

Interpretation of Symbols in the Film "Ash Is Purest White"

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ABSTRACT

Director Jia Zhangke's films have always paid close attention to social changes, and he is good at using symbolic expression in films, which is also an important feature of his films. The use of symbols in the film "Ash Is Purest White" (also known as "People of Jianghu") runs through the entire film, in which the portrayal of the characters' images highlights their status in "jianghu (江湖, referring to the folk society)"; the display of physical images expresses the changes in "jianghu", and the use of popular music from Hong Kong and Taiwan conveys the ideal "jianghu" in the director's heart. The use of dialects is the symbol of Jia Zhangke's films that highlight the "jianghu". The use of these symbols expresses the theme of "change" in the film: "jianghu" is changing, and "people" are also changing. Its essence is to pay attention to the interpersonal relationship in Chinese society and depict the changes in society and characters under the change of time. This research aims to use the theory of film semiotics to analyze various symbols in films, including the analysis of visual symbols, auditory symbols and accompanying text. The first is to analyze the character image symbols, physical image symbols and virtual image symbols in the visual symbols; the second is to analyze music symbols and dialects in auditory symbols; the third is to analyze the pre-text in the accompanying text. Through the interpretation of the three aspects, this paper analyzes how the film presents themes and pays attention to the interpersonal relationship in Chinese society, and depicts the changes of the characters under the change of time.

Keywords: "Ash Is Purest White", symbol, music, pre-text

I. INTRODUCTION

Jia Zhangke is a representative of the sixth generation of directors in China. He is good at using lens language to express various social problems in China's social transformation, and he has a strong humanistic concern for China's real society. The film "Ash Is Purest White" is a work directed by Jia Zhangke and starred by Zhao Tao and Liao Fan. It was released in mainland China in September 2018. The film tells the story of Qiao Qiao and Brother Bin's love and betrayal, and separation and reunion after 17 years. The film was shortlisted for the main competition unit of the 71st Cannes International Film Festival. The film pays attention to the interpersonal relationship in Chinese society, and the changes of characters under the changing times. Among them, the portrayal of the characters deeply embodies the characteristics of people in the "jianghu". The use of music effectively combines the background of the times and deepens the theme. Combined with the use of the pre-text, it strengthens the intertextuality between his films, forming the continuity of his film creation. In view of the large number and a

wide range of research papers on the film "Ash Is Purest White", including research on film narration, theme expression, audiovisual language, etc., based on the film itself, this paper mainly interprets the symbols of the film and conducts an in-depth analysis of the themes expressed by the film.

II. VISUAL SYMBOLS: THE LOOK OF BEINGS IN JIANGHU

The famous film symbologist Metz's emphasis on visual symbols is based on the fact of film: films without sound symbols or language symbols can be established. However, without visual symbols, films can't exist. It expresses the importance of visual symbols. The expression of visual symbols in the film is mainly through the depiction of characters and the use of physical images.

A. Images of people: the changing people in jianghu

On the entire screen, the image of characters occupies the center of the largest space, almost occupying the entire length of the film, and is naturally

the core symbol of most film texts. The character image is visualized through images, which is an artistic symbol, which means that the creator tries to reflect a certain thought or emotion through the character image, so that the character image carries a certain meaning. In the film, the film creator effectively embodies specific thoughts or emotions through character images.

1) *The lost ones in jianghu*: Brother Bin is the representative of jianghu characters in the film. As a symbol of the image, he assumes the character symbol of the jianghu. His experience is closely linked with jianghu, and his changes are also the history of jianghu. Brother Bin's journey in jianghu can be divided into three parts, from the speaker of jianghu to gradually sinking into jianghu, and finally, he is no longer a person in jianghu. The first part of his journey is his experience in Datong, Shanxi. Bin Bin at this time is the representative of the "loyalty, righteousness and courage" of jianghu. Righteousness, rules, and power are all necessary features for walking in jianghu. When there are conflicts in the relationship between people in society, he uses the rules of jianghu to make a ruling, and he is the speaker of jianghu. When Brother Er Yong encounters social problems in the development of real estate, Brother Bin comes forward to solve them. At this time, he is the law enforcer of jianghu; in the second part of his journey, after experiencing the calamity of imprisonment, he chooses to escape from jianghu and comes to Fengjie, Chongqing. At this time, he casts himself on a "undergraduate" enterprise with the intention of making a comeback. But in the face of a fully modernized society, his law of survival has been eliminated, and he can only slowly sink into jianghu. At this time, it expresses the rapid changes in jianghu, which causes Brother Bin to not adapt to the current jianghu; in the third part of his journey, he chooses to return to Datong, Shanxi, to live with Qiao Qiao when he is unable to take care of himself. At this time, he no longer has the right to speak in jianghu, and he is no longer a person in jianghu. Lying on the bed alone, when confronted by brothers' slander, he can only stand against weakly, but he has disappeared in jianghu. This is the tragic brought about by social changes, and he is a lost person in jianghu.

2) *Belongers of jianghu*: As Jia Zhangke's frequent heroine, Zhao Tao's images in Jia Zhangke's films have typical characteristics. Yin Ruijuan in the film "Platform", Qiao Qiao in "Unknown Pleasures", Zhao Xiaotao in "The World", Zhao Hong in "Still Life", Shen Tao in "Mountains May Depart", and Qiao Qiao in "Ash Is Purest White" all come from Shanxi, and each of them is an important character image symbol in Jia Zhangke's films. Qiao Qiao is an important female

character in the film. Her experience of in jianghu can also be divided into three parts, from being unwilling to be a person in jianghu to living in the way of jianghu, and then to becoming a person in jianghu.

Using Lacan's mirror image theory can effectively interpret the three journeys of the Qiao Qiao's life in jianghu. The first part of her journey is the experience in Datong, Shanxi. At this time, Qiao Qiao belongs to the people around the person in jianghu. She has no intention of being in jianghu, but is willing to live in jianghu for the people she loves. Under the projection of Brother Bin, the law enforcer of the jianghu, she gradually builds up her self-awareness, which belongs to the "self" identified by Brother Bin as the "other". The "self" at this time is not the real self, but the "self in the mirror" of Lacan's "mirror stage". When Qiao Qiao pulls out the gun in order to save Brother Bin, she, like Brother Bin, possesses the loyalty of jianghu. Through this assimilation, the "image self" of Qiao Qiao is formed from the imaginary world to the symbolic world. The second part of her journey is that after five years of being in prison, Brother Bin has left her life. She has completely lost the "other" that makes her "self". She comes out of the "self in the mirror" at this time, survives in jianghu in the way of jianghu, and becomes a person who wonders about in jianghu. She defrauds merchants of money, cheats to eat at weddings and banquets, and uses the method of calling the police to make Bin Bin appear. When Bin Bin told Qiao Qiao that he is no longer a member of jianghu, Qiao Qiao's own concept of "I" is gradually established. The third part of her experience is that Qiao Qiao goes back to Datong, Shanxi, opens a tea house, and gathers a group of brothers who followed Brother Bin before. She becomes a person of jianghu. When Brother Bin is unable to walk because of a stroke, she takes Brother Bin back to Datong, Shanxi. At this time, she assumes the "righteousness" of jianghu. When hearing a brother's insult to Brother Bin, Qiao Qiao uses a teapot to hit that person for Brother Bin, and solves the problem with her way of jianghu. At this time, Qiao Qiao and Brother Bin's identities are exchanged. Qiao Qiao has formed a complete self, and she is the belonger of jianghu.

3) *Walkers in jianghu*: Brother Er Yong is the representative of the local nouveau riche. He gains wealth by developing real estate, but he still lives in the old house with his parents. He is with conservatives' inherent jianghu thought. Because he needs to rely on the local jianghu forces, but also wants to get new thoughts, such as enjoying the international style of ballroom dancing and frequent trips to Hong Kong and Macau and using Hong Kong dollars, etc., which represents a yearning for new things. But when facing new things, he still follows the old jianghu system, which is a contradiction in itself. Wandering in jianghu

and the new order, he is stabbed to death by young people of a new generation in the contradiction of this change, ending in tragedy.

The undergraduate is the pioneer of the new order in jianghu, representing new ideas. Through the contact with new things from the outside world, his company has been in line with the market, operating in a corporate manner, avoiding the restrictions of the rules of jianghu, and forming its own set of systems. This is the development trend that follows the changes of the society and era. He adapts to social changes and can walk smoothly in the changing jianghu.

The twins represent the new forces of jianghu. They have passion, are not afraid of jianghu, and dare to challenge jianghu. This is the trend of the times. Brother Bin enters the prison only after being attacked by a young man by motorcycle. Brother Bin's jianghu is eventually replaced by a young man and he finally leaves jianghu. It expresses that in the changing process of the times, society is changing, characters are changing, and jianghu is also changing.

Captain Wan's role is a policeman, and his appearance is at Brother Er Yong's funeral. As a policeman, he appears in jianghu in harmony, catering to the order of jianghu. In the room, he is the only policeman to appear in the reactionary gang. He and members of reactionary gang live in harmony and help each other, which is a strange feature.

B. Physical images: the ideographical expression of symbols

Images of various objects are almost everywhere in the film. In terms of their meaning, they can be the background and foil in the film, they can also be the clues to the development of the film, and they can even be the main performance objects of the film. The image symbols appearing in the film text participate in the meaning of the film in various ways. The typical objects in the film, including Guan Erye, gun, video room, train, etc., all have a clear ideographic effect ("Table I").

1) *Guan Erye: a arbitrator*: The jianghu presented in the film have a fixed order. Jianghu values "loyalty, righteousness and courage". When something goes against the order of jianghu, people in jianghu naturally choose to use the methods of jianghu to solve the problems that arise. At this time, the order needs to be maintained, and the sustainers must also be those who are convinced by jianghu.

As a cultural symbol, Guan Erye has been used many times in the film. When adjusting the contradiction between the two brothers, Brother Bin asks the appearance of Guan Erye to make a ruling. At this time, Guan Erye means loyalty. In front of Guan Erye, being a person in jianghu, one can't lie. Guan

Erye becomes an arbiter. This is a kind of cultural cognition, which is accumulated and developed by Chinese society over a long period of time.

2) *Guns: the terminator of jianghu*: Guns appear many times in the film and has a typical functional symbolic meaning. The emergence of guns can be divided into three stages. First, guns exist in jianghu, which is an effective and direct way to solve problems in jianghu, so Brother Bin always carries a gun, even when dancing in the ballroom. Although the gun falls out while dancing, Brother Bin puts it away naturally. For him, the gun is a tool to deal with problems in jianghu normally; second, when Bin Bin teaches Qiao Qiao how to use a gun, Qiao Qiao mentions that the police are now taking off the gun. At this time, the gun is already a potential danger for Bin Bin; third, when Brother Bin is in danger, Qiao Qiao draws her gun and solves the problem with the method of jianghu, but it directly causes Qiao Qiao and Brother Bin to enter the prison, ending Brother Bin's jianghu.

3) *Video halls: dreams*: The presentation of the video in the video hall in the film has a very contrasting effect. Watching the video is supposed to be a process of entertainment. But in the minds of jianghu people, the functional symbolic meaning carried by the video hall is extremely important. Brother Bin and his brothers are dressed formally, wears gloves, and watches Hong Kong gangster films with a serious look. In the process of watching the film, they constantly strengthens their belief in jianghu. This is an illusion of the idealization of jianghu in their minds, but it is an unrealistic state and an unattainable state. However, they imitate and respect it. It expresses that they can only find the ideal jianghu in the virtual imagination space. This is a dream that belongs to them.

4) *Trains: a symbol of the times*: The train is a very common symbol used in Jia Zhangke's films. It is involved in the films "Platform", "A Touch of Sin" and "Mountains May Depart", and the director Jia Zhangke has given it symbolic meaning. In the film "Ash Is Purest White", the train plays a unique narrative and expressive role.

In terms of narration, the story of the film takes place from 2001 to 2018. In the long span of changes, society is changing rapidly, and the tools used to ride are changing, from green trains to fast trains to high-speed trains, expressing the rapid development of society. For the development of the story, the viewer interprets the train's use of image symbols by the image producer through the train, and strengthens the depiction of the subject of change. The viewer exists as the characters in the film and feels the changes between the society and the characters.

In terms of ideographical expressions, the first time the train appears is when Qiao Qiao returns to her father's house by bus. At this time, the operation of the coal plant is deteriorating and no wages can be paid to workers. The train is a tool for transporting coal, effectively expressing the characteristics of the times. The operating status of coal mines goes downhill, and new economic structural adjustments are needed, which implies that the entire society is now in a critical stage of transformation. The second time the train appears during Qiao Qiao's journey from Fengjie to Wuhan to Datong. At this time, the train is not only a means of

transportation, but also represents Qiao Qiao's new direction in life. She faces the choice of fate. When the third time the train appears, it is 2018. At this time, the train has become a fast high-speed rail, and the social transformation has taken effect. Bin Bin can only go back to Datong, where he uses to experience jianghu. At this time, he is no longer a person in jianghu, and the train effectively represents the characteristics of the times. It is not only a means of transportation, but also Bin Bin's direction to life's destiny. He faces the choice of fate.

TABLE I. IDEOGRAPHICAL EXPRESSION OF PHYSICAL IMAGES AND SYMBOLS

Physical images	The ideographical expression of a symbol
Guan Erye	A arbitrator
Guns	The terminator of jianghu
Video halls	Dreams
Trains	The symbol of the times

C. Virtual images: surreal expression

The use of surreal symbols in Jia Zhangke's films is a unique style. There are surreal symbols used in the films "Still Life" and "Mountains May Depart", which is in obvious contrast with the realistic style characteristics of the film. Zhao Hong, played by Zhao Tao in "Still Life", looks at the building suddenly lifted into the sky, which is a surreal expression. The city of The Three Gorges has a long history. It has been developed step by step and is realistic, but the speed of the city's dying out at this time is surreal. The plane took by Shen Tao who is played by Zhao Tao in "Mountains May Depart" falls from the sky. The fall of the plane may be caused by several young people setting off fireworks, expressing the impermanence of affairs in the world. An event with a small probability in reality happens before your eyes, which is a surreal expression.

The virtual image symbol UFO appears in the film "Ash Is Purest White". UFO does not exist in real life, it is a surreal expression. Qiao Qiao sees a flying UFO in the dark night when her feelings are hurt and she is confused about the future. This means that Qiao Qiao has a new beginning in her life, and her future will have a better way out.

III. AUDITORY SYMBOLS: A COMBINATION OF POPULAR AND LOCAL

A film is an art that combines vision and hearing, and the sound of the auditory part is an important part of the film symbol. The intervention of sound not only avoids the monotony of the pure picture, but also increases the sense of reality of the film. According to the classification of the symbol carrier, in the film, the sound can be divided into three types: music, sound, and human voice. The music in the film "Ash Is Purest

White" is an important part of the film's text symbol, and the use of dialects reflects the continuation of the film's style of Jia Zhangke.

A. Popular songs in jianghu

In the film text, music is an important component of the film text symbol system, which weaves a meaning network with other symbols. The function of music is mainly to create an atmosphere and suggest the psychology and emotions of the characters. It is often used to render and metaphorize the situation of the characters, reflect the character and psychology of the characters, and thus guide the audience to bias the meaning related to the situation and psychology of the characters when perceiving the music. It is a common way to make the audience's perception of music symbols subordinate to the film's meaning.

In terms of directional collection of music, there are mainly four aspects: one is the directional collection based on film themes and emotional tone, the second is the directional collection based on characters' psychology and living conditions, the third is the directional collection based on narrative functions, and the fourth is the directional collection based on the manifestation of the social times.

The use of popular songs in Jia Zhangke's films has typical characteristics, especially the use of popular music from Hong Kong and Taiwan, which can effectively characterize the social times. The opening time is April 2, 2001. At this time, the heroine Qiao Qiao comes on the stage, and the music used is "A Man Should Strengthen Himself". It is a high-pitched male song that expresses the masculinity in jianghu. The film sets the tone from the beginning. The jianghu is the jianghu of men. At this time, the use of music is based on the theme and emotional tone of the film.

The song "Drunk for Life" sung by Ye Qianwen appears three times in the film. The first time is when the brothers drink with people from all corners of the world together, everyone is surrounded by jianghu centered on Brother Bin. With the song, drinking with people from all corners of the world represents everyone is of one mind. The music at this time is based on the theme and emotional tone of the film, the state at this time is the state of jianghu they live in, and they are the characters in jianghu; the second time is when they are all dressed in formal clothes and watch the video "Once A Thief" in the video hall, accompanied by songs. This is the fantasy of their idealized jianghu. This fantasy is an unrealistic state and an unattainable state, but it is also what they follow and respect. It expresses that they can only find the ideal jianghu in the virtual imagination space. This is a kind of dream, and the music at this time is based on the emotional tone; the third time is when Qiao Qiao draws her gun. Accompanied by the song, at this time, Brother Bin's life is threatened and Qiao Qiao becomes the center of jianghu. The music at this time is based on the character's psychology and survival situation. The three times of repeated use of music are a typical use of music montage, which strengthen the theme of the film, and the emotions and psychology of the characters.

At Brother Er Yong's funeral, the background music used is "Shanghai Beach", which is an expression of emotional tone at this time. The theme of "Shanghai Beach" expresses the disputes in jianghu, where bloodshed and death often occur, which is regarded as a tragic situation. Brother Er Yong's death is obviously also caused by the disputes in jianghu. At this time, when the song appears at the funeral, it is also a heroic situation. Both are because of the disputes in jianghu, and the music is based on the theme of the film.

The song "How Many Times Can Love Come Back" appears when Qiao Qiao loses Brother Bin. This song is used twice in the film. The first time is when Qiao Qiao comes to Fengjie, but doesn't find Brother Bin. But she still doesn't know that Brother Bin doesn't meet her on purpose. At this time, she preserves her love for Brother Bin, a yearning for love. At this time, the music strengthens the character's emotions; the second time is when Qiao Qiao completely separates from Brother Bin. Qiao Qiao completely loses the love of Brother Bin. She is extremely sad and lost. At this time, the music strengthens the character's psychology.

B. Unchanging dialects

Jia Zhangke is a director who is good at using dialects, and dialects have become an important feature of his films. This is closely related to the director's expression of realistic aesthetic style. The use of dialects runs through his films, from the hometown trilogy "Xiao Wu", "Platform", "Unknown Pleasures"

to "Still Life" and "The World" to "A Touch of Sin" and "Mountains May Depart", to "Ash Is Purest White". The use of dialects is the iconic feature of Jia Zhangke's films. Jia Zhangke's films have a strong realistic style, and the use of dialects restores the real life state to the greatest extent. In addition, many of the actors in Jia Zhangke's films are from Shanxi or amateur actors. Dialects allow the actors in the film to quickly enter the film's environment.

The lines in the film "Ash Is Purest White" are mainly dialects. Very few people perform in Mandarin, only the undergraduate, the gentleman who is cheated of money, and the shopkeeper who goes to Xinjiang. Other actors all use dialects, mainly the dialects of Datong, Shanxi and Fengjie, Chongqing. Dialect dialogue has a clear regional orientation, and the story mainly takes place in Datong, Shanxi and Fengjie, Chongqing. The use of dialect reflects the naturalness of the film.

IV. ACCOMPANYING TEXTS: THE CONTINUATION OF FILM TIME AND SPACE

Film symbols include not only various symbols involved in film narration, but also various symbols involved in the process of generating meaning in film. Film is not only a narrative art, but also a cultural ideographical expression practice. The pre-text is a type of accompanying text, and the pre-text is a previous text that has a cultural influence on the meaning of this text. In the ideographical expression practice of symbolic text, the existence of the pre-text is very common. The allusions used by ancient Chinese and the concepts of "intertextuality" in Western literary theories all involve the pre-text. The use of pre-text in the film is intentional by the director and plays an important role in the narrative of the film.

A. Frames connecting time and space

In the process of conceiving the story of the film, the director Jia Zhangke decides to use different frames for creation. Among them, six kinds of photography equipment are used for making the film. The different frames also represent different eras, indicating a long span of time. In addition, it is also a continuation of the story of the previous films made by the director. In his opinion, many elements among his films are connected, and the characters between films are continuous.

Jia Zhangke uses different frame ratios in the film, which is designed before the film is shot.

B. Continuing the intertextuality of the story

The concept of "intertextuality" is first proposed by French semioticsist and feminist critic Julia Christeva in her paper entitled "Bakhtin: Words, Dialogues and Novels": "The text of any work is composed like many

boutiques of texts, and any text is the absorption and transformation of other texts." The basic connotation is that every text is a mirror of other texts, and every text is the absorption and transformation of other texts. They refer to each other and are connected with each other to form an open network with unlimited potential, which constitutes the huge open system of the text in the past, present and future and the evolution of literary semiotics.

The feature of intertextuality is reflected in the film, which is the intention of director Jia Zhangke. He naturally connects the plot of the film he created before with the plot of "Ash Is Purest White". The two seem to be in the same scene, but time and space have changed on the original basis. When Qiao Qiao comes out of prison to find Brother Bin in Fengjie, she takes a cruise to The Three Gorges, and The Three Gorges is facing the forthcoming fourth external migration, which will cause part of the beautiful scenery to become underwater relics. At this time, it correlates the film "Still Life". At the same place, at different times, with the development and changes of the entire society, The Three Gorges is undergoing internal changes, which is also a mapping to the theme of the film.

In the film, the song "How Many Times Can Love Come Back" appears twice, once is when Qiao Qiao fails to find Brother Bin, and once is when Qiao Qiao and Bin Bin are completely separated, expressing the psychological state of the character, Qiao Qiao. At this time, it intertextualizes the film "Still Life". In the same place, at different times, they share similar plots. The heroines in the two films both go to The Three Gorges to find their lovers, and finally they are both completely separated. At this time, intertextuality is carried out to express the psychological state of the characters.

V. CONCLUSION

The film "Ash Is Purest White" tells the story from 2001 to 2018, spanning seventeen years. It tells the story of Jianghu, where there is Jianghu, there will be people's stories. As the protagonists of the film, Brother Bin and Qiao Qiao, their life experience reflects the changes of Jianghu. Brother Bin changes from the arbiter of the order of Jianghu to a person who disappears in Jianghu, and then he is not a person in Jianghu. And Qiao Qiao has changed from a person who is not a person of Jianghu to a person of Jianghu. These experiences reflect the unpredictability of affairs in the world, reflecting the changes of the society and characters. Among them, the change of the characters changes with the change of society. As a person in Jianghu, one needs to choose the right life between the changed and the unchanged.

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