

Screening Displacement: A Qualitative Study of Immigrant Identity in Contemporary Diasporic Cinema

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Abstract. This paper examines how contemporary diaspora films, in the context of globalization, represent the complex identities of immigrants through their unique narrative and aesthetic strategies. This study uses a qualitative research method to analyze the visual and linguistic diversity of Diaspora Films after 2010. It is found that immigrant identity in film performance is a process of continuous change and renewal across multiple dimensions, including character identity, digital home, and memory landscape. This kind of identity is not the presentation of a binary opposition, but is creatively reconstructed in the “Third Space” proposed by Bhabha; it reflects the continuous efforts and integration of discrete individuals in the cultural crevice to seek belonging and self-definition.

Keywords: Diaspora film, identity construction, the third space, qualitative research

1. Introduction

With the deepening of globalization in the 21st century, immigration has become a common phenomenon in the international community. According to the UN World Migration Report 2021, the total number of international migrants globally has reached 281 million, representing 3.6% of the total population [1]. In this context, identity issues have increasingly become a hot research topic in the humanities and social sciences. As a type of film dominated by the creators of the Diaspora and with the immigrant experience as the core theme, diaspora film provides a rich cultural text for understanding this complex issue.

Early immigrant narratives often revolved around binary, antagonistic patterns of “assimilation” or “nostalgia,” while contemporary immigrant films present more complex, fluid narrative forms. Bhabha, H. K. stated that the “third space” theory provides an important perspective on this transformation [2]. He points out that cultural identity construction occurs in a hybrid realm of cultural clashes and negotiations, where new meanings and values are created.

Through the analysis of representative works after 2010, this study finds that contemporary diaspora films show how identity is constantly “Generated” through unique film language under the influence of multicultural forces. Hall, S. viewed that cultural identity is “In the making” rather than “Being” aptly illustrates the dynamic nature of this identity [3]. The film paints a dynamic picture of identity construction by showing the tension between “Hyphenated identity,” the “Digital home” constructed by social media, and the reactivated memory landscape. Naficy, H. called that

the “Cinema of emphasis” aesthetic the direct embodiment of this identity negotiation process in the cinematic form [4].

2. Building the theoretical framework

Based on cultural studies and sociological theory, this study develops an analytical framework for understanding the construction of diaspora film identity. Bhabha's “Hybridity” and “Third Space” theories reveal the generative mechanisms of new identity forms in cultural conflicts and provide a core tool for analyzing cultural conflicts in films. Stuart Hall's theory of “Cultural identity” emphasizes the dialectical relationship between “Being” and “Becoming” in identity and deepens understanding of the fluidity of immigrant identity. At the same time, the concept of “Digital home” in the field of digital humanities helps us examine how social media constructs identity negotiation fields beyond geographical boundaries. These three theoretical perspectives complement each other and, together, constitute a multidimensional framework for interpreting the identity politics of contemporary diaspora films.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research orientation and primarily uses the text close reading method and the film visual analysis method to deeply interpret the film's narrative structure, character arc, lighting, dialogue, lens language, color, sound, and other elements, revealing the identity politics behind it.

The core methodology of this study is the in-depth, interpretive analysis of the film text. Firstly, narrative analysis is adopted in this thesis. The research is mainly concerned with how the film's narrative structure breaks the linear time, through flashbacks, interjections, parallels and other narrative techniques, it shows the contrast and change of the plot and characters between the past and the present, here and there, so as to map the deeper emotional color of identity. Secondly, the research employs a person analysis method. This paper focuses on the psychological changes, behavioral choices, and dialogues of the protagonist and his family members in dealing with cultural conflicts, in order to reveal the internal processes and external performances of identity negotiation. Third is the audio-visual language analysis. This is a key step in this study, which will specifically analyze the following four aspects:

(1) Space image: how space, such as family interior and city streetscape, becomes a metaphor of cultural conflict and integration.

(2) Shot and scheduling: how close-ups, depth of field, and hand-held photography convey a character's emotional state and identity anxiety.

(3) Color and sound: how the conversion of color tones, multilingual mixing, and juxtaposition of musical styles create sensory “Hybrid” experiences.

The method of this study does not pursue data universality, but aims to reveal the cultural logic and emotional structure underlying the phenomenon through in-depth interpretation.

4. Results and analysis

4.1. Hyphenated identity and the “third space”

The analysis shows that characters often struggle with the tension of a “Hyphenated identity” (e.g., “Sino-American”). This tension is on full display when Billie says goodbye: she can neither fully

embrace American individualism nor fully return to the ethical system of Chinese family values. The beauty of the film, however, is that it doesn't leave the characters in this state of tearing, but shows how they carve a “Third space” between the cracks.

In *Minari*, this “Third space” is a garden my grandmother opened in Arkansas to grow a Korean wild vegetable called *Minari*. It is neither entirely Korean nor entirely American, but a hybrid, nascent cultural field. The interaction of characters in this space symbolizes the creation of a new, integrated identity. The hyphen is no longer a sign of division, but a bridge of creative connection.

Table 1. Representation analysis of “the third space” in representative films

Title	The concrete image of “The third space”	The embodiment of cultural conflict	The result of the identity negotiation
Minari (2020)	American farm growing South Korean wild vegetable “Minari”	Korean family tradition vs. American “Pioneer” spirit Western individual right to know	It creates a new family identity and cultural practice rooted in a foreign land
Don't Tell Her (2019)	“White Lies” built around grandmother's illness	vs. Eastern family collective protection African community culture	Billie finds a personal ethical position that she understands and participates in, but doesn't fully belong to either side
Atlanta (2016-2022)	The protagonist Earn's journey through different social circles	vs. mainstream white business systems	It forms a highly contextualized, fluid and critical survival strategy and identity performance

4.2. Social media and the digital homeland

Contemporary displacement films keenly capture the far-reaching impact of digital technology on identity construction. In the past, Nora has stayed in touch with her childhood love in South Korea through social media, and this episode vividly demonstrates how digital platforms can create “Digital homes” for those displaced by physical distance. This digital space enables migrants to maintain multiple life trajectories and emotional identities simultaneously, and as Miller, D., & Slater, D. point out, digital media enables migrants to construct a “Pluralistic social context” in which they are able to participate in their own social and cultural identities, moving flexibly between cultures [5].

This “Digital home” is essentially a mobile, customizable identity lab. The displaced can selectively present themselves and maintain immediate contact with the cultural community of their home country, which can help alleviate a sense of geographic alienation. Bourne, M. suggests that social media platforms such as WeChat and Facebook have become ‘Digital Bridges’ for immigrants to maintain their cultural identity, enabling them to maintain their original social capital in a new cultural context [6]. But the film also offers an insight into the illusory nature of this digital connection—the contrast between the intimacy of online connection and the disconnect of offline

reality. As Zhou, M., and Li, X. described in research on Chinese youth, while digital media use reinforces cultural identity, it can also exacerbate feelings of marginalization in the real world [7].

This digital way of maintenance itself constitutes a new identity tension and ethical dilemma. As Madianou, M., and Miller, D. point out, the “Multimedia” environment created by digital media creates opportunities for social interaction and offers more options for communication, as well as opportunities for social interaction, but it also complicates expectations, responsibilities, and misunderstandings in cross-cultural relationships [8]. The cross-cultural connections Norah has maintained through social media in the past embody the emotional contradictions that characterize the digital desire to stay connected. People may confront the gaps in understanding created by differences in space and time. This duality of the digital motherland is not only emotional support but also a new source of pressure, becoming an important dimension for contemporary diaspora films to explore identity.

4.3. The cinematic landscape of memory

Memory is not a mere flashback device in an immigrant film, but is constructed into a cinematic scene filled with emotional and sensory details. In “Minari,” Korean memories seep into American reality through sensory details such as the taste of food and the tone of dialect.

The film “Don’t Tell Her” shows memory through audiovisual language. For example, the depiction of Chinese cities in “Don’t Tell Her” is filled with warm, saturated colors and a bustling atmosphere, in sharp contrast to the relatively calm, alienating tone of the American scenes. This memory landscape is not an exact reconstruction of the past, but an emotional and selective reconstruction. It becomes an important frame of reference for the characters to define themselves, understand a sense of belonging in the present, and constantly participate in and shape their current identity.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study clearly show that contemporary diasporic films have transcended the binary opposition of “Assimilation” and “Nostalgia” in early immigrant narratives, and that contemporary diasporic films have transcended the binary opposition of “Assimilation” and “Nostalgia” in early immigrant narratives, moreover, contemporary diaspora films have also transcended the binary opposition of “Assimilation” and “Nostalgia” in early immigrant narratives, and constructed a more complex, dynamic and fruitful picture of identity politics. The characters in films are no longer just passive recipients of cultural conflicts, but active negotiators and creators. They continue to define themselves through struggles with hyphenated identities, the use of digital technologies to maintain cross-domain connections, and the sensory reconstruction of memories. This finding strongly supports Stuart Hall's classical claim that identity is “Becoming” rather than “Being,” and places Bhabha's somewhat abstract “Third space” theory within it; it is endowed with vivid cultural practice and emotional connotation. Like the garden in *Minari* and the “Lie down” ritual in the farewell performance, identity is not a fixed thing to be “Discovered”; it is a process of constant “Creation” in the crevices of daily life.

In addition, the aesthetic form of diasporic film and its theme of identity politics constitute a profound intertextual relationship, which itself is a practice of “Third space”. The film language of “Emphasis”, with its multilingual dialogue, mixed musical style, non-linear narrative structure, and purposeful visual alienation, is more than just a storytelling tool; they are part of the story -- it allows the audience to experience the hybridity, fluidity, and uncertainty of identity directly at the

sensory level. When the audience listens to the juxtaposition of Korean folk music and American country music, or feels the long, cool footage of “Rome,” they are experiencing an emotional and cognitive state that cannot be categorized by a single cultural label. Therefore, diaspora film is not only a mirror of identity negotiation but also a “Cultural field” that actively participates in identity construction, inviting and guiding the audience to understand this complex experience of modern life.

Finally, the cultural significance of contemporary displacement film is that it provides a new paradigm for understanding a sense of belonging in the era of globalization. It reveals that home and identity can no longer be attached to fixed geographical boundaries, nor can they be completely immersed in virtual digital networks or nostalgic memory pictures. A true sense of belonging may stem from the ability to sustain dialogue, translation, and creative integration between these different dimensions. These films are not about displaced grief and loss, but about finding agency and creative resilience in the inevitable cultural mix. They tell us that in a world of blurring and redrawing cultural boundaries, identity may not be about choosing this or that, but about learning to inhabit the hyphens that connect us and to set up a flowing and solid home of one's own in the third space full of tension.

6. Conclusion

Through a qualitative analysis of several representative contemporary displacement films, this study finds that together these works paint a picture of the dynamic construction of migrant identity. Identity is neither a simple fixation on the culture of the motherland nor a passive assimilation of the culture of the host country, but a continuous process of “Reconstruction” in creative practice, including discrete traumatic experiences and cultural hybridization. The film vividly demonstrates the flow, negotiation, and generation of identity in the state of “Between” through multiple dimensions such as space, memory, and the body, as well as the unique audio-visual language “Stress”. This strongly supports the theoretical insights that identity is “Becoming” rather than “Being” and is generated in the “Third space”.

The limitations of this study are as follows: firstly, the case selection, while representative, can not cover all diasporic filmmaking across all ethnicities and regions of the globe; second, the qualitative research focuses on in-depth interpretation, and the generalizability of its conclusions needs to be verified through a wider range of texts.

Future research can be extended in the following directions: first, to extend the research object to immigrant-themed TV dramas on streaming platforms such as Netflix to examine the impact of new media forms on discrete narratives. Secondly, it explores how audiences of different cultural backgrounds accept, interpret, and resist the representation of identity in films. Third, we should pay close attention to the new works of second- and third-generation immigrant directors and follow the latest developments in immigrant status issues in the context of deepening globalization. The immigrant film, as a moving mirror, will continue to reflect our eternal questions about who we are and how we get along in an increasingly complex world.

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