

Film as Civilizational Palimpsest: Tracing Marine and Agricultural Longue Durée Imprints in Visual Aesthetics Narratives

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Abstract. The comparative study of cinematic aesthetics between Western and Chinese traditions reveals profound influences from their underlying civilizational foundations. While Western film aesthetics, shaped by maritime civilization, emphasize dynamic movement and Visual hegemony, which are theorized by Virilio's "dromology" and Panofsky single point perspective. Chinese cinema is deeply rooted in agrarian civilization, drawing from the "Three Distances" principle of classical landscape painting to construct its unique visual language with multi-dimensional cavalier perspective. Despite extensive research on cross-cultural film analysis, the role of civilizational *longue durée* in shaping cinematic form remains underexplored. This paper examines how marine and agrarian civilizational genes manifest in film aesthetics, focusing on spatial composition, perspective selection, and ideological encoding with the aim of reaching dynamic and static organic coordination and unity. By integrating Braudel's historical framework with film theory, this study aims to provide a systematic comparison of Western and Chinese cinematic paradigms. The review uses Eisenstein's montage as theoretical tools for Western cinema and *san yuan* perspective for Chinese film—while addressing challenges in cross-cultural visual analysis. Ultimately, for the sake of a more nuanced understanding of how civilizational heritage continues to influence contemporary filmmaking, this work offers insights for global film theory and comparative media studies.

Keywords: film aesthetics, cultural genes, marine culture vs. Agrarian culture

1. Introduction

The exploration of visual aesthetics in movies has never stopped. The visual aesthetics of film go beyond the simple beauty of images, exploring how images construct narratives, convey emotions, and reflect their cultural roots through elements such as composition, motion, perspective, and light and shadow. This aesthetic difference is particularly significant in cross-cultural comparisons. The fundamental distinction between Western and Eastern film aesthetics stems from the visual extrapolation of their underlying cultural genes. Western cinema, at its deepest level, is shaped by the kinetic dynamism inherent to maritime civilization. Its preoccupation with speed and movement can be analytically deciphered through Paul Virilio's [1] theory of dromology, while its historical

drive toward global expansion manifests visually in the dominance of single-point perspective—a technique that reinforces a hierarchical and often oppressive aesthetic paradigm.

In contrast, Eastern cinematic traditions are deeply anchored in a stability-oriented dynamism, drawing extensively from the spatial composition principles of *Sanyuanfa* found in classical landscape painting. This framework facilitates a striking vertical authority, meticulously orchestrated depth-of-field arrangements, and a laterally unfolding poetic motion. Moreover, the agrarian foundations of Eastern civilization, with their emphasis on environmental harmony and complex, decentralized social structures, have fostered a preference for the cavalier perspective—a more fluid and immersive mode of visual representation.

This paper systematically examines these aesthetic divergences through the lens of cultural genetics. It introduces, for the first time in comparative film studies, Fernand Braudel's [2] *longue durée* historical framework, which allows for a macro-historical analysis of how material and civilizational factors shape aesthetic forms over extended periods. By applying this methodology, the study offers a unified yet dialectical analysis of dynamic and static visual strategies across cinematic traditions. In doing so, it not only elucidates deep-seated cultural divergences but also contributes meaningfully to contemporary discourses on "cultural confidence" within the broader context of globalization.

2. Literature review

Fernand Braudel's [2] *longue durée* theory posits that civilizations are fundamentally shaped by slow geographical and environmental forces, which unconsciously plays a crucial role in forming cultural production across centuries. While Braudel's primary research field covers economic and social structures, subsequent scholars have extended his framework to the evolution of literary forms. Notably, Moretti explicitly adopts Braudel's *longue durée* perspective to trace the cyclical rise and decline of 44 subgenres of British novels over two centuries [3]. By employing quantitative methods such as bibliographic data analysis, Moretti depicted these trends through "boom-and-bust" curves and demonstrated that the novel's development was driven not by individual authors or events but by deep-rooted and structural forces. This approach reflects Braudel's emphasis on geographical and economic dimension over impermanent historical moments.

Despite its utility in literary studies, the application of *longue durée* theory to film aesthetics remains underexplored. Few studies have systematically investigated how Braudel's framework might elucidate persistent visual tropes or stylistic conventions in cinema. For instance, within Western cultural contexts, scholars have examined how environmental and historical forces manifest in filmic imagery. Simmon [4] interrogates the mythmaking function of landscape in Western films, arguing that directors like John Ford transformed Monument Valley into a visual metonym for "American national mythology"—its mesas and deserts serving as stages for narratives of frontier exceptionalism. Similarly, Szaloky deconstructs Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man*, revealing how its surrealist aesthetics expose the suppressed violence of Western expansion against Indigenous peoples, thereby critiquing the "forgetting mechanisms" embedded in dominant historical narratives [5].

Conversely, maritime civilizations have left distinct imprints on cinematic aesthetics. Sun analyzes the oeuvre of Greek auteur Theo Angelopoulos, demonstrating how recurrent ship imagery—ferries, rafts, and drifting vessels in films like *Landscape in the Mist*—encapsulates the liminality of Greek modernity, oscillating between displacement and historical rupture [6]. Zhu [7] extends this inquiry to Hollywood blockbusters, examining James Cameron's [8] *The Abyss* and *Avatar: The Way of Water* to argue that ocean visuals encode the "fluidity" and "ecological symbiosis" inherent

to Western maritime traditions, projecting navigational ideals onto futuristic, post-terrestrial communities. Meanwhile, agrarian civilizations have also influenced filmic representation. Landman and Ballard explore how Pacific Island films function as historical archives, mediating colonial encounters while simultaneously reinforcing or subverting imperialist visual paradigms [9].

However, there are few articles compare western and eastern aesthetics differences especially under the cultural background. This work reveals how *longue durée* environmental imprints shape visual unconscious: marine films encode speed, horizons and single point perspective, while agrarian films embody stability with cavalier perspective. By systematizing these contrasts, the study bridges historiography and film theory, offering a civilizational lens to decode both opposing and unified aesthetic divergence.

3. Method: compare marine and agricultural *longue durée* imprints in visual aesthetics narratives through qualitative method

3.1. Theoretical framework: civilizational *longue durée* and cinematic aesthetics

Fernand Braudel's [2] *longue durée* theory states that geographical and civilizational structures play a crucial role in influencing cultural production. The structural time frame proposes that civilizations are unconsciously shaped by slow-moving and almost imperceptible forces like geography, climate and cultural mentalities.

As an important part of the cultural process, film is especially under the influence of gene foundation, which is during and meaningful. Applying this to film aesthetics, marine civilization which is characterized by mobility, exploration, and horizontal spatiality, fostered cinematic techniques such as dynamic tracking shots, expansive horizons, and narratives of conquest which is performed by Panofsky's [10] single point perspective. Conversely, agrarian civilizations stress chronological time, vertical hierarchies, and space ethics, reflected in static compositions such as yellow earth, layered depth, and multi-dimensional cavalier perspective.

3.2. Image and composition: a civilization dialogue of speed and depth

In the deep structure of maritime civilization and agricultural civilization, film images present completely different aesthetic logic and spatial concepts. Ocean civilization relies on mobility, speed, and expansion, giving rise to visual mechanisms characterized by dynamic tracking and horizontal breakthroughs. And agricultural civilization is rooted in the land, solar terms, and patriarchal system, forming an aesthetic system centered on static gaze, vertical order, and deep immersion. This section uses Braudel's [1] perspective on the long-term history of civilization to place film techniques in the dual context of material geography and civilization structure, examining the power encoding of speed aesthetics in maritime narratives, as well as the translation and continuation of the "Three Distant Laws" in Chinese cinema. These two visual paradigms not only shape different contrasting film languages of movement and stillness, but also reflect the profound influence of civilization paths on perceptual patterns.

3.2.1. A braudelien reading of speed in marine-civilizational films

The cinematic expression of marine civilization embodies a unique visual frame characterized by kinetic velocity and expansive horizontality. Virilio's [1] *dromology* decodes the technological sublime of nautical speed.

Due to the geographic compelling force, broken coastlines such as the Mediterranean and Nordic fjords obliged pilots to engage in short distance high-frequency navigation, which demanded heavily on accuracy of speed. In addition to the instability surroundings, such as monsoon and ocean current, making it regular to go on sailing. The pace of waiting-sprint contributes to demand for explosive pace. Based on the speed physic foundation, dynamic tracking lens show the process from technical mechanics to decoding visual power. Virilio's dromology argues that speed reshapes spatial perception, with marine films exemplifying "the logistics of perception" in conquest narratives [1]. Speed is not only the frequency of movement, but also a destructive force that can even reconstructs power by changing perception patterns.

In the film *Mad Max: Fury Road*, chasing cars can be regarded as the ultimate embodiment of speed aesthetics. Its dynamic tracking shots not only capture physical motion, but also imply the deep cultural encoding of speed, conquest, and violence in Western maritime civilization [11]. After realizing the betrayal, Immortan Joe led all his armed convoy (including modified tanks, motorcycles, flamethrowers, etc.) to relentlessly pursue and try to regain his wives. The straight sprint of vehicles in the desert during the chase scene echoes the linear trajectory of sailboats crossing the ocean with the help of trade winds during the Age of Discovery. The camera follows the vehicle at a low angle, like a ship breaking waves, emphasizing speed as a tool to break through spatial limitations—this is in line with the logic of maritime civilization conquering unknown territories through speed. Under dynamic camera, the mast and flag of the modified car swing violently in the strong wind, transforming wind energy into visual symbols of speed, implying that speed originates from the violent domestication of natural forces. These subjective shots in pursuit battles use a large number of handheld follow-up lens models to shape the bumpy perspective at high speeds and create a sense of instability. This simulated perspective immerses the audience in the scene, forcing them to engage in violent confrontations at high speeds, enhancing the sense of oppression that comes with being there.

3.2.2. The transmedial journey of 'Three Distances' theory in Chinese film aesthetics

In contrast, Chinese cinema's visual language is deeply rooted in the aesthetic principles of classical landscape painting, particularly the "Three Distances" theory—high distance, deep distance, and level distance. The agricultural civilization is influenced by the shackles of the 24 solar terms and the constraints of the land, geography forces that collectively rooted populations to their ancestral lands through multiple interlocking mechanisms. Adding the effect like the self-locking effect of small-scale agricultural economy and the spatial anchoring of patriarchal system, creating an economic trap where mobility equated to ruin, the whole culture is blanked with the characteristic of stable and settled. The Three Distances Method is a spatial expression theory in traditional Chinese landscape painting, first systematically proposed by the Northern Song Dynasty painter Guo Xi in his work "The High Mountains and Springs". It includes three spatial paradigms: "high and far" (looking up from the bottom of the mountain to the top of the mountain), "profound" (peering back from the front of the mountain), and "flat and far" (looking up from the nearby mountain to the distant mountain). This theory has been transformed into a unique static expression system in film aesthetics under the influence of Chinese agricultural civilization.

The high distance perspective in Chinese landscape painting emphasizes towering mountain compositions that convey hierarchical power, which is translated to cinema through: vertical framing for authority to show hierarchy power. In Zhang Yimou's *Hero*, the Qin palace's staircases are shot in extreme low angles, reinforcing imperial dominance through vertical oppression. The geometric design of the stairs adopts the Qin Dynasty's "stacked style" structure, with each step having a

strictly uniform height (about 45cm), forming a mechanically repeated ascending sequence. This mathematical precision is magnified through the lens as a form of inhumane institutional violence. The camera shoots at an extreme elevation angle of 15° - 25° , creating an exaggerated perspective distortion of the 20 meter high steps in the image. This transformation transforms the building entity into an abstract totem of power (the lens focal length is enhanced with a 35mm wide-angle lens).

Deep distance employs overlapping planes to create contemplative depth, adapted in film through long takes with layered mise-en-scène [12]. Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* uses doorways, curtains, and rain-smeared windows to construct visual tunnels, enhancing the vertical depth of the scene. The camera lingers to simulate a "walking into" the painting's depth. The six door frames of the Shanghai apartment form an optical tunnel, with each frame nested at a 15% decreasing width rate, using a 50mm lens to create gradient blurring at an f/2.8 aperture. This precise perspective control reproduces the "profound" view of landscape painting from the front to the back of the mountain, which is important in "Three Distances" theory.

Level distance prioritizes serene horizontality, translated to cinema as slow lateral tracking shots that evoke scroll-painting unrolling [13]. Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* employs the Yangtze River as a horizontal axis, with boats drifting like brushstrokes across the frame. This mirrors Xu Daoning's *Fishing in a Mountain Stream*, where flat vistas embody Taoist harmony. The film uses a 2.35:1 widescreen ratio, strictly controlling the surface of the Yangtze River to the bottom one-third of the frame (in accordance with the three part composition rule), forming an intertextual relationship with the "one river, two banks" layout in the Northern Song Dynasty's "Ping yuan" composition. In the scene of Han Sanming, a demolition worker, taking a boat, the water surface continuously maintains a horizontal calibration of with the help of a gyroscope stabilizer, reproducing the stability and relaxation of the Song Dynasty silk "lying down".

3.3. Differences in perspective: the aesthetic opposition between single point focusing and scattered view of motion

The conquest logic of Western maritime civilization and the cyclical order of Chinese agricultural civilization are further reflected in the visual mechanism of film as the fundamental division of perspective - the centralization of single point perspective and the inclusiveness of scattered perspective form a sharp contrast [10]. The linear perspective method relies on geometric accuracy and visual convergence to focus power on a single vanishing point, shaping a dominant and centralized static solidification viewing mode; China's "Youguan" style scatter perspective, on the other hand, originates from the experience of looking around in agricultural labor and the time view of the four time cycle, emphasizing the understanding of the world from multiple angles and levels while moving. This section will start from the specific formal element of perspective, analyze how Western films construct authoritative narratives through single point perspective, and how Chinese films transform the "scattered" visual logic in traditional painting, creating an aesthetic conception that blends emotions with scenery and time and space.

3.3.1. Western panofsky single point perspective

Single point perspective also known as linear perspective, is a geometric based spatial representation method. Featured by vanishing point, all lines parallel to the line of sight converge at a single point in the image. This perspective can also be used in analyzing western film under the effect of marine genes [10]. In the Age of Discovery, western countries occupied the world map with monopolistic oppression, describing Europe as the center of the world with conquest and enterprising

perspectives. The single point perspective became a method to show oppressive power in film aesthetics.

In Charlie Chaplin's "The Great Dictator", the stage scene at the Tomania Palace deconstructs the absurdity of authoritarian aesthetics with the precision of visual geometry through deliberately distorted single point perspective. Its design concept and execution details can be regarded as one of the most exquisite political satire in film history.

All columns, wall seams, and ceiling decorative lines point at a special angle towards Hynkel's Adam's apple position, which is the source of vibration during speech, symbolizing the "dictatorship of sound". As Henkel swallowed his saliva, the entire building seemed to tremble, exposing totalitarianism and sanctifying biological instincts. The convergence of visual focal points focuses the film's center of gravity on the characters, using a forced single perspective to capture the audience's attention, forming a hidden aesthetic of violence.

3.3.2. Chinese cavalier perspective

Based on the social structure of 'differential order pattern', Chinese rural country works like a self-based circle from inner layer to outer layer, forming concentric and scattered layer by layer cognition [14]. And the surrounding observation of farmland management, such as rice planting, requires viewing the growth from multiple angles and cultivates a cyclic observation method and spatial cognition. With the narrative logic and time concept of the four time cycle, the cyclical labor throughout the entire process of farming reflects the importance of seasonal sequence and spatial depth surrounding.

Learning from traditional Chinese drawing technical features with visual logic of moving, the cavalier perspective also construct the aesthetics foundation of film. In the film *The Assassin*, after the scene where Nie Yinniang rescued her exiled father Nie Feng from the hands of the Yuan family assassin, her father's remorse made her face the family bonds and shook her determination to assassinate her cousin Tian Ji'an. The horizontal transition of the landscape painting, composed of dry and barren trees and long water surfaces, is a key transitional segment in the film with a broaden perspective. The composition adopts a "one river two banks" style flat and far composition, with the horizon placed at one-third of the top of the picture. The flowing lens and visual center stimulate the audience's emotions and resonate with Nie Yinniang's inner turmoil

4. Future directions

The interplay between dynamic and static aesthetics in Eastern and Western cinema presents a rich field for future research, particularly as globalization and digital technologies continue to reshape cinematic expression. We can expand Cross-Civilizational Comparative Studies not merely limit the perspective into Western (Hollywood, European) and East Asian (Japanese, Chinese, Korean) cinema, but future research should include other cinematic traditions—such as South Asian (Bollywood's rhythmic dynamism), Middle Eastern (static contemplation in Iranian cinema), and Indigenous filmmaking (cyclical temporality). The future of dynamic-static dialectics lies in transcending binary oppositions and fostering hybrid forms by embracing interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and technological innovations, scholars and filmmakers can unlock unprecedented aesthetic syntheses.

5. Conclusion

The comparative analysis reveals that the cinematic expressions of Western marine and Chinese agrarian civilizations—though fundamentally shaped by their respective *longue durée* geographies—exhibit a dialectical tension between relative dynamism and stability.

On one hand, the marine civilization's emphasis on speed and mobility is encoded through dynamic tracking shots and Panofskian single-point perspective. This technique manifests not only exploratory fluidity but also an imperial "logistics of perception". The vanishing-point geometry, while technically enabling spatial depth, simultaneously constructs a visual hierarchy that mirrors Europe's colonial gaze during the Age of Discovery.

On the other hand, agrarian stability, embodied in the "Three Distances" theory's layered compositions, imposes a temporal oppression through static frames. Yet this very fixation fosters the cavalier perspective's circular epistemology—a spatial logic derived from rice-terrace surveillance and Fei Xiaotong's differential order pattern, where multi-angle observation subtly challenges centralized authority.

Ultimately, both aesthetics betray their civilizational paradoxes: marine dynamism seeks to conquer space yet relies on rigid linear perspective, while agrarian stability cultivates dispersed viewpoints within an ostensibly rigid temporal order. This duality invites future studies on how contemporary hybrid cinemas negotiate these historical imprints.

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