

Subversion and Deconstruction: A Study of Nobuhiko Obayashi's Films from the Perspective of Carnival Theory

Huanyu He

HongKong Baptist University, HongKong, 999077, China

ABSTRACT

Nobuhiko Obayashi is a post-war Japanese director, who began working on films in the 1960s, and gained fame in the 1970s with his work on *The House*. In his work, he has created a carnivalesque narrative style. He insisted on using innovative modes of filming to break the traditional film language. The alternation of dream and reality, the collage-like illustrations and the overall style of childishness constitute the unique authorial style of Obayashi. This paper employs Bakhtin's "Carnival Theory" to analyze Nobuhiko Obayashi's films through three dimensions: subversive narrative style, playful bodily expressions, and ontological reflections on cinema. Also, it will explore how these elements collectively offer an innovative depiction of Japanese society and war through processes of subversion and deconstruction.

KEYWORDS

Nobuhiko obayashi; Postmodern; Carnival theory; Film ontology

1 Introduction

Nobuhiko Obayashi's work began in the 1960s, when Japan was experiencing a period of great innovation. During this period, Oshima Juku, Terayama Shuji, and even the New Wave of French Cinema outside of Japan had influenced Nobuhiko Obayashi's work. Simultaneously, Japan's defeat in the war and the promotion of militaristic values led the post-war generation into a crisis of faith. When traditional beliefs and authority collapsed, some filmmakers began to use their own works, characterized by a tone of irony and innovative cinematic language that broke the traditional rules of authority. They attempt to criticize reality and express their own thinking about social reality. In the "The Last Lecture", Nobuhiko Obayashi invented the term "Cinema Guernica". Picasso used an odd method to remind people of the painful recollections brought on by the conflict. However, if Picasso depicted Guernica during World War II in a realistic painting style, people may try to forget such tragic memories because that memory is too cruel. In the view of Nobuhiko Obayashi, adults think in a realistic way while children think in a heartfelt way. For this reason, he has some kind of animation element in almost all of his works. In addition, after Japan's golden age, Japanese cinema entered a period of decline in the seventies. In the seventies, with the rapid development of television, Japanese movie production began to decline while pornographic and peach films began to rise, which affecting the creative climate of the Japanese film industry. At the same time, Japanese film industries faced a state of collapse, under which a number of independent filmmakers stepped into the Japanese film field. One of them is Nobuhiko Obayashi. As a commercial director, he created his films with commercial characteristics and his own inspiring thoughts in the 1970s. As Obayashi said in *The Last Lecture*, "Philosophy behind movie making. Movies are not entertainment to be watched for fun and forgotten, but rather, they led us to think about how we see the world, and tell the audience in a profound way. After watching films, audience can comprehend the mysteries in the work for themselves^[1]." Thus, we can see that underneath the commercial appearance and carnivalesque audiovisual approach is the exploration of the film and the ideas it can convey. *The House* made Obayashi received more attention in this field in 1977. In this film, he used a personalized film language and various collage and fantasy elements to achieve commercial success and expressed his thoughts on war and nuclear explosion. The carnivalesque narrative techniques and absurd body portrayals show the post-modernist style of Obayashi's creation, and also express his own exploration of the ontology of film art.

Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival poetics theory originates from the Western classical "carnival" rituals. During such festivals, people engage in prayers while indulging their primal instincts through singing and dancing. These carnival rituals represent a subversion of religious and theocratic authority, emphasizing equality, freedom, and resistance against strict hierarchical orders. The resistance toward power and institutions is achieved through humorous and joyous festive forms. Central to carnival theory are the principles of popularity, subversiveness, and dialogism. Bakhtin advocated for free and open spiritual dialogues among the public to pursue cultural innovation and multiple possibilities. His theories of carnival and deconstruction share affinities with postmodernist ideas put forward by Jacques Derrida and others, as they reject the hierarchy and authority of mainstream classical art. Instead, Bakhtin champions the raw vitality of folk art, seeking to establish a pluralistic cultural and artistic dialogue. "People in the Middle Ages seemed to live two lives: one governed by strict hierarchical order, filled with fear and dogma; the other a carefree carnival-like existence in public squares, characterized by dual laughter, blasphemy and distortion of the sacred, and informal interactions with all beings^[2]."

Bakhtin aimed to deconstruct traditional power and discursive logic, constructing a carnivalesque cultural system where multiple forms and languages coexist—an endeavor that liberates greater creative potentials in art and literature. This paper thus employs Bakhtin's carnival theory to analyze how Nobuhiko Obayashi subverted the norms of Japanese contemporary film creation, as well as the director's reflection on war history and rebellion against mainstream patriarchal discourse.

2 Subversive narration: reconstructing history and war

In the interview, Nobuhiko Obayashi has mentioned that although he has not been a doctor, he can diagnose the ages and people's mental illnesses in his movies. Japanese society experienced the heavy psychological shadow brought by World War II. When facing the casualties and partings brought by the war, Nobuhiko Obayashi felt a deep sense of powerlessness. Also, Japan's defeat deepened the absurdity and grief of this war, and almost everyone living in this period felt powerless about their lives. Afterwards, Japan went through a heavy disaster brought by the earthquake. Due to the above reasons Nobuhiko Obayashi chose to use the animation style of filming techniques with a mixture of carnival and fantasy. This method can help him express his thoughts on the history of wars and disasters in an ecstatic and fantastical storytelling. By deconstructing the grand war and disaster narratives through collage images and grotesque depictions, we can see the duality of laughter and sadness brought by the carnival.

In Nobuhiko Obayashi's film, a distinctive narrative style characterized by its grotesque and carnivalesque elements typifies his creative approach. At the beginning of *The Girl Who Cut Time*, the beauty and romance of love is imagined through a child's narration, showing the inner feelings of an ignorant girl. When Yoshiyama Kazuko entered the laboratory, she broke a flask. Then Yoshiyama accidentally acquired a strange ability to sense earthquakes and fires at night, and dreams came one after another, making Yoshiyama unable to distinguish the reality and illusion. Obayashi used a fantastical narrative technique to show the pain of the disasters that Japan was facing in a seemingly grotesque plot. The pain caused by earthquakes and other disasters circulates in protagonists' minds and even the Japanese people, which just like the movie used a similarly cyclical and grotesque mode of narration to show. It is through the image of a beautiful young girl that the movie brought the audience to experience the destruction of beauty and the psychological trauma caused by the huge disaster. Bakhtin's carnival theory introduces the concepts of "decrowning" and "crowning"^[3], which he defines as embodying "the spirit of alternation and renewal, death and rebirth"^[4]. In the festive square, roles are inverted: kings are decrowned while jesters are crowned, breaking traditional social hierarchies and subverting cultural meanings. Within this fluidity, ordinary people become the protagonists and masters of the world, shifting social power and infusing the cultural system with mobility. In Obayashi's film, Yoshiyama Kazuko gains the ability to time-travel after accidentally breaking a laboratory vial. This grants her an unexpected "crowning" moment: she meets Kazuo, a botanist from the year 2660, and experiences an idealized love story. Notably, Kazuo's character dies in a car accident, yet Kazuko briefly acquires the power to communicate across life and death during her "crowning," allowing a tragic story to be rewritten through temporal reversal. However, as the narrative progresses, Kazuko undergoes "decrowning" when she discovers Kazuo's death has devastated his family. Her once-magical time-travel ability now reveals her powerlessness and grief, highlighting the transient nature of carnival-inspired empowerment. Nobuhiko Obayashi, through his films, portrays the beauty or regrets deep within people's hearts within a seemingly absurd and nonsensical narrative style. These stories, which are impossible to happen in reality, are used by Obayashi to construct a strange new world for us. "Rituals are not only a profound life experience, but also a way to observe and express the world"^[5]. *The House*, beneath its commercial and horror film exterior, is director's reflection on war. The film features numerous symbolic visual images. The cat in the movie can be seen as a symbol of the grievances of war history. In the old photos of the cat on the wall, we find that this cat is filled with the ghostly aura brought by war and nuclear explosions. When Melody is consumed by the piano, she does not show any signs of pain; on the contrary, she embraces the destruction of her limbs by the piano with a sense of ecstasy and madness. Obayashi used a carnival-like approach to depict everything in this haunted house, and the girl's death also carries a magical quality. From this, we can see the director subverting the mainstream narrative of traditional death and the painful trauma of reality. This bizarre film narrative shows us the irrationality of war and the disregard for life. The cruel and absurd reality is presented to us through the lens of carnival.

3 Absurd bodily play: postmodern deconstruction of corporeal imagery

Bakhtin's theory introduces the concept of "carnavalesque body." During the festival, people gather in the squares to dance and sing freely, indulging their bodies and highlighting their physical characteristics and various grotesque images. This signifies a declaration of a new worldview, where the enjoyment of pleasure and laughter replaces the control of

repressed and constrained bodies. The carnivalesque emphasizes the material and sensory enjoyment of the body. Therefore, Bakhtin proposed the liberation of the body to counter religious taboos and physical constraints, allowing the body to develop in an open direction.

Obayashi's films challenge traditional constructions of bodily imagery through innovative physical performances that deconstruct normative orders. In *Transfer Student*, Kazuo and Kazumi swap bodies after accidentally falling into water, implicitly raising questions about gender identity. When Kazumi—now in a male body—uses her feet to knead dough instead of her hands, the act violates societal expectations of female behavior, inviting ridicule and condemnation. Through this comedic carnivalesque body-swap narrative, Obayashi exposes how mainstream discourse constructs and polices gendered physical norms, using humor to subvert rigid societal frameworks. *Lonely Heart* similarly uses the deconstruction of traditional bodies to narrate its story. In this film, the former mother enters the body of the "lonely person" to experience the youthful years she never had. The mother, having regained her youthful body, explores the world filled with unknowns and possibilities. Besides, in the early experimental short film *An Eater*, we see the grotesque image of women being used as food due to material scarcity. In the short film, the grotesque reflection of a man's face in the disemboweled female body, with the man always keeping his mouth open waiting for food, serves as a means for the director to break the traditional portrayal of bodies in films through this carnival-like body deconstruction. Through the plot, the director can reveal the darkness of human nature amidst the absurdity. At the same time, the director chose the body image of women in a patriarchal society, which is beautiful yet carries a sense of vulnerability, to deconstruct the unequal constraints imposed on women by traditional Japanese society. Greedy men are devouring women's bodies, expressing the pathological reality of Japanese patriarchal society through this carnival-like narrative.

4 Technical carnival: reflections on film ontology

Beyond narrative subversion, Obayashi's films exhibit dialogism and polyphonic storytelling in line with Bakhtin's theories, characteristics that define their postmodern innovativeness. The term "polyphony^[6]," borrowed from music, describes in literature a composition of multiple independent voices and consciousnesses that coexist harmoniously yet retain their autonomy. In Obayashi's works, diverse narrative threads—each with distinct perspectives and values—converge around a central event, creating a free and equal dialogic world. This approach not only solidified his status as a visionary "auteur" in Japanese cinema but also expanded the medium's creative frontiers, embodying the carnivalesque spirit of challenging ontological boundaries and embracing pluralistic expression. In *Seven Weeks*, Dr. Ruoshan talks about Japanese war medicine in the hospital and exchanges food practices with Nurse Kamimutices, along with Grandpa telling his life experience in the bed, create a dialogic polyphonic structure through the interweaving of Guangnan's family's experiences in a non-linear narrative. In the polyphonic narrative, we are also exploring how people from different generations can understand and empathize with each other, thereby further delving into the absurdity of war and the regrets of life. Nobuhiko Obayashi breaks the single narrative thread in the film, exploring the possibility of a shared historical narrative through different eras and experiences. Here, we witness the potential of cinematic art to bring multiple temporal narratives to life. Obayashi uses the narrative characteristics of film itself to depict the impact of past events on the lives of Japanese people at different times.

In terms of visual expression, Nobuhiko Obayashi's films often employ extreme cinematic color schemes, imbuing his works with painterly qualities and dreamlike characteristics. For instance, in *Hanagatami*, Obayashi uses oil painting-like colors to depict the story of two young lovers during wartime. His use of cinematographic form often involves a collage-like, fragmented, uncertain style, interspersed with animation. This seemingly absurd and melancholic visual language reflects the characters' psychological states, allowing the audience to feel the absurdity of the era through these mixed and surreal images. In *Labyrinth of Cinema*, whether through animated depictions of the horrors of nuclear explosions or the traversal of three characters through the vast currents of history, Obayashi showcases his unique imagination. Through animation and time-traveling characters, he attempts to bring the audience closer to the past. Yet, to what extent history is truly real remains unknown—just as Obayashi once said: "No matter how advanced CG becomes, it can never recreate real war. I would rather use CG to create illusions, to reflect the greatest lie in the world—that we call for peace but have never achieved it^[7]." From this standpoint, the director adopts the perspective of an observer, entering the war scenes of the 20th century and encouraging the audience to think for themselves. By creating a sense of distance between the film and the viewer, he prompts reflection on war and peace. Obayashi's use of collage and animation is not meant to authentically recreate war scenes or explore factual history. Rather, he uses illusion and simulation to investigate the impact of war and how we today should revisit that history.

Conceptually, Obayashi believed that cinema is an extension of memory. Through film, audiences can witness things that are impossible in real life. His philosophy aligns closely with Jacques Derrida's notion of the ghosts of cinema. "If cinema is drawn to portray death, then the many characters who die in a film become ghosts for the rest of the movie^[8]." In *Seven Weeks*, the deceased father exists like a ghost throughout the narrative. Repeated shots of clocks signify the

halting of time—time stopped when the father died, yet he lingers on, neither alive nor dead, participating in the story as a spectral presence. This ghostly carnival reveals cinema's potential to express human memory. Simultaneously, film "deconstructs death, denying death as the end of life and challenging the central and dominant position death holds^[9]." The art of cinema breaks the linear nature of time and reconstructs our perception of temporality through its cross-temporal storytelling. In *House*, the aunt has waited alone for her deceased husband for many years and becomes a ghostly presence that haunts the house. Obayashi's belief that cinema can transcend life and death, becoming a visible or invisible ghost—an ongoing memory that lives on through the people still alive. In *Labyrinth of Cinema*, Obayashi tells the story of 20th-century Japanese wars through the journey of three characters who enter into the world of film. As spectators, viewers can follow these young people into the film and engage in dialogue with its characters. Film becomes a medium for producing memory and allows the audience to immerse themselves in the joys and sorrows of the characters. Toward the end of the film, the three time-travelers from the future learn of the impending atomic bombing of Hiroshima. They do everything in their power to minimize casualties, and the audience, like them, hopes that the people of Hiroshima can escape safely. Though history cannot be changed, film as a medium can influence the present, encouraging reflection on the cruelty of war. As Akira Kurosawa once told Obayashi: "Film cannot change history, but it can shape the future^[10]." Film can produce memory and act as a ladder toward the future. This belief enables Obayashi to deconstruct and subvert the traditional historical narrative in cinema, presenting Japan's wartime trauma from diverse perspectives.

5 Conclusion

Nobuhiko Obayashi, as a member of the post-war generation in Japan, has always infused his works with reflections on war and peace, as well as the rebellion and confusion of the post-war youth in Japan. This rebellion is evident in Obayashi's works. In his films, the bizarre narrative style, unconventional non-linear narrative structure, and animated and collage-like cinematography all contribute to the postmodernist characteristics of Hayao Miyazaki's films, which break conventions and traditional film rules with a carnival-like narrative. Moreover, Nobuhiko Obayashi believes that movies can connect the past and the future. In the director's works, the past and the future can exist in the same space-time, and the space-time of the film can continuously change to meet the emotional expression of the characters and the presentation of the story. Nobuhiko Obayashi relies on his unique imagination to allow characters separated by distance or time to engage in dialogue. This carnival-like conversation compensates for the regrets that cannot be fulfilled in real life. Finally, it is worth noting that in "The Last Lecture," Nobuhiko Obayashi mentioned that he never denies the development of new technology, but when the author succumbs to technology, he may become a clown. The techniques in Nobuhiko Obayashi's films always serve the purpose of expressing the content and the inner emotions of the characters. This allows his films to convey his own thoughts on what cinema is and what it should express, while simultaneously presenting childlike whimsy and absurd editing. Therefore, behind the carnival-like film style, we always see Nobuhiko Obayashi's contemplation on "humanity itself" and the expression of the absurdity of war and the regrets of life. He uses irrational revelry to resist the shackles of reason and order, and further focuses on the plight and life experiences of people submerged by grand wars and history.

About the Author

Huanyu He, female, Han nationality, Shenyang, Liaoning, master's degree, faculty of arts and social sciences, research direction: film and cultural studies.

References

- [1] Nobuhiko Obayashi, *The Last Lecture*[M]. Housewife's Friend Society, 2020.
- [2] Michail Michajlovič Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*[M]. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965:12-15.
- [3] Stevens, Adrian. *Carnival and Comedy: On Bakhtin's Misreading of Boccaccio*[J]. *Opticon* 1826, no.3, (2007).
- [4] Jin and Li Zhao Lin. *Rabelais and His World*[M]. Hebei Education Press: HeBei Education Press (Volume 6), 1998:14.
- [5] Jin and Li Zhao Lin. *Rabelais and His World*[M]. Hebei Education Press: HeBei Education Press (Volume 5), 1998:160.
- [6] Zhongwen Qian. *Problems of Bakhtin's Theory about Polyphony*[J]. *New Literary History* 28, no.4, (1997):779-90.
- [7] Qiuying Wang. *Hanagatami* [J]. *ONE*, 2016.
- [8] LiYang. *Derrida and the Philosophy of Ghost Films*[J]. *Film Art*, 03(2020):3-10.
- [9] Ranran Gong. *The Spectrality of Cinema*. China Film Art Research Center [D], MA thesis. 2023.
- [10] Mark Schilling. *Nobuhiko Obayashi: A Life Spent Working among Japan's Movie Greats*[J]. *The Japan Times*, 1970.