

An Interpretation of Defamiliarization and Anti-hero in "The Shape of Water"

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ABSTRACT

"The Shape of Water" is an adult fairy tale with the theme of love. The film defamiliarizes the characters and the narrative plot of the hero and heroine, which widens the aesthetic distance between the film and the audience and makes the plain love story present a strange sensory experience. The depiction of anti-hero not only enriches the theme, but also shortens the sensory distance with the audience, which makes the audience feel the same and quickly integrate into the film to produce empathy. It is the skillful use of "defamiliarization" and "anti-hero" that depicts a great love story which is unusual, ethereal, aesthetic and magical.

Keywords: "The Shape of Water", Defamiliarization, Anti-hero.

1. INTRODUCTION

Because of its high-level film directing, clever character setting and rich theme implication, "The Shape of Water" has won many awards, such as the best film, the best director, the best art direction, the best original score and so on. The strange plot, the novel character setting and the depiction of anti-hero create a dark fairy tale full of metaphors for the audience. The story takes place in 1963 in the United States, with the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union as the background. Eliza, the heroine, is an ordinary cleaner in the American laboratory. She has neither the devil's body nor the angel's face. She even has physical defects. She is a dumb girl who can only communicate with people in sign language. The hero who made her fall in love and risked her life to save is a water monster imprisoned in the laboratory. He is half human and half fish. His face is weird and ferocious, but he has mysterious magic. The US and the Soviet Union are carrying out an arms race around him. Eliza's neighbor is a down and out gay painter. Eliza's friend, Zelda, is a black woman who is very disappointed in her family life. Robert Hofstadter, an expert in the laboratory, was a spy from the Soviet Union. He was neither accepted by the United States nor valued by his motherland. He became an outcast of both sides. These little people who live at the bottom of the society use their wisdom and courage to work

together to save the water monster. Finally, Eliza and the water monster return to the sea, get rebirth, and harvest the beautiful love across species. This film defamiliarizes the characters and narrative plots of the hero and heroine, prolongs the aesthetic distance of the audience, and makes the ordinary love story present a strange feeling. The portrayal of anti-hero makes the movie characters civilian and bottom, which shortens the distance with the audiences and makes the audiences feel the same. The audiences can quickly integrate into the film and resonate with it. It is the skillful use of "defamiliarization" and "anti-hero" that makes the film unique in style and high in artistic achievement. Based on the theory of "defamiliarization" and "anti-hero", this paper interprets the film from the perspectives of role building, narrative plot and theme connotation, and comes to the conclusion that it is the skillful use of "defamiliarization" and "anti-hero" that makes "The Shape of Water" the great success.

2. DEFAMILIARIZATION AND ANTI-HERO

The concept of "defamiliarization" was first put forward by Russian formalist critic Shklovsky in the early 20th century. Its related theories mainly include three aspects. Firstly, when appreciating art, the aesthetic is not for the cognitive process of things themselves, but for the process of experiencing the

things and emotions after art processing; Secondly, defamiliarization is a kind of writing techniques. "In the process of daily artistic creation, some innovative artistic techniques and methods are adopted to make the description object not stick to the stereotype for a long time, make it break away from the normal and show a novel side, with the purpose of changing the original thinking mode of readers and prolonging the aesthetic process of readers." [1] The purpose of its use is to break the aesthetic habit of aestheticians which is based on the general experience in daily life, so that they can interpret the works from a new perspective, so as to obtain a new aesthetic feeling and rich aesthetic experience; Finally, the connotation of defamiliarization is to make the normal things strange, to increase the difficulty of aestheticians' experiencing the works, so as to extend the whole experiencing process. In essence, defamiliarization is not to make the aesthetic simply feel strange to the form and theme of the works of art, but to change the objective state of things through certain skills, so as to change the general aesthetic experience of the aesthetic. Defamiliarization is an art trend that breaks the restriction of original form, encourages the creators to innovate boldly, and challenges the aesthetic stereotype and aesthetic psychology.

"Anti-hero, a concept opposite to hero, is a kind of character type in film, drama or novel." [2] It refers to the character who has the characteristics of villains or has the shortcomings of ordinary people, but at the same time "has heroic temperament and potential. Accidental factors force them to fight and stimulate their heroic potential. They overcome their own shortcomings with amazing perseverance and make extraordinary actions like heroes." [3] The related roles and concepts of anti- hero first appeared in Chinese and foreign classical literature, such as Achilles in Iliad and heroes of Liangshan in Water Margin. On the one hand, they may be heroes to save the people in some scenes, on the other hand, they may be villains full of shortcomings and evil character in some scenes or values. This contradiction endows them with distinct personality characteristics and unique personality charm. Compared with the traditional hero's absolute justice, nobility, impartiality, selflessness and non-cannibalism, the role of anti-hero is often closer to ordinary people's life and is more full of human fireworks. Its authenticity and intimacy shorten the sensory distance with the audiences, make the audiences feel the same, quickly integrate into the film, and resonate with it.

3. AN INTERPRETATION OF DEFAMILIARIZATION IN "THE SHAPE OF WATER"

3.1 *Defamiliarization of Characters*

In "The Shape of Water", the defamiliarization of characters is reflected in the defamiliarization of their external images. At the beginning of the film, it clearly shows that the film is a love fairy tale with fantasy color. But as the story unfolds, it seems that neither the ugly merman with evil temperament nor the pale and thin heroine Eliza is in line with the audiences' assumption of the golden boy and jade girl in the love fairy tale. Even compared with the beast in Beauty and the Beast, the appearance of the merman in this film is too scary. However, it is this strange shape that brings the audiences a strong new experience, opens up the aesthetic space, and greatly stimulates the curiosity of the audiences.

Eliza, the heroine in the film, gives people the feeling of mediocrity or even ugliness as soon as she appears on the stage. The depressed expression and pale skin color on her face are not pleasing. The audience can't help but wonder that the heroine is far away from the traditional heroine who combines beauty and wisdom. As the heroine of a love fairy tale, she obviously lacks the attraction to the opposite sex from the external image; while the male protagonist, as a merman, plays up his cruelty with a lot of blood from the beginning of his appearance, and the image is inclined to the setting of fish, which makes people feel extremely terrifying. In the film, he is imprisoned in the water prison for a long time, which makes him not like a powerful hero, but more like a weak person to be rescued. In fairy tales, such characters bear a curse, and they often break the curse and return to human form at the end of the plot. However, there is no such arrangement in this film, which is also the biggest defamiliarization in the characterization of this film.

Generally speaking, a mediocre and slightly ugly heroine, an ugly looking monster from the beginning to the end, subverts the role building convention of love fairy tales, goes against the general direction of public aesthetics, and creates a strange and unique artistic effect of defamiliarization.

3.2 *Defamiliarization of Narrative Plot*

In the classic love fairy tale narrative plot, the most common value orientation is "the prince saves the princess" and "evil does not oppress the right", and the narrative sequence derived from this is: 1.

Meeting 2. Love 3. Crisis 4. Solving crisis 5. Happy ending. This film also continues this basic narrative structure, but uses defamiliarization narrative in detail processing, "through the artistic means to make the characters, things and space in the film novel, and defamiliarize the common things to show the visual charm of the film" [4].

First of all, in the first stage of the first encounter between the protagonist and heroine, the merman, as an experimental object caught for research, meets the heroine in a dark laboratory. This first encounter does not show any sweetness and beauty. However, the plot of violence and abuse to the merman in the film adds a kind of black cruelty, breaking the audiences' usual beautiful fantasy of love fairy tale; in the second stage, the two people's acquaintance and love are absurd to normal people. On the one hand, the male and female protagonists have different species, and the love between man and beast has a sense of ethical taboo. On the other hand, the male and female protagonists do not have the ability to communicate with each other, so communication can only be carried out by sign language, which also has a sense of strangeness. In the third stage, defamiliarization expands the crisis of blocking their love to the political confrontation under the background of the times, which adds a variety of pressure from race, social environment and international situation to the love between them. In the fourth stage, the one who solve the crisis is not a strong hero, but a disadvantaged group who is marginalized in the society and has the characteristics of anti-hero. In the fifth stage, the ending of the film is not perfect, Dr. Hofstadter's tragic death adds a strong color to the ending and makes the audiences feel the cruelty under the background of the times.

Generally speaking, in the narrative plot of this film, a large number of defamiliarization narrative processing breaks the usual routine of love fairy tales in the past, "breaks the audience's inherent horizon of expectation, and realizes the effect of novelty brought by strange narrative" [4].

4. INTERPRETATION OF "ANTI-HERO" IN "THE SHAPE OF WATER"

4.1 The Role Building of "Anti-hero"

On the one hand, the characterization of the anti-hero in this film is reflected in the weird images of the hero and heroine. On the other hand, it is reflected in the ordinary and great heroic characteristics of the supporting role. The male and female protagonists in

the film are deliberately vilified. They do not have the typical image of traditional heroes, such as high, noble and all-round, and even have defects in ability and body. But under their weakness and ugly images, they have the most simple and pure kindness. Faced with the dilemma of life and death, their courage and wisdom inspired their heroic potential. The strong contrast between the external image and the internal character is more frightening, which makes the audiences refreshing, and also makes the hero and heroine successfully portrayed as a typical anti-hero role. "In the face of such an anti-hero, the audiences can easily achieve the integration of personal vision and historical vision. They can carry out interpretive reading according to their own life experience and form a new aesthetic experience." [5]

For supporting actors, whether they are gay artists, black female workers at the bottom of society or professors of enemy agents, they all have the attributes of marginal people more or less. In their life, they are oppressed by the powerful people around them for a long time. They are lonely and depressed in their hearts, and they have the unspeakable pressure of the vulnerable groups. But when they are determined to help the hero and heroine out of kindness, they have successfully completed the transformation from ordinary people to anti-hero roles. Compared with traditional heroes, these anti-hero characters are more admirable and thought-provoking.

4.2 "Anti-hero" Against the Background of the Times

In novels, dramas, movies and other literary works, the role of anti-hero is often endowed with the significance of fighting against the traditional values by the creators. Through the reversal of the fate of the anti-hero role, we try to question the traditional value system, collectivism, social order, ideals and beliefs. The appearance of anti-hero is not only an innovation of hero image, but also an abbreviation of the change of human thought and social form. The creation of the anti-hero character and the development of the corresponding plot are also to highlight the dramatic changes of the times and the adjustment of social order.

It is easy to see that the story took place in the cold war period of the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. In this special era, the political high pressure environment has brought great impact on the social order, and the political power is almost superior to any individual consciousness. In fact, the merman trapped in the

water prison and the marginal group in the film can be regarded as the life status of ordinary people in the social environment at that time. In the film, the director creates an anxious atmosphere with gray tone and humid background. In this environment, the struggle of ordinary people actually has a kind of anti-hero characteristics.

5. DEFAMILIARIZATION AND ANTI-HERO IN "THE SHAPE OF WATER"

It is the skillful use of "defamiliarization" and "anti-hero" that presents a fantastic, ethereal, aesthetic and magical love story for the audience. The use of "defamiliarization" in this film brings great freshness to the audience, breaking the audience's consistent understanding of fantasy fairy tales. The interracial mermaid romance is no longer as romantic and aesthetic as Andersen's fairy tale "Daughter of the Sea", but is deliberately twisted into an adult fairy tale full of violence and darkness. The story plot of "Beauty and the Beast" is not applicable in this film, no matter the heroine with poor image, or the merman with ferocious face from beginning to end. The alternative aesthetic style of character modeling also brings the audience a huge contrast to break through the potential cognition. For this film, the use of defamiliarization not only gives the film great freshness, but also makes the audience pull away from the inherent thinking of the past love fairy tales. The film narrative under the effect of alienation can help the audience better think about many metaphors in the film, which also highlights the film's rich theme greatly. "The defamiliarized plot is no longer a plot that causes the readers to feel delayed, but a way for the readers to re-examine life." [6]

And the use of "anti-hero" makes the positive role in the play not perfect person, but the ordinary people who will suffer and have pressure. On the one hand, this opposite way of character building makes the content of the story a little more earthly, so that the audiences can quickly integrate into the film through the daily life of gay artists, black female workers and other characters, so as to better accept the story development in the background of the film era. On the other hand, the creation of grassroots heroes also makes the story burst out with strong appeal in specific nodes. In the climax of the film, when people work together to help the hero and heroine escape from the predicament, the audiences can be moved by their courage weak but willing to bear the terrible consequences for the sake of kindness, and can also bring themselves into the role and have empathy with

them. The use of "anti-hero" gives the film a strong sense of substitution, so that the audiences can better integrate into the dark fairy tale like cold world, to think and experience the difficulty of ordinary people's life in such an environment, as well as the hero and heroine's courage to pursue the great love.

6. CONCLUSION

The simultaneous use of "defamiliarization" and "anti-hero" greatly enriches the connotation of the film, and enables the film to reflect human nature, politics, religion, human relations and other propositions from more levels. The use of defamiliarization breaks the fixed trend of love fairy tales, and makes the film create the era background of the story from a more mature and cold perspective, which gives more connotation besides good and evil to the confrontation of different camps in the film. While the use of anti-hero breaks the monotonous shaping of good and evil characters, and the weak and ugly protagonists and grass-roots supporting roles radiate more brilliance of human nature under the background of the times, which also adds a lot of consideration for human nature besides love to the film. "Defamiliarization" widens the aesthetic distance, and makes the old love story novel. The anti-hero focuses on the ordinary people around us, shortens the sensory distance with the audience, makes the audience feel the same and quickly integrate into the film. It is the ingenious combination of "defamiliarization" and "anti-hero" that makes "The Shape of Water" a great success.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Yingchun Zhang.

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