

로버트 플로리의 “B급” 영화에 나타난 실험적 미학

Experimental Aesthetics of “B” Film in Robert Florey’s Works

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요약

B급영화는 A급영화에 대비되는 용어로 경제공황기에 탄생하였다. 할리우드는 관객유치를 위하여 A급영화와 B급영화의 동시상영을 기획했으며, A급영화는 수익창출을 위해, B급영화는 수지균형을 위해 제작되었다. B급영화는 저예산, 저기술영화임에도 불구하고 자신만의 스타일과 미학을 가지고 있었으며, 역설적으로 영화를 창의적이고 혁신적으로 만들었다. 역사적으로 B급 영화는 유럽과 미국의 전위영화와 연계되어 있다.

초창기 B급영화 감독 중 주목할 만한 로버트 플로리는 전위영화의 전통과 주류영화의 관습을 결합했으며 B급영화감독이 누리는 자유를 선호하였다. 로버트 플로리는 실험영화의 성공으로 헐리우드에서 <Murders in the Rue Morgue>와 <The Florentine Dagger>를 감독하게 된다. <Murders in the Rue Morgue>는 호러영화 장르를 통해, <The Florentine Dagger>는 스릴러영화 장르를 통해 아방가르드의 독특한 스타일과 주제를 보여 주고 있다.

■ 중심어 : | 로버트 플로리 | B급 영화 | 아방가르드 | 실험적 미학 |

Abstract

The term “B film” is contrasted to the term “A film” and it has started life since the Great Depression. Film industry had planned the double bills for the audience attraction; double bills means the release of A film and B film. While A’s is made to make profits, B’s film is made to meet the balance. B film has two features of low budget and low technology. Nevertheless B film has its own style and aesthetics and ironically has made the film more creative and innovative. Historically, it has been related to European and American avant-garde.

Robert Florey who is worthy of notice among the early B film makers has adapted and integrated the expressionist and avant-garde styles into the American feature. He also preferred the greater liberty generally afforded “B” directors. Florey has directed *Murders in the Rue Morgue* and *The Florentine Dagger* due to the success of his experimental films. *Murders in the Rue Morgue* shows the style and aesthetics of avant-garde through horror genre and *The Florentine Dagger* shows the style and aesthetics of avant-garde through thriller genre.

■ keyword : | Robert Florey | 'B' Film | Avant-garde | Experimental Aesthetics |

I. Historical Background of 'B' Film

Historically, the early American avant-garde had been intimately associated with the low-budget amateur filmmaking because of its economical and technological deficiency and constraints. While the early avant-garde films pioneered alternative forms that survived on the fringes of institutional power, it was only sporadically able to support itself economically.

Thus, as Jan-Christopher Horak notices, the early avant-garde defined itself in opposition to the commercial industry not only aesthetically, but also economically, producing films at minimal expense[1]. Instead of large crew and expensive sets, avant-garde filmmakers worked with modest expenditures of money and materials. In other words, the avant-garde itself had not yet been embraced by the main stream cinema that could have created the material conditions for its continued survival.

Nevertheless, the limitation of low budget frequently played a crucial role in inventing creative and innovative styles and forms. Besides, it is evident that the independent filmmakers could establish the authorship not only in details of narrative and style but also in the process of production. For, they had no institutional supervisors and producers of studios, who had long interrupted the progressiveness of mainstream cinema in terms of the themes and aesthetics.

In this sense, it is interesting to note that, in their introduction to *Incredibly Strange Film*, V. Vale and Andrea Juno describe why low-budget films represented by particular visionaries are so often superior to mainstream, Hollywood cinema.

The value of low-budget films is: they can be transcendent expressions of a single person's individual vision and quirky originality... Often

[low-budget] films are eccentric - even extreme - presentations by individuals freely expressing their imaginations, who throughout the filmmaking process improvise creative solutions to problems posed by either circumstance or budget[2].

Interestingly, in the studio era, the "B" films had much in common with the early American avant-garde cinema in that both had limited budget and production resources, and, further, their limitations gave rise to diverse experimentation with the style and content. "B" films arose in the early 1930s in an effort to fill up double bills cheaply, and then the heyday of the "B" films had last from the mid-1930s to the end of World War II. With the disruption of vertical integration of major studios and the fall of theater attendance, the reliance and need for such films diminished.

Therefore, given the historical background, I would like to research how the "B" films had adapted the experimental elements from, or had been connected with, the early American avant-garde as well as the European avant-garde.

II. Characteristics and Categories of 'B' Film

What does the term "B" mean? Historically, such term implies pictures that were regarded as secondary even in their own time, or the "B" label has often been used to imply minor pictures or simply poor filmmaking, anything tacky or produced on a low budget[3]. In short the "B" label was equivalent to the term low-budget. B film was in fact Hollywood's response strategy during the Great Depression.

It has also been defined by a variety of possible characteristics: a shooting schedule of no more than five weeks, the absence of any big name stars, the

shorter running time ordinarily ranged from fifty-five to seventy minutes, and exhibition planned for the lower half of a double bill. However, as Brian Taves suggests, to define a “B” film on the basis of a budget of a certain size or shooting schedule is problematic, because of the wide variations in standards set by the different studios[4].

According to Taves, the “B” film is broken down into four categories, listed in order of prestige: (1) major-studio “programmers” (2) major-studio B’s (3) smaller-company B’s, and (4) the quickies of Poverty Row[4]. Programmers share the characteristics of both A’s and B’s though they did not attain the aura of prestige associated with the high gloss of the A movie. Major studio B’s took advantage of the existing lavish facilities and standing sets, often utilizing their roster of top technical talent and character actors. Yet, the smaller companies had problem finding financing, causing many marginal ones to vanish by 1937.

Thus, it is worth noting how the differences in production and exhibition resulted in divergent types of B filmmaking in terms of diverse narrative style and visual characteristics. Moreover, it is interesting to see how the “B” films in the 1930s and 1940s had been associated with the tradition of avant-garde. For, B-films had frequently experimented with the form and style in opposition to the convention of typical Hollywood A-films. In other words, the financial and technological limitations ironically gave rise to creative and innovative style and aesthetics in the “B” films.

Within the limits of the B form, resourceful filmmakers, especially directors and cinematographers, were sometimes allowed to be more creative than in A’s. Furthermore, in the era of Production Code, B’s could deal with the current social and political issues as well as the morbid themes, which could not be

represented in the classical Hollywood cinema. Therefore, despite the regimentation of censorship and studio domination, the prolific quantity of the “B” allowed a broad array of diverse approaches to movie making and spectatorial positions. Besides, B’s had advantages over A’s, stemming from the fact that they could target smaller audiences instead of the usual wide appeal of family entertainment A’s. Accordingly, B’s experienced many such contradictory pressures that both liberated and constrained the form in both production and narrative.

The one of major aspects of “B” film distinguishing from classical Hollywood films is ethnic film. Film of special appeal to the small but definite market of ethnic minorities was an important product of the so-called quickie of Poverty Row. Reflecting the need of an independent cinematic voice, many ethnic films emphasized and adapted the minority group’s traditional stories and indigenous cultural heritage such as oral tradition. In a sense, these ethnic films might be regarded as a sort of branch of avant-garde in that, responding to the prevailing stereotypes of the classical Hollywood cinema, they tried to represent their own cultural and historical identities.

In this sense, it is worth noting that, as Taves points out, indeed all 1930s black movies when ostensibly nonpolitical, have very strong political resonance that was appreciated by their audiences[3]. Even the films that did not deal with racial issues or specific contemporary events still had political implication in terms of the very fact of production and exhibition of ethnic films made by and consumed by ethnic minorities.

On the other hand, an experiment with style could be exemplified with the broad influence of German Expressionism on all sections of film practices. German Expressionism influenced not only the style and form of American avant-garde but also the “B”

thrillers, horrors, and noirs of the industry. Since they discovered the merits of German Expressionism, the Hollywood studios had adapted the major characteristics of it, such as bizarre angles, striking contrast of lighting, and artificial painting sets. As such, there had been always interrelationship between avant-garde and industrial film, or between A films and B films though the relations were often contradictory and in conflict. As David James suggests, thus, “the categories of the avant-garde and the industry must be dismantled, and their blank polarization opened to the play of heterogeneity and interdetermination within the field of practices the terms otherwise simply divide[5].”

III. The Uniqueness of Robert Florey's Filmmaking

Robert Florey, a former European journalist, is a significant filmmaker who, inspired by German Expressionism, not only attempted to combine the avant-garde tradition with the convention of the mainstream cinema but also indeed preferred at times the greater liberty generally afforded “B” directors. For “he wanted to be able to work on his own and resented the authority and interference of producers, who were more likely to hold a tight rein where big money was concerned[4].” Therefore, the position of Florey in the Hollywood cinema history is very interesting in that he was one of the significant early avant-garde practitioners as well as one of the distinguished “B” filmmakers, who created very unique and experimental style in horror and thriller genre. In fact, Florey was one of the most important avant-garde filmmakers who opened up the possibility of American avant-garde cinema.

In 1927, he produced *The Life and Death of 9413* -

A Hollywood Extra with Slavko Vorkapich. In some sense, as some critics suggest, the main current of American experimental films might begin with *A Hollywood Extra*, which showed the influence of the expressionistic style of the German film, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1919). This film cost less than a hundred dollars and aroused so much interest and discussion that Film Booking Office, a major distribution agency, contracted to distribute it through their exchanges, booking it into seven hundred theaters in the U.S. and abroad[6].

While simultaneously continuing to work on Hollywood film productions, Florey went on to produce *The Love of Zero* (1928) together with William Cameron Menzies and *Johann the Coffin Maker* (1927). Both films, also produced at a minimum cost, employed the stylized sets, costumes and acting derived from *Caligari*. After the success of his experimental films, he was hired by the majors, in the hope that he would be able to introduce new and provocative types of filmmaking. In fact, in some films such as *Murders in the Rue Morgue* and *The Florentine Dagger*, Florey used his projects as opportunities for experimentation, especially in the adaptation and integration of expressionist and avant-garde styles into the American feature.

Thus, interestingly, some films he made in the 1930s and 1940s not only illustrated the convention of Hollywood cinema but also reflected the tradition of avant-garde cinema, revealing the interrelationship between the avant-garde and the industry. Therefore, he studied different types of art from all over the world. His pictorial style and composition were influenced not only by expressionism and impressionist paintings, but also by Dada and Surrealist movements that were little known in the Hollywood production. At the same time, as Taves notices, it was his ability to stay within budget and

schedule that kept him from committing the excesses of a Josef von Sternberg or Orson Welles, thus remaining at work in Hollywood despite sometimes adverse relations with producers[4]. Thus, Don Miller argues, “Florey seemed to be stuck with “B” films not because of lack of talent, but simply because he did them so efficiently, on time and often under budget[7].” However, it is also evident that Florey preferred “B” films because of the relative freedom in production system and the authorship that might control over all the details.

IV. The Experimental Aesthetics of Florey's Works

Based on the story by Edgar Allan Poe, *Murders in the Rue Morgue* is a haunting atmospheric film, heavily influenced by the German Expressionist classic, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, and anticipating *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper, Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933) in certain sequences. After finishing the screenplay work of *Frankenstein* that opened up a new dimension of horror genre, Robert Florey made *Murders in the Rue Morgue* in 1932. In terms of budget and schedule, the film illustrates the typical characteristic of “B” films. Florey had just over one week in which to write a five-page adaptation, and it was to be made for \$189,000. Shooting lasted twenty-three days, going five days over schedule but remaining under budget.

Although this film follows the trait of Poe in combining elements of horror and detection or in maintaining the dark period setting, in terms of plot, there is almost no similarity between the Poe’s story and Florey’s film. Rather the plot of *Murders in the Rue Morgue* is indebted to *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*.

A deranged scientist, Dr. Mirakle (Bela Lugosi), searches Paris for a “prospective bride” for his pet gorilla. Inviting young ladies to his sinister laboratory, he injects his victims with gorilla’s blood and then disposes of their ravaged bodies through an ingenious trapdoor. As such, the similarity between two films is apparent in the resemblance of main character Dr. Mirakle to Dr. Caligari. Both are mad scientists, symbolizing technology, suggesting that technology can result in dystopia rather than utopia. In a sense, as Taves notices, this film might be a popularization and Americanization of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*[4]. For, Florey was concerned with integrating the artistry of the motion picture into the feature enjoyed by the mass audience. Other stylistic influence of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* can be found in the artificial and distorted set design, dramatic and dreary lighting such as low-key or shadow effect, weird compositions, and unusual camera angles such as the use of the tilted camera.

On the other hand, the visual aesthetics of this film demonstrated by Paris, river, and park reveals the influence of Impressionist paintings. In particular, the river scene just looks like a painting *Impression by Monet*, and the picnic scene looks like a *Luncheon on the Grass* by Manet. Furthermore, Florey experiments with the close-ups from various perspectives for the purpose of creating mood, establishing the characters, and implying the psychological inside. In the beginning, he repeatedly uses the big close-up of Dr. Mirakle with low angle and low key lighting in order to reveal his madness.

Unlike the convention of Hollywood cinema, Dr. Mirakle directly speaks to the camera, that is to say, the audience, creating visual tension and horror. As such, tension, in most cases, was built through cutting from frame to frame, rather than utilizing activity within the shot. He sometimes relied on

intercutting to create a mood, shifting back and forth between various angles and close-ups, as in the scene of crowd, in which various close-ups of people are juxtaposed to capture a crowd's terror. Lighting also plays a very important role in *Murders in the Rue Morgue* in that it in some ways signifies the psychological madness of human beings. Shadows frequently line the face and etch in strange patterns. Low-key lighting emphasizes the contrast between light and darkness. Characters appear and are devoured by fog and shadows. On the other hand, given the small budget, Florey strove for creating a proper mood by the use of expressionism to cheaply evoke the Paris, a shadowy underworld of temptations, evil, and mysterious event.

Florey said, "We walked on the many dusty stages searching for and selecting the most appropriate standing units that Hall (art director) could redeem and change by adding, flats, canvas ceilings, slightly bent walls, with misshaped doors and window made of cardboard and painted chalking light effects around bracketed lamps[4]." Florey used these expressionist devices with great effect in creating the desired mood and atmosphere.

Besides, in *Murders in the Rue Morgue* Florey attempted to experiment with various genres such as musical, comedy, and avant-garde. Mocking the authority of police officer, in the investigation scene, this film draws on the humor and joke from the different ethnic characters such as Italian, German, and Dutch. Meanwhile, in the scene of homeless people who are living under the bridge, the impressionist style of the contradictory harmony between sunshine and shadow is well combined with the poetic dialogue of them, which implies the madness, absent dream, and starvation of city. In this sense, it is worth noting that the horror genre often illustrates the avant-gardist characteristic in terms of

style and theme. Horror, as Lucanio claims, is "concerned with an isolated, exotic and alternative world that is different from that of the society in which it is produced, and which does not obey its accepted social or physical laws[8]." Thus, it is no coincident that Florey frequently attempted to explore the experimental elements with his horror or thriller films, in relation to the convention of Hollywood cinema.

Another example of experimental aesthetics in Florey's films is *The Florentine Dagger* (1931), a pre-noir thriller, which settles a foundation for the later development of film noir and a more artistic cinema. Although he made diverse films from musicals to war film, it was in a thriller that his experimental skill was most recognized. This film was shot on a \$135,000 budget in twenty days and Florey had barely a week for preparation[4]. However, he could minimize such disadvantages, concealing the movie's faults and shortcomings, frequently by application of the expressionist style.

In terms of theme, as Taves notices, the morbid themes of incest, patricide, and suicide, not to mention the anti-patriarchal tone and the lack of retribution for murder, are startling for a film made in the ear of the Production Code and probably could only have appeared in a "B" film[3]. The style is also as unusual as the content, with the psychological motifs enhanced by various expressionist treatment. The film is full of dark and shadowy lighting; bizarre, oblique camera work and overhead shots; and frequent use of composition in depth, often emphasizing the distortion and imbalance created by the positioning of foreground and background objects. Thus, this film offers a forceful example of the adaptation and integration of expressionist and avant-garde styles into the American feature through the "B" film. Therefore these two films explain why

Taves calls Robert Florey “an artist in the studio system[4].”

V. Conclusion

The cinema has been rapidly industrialized after its birth, and that is the exact point to distinguish the cinema from other arts. With the emergence of the mass society in 20th century, almost every art has been industrialized but the motive power of the cinema was the business enterprise from its birth.

The enterprise has hired the artists (the directors) and fostered the arts (the cinematic ability). It is the double edged sword in that the enterprise has not only fostered the art but also defeated the creative impulse of the artists. Whereas the directors have constantly tried to find ways to carry out their artistic worlds. B film should be worthy of notice in that regard.

Ironically, the cinema has become the art not through A film but through B film, and the directors have enjoyed their creative freedom to the fullest through B film. Historically, B film has followed the tradition of the Avant-garde, and thus I have examined B film’s experimental characteristics by Robert Florey’s works.

In this article, I would like to contend that the most important thing in the cinema should be the director’s will of creation and the originality rather than the production environment and the budget. On the other hand, I would like to redefine the categories of the cinema. The cinema has been categorized into three parts : Feature film , Documentary film and Experimental film. These classifications were the old style of the 20th century and the cinema has encountered the major changes with the Digital. It is a revolutionary situation that anybody can make the

cinema and upload it on YouTube. Some people think that thanks to new technology the cinematic paradise has arrived and others think that the cinema has cut off its own past. In this respect, it can be said that the era of ‘film cinema’ is over and a new form of cinematic art begins.

Let me suggest some questions.

Can the new technology automatically contain the new contents?

Should the classic cinema and its aesthetics be forgotten?

It is evident that cinema itself is a technology and technology is an element of creativity. Therefore, we have to embrace new technology in filmmaking. At the same time, we must remember that technology itself is not the main source of creativity, but the tool for cinematic creation. Technological advances that lack the spirit of the creator may hinder the development of the cinema.

Robert Florey has provided the creative fodder for A film’s convergence with B film. He could be the source of inspiration not only to independent filmmakers but also to industrial filmmakers. Florey has attempted to combine the avant-garde tradition with the convention of the main-stream cinema and enriched the cinema in his own way. In this sense, his cinematic challenge could be a good precedent for filmmakers in Digital age to find a new film language and grammar.

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