Trying to Discuss the Important Significance of Semiotics in Film Criticism

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Abstract: Symbols are representative and symbolic signs that carry information that can be accepted and perceived. Modern semiotics emerged at the beginning of the 20th century, pioneered by Saussure and Peirce, and further developed and extended with the rise of structuralism. Film semiotics, a newly born methodology, has had profound effects on film criticism and film studies. This paper, based on the semiotic perspective, explores the origins and applications of film semiotics theory, examining its significance and contemporary value in film criticism.

Keywords: film semiotics, film criticism, symbols

1. Introduction

The theoretical foundation of semiotics primarily originated in the field of linguistics, with Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of modern linguistics, being its most prominent figure and precursor to semiotics. His core idea of the dichotomy between language/speech introduced the concept of language as a symbolic system, where the union of the "signifier" and the "signified," linked by "meaning," forms the theoretical basis of symbols. Subsequently, Roland Barthes' "Elements of Semiology" marked the formalization of semiotics as an independent discipline.[1] In his book, Barthes expanded the duality of language/speech proposed by Saussure deeply into the cultural research field of semiotics, [2] constructing a rigorous semiotic system. The emergence of film semiotics can be traced back to 1984 when Christian Metz, a French scholar, published "Film: Language or Language System," marking the birth of film semiotics. [3] Film semiotics flexibly applied the theoretical viewpoints of structuralist linguistics and semiotics in the realm of cinema. Since then, Western film theory has been deeply influenced by film semiotics, entering the era of modern film theory. With the continual elevation of film within the modern media landscape, the aestheticization of film criticism has increasingly leaned towards popularization. Various symbolic languages have played functional roles in the narrative and aesthetic expression of cinema. Both film critics and ordinary movie enthusiasts have focused more on interpreting and analyzing "symbols." Film semiotics has entered the public eye, becoming an indispensable component of film studies with its distinctive aesthetic representation and visual connotations, also standing as a significant theoretical achievement within interdisciplinary perspectives.

2. The Context of Film Semiotics' Emergence

2.1. What is Semiotics?

Symbols have existed in human life since ancient times, primarily stemming from the observation and recording of the world. Early human symbols originated from experiences in nature and collective life, such as ancient pictographs and special graphical shells used for divination. Semiotics is a theory that studies symbols, primarily focusing on the homomorphic relationship between the contents of symbols and the cognitive constructs involved in their generation. The mutual reflection between symbols and meanings gradually increased interpretive flexibility within semiotics, positioning symbols in the continuum between expression and interpretation in public cognition and academic definitions. Tracing its roots, we can find that since the 1960s, semiotics rose in major Western European countries and gradually spread. The theories that served as the catalyst for this were Peirce's pragmatism, Saussure's structuralism, and Husserl's phenomenology. In the book "Elements of Semiology," mention is made of "Jakobson's discourse on dominant metaphoric and metonymic modes," which marked the transition from linguistics to semiotics. [4] Within a semiotic system, symbols are systematically composed and filled according to specific combinations and sequential information, possessing their own randomness and freedom in combination. With the surge of postmodern thoughts and the encouragement of semioticians, semiotics continuously sought research methods and theoretical paradigms from various perspectives, forming a disciplinary characteristic with culture as its research scope. Evolving further from the semiotic perspective, various branches emerged, among which "film semiotics" forms the main subject of this paper.

2.2. Semiotics and Film

Film, a product that combines technology and art, has undergone a long development since its inception, continuously integrating various cultural and artistic forms of expression, thereby becoming the "seventh art" distinct from other arts. In the book "Film Language," the core argument attempting to substantiate is that "film is a language and also an existence" [5]. Viewing film as a language provides crucial theoretical support for the infiltration of semiotics into film studies. According to Mikhail Bakhtin's semiotic theory, as symbols representing ideological symbols, they are interconnected with objective material existence and can undergo transformations under certain conditions. To illustrate this, consider a simple example: a rose itself is an objective reality, but through the sedimentation of time and cultural changes, when people associate red roses with love, the rose assumes an ideological meaning as a symbol of love, acquiring symbolic significance. Thus, symbols can be seen as having a dual discourse attribute, possessing both objective reality and consciousness. However, not all substances can be considered symbols; symbols must encapsulate meaning. Objective matter needs to be processed by the human brain, endowed with ideological judgments and significance, to be transformed into symbols. Similarly, in films, characters exhibit different dynamics in various visual contexts. The characters' dialogues, actions, expressions, etc., all exist objectively but through the language of the camera lens, the consciousness of the director and creative personnel is injected into the cinematic spatial expression. Certain specific elements, after receiving intentional human intervention, become a comprehensible symbolic language for the audience, serving a substantial utility for cinematic narrative and thematic expression. Deciphering the core of symbols and conducting multidimensional decoding requires a keen focus on the sociality of symbol existence, an examination of the internalization tendency of symbols, and an exploration of their interaction with the subject. Addressing the social attributes of symbols, it must be acknowledged that symbols arise from the process of conveying information and communicating meanings. In the context of film semiotics, film symbols can be considered as originating from the

screening of the film, the interaction between the film and the audience. Film symbols need to be initially empowered by the director and creators to possess information, then enter the audience's minds during the screening, ascending in analysis and reception to become symbols and ideologies that can be understood and expressed, thereby forming one of the key dimensions for critical interpretation in film commentary.

3. The Application of Symbols in Film

Symbolic language in film is almost omnipresent, whether it's the special situations, identities, or fateful directions set for characters, the implicit metaphors of various images, or the tonalities of images constructed through various factors such as composition, color, sound, etc. These different types of symbols blend in films, enabling films to have their unique aesthetic styles, emotional expressions, and even philosophical contemplations. I will primarily delve into the specifics of character symbols, image symbols, and cinematic symbols through case studies, thereby glimpsing the comprehensive landscape of film semiotics in application, capturing the aesthetic representation of films within the flux of symbols.

3.1. Character Symbols

Analyzing character symbols using Director Chen Kaige's film "Legend of the Demon Cat." "Legend of the Demon Cat" is a fantasy costume drama directed by Chen Kaige, narrating the story of a monk from the Wokou country, Kukai, and poet Bai Juyi, who join hands in investigating the turmoil caused by a demon cat in Chang'an city, uncovering a long-buried painful truth. In the film, the symbolic characterization of the characters relies on a fantastical backdrop, allowing for greater creative space and dramatic treatment. The design of the character Yang Guifei is constructed above historical accuracy, precisely because of her inherent unreality, making her an important symbol and carrier of culture in the film. The recurring line in the film, "In prosperity, she is the symbol of the empire; in decline, the empire will no longer need her," demonstrates that Yang Yuhuan is first a symbol of the rise and fall of the Tang Dynasty, and her individual fate is entwined with the fate of the nation. The profound truth of the highest secrecy is also revealed through Yang Guifei's choices and paths, adorned with symbolic representation. Yang Yuhuan saw through the deceit surrounding Emperor Xuanzong's death. In the midst of the game of love, destined to be trapped in a chaotic world, she was not just the Yang Guifei filled with the hope of life and yearning for love, but also resembled a sage, seeing the truth in the illusion, calmly accepting her fate with a symbolic setting of emptiness, perhaps the reason for her enchantment by others. What people admire is not just her astonishing beauty but also her ability to differentiate reality from illusion, maintaining goodwill towards the world and transcending it. To a certain extent, Yang Guifei herself embodies a symbol of people's emotional reliance on chaotic illusions and their attitudes towards self-existence.

3.2. Image Symbols

Symbolic imagery enriches the essence within films, as seen in "Gravity." After Stone enters the space station alone, she sheds her spacesuit and stands in front of the hatch, gradually transitioning from a stretch to curling into the posture of a baby in a mother's womb. Employing a long shot with a slow-motion effect, the film slows Stone's curling process, depicting an adult regressing to the most primitive form of life - the process of becoming a baby. This exquisite moment creates an illusion of bewilderment, representing not only Dr. Stone's existential reset between life and death but also symbolizing humanity shedding all baggage and concerns, cradling a naked, sincere heart in its most primitive form, embracing civilization. When Stone, in desperation, unsuccessfully attempts to

contact Houston, the film uses a prop detail - a figure of "St. Christopher" - signifying destruction and subsequent rebirth. As Stone tries to communicate with an Inuit man but fails due to language barriers, the man is about to euthanize his beloved old dog to release it from suffering. This, followed by the imaginative montage, juxtaposes Stone's conversation with the deceased Matt, metaphorically linking the Inuit man euthanizing the aged dog to Matt helping Stone kill her past self, symbolically rich with meaning. Furthermore, the crying of an infant and the lullaby heard from the communicator portend the arrival of a new life. In summary, symbolic imagery such as the baby posture, dog sounds, infant cries, and lullabies strongly imply Stone's own need for a transformation and the entire human civilization undergoing continuous cycles of rebirth and evolution through perpetual resets.

When Stone attempts to report to Houston from the Shenzhou capsule, there is a close-up of a Buddha figure, subtly suggesting Stone's subsequent phoenix-like rebirth through fire, symbolizing her attainment of the "realm of emptiness" in Buddhism, irrespective of life or death, having attained a new life. It also foreshadows a beautiful vision of initiating a new era for human civilization. The frog seen after Stone safely lands in water essentially signifies amphibian life, showcasing the evolution from aquatic to amphibious and ultimately terrestrial life. This parallels Stone's journey from swimming in water to reaching the shore, touching the soil, and finally succeeding in standing up after initial failures, collectively portraying the origins of life's evolution. Throughout the river of life, natural evolution bestows both a gift and a constant rebirth, enabling organisms to continue developing in an endless cycle. It's not just humanity; practically everything perpetually undergoes resets.

3.3. Visual Symbols

From the perspective of audiovisual language, different visual techniques such as color, light, shadow, and sound contribute structurally to the film's artistic portrayal, where visual symbols become an integral part of film symbols. Color possesses emotional tendencies and, in the film "Raise the Red Lantern," for instance, the entire film predominantly employs a cold color palette. The only bright color in the entire film is the "red lantern." This high-contrast and high-impact coloration emphasizes the oppressive and claustrophobic atmosphere of the feudal society, a powerful visual indictment and reflection of the subjugation and confinement of women in feudal society. Light and shadow, brightness and darkness, while serving narrative expression, also render the imagery aesthetically appealing. In "La La Land," for instance, when the male protagonist returns to work at the restaurant and improvises the creation of "Mia & Sebastian's Theme" while playing a designated piece, the surrounding lights gradually dim, focusing a stage light on the male protagonist, shaping the charm of this performance and the outcry of fate emitted by the male lead during this moment through his performance. Film sound mainly falls into three categories: human voices, music, and sound effects, each having distinct narrative functions. For instance, in the film "The Legend of 1900," the voiceover slowly narrates a legendary story about 1900, driving the narrative logic and emotional cues in the film.

4. The Significant Importance of Film Semiotics Research

From its inception to its evolution, spanning over a century, film has transitioned from a language system to further developing into a "language." Undeniably, film possesses artistic expressive capabilities, constituting an art form with "homogeneous connotations." Today, our exploration into the theoretical origins and practical application of film semiotics, conducting multidimensional research into film semiotics, aims to grasp the narrative representation of film, unearth the significance of symbols in the artistic creation of cinema, and consequently, delve into the academic value of film semiotics on deeper and broader levels. The research related to film semiotics plays an

important role in film theory and criticism, opening up new dimensions and methodological theories for film critics and film theorists. This allows films, from various aspects, to attain theoretical extensions in a systematic manner. Additionally, another value of film semiotics lies in elevating aesthetic perception, enriching aesthetic paradigms, providing viewers with more aesthetically pleasing viewing experiences, thereby demanding filmmakers enhance the artistic essence in their creations to meet the audience's aesthetic demands. For a group truly willing to delve into the intricacies of film through meticulous observation, the diverse film symbols are akin to clues in a detective's unraveling, allowing them to become more engrossed in decoding and analyzing symbols in details, attempting to decipher the creator's ideological expression and even combining different symbols to form a series of implicit analyses on themes. However, the academic community's view of film semiotics has always been dualistic. Zhou Qingping pointed out, "Film semiotics seems to be omnipotent in interpreting films, but its deficiency is inherent." Indeed, film semiotics exhibits strong agency in film appreciation and interpretation.[6] Still, due to the inherent nature of symbols, the formation of film symbols necessitates creators to imbue them with meaning, followed by the complete process of interaction between film images and audiences' interpretations. Hence, film symbols possess uniqueness, lacking strong guiding attributes in the realm of film creation. However, regardless of the fluctuating opinions, we must recognize the significant value of film semiotics in the history of domestic and foreign film studies. We must acknowledge the irreplaceable status of film semiotics in interpreting and appreciating classic films from China and abroad. Its significance in promoting the development of human civilization is also substantial.

5. Conclusion

Currently, new media emerges endlessly, and the screen attributes of films face challenges, with instances of mobile phones and computers replacing cinema screens. People are reluctant to pay for movies, and the film market faces a predicament in survival and development. Nevertheless, with consumers' entertainment demands and viewing desires significantly increasing, the trend of aesthetic populism is continually strengthening, and the Chinese film market is witnessing new vitality. In this social context, the popular acceptance of film semiotics is increasing. It is not merely confined to the academic research field but is being widely recognized as an aesthetic study. Despite the controversies surrounding the development of film semiotics abroad, since the introduction of film semiotics to China in the 1970s, it has been interpreted to a certain extent. Today, our research on film semiotics serves as an indication for revitalizing film vitality and addressing cultural contextual changes. We must realize that film semiotics not only provides an effective methodology for interpreting and appreciating films but also holds a certain degree of guiding significance for film theory and other disciplines. Every discipline has its limitations, and correctly viewing the dualistic nature of film semiotics theory and adopting a more inclusive attitude towards the development of new theories is also what scholars engaged in film research and film criticism should do.

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