

From Bodily Simulation to Expansion: Embodied Metaphorical Construction in the Climactic Sections of Chinese Animated Films

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Under the paradigm of embodiment, this study proposes that the analysis of Chinese animated films can transcend objective investigation anchored in geopolitical context, which is the mainstay of international academic research in the field, instead focusing on the dynamic interaction of animated interface with audiences, that is, the vibrant embodied coupling within internal landscapes. Specifically, this study implements textual analysis on several typical cases, re-evaluating the mechanism of meaning construction in Chinese animated films based on the theories of “haptic visuality” and “conceptual metaphor”. This refers to that within Chinese animated films, animated techniques has the capacity to construct metaphors for abstract concepts by simulating and evoking the audience’s familiar bodily experiences. Moreover, Chinese animated films could also leverage the medium-specificity to extend embodied representations into non-human domains, thereby crafting intricate meanings through the infiltration and expansion of the audience’s sensory boundaries. It is crucial to underscore that these embodied metaphorical strategies are primarily deployed during impactful and thematically significant climactic moments, thus constituting essential elements within the overarching narrative. The authors posit that investigating these expressive mechanisms can contribute to the research diversity and supra-typological artistic practices within the realm of Chinese animated films.

Keywords: Chinese Animated Films; Embodiment; Metaphor; Haptic Visuality; Conceptual Metaphor; Perceptual Expansion

Introduction

Over the recent years, scholarly investigation into Chinese animated films at the international level has primarily centred on objectively scrutinizing them as the geopolitical representation, yet there has been a notable absence of embodied explorations into the medium technologies and potentials. In concrete terms, from the internationally acclaimed “Chinese School of Animation” 1 in the latter half of the previous century to the present era marked by a surge in animated film creation since 2015, characterized by its adoption of advanced technologies and adherence to international standards, scholarly examination of Chinese animated films has primarily consist of the cultural and political discourse construction (Bobrowska, 2023; Chen & Lau, 2021; Du, 2021; Guan & Hu, 2020; Li, 2024) and stylized visual representation (Wang & Whyke, 2024; Chen, 2017; Macdonald, 2015; Sun & Cao, 2023), often approached from a nationalistic standpoint, resulting in an overarching trend towards “de-bodying.”

Meanwhile, within the field of animation studies, employing embodiment theory to examine and reflect on how animated texts originate from vivid bodily sensations to produce metaphors has indeed become a legitimate research paradigm crossing disciplines such as film studies, cognitive semantics, and neuroscience, and this perspective aligns with the advocated “perceptual paradigm” in contemporary Chinese film studies. For instance, drawing from film phenomenology with “haptic visuality” theory as its core, animation can manipulate materiality to awaken in the viewer an integrated sensory experience initiated by the sense of tactility and then metaphorically expanding it into the realm of abstraction (Budach & Sharoyan, 2020; Hattler, 2021; Husbands, 2018).

Meanwhile, along the trajectory of film embodied cognition research rooted in “conceptual metaphor” theory which is one of the important claims of cognitive semantics, animation can actualize metaphors by constructing image schema (recurring sensory patterns or structures) (Forceville, 2017; Forceville & Paling, 2021) or multimodal sensory images (Bissonnette, 2019; Chow, 2021; Voci, 2023), and some related research in neurobiology supports the research of this field, mirror neurons within the human brain, alongside embodied simulation (ES) mechanisms, enable the establishment of correlations between viewers’ observational behaviors and their embodied coupling with animated interface (Coëgnarts & Kravanja, 2012; Gallese & Guerra, 2012). This research field emphasizes the resonance and integration of visual media with multisensory experiences, striving to explore diverse embodied pathways’ positive roles within the sense-making mechanisms of cinema.

This corresponds to the contemporary emphasis on the “perceptual paradigm” in the creation and reception of Chinese cinema, echoing (Annett, 2024) assertion in “Aesthetic Perception and Perceptual Cinema: Rethinking the Essence of ‘Perception’ in the Technological Era,” wherein he argues that we utilize our entire corporeal presence to experience films, manifesting not as confined to passive observation but as a richer, more immersive audience perception flowing throughout the entire cinematic space, and the return to perception represents the rightful stance for cinema in the technological age. Nonetheless, scholarly inquiry into Chinese animated films has yet to fully embrace the paradigm of embodiment. In addressing the previously mentioned “absence of body,” the authors scrutinize numerous renowned Chinese animated films and observe that they frequently construct metaphors by evoking sensory experiences during pivotal scenes. Arguably, the embodiment meaning-making mechanism has emerged as a pivotal element driving narrative development in Chinese animated films. Expanding on this premise, the study dedicates to implement an examination of the pathways and patterns of embodied metaphorical construction within Chinese animated films.

As previously stated, contemporary academic research on film embodiment adopts two primary approaches: the phenomenological perspective revolving around “haptic visibility” theory and the film embodiment cognition perspective grounded in “conceptual metaphor” theory. These approaches essentially constitute frameworks for elucidating the animated embodiment (Bissonnette, 2019). Drawing upon the relevant theories from these two approaches, this study embarks on an examination of the textual semantics of domestic animated films. Its objective is to elucidate how films utilize specific frameworks to construct multimodal bodily experiential representations and articulate abstract concepts and assertions.

Concurrently, by rooting on the specific characteristics of animated film genres and integrating the latest research findings in the field, this paper delves into the mechanisms of perceptual expansion aimed at audiences in Chinese animated films, i.e., investigates whether, beyond simulating conventional bodily experiences, Chinese animated films can also offer audiences alternative perceptual activities that transcend conventional ones, thus achieving rhetorical expressions. In summary, this research centers on domestic animated films, utilizing purposive sampling to focus on several typical cases (see Table 1), and aims to provide comprehensive assessments of the conceptualization and techniques of embodiment expression in Chinese animated films through textual analysis.

Table 1

Representative Scenes Illustrating Embodied Metaphor Strategies in Chinese
Animated Films

Release Date	Director	Title	Selected Scenes	Scene Description
1964	Wan Laiming & Tang Cheng	The Monkey King	1: 50: 38 -1: 51: 50	Sun Wukong was thrown into the alchemy furnace by Taishang Laojun and ultimately, unable to endure the humiliation, he stormed into the heavenly palace, defeating the celestial soldiers and causing the Jade Emperor and others to flee in panic.
1985	Te Wei, Yan Dingxian & Lin Wenxiao	The Monkey King Conquers the Demon	09: 05-11: 25	In order to deceive Tang Sanzang and his companions, Baigujiing transformed herself into a charming young maiden in the water mirror.
2015	Tian Xiaopeng	Monkey King : Hero Is Back	1: 17: 00 -1: 19: 00	At the end of the film, the Monkey King transformed and battled Chaos.
2018	Liu Jian	Have a Nice Day		The overall visual presentation of the film.
2019	Jiao Zi	Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child	1: 05: 37 -1: 06: 40	Ao Bing, clad in the Armor of a Thousand Dragons, was entrusted with a significant task by the Dragon Clan.
2019	Jiao Zi	Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child	1: 32: 30 -1: 34: 59	Nezha and Ao Bing engage in a decisive battle at Qiantang Pass.
2021	Sun Haipeng	I Am What I Am	1: 30: 25 -1: 36: 30	The match enters a deadlock stage, with Ajuan challenging by performing lion dance atop the towering pillar.
2022	Zhao Ji	New Gods: Yang Jian	1: 37: 10 -1: 45: 56	Yang Jian, Chen Xiang, and Wan Luo are thrown into the Taiji diagram.
2023	Tian Xiaopeng	Deep Sea	58:20-1:00:25	

This study argues that the exploration of embodiment in Chinese animated films holds both research and practical significance. Firstly, the embodied textual interpretation paradigm enables a re-evaluation and diversification of content production, creative concepts, and viewing methods, thereby opening up a new path for the study of Chinese animated films. Additionally, while Chinese animated film production has developed a conscious awareness of typification, it has also demonstrated a mixture and fusion of types, leading to an exploration of supra-typological artistic practices, and ushering in a fresh attempting of animation media representation and aesthetic concepts. Summarizing the embodied representational techniques in Chinese animated films contributes to the discovery of richer representational potentials and the identification of iterative technological patterns, supplementing clues and contexts for ongoing supra-typological practices.

Moreover, Chinese domestic animations lack effective promotion on a global scale (Lent & Ying, 2013). Analysing and exploring the embodiment of bodily experiences in Chinese animations, and subsequently summarizing an intrinsic spatiotemporal interpretative paradigm that assimilates, controls, and expands the audience's entire bodily sensations, can contribute to eliciting a deep resonance with the audience on thematic levels and promoting the dissemination of Chinese animated content globally. Prior to engaging in detailed textual analysis, it is imperative to revisit the emergence of postmodern embodied thought and the sensory shift in the realm of film studies. In this context, film, conceptualized as a "lived body," serves as the cornerstone for the formation of its embodied significance, acting as a mediator between the creator, the artwork, and the audience.

The Embodied Meaning Construction and the Corporeality of Film

The embodied construction of meaning arises not only from the body's interaction with the physical world but also with films (Sobchack, 2004). Merleau-Ponty emphasizes in his "phenomenology of perception" (Merleau-Ponty et al., 2013) that the body serves as our general medium for experiencing the world; essentially, he argues that meaning is conferred upon the flesh as individuals undergo carnal sensations, with meaning revealed through the interaction of human experience. The concept of embodiment, rooted in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy (Spiegelberg, 2013), recognizes the subjectivity of the body in the mind-body relationship (Bergen, 2019; Smith, 2017) and also proposes a form of knowledge based on somatosensory phenomena (Longo et al., 2008). Embodied knowledge derives from the body's self-sourced impulses, while also involving simulations of others' sensory, motor, or affective states (Ostarek & Huettig, 2019). The audience can acquire both aspects in films, as Sobchack (1992) states that when watching a film, one can perceive changes in space while also seeing moving objects; film is both the subject and the object of experience, actively participating in perception and expression. In summary, moving imagery serves as a site for triggering embodied interaction and transmitting embodied knowledge.

It is necessary to elucidate that the realization of embodied meaning in film primarily relies on its capacity to facilitate two crucial endeavours: effective embodiment of description and embodied reception, thus establishing the "coupling of experience" between creators and audiences. Film is conceptualized as a "living body" to explain this interaction. According to Barker (2009), the film body is a concrete but distinctly cinematic living object, different from the bodies of viewers or filmmakers, but instead interacts with both, thereby manifesting its intentions in the

world. This can be understood as follows: through specialized calibration, filmmakers craft an idealized perceptual landscape accessible for interpretation. Concurrently, this technologically mediated cinematic interface can guide and mobilize various movements, emotions, and sensory simulations and interactions within the audience which permeate from the ocular, auditory, and even dermal realms into the musculature, penetrating deeper into the visceral domain, ultimately culminating in conveying profound insight and meaning. Exploration of this phenomenon is not limited to qualitative analysis by theorists or subjective experiences of audiences.

A substantial body of research has focused on the neurobiological underpinnings of achieving this simulated embodied experience: embodied simulation (ES) is recognized as a fundamental functional mechanism of the human brain; Through this mechanism, the actions, emotions, and sensations of others are mapped onto the corresponding neural systems of the observer; This intervention of cognitive neuroscience serves as a valid approach to corroborate and refine the pertinent insights of film cognitive research and film phenomenology (Gallese & Guerra, 2012). Consequently, it can be inferred that film has the inherent capability to mediate the world vividly, enabling creators and audiences to perceive the same world through its embodied perception and, based on this foundation, construct and acquire meaning. Expanding on the aforementioned, this study, grounded in the notion of film embodiment as an “intermediary” entity, endeavours to pursue three avenues for conducting textual analysis on chosen representative segments from well-known Chinese animated films, with the objective of discerning and comprehending their mechanisms of embodied meaning.

Meaning Construction Based on Haptic Visuality

The origination of “haptic visuality” theory can be traced back to the realm of film phenomenology and this theory highlights the tactile functionality of vision and its resultant embodiment effect. In the latter half of the 20th century, with the waning influence of structuralism and post-structuralism, academia transitioned into a heterogeneous epoch characterized by the coexistence of diverse consciousness, including postmodernism. Throughout this period, film phenomenology increasingly underscored embodied experiences, with the “haptic visuality” theory as the most representative achievement among film phenomenologists influenced by Merleau-Ponty. Laura Marks delineates “haptic visuality” as follows: sight becomes tactile, enabling us to palpate a film with our eyes, where the film’s surface serves as a metaphor. Essentially, the film communicates meaning through the interpretation of materiality and the interplay between the viewer and the image’s texture

(Marks & Polan, 2020). Moreover, “haptic visuality” accentuates the multidimensional sensory linkage effect. As posited by Marks and Polan (2020), the tactile dimension of vision traverses from the surface to the depths of the audiences’ body, activating the sensory experience on the surface, internally, and everywhere in between.

Rooted in this theory, within the realm of Chinese animated filmmaking, interpreting materiality provides a distinctive avenue for cinematic representation, initiating the generation of meaning from the integrated perception, in another word, this mode of expression challenges the paradigm of visual centrism, unlocking the films’ rich potential. In the animated film *Deep Sea*, the creator metaphorically expresses the protagonist’s depression as the pursuit and entanglement of “Despair Ghost”. In concrete terms, when Shen Xiu is in depression, “Despair Ghost” breeds out of the corners (Figure 1a) and surges with countless tentacles, resembling the menacing spread of thick, viscous blood pursuing the unhappy girl (Figure 1b). This vividly portrays the life state and psychological feelings of depression sufferers, who are ensnared in an inescapable abyss, devoid of refuge and the ability to breathe (Figure 1c). This representation mechanism can be understood that the particle ink structure in the imagery construct the dense and viscous materiality and as viewers gaze upon these ever-changing ink effects, they receive a corresponding tactile experience. Meanwhile, this sensory coupling delves deep into the marrow of the audiences’ inter-landscape, fostering conceptualized cognition. Overall, the director employs the “haptic visuality” mechanism to embody the abstract concept, leading the audience from bodily sensations to the torn inner world of depression sufferers.



(a) The “Despair Ghost” sneaks out of the corner



(b) Sticky “Despair Ghost” spreads out to chase the girl



(c) The girl is wrapped up by “Despair Ghost”, unable to move or breathe.

Figure 1: from *Deep Sea*. © Tian Xiaopeng, 2023. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgqUdDrJu6Q> (accessed 7 April 2024).

Similarly, in the animated film *New Gods: Yang Jian*, this metaphorical mechanism is also employed in the scene where Yang Jian is thrown into the Taiji diagram (Figure 2a). As the Taiji diagram is a supreme treasure capable of transforming all time and space into primordial chaos, the imagery within the diagram is depicted in the form of ink spreading, with abundant smoke and dissipating particles along the edges of the characters (Figure 2b, 2c). This dispersed and reunited ink texture allows the audience to retrace the characters and scenes in a tactile sensory manner, that is, the audience seems to be able to feel the pain generated by the friction on the surface of the body. While the ethereal and unrestrained material operation of ink, triggered by “haptic visuality”, induces a deeper somatic engagement. Specifically, the subtle dialogue between the audiences’ body and ink imagery embodies the latent connotation behind the images, not only demonstrating the dissolving

function of Taiji diagram vividly, but also metaphorically constructs the spiritual world of the protagonist who endeavours to maintaining selfhood amidst the chaos of deceit and the erosion of power.



(a) Yang Jian is thrown into the Taiji diagram



(b) Taiji diagram's corrosive function makes him feel pain



(c) The hands are slowly eroding

Figure 2: from *New Gods: Yang Jian*. © Zhao Ji, 2022. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w4HXfajviO4> (accessed 7 April 2024).

If the representation of tactile sensations in the last two films focuses on the fluid materiality, the animated movie *Have a Good Day* utilizes concise lines and sombre yet discordant colours to redraw and fill the real imagery, accompanied by numerous fixed shots and still frames, creating

a sense of congealment and sluggishness, that is, the reality's texture is reconstituted into a more empathetic style through the overlay of animation techniques (Figure 3). This can be interpreted as a "reinvention of materiality," as Bruno (2014) argues that in our virtual age, materiality is not a question of materials but rather pertains to the substance of material relations, and there is the potential for a reinvention of materiality in our time. The rhetorical technique, imbued with the archaeological significance of the medium, plunges the audience from the visual tactile level to the depths of their bodies into the lime-like, sluggish, and chilling tone, aptly accentuating and metaphorizing the desolation and absurdity of remote towns and the underprivileged masses, which constructs the underpinnings of the entire film's narrative.



(a) Bathroom sign in the crevice of the building



(b) Panoramic view of the town



(c) Street-level shops.

Figure 3: from *Have a Good Day*. © Liu Jian, 2018. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SUZpTK3qqx8> (accessed 7 April 2024).

In summary, in the field of film phenomenology, the theory of “haptic visuality” anchors the embodied metaphor mechanism of meaning production through the blending of tactile sensation and vision on the screen, while in Chinese animated films, this mechanism not only assists in conveying profound themes but also forms a stylistic feature with strong artistic expression. Next, this research shift our focus from phenomenology to the field of embodied cognition in film, where there, influenced by cognitive semantics, has proposed a series of more integrated experiential representation structures and metaphor embedding pathways.

Conceptual Metaphor Based On Physical Experience

In the field of cognitive semantics, proponents of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) claim that understanding abstract phenomena requires linking them to embodied experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Specifically, much of our knowledge is not static, propositional, or sentence-based but is based on various patterns of perceptual interactions, bodily movements, and interactions with objects, constituting them (Lakoff, 1990). Applying the insights of this theory to audio-visual media and analysing the potential for meaning-making through embodied perspectives on moving images is an increasingly growing trend in cognitive film studies. First and foremost, grounded in the “Conceptual Metaphor Theory,” film is recognized as capable of metaphorical construction through the representation of “image schemas” (Coëgnarts & Kravanja, 2012). In cognitive semantics, “image schemas” refer to dynamic patterns that repeatedly emerge in our physical movements and perceptual interactions, providing coherence and structure to our experiences (Johnson, 1987), in other words, it can be understood as the inclusive and generalized gestalt of body experience.

Fahlenbrach (2016) further notes that image schemas have their own logic and can be applied to the domain of abstract concepts.

Several image schemas frequently occur in people's everyday thinking, reasoning, and imagination, such as CONTAINER, BALANCE, SOURCE-PATH-GOAL, PATH, CYCLE, ATTRACTION, CENTER/PERIPHERY, and LINK (Gibbs Jr & Colston, 1995). The existence of image schemas is not only based on the linguistic dimension but also manifested in the non-linguistic, explicit image level. Filmmakers can leverage these embodied templates to convey complex meanings, and the thematic essence of many domestic animated films is revealed along this path. In the climactic ending of the animated film *The Monkey King*, Sun Wukong, after being placed into the alchemy furnace by Taishang Laojun and enduring humiliation, storms into heaven. This sequence employs image schemas to construct the film's central theme. Sun Wukong rides the Golden Hoop and ascends to the entrance of heaven, where he disperses the guards on the bridge with a single blow (Figure 4a). He then swiftly ascends further to the gates of the Lingxiao Palace, driving away the celestial soldiers guarding it (Figure 4b), and finally enters the main hall (Figure 4c) fiercely splitting the plaque of the Lingxiao Palace in half (Figure 4f).

In this segment, Sun Wukong's spatial position, actions, and emotional changes are structurally represented through the "source-path-goal" image schema. His self-propulsion towards the goal and purposeful activities are mapped onto the viewers' bodies, serving as the source domain of conceptualized metaphors. The film's thematic essence is embodied in the protagonist's strike against authority, escalating from the lower to the upper levels, from the periphery to the core, with increasingly intensified resistance. Simultaneously, within the main hall, the deities panic and flee, while Erlang Shen attempts to suppress Sun Wukong with the Pagoda (Figure 4d). The tower, symbolizing political authority, seeks to subdue Sun Wukong from above but is shattered by him (Figure 4e). Here, the "verticality" image schema metaphorically signifies the abstract concept of "control being high, submission to control being low," that is, the film conveys the political notion of overthrowing feudal authoritarian rule through the embodied representation of physical spatial experiences.



(a) Sun Wukong repels the celestial soldiers guarding the bridge

(b) Sun Wukong disperses the celestial soldiers at the entrance of the heavenly palace



(c) Sun Wukong arrives in the heavenly palace facing the Jade Emperor



(d) Marshal Li uses his tower to suppress Sun Wukong



(e) Sun Wukong breaks free from the tower



(f) Sun Wukong ultimately shatters the plaque of the heavenly palace

Figure 4: from *The Monkey King*. © Wan Laiming & Tang Cheng, 1964. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hu0XosgxCyU> (accessed 7 April 2024).

In addition, the confrontation scene between Nezha and Ao Bing in *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* also prominently utilizes the “verticality” and “container” image schemas to metaphorically depict Nezha’s struggle against fate and his love and redemption for his dear friend. When the Dragon Clan’s conspiracy is exposed, Ao Bing attempts to freeze Qiantang Pass. In order to save the people, Nezha transforms himself and lifts up the massive ice layer. In this scene, Nezha’s back is tightly pressed against the ice and his muscles tense as he battles the weight of the ice (Figure 5a). He even manifests multiple arms to lift the ice upward (Figure 5b). The physical spatial opposition between Nezha and the ice layer, along with the character’s expressive movements, allows the audience to vividly perceive the abstract spiritual concept of “my fate is determined by myself, not by heaven” within the context of anti-gravity bodily coupling. Simultaneously, the energy released by Nezha beneath the ice forms a massive, lotus-like flame, seemingly intending to burn away all injustices and prejudices in the world. The bursting flames, like gentle hands, slowly unfold and securely envelop the frozen heart of his dear friend (Figure 5c). This can be understood as an expression of the “container” image schema, where the mode is represented by attributes of the internal, boundary, and external aspects. The physical experience of spatial containment and contraction helps the audience understand Nezha’s internal portrayal of acceptance and redemption in the face of genuine friendship.



(a) Nezha's back is tightly pressed against the ice and his muscles tense as he battles the weight of the ice



(b) Nezha manifests multiple arms to lift the ice upward



(a) The energy released by Nezha beneath the ice forms a massive, lotus-like flame.

Figure 5: From *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*. © Jiao Zi, 2019. Available at: https://www.yidio.com/movie/nezha/216795/watch/1516597366?link_order=0&source_order=1&total_sources=4&site_category=HDFlix.com (accessed 7 April 2024).

In the field of embodied cognition research in film, the “Conceptual Metaphor” theory promises the effectiveness of multimodal embodied sense-making mechanisms. In addition to image schemas with integrated experiential structures, sensory imagery can also serve as standalone

elements to generate meaning and evoke empathy in films. Specifically, the representation of expressive movements often serves as a source of metaphorical meaning in films (Kappelhoff & Müller, 2011). For example, in the animated film *I Am What I Am*, the scene where Ajuan challenges the lion dance on the towering pillar showcases the character's lion dance movements filled with boiling passion and a sense of endeavour (Figure 6). This portrayal elevates the Southern-style lion dance beyond the visual aesthetic realm of folk performances, transforming it into a spiritual symbol driven by bodily experiences, helping rural youth overcome fear, reshape themselves, and awaken self-reliance. As the audience watches, they undergo neural mapping and coupling with these expressive actions, gradually achieving a deep resonance with the characters' psychology and emotions.



(a) Ajuan gets ready to challenge the lion dance on the towering pillar



(b) Their lion dance movements are filled with boiling passion and a sense of endeavour



(c) Eventually the challenge is successful.

Figure 6: from *I Am What I Am*. © Sun Haipeng, 2021. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TlihavxJlmo> (accessed 7 April 2024).

The embodiment mechanism in Chinese animated films mentioned above works by eliciting audience's neural memory through the portrayal of movement, emotion, and sensation, in other words, it achieves empathetic resonance by simulating and awakening familiar human bodily experiences, ultimately conveying reflexive deeper meanings. This bears some degree of similarity to live-action imagery, however, the embodiment representation mechanism in animation media possesses distinctiveness compared to live-action imagery. This pertains to the forefront of animation embodiment research: animation media has the ability to expand human sensory boundaries beyond the live-action media (Bissonnette, 2019). It not only simulates and awakens but also disrupts our perceptual expectations.

Rhetorical Expression Based On Perceptual Expansion

In his work *Affect and Embodied Meaning in Animation*, Bissonnette (2019) integrates insights from the humanities and modern neuroscience, pioneering the expansion of embodied expression research to the realm of “non-human” and “semi-robotic” characters in animation media. He explains the non-human nature of sensory experiences, highlighting how certain embodied interactions between the audience and animated characters can lead to the reconfiguration of neural, sensory-motor, and emotional processes. This process prompts us to reassess our understanding of sensory boundaries and human limits. In addition, Bissonnette also provides a detailed analysis of the pathways related to this embodied sensory expansion and meaning-making, such as the post-human nature of perception in cyberpunk animation and the rhetorical possibilities offered by metamorphosis of characters. Such embodied rhetorical expressions within the narrative framework of “non-human” and “post-human” also frequently appear in the highlight moments of domestic animated film texts.

For instance, in the climax scene at the end of *Monkey King: Hero is Back*, the burning armor pieces attach themselves to the surface of the Monkey King's body, piecing together to form a complete set (Figure 7a). As his cape unfurls in the wind (Figure 7b), he slowly retrieves weapons from his ear, long sealed away yet still radiating with golden light (Figure 7c). This is not just a protagonist's cross-dressing before battle to showcase their identity; it should also be recognized as a type of bodily metamorphosis that can engage the audience in embodied interaction. The energy lost by the Monkey King in the past re-emerges on the surface of his body as symbolic components, prompting the audience to experience a thrilling sensation of transform coupling and a feeling of transcending humanity as they watch. It's as if the spectators become the character - growing impenetrable skin, powerful wings soaring through the air, and unleashing earth-shaking energy from within, allowing them to profoundly understand the emotional and mental state of going through much suffering, breaking free from constraints, and rediscovering their original intentions.



(a) The burning armor pieces attach themselves to the surface of the Monkey King's body, piecing together to form a complete set



(b) His cape unfurls in the wind



(b) He slowly retrieves weapons from his ear.

Figure 7: from *Monkey King: Hero is Back*. © Tian Xiaopeng, 2015. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ag2qt3Zs4Fs> (accessed 7 April 2024).

In *Nezha : Birth of the Demon Child*, the scene where Ao Bing wears the armour of ten thousand dragons presents a similar rhetorical structure. The Dragon King utilizes the toughest dragon scales from all the dragons to create the armour for Ao Bing (Figure 8a). Each scale assembles on Ao Bing's body surface like flying feathers, weaving into a robust armor that melds with his bones and blood (Figure 8b). As the audience follows the depiction in the visuals, they experience the sudden tightening and invincible pressure imposed on the skin's surface (Figure 8c) coupling with Ao Bing and can effortlessly acquire the metaphors behind the experience. In other words, through this embodied expressions constructed from metamorphosis of the body's surface, they cognitively recognize that the armour of ten thousand dragons is not only a defensive weapon but also a symbol of Ao Bing bearing the heavy burden of his family's legacy, representing his involuntary fate.



(a) The Dragon King led the dragon clan to pluck the hardest scales;



(b) All the scales flew towards Ao Bing



(c) The dragon scales transformed into the Dragon Armor on Ao Bing's body surface.

Figure 8: from *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*. © Jiao Zi, 2019. Available at: https://www.yidio.com/movie/nezha/216795/watch/1516597366?link_order=0&source_order=1&total_sources=4&site_category=HDFlix.com (accessed 7 April 2024).

If the first two films metaphorically conveyed the return of energy and self-redemption through bodily regeneration and extension, then in *The Monkey King Conquers the Demon*, the scene where the White Bone Demon transforms using the Water Mirror illusion employs bodily mutation, dissolution, and recombination to metaphorize the abstract concept of “evil disguised as goodness.” Within the Water Mirror, the White Bone Demon’s body rotates, dispersing into twisted, fragmented parts (Figure 9a), then dissolves into swirling vortices (Figure 9b). After shimmering with light, the grim facial features and limbs reassemble into a charming young maiden (Figure 9c). The body movements in this scene are fluid, coherent, and highly expressive. The White Bone Demon’s body exhibits unsettling and eerie transformations during the metamorphosis, portraying a “non-human” quality, while the maiden’s body unfolds gracefully like a blooming orchid. Through interaction with the animated interface, the audience undergoes a visceral experience of bodily transformation from mutation to recombination, allowing the film’s

contemplation and advocacy of the concepts of “good and evil” to be embodied and conveyed. The sensory expansion mechanism observed in Chinese animated films, as analysed above, differs from traditional representational paradigms that emphasize the similarity between human perception and film equipment. It highlights the uniqueness of the animated medium compared to live-action imagery. The portrayal of supernatural bodily experiences described therein not only permeates and expands the audience's sensory boundaries but also facilitates the construction of more complex, engaging, and memorable ethical narratives.



(a) Within the Water Mirror, the White Bone Demon's body rotates, dispersing into twisted, fragmented parts



(b) The White Bone Demon's body dissolves into swirling vortices



(c) The grim facial features and limbs reassemble into a charming young maiden.

Figure 9: from *The Monkey King Conquers the Demon*. © Te Wei, Yan Dingxian & Lin Wenxiao, 1985. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1wblzKhCCho> (accessed 7 April 2024).

Conclusion

Building upon the literature review and theoretical examination, this study integrates a comprehensive understanding of a new perspective in the critique and analysis of Chinese animated films the embodied imagery expression mechanism. Firstly, in our nine cases which are all prominent and representative in the history of Chinese animated film development, it is evident that the embodied expression segments in Chinese animated films often strive to establish the overall style setting or thematic construction of the film, appearing prominently during climactic moments or as focal points of artistic expression, highlighting the significance of this expressive pathway. Secondly, typical texts of Chinese animated films exhibit diversified embodied representation modalities, involving the interpretation of image materiality, image schemas, expressive movements, and bodily metamorphosis to create metaphors.

In other words, while inheriting the traditional embodied representational framework of live-action imagery, Chinese animated films also demonstrate the advantages and specificity of the animation medium. Audiences, through their engagement with the animated interface, can accurately achieve perceptual evocation and expansion, thereby reflexively recognizing the film's deeper thematic content. Lastly, animation, as a tool, is redefined and reimagined as a cutting-edge cultural carrier of moving images, capable of depicting the possibilities of moving image culture in any style, background, or technology (Wells & Hardstaff, 2008). Correspondingly, Chinese animated films, as a highly regarded medium across all age groups, could leverage their embodied expression mechanisms and technical practices to promoting the artistic qualities of representing vivid life experiences and developing powerful capabilities to create narrative and argumentative meaning. This is the direction that research and practice in Chinese animated film should delve into.

Note:

For more material related to Chinese School of Animation, see Huang, *A View of the Definition, Origination and Development of the Term 'Chinese School of Animation'*; Jifeng & Baochuan, *The Reconstructed History of the Foundation of the Chinese School of Animation: A Textual Criticism on the 'Crow Incident'*.

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