

Image Symbol Interpretation of Tibetan Film “Balloon”

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ABSTRACT

From the perspective of semiotics, the images in the movie text all have certain referential significance. Individual symbols and the arrangement and combination between symbols together constitute a complete movie text. Applying semiotics theory to analyze the movie text is helpful to interpret the deep meaning of the movie. Based on the basic principles of semiotics, this paper interprets the Tibetan film *Balloon*. By analyzing the expression of Tibetan culture by image symbols in the film, the interpretation of theme implication by surrealist images and the symbol reference and symbol matrix pattern in the meaning construction of this film text, this paper constructs a cultural picture of Tibetan characters and their survival dilemma drawn by director Pema Tsenden.

Keywords: *semiotics; Tibetan films; "Balloon"; Tibetan culture*

1. INTRODUCTION

Tibetan film refers to the film based on Tibetan cultural standpoint, taking Tibetan life as the theme, reflecting Tibetan cultural characteristics and showing Tibetan cultural spirit. Compared with Tibetan movies in a broad sense, Tibetan films have the characteristics of reflecting deeper cultural connotation, embodying the particularity and spiritual core of traditional Tibetan culture, and they are essentially different. In recent years, "Tibetan films with Han nationality thinking in Tibetan cloaks" have emerged one after another in the film market. Pema Tsenden, a local Tibetan director, has opened a new way of thinking about the creation of Tibetan films, aiming at telling Tibetan stories from an objective and head-up perspective. "*Balloon*" is one of Pema Tsenden's representative works. The director expresses Tibetan culture through image symbols, reflects the current Tibetan life through realistic movies with surrealism, and writes Tibetan culture with a guide pen, which makes dreams and reality interweave into a Tibetan image poem in his films.

2. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF IMAGE SYMBOLS TO TIBETAN CULTURE

From the perspective of semiotics, Tibetan films

should be films that organize narratives by encoding and decoding Tibetan cultural symbols. The use of such symbols contains the nation's life knowledge, life attitude and cultural core and its particularity, and has a distinct narrative position. The interpretation of the application of symbols is also the interpretation of the meaning conveyed by the films. ^[1] In the film "*Balloon*", there are many symbols in the film text that are worth interpreting, which can be generally summarized as "image symbols symbolizing traditional Tibetan culture" and "image symbols metaphorically reflecting the impact of traditional Tibetan culture on modern civilization".

2.1 Traditional Tibetan cultural image symbols

In a certain sense, the image symbols in Tibetan films refer to the traditional Tibetan culture. They not only show the customs and spiritual beliefs of Tibetan areas, but also the rich cultural heritage of Tibetan areas. In the film "*Balloon*", director Pema Tsenden didn't deliberately show Tibetan traditional culture, but they were everywhere and conveyed to the audience in the form of symbols. Typical traditional Tibetan image symbols can be divided into two categories, namely, Tibetan traditional ritual symbols and Tibetan religious belief symbols.

Tibetan traditional ritual symbols are embodied in

three kinds of symbols: characters, scenes and behaviors. From the character symbols, the typical one that can best embody Tibetan traditional culture is Grandpa. He is dressed in Tibetan costumes; cows are considered to be the best means of transportation; think that the new birth mode will lead to the end of the world; Grandma's "reincarnation" of Wang Yang Dian butter lamp, and so on, grandpa's thoughts and behaviors all show his adherence to traditional Tibetan culture. In terms of scene symbols, the village, the main place of the story, is a major scene symbol of the film. Colorful prayer flags (or wind horse flags) are flying everywhere in the village, which is the most influential representative of Tibetan cultural symbols. The villagers in the village show the ethnic image of the Tibetan people from language, clothes and behavior. In terms of behavioral symbols, the ritual of finding high-quality breeding sheep is an important behavioral symbol in Tibetan traditional culture. The behavior of treating rams and ewes is a metaphor for Tibetan traditional family concept and deep-rooted fertility concept.^[2]

Tibetan religious symbols are mainly embodied in line symbols and behavior symbols. Judging from the line symbols, the six-character mantra; the unquestionable words of the guru and the supreme religious status, and follow the Buddhist philosophy" when Zhuoga's sister came to the village for alms, all reflected the Tibetan people's devotion to religious belief. Behavioral symbols are mainly reflected in people's belief in reincarnation. Their brother has certain privileges at home because he is considered to be the reincarnation of his grandmother, etc. These behavioral symbols are the image expression of Tibetan mysterious religious culture.

The above image symbols not only convey the simple family ethics, but also the transcendent concept of reincarnation, as well as the long-standing cultural beliefs. Through the signification of symbols, Pema Tsenden tells the original Tibetan story.

2.2 Image symbols of Tibetan culture under the impact of modern civilization.

Under the strong impact of modern civilization on traditional culture, the lives of Tibetan people are also changing quietly. In *"Balloon"*, a large number of live-action shooting and large-scale shooting are used, and the shooting method of hand-held camera is used to show the real Tibetan life and the living conditions and ideological concepts of the Tibetan people under the impact of modern civilization. The development and changes, contradictions and conflicts, as well as racial reflections on the loss and inspection of the entire traditional Tibetan culture.

The most vivid representation in the film that traditional culture has been impacted by modern civilization is the character symbol of Zhuoga. As a

traditional Tibetan woman, she showed an attitude of acceptance and resistance to modern civilization. On the one hand, Zhuoga tried hard to control her body repeatedly. She wanted to have a ligation operation and family planning supplies. In the end, under the influence of Dr. Zhou Cuo's female consciousness, she wanted to abort the reincarnated child of her grandfather in her womb; on the other hand, like most Tibetan women, she bears children and keeps to old traditions. She feels ashamed to be seen by male doctors in the hospital. As a result, the film not only shows Zhuoga's hazy awakened female individual consciousness, but also implicitly expresses the restricted and disciplined side of this consciousness. In today's Tibetan areas, traditional Tibetan culture and modern civilization are in a state of coexistence. The character symbol of Zhuoga represents the changes in the traditional way of the Tibetan people under the impact of modern civilization concepts. Her awakening of self-awareness and her reflection on traditional gender concepts show the living conditions of the Tibetan people today. Some of them are mixed and some are relatively opposite, but whether it is lifestyle, traditional rituals, religious beliefs or the stipulations of husband's power repression are all subject to certain influence.

In addition, many symbols of modern civilization in traditional Tibetan culture appeared in the film.^[3] In the face of the motorcycle that Dajie rides, Grandpa's attitude is "not as good as a horse", even so, in reality, the horse has been replaced by the motorcycle. Airplanes and highways have also been quietly integrated into this land.

3. THE INTERPRETATION OF THE THEME IMPLICATION BY SURREALIST IMAGE SYMBOLS

In *"Balloon"*, a realistic film, the director added surreal lens under the realistic tone, which increased the poetry of the work and gave the work a magical realism color. Surrealist images show people's subconscious emotions with metaphorical symbols, collage and collide images with different connotations to convey some hidden thoughts together, which plays a role in highlighting the deep theme of the film and enriching the connotation of the works.

The director has used surreal scene symbols many times, and the typical ones are as follows: The first one is Wang Yang's dream when Grandpa is going out. Wang Yang calls out to Grandpa, and the camera slowly moves down to the surface of the water. The reflection of Grandpa walking with Buddha beads in his hand appears in the water, and a horse is tied at the end of the road. In psychoanalytic semiotics, dreams are the spiritual product of the subject, and unconscious thoughts in real life are often presented in the form of dreams. This surreal image is a metaphorical expression, and it interprets the concept of reincarnation in the traditional Tibetan cultural

beliefs-death is not the end of life, but the beginning of the next life. ^[4] The second typical image symbol is that the mole on Wang Yang's back, which symbolizes the reincarnation of grandma, is taken down by two younger brothers. The camera goes from the desert to the lake, and Wang Yang stops and stands. In this scene, the original ecological scene of the desert, as a symbol, contrasts with the highways and construction projects in the county, and reproduces the original state of this Tibetan land. The mole symbolizing reincarnation and traditional belief was easily picked, suggesting that the two younger brothers had doubts about the so-called reincarnation concept, and reinterpreting the theme of the swing of traditional Tibetan culture under the impact of modern civilization. The third typical surreal image is a fantasy of Zhuoga in a dilemma. In the mirror image of the window glass, she and her sister were laughing when they were young, and the next second, in reality, her sister dressed as a nun was waiting for her, suggesting that neither Zhuo Ma nor Zhuoga could resist at the mercy of fate. The last surrealist image is that after Zhuoga hides the condom sent by the male doctor, the lens goes from the tied ewe to the sun to Zhuoga. Her face is reflected in the basin, and the water in the basin fluctuates from microwave to waves until Zhuoga's reflection is completely invisible. This image shows her inner turmoil, anxiety and uneasiness at the moment.

The application of these surrealist scenes in the film explains the issues of reincarnation, faith, humanity and destiny, and deepens the theme of the film. Taking sex as a secret incision, it unfolds multiple thematic clues such as life, reincarnation, belief and binary opposition of reality, and penetrates into modern issues such as religious belief and fertility issues, which makes this realistic film have richer thematic connotations.

4. INTERPRETATION OF INDIVIDUAL TRAGEDY IN SYMBOLIC MATRIX MODE

Binary opposition is a model of symbolic matrix mode. Greimas of France put forward the concept of symbolic matrix in his symbolic narratology theory, and analyzed the construction of film text meaning through symbolic matrix. Levi-Strauss also mentioned binary opposition in structuralist anthropology. He thought it was an internal relationship and logic of myth. As a basic relational element, it often appeared in movies. ^[6] For the interpretation of the film, through the binary opposition structure, we can further analyze the connotation of the film, and understand the deep-seated problems such as the construction of symbols and how the combination and arrangement of symbols produce meaning. The matrix pattern is as follows: firstly, set an X; The opposite one is anti-X; In addition to the establishment of the project, there is another item that contradicts X but is not opposite, which is not X; There is also a contradiction between anti-X and non-anti-X.

In the film text, the binary opposition relationship is not only the basic structure that produces meaning, but also the most fundamental deep structure. The opposite relationship is a basic relationship, and the meaning can only exist through the binary opposition relationship, while the contradictory (negative) relationship is an auxiliary relationship that helps to express the deep meaning of the text. By analyzing the opposition or contradiction of each symbol element in the film, we can explain the construction and generation of meaning. Although this symbol matrix model is not complicated, it can introduce new elements into the story process and enrich and expand the story.

In *Balloon*, opposing elements (belief and reality) and contradictory elements (unbelief and unreality) form a symbol matrix. In this film, director Pema Tsenden pays attention to expressing realistic problems. From a personal perspective, he sets up a number of binary opposition structures, such as different attitudes, beliefs and realities, resistance and compromise, which treat traditional culture and modern civilization, and explains the tragic life of little people under the background of the big times. ^[7] Applying Greimas' symbol matrix to interpret the film *Balloon*, one of the most obvious binary opposition relations is the opposition between belief and reality, that is, X in the model is the belief, and anti-X is the belief's right project, that is, reality, which is opposite to each other. It can be said that this group of relations is the most profound proposition in the film. The non-X in the model is a modern civilization, which, as a new culture, is contradictory to the traditional belief, but not antagonistic; Non-anti-X, which contradicts reality but is not opposed, is the traditional culture of Tibet. Based on the binary opposition relationship in the symbol matrix, it can be concluded that: First, belief and reality are opposed to each other, Zhuoga is pregnant, and both herself and Dr. Zhou Cuo think it should be aborted. Both of them are more concerned about the problems in real life, leaving children means paying fines and facing greater life pressure; However, the husbands, sisters who stand on the opposite side and the majority of Tibetan people who do not show their positions think that children should be kept, because they think that children are the reincarnation of grandpa, and aborting them means rejecting the rebirth of the undead. Different positions represent a pair of propositions of opposing beliefs and reality. However, modern civilization and belief are contradictory, and the new technology and new ideas brought by the development of modern civilization have had a certain impact on traditional belief. ^[8] Dr. Zhou Cuo suggested that Zhuoga abort the child. It was under the guidance of modern civilized education that she had her own understanding of the concept of female fertility, and Zhuoga was also influenced by it. This new concept was negative to her faith; Tibetan traditional culture is also contradictory to reality. Adhering to Tibetan traditional culture means ignoring the practical

problems of economic pressure. Similarly, it is mentioned in the interpretation of "sheep" that ewes without lambs mean "useless". Like ewes, Zhuoga has her obligation to bear children, which also reflects the denial of reality by traditional Tibetan culture.

Through analysis, the symbol matrix of the film *Balloon* is as follows: belief and reality are opposed to each other, modern civilization has impacted traditional belief, while traditional culture has denied reality. As a woman who has been influenced by traditional Tibetan culture, Zhuoga, the protagonist, has been influenced by modern civilization from many aspects. On the question of whether to keep children, she started a tentative confrontation due to the opposition between practical problems and beliefs. Through the four elements in the symbol matrix mode, we can realize the deep relationship in the film, discover how the story develops and the tragedy of the characters comes into being.

5. CONCLUSION

In this film, all the voices of confrontation, such as love and estrangement, tradition and modernity, life or not, oppression and relief, tears and laughter, include two balloon images of red and white, which continue in opposition and unity, jointly interpret the tragedy of the individual's destiny and construct the meaning of the image symbols in the film text. At the end of the film, Zhuoga, Dajie, and the children watched *Le Ballon Rouge* rise slowly in different places. The surreal scene made this story even more sad. Director Pema Tsenden used symbols and permutations of symbols to express their feelings together, and portrayed the Tibetan people's group images and the cultural picture of their survival dilemma.

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