

Themes and Culture Concepts in Disney's "Mulan": The Evolution from Chinese "Imagery" to Postmodernism

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between film and culture is established through a shared focus on people's lives. Culture changes at different times, which makes a dynamic and complex relationship between film and culture. Understanding this relationship helps to provide better support for current filmmaking. The purpose of this study is to provide insights into the macro issue of film and culture by exploring the relationship between film theme and culture concept. To this end, we used a case study to explore the connection between themes and culture concepts in Disney's *Mulan* (1998, 2020) through literature and analyses of culture concepts (Chinese "imagery" and Postmodernism). The study concludes that, "Culture assemblage" and "Vision is king" have become cultural trends that influence the creation of film theme and style to a certain extent; how to balance the relationship between the core idea of film theme and the external forms is an important issue in current filmmaking. The article contributes to promote thinking about culture in film creation, and its research perspective on different cultures and histories is innovative.

Key words: Film Theme, Culture Concept, *Mulan*, Chinese "Imagery", Postmodernism, Case Study

1. INTRODUCTION

For Andre' Bazin, the importance of cinema lies in its ability to produce worlds or visions of the world which audiences might be able to 'take' for reality [1]. Historically, most films have some reasons to tell a specific story, and these reasons relate to the current issues and events of life [2]. The impact of films on people's lives has been confirmed in many studies, such as films can have a significant impact on gender and ethnic stereotypes [3,4]; the screening of films on climate issues increases the number of online requests and media discussions on these issues [5]. This suggests that meaningful films can help people make sense of life. Raymond Williams understands culture as "a whole way of life", the social composition and expression of human relationships and practices [6],

which means that life is the bridge between film and culture. Meanwhile, the expressions and meanings of culture have certain materiality, which are embodied in sounds, words, and images, and are generated and expressed in a particular social context [6]. If we associate culture with film, as "a whole way of life", the issues of culture are also the concerns of film.

Influenced by political, economic and other factors, culture changes at different times, which presents a dynamic and complex relationship between film and culture. Taking the theme of film as an example, gender equality is a common theme in American cinema, but this theme also began to receive more attention only after American women won the right to vote in 1920 [7]. Disney created the animated film *Mulan* (1998) and the live-action film *Mulan* (2020) based on the Chinese legend of

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Hua Mulan. Both films follow the theme of "loyalty and filial piety" and incorporate the heroic character of Mulan, a young girl who disguises herself as a man and joins the army for her father, into the Disney princess family. However, the theme of *Mulan* (20) also incorporates a focus on the "awakening of women's consciousness" [8], which is inseparable from the influence of the "MeToo" movement that began from America to the world in 2017. How are the culture phenomena and concepts of different periods reflected in the theme of films? This is our research question, and the answer helps provide insights into the macro issue of film and culture.

The purpose of this study is to provide insights into the macro issue of film and culture by exploring the relationship between film theme and culture concept. It can also provide better support for current film creation. To this end, we used a case study to explore the connection between themes and culture concepts in Disney's *Mulan* (1998, 2020) through literature and analyses of culture concepts (Chinese "imagery" and Postmodernism). The article contributes to promote thinking about culture in film creation, and its research perspective on different cultures and histories is innovative.

2. THEORETICAL STUDY

2.1 Concept

Concept is an abstract or generic idea generalized from particular instances [9]. In this paper, we use culture concept to describe an overall idea of culture in a specific period, which includes the identification with nationalities, identities, rights, aesthetics, and other lifestyles and relationships. The culture concepts covered in this paper are Chinese "imagery" and postmodernism.

2.2 Films *Mulan*

Mulan (98) was an animated film released during the Disney Renaissance (1989–1999). At that

time, a few artistic supervisors were sent to China to receive artistic and cultural inspiration. The film's theme reflects the honor and responsibility, which basically echoes the traditional Chinese concept of "loyalty and filial piety". The visual design of the film is based on the Chinese Ming and Qing dynasties, and the art style is close to Chinese painting, with watercolor and simpler design [10]. Overall, its aesthetic is inspired by ancient Chinese art represented by "imagery". *Mulan* (98) received a Douban rating 7.9 [11] and an IMDb rating 7.6 [12].

Mulan (20) is an action live-action film released in 2020. The film has experienced a lot of controversies in terms of politics and the production team. It was only released online and in some theaters due to the epidemic [13]. Besides the theme of "loyalty and filial piety", the film is more concerned on the "awakening of women's consciousness" [8]. The visual effects of the film were well received, but some visual elements were not accepted by Chinese audience [14]. This reinterpretation of inherited ideas, different perspectives of understanding, can be seen from the influence of postmodernism. *Mulan* (20) received a Douban rating 4.9 [15] and an IMDb rating 5.7 [16].

2.3 Film Theme and Culture

Previous studies on film theme and culture are richer and mainly focus on their relationship. Some studies considered themes as the concrete embodiment of social and cultural issues, such as the female theme of film *Thelma And Louise* reflects the feminist movement in American society of the 90s [7]; the environmental theme of the film *Princess Mononoke* indicates the reflection on the conflict between human development and environmental protection in industrial society [17]; Disney films *Bambi* and *Tarzan* contain features of American couples and family images [18]. Also, studies suggested that films promote thinking about social and cultural issues through their themes, such as men-

tioned in the previous section films can have a significant impact on gender and ethnic stereotypes [3,4]; the screening of films on climate issues increases the number of online requests and media discussions on these issues [5], etc. These studies suggest that film theme and culture are in a mutually influential relationship.

Research on the film *Mulan* has mostly focused on cross-cultural comparisons of themes, characters, styles, and discussions of feminism. In the recent literature of *Mulan* (20), a study focuses on the cultural identity of Disney's *Mulan* and explores how it is reconstructed as a transnational culture which flowed from China to America [19]; another argues that creators of the movie adopt Chinese elements and characters to convey American ideology and values [20]. In feminist perspective, studies believe that: *Mulan* (20) exists to change Chinese *Mulan* from a humanistic behavior that appeals to the ethics of loyalty and filial piety to a modern type of personality behavior that pursues the liberation of individuality and the realization of self-worth [21]; the comparative analysis of two *Mulan* films reveals the new changes in gender narratives in the context of globalization [22].

In general, these studies mainly focus on the relationship between film themes and social, cultural phenomena, which are inevitably linked to the holistic concepts of society. We take two *Mulan* films as examples and focus on how are the culture concepts of different periods reflected in the theme of films, the research question and perspective are innovative.

2.4 Research Method and Framework

2.4.1 Research Method

Case study, sometimes called idiographic research, means a particular individual, program, or event is studied in depth for a defined period of time. Its data often includes observations, interviews, documents (e.g., newspaper articles), past

records, and audiovisual materials (e.g., photographs, videotapes) [23]. This method often uses the thematic analysis for data analysis. Thematic analysis is a method of analyzing qualitative data. Its researcher often closely examines the data to identify common themes (topics, ideas and patterns of meaning that come up repeatedly) [24].

2.4.2 Research Framework

Based on the question of How are the culture concepts of different periods reflected in the theme of films, we explore the connection between themes and culture concepts in Disney's *Mulan* (1998, 2020) through literature and analyses of culture concepts (Chinese "imagery" and Postmodernism). The research framework is as follows (Fig. 1).

3. TWO CONCEPTS

3.1 Chinese "Imagery"

In ancient China, the concepts of Laozi and Confucius, which began in the pre-Qin dynasty, established the origin of Chinese cultural thought. Laozi's concepts "Dao", "Qi", "Xu" and "Shi", and Confucius's proposition "The knowledgeable love waters, the benevolent love mountains" [25], summarize the simple nature's laws and the harmonious discursive thought that Chinese people have followed for generations. In the ancient Chinese view, man and nature, emotion and scenery, subject and object are all in harmony [26]. Chinese thinking is a holistic and intuitive thinking, emphasizing the whole body and mind to experience. It gains insight for the world essence through "Unattached" and "Heart-to-heart Communication" [26] and achieves the realm of "Unity of knowledge and action". This holistic intuitive thinking, which focuses more on the interconnectedness of things and emphasizes the common features among things, has formed a cultural view that emphasizes synthesis, image, and harmony [26]⁸⁷. Chinese "imagery" is a convergence of the

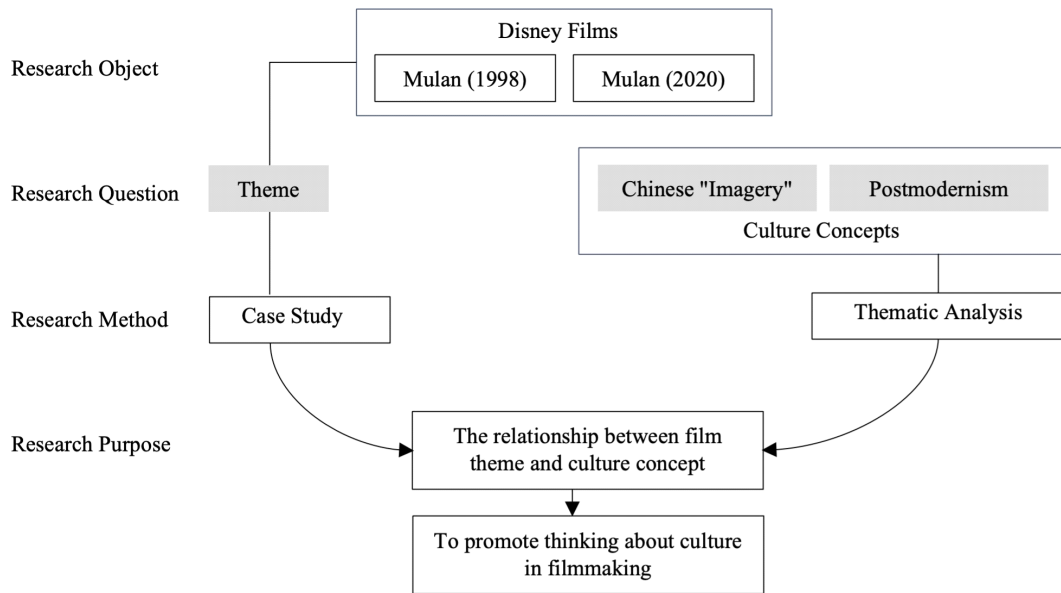


Fig. 1. Research framework.

above ideas, combining the "image" (objective objects, everything in the universe) and the "meaning" (human subjective consciousness, will) as an interchangeable organism, and subjectivizing the objective objects for recognition and judgment [27].

The Ballad of Mulan is an ancient poem from the Northern and Southern Dynasties (4th–6th century AD) [28]. The poem is divided into six stanzas of 392 words, and uses a sequential approach, from Mulan’s conscription, departure for the battlefield and triumphant return her hometown, describing the process of a girl who disguised herself as a man and joined the army for her father for more than ten years. The language of the poem is full of romanticism, and it has got a high level of achievement both ideologically and artistically. In the eyes of the ancient Chinese literati, the subject of artistic creation mapped everything with the mind: the scenery in the poem, the emotion in the painting [26]. For example, in modern painter Liu Danzhai’s “木蘭從軍” (Fig. 2), the character’s homesickness arises under the view to the distant mountains, which shows the natural integration of poetry and painting. Chinese painting

pursues elegance and simplicity in modeling, composition, and coloring. Although the main characteristic of painting is to copy the scenery, the sentiment and scenery cannot be separated [26]. Just like Song Dynasty painter Ma Yuan’s “山徑春行圖” (Fig. 3), it is not only depicting the natural scenery of spring, but also expressing the joy in literati’s heart at that moment. Chinese “imagery”, like the pursuit of “harmony” between man and nature in Chinese poetry and painting, is not only the Chinese view of art and aesthetics, but also the Chinese view of life and worldview.

3.2 Postmodernism

Postmodernism, in Western philosophy, is a late 20th-century movement characterized by broad skepticism, subjectivism, or relativism [29]. The discussion of postmodernism revolves mainly around the questioning of the modernity, including: a questioning on objective natural reality, according to postmodernists, it is an artifact of scientific practice and language; a questioning on science, technology, which postmodernism sees the eventual development of technology as inherently de-



Fig. 2. 木兰从军 Liu Danzhai 1955.



Fig. 3. 山径春行图 Ma Yuan 1190.

structive; and a questioning of the construction of a general theory, which postmodernism deems a consistent view as oppressing and marginalizing other views or discourses [29]. At the artistic level, postmodernism rejects modernism's grand narratives of artistic direction, eradicating the boundaries between high and low forms of art, and disrupting genre's conventions with collision, collage, and fragmentation [30]. There are several characteristics that lend art to being postmodern, these include assemblage (an open-ended collage of sorts, often mobilised to connote "indeterminacy, processuality, turbulence" [31]), simulation, reproduction, collage.

Today is a digital age represented by computers, simulation technology and AI technology, and people are no longer skeptical of any phenomenon that appears on the Internet or in the media: they are already familiar with how to interact with the mimetic environment; the devotion to copying, re-

production, and mashups [32]; the broader acceptance of virtual images. With the AI technology, movie characters even can automatically reproduce the actions or contents [33]. As described by French philosopher Busia – it is an epoch in which the image is truer than the real; simulation replaces copying and reproduction; one cannot judge what is the real [32]. When we see the Lego toys we own in the animated film *The Lego Movie* (Fig. 4), it foreshadows a world of "real" products, as parents buy these toy models, the child can live in them [32]. Postmodernism has a questioning on technology but also uses technology as a means of questioning, and this reflexivity will be directly reflected in current filmmaking and is well worth studying and thinking about. For the visual effects of films, virtual images break through people's imagination of reality, from the time we marveled at the beautiful alien spectacle and dramatic war scenes of the 3D live-action movie *Avatar* (Fig.



Fig. 4. Characters of *The Lego Movie* (2014).

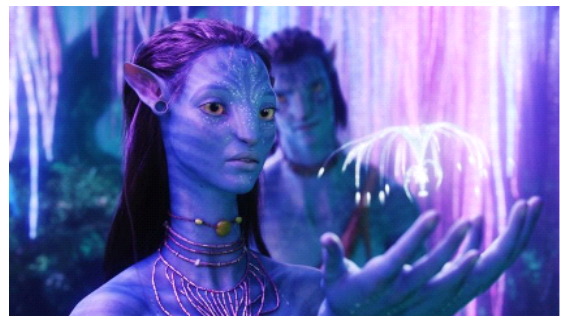


Fig. 5. Scene of *Avatar* (2009).

5), it was like opening Pandora's box and more desires were released. Audiences are no longer satisfied with just a story, and the constant expectation of visual effects has become a cultural trend.

3.3 Thematic Analysis of Culture Concepts

The previous section describes the overall concepts and ideas of Chinese "imagery" and postmodernism based on the literature and audiovisual materials. To further develop the discussion with the film, we used a thematic analysis to summarize the core cultural themes of Chinese "imagery" and postmodernism in the social and cultural fields (Fig. 6). It is carried out through familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes [24].

4. DISCUSSION: EVOLUTION OF CULTURE CONCEPTS IN MULAN

4.1 Theme: "Filial piety" and "Qi"

In traditional Chinese concept, "Filial piety" mainly refers to children's obedience and respect for their parents [34]. The verses of The Ballad of

Mulan repeatedly focus on Mulan's concern for her parents and kinship: "愿为市鞍马，从此替爷征。"、"不闻爷娘唤女声，但闻燕山胡骑鸣啾啾。"、"木兰不用尚书郎，愿驰千里足，送儿还故乡。"。 In general, this expresses the idea of "loyalty and filial piety" in which Mulan takes up the responsibility of men to protect the family and the country, and pay for the restoration of peaceful life and family reunion [35]. As described in the poem, Mulan (98) uses a simple and natural narrative to present the storyline of a girl dressing as a man, going to the battlefield, defeating the enemy, and returning home in triumph. More importantly, she looks like a girl next door, ordinary and real. It is gratifying to see that the young girl is wise and brave and returns safely from the battlefield. Such a theme and plot are in line with the expectation of family reunion in the culture of "filial piety", and this character also represents the most receptive female image for Chinese audience.

Due to the influence of politics, economy and technology, today's social formation and consciousness have become more complex. The "MeToo"

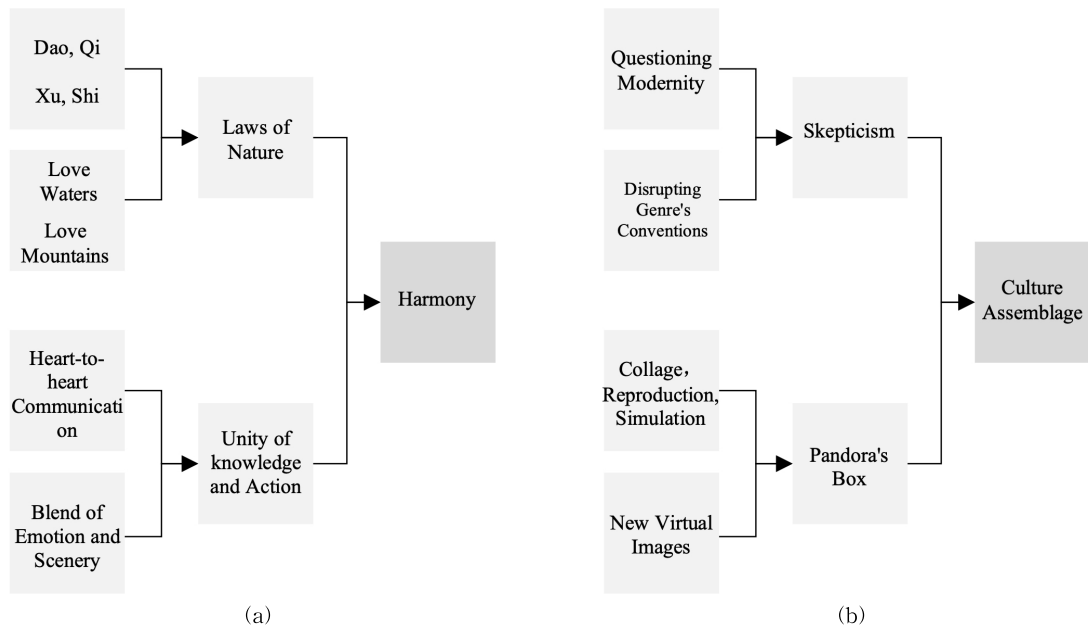


Fig. 6. Core culture themes of Chinese "imagery" and postmodernism. (a) Chinese "imagery" and (b) Postmodernism.

movement, which went global in 2017 from the U.S. has brought to the forefront the identity dilemmas women face today. *Mulan* (20) director Niki Caro, as well as a producer and director of photography, are all women, and it is hard to argue that the decision to make the film did not express the support for women's identity and rights. Caro said in an interview: "essentially, it's about a young woman who comes to understand, appreciate and respect her own power," [8]. In the film (20), "Qi" is a power hidden inside the human body (Fig. 7). In the secular concept, men could have strong "Qi", but women who have such "Qi" will be treated as witches and be exiled. While expressing the traditional idea of "devotion to family", the film also conveys the theme of female awakening from "I am Hua Jun" to "I am Hua Mulan" through the transformation of "Qi". This is the director's attempt at authenticity about real life, but this authenticity is slightly profound for children who are accustomed to the Disney culture of "Happy family", and a little heavy for adults, which affects the audience's habitual emotional experience when watching the movie.

4.2 Style: "Harmony" and "Assemblage"

Maintaining harmony in a film means that the core idea of the theme is unified with the external characters and visual style. Like Olaf of "Frozen" and Timon, Pumbaa of "The Lion King", Mulan (98) has companions Mushu and Cri-Kee. These

characters' personalities and appearances are in line with childish psychology, constituting a humorous and witty plot in the film [36], which is a characteristic and tradition of Disney film culture. At the same time, harmony also reflects the inheritance of national and cultural aesthetics related to the theme. *Mulan* (98) maintains the style and aesthetics of ancient Chinese art: people's aspirations and emotions for natural life through the simple depiction of mountains, rivers, and trees by the emptiness and reality of ink painting; the idyllic scenery on the marching road, and the people working in the fields, pounce on the simple folk style of the ancient eastern country where the military and the people are interdependent and quite secure [21]. Whether the Disney funny characters, or the tranquil and serene landscape, ink-painted expressions, all appear naturally and harmoniously in the folklore that the audience expects from the *Mulan* story.

2020's "Mulan" has been marketed well in advance of its release, filling audiences around the world with anticipation. However, its overall theatrical release was limited due to the epidemic, and the film grossed just under \$70 million (excluding online) [13]. Chinese audience emerged with many negative comments about the only live-action Disney princess movie in the East. Such as, Mulan lived in the 4th-6th century AD, but the place where she lived in movie, Fujian Tulou, only appeared in the 12th century during the Song

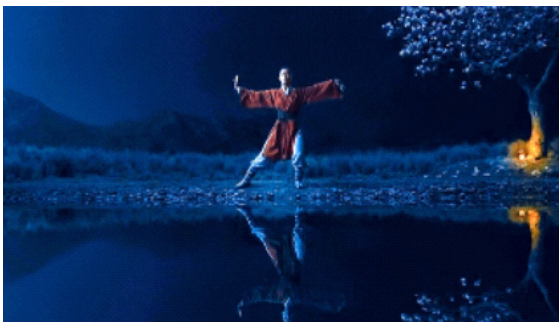


Fig. 7. Qi in film *Mulan* (2020).

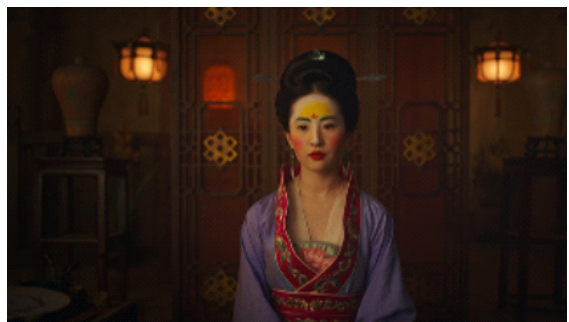


Fig. 8. The makeup in film *Mulan* (2020).

Dynasty, which makes viewers feel a lack of respect for history. In the film, women's faces are painted with thick white powder (Fig. 8), which derived from the "Forehead yellow makeup" of the Northern and Southern dynasties, but it is not in line with modern Chinese society's recognition of ancient images of women. In addition, the male protagonist has an ordinary appearance and lacks the righteousness in his eyes, making it difficult for the audience to empathize with the potential emotional line between Mulan and Honghui. Massive pile-up of Chinese elements, such as excessive lanterns, verbal-style couplets, and metaphorical phoenixes are not the same as the original perception of the Chinese audience. This culture assemblage based on the western imagination creates a psychological cultural dislocation and makes it difficult to gain the appreciation and recognition of the audience from the place where the story originated.

4.3 Reflections on Current Film Creation

Technology-driven digital simulation allows for a high degree of fusion between the reality and the virtual, flooding today's social scene with a universal recognition of visual authenticity (both true and false are possible), changing the way people view the world. Now may be the best and worst time for filmmaking. On the one hand, with the support of digital simulation, the imagination of film creation continues to break through. When people marvel at the extraordinary visual imagination of the movies *Alice in Wonderland*, *Aladdin*, they have more expectations for the next movies. But this means that future movies need to be more visually exciting to gain the audience's approval. Is this a shift from "Content is king" to "Vision is king"? *Mulan (2020)* is a 3D live-action film, its character "Xianniang" promotes the awakening of Mulan, however, the visual effects of "Xianniang" are far from meeting the audience's visual expectations that have been raised by movies such as

Marvel. How to balance the relationship between the core idea of film theme and the external forms is an important issue in current filmmaking. When technology solves most of the problems in life, the conflict between the development of technology and the dominant position of human being will become an inevitable topic. Future films should not only focus on the maintenance of forest homes under economic development, but also how the spiritual home of the human subject will stick with the participation of technology.

5. CONCLUSION

This study used a case study to explore the links between themes and culture concepts in Disney's *Mulan (1998, 2020)* through literature and analyses of culture concepts (Chinese "imagery" and Post-modernism). The results show that, *Mulan (98)* is influenced by the Chinese "imagery" concept of harmony and nature, and its theme (loyalty and filial piety) and style (traditional aesthetic) are unified in thought and form, basically meeting the audience's psychological expectations from the *Mulan* story. *Mulan (20)* faces a more complex and diverse social situation, incorporating multiple relationships and elements (gender awakening, culture assemblage) in its theme and style. This reflects that under the influence of globalization and technologization, cultures from different periods and regions have been broken and reorganized, different oppressed and marginalized viewpoints have been noticed and discussed. Cultural Borrowing and assemblage have become the common means in film creation, but what needs to be considered is whether the core ideas of the film will be influenced by these pluralistic and diverse external forms to the extent that they will deviate from the main narrative line of the film.

Our conclusion is: "Culture assemblage" and "Vision is king" have become cultural trends that influence the creation of film theme and style to

a certain extent: How to balance the relationship between the core idea of film theme and the external forms is an important issue in current filmmaking. Because the problem of film is very macro and complex, we do not discuss too much about the other influencing factors (politics, epidemics, etc.). But these point us in the direction of future research. The purpose of this study is to provide better support for current film creation by exploring the relationship between film theme and culture concept.

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