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Mirror Aesthetics in The Lake: A Study of the Construction of Characters' Psychological Space

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Abstract. Taking the realist film The Lake as its research object, this paper uses close reading of the film text to examine how mirror images participate in the construction of characters' psychological space, from three dimensions: the superimposition of the virtual and the real, spatial division, and dynamic transformation. The study finds that the superimposition of old photos and present-day reflections in the frame glass places past family reunions and the solitude after widowhood side by side, allowing memory to enter the present living space; the compositional divisions formed by mirrors and glass provide visual clues for understanding the psychological distance between family members; the movement of characters in the mirror and the changing reflections in the car window present the closeness between family members and the emotional state of individual silence. These forms interweave in the film's family narrative, presenting the loneliness that still exists within shared life, and the process of family members trying to understand each other.

Keywords: The Lake, mirror aesthetics, psychological space, visual narrative, realism

1. Introduction

In the creative practice of Chinese realist art films, quite a few family-themed works turn their attention to the inner spiritual world of ordinary people. Some creators do not rely entirely on intense external conflicts or long monologues to deliver emotion, but use audiovisual means such as scene composition and camera scheduling to project onto the screen the psychological difficulties that characters cannot say in plain words. The regional realist film *The Lake* is exactly such a work. The film takes the life trajectory of the elderly father Shuwen as its main line. After his first wife passed away, the father both keeps a deep remembrance of his late wife and develops the wish to start a new emotional life. Facing the father's choice, the children care about his life, yet find it hard to accept this new relationship. From this the story spreads out the respective family situations of the three daughters, presenting the tangled emotions and cognitive divergences inside the whole extended family. The film's overall narrative leans toward restraint, with few explosive conflicts; the loneliness and obsessions in the characters' hearts, and the barriers between family members, are mostly hidden in the plain details of family daily life, and the mirror shots formed by reflective media such as glass, mirrors and car windows thus become an important visual clue for reading the characters' spiritual world.

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On this basis, this paper focuses on how *The Lake* uses the reflections of everyday objects to transform characters' memories and family relationships into concrete visual forms. Most of the mirror images in the film are formed by everyday media such as mirrors, glass and car windows, yet they carry the narrative functions of presenting characters' inner worlds and organizing the relationships between characters. From this, this paper raises two core questions: through which audiovisual strategies do the mirror shots in *The Lake* construct the characters' psychological space? And how do these mirror forms participate in the expression of the film's family emotions?

This study mainly adopts the method of close reading of the film text, sorting out the different presentation forms of the mirror language in *The Lake*, and combining frame case analysis to examine the expressive functions of composition logic, camera movement and reflective media, exploring how mirror images transform invisible inner activities of characters into perceivable psychological space, and digging out the aesthetic implication and realist creative value of Chinese family narrative behind this set of shot language. Note that the mirror images discussed in this paper mainly refer to the images formed by reflection through media such as mirrors and glass, and the focus is on how their composition and movement changes participate in the expression of characters' psychology.

2. Literature review

2.1. A review of research progress on mirror images in film

First, at the level of mirror image research in film, studies mainly focus on two directions: theoretical tracing and audiovisual interpretation. The theoretical part draws on the psychoanalytic views of three scholars: Freud's discussion of the unconscious, repression and dreams provides psychoanalytic theoretical resources for understanding the psychological activities of characters that are not directly spoken [1]; Lacan proposed the "mirror stage" theory, discussing how the subject forms self-cognition through the image in the mirror, and the misrecognition mechanism contained in this process of identification [2]; Baudry further introduced psychoanalytic theory into the study of the cinematic apparatus, and the "screen mirror identification theory" compares the screen to a mirror, explaining that when watching a film the audience identifies with the image, thus producing the psychological feeling of self-displacement [3]. Compared with the discussions of deep psychic analysis, subject identity construction and audience identification emphasized by the above theories, this paper focuses more on the audiovisual expressive value of the mirror image itself, and focuses on exploring how the mirror image, as a classic film language, participates in and constructs the psychological space exclusive to characters. Besides the psychoanalytic path, foreign studies also discuss mirror images from the levels of film space and form. Hanich summarizes some mirror shots as "complex mirror shots", emphasizing that the mirror can reorganize the in-frame, out-of-frame and deep space [4]; Elsaesser and Hagener proceed from film viewing and spatial relations, discussing how mirror images change the relations between characters, space and viewing position [5].

Localized research approaches to mirror images have also taken shape in Chinese film studies, and the "jing you" theory proposed by Lin Niantong is a representative among them [6]. The core of this theory is divided into "jing" and "you": "jing" refers to various reflective media, which carry the narrative function of characters' self-examination; "you" is taken from traditional Chinese spatial aesthetics and refers to narrative techniques of flowing shots and interlaced time-space [7], and can be used to interpret how Chinese films rely on mirror images to complete retrospection of the past and reshape characters' images [8]. At the level of audiovisual form, existing studies have paid

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attention to the emotional expressive functions of visual forms such as mirrors, glass, occlusion and reflection. For example, one study takes Wong Kar-wai's films as its object, pointing out that the films use shot language such as mirrors, glass, occlusion and reflection to carry Chinese holistic thinking and the aesthetic quality of restraint and introversion. In works such as *In the Mood for Love* and *Chungking Express*, the visual forms of reflections in mirrors and partitions of doors and windows directly externalize the characters' restrained and suppressed emotions and long-lasting spiritual loneliness, integrating traditional Oriental aesthetic connotations into modern urban image narrative [9].

2.2. A review of research progress on psychological space in film

Second, research on psychological space in film has also accumulated many results. Quite a few documents focus on the creation of transforming physical scenes into inner emotional space. Some scholars take post-emotionalism theory as the research perspective, proposing that images can reconstruct original emotions, and emotional space thus becomes an important carrier of expression in films; in related studies they take realist films such as *Youth* and *Better Days* as examples to argue how real scenes such as rooms and streets carry private emotions like pain and endurance, and at the same time point out that current emotional narratives mostly use bodily trauma and everyday scenes as carriers of emotion, but rarely combine reflective visual elements such as mirrors and glass to complete the analysis of psychological space [10]. In addition, in discussions of the memory space of Chinese suspense films, some scholars have sorted out two types of psychological space construction, interweaving of the virtual and the real and jumps of time-space, using films such as *The Dead End* and *Deep in the Heart* as examples to show that films build multi-layered spiritual worlds through fragmented memories and spatial gazing. Existing studies mostly focus on spiritual spaces such as memory and dreams, discussing the interaction between memory narrative and screen space, and sorting out the various ways of constructing psychological space [11].

To sum up, at present, studies on mirror images are mostly interpreted at the levels of visual symbols and cultural metaphors; discussions in the direction of psychological space put more weight on the film's emotional expression and virtual-real narrative. On this basis, there is still room for further discussion of how the mirror image, as a concrete visual mechanism, participates in the construction of characters' psychological space. *The Lake* makes heavy use of mirror and glass reflections from everyday environments, providing a fairly concentrated text case for observing the connection between the two.

3. Analysis and results

3.1. The superimposition of the virtual and the real of mirror images: visual construction of memory psychological space

The superimposition of the virtual and the real in mirror images is an important visual means by which the film builds the father's memory psychological space. Although the memory psychological space does not exist physically, it is rooted in the character's past experiences; it is an inner spiritual world formed by the character being entangled in past emotions and processed by the character's subjectivity.

Through the reflection of the photo frame glass, the film superimposes the father's present figure on the old photos, so that the present situation and the past family life enter the frame at the same time, thereby transforming the character's memory into visible spatial relations. As shown in Figure

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1(a), the frame glass superimposes the reflection of the father in reality and the family photos of the past in the same frame. The shot points at the family photo placed in the room; the photo in the frame completely preserves the appearance of the family, including Yuanqin — this is the frozen, unalterable past. The transparent glass on the surface of the frame produces reflection, superimposing the shadow of the father sitting nearby in the real space onto the photo. Thus two layers of images exist simultaneously within the same frame: one layer is the old times of family reunion in the photo, the other layer is the father reflected by the glass, now sitting alone on the sofa. When discussing "complex mirror shots" in cinema, Hanich points out that the mirror can form a kind of "frame within the frame", and by reorganizing the depth of the picture and the out-of-frame space, what the audience faces is no longer a single, stable visual space, but a composite image with multiple spatial layers placed side by side [4]. With this composite composition, the two temporal layers are transformed into visual spaces overlapping each other, the father's memory thereby gains a concrete spatial form, and the loneliness of the unchanged place and the changed people is magnified through the glass's superimposed images.

The clock in Figure 1(b) adds a temporal meaning to the character's memory theme. If the family photo preserves the frozen family image, the clock hints at the continuous passing of time. Combined with the father's life situation after losing his wife, this frame can be understood as an indirect hint at the passage of time and the absence of the loved one. Unlike the way the frame glass superimposes the old photos and the present reflection, the clock mainly forms an echo in meaning with the aforementioned family photo through the temporal attribute of the everyday object.



(a) Reflection of the family photo in the frame glass (b) Reflection on the clock mirror

Figure 1. Visual presentation of the superimposition of the virtual and the real of mirror images in *The Lake*

3.2. The spatial division of mirror images: visualization of the psychological space of family relationships

The film organizes the relationships between characters through media with reflection, perspective or space-dividing functions such as mirrors and glass. It needs to be explained that the expressive function of glass here does not come entirely from clear reflections, but from the composite visual effect formed by reflection, perspective and physical separation together, so this paper discusses it as an extended form of mirror language in real space. The mirror can form two visual areas, inside the mirror and outside the mirror; glass has both transparency and separation, so that characters can see each other while being at different spatial levels. This kind of composition gives the relationships between characters in the same physical space a visual distinction. This visual state exactly corresponds to the psychological distance between family members: the family members share the same physical space and know of each other's existence, yet generational ideas, life positions and real circumstances create rifts at the psychological level.

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Hanich points out that complex mirror shots can reorganize the relations between the space inside the mirror, reality and the out-of-frame space [4]. As shown in Figure 2(a), in the shot sequence of the eldest daughter's family, Xiaoqian outside the mirror and the father are arranged in the same visual area, while Xiaoqian's mother appears in the mirror in the form of a reflection. This composition first forms a grouping relationship of the characters visually: the former two share the space outside the mirror, while the mother is separated by the boundary of the mirror frame. Combined with the family interaction in this scene, the spatial difference between inside and outside the mirror further hints at the not entirely consistent emotional positions among the characters. The characters are not completely separated in physical distance, but the mirror division transforms the hidden relationship differences within the family into visible visual relations.

Figure 2(b) uses the transparency and separation of glass to make the living spaces of different characters distinguishable in the same frame. In the scenes of the second son-in-law's family and the third daughter's family, the transparent glass stands between the characters; the characters can see each other, but the frame is cut apart by the glass, reflecting the different living environments and material details of the two small families, visualizing the differences in living conditions between the families. The family members belong to the same extended family and keep in contact with each other, but their respective life circles and real circumstances have drawn apart. With the composition of mirror division, the director makes visible this complex family psychological relationship that is hard to express in plain words, letting the audience read the subtle psychological gaps between the characters through the images.



(a) Spatial division of the indoor mirror (b) Spatial separation of the architectural glass

Figure 2. The division of the characters' relationship space by mirror images in *The Lake*

3.3. The dynamic transformation of mirror images: flowing presentation of character relationships and emotional memory

Different from the first two types of relatively static mirror compositions, the film also uses character movement, camera movement and changes of reflective media to constantly change the spatial relations inside the mirror image. Dynamic mirror images can both present the closeness and adjustment of character relationships and give the characters' persistent emotional memory a flowing visual form.

As shown in Figure 3(a), the eldest daughter's position inside the mirror changes as the characters move. The eldest daughter finds the harmonica that the late mother kept for the father from the wardrobe, then she leaves the wardrobe and walks step by step toward the window. Throughout the process, the figures of the father and daughter are not directly presented in the shot frame; they are all taken in by the reflection of the mirror hanging on the wardrobe door. As the eldest daughter keeps moving toward the window, the composition inside the mirror also changes synchronously; the mirror completely records the scene of her walking to the father's side. The movement of

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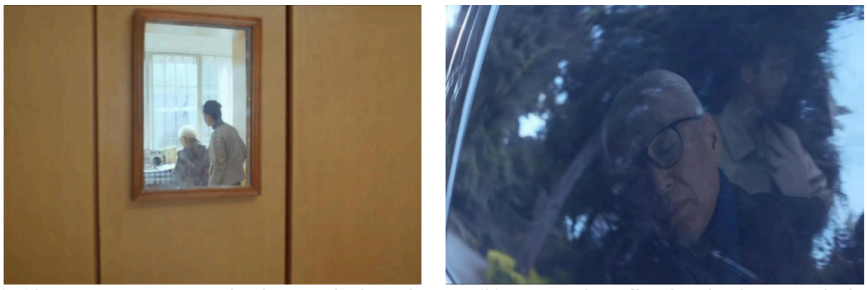
characters in real space is thus transformed into changes of character relationships inside the mirror image. The eldest daughter gradually walks from one side of the mirror to the father's side, and the distance between father and daughter inside the mirror is thereby shortened. Elsaesser and Hagener regard the "mirror" as an important spatial structure connecting the inside and the outside in film viewing, pointing out that the mirror image not only involves characters' watching of themselves, but also reorganizes the relations between characters, space and viewing position [5]. At the same time, the harmonica in her hand brings the memory of the late mother into the present interaction between father and daughter. The mirror image here links the spatial process of the daughter gradually approaching the father with the emotional process of her gradually understanding the father's remembrance of his late wife.

In Figure 3(b), the movement of the car makes the car window a constantly changing reflective medium. The trees and street scenes outside the window keep sweeping backward, and their reflections enter the frame together with the father's relatively stable facial image, forming a visual contrast between the flowing and the still. Compared with the constantly changing outside scenery, the father's body and expression remain relatively stable; this contrast strengthens the character's silent, restrained emotional state.



(a) Character movement in the wardrobe mirror (b) Dynamic reflection in the car window

Figure 3. The dynamic transformation of mirror images in *The Lake*

4. Discussion

4.1. The visual transformation of restrained family emotions in mirror language

The family emotions presented in *The Lake* have obvious features of introversion and restraint. The sadness and longing in the characters' hearts, and the barriers between family members that are hard to put into words, are not vented plainly through intense dramatic conflicts, but mostly hidden in the details of daily interaction. Fei Xiaotong's discussion of interpersonal relations and family structure in the traditional rural society provides a social and cultural background for understanding this restrained emotional expression: "in the traditional family, emotions are not accustomed to being vented outward; complex emotions are often stored in the cracks of daily life and not easily spread out in conversation" [12]. In *The Lake*, this kind of emotional expression that does not rely on direct speech is further transformed into a visual way; the psychological feelings that characters find inconvenient to speak are not stated directly through dialogue, but complete the visual transformation through reflective media in the real environment such as glass and mirrors.

The mirror effects discussed in this paper are mainly built on physical reflections in the real environment; these reflective media from daily life give the memories, barriers and longing that characters can hardly say directly a visible spatial form. Zhang Xi, in discussing the nostalgic narrative of recent Chinese films, notices that mirror images can participate in the reorganization of "the past", allowing memory to re-enter the narrative in the form of present images [8]. *The Lake*

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continues this mode of expression in which mirror images and memory are interconnected, but its handling is more everyday: the past does not reappear through complete flashbacks, but attaches itself to household objects such as the photo frame glass and the wardrobe mirror, so that the characters' remembrance always exists inside the present living space.

4.2. The creative value of mirror aesthetics in realist image expression

From the perspective of film form, mise-en-scène, composition and cinematography are not decorations attached outside the narrative, but an important way of organizing the audience's understanding of characters and story [13]. Therefore, the mirror design in *The Lake* does not weaken the film's sense of life: the mirrors, glass and car windows themselves all come from the characters' real living environment, and the formal design is also built on these everyday objects. Mirror aesthetics is thus not formal showmanship outside realism, but becomes a way for real space to extend into the characters' psychological space.

The superimposition of the virtual and the real, spatial division and dynamic transformation of mirror images present the characters' memory experience and family relationships from different angles, and these forms can also work together in concrete shots. The practice of *The Lake* shows that mirror aesthetics does not only serve urban or suspense subjects, but can also enter the realist narrative of ordinary families. On the basis of preserving the sense of life, the moderate use of mirror language can dig out the spiritual world that ordinary people hide beneath the surface of life, and also provides a certain reference for how realist art films of the same type present characters' psychology through audiovisual forms.

5. Conclusion

Taking reflective media such as mirrors, glass and car windows in *The Lake* as the research object, this paper analyzes the ways mirror images participate in the construction of characters' psychological space from three dimensions: the superimposition of the virtual and the real, spatial division and dynamic transformation. The study finds: first, media such as the photo frame glass, through the superimposition of old photos and present reflections, allow the characters' memory to enter the real living space; second, the visual partitions formed by inside and outside the mirror, inside and outside the glass, provide a spatialized expression of the psychological distance between family members; third, character movement, vehicle movement and changes of reflected images give the closeness of character relationships and the persistent emotional memory a dynamic form. The three ways are not isolated from each other, but together transform the memories, barriers and longing that characters can hardly say directly into visible visual relations.

Therefore, those longings and barriers never spoken out in *The Lake* also constitute a part of the film's real experience. The mirror image does not explain the emotions for the characters, but lets these parts that cannot be exhausted by dialogue gain a concrete form.

Of course, the discussion of this paper is mainly limited to the visual analysis of a single film, and the coordination of mirror images with sound, color and other means still has room for further examination. Future research can further examine the synergistic relations between mirror images and audiovisual elements such as sound and color, and by expanding the research sample, break through the limits of a single region and a single subject.

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