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Normative Reconstruction and Collective Memory: Myth Reinterpretation in the Perspective of Visual Anthropology—Taking the Film *Ne Zha 2* as an Example

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Abstract

Myth retelling is not only an innovative translation of traditional culture but also a visual manifestation of the collective unconscious of society. Through the reinterpretation of bodily symbols and the reconstruction of norms, the film *Nezha 2* critiques the symbolic violence of institutional oppression while providing a cultural path for individuals to seek subjectivity amidst the tension between tradition and modernity. This article aims to explore the case of the film *Nezha 2* to reveal its role in the visualization of myth retelling and its implications for cultural inheritance and innovation. In terms of cultural innovation, the film endows bodily symbols with new meanings, reshapes the normative system, and updates collective memory, providing traditional myths with the vitality to keep pace with contemporary societal changes, thus achieving a harmonious integration of traditional and modern cultures. This research is significant for exploring the function of film as a cultural carrier in the dissemination and innovation of myths, while also providing novel examples and perspectives for anthropological analysis of cultural evolution.

Keywords

Visual Anthropology; Myth Re-narration; Structuralist Mythology

In recent years, the rise of Chinese mythological animated films not only reflects a cultural trend but also represents an innovative practice of integrating modern visual technology with traditional cultural narratives. Since the premiere of "The Monkey King: Havoc in Heaven" in 2015 to the release of *Nezha 2* in 2025, these works have reimagined traditional myths, infusing classic stories with contemporary spirit, showcasing their vitality and value in contemporary culture. Myths, as important cultural symbols, carry collective memory and beliefs, and serve as carriers of social norms and values. "Myth is not the complete opposite of reason and history, but rather the true nature and foundation of reason and history (Hu, 2020)." Anthropology excels at viewing the long-marginalized study of myths as an important academic subject, allowing for a deeper understanding of the cultural logic, worldviews, and values of different societies through the study of myths. However, there is still little anthropological research on the phenomenon of traditional myths being reinterpreted or even subverted in modern society. Visual anthropology often reveals the signifying mechanisms of myth reconstruction symbols in films. From the perspective of visual anthropology, myth re-narration is not a simple reproduction of stories but a process of deconstruction, reorganization, and recreation of traditional myth texts, a process of meaning production and value transmission.

1. Rationalization of Rebellious Spirit

Symbolic thinking and symbolic activities are the most representative characteristics of human life (Cassirer, 1965). In Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, the meaning of a symbol is not inherently predetermined but is constructed through the dynamic relationship between the signifier and the signified within a specific cultural context (Hawkes, 2003). In "Investiture of the Gods," Nezha is a divine symbol of "reincarnation of the spirit pearl," whose fate is a projection of the celestial order. However, the film *Nezha 2* resets his image to "born from the demon pill." This symbolic recoding not only strips away the traditional divine framework and dissolves its identity legitimacy but also reconstructs the rebellious persona through bodily alienation, materializing the spirit of rebellion and breaking the original identity recognition paradigm. Furthermore, the narrative of rebellion is embedded within the visual system, as Nezha's alienated images—such as shark teeth, a dejected posture, and heavy, dark circles—challenge traditional bodily aesthetics and norms, with his "body" becoming a carrier and expression of cultural meaning. This alienated bodily form is not merely a superficial change in appearance but a concrete presentation of cultural meaning, akin to Foucault's discussion of the body as a "surface of inscription" (Foucault, 1997) of power and knowledge, which metaphorically reflects the violent shaping of the "demon child" identity by celestial hegemony, while also embodying the character's confrontational traits through provocative bodily performances, transforming the body into a dynamic battlefield for reconstructing value systems.

The innovative introduction of the character Ao Bing not only expands the narrative's multiple perspectives but also deepens the argument for the rationality of rebellion from the dimension of the "Other." When the Primordial Supreme Being reconstructs the order of the Investiture universe with the binary setting of "spirit pearl/demon pill," it essentially transforms the absolute opposition of "immortal/demon" in traditional mythology into a convertible symbolic system (Wang, 2024). The symbiotic relationship between Nezha and Ao Bing resembles the "twin motif" discovered by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his analysis of American myths (Lévi-Strauss, 1969)—this mirror-like existence is both opposing extremes and mutual mediators. As the embodiment of the "spirit pearl," Ao Bing should, from a semiotic perspective, carry the messianic mission assigned by the orthodox order, becoming a typical symbol of the maintenance of justice and order in traditional power narratives. However, a deeper analysis of his character reveals that Ao Bing gradually becomes a tragic vessel of value fragmentation under the dual pressures of the burden of dragon identity and the discipline of his master. From the perspective of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence, social order imposes specific values and behavioral norms on individuals through an invisible symbolic system, which individuals often unconsciously accept and internalize (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). The dragon clan represented by Ao Bing has long been marginalized by the heavenly court and oppressed in the deep-sea dragon palace. The dragon clan places its hopes on Ao Bing, compelling him to become a sacrificial vessel for power demands under the symbolic coercion of family expectations and master teachings. His decision to massacre cities to maintain the continuation of the dragon clan is essentially a deep internalization of symbolic violence—under the dual oppression of invisible power and ethnic expectations, he deviates from the just essence of the spirit pearl, becoming a tragic character manipulated by the symbolic system. This shaping reveals the operational logic of symbolic violence and critiques the domestication mechanisms of traditional power over individuals.

In contrast, Nezha, as a demon child, faces discrimination and exclusion from Chentang Pass but maintains self-awareness throughout his rebellious actions, actively resisting and challenging established prejudices. In a mirrored contrast with Ao Bing, Ao Bing is passively dominated by symbolic violence, while Nezha actively breaks free from constraints. The rationality of his rebellion lies in his personal will to break the discipline of the symbolic system and achieve self-definition. This resistance directly challenges the order of the celestial realm by deconstructing symbols such as Yuxu Palace and Tianyuan Ding.

2. Deconstruction of the Order of the Celestial Realm: A Modern Fable of Mythical Self-consumption

In the film *Nezha 2*, the Yuxu Palace serves as a core symbol of the order of the celestial realm. Initially, the Yuxu Palace is presented as a transcendent and lofty sacred space, characterized by its entirely white architectural complex and swirling dark clouds, which precisely corresponds to the vertical order of "celestial realm - mortal world" in traditional Chinese mythology, becoming a symbol of justice and order. However, when the camera penetrates the swirling clouds to reveal the interior of the palace, the chains faintly emerging in the shadows of the columns already

exhibit the dual characteristics of its space, implying the symbiotic relationship between the sacred space and disciplinary power. As the plot progresses, the Infinite Celestial Elder acts as the executor of structural violence, ostensibly under the guise of "slaying demons and maintaining order," but in reality drives the demon-hunting team to capture monsters and refine them into elixirs to enhance their powers, leading to the gradual corruption of the Yuxu Palace. Through the deconstruction of the Yuxu Palace, the film cleverly breaks the audience's preconceived notions of celestial authority, forming a progressive dismantling of the "perfect facade" of mythical authority, making the audience realize that the so-called just and sacred order may often be merely a fiction that maintains the legitimacy of power, achieving a preliminary demystification of the sacredness of the celestial realm in traditional mythology.

The Tianyuan Ding, as another important visual metaphor, symbolizes the celestial realm's indifference and greed towards life. It is enormous, with an opening shaped like a dollar sign, resembling an insatiable devourer, hinting at the endless desires hidden behind it. The process of refining the demon and dragon races into elixirs within the cauldron superficially replicates the sacred sublimation ritual from raw to cooked, but in reality, it completely subverts the original symbolic function of this ritual. According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, in traditional mythological systems, the act of "cooking" symbolizes the cultural domestication of nature, representing the progress of human society from barbarism to civilization, a form of control and transformation of natural forces (Lévi-Strauss, 1969). However, the refining in the Tianyuan Ding directly reduces the vibrant lives of the dragon and demon races to quantifiable "spiritual power units," representing a brutal consumption of life by power. From the perspective of social order construction, primitive tribes establish social order through the binary of "edible/inedible" (Lévi-Strauss, 1966), while in the celestial realm system constructed in the film, this logic is transformed into a biopolitics of "refinable / non-refinable." The demon-hunting team led by the Deer Man and Crane Woman serves as a classification machine under this logic, biologically alienating others based solely on "non-human characteristics." This classification is inherently violent, marginalizing lives that do not meet the celestial realm's standards. Visually, the blue demon blood and red celestial blood reinforce the violence of classification: blue symbolizes the oppressed, low status of the demon race, while red represents the orthodox authority of the celestial realm. The color contrast highlights the structural opposition of "impurity/purity," revealing the decay of the celestial power system. The once indestructible order of the celestial realm collapses under internal and external shocks, which is not coincidental but rather the result of long-accumulated contradictions within the mythological system, reflecting similar dilemmas in the social power structure amid historical changes.

3. Collective Unconscious Projection in Mythical Retelling

3.1 Expression of Collective Anxiety in "Celestial and Demon Paths"

Lévi-Strauss pointed out that myth is a "structural expression of the collective unconscious (Lévi-Strauss, 1963)." The success of *Nezha 2* indicates that the modernization of traditional mythology is not coincidental but a visual conveyance of contemporary Chinese society's collective anxiety. The classification system of "celestial and demon paths" is not merely a mythical imagination but a concretization of what Lévi-Strauss referred to as "the power of difference production." In this system, the classification of "celestial" and "demon" is not only a narrative device but also a mode of power operation.

Furthermore, the classification system of "celestial and demon paths" symbolizes the structural solidification of power in society. In the film, each character carries a complex identity dilemma and can no longer be simply categorized as either celestial or demon. From the perspectives of the protagonists Nezha and Ao Bing, neither belongs purely to the category of "celestial," nor can they be completely defined as "demon." The complexity of their identities is particularly prominent, and this ambiguous identity positioning mirrors the confusion and uncertainty many individuals face in contemporary society under a pluralistic value system and complex social structure.

The dragon race in the film is not merely a mythical element but a profound metaphor for the plight of marginalized groups in modern society. The fate of the dragon race also symbolizes the ongoing dilemma of identity recognition and the oppression of power. The setting of the dragon race being trapped in the underwater dragon palace symbolizes a marginalized group with potential that is excluded by the centers of power. Although they possess great strength, they are confined within a predetermined identity, unable to overcome the barriers of the heavenly system. This predicament closely resembles the vulnerable groups in contemporary society who face structural disadvantages due to regional, class, educational, and resource disparities, including but not limited to rural populations under the urban-rural binary structure, low-income groups, and ethnic minorities. These groups generally face institutional

discrimination or invisible exclusion, hindering their access to resource distribution, social recognition, and opportunities. The fate of the dragon race reflects the anxiety and helplessness of these groups in seeking identity recognition and social mobility, and ultimately, the dragon race's extreme measures to change their fate mirror the despair and resistance of some marginalized groups in contemporary society when confronted with institutional oppression. This resistance is both a challenge to the existing order and a strong yearning for identity recognition.

Meanwhile, the Yuxu Palace, as the center of celestial power, defines and maintains hierarchical order through the labeling of "celestial and demon," revealing that institutional norms in reality may repress individual identity while maintaining stability. The film prompts reflection on social fairness: how to seek a balance between order and individual development, constructing a social framework that ensures stability while respecting rights, with its artistic expression driving the audience to deeply reflect on the legitimacy of power.

3.2 Symbiotic Body: A Breakthrough in Narrative

In the narrative of the film, the "dragon clan mission embodied by the spiritual pearl" metaphorically represents the traditional family ethical system. This mission reflects the generational bloodline's insistence on family glory, embodying the inheritance of collective values deeply rooted in the foundation (Guo, 2025). In contrast, the "rebellious spirit represented by the magic pill" alludes to the deep motivation of individualism, revealing the strong demand for self-actualization, unique identity construction, and autonomous expression in modern society. This tendency, to some extent, challenges and reconstructs the traditional collective value system. The setting of dual existence is not only the core contradiction of the film's narrative but also subtly projects the profound value dilemma faced by youth when confronted with traditional concepts and modern consciousness, collective interests, and personal pursuits. This dilemma reflects the inherent tension between traditional family ethical norms and individual freedom demands, as well as the difficult exploration of how a generation seeks self-positioning amidst the clash of old and new values during the process of modernization. As cultural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss pointed out, contradictions in culture often need to be reconciled through specific mediating mechanisms. The characters Nezha and Ao Bing in the film serve as important cultural mediators that connect tradition and modernity, linking the collective and the individual. Their complex relationship, which is both oppositional and symbiotic, reveals the possibility for contemporary youth to carve out new paths amidst the struggle of multiple values.

This attempt is not only a breakthrough in traditional myth narrative but also a profound examination of the collective unconscious of contemporary Chinese society. The traditional Nezha story usually revolves around the cycle of "rules-punishment-redemption," while this film elevates the "cyclical narrative" of traditional mythology to an "existential revolution." The film depicts the lotus as a vivid, dynamic field of energy, making it a symbolic space for challenging established rules and redefining meaning. When Nezha and Ao Bing merge in the lotus, their physical forms transform from solid to liquid, which is not merely a simple physical change but a profound symbolic breakthrough, marking the birth of the "anti-structural subject." This signifies that the subject breaks free from the shackles of traditional rules and, relying on its own creativity, completes the paradigm shift from "rule compliance" to "rule creation."

In terms of identity recognition, the film resonates with the contemporary youth's pursuit of fluid identities and multiple identifications. Traditional mythology often employs "gaze violence" to discipline characters' identities, allowing them to operate within established identity frameworks. However, in this film, Nezha and Ao Bing break this violent identity discipline through "reverse gaze." They no longer passively accept the identities assigned by traditional mythology but actively deconstruct these identity constraints, exploring a pluralistic self-identity, providing a symbolically meaningful solution for people facing identity dilemmas in contemporary society. This narrative approach allows the film to transcend the boundaries of traditional mythology and delve into the spiritual core of contemporary society.

4. Conclusion

Traditional culture is not a static specimen in a museum but a meaningful resource that can be activated (Feng, 2024). The myth retelling practice in *Nezha 2* marks a paradigm shift in Chinese animated films from cultural replication to meaning production. The reconstruction of myth narrative in *Nezha 2* significantly reveals the transformation of the Chinese animated film industry in its creative concepts from mere cultural representation to deep meaning creation. This film cleverly employs narrative art to transform mythological stories into a lens for examining social phenomena,

deeply exploring contemporary social issues such as class solidification, the inhuman distortion of capital, and inter-generational emotional trauma. This innovative interpretative strategy reveals that the fundamental meaning of myth retelling is not merely to reproduce history or cultural traditions but aims to stimulate dialogue with modern social contexts, thereby excavating the possibilities of universal humanity and social critique embedded in ancient stories (Chen, Yang, & Zhong, 2023). Future remakes of myths may deepen exploration in this direction, aiming to transform traditional culture into an intrinsic driving force for social change.

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