

Reconstruction of Mythic Imagination, Modern Identity, and Cross-media Exploration

A Case Study of the Gods of Honour-Series Films of COLOROOM

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Abstract. With the release of Legend of Deification, COLOROOM Pictures Company has made further progress in the construction of the Mythic Universe. Two films, *NeZha: Birth of the Demon Child* and *Legend of Deification*, have subversively rewritten and reconstructed the mythic imagination in China, combining the strengthening self-concept and reflection on the social survival dilemma, which is in line with the current social context and audience expectations. The film pays attention to the realistic portrayal, touches the nerves of the times, and arouses the audience's intense recognition with the slogan "I'm the master of my own destiny". Their cross-media communication modes also make the two films a hit. However, the barriers and obstacles encountered in the communication are also worthy of reflection in the current domestic animated films.

Keywords: COLOROOM, Gods of Honour-Series, Mythic Imagination, Cross-media Communication, Mirror Stage.

1. Introduction

COLOROOM is a comprehensive film company under Enlight Media, which mainly creates two-dimensional and three-dimensional animations as well as introduces foreign animations. During its seven years of establishment, COLOROOM has successively released several original animated films and constructed the Mythic Universe in their films, with its works stirring up box office sensation and heated discussion in China. For example, the two-dimensional animation *Big Fish & Begonia* (2016) incorporates Chinese traditional Taoism and stimulates the potential of myth recreation. Besides, it draws Chinese unique architectural landscapes such as Nanjing Tulou in visual presentation, which becomes a milestone in the history of Chinese animated films. The three-dimensional animation *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* (2019, hereinafter referred to as *Nezha*) not only makes a breakthrough in technology but also innovates Nezha, a classic mythological character in text narrative. It takes Nezha's personal growth and awakening process as the narrative center, which coincides with the audience's search and recognition of self-awareness nowadays to drive the re-dissemination of *Nezha's* Intellectual Property (IP). Meanwhile, COLOROOM has also cooperated with well-known animation teams such as Studio Ghibli to introduce overseas high-quality animated films, such as *Your Name* (2016) and *Spirited Away* (2019), so as to promote the international exchange and dissemination of animated films. In addition, its industrial territory has expanded to derivative products, game development, and other fields, providing fertile ground for the reuse of animated characters. As one of the leaders of Chinese animated film production, COLOROOM takes the creation of mythic adaptation and reality integration as its backbone, which promotes the future development of the animated film industry.

As the most important part of the Mythic Universe constructed by the COLOROOM, the Gods of Honour Series integrates the advanced technology of the industry in narrative text, picture aesthetics, and media communication. At present, this series has released two films, *Nezha* and *Legend of Deification* (2020). The upcoming new film *Lend of Yang Jian* is also in tight production and preparation, with a preview released at the end of the film *Legend of Deification*, which further consolidates the popularity of this series of films. Gods of Honour-Series plays a vital role in the

animated film market for three crucial reasons why its creative ideas influence the animation production trend. Firstly, this series relying on China's rich mythic resources excavates the mythic motif to fit the national beliefs and aesthetic orientation of Chinese audiences. That's why this series of films can directly talk with animated films in other countries in spiritual connotations. Secondly, sheer misappropriation and remaking of mythic materials will only fall into a stereotype. This series subverts mythic characters and reflects on the plight of social survival, which realizes an emotional connection with the audience. Thirdly, the COLOROOM has created a preliminary Mythic Universe, and constantly leverages the construction and improvement of IP pools and cosmology through related films. "We have a huge system of Journey to the West, Gods of Honour, and a colossal mythic system in China." [1] The systematic concept of the universe will bring greater creative vitality in the future and also promote the benign reform of the whole animation. Therefore, films of the Gods of Honour Series are of high research value.

2. Reconstruction and Breakthrough of Mythic Imagination including Landscapes and Figures

2.1 Refreshing Audio-visual Reconstruction

"The influence of technology does not occur at the opinions and ideas, but to irresistibly change people's sensory ratios and perception patterns." [2] The innovation of this series lies in the innovative use of film sound to reach auditory resonance with the audience. Before the release of *Nezha*, animated films only paid attention to the proper Mandarin dubbing and timely sound effects when the audience have a higher aesthetic standard. Then *Legend of Deification* also ignored the auditory appreciation of the audience. And *Nezha* creatively reconstructed the sound in the film. For example, Taiyi, who should have been sage, is rewritten as a fat-headed man with an authentic Sichuan accent. The humorous and vivid Sichuan dialects, including "You bustard" (ni ge hun zhang wa'er), "You beat me" (ni da wo sa), and "psycho" (you bing suo) dispel the stereotype of mythic characters and makes Taiyi's image more postmodern with strong individuality and tradition disruption. The use of Sichuan dialects is bold but serious. In fact, the creator carefully studied the historical records of mythic stories and found that Taiyi's Dojo is located in Jinguang Cave, Ganyuan Mountain near Mianyang, Sichuan. "Film sound is not only the emotional resonance of creators, characters, and audiences' inner world cognition, but also the resonance, mutual interpretation, and interpretation of the 'landscape image' of the inner world for creators, films, and audiences." [3] The dialect familiar to the Chinese is enough to awaken the inner psychological cognition and spiritual memory of the Chinese audience, facilitating the acceptance of sound for films.

Nesting diversified and modern visual imagination into classic mythic texts also makes this series more spectacular and inclusive on the screen. *Nezha* brings *Map of Mountains and Rivers to the screen*, encoding the diverse cultural symbols from one-dimensional to three-dimensional visual presentation. In the *Map of Mountains of Rivers*, *Nezha* drifts around in lotus leaves for exploration. The cultural symbol of lotus leaves is equivalent to the roller coaster in modern amusement parks. The elements of different cultural semantics realize intercommunication and integration in the same picture space, constantly breaking and constructing the audience's mythic imagination. If *Nezha* defamiliarizes familiar landscapes, *Legend of Deification* places unfamiliar spaces in familiar contexts. Beihai Tavern, where Xiao Jiu entered, is a newly constructed space for the film. In order to sustain the audience's imagination, the film parodies the underground gangster gathering place in genre films and intentionally depicts the chilling environment where all kinds of ghosts in Beihai gather here, which constantly teases the audience's visual nerves. It is under the integration of brand-new sound and visual landscapes that the film interests the audience and becomes a hit adapted from myths.

2.2 Subversion and Reconstruction of Characters

As the soul of the story, a vivid character image often makes the audience remember for a moment. It's also the finishing touch that endows the character with strong vitality. Frank Thomas once said: "In addition to gags and special effects, there must be an entry point for the audience to really agree with the situation of the story. The best way is to introduce it through a character that audiences know and like." [4] This series also adopts the most familiar motifs of characters in Gods of Honour, with the stories of Nezha and Jiang Ziya as the film content. The creation of Nezha in film history basically follows its historical prototype to create a brave, resourceful, lively, and clever little hero. However, after numerous unsatisfactory versions, the character image design of Nezha was finally set as a sloppy image with gaping teeth, a pockmarked face, and dark circles under the eyes, which completely subverted its positive image in the past. Jiang Ziya's prototype is the resourceful old man. However, the film presents its taciturn and frustrated image in middle age and adds such typical characters as obsessive-compulsive disorder and cleanliness monster as "the table must be straightened and the cups must be put together", which plumps the characters. Moreover, Jiang Ziya's toughness hides its softness to animals, which caters to the current aesthetic tendency of "cuteness in sharp contrasts".

Similarly, the characters' personalities in the film also have great contrast. Nezha was irritable and willful under the action of magic pills, and the people in Chentangguan avoided him. Just when the audience was astounded by this sloppy Nezha, he changed into an adult with long limbs and anger to save the people from misery, which finds visual motivation for Nezha's rebellion and refusal to accept fate as well as pushes the film to a climax. By the same token, Jiang Ziya went to the heaven ladder to question the master. His coat was torn by the wind and lightning, and his white hair and lean figure made the characters go to the glory of divinity. In addition, Shen Gongbao of the two films also has different personality characteristics. In *Nezha*, he who is cunning and treacherous deliberately steals the magic pill bead to stumble the younger brother of Taiyi. His stuttering also makes the villain an unexpected comedy effect. However, Shen Gongbao in *Legend of Deification* is simple, honest, and kind. For the life mystery of Xiao Jiu, he resists the image of the powerful nine-tailed fox as a loyal friend. Such different character settings also make the audience have various emotional experiences. It can be said that the reconstructed image shows the initiative to participate in the narrative of the film text, and changes in time at the narrative turning point to meet the audience's innovative expectation of mythic imagination, which also makes mythic content more possible.

3. Hidden Pain of the Times and Audience's Recognition in the Mirror image

3.1 Mirror Setting of Magic Pill, Spirit beads, Self, and Others

In traditional texts, Nezha and Ao Bing are naturally hostile. However, in *Nezha*, they establish a mirror relationship of being enemies and friends who appreciate each other and seek self-identity together. The ixed spirit bead is divided into two and the Eight Diagrams of Yin and Yang are replaced in Nezha (magic pill) and Ao Bing (spirit bead). After twists and turns, they finally return to the essence of spirits in the treasury lotus of Taiyi. It can be said that they have a natural mirror image structure in their settings. In the character mechanism, the two are also deeply intertextual. Nezha was hated by the people in Chentangguan and unpopular when he was born. Ao Bing who hid deep in the sea and endured humiliation was given the inevitable mission of saving the dragon by the Dragon King. Both of them are struggling in the process of life experience, looking for self-identity. Therefore, their self-attributes make them become close friends when they meet, but the ethical missions such as family relationships will lay the foundation for the split of their concepts. "The construction of self is inseparable from itself, its counterpart, and others, while "others" come from the image of self in the mirror," [5] Lacan argues that the ego is fundamentally constructed through a series of imaginary identities. Nezha projected the imaginary results on the "others" like Ao Bing, so when he saw that Ao Bing was not as brave as he imagined, he would roar and despise him. Therefore, inspired by the "others", Nezha is determined to save the people in Chentangguan. "The functions in

which identity is realized, such as projection, inward projection, and merger, create an order for various forms of infant experience. It is this order that gradually forms an ego.”[6]Ao Bing also joined Nezha in the self-identity, and they merged into a mixed spirit and bead, moving from self to superego together.

3.2 Care from Screen, Dream to Reality, and Writing of Hidden Pain of the Times

This intertextual relationship not only stays in the choice of characters in movies but also establishes the corresponding mirror image relationship between the audience and the characters. “The movie screen, for human beings, replaces the broken mirror image and makes the subject re-enter the illusory and imaginative visual world.”[7]The screen is a natural mirror. By watching movies, we can enter the dream they created but you can also look back from dreams to reality. On the other hand, when it comes to self-life from the free “others” to the active “constructor” of self-consciousness, *Nezha* strips off the traditional ethical plot and adds narrative texts that fit the modern context, such as friendship with Ao Bing and parental affection, especially the depiction of Nezha's mother. Nezha's mother is no longer a traditional woman who loves her husband and godson but cuts off demons with her own career outside. However, they are too busy to care for Nezha, which fits the dilemma that women can't balance their careers and family. Although Nezha is a baby, the dark circles on his face cannot be ignored. In ancient times, children were not suitable for these appearance features. But in reality, dark circles have become the normal portrayal of young people. With the image of Nezha, the film examines and tortures the highly homogeneous and competitive systems such as 996 and involution, which can be also seen in *Legend of Deification*. The film *Legend of Deification* mainly takes the battle of cutting Zhou as the story background and nests realistic metaphors into a brand-new story system. In the film, many ghosts in Beihai squeezed their heads to escape into reincarnation or go to celestial life, but Jiang Ziya stayed in because of his obsession with the girl in the arms of the nine-tailed fox. He also declared war on theocracy in the tram problem of saving one person or the whole world. In reality, Jiang Ziya, a late bloomer, chose to deviate from the tradition in middle age. Even under the suppression of authoritarianism and secular discipline, Jiang Ziya was the self-projection of the real audience. Whether it is *Nezha* or *Legend of Deification*, the creators reshape the reality after many mirror images on the screen and show the symptoms of the times one by one, so as to awaken the audience to reflect on themselves and the present. “Freud, a master psychoanalyst, believes that the dream of human beings can be released in an impossible space by disguising and modifying the repressed consciousness and subconscious in daily life. Under the framework of dreams, the primitive unconsciousness hidden deep in the heart achieves a kind of unconscious cohesion or transposition through multiple decisive functions such as symbolic elements, plot replacement, content condensation, and purpose transfer.”[8]The dream created in the movie shows the problems and symptoms of real life. Animation projects the hidden pain of the times and the repressed unconsciousness onto the screen through the dream-making mechanism. Make the audience's inner self-desire reappear, including dark circles due to staying up late, bad children who are not understood, middle-aged men stubborn in the truth... The film touched the audience again and again with a concentrated realistic portrayal. “I'm the master of my own fate”, “A god, demon, and person can't be bullied, manipulated, or saved.” All emotions broke out intensively, which aroused strong recognition, resonance, and praise with great value and energy.

4. Exploration and Estrangement of Cross-media Communication

4.1 Exploration of Cross-media Communication of “Movie +”

Under the background of media integration, the exploration of the Mythic Universe should not only form an echo between film texts but also open up a communication bridge between different media. After the release of *Nezha*, the cumulative box office exceeded 5 billion[9] and the discussion on related topics on Weibo remained heated. The film's Weibo is publicized and promoted in Nezha's first person, which further provides an opportunity for role linkage. Before the release of *Legend of*

Deification, a trailer with Nezha started the initial linkage path of the characters in God of Honors Universe. The audience's enthusiasm for *Nezha* is still in sight and they have the same expectation for the second work of this series. In addition to the cooperation within the series, *Nezha* also cooperated with brands such as Robles, Honor of Kings, Unhappy King, and HOZON Automobile. *Legend of Deification* also cooperated with the game Online and the dairy product Mongmilk at the beginning of its release, breaking the barrier that animated images only appear in film and television media. It also actively appears on major mobile platforms and realizes the integration of movies and games. In the post-text era, it is obviously not strong enough to spread classic texts alone. The popularity of the film has driven the upsurge of secondary culture. The couple of Nezha and Ao Bing has become the center of fanfiction, mashup, and cartoon creations. As for the open ending about "how to reshape the flesh after Nezha and Ao Bing retain the spirits", there are 1,000 Nezha in the hearts of 1,000 people. The film text is rewritten to realize the interaction between fans and text creation. In addition, many merchants who aim at the fan economy and the IP popularity in Nezha and Jiang Ziya actively carry out peripheral hand-made sales to stimulate fans to buy. In a word, the box office victory of *Nezha* promoted the exploration of "Movie +" mode by COLOROOM. The appearance of *Legend of Deification* further consolidated the traffic heat of God of Honour Universe, which provided an example for domestic IP communication.

4.2 Cross-media Barriers and Obstacles

Even though God of Honour Universe has planted the rise of domestic animation in different media and audiences, there are still communication obstacles such as incompatibility and lack of follow-up in the publicity. There are three barriers. First, the cooperation between God of Honour Universe and the brand only strengthens the image of classic characters. For example, 999 medicine for flu launched a joint advertisement with Jiang Ziya. In the advertisement, Jiang Ziya's line "When we were young, we only had the road ahead as dream-chasing teenagers and we only wanted to prove ourselves. But the more you get, the more loneliness you have." In fact, "all one's life wants is warm wine and light soup, together with some relatives and friends". Jiang Ziya's monologue maximizes the output of the brand's concept of "companionship", but it is difficult to play a leading role in the narrative plot of the film even with the suspicion that the brand is to utilize its popularity. This will lead to the incompatibility of movies in cross-border communication. Secondly, COLOROOM has not launched the official derivative products of God of Honour roles, and most of the hand-made products in the market are designed and sold by merchants themselves. There is no standard legalization of buying and selling, and it is worth rethinking whether this involves infringement. Thirdly, the production circle of animated films is too long, which ensures the excellence of films on the one hand but drops the popularity of God of Honour Universe after a long period of the advertisement on the other hand. Michelle Saier speaks for the people of mobile phones in the *Thumb Generation*. When the audience is immersed in fragmented short videos, whether the God of Honour Universe which has not been updated for a long time can win the hearts of the audience is an urgent problem to be solved in the post-text period. In a word, only by examining and thinking more about the obstacles in communication can we further help the production and dissemination of God of Honour Universe.

5. Conclusion

According to the box office and scores of the two films, *Legend of Deification* failed to achieve the box office miracle like *Nezha*. A careful study of the reasons shows that the overall box office of the film industry has shrunk due to the epidemic. Besides, there is no fixed creative team because of the investment of COLOROOM in corresponding production companies, which also challenges whether the God of Honour Series can continue its overall style.

In any case, the Gods of Honour Series, as a key animated film with mythic themes in China, sets an example for domestic animated films in excavating mythic motifs, reconstructing the mythic image,

opening up media communication, etc., which leaves a unique way to the rise of domestic animations. Meanwhile, the obstacles in communication can not be ignored. 80% of the income of the American Marvel Universe comes from the redevelopment of character images. There is still a long journey to explore and breakthrough in the future, such as how to tell the animation stories and how to spread the mythical universe belonging to China.

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