

The Last Emperor Film Analysis From the Technique to the View of the Western World

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Abstract. The Last Emperor is a 1987 British-Italian epic film about the life of Pu Yi, who, at the age of three, was named Emperor of the Qing Dynasty and died as a gardener at a botanical garden in Beijing. The movie won the Academy Award for Best Cinematography and six more awards in 1987. The Last Emperor is a milestone for Chinese historical movies because it was the first to show a specific period at the end of the Chinese monarchy. Furthermore, the brilliant sound design and the director's perspective of this tragic character have become spotlights in the history of world cinema. This article analyzes the director's cinematographic skills, including editing and narrative techniques. By focusing on the relationship between Western philosophy and Chinese history, the author illustrates the artistic presentation of the storyline and the Western stereotype towards the Eastern world, which is known as Orientalism.

1. Introduction

The Last Emperor is a biographical film based on the real-life story of Aisin-Gioro Pu Yi, the last ruler of the Qing Dynasty. The storyline unfolds in a series of flashbacks and covers the period from 1908 to 1967. Directed by Bernardo Bertolucci and shot by the legendary cinematographer Vittorio Storaro, The Last Emperor is a work of cinematographic art that offers a Lucullan feast without turning into a surfeit, through a splendid storyline and an epic presentation[1].

At the beginning of the movie, the audience first sees the three-year-old Pu Yi being appointed by the dying Empress Dowager Cixi in the Forbidden City. Though he preferred to lark about like other boys, the infant Emperor was cosseted and cajoled into accepting the responsibilities and privileges of his office. In 1912, the young Emperor was forced to abdicate when China was declared a republican country. Pu Yi became a prisoner in his own palace, "protected" from the outside world. Attracted by the worldliness of his Scottish tutor, Pu Yi plotted an escape from his cocoon by means of marriage. He chose the Manchu descendant Wan Rong as his Empress. Wan Rong had the same ambition as Pu Yi. They longed to experience the 20th century rather than be locked into the past by tradition.

Pu Yi effected several social reforms and banished the eunuchs as punishment for their corrupt behavior in the palace. In 1924, an invading warlord expelled the residents of the Forbidden City, including Pu Yi and his family members, allowing Pu Yi to "westernize" himself by embracing popular music and the latest dances as a guest of the Japanese Concession in Tientsin. Six years later, all of his power had gone. Pu Yi escaped to Manchuria, where he unwittingly became a political pawn for the Japanese government and a puppet Emperor of Manchukuo. In Manchukuo, Pu Yi had many affairs with a variety of parasitic females and humiliated his faithful wife. During the Second World War, the Japanese government forced Pu Yi to sign a series of documents, which endorsed their despotic military activities. At the end of the war, the puppet Emperor was taken prisoner by the Russians; while incarcerated, he was forced to fend for himself without servants for the first time. He was eventually released in 1959 and publicly displayed as a productive achievement of Communist re-education. The last scene of the film is set in 1967, the year of Pu Yi's death. He made one last visit to the Forbidden City as a tourist while working as a State Gardener[3].

The Last Emperor won a large number of prizes. At the 60th Academy Awards, the film won nine awards: Best Picture (Jeremy Thomas), Best Director (Bernardo Bertolucci), Best Art Direction (Art

Direction: Ferdinando Scarfiotti; Set Decoration: Bruno Cesari and Osvaldo Desideri), Best Cinematography (Vittorio Storaro), Best Costume Design (James Acheson), Best Film Editing (Gabriella Cristiani), Best Original Score (Ryuichi Sakamoto, David Byrne and Cong Su), Best Sound (Bill Rowe and Ivan Sharrock), and Best Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium (Mark Peploe and Bernardo Bertolucci).

2. Cinematography

The cinematographer of *The Last Emperor* is Vittorio Storaro, who is regarded as a legendary Italian director. As John Simon commented, “The work that Vittorio Storaro has done, with the help of Ferdinando Scarfiotti’s production design and James Acheson’s costumes, creates a world of exotic beauty—almost a kind of visual eroticism—that people usually get only from science fiction, but this actually happened, was not made up by the movies”[1]. Indeed, none of the audience had a moment to rush to the toilet in the entire film. To interweave the overall aspects of Pu Yi’s personal life, the narrative structure of the whole film uses a montage technique and two main narrative lines. One is the magnificent past when Pu Yi was the Emperor of the Qing Dynasty and head of the puppet regime. The other shows the darkness and a colder atmosphere. The artistic charm created by the perspective of the film condenses the life of the last Emperor of the Qing Dynasty into no more than 180 minutes. Screenwriter Mark Peploe used flashbacks to cover 60 years of remote, enigmatic history, and, for once, the device accurately reflects reality[2].

2.1 Light design

The film starts in a noisy train station. Pu Yi, as a war criminal, has attempted to commit suicide in the bathroom of the railway station. The blue-gray color and the cold light make the atmosphere appear cool and calm. The primary source of light is the sun, and some scenes use artificial lights. Black shadows and extremely bright highlights create a distinctive contrast. A high-key high contrast is used throughout this scene because high contrast can create deep shadows and sharp highlights. Pu Yi’s whole life is reflected by the light contrast used. When the warden broke through the door, the camera turns to Pu Yi’s childhood—the beginning of his tragedy. The eunuch told him, “You are the supreme Emperor, you can do anything”. However, when Pu Yi asked when he could go home, no one said a word. The light on Pu Yi’s face is dim. Storaro uses sidelight to cast half the face into a bright light and half into shadow, which expresses young Pu Yi’s depression.

As the story develops, the light on Pu Yi’s face changes and the scene moves to his recent imprisonment in Fushun. In the Fushun War Criminals Management Center, the warden woke up Pu Yi, and Pu Yi asked why the warden could not let him die. The warden replied that he is a war criminal and will be judged. The supreme imperial power seems ironic and sad at this moment. Pu Yi was destined to live life alone when he entered the palace. However, over time, the light on Pu Yi’s face becomes gradually softer as he is educated in Marxism. The high-key high contrast visuals gradually replace the high-key low contrast. Pu Yi slowly emerges from “the prison in his heart” and makes his way towards freedom and a bright future. In several scenes, overhead lighting is used to create a clear outline of his face. Brightness pops out of darkness, which implies that light will defeat the darkness in his heart. He knew he made a mistake about trying to restore his administration.

One of the most impressive scenes in *The Last Emperor* is the final scene. When the Cultural Revolution ended, Pu Yi brought a ten-cent ticket and entered into the Tai He Palace where he used to live. The clip uses the light of the sunset at dusk and the shadow of the oblique white jade railing to divide the staircase. The Tai He Palace is divided into two parts under this technical light design. The camera rises and follows Pu Yi’s steps and shows a sign indicating “No Entrance”. Pu Yi found the cricket he kept in his throne when he was ten years old. He gave the cricket to a member of the Red Guard. Pu Yi’s face was bright throughout the whole scene. Although the film crew could not place lights inside the Tai He Palace, Storaro managed to use the warm light outside the palace to illuminate Pu Yi’s face, and the color on Pu Yi’s face tends to be orange. Then, the camera moves from Pu Yi to the gate. The memories end at this moment. The contrast becomes ever lower, and the colors become

more real. Storaro used contrasts, different color tones, and camera movements to show us times have changed, and a new era has begun.

2.2 Colors

In addition to the light design, the colors used in *The Last Emperor* have great value to study from the technical perspective. The color tones in *The Last Emperor* are endowed with symbolism. Storaro set a basic color tone of green in the movie. Green symbolizes youth, life, and vitality. After Mr. Johnston entered a scene full of the initial dark colors of yellow and red as well as gray suits and bicycles, these colors give way to green. Johnston brought Western preconceptions and a new atmosphere to the Forbidden City. In the middle of the movie, when Pu Yi was arrested, the color tone of the movie also becomes green to indicate the rapid economic growth in China at that time. This transition also symbolizes Pu Yi's rebirth in prison. In the years Pu Yi was in Tianjin, the director uses blue as the main color to symbolize depression. At this time, although Pu Yi had completely forgotten he was the Emperor of the country, he cannot escape his fate of being a bird in a cage. Afterward, all enjoyment in Pu Yi's life disappeared gradually, and the blue tones progressively turn into gray during his life as a war criminal. Such use of color is not merely an invention of the filmmakers but also their ideal vision. In reality, the uniform of the People's Liberation Army at that time was gray and blue, but in the movie, the uniform looks green. Storaro abandoned the original color tone because he wanted to emphasize the theme of the movie—kindness and peace.

The colors in all of Pu Yi's memories are warm reds with a little bit of yellow. The smog in Kunning Palace is massive, and large blocks of dark red lead to a sense of suffocation. These colors typically represent the Chinese Emperor. In Chinese culture, warm reds represent "sunset", which indicate the end of the Qing Dynasty. When Pu Yi succeeded to the throne, the color tone transformed into a bright yellow, symbolizing the ultimate power. In addition, Pu Yi's suspicion of his "Emperor's power" begins with the color yellow. Pu Yi saw his younger brother wearing a yellow gown and asked him why he was wearing a royal color; the younger brother replied that the Republic of China had been established. Thus, color as a visual symbol is clearly identifiable. This scene is also a turning point in the development of the story. Storaro used four kinds of color tones throughout the movie and divided the movie into three parts showing the distinct periods of Pu Yi's life—Pu Yi as Emperor, Pu Yi as a puppet of the Japanese, and Pu Yi as a prisoner or citizen of China. All the transitions of color tone are smooth and natural. The color changes from green to red following the scene in which Pu Yi attempted to commit suicide. The blood becomes the base for the transition and spreads over the screen. After the opening scene, the color tone becomes red with a little bit of yellow. Additionally, the use of mirrors in Storaro's movie is worth mentioning. Storaro is not a "mirror lover"; therefore, he rarely uses mirrors in his movies. However, *The Last Emperor* is an exception. For example, a mirror appears in a particular scene when Pu Yi thought he was the Emperor, but his wife insisted he was not.

3. History reappearance

The Last Emperor is a milestone for Chinese historical movies. This film portrays the end of the Chinese monarchy. However, a movie, as an artistic medium through which to express a certain historical period, inevitably differs from authentic history. This difference causing problems reconciling with reality. *The Last Emperor* successfully combined fantasy and reality and brought a literary work to the movie screen. Although the movie was filmed 30 years ago, it is not inferior to current films in terms of its combination of reality and fantasy.

The opening scene of *The Last Emperor* in the railway station gives the film a profound historical meaning. Although this scene was not completely shot from the official historical location, the spirit and atmosphere of the actual historical space have been preserved in the film. As mentioned above, *The Last Emperor* is a film that closely follows past events from the late Qing Dynasty to the founding of the People's Republic of China. Real history should be compared with the fictional story presented in *The Last Emperor* to understand the film's artistic method of dealing with fantasy and reality. The film presents more prominent characters and more explicit history through a series of

artistic methods. Several historical events must be rewritten or even ignored to fictionalize the story. Thus, comparing historical events with the cinematic story has vital significance in understanding the artistic way the movie represents reality. This article considers two dominant paradigms as the significant methods of the artistic representation of history. A key event reflecting on one of the leading historical figures in the movie will be analyzed in the following discussion.

The Empress Dowager Ci Xi made arbitrary arrangements when she asked Pu Yi to come to the East Palace. The arrogant personality of Ci Xi was clearly shown in this event. Many parts of Ci Xi's life have been written, but such a powerful image may not be evident. In contrast, adjusting the historical facts and creating the plotline of Ci Xi giving a decree can reflect the thoughts and characteristics of Ci Xi and shape the public perception of this historical figure. The scene discussed below is not a conspicuous shot in the film but is an example of the first paradigm.

The first flashback in the movie shows that in 1908, Pu Yi was chosen to be the Prince of the East Palace, and he was prepared to become the Emperor to succeed the Emperor Guang Xu. However, according to the History of the Qing Dynasty, the Empress Dowager Ci Xi had already intended to allow Xuan Tong to deal with some political affairs two years previously as a clear sign he would be the next Emperor. Thus, the plot point in the film in which the Empress Dowager Ci Xi appointed Pu Yi to become Emperor in 1908 is not the real history. The Empress Dowager Ci Xi's choice required long-term consideration because the issue of choosing the crown prince requires careful thought. Thus, the decision made in the movie is fictitious. The Empress Dowager Ci Xi seems to be an obtrusive person who wants to dethrone Guang Xu and support Xuan Tong. In the film, everything happened within one night in 1908. The Empress Dowager Ci Xi sent a eunuch to Pu Yi's house to read a decree implying Pu Yi should become the Emperor right away. When compared with the record found in the History of the Qing Dynasty, the director undoubtedly modified the historical facts.

The purpose of modifying aspects of real history in the film is to shape the historical characters. For example, in the film, the Empress Dowager Ci Xi made the decree allowing Pu Yi to enter the East Palace. Although this event is not reflected in real history, the film presents an image of the Empress's arrogance. However, rather than deciding the authenticity of the fictional storyline and the historical records, unveiling the significances of each version is more vital in studying the cinematic representation of history.

Even though the decree issued by the Empress Dowager Ci Xi in *The Last Emperor* was fictional, she still had great influence over important issues—including choosing the crown prince. Thus, this scene becomes a particularly intriguing technique of presenting history artistically. Ci Xi was indeed an arrogant person, but with regard to the issue of the crown prince, Ci Xi showed calmness. The fictional aspects of this key scene in the plot intentionally highlight the domineering character of Ci Xi. Although this scene does not correspond with historical facts, it portrays the true character of Ci Xi. These characteristic traits of Ci Xi are historically documented. After watching *The Last Emperor*, audiences will gain a fairly accurate understanding of Ci Xi's arrogance and extravagance that does not deviate from history. Although the issue of the crown prince is not presented as it occurred in reality, the film portrayed an authentic image of Ci Xi. Artistic privilege permits the adjusting of historical facts, but it is not right to modify the real traits of historical characters. The events in the movie may not be found in history books, but the characters are shown more profoundly than they are in recorded events.

4. Orientalism

Orientalism is a topic that cannot be avoided when analyzing *The Last Emperor*. Edward Said mentioned in his book *Orientalism* (1979):

"In a sense, the limitations of the East, as I said before, are the limitations of the practice of abandoning, extracting, and stripping the humanity of other cultures, nations, or regions. But Orientalism has gone further. It not only believes that the East exists for the West, but also believes that the East will always solidify in a specific time and space"[4].

Said considers Orientalism as a prejudicial way of thinking and understanding non-Western culture, which leads Westerners to despise Eastern culture and arbitrarily fictionalize “Oriental culture”. Bertolucci once said, “China had become the front projection of our confused utopias”[5]. Thus, the Orientalism in the movie can be seen in its symbolism and feminization.

4.1 Symbolism

The Last Emperor invokes the problematic image of China as a myth, symbolically different from and the ultimate other/double for the West[6]. Although Bernardo Bertolucci claimed to present the story in a non-ideological way, he could not eliminate Orientalism from the narrative. People from particular regions cannot understand the overall characteristics and deep cultural connotations of another region. The local characteristics of the people from another region are the most convenient symbols, gaining greater significance at any time. Therefore, Westerners are inclined to rely on the formation of modeled, symbolic local features when they imagine the Eastern world and comprehend the people there.

4.1.1 *Symbol one: eastern culture*

The film constructs the illusion of China through symbolic and exaggerated features of Chinese culture, such as representations of Chinese Buddhism, the connection of the feudal dynasty and eunuchs, the group of imperial concubines, the spectacle of Chinese women, and materialism and treatment methods. Such things are mysterious for the Western world, and Orientalism is emphasized when any of these features enter a scene. In the first flashback, in the mysterious and dark hall of the Tai He Palace, different arhats are shown on either side of the palace. Lamas are always in the crowds on the streets of Beijing. After the death of Ci Xi, a group of Tibetan lamas arrived to release her soul from purgatory. The Emperor was also surrounded by lamas during his enthronement over Manchuria. The Eastern world is linked to the mysteries of Buddhism. Chinese culture is connected to the irrational backward system of polygamy, and Chinese women with large breasts are presented to satisfy voyeurism and to hint at sexual intercourse. These connections, together with the symbols of the Cultural Revolution—the red flag, the red book, the Yin Yang head, the loyalty dance, and the slogan—are all regarded as a series of stereotyped symbols of China. From the perspective of Orientalism, the Eastern world is in a state of “mystery, uncivilized, and needing to be saved”. With such a perspective, Bertolucci maintains a strong position against a culture that is negative, primitive, weak and even silent. Bertolucci then expresses the East in general with this perspective as a basis.

4.1.2 *Symbol two: the impact from the western world*

In one scene in the film, Johnston gave a bicycle to Pu Yi as a present. The bicycle represents Western civilization and is shot close up. In this shot, the bicycle is the protagonist. Johnston pushed it through the narrow door of the palace. This scene suggests Western civilization easily opens the door to the Eastern world. The symbol of the bicycle shows the gap between Chinese and Western civilizations at that time. Johnston patiently taught Pu Yi how to ride a bicycle, and Pu Yi rode the bicycle touring around the Forbidden City. This episode represents the Western world teaching the Eastern world how to be civilized and the Western world bringing advanced technology to the Eastern world. In the next scene, we see Pu Yi no longer takes the sedan chair and the carriage (representations of the Eastern world); his mind was fully occupied by Western artifacts. Johnston was Pu Yi’s teacher, which means the Western world is the teacher of the Eastern world. Johnston guided Pu Yi to the modern world, symbolizing the way the Western world leads the Eastern world out of backwardness. When the bicycle appeared in the film, its symbolic meaning is highly distinctive, pointing to the large gap between two worlds and deconstructing the Orientalism infiltrating the whole movie.

4.2 Feminization

In the system of power in mainstream Western culture, women are in a subordinate position. Therefore, when Westerners deal with characters from a foreign perspective, especially when the place is associated with Orientalism, they often feminize the characters, so the other cultures are in the “repeated” and “eternal” feminine “space”, separated from “historical time”[7]. It becomes impossible for such a place to exist in the symbolic order.

4.2.1 *From the perspective of camera movements*

Bertolucci presented this type of feminization through camera movements. He presented a feminized view of Pu Yi by showing people who surrounded the young Emperor paying great attention to his movements and causing the camera to hold a continuous internally structured gaze. This technique constructed a feminine view of foreign culture. During Pu Yi's childhood, he was always in the care of a series of female characters such as eunuchs and nursing mothers. Pu Yi obtained his self-awareness through a series of expressions and concerns voiced by his servants. He established a false understanding of his authority as an Emperor. Whether he is eating, entertaining or traveling, the Emperor always pays attention to his appearance. Even when he was being nursed, he was being watched by someone through a telescope from the other side of a lake. This kind of close attention and protection could be considered monitoring and tracking. In the "gaze" of these people, Pu Yi has been placed in a completely negative and passive position. Accompanied by this dominant "gaze", the implicit perspective taken by the camera is called the humanist perspective, which creates awareness of the "other" body. This illustration allows us to see that Pu Yi's whole life was controlled. As the last Emperor, Pu Yi failed in his title as Emperor. He was not the true owner of absolute power but merely a symbol. He was bent on restoring the monarchy and wanted to address great causes and confirm his identity as Emperor. However, his experience shows he was controlled by other powers from the beginning of his reign to its end. He was only an object manipulated by others.

4.2.2 *From the perspective of storytelling*

The Last Emperor portrays Pu Yi being manipulated and monitored during his whole life. The ecstasy of eroticism and humanistic sympathy completely feminized him. He became a child who never seemed to grow up, and he is always connected to the status of women. This point of view was cleverly presented in the movie and it implies a profound meaning: Pu Yi was abused and deprived of freedom by his Chinese compatriots. The film draws parallels between the personal life of Pu Yi and the chaotic situation in China. The camera's line sympathetically observes Pu Yi. The camera trajectory mirrors the Western world's sympathy and salvation strategy for ancient China. Correspondingly, the women in the film are treated as the least important characters. They are objects used for milk and childbirth; they are lesbians, opium addicts, and insane people. The repeated appearance and emphasis of the fetish-like worship of the breast suggests the breast is women's only feature. In the film, women must manifest a perverted madness to express their correct intentions. For example, the Empress wants to express her political stance against establishing the Manchurian regime. She was insane at the reception and afterward experienced a mental breakdown to show her unwillingness ironically. These aspects of the movie fully demonstrate Bertolucci's strategy of creating feminine spectacles throughout the film, thus establishing the dominance of Western culture over non-Western nations in the global power system.

5. Conclusion

As an epic blockbuster, The Last Emperor's ideological content and artistic techniques are undoubtedly multifaceted. This film continues to have further interpretations and aspects requiring future research. In this study, I analyzed the excellent cinematography skills and techniques of historical presentation in The Last Emperor. I also demonstrated the prejudice of Orientalism articulated by the movie. Additionally, I unveiled an imagined version of a mysterious China created by the directors. The outcome of analyzing The Last Emperor has fundamental significance for providing new ideas to scriptwriters and producers of future films. Eventually, this study proved filmmakers could use their artistic privilege to break down the Orientalist stereotypes of the Western world.

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