

# Nostalgia: Analysis of Chinese Factory-Themed Movies from the Narrative of Diaspora

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**Abstract:** Focusing on the Chinese factory-themed films since the new century, the paper explains the social order of spiritual and cultural reproduction constructed by the factory area as the living world, so as to analyze the creative motivation of the creators for the diaspora narration of the factory movies; Then, it discusses the expression of “pseudo past” in images from three levels of materiality, culture and ethics; Finally, it explores the nostalgic attitude expressed by the creators with the help of the “form compensation” of the life world of the factory-themed films.

## 1. Introduction

Since 21st century, there have emerged a number of films closely related to the restructuring of state-owned enterprises at the turn of the new century and the wave of laid-off workers brought about by the restructuring of state-owned enterprises at the turn of the new century, all of which place the main narrative space in the factory. Based on this narrative space, this kind of film is defined as “factory-themed films”. Factory-themed films focuses on the individual living conditions of factory workers under the influence of state-owned enterprise reform, presents the production and life picture of workers, and reconstructs the social order of spiritual and cultural reproduction. It is an important text for the study of state-owned enterprise reform. This paper will take the above-mentioned factory-themed films as the specific text, first expand the extension of diaspora film in the new space-time context, and then start with the life world theory of German contemporary philosopher Habermas, analyze the significance of factory space for film creators, and explore the creative motivation of diaspora narrative; Then, from the three levels of materiality, culture and ethics, this paper discusses the diaspora narration in the image expression of the factory-themed films; Finally, with the help of Jung's personal unconsciousness theory and Jameson's nostalgic film criticism, the author explores the nostalgic attitude expressed by the “form compensation” of the living world of the factory-themed films.

## 2. How to Be Home: the Factory as “Life World”

Diaspora is derived from the Greek word diasperien, which originally specifically refers to the Jews who were scattered all over the world. After World War II, the denotation of diaspora has changed. It refers to the group driven by economic, political and colonial factors, forced or voluntarily to leave their own country, and still cherish the feeling of nostalgia for their hometown in a foreign country. The research field of vision has also expanded to overseas Chinese, black Americans and Armenians living in different parts of the world, and the types of diaspora have increased accordingly.” As a subject area and a critical research category, diaspora has become a theoretical tool in film studies, ethnic studies and cultural studies, and resonates in debates and criticisms of migration, identity, nationalism, transnationality and exile.” [1] In the contemporary era, dispersion refers to not only the geographical space movement of ethnic groups from their homes to their settlements, but also the situation and cultural integration of ethnic groups in their settlements. It also includes the types in which groups are forced to lose their homes under the impact of modern society, such as market mechanism, commodity economy and instrumental rationality, and thus have nostalgia for their spiritual homeland with common consciousness. The characteristics of common value and communicative rationality contained in it are in line with the characteristics of

“life world” explained by Habermas, such as following communicative rationality and value principle. Therefore, we can extend the concept of diaspora ness, and further explain the theory of diaspora ness based on the concept of life world.

Habermas developed the concept of life world discussed by Husserl and Shu Ci, and defined life world from two aspects in “Communicative Behavior Theory”: First, he regarded life world as an existing cultural background, which was helpful for communication subjects to conduct common communication behaviors, in which communication subjects could coordinate and understand each other and realize common values. From this definition, the living world is a “unique world” which is different from the objective world, the social world and the subjective world.[2]Secondly, he defined the life world as “self-understanding or unshakable belief repository”,[3]Communication subjects can gain a strong sense of self-identity and firm belief. Habermas believes that modern society is composed of life world and system, and the life world belongs to the cultural field, following the principles of communicative rationality and value. On the contrary, the system belongs to the political, economic and institutional fields, follows the principle of instrumental rationality, and thus puts forward the dual framework of “system-life world”.In primitive society where the social structure has not yet been clearly constructed, the system and the living world exist in one. With the development of history, people have an infinite demand for material reproduction, and the system is independent in the process of constantly corroding the living world. Especially when the life world is greatly influenced by the modern state and market mechanism, the dual framework of “system-life world” becomes more prominent. The free and equal communication behavior between the communication subjects is broken by the rapidly developing instrumental rationality, and the original normal life order is out of balance, resulting in a series of social problems.

From the perspective of the dual structure of “system-life world”, life world has the characteristics of spiritual and cultural reproduction, and the disappearance of life world leads to the imbalance of the dual structure. From this perspective, the disappearance of the factory in the 1990s brought workers a profound experience of this imbalance of order. According to Shi Jianguo's A Brief History of Northeast Industry for a Hundred Years, Northeast China can usually be divided into two different concepts: narrow sense and broad sense. In a narrow sense, Northeast China refers to Liaoning Province, Jilin Province and Heilongjiang Province, which are three common “three northeastern provinces”; Broadly speaking, Northeast China refers to the three northeastern provinces and the northeastern region of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region.[4]in this paper, the concept of division in a broad sense is adopted in the film production of the northeast area.Northeast China has a superior geographical position, rich in coal resources, metal mineral resources and forest resources. These natural resources provide the basic prerequisite for the development of northeast industry.Relying on the rich natural resources background, Northeast China has a long industrial history.As early as 1948, after the end of the Liaoshen campaign, under the guidance of the CPC Central Committee's policy of “let the Northeast work go one step ahead”, Northeast China took the lead in becoming the first truly complete strategic base with modern industrial foundation of the Communist Party of China, and it was the first to realize centralized and unified leadership and planned economy.In 1950, with the cooperation of China and the Soviet Union, 38 large-scale heavy-duty projects were launched in Northeast China.In the first Five-Year Plan period, the state invested heavily in Northeast China.Until the completion of the first five year plan in 1957, a complete heavy and chemical industrial system was basically established in Northeast China.

In the process of industrial development in Northeast China for more than 100 years, the mode of “enterprise running society” formed under the planned economic system has effectively ensured the normal operation of factories and enterprises, and promoted the strong dependence of employees on the plant area.The so-called enterprise running society is to bring the medical treatment, education, entertainment and life of workers into the category of enterprise welfare.A small society similar to independence has been formed within the enterprise, with all kinds of service facilities. In terms of educational resources, it has everything from kindergartens to primary and secondary schools for

children, and then to vocational training schools; In terms of living facilities, the factory area ensures the basic necessities of life and most of the entertainment needs of employees, such as canteens, shops, baths, clubs, cinemas, and some enterprises even have funeral homes. In this small society, employees have close contact with relatives, workers, neighbors, friends and other contacts, which truly realizes the full coverage of workers' life from "cradle" to "grave", which in turn makes employees have to rely on the factory for production and living activities. It needs to be pointed out that it is not only the individual workers who rely on enterprises to run the society. The phenomenon of children taking over the duties was quite common at that time, which also made the workers' families and the fate of enterprises further linked. In short, under the mode of enterprise running society, the factory is the life world of factory workers, and has a highly stable internal structure. In the closed and independent life world, employees, as the main body of communication, can carry out free and equal communication behavior under the common cultural background according to the communication rationality and value principle. As Jia Zhangke pointed out in the film "24 cities" by Song Weidong, the son of the factory, the factory is "an independent world that does not need to be connected with the place". Therefore, when the familiar old order is rashly broken by the foreign commodity economy and open ideas, the workers can only accept the new concept objectively, but it is difficult to accept the fact that their homes have disappeared from the subjective emotion, because what they have lost is not only the space of the factory, but also the life world in which they live.

The disappearance and impact of the life world has brought the remembrance and review of the normal life order. Under the wave of the times, the disappearance of the factory area means the disappearance of the workers' life world. As for the impact of the instrumental rationality and commodity economy brought by modern society, they inevitably have the psychology of bewilderment and nostalgia for their hometown. Inspired by this feeling, directors who are closely related to the life world and the factory area created the factory movies. For example, Zhang Dalei, the director of *August*, grew up in the Inner Mongolia Film Studio. He has witnessed the change process of film studio from prosperity to decline to disappearance; Zhang Meng, the director of *Steel Piano*, was born and grew up in Shenyang, a heavy industry base. As spectators, they witnessed the changes in the factory and the people's lives in the factory. Similar "industrial complex" and growth experience reappeared in the film. They became film studio (*August*), steel factory (*Steel Piano*), saccharin factory (*Young Babylon*), 420 flying aircraft factory (*24 Cities*). In the context of the state-owned enterprise restructuring, we can use the "everlasting days", "twenty-four cities" and "twenty-four cities" as examples. *August* and *Young Babylon* and other factory-themed films belong to the type of diaspora. Therefore, we can combine the extended diaspora theory and the life world to make a further analysis of the factory-themed films in terms of image expression.

### 3. Image Expression: Diaspora Narration in the Factory Space

Habermas believes that the life world, as a phenomenological world, is composed of three formal elements, namely, culture, society and individuality, instead of the systematic relationship between the whole and parts. Combining these three elements with the diaspora theory, we can think that the composition of life world has the characteristics of "material-cultural-ethical". Therefore, the diaspora narration of the life world reflected by the factory movies can be analyzed from three levels: material, cultural and ethical. Starting from these three levels, the creator returns to the life world in the form of images, and deeply expresses his nostalgic feelings.

First of all, from the material point of view, factory movies often reproduce the living world with visual symbols such as factory buildings, chimneys and bicycles, trying to create a "pseudo-past" space field. For example, the film *Steel Piano* shows the difficult living conditions of the bottom-level laid-off workers at the beginning. Chen Guilin is facing the crisis of divorce and losing her daughter. In this shot, the director uses a long lens and symmetrical composition to shoot from a low angle, showing Chen Guilin and his ex-wife Xiao Ju's struggle for the custody of her daughter Xiaoyuan in the foreground. They keep a restrained distance and look indifferent and alienated. In the back scene, the factory ruins are shown through towering chimneys, dilapidated factory

buildings, crumbling steel frames and gloomy sky (see Figure 1). With the development of the story, the standing chimney has been used as the back scene of Chen Guilin's struggle with his ex-wife for the custody of Xiaoyuan and the back scene of the funeral (see Figure 2). The elegiac couplet of "grieving for his mother" at the funeral indicates that the chimney will finally collapse, and it also symbolizes the exit of an era and the disappearance of the collective memory of workers. This kind of material reconstruction is the basis of returning to the "pseudo-past", which can briefly pull creators and audiences back from the unbalanced dual structure of "system-life world" to the life world that follows communicative rationality. Therefore, the materiality of diaspora narration is the basic element of creating a "pseudo-past" space field, which is reflected in the construction of visual symbols in the movies of the factory area.

Secondly, from the perspective of culture, British cultural theorist Raymond Williams once defined culture as "a special lifestyle of a group of people, a period or a group"[4]. The movies in the factory area reproduce the contemporary lifestyle of employees and their families in the factory space, which reflects the cultural nature of the factory space. Take "The Piano of Steel" as an example, the important influence of the former Soviet Union culture on factory life can be seen everywhere in the film. For example, the music played at the funeral by Chen Guilin's workers is the song "Three Cars" of the former Soviet Union; Compared with Russian lyrics, Shu Xian can skillfully sing Soviet songs; Wang Gong, who once studied in the former Soviet Union, has a unique temperament and is deeply admired by female factory workers. The movie "August" shows the daily life of the staff of Inner Mongolia Film Studio with the help of young Zhang Xiaolei. The film adopts the narrative method of "life flow" similar to Truffaut's film "Four Hundred Times". Director Zhang Dalei integrates his childhood memories into it, and the film has distinct authorship. Unlike the film "Old Things in the South of the City", which also narrates from the perspective of children, Eiko doesn't fully understand the operation rules of the adult world, while Zhang Xiaolei is no stranger to the adult world. In the juvenile's vision shown in the shallow-focus lens, the news of the restructuring of state-owned enterprises rings in the background sound of the broadcast, and there is only one sentence left in the "pain" of history: "Thirty years of service have been replaced with wool". Zhang Xiaolei graduated from elementary school in the summer of 1994, and his nunchakus always hung around his neck, which reflected the important influence of the popular Bruce Lee Kung Fu movies on the audience. And a group of children in Zhang Xiaolei can watch Peisi Chen's classic movies for free in the film factory by virtue of their unique advantages (see Figure 3); The music our parents listened to was Cui Jian's "Walk the Line"; Idle youths often hang out in cinemas and billiard halls; The factory held a huge tug-of-war competition. Zhang Xiaolei is at a critical growth stage in her life, which forms an intertextuality with the important turning point of the country and family. The growth of teenagers is restless, and the adult world is undergoing a difficult and silent transformation at the same time. In the trivial daily narration, the real hero of the film gradually emerges-Zhang Xiaolei's father, who is an editor laid off by the transformation of the joint-stock system in a film factory. When the life world is constantly eroded by the system, he has no choice but to give up his pursuit of art and self-worth and choose to go out to work as a field worker to make a living, which is the common choice of most workers. From this point of view, culture is a special lifestyle of a certain group in a specific period. By presenting the cultural contrast between the system and the life world, the film creators in the factory clearly express their disorientation of the system that overemphasizes material production and consumption, and also express their nostalgia for the life world that pursues subject communication and spiritual and cultural reproduction.

Finally, from the perspective of ethics, the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas regards ethics as "the concern for the human nature occasionally displayed in people." Beyond the diaspora cultural vision, the nostalgia complex of the film creators in the factory area and their experience of the changes of the times add an important ethical sense to the film. Seimi Zhang, director of Steel Piano, mentioned in an interview: "People in that era didn't have such impetuous relationships between people as they are now, and they didn't have too many material desires, but they were very calm. It's not calm now, and people don't know what to say, especially in old industrial areas like

Northeast China. “[5]Zhang Dalei, the director of *August*, felt the same way: “People in that era or in that era, as well as the relationships between people, were particularly simple and didn’t have so many purposes.” [6]He also mentioned in a recent interview: “My first thirteen years were wonderful. I was in the best 1990s, and like gold, I played a vital role in shaping my personality.” Based on this realization, the director expressed his deep concern for human nature in the film. In the film *Steel Piano*, the piano seems to determine the custody of Xiaoyuan. To this end, Chen Guilin went through several struggles, from pasting the piano with paper to stealing it. Finally, together with his workmate Qi Xin, he started the journey of making “steel piano” in the already dilapidated factory building. When the chubby daughter was bullied and got pregnant before she got married, the workers unanimously chose to grab the guy and go to the “battlefield” together. In the production process of “steel piano”, there is always a unique emotional fetter among workers, which is beyond the secular interest relationship and only related to the morality in their hearts. However, just as the chimney in the industrial age can’t escape the fate of being blown up after all, the film contains a heavy tragic core under the romantic and absurd comedy package, and the piano can’t keep the small yuan in the end. After the economic transformation in the 1990s, China society ushered in a period of rapid development. Whether it’s *The Piano of Steel*, *Babylonia*, *Forever and Forever*, or *August*, all of them show scenes of friends and relatives gathering happily and supporting each other in economy, life and emotion, vividly showing the close connection and sincere emotion among people. Therefore, ethics, as a concern for human nature, actually expresses the personal memory of film creators in the factory area and reflects their nostalgia for the common consciousness in the living world.

To sum up, through the image expression of movies in the factory area, the production and lifestyle of employees and their families in this life world of the factory area can reappear, and a long-buried historical memory can be revealed. The film in the factory area writes the fable of the disappearance of the homeland from three levels: material, cultural and ethical, and entrusts the creator’s nostalgia for the beautiful life world that has passed away in the modern society driven by instrumental rationality. Around the factory space as a living world, film creators write diaspora narratives with different styles through image carriers. Starting with Jung’s psychology and Frederick Jameson’s nostalgic film criticism, we can further explain the nostalgic attitude of the film creators in the factory towards the past life world.

#### **4. Nostalgia Complex: Factory-Themed Films as “Formal Compensation”**

In modern society, the lost life world has always been a collective memory that has been put on hold, and it exists in the personal unconsciousness of film creators in the factory area, forming a special complex. Looking at this complex with nostalgia theory, we can understand the diaspora narration of factory-themed films as the “formal compensation” of the creators for nostalgia complex.[7]American scholar Boim said, “When we are at home, we don’t need to talk about being at home.”[8]As the director Seimi Zhang said when commenting on the current Tiexi District in Shenyang, “The pace of construction is getting faster and faster, but buildings, real estate, etc. have all swallowed up the past. At that time, I felt that it was better to return to that era. “Because the dualistic framework of “system-life world” was broken by power and money, the old social norms were out of balance, and the creators lost their life world with a common consciousness, which resulted in confusion and nostalgia. “nostalgia comes from two Greek words, *nostos* (returning home) and *algia* (nostalgia). It is the yearning for a homeland that no longer exists or never existed.”In Jung’s psychology, personal unconsciousness is called “the warehouse of repressed psychological content”, which has an important characteristic, that is, groups of psychological content can be gathered into a cluster of psychological clusters, which Jung calls “complex”. Jung found that complex will not only become an obstacle in people’s adjustment mechanism, but also often become the source of inspiration and motivation. Therefore, nostalgia plays an intermediary role between creators’ collective memory and personal memory, and nostalgia complex becomes the inspiration source of creators. The film in the factory area is the creative carrier of nostalgia complex, which contains three levels of diaspora narratives: material, cultural and ethical, and

creators use this to connect the past, present and future. However, due to the irretrievability of time and the limitation of people, factory movies that try to restore the life world in memory are actually only a form of compensation, and they can never return to the real history.

Fredric Jameson's definition of nostalgic movies in *On Magic Realism in Film* (1986) is: "Generally speaking, nostalgic movies are in line with the trend of post-modernism, trying to generate images or imitations of the past in a real historical or class tradition weakening social situation, and create something similar to the pseudo-past as compensation and replacement of the past for consumption." [9] In the book *Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson holds a similar view. He believes that "(Nostalgia) is a form of compensation for the ever-weakening historical truth in our times." [10] The reason why we want to create the history of "compensation and substitution" is that the creators attempt to subvert the single and utilitarian value standards, escape from vulgar and impetuous popular culture, repair alienated interpersonal relationships, and then rebuild a fair and just social order, return to the living world with common consciousness, and reshape sincere and friendly social relations.

In order to reproduce the factory memory of formal compensation, the creator has adopted various methods in image. No matter the black-and-white image style adopted by the films *August* and *Young Babylon* as a whole, or the above-mentioned construction of material symbols such as factory, chimney and bicycle, all of them make the factory-themed films itself closer to a "pseudo-past" dream, and finally achieve the goal of returning to the living world, rediscovering the culture with obvious characteristics of the times and the ethics of condensing common consciousness. However, not all forms of compensation can achieve positive results. In the film *"Twenty-four Cities"*, simple non-professional actors and professional actors with excessive performance traces co-starred, and their performance styles were out of place, blurring the boundary between reality and performance, weakening the historical texture of the film itself. The distinctive performance traces of professional actors highlighted the characteristics of "pseudo-past", which made nostalgia only a superficial form of compensation, and could not touch the living world in memory.

To sum up, the creators try to reunite with their hometown in the factory movies, but not all factory movies can achieve the creative purpose of returning to the life world as they wish. For the creators, the factory-themed films can only be used as a kind of compensated image fugue and nostalgic imagination, and it can't be a real homecoming.

## 5. Conclusion

Taking the movies in China factory area since the new century as the research text, exploring the creative source of the movies in the factory area from the theoretical path of life world is helpful to understand the diaspora narrative of such movies in the unique time and space context, and further understand the nostalgia complex of the creators in the image expression. Faced with the highly expanded instrumental rationality in modern society, the extension of diaspora theory continues to extend. Apart from the movement of spatial geography such as immigration and transnational, the groups that are forced to leave their native land following the principles of communicative rationality and value and have nostalgic feelings have also entered the diaspora research field of vision. The communicative rationality and value principle are in line with Habermas's concept of life world. Therefore, based on the concept of life world and diaspora theory, the disappearance of factory area means the disappearance of life world for employees. Out of nostalgia for the living world, the movies in the factory area have made image expression from three levels: material, cultural and ethical. However, the pseudo-past constructed in the image creation is only a kind of compensatory return to the homeland, which can't really return to the living world that follows the communicative rationality.

Under the background of diaspora narration, film creators have met with the disappearing life world through artistic forms. However, the film in the factory area is always just a form of compensation in images, which helps the creators to escape from the modern society where consumerism prevails briefly, recall the simple and pure social life, and reflect on the social order of

spiritual and cultural reproduction.

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