

Influences, Methods and Distortion in Film “Chang” (1927) by Merian C. Cooper

影响、方法和扭曲 在“大象”(1927)由梅瑞恩·C·库珀

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Abstract

The main purpose of this article is to understand the methods, the inspirations, and the choices during the film-making processes of ‘Chang – the drama of the wilderness’ (1927) by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, which is one of the earliest feature films that was made in Thailand by foreigners, as well as the distortion of the Siamese life, portrayed in the film. By studying various sources, ranging from academic sources, magazines, news clippings, letters containing first-hand account and conducting an interview with the relative of the Thai actress, the author has formed theories relating to the filmmakers’ methods of creating wildlife-film and the factor that influenced their decision during the filmmaking process. The author also found that the distortion and the confusion of, and by, the film genre are the result of experimentation with the new medium in terms of form and practice.

Keywords: *Wildlife Filmmaking, Chang, Merian C. Cooper, Siamese, Laotian, Thai Elephants, Thai Film, Animal Filmmaking*

บทคัดย่อ

จุดมุ่งหมายของบทความนี้คือต้องการที่จะทำความเข้าใจวิธีการแนวคิดเหตุผล และแรงบัลดาลใจของผู้สร้างภาพยนตร์เรื่อง “ช้าง” (2470 B.E.) โดย แมเรียน ซี. คูเปอร์ และ เออเนส บี. ไซด์แซค ซึ่งเป็นหนึ่งในภาพยนตร์เรื่องแรกๆ ที่ถ่ายทำในประเทศไทยโดยชาวต่างชาติ รวมถึงการบิดเบือนในภาพยนตร์เกี่ยวกับเรื่องความเข้าใจวัฒนธรรมสยาม และความสับสนในการจัดประเภทของภาพยนตร์สารคดี โดยได้ทำการศึกษาจากแหล่งข้อมูลที่หลากหลาย ทั้งแหล่งข้อมูลทางวิชาการ นิตยสาร ข่าว จดหมายของผู้ผลิตรายการ และการสัมภาษณ์ญาติของนักแสดงหนุ่งในเรื่อง ผู้เขียนได้สร้างทฤษฎีเกี่ยวกับวิธีการที่ผู้สร้างได้ใช้ในการผลิตภาพยนตร์สัตว์ป่า และแรงจูงใจของผู้สร้างในขณะการดำเนินการสร้างภาพยนตร์เรื่องดังกล่าว ทั้งนี้ ผู้เขียนยังพบว่าการบิดเบือน และความสับสนที่เกี่ยวกับประเภทของภาพยนตร์เกิดขึ้นในภาพยนตร์เรื่องและโดยภาพยนตร์เป็นผลมาจากการคิดค้นและทดลองกับสื่อประเภทดังกล่าว ทั้งในด้านรูปแบบ และด้านการผลิต

คำสำคัญ: ภาพยนตร์ชีวิตสัตว์ป่า ช้าง แมเรียน ซี. คูเปอร์ สยาม ลาว ช้างไทย ภาพยนตร์ไทย ภาพยนตร์สารคดี

Introduction

“Chang: A Drama of Wilderness” is the second film that was made in Siam (Thailand) by a film company that was later known as Paramount Pictures. The film was nominated for an Oscar in 1927 for “Unique” and “Artistic” Production. It was one of Paramount Pictures’ five best-selling films in 1927 (Behlmer, 2003). Despite of the commercial and critical success of the film, there has been very few number of studies about the methods that had been used to make the very first mixed-genre documentary film and how it constructed the distorted-reality of Siamese life. This article aims at studying the methods, the inspirations and the choices during the film-making processes as well as the distortion of the facts in that film by using various sources, ranging from academic sources, magazines, news clippings, filmmaker’s letters and a personal account of the actress’ relative. The author cannot find a Thai academic paper that focused on in-depth study about the film, therefore, the author believes that this study will help Thai and foreigners understand the history of early filmmaking related to early Thai-cinema as well as to raise the awareness of cruelty, in some cases, in using animal for filming.

The Classification of Chang

In this film, there is a new form of storytelling which blends documentary and drama together, which was practically new at the time. Respectively, the studio did not use the word “documentary”, instead it was widely advertised as a melodrama (Paramount Famous Lasky Corporation [PFLC], 1928). Some articles in the press-kit, however, put this film in a documentary mode. For examples, “...it is a dangerous battle of Siamese savages...could not be faked. It is the greatest photographic documents that ever been made...” (PFLC, 1928). Ignoring the fact that almost every scene in the movie was orchestrated and it mostly used domesticated-

elephant for filming. Another example is “.... *“Chang” to us is a travel picture....It is melodrama, natural and unpolluted...*” . (Behlmer, 2003). The word melodrama and unpolluted contradicted each other for an obvious reason. Melodrama strongly relates with something ‘unnatural’ which is the opposite of ‘unpolluted’. It might be because of the rhetoric reason for the critic to use those words or the critics could not clearly define the genre of the film because of its unique method of production.

The mixing between a wildlife film (documentary-oriented) and a drama film was very new at the time. Therefore, there was probably no name for this kind of genre yet. What then were the genres that people were familiar with at that time? How and why did the filmmaker decide to make this film in this manner? These questions will be explored in the following paragraphs.

The Past Influences

In 1909, there was an increasing interest in wild animal-films in America which encouraged Mr. Selig (William Nicholas Selig) to make the dramatic animal-films. The Selig Film Studio developed its own thriller style featuring animals from its own zoo (Petterson, 2011). The film incorporated “wild” animals from the zoo with his female star, Kathryn Williams, managing to evade the attacks of these “vicious” beasts (Petterson, 2011). In many cases, the wild beast had to be executed after performing in front of the camera or right before it was about to kill the actor. Despite the controversial methods, the film gained high acceptance from the audience and the sales were high which emphasized the profit that most film companies could not ignore (Petterson, 2011). This trend on the film market might as well have some influences on Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, the photographer of Chang. Although it remained a secret of how Cooper actually did to obtain the startling scenes

of wild animal and Cooper strongly refused to tell (Brownlow, 1979). What we can do is to conclude from the interview in which Cooper mentioned about his method that he was testing the technique by having children running in a safe distance before releasing the leopard. Unfortunately, the native in charge of the box mistakenly released the leopard before he gave the signal. The leopard immediately targeted the children and he had to kill the leopard before it attacked the children (Brownlow, 1979). From this, we can conclude that the “device” is a box shape with a door to release the animal. There was a technique popularly used before 1910s which was similar to Cooper’s method. The method was to keep animals in a large confinement to stress the animal and made them inclined to strike at anything when they came out (Petterson, 2011). All this was staged to produce an image of life-threatening wild animals and unfearing hunters.

In pursuance of getting the threatening and ardent wild beast on film, the creature had to be infuriated. It became a standard process to provoke animals so that they looked more life-threatening than they really were. It could be accomplished by throwing rock or yelling at the animal and when they began to get irritated or to strike, the huntsman had to be ready to fire (Petterson, 2011). Schoedsack mentioned the similar method to the reporters when the movie “Chang” was premiered in New York. Reporters asked Schoedsack how he acquired the leaping-tiger shot. His answer was that the creature jumped up closely to the camera, its paw even slightly touched the lens, when Cooper had to kill it (PFLC, 1928). Even though this method produced the satisfied result for the sensation-craving audiences, it also created an impression among people that the wild predators are evils or man-eating beasts.

The Struggle in The Wilderness

Contrasting to “Grass” (Cooper, 1925), where the objective of the natives in the film was to find grass (Vaz, 2005), this new film would be something on the opposite, a remote area enriched with vegetation. Cooper and Schoedsack were informed that deep into the Nan district, north of Siam, there would be an ideal forest to serve their purpose. It took them six weeks to journey to Nan district which was said to be the most tiger-populated district in the world (Marian C. Cooper). They settled in a small village, Cooper’s purpose was to find the way to capture man-eating tigers. From village to village, he spent several months trying to trap a tiger. More and more tiger traps were built, but there was no success in capturing even one tiger. Cooper believed that the failure was the result of the natural cunning characteristics of the tiger and the fear of tiger by the natives. His situation gradually developed into frustrating state because of his failures, his exasperation finally broke out and almost cost him his life. One day during the pre-production period, he was furious of the news that the tiger struck in a trap had gotten away by mistake. He slapped the village chief across the face in public (Vaz, 2005). That evening, the chief’s wife cooked dinner for Cooper which Cooper believed the dinner contained poisonous element and nearly killed him (Cooper, 1927).

The filmmakers’ approach for capturing of the wild tiger was too necessitating to make a documentary. Seemingly, they had imagined the content they wanted beforehand and tried to actualize it, even though it was not applicable to the Laotian culture. The locals did not capture or kill tigers, it was not their norm. At this point, the author believes that the film-makers started to realize that their experience from the last film they

made could not be applied here in this part of the world. In addition, the chance of making a simple documentary that they planned to shoot here, in this jungle, was close to impossible. They needed a different approach. With no prior experience in tropical jungle, most Americans filled it with their creative ability, drawn from an assortment of artistic and visual sources accessible in the mass market. The individuals who went there experienced a procedure of supplanting void space with a place they called jungle. They had predispositions and imaginings of the jungle. Keeping in mind the end goal to render its bizarreness recognizable, guests portrayed, distinguished, experienced, and explored different avenues regarding the jungle (Enright, 2009).

After changing their tactic, the new approach was to build a dramatic situation in documentary which means that they had to write a script and had to use performers, both humans and animals. Most creatures in the film “Chang” were domesticated. For instance, the monkey was a pet monkey and the elephants (well the majority of them), were tamed. From my meeting with Sakda Phantuprayoon, the relative of the infant in the film, Duang Phantuprayoon, Sakda revealed that his grandfather, Duang Phantuprayoon, was a coordinator for the film. He brought two tamed Malayan-tigers from Nakorn-Sawan region, in Northern Thailand, for the filmmaker to film. This new information is important to the story since Cooper had never specified anything about the tiger that he captured in the film. Although he composed a tale about his catching of the man-eating tiger called ‘Mr. Crooked’, the so-called ‘Mr. Crooked’ never made it into the film.

Looking at the problems and struggles that the filmmakers had gone through, it would be understandable that he used trained-animals for filming, even though it was not what they had intended to do in the first place. The film was shot entirely in the daytime due to a few reasons. Firstly, there was no electric lights in the deep

jungle. Secondly, to wait for the animal to come out in the open in day time was really rare, leading to the fact that this very dense jungle greatly reduced human visibility and chances of spotting wild animals. Finally, the light condition in the tropical wilderness was very troublesome. For example, in the shades, the light appeared to be lower than the minimum exposure-level of the film. Therefore, their solution was to film in the open-space with no canopy around or anything that could create shade. They found that their filmable time was from 6 am. to 10 am. (Cooper, 1928) which means it was too constraining to get a footage of genuine wild creatures. Later on, Cooper specified about the new approach to make the film in the letter to Isaiah Bowman, the director of AGS (American Geographical Society), that he would “cast a group of natives and try to imitate the scripted scenes of the real struggle of jungle men. He would incorporate a mild dramatic theme into the film. This outcome will undeniably be fake; yet, in its way, it will tell ... the very real struggle” (Vaz, 2005). This letter confirmed that the studio’s intervention may be another factor that made the filmmakers venture on the newly integrated tone.

Thai’s Chang and Cooper’s Chang

The elephant’s charge decimating the local town or a tiger jumping up to get a man on the tree may be the primary fascination of the film, concurring the studio’s official statement. There was a major sensation of the audience when the villagers were attempting to catch elephants. For the author, the scene is extremely epic and the most documentary-like, compared to the entire film. However, the true condition of filming was opposite to what it seemed, as this scene was highly fabricated as well. There is an evidence that, Cooper had a chance to see one of the new year celebrations in Siam that identified with elephant drive for engaging public (Cooper, 1928). In attempting to reproduce the event, the

filmmakers went to meet Prince Yugala and the prince requested a total of \$30,000 for using his private elephant herd in Chom-Pon. As he depicted in his article, “Schoedsack and I needed to see elephant drive. The American Chargé d’Affaires in Bangkok mercifully gave us a letter of prologue to Prince Yugala of Lopburi” He mentioned that the Prince said to him that it would be anything but difficult to do as he inquired. The prince knew an old man who had numerous elephants and could help demonstrate the event. Later on, the filmmakers decided to do the enormous elephant-succession scene with the help from the prince.

Having watched the elephant drive, they chose to utilize local works to construct a kraal for the film to some degree (bigger than the one they had seen) for the emotional purposes. Schoedsack had set up his camera on a big tree. The shots of elephants in “Chang” were taken from the annual round-up by the Siamese government. Every year, the elephant herd was driven into a kraal for domesticate-selection purpose (Behlmer, 2003).

One evident example of the cultural distortion in Chang is in the huge scene toward the end where locals hiding themselves behind moving shrubs. This method was invented by Cooper and Schoedsack, not by the native, but it was portrayed as the native’s method. The story behind this invention is extremely interesting, as the filmmakers reviewing Macbeth, Shakespeare’s literature, when Macduff’s armed force is progressing on Macbeth’s stronghold. The army was hidden behind cut green branches, which from far away gave off an impression of being a moving Birnam Wood (Behlmer, 2003). From Europe to Siam is quite a long distance, not only in the physical distance but also the cultural distance. Merging these very two different cultures and concealing it in factual form, one might say it is quite a genius in the term of art, but it is questionable in ethical term whether this film could use the word “documentary” to be a part of the genre.

It appeared that Cooper attempted to concentrate on making the most emotional film while paying little respect to reality. The elephant in the film was portrayed as a wild-ferocious animal. The first occasion when an elephant showed up in the film was the point at which the main character “Kru” caught a baby elephant and tied it to his house’s pole. Next thing that happened in the scene was the mother elephant discovered her infant and decided to secure her infant. The “wild elephant” crushed the house’s pole to free her baby. The following scene was the point at which the hero cautioned the town senior that the greatest elephant crowd was en route to wreck the town as one of the inter-title says: “*The dread destroyers are once more on the war path!*” “*We dare not return to the jungle!...The Great Herd would crush us all!*” The depiction of most creatures, in the film was a long way from the nature of the creature and, thereby, overlooking the relationship amongst the locals and the creatures.

The relationship between humans and elephants in Thailand, or Siam, has been penetrated by convention, custom and myth, a lot of which reflects prior Hindu impacts and old Indian traditions. The elephant, more especially the white elephant, has been portrayed as a continuing image of the nation. The regard for the elephant as part of life has proceeded into the present. Furthermore, it has been shown in types of royal patronage, art, nature conservation and national character (Harrington, 2005). Cooper knew about the relationship of Thai people and their elephants as he said in his diary (Cooper, 1928) that no man will murder an elephant in Siam aside from the maverick one. The way that Cooper chose to show the elephant as a life-threatening wild creature backs up the notion that Cooper focused more on building his rendition of dramatization than intending to consolidate the truth of the subject into the film.

Conclusion

There are many factors that influenced the filmmakers to make the film “Chang” the way it is. Those factors are the receding of wildlife film popularity, the past experience of the filmmaker in the making of Cooper’s previous film “Grass,” the tropical jungle conditions and the studio intervention as well as the filmmakers’ cultural perspective on tropical and wildlife. Similar to other documentary films, it is always subject to discussion when it comes to questioning the actual reality. In many instances, Chang was compared with the film “Nanook of the North” in the discussion of reality of the documentary. For the author, it is not the question of how close to the reality that the documentary can portray, but the question is how it affects the audience. Even though “Chang” is questionable in terms of the form and genre of the medium, but the film has made a great impact, intentionally and unintentionally, both constructively and destructively on the culture. However, in defense of the filmmaker, looking back in the

silent-film period, movie producers did not acknowledge they were making documentaries or what type of genre the film was. They attempted to create moving images about real occasions, and there was no formula. The movie producers at that time wandered on undertakings not only to examine the subjects that they were interested in, but also researching on the technique for capturing the truth. What Cooper and Schoedsack had achieved from the film “Chang” was significant. Regardless of the twisting of the truth and the misconception in the depiction of the wild creature or the culture, the author believes that the film is prominent, in some degree, as a historical evidence. Cooper and Schoedsack were the type of filmmakers that the movie industry today needed, the ones that keep pushing the frontier of cinema. They go out, investigate and experience the truth of the subject, even though a definitive result of the expedition cannot genuinely pass on the full comprehension of the subject. ❤

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