

The Ordeal of Youth and the Cost of Growing Up on the Realism Critique and Human Nature Critique in the Film “Einstein and Einstein”

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Abstract: The film “Einstein and Einstein” was completed in 2013 and released in China in 2018. Directed by Cao Baoping, it is a work that delves into the themes of “youth, growth, and family ethics.” The story focuses on the life of a 13-year-old girl named Li Wan from a middle school in Xi’an. This paper analyzes Li Wan’s growth cycle of “discovering cracks, struggling against, resistance failing, being disciplined, and actively disciplining oneself,” and dissects the depth of the film’s “realism critique” and “human nature critique.”

Keywords: “Einstein and Einstein”; Cao Baoping; Realism Critique; Human Nature Critique

1. INTRODUCTION

The film “Einstein and Einstein” is a realistic masterpiece directed by Cao Baoping, dealing with themes of “youth, growth, and family ethics.” The movie was completed in 2013 and released domestically in 2018. It is ingeniously conceived, stylistically innovative and bold, and rich in critical depth.

The protagonist, Li Wan, is a 13-year-old girl from a middle school in Xi’an. The scriptwriter, Jiao Huajing, sets her family background as follows: after her parents’ divorce, her father remarries, and Li Wan lives with her grandparents. She finds herself in an extremely awkward position in her “father’s new family.” Additionally, the three generations have different views on “youth,” “growth,” and “family,” leading to frequent conflicts within the family. Director Cao Baoping uses a realistic approach to delve into the dramatic and conflicting elements inherent in everyday life, portraying the “growth” of a smart girl confined by patriarchal and societal norms. This film is an elegy for the “death of youth.”

2. THE ORDEAL OF YOUTH: THE GROWTH AND DISTORTION OF A “MODERN SELF”

“Self” is a modern concept, referring to our ability to be aware of ourselves and distinguish ourselves from other objects and people in our experience – this is the self and self-consciousness, mainly referring to an individual’s awareness of their own existence. The growth and liberation of the self are among the goals of modernity. However, during the growth process of the modern self, it is easy to turn and distort due to external or internal forces. In “Einstein and Einstein,” we can clearly see how this “self” is disciplined into “distortion.”

2.1 The Double Effect of “Intelligence”

Li Wan is 13 years old, with a ponytail and braces, often found sitting alone by the window at night, listening to rock music and eating instant noodles. She is a very intelligent child, always full of love for the world. At the beginning of the film, Li Wan is in a relatively stable and incomplete state: although her parents are divorced, her family treats her well; her grandfather and father, despite favoring boys, are also very caring towards Li Wan in non-critical moments: her

grandfather remembers her love for crab, her stepmother buys her roller skates when the dog goes missing, and her father takes her to the science museum, albeit on the wrong day; Li Wan also gets along well with her teachers and classmates. However, as she grows older, Li Wan’s sensitive and intelligent nature makes her aware of the awkwardness of her position in the family: although her grandparents and stepmother are good to her, this “goodness” is clearly different from the unconditional love a biological parent would have for their child and has a strong purpose. The intelligent Li Wan cannot fail to notice this. At the skating rink, when her father decides to tell her about her younger brother, Li Wan still successfully plays the role of a decent older sister in the scene of her cousin’s birthday: watching her father and grandparents, who normally care so much about her, now focused on this stranger, Li Wan is naturally very upset, but she does not cry or make a scene because she clearly knows that “being understanding” will win her more favor with her elders, which is beneficial for her future. Only her cousin notices her abnormality, but Li Wan rejects her concern, as she does not need the embarrassment of being seen through.

Li Wan is smart, but intelligence often comes with high sensitivity. “Smart” means Li Wan has a strong ability to observe and learn, while “sensitive” makes her more aware of the cracks between herself and her elders or the outside world. However, her intelligence allows her to adapt and adjust herself when she discovers these cracks. Nevertheless, Li Wan is still just a teenager, and this superficial stability cannot last long. The director designs “a dog” to disrupt their peaceful life.

2.2 Four Imagery, a Process of Growth and Distortion

The film uses four imagery to showcase Li Wan’s process of “growth and distortion”: milk and red wine, and two dogs named “Einstein.” Li Wan is lactose intolerant and drinking milk causes her to vomit and have diarrhea. However, at the beginning of the film, there is a scene where her grandmother forces Li Wan to drink milk, showing that despite appearing to care for Li Wan, the grandmother does not even remember that Li Wan cannot drink milk. If this is the case with the grandmother who loves Li Wan the most, it is even more so for the others. The second appearance of milk is at a dinner

with Li Wan's father. The father, who promised to take his daughter to the planetarium, instead takes her to a business dinner where he makes her toast with the guests, but the glass Li Wan holds contains milk, which is her allergen, poured by her father himself. This imagery of milk vividly portrays a father who is absent from his child's growth. The third time milk appears is when it is offered to Li Wan by her cousin's boyfriend, Gao Fang, at a time when her beloved dog has been sent away by her father. Nearly breakdown, Li Wan hesitates for a moment before drinking the milk offered by Gao Fang. The grandmother's milk represents a suffocating love from the older generation, the father's milk represents his neglect of his daughter, and Gao Fang's milk represents the outsiders' lack of understanding of Li Wan. Whether it is among family or outsiders, Li Wan receives no attention or recognition. In the end, at her father's dinner, Li Wan, though still somewhat unfamiliar, has started to drink red wine like an adult. Behind the various behaviors of her family towards her, the intelligent Li Wan quickly understands her position and grasps the rules of the game, choosing to "join in" and comply with these rules.

As for the two dogs, they are the core imagery of the entire film. Her father buys her a puppy as a gift to please Li Wan. Initially hostile to the dog, Li Wan gradually grows to like it and names it "Einstein," after her favorite physicist. Later, when "Einstein" goes missing, her stepmother buys another dog, which Li Wan also calls Einstein, but she is well aware that it is not the original Einstein. The second dog attacks her younger brother and is sent away by her angry father. At first, Li Wan searches frantically for the dog, but after a series of events, she comes to understand that in her family's system of discourse, a dog that has hurt her brother should not exist. If she insists on searching for the dog and stands with it, she will be disliked or even abandoned by her family. In order to gain recognition and subsequent power within this system, she gives up "the dog and physics," and even pretends not to recognize Einstein when she sees it again later. The director uses a dog to accurately reveal the girl's "presumed maturity." Once Li Wan has mastered the rules of the real world and decides to pursue them, she will progress rapidly. It is conceivable that in the not-too-distant future, Li Wan might become even more "sophisticated" and "perfect" than her father.

3.THE COST OF GROWING UP: OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY, ACTIVE SELF-DISCIPLINE

Li Wan is thoughtful and intelligent, filled with warmth and love for the world and everything in it. However, her father's strict and utilitarian educational approach, her grandparents' preference for boys over girls, and the subtle threats from her stepmother and younger brother, have taught her to navigate the adult world with duplicity and composure. The uniqueness and depth of Cao Baoping's direction lie in Li Wan's proactive and swift transformation once she realizes her resistance is futile. She quickly learns the rules of the world she dislikes and uses them to discipline herself, adapting swiftly.

In the eyes of authorities and elders, Li Wan is never perfect, and the boundary between "perfection" and "imperfection" is set by them. They reinforce Li Wan's acceptance of their rules through a system of rewards and punishments, always maintaining their superior position as the unchallenged creators of the rules. The process of Li Wan accepting and learning to obey this discipline within the family is a

microcosm of society as a whole: the powerful impose invisible disciplines to constrain others, extinguishing the flames of resistance in subtle ways, thereby creating a formulaic and mechanistic society and individuals. This ultimately forms an irrefutable authoritative paradigm: everything I do is right, and how could my love for you harm you? Facing the complexities of the adult world, Li Wan chooses to reconcile with everything and compromise. The scene of the mentally ill person being carried out shatters Li Wan's final illusion; there is no such thing as a free bird, not even this is real, so she becomes disillusioned and loses the courage to resist further.

The film features three scenes at dinner tables: one at Zhao Zhao's birthday banquet, one at her father's business dinner, and one at the celebration for Li Wan's first-place victory in a physics competition. At Zhao Zhao's banquet, she loses the love of her father and grandparents; at the business dinner, she misses the astronomy exhibit and witnesses the hypocrisy and utilitarianism of the adult world for the first time; at the celebration, she has already begun her transformation and swallows a piece of dog meat under the watchful eyes of others, after just learning of her pet dog's death from starvation. What she swallows and leaves behind is not just a dog, but her once innocent youth and time. Thus, a smart and kind girl is trained by the school, family, and patriarchal society into a "strong and useful person." The deeper tragedy lies in the younger generation: at the end of the film, as the storm surrounding Li Wan seems to have passed and life appears to return to calm, the director turns the lens to Li Wan's brother Zhao Zhao, beginning to record his ice skating training, which starts with the requirement to drink a glass of milk. Coincidentally, Zhao Zhao also cannot drink milk, and a new round of obedience training begins.

Li Wan's growth is twisted and compromising, a result caused by multiple factors. In the first half of the film, Li Wan's situation is like that of a dog, with no one treating her as a person with independent personality. From the loss of Einstein, the adults' solution is "compensation": compensating with a pair of roller skates, compensating with a similar dog, rather than solving the problem. Facing the child's willfulness, the father chooses violence and then compensates with a trip to the astronomy museum. No one pays attention to what Li Wan actually thinks; the elders simply keep changing the subject instead of solving the problem. This is fundamentally because, in the eyes of the elders, the young Li Wan is not someone entitled to independent thoughts; they are treated like kittens and puppies, to be soothed when upset. The author cannot deduce whether the father has also buried a period of genuine tenderness as Li Wan has, but the father's present is likely Li Wan's future. Li Wan, who once could not compromise with the conventions as her sister did, has now been transformed even more thoroughly. A similar cycle of themes can be seen in Wang Meng's "The Newcomer in the Organization Department."

Youth must grow up, but the cost is enormous. Li Wan once said to Gao Fang, "If you go faster, time will shorten, and if time shortens, people will grow up faster." But if the cost of growing up is "active obedience and self-discipline, loss of self, loss of the ability to feel, and loss of innocence and kindness," then where is the meaning of growth? This is the deepest question Cao Baoping leaves for the audience, the most powerful critique of reality.

4.CONCLUSION

In the new era of rapid material development, the tragedy depicted in “Einstein and Einstein” has become a social norm: young people pursue diversity, but elders often recognize only a single standard. Initially, young people may wave the flag and cheer loudly, but eventually, they often lower their banners under the strong pressure of society and their parents. This paper reflects on the family, ethics, and parent-child relationships in real society by examining the questioning of youth and the cost of youth growth in the film “Einstein and

Einstein,” and strives to provide some reference information for the healthy growth of Chinese adolescents.

5.REFERENCES

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