

Nostalgia Film Narratives and Emotional Mobilization for Environmental Communication

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Abstract: Mass media has a profound impact on public perception of the natural environment, and the presentation of ecology in films has attracted much attention, such as the rise of natural resource television channels and environmental documentaries, but there is a relative lack of current research on nostalgia film and ecological issues. According to this study, nostalgia is a powerful means of realizing environmental values and shapes environmental governance decisions, and nostalgia film profoundly shape public ecological perceptions by highlighting the importance and desirability of landscapes, showing past lifestyles, and depicting non-human things. This study focuses on the factors that mobilize ecological issues in nostalgia film, analyzes their association with public ecological perceptions and their influence in environmental values and governance, and aims to stimulate public environmental action through nostalgia film. This research illuminate the importance of the visual components of nostalgia in films for sustainable development, which can stimulate the public's discussion of environmental issues and encourage pro-environmental behaviors among the audience. It is suggested that local governments and film practitioners should pay attention to the expression of nostalgia as a factor in the medium of film, especially through the use of nostalgic narratives, to promote environmental protection and sustainable development, and develop effective environmental practice programs and policies.

Keywords: Nostalgia film, Emotional mobilization, Ecological perceptions, Environmental issues

1. Introduction

The mass media play an important role in the construction of environmental issues, influencing public attitudes and perceptions of the natural environment through a various visual content, and the appearance of a variety of ecological forms in films has been of increasing interest to people around the world in recent years. With the introduction of cable channels dedicated to natural resources (e.g., National Geographic Channel and Discovery Channel), the number and popularity of environmental documentaries have increased dramatically around the world [1]. In his case study of the popular documentary *Sharkwater*, Hughes [2] found that the film tended to include humans and wildlife in a visual framework in order to "raise awareness of the complex issues of human attitudes toward other animals. While there has been an increase in research on the ecological aspects of film appearances in a variety of fields recently, there has been less research on the relationship between nostalgia films and ecological issues. Howell, J. P. [3] and others have argued that nostalgia can be described as a means of "environmental value" and that nostalgia represents a potentially powerful "motivation" for

environmental and political decisions. Different parts of nostalgia films help shape how people view the environment and are important in influencing public opinions about nature, emphasizing the value of beautiful landscapes, the need to protect the environment, and showing the worries of non-human characters. Therefore, this paper explores the factors that mobilize ecological issues through nostalgia films and analyzes their correlation with public perceptions of these issues, considering environmental values and governance. It includes literature on public ecological perceptions and aims to encourage the public to engage in environmental actions via nostalgia films.

2. Literature review

2.1. Nostalgia: an important component to the building of public environmental awareness

Nostalgia, as an emotional element that expresses a sense of remembrance of the past, causes people to look to the past, even the past, and make reference to present life, so that they begin to appreciate, talk about, and compare changes in their surroundings. The word "nostalgia" is derived from the ancient Greek words "nostos" and "algia", the former meaning "going home" and the latter expressing a state of distress. It has been defined as a "state of homesickness" or a nostalgia for a past period that cannot be undone, or an overly sentimental longing [4]. Although nostalgia was initially used as a pathological term, encompassing emotional disorders such as frustration, depression, and even a tendency toward self-destruction, it is now conceptualized as a bittersweet and more positive emotion, and the interpretation of its discourse is gradually shifting to the field of cultural studies. Nostalgia is very common in people's daily lives, and the reason for this can be attributed to modernity. British sociologist Anthony Giddens believes that the most basic feature of modernity is rupture and discontinuity. This form of disruption engenders inner fear and anxiety, as well as an asynchrony between the spiritual realm and the advancement of the material world, ultimately leading to a spiritual breakthrough characterized by "nostalgia." Nostalgia can be seen as a way to realize this kind of rupture and anxiety. Almost everyone experiences nostalgia, triggered by events, media, and other factors. Film, as a dynamic art of 24 frames per second, is conducive to cathartic nostalgia, and some scholars believe that nostalgia is inextricably linked to memory, and that the natural characteristics of the medium of film are more suitable for nostalgia. From the perspective of the tourism industry, some researchers also view nostalgia as a motivation that generates sentimentality through the recollection of past experiences and creates an effective attraction for travel destinations, which not only promotes the development of local tourism, but also contributes to the public's participation in sustainable tourism and pro-environmental behaviors [3]. In addition, the feeling of nostalgia is a potential factor that influences visitors' behavior and interaction with the environment. Thus, nostalgia has a positive effect in promoting pro-social behavior [5].

2.2. Nostalgia film and environments

Nostalgia films are made through the visual representation of certain historical periods and the restoration of ecological and natural images of those periods through storytelling. Film genres, i.e. types of storytelling, include comedy, drama, action, adventure, biography, crime and western, etc. nostalgia film cannot be simply called and categorized as nostalgia film. It may contain a variety of factors, but it is difficult to form a unified and fixed paradigm, and ultimately it is necessary to land on the discussion of nostalgia itself. Within the category of nostalgia, the most notable researcher who has studied film is the Marxist sociologist Jameson. He claims that nostalgia films are entirely the product of postmodern collage and distinguishes between historical dramas and nostalgia films in his own work *"The Transformation of the Image of Postmodernity,"* arguing that in nostalgia films, the historical background serves as a mere signifier that provides a pseudo-historical image [6]. Film

locations, whether in the background or foreground, can generate nostalgia in the spectator, since the narratives and events linked to these sites elicit memories and recollections [7].

In answering questions about the environment, film offers a vantage point for exploring how nature and its problems are visualized at the intersection of science, popular education, art, and commerce [8]. David Ingram's *Green Screen: Environmentalism and Hollywood Film*, the first book-length study of environmental themes in mainstream film, undertakes to analyze "the interplay of environmental ideologies in Hollywood Film," with a particular focus on "environmentalist" films, which he defines as "films in which environmental issues are explicitly addressed and central to the narrative." Criticizing the emergence of environmentalist films in Hollywood, which often use nonhuman nature as the basis for speculative human relationships to serve the commercialized interests of Hollywood's focus on anthropocentrism, Ingram also offers a critique of films such as *Thunderheart*, *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, *Country*, and others. According to the author, films, as a form of mass communication, to some extent, reinforce the public's impression of and concern for the ecological and natural environment through their dramatic narratives and exaggerated visual expressions. Meanwhile, nostalgic films can stimulate public nostalgia and contribute to sustainability [9].

2.3. Nostalgia film as an environmental value

Nostalgia films have a positive impact on public attitudes toward the environment. Nostalgia functions as an emotional impetus for viewers to associate themselves with settings in films, and empirical research indicates that films cultivate nostalgia through people, portrayed locales, narratives, history, culture, and society [10][11]. In addition, the prevalence of film nostalgia is associated with psychological variables such as cultural proximity, fandom of film stars, and self-expression [10]. While film tourists differ in the degree of nostalgia and the elements and domains from which it is extracted, film tourists with different preferences have their specific preferences for the particular scene environment presented in a particular film. Consequently, employing nostalgia films as a medium to articulate nostalgia allows for the construction of the past through images and narrative references, offering a distinct visual representation of historical contexts while simultaneously fostering public engagement with the attraction's environment, thereby potentially eliciting awareness of environmental concerns.

Wu Z et al. argued that nostalgia can enhance tourists' environmental behavior through mediating factors such as subjective attitudes, perceived behavioral control, subjective norms, and meaning of life [9]. This also shows that films can use nostalgic elements to design effective planning in the practice of scenic environmental design. The contemporary structure of the film industry, based on a highly capitalistic approach, often inadvertently promotes an exciting and productive debate about the centrality of ecological agendas rather than commercial, marketing models. As concerns about global warming continue to escalate, mass media films present this bipolar tension. Many viewers see documentaries as a window to the world, a representation of the real thing, and however selective, film and video media seem to bring viewers closer to otherwise inaccessible dimensions of nature. Sean Cubitt's study of the BBC documentary series *Blue Planet* examines the use of high-end production and post-production techniques, as well as clever soundtracks and editing techniques, to convey a sense of wonder at the ecological creativity of the *Blue Planet*. A number of scholars have also supported the analysis of audiovisual works through a constructivist lens, which recognizes the creativity of film-making and the ability of the viewer to assign meaning to what is presented [12]. This epistemological understanding allows us to move beyond the documentary/fiction dichotomy, leading to an exploration of the utility of certain characters and representations of nature. Thus, it can be argued that nostalgia has the ability to influence and promote the acceptance of environmental

policies, which cannot be ignored when discussing environmental values, and that nostalgia films become part of environmental values in terms of conveying nostalgic emotions.

2.4. Mobilizing environmental emotions through nostalgia film

Nostalgia films, in contrast to mainstream cinema that typically prioritizes marketability and dramatizes natural settings, focus on authentically recreating situations from a particular era, emphasizing documentary realism over the intentional creation of visual effects or grand spectacles. Nostalgia films emphasize the retrospective display of scene space and depict specific memories of the past era to make the audience feel nostalgic about the era and use it to remember their past lives, including the environment of a specific era. Some studies have shown that viewers will have a sense of familiarity or connection with the place where the film was filmed, [13][14]. Whether it is the spirit of positive life shown by the protagonist of *"Return to Dust"* when facing the harsh as well as irresistible natural environment, which makes one think about the survival state of people under the harsh natural environment; or the description of the historical content of rural life in the films, such as *"Postman in the Mountains"* and *"Under the Hawthorn Tree"*, etc, including the record of the beautiful scenery of the mountains and the simplicity of people's customs; or the restoration of geographical factors and buildings with a sense of the age as represented by *"The Little Chinese Seamstress"*. All of them use visual symbols to construct descriptions of environmental issues. This kind of contemporary record of the ecological environment can constitute various elements that trigger nostalgia and lead to a series of discussions on environmental issues. It has also been argued that nostalgia can bring about positive changes by evoking youthful memories of forested areas, clear streams, and historic buildings, and by generating protection of environmental resources from various destructive forces [3]. Thus, depictions of ecological environments in nostalgia films usually use nostalgia as a strong emotional motivation, i.e., an emotional attachment to past experiences and environments, nostalgically remembering the biodiversity that once existed there, in order to promote more opportunities for people to interact well with nature (non-destructively).

3. Discussion

This study examines how nostalgia might enhance public understanding of environmental issues, the environmental significance of nostalgia films, and the ways in which these films visually represent and emotionally engage with ecological concerns. It can be found that nostalgia films have attracted public attention from the perspective of emphasizing the importance and desirability of landscapes (farmlands, cultivation, etc.), depicting the lifestyle of the past (the use of horse-drawn carriages, bicycles, and boats, etc.), and depicting non-human things (e.g., mountains, water, fields, dogs) to attract the public's attention, to help the public generate emotional resonance, and then to influence the public to think about ecological issues in the context of current living conditions. The audience's response to the film is influenced by several elements, including their understanding of the historical context and the temporal distance from the depicted era [15]. On one hand, Nostalgia, as an idealized recollection, engenders a sense of reminiscence regarding the past, leading nostalgics to perceive varied memories, including ecological ones, as more appealing. As an intuitive visual medium, effectively evoke memories of picturesque past environments, including forests, pristine streams, and historic structures, thereby potentially motivating the preservation of environmental resources and diminishing harmful behaviors. The film illustrates human existence in diverse contexts, exemplified by the protagonist of *"Return to Dust,"* who sustains an optimistic perspective despite the severe natural surroundings, potentially prompting viewers to contemplate the relationship between humanity and nature.

Nostalgia films demonstrate the irreversibility of environmental degradation by presenting culture, tradition and history to encourage the public to develop local attachment, which in turn leads to actions to protect the local environment and various cultural assets. In this regard, the public can be mobilized to minimize the negative impact of environmental degradation and establish a mechanism of consensus and responsibility. In addition, there is a need to further transform the concern for the environment inspired by nostalgia films into more practical and effective actions for environmental protection, which still needs to be studied in depth in the future. Meanwhile, how to integrate the concept of ecological environmental protection more systematically and comprehensively into more nostalgia films to expand their influence on environmental education is also a direction worth exploring in the future.

4. Conclusion

The unique media conditions of film provide an important opportunity to disseminate information to the public. Nostalgia films are different from market-driven Hollywood commercial films that dramatize the natural environment, which focus on recreating the scenes of a specific era and are characterized by authenticity and record-ability. Through the retrospective display of scene space, it stimulates the public's nostalgia and makes them remember their past lives and the nearby ecological environment. Films such as *"Return to Dust"* *"Postman in the Mountains"* *"Under the Hawthorn Tree"* *"The Little Chinese Seamstress"* and others provide a current record of the ecological environment. The visual components of these films, including the emphasis on landscapes, depictions of daily life in specific eras, and representations of non-human organisms, may inspire public nostalgia and stimulate discourse on environmental issues, subsequently encouraging pro-environmental behaviors among the audience. There is still a long way to go on the issue of sustainable development, which includes asking society to use media resources or mobilize more creative resources to actively promote environmental protection concepts. The government must continue to focus on macro-planning and micro-management to promote sustainable behaviors and healthy interactions between individuals and the environment, while also addressing the expression of nostalgia as a factor in the medium of film, particularly the role of films in environmental protection through the use of nostalgic narratives. Simultaneously, we must consider the manifestation of nostalgia in films, particularly the influence of films on environmental conservation and sustainable development through nostalgic narratives. At the same time, there are cross-cultural differences in the perception of nostalgia in films, so there is a need for continuous research on the benefits and other impacts of films in the promotion of sustainable development.

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