicity and modernity such as “Enlightenment” and “liberation” achieved through political functions, but also connect them with the exchange of material sensory experience and the initiative of the general public under the industrialized mass media (film). This explains how movies, based on the immediacy of the senses and the direct effect of emotions, can stimulate the dimension of deep introspection: movies not only make the experience of ordinary individuals expressed in the most approachable form, but also are recognized by strangers in the “stupid public sphere” belonging to the general public, it also gave birth to public experience rich in liberation and advanced modernity. At the same time, Hansen explained the relationship between film, modernity

and publicity through similar concepts such as “Vernacular Modernism”, “sensory reaction field”, “circulation field of social experience [6]”. It is suggested that “how to respond to modernity through film itself” is a practical problem, that is, how to develop film itself into a public domain, and how to localize and popularize Western modernity, so that it has universal comprehensibility and wide public support and concern. In such a public field, there are blockbusters that integrate technology and spectacle, local productions that adhere to the traditional discourse, and artistic films with the director's unique personality and unique views, even political propaganda films and other films with different aesthetic consciousness and ideological tendency should have a place. Therefore, “Vernacular Modernism” is indeed not the same, it includes not only the description of “modernity / publicity of enlightenment” and “modernity / publicity of sensory material”, but also the reconciliation of local traditional discourse and Western discourse. These elements may not be perfectly reconciled in a certain film, but they just refer to the complex situation of reality, and in the public domain, a space full of sociological significance, it expresses modernity almost completely.

## 7. Conclusion

If Vernacular Modernism, as Hansen expected, can make an important contribution to the study of film history and film theory, then it cannot be confined to the world of film itself. Therefore, in the application of the concept of Vernacular Modernism, we must pay attention to the nonidentity of its appearance, give up the concept of criticism as a semiotics and film aesthetics, and regard it as a criticism concept of film sociology. Through the discussion of the theoretical framework behind the Vernacular Modernism, we can find that the Vernacular Modernism, which absorbs the critical theories of Benjamin, Krakauer and Kruger and nager, is not only a concept to describe the film itself, but also a concept to describe the wonderful connection between the film world and the real world and the sociological significance of the film. When we no longer stick to the one-to-one correspondence between the modernization of vernacular and the characteristics of film, no longer focus on the basic viewing behavior within the space of cinema, but focus on the social significance of film entering the real space, the real significance of Vernacular Modernism will emerge. Even if we focus on the film itself, its function is not to evaluate the characteristics of the film production level, but to evaluate the significance of the film consumption level. It is not only a “movie” concept, but also a “foreign movie” concept.

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