

A Study of the Narrative Method and Philosophical Core of Suspense Films

- A Case Study of the Practice Suspense Short Film Symmetrical Composition

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Abstract: The tone of suspense films is one of suspense, with a greater focus on breaking stereotypes in artistic production and viewing modes than in the genre in general. This paper focuses on the description and analysis of the short suspense film *Symmetrical Composition* in terms of both its presentation and its content. On this basis, it focuses on the prominent element of “dreams” in suspense films and analyses the deep subconscious and desires of human beings contained in dreams in depth. It also uses narrative theory to examine how suspense films can use the idea and mechanism of the dream world to construct more exciting suspense stories. On the other hand, it draws on cognitive construct theory to point out the cognitive difficulties of dream narratives in suspense films, and how techniques such as story lines, logical narratives and detailed cues can be used to make the films exciting to watch without confusing the audience. The paper concludes with a summary of the practical experience of suspense films on how dream narratives are presented and their reference value for academic research.

Keywords: suspense, narratives, dream

1. Introduction

From a historical and social perspective, it can be concluded that there are three main aesthetic features in the development of suspense film: the reversal of settings and the multi-perspective presentation of the plot; the noir style that creates the cinematic atmosphere; and the narrative framework constructed by the dream world. These three features include the narrative techniques and noir style of suspense films, as well as the psychology and cinematographic expression of the element of dreams.

This paper takes the suspenseful short film *The Realm* as an object of analysis. On the one hand, it analysed how the narrative structure and visual presentation of the film represent the difference between dreams and reality, how “truth” and “falsehood” are expressed, and how “dreams” are used as clues to guide the development of the story and thus attract the audience’s attention; On the other hand, the content of the film is analysed in terms of both the core of the story and the philosophical thinking of the characters’ dreams, and why they are created. This leads to the creation of suspense and reversals, and ultimately to the core thematic values that the film seeks to convey: Where is the

border between the harsh reality and the imaginary world? What choices do people make when people are faced with painful frustrations and difficulties, and what situations do such choices create?

In recent years, suspense films and TV series have continued to gain popularity in China and have been well received by audiences. China's four major domestic video platforms have also opened up dedicated suspense sections in a market-driven manner. This is because viewers are attracted by the highly unknown narrative settings and the endless ways of reversal, enjoying the excitement and engagement brought by plot reversals and brainstorming. However, suspense films still suffer from general textual weaknesses and superficial 'suspense' settings, resulting in an often contradictory and awkward feel to the films. Even the involvement of first-rate actors, cinematography and art cannot save it. So, for suspense films, the logic of the narrative text determines in large part the quality of the suspense film. The author therefore selects the more prominent element in suspense films - "dreams" - as the main object of analysis, relying on the presentation of cinematic expressions to summarise the aesthetic characteristics of suspense films on the one hand, and on psychoanalytic and narrative theories to interpret dreams in suspense films and point out the value they play in suspense films on the other.

2. Short Film: Introduction to Symmetrical Composition

The man has been searching for his missing sister for years, and he only vaguely remembers her sneaking to the bus stop one late afternoon when his neighbour's aunt wasn't looking and trying to greet himself from work, before being abducted by a strange man in black. He rushed to call the police, but they told him that the surveillance at that junction happened to be broken and failed to record the appearance of the man in black. He began to lose sleep after that, tossing and turning every day in remorse over the loss of his sister. Until recently, he was approached by a woman who claimed to be a "dreamer" and told him that she could help him find his sister through dreams. But in the dream world, the truth of what happened back then gradually emerges. It turns out that he and his sister lost both parents as children, and his sister is severely mentally challenged and often goes crazy and uncontrollable. On the one hand, he has to carry the burden of life and the responsibility of taking care of his sister, and on the other hand, he finally can't stand it when faced with her often out-of-control behaviour. He abandoned his sister at an unfamiliar junction, but to his surprise, she was seen by a kind person who lived nearby and returned home. Feeling his sister's haunting presence, he finally decides to kill her with his own hands. But his guilt for his sister plunges him back into deep remorse, and over time he begins to embellish his memories, imagining that someone who doesn't exist abducted her. The dream came to an abrupt end, and he opened his eyes. "Do you want to stay in this dream world with your sister and make up for your mistakes or do you want to return to reality and live with your guilt?", looking at the familiar face of the dream master, the man made his choice.

3. A Study of Narrative Techniques

3.1. Narrative Structure and Visual Presentation

The narrative structure of a suspense film is an important skeletal structure that underpins the entire film's worldview, presents the content of the story and captures the rhythm and suspenseful twists and turns of the narrative. The most important aspect of the film is how the dream world and reality are presented, how to maximise the fragmentation of the dream world, how to innovate the narrative structure on the basis of the traditional linear narrative, how the real and the unreal are intertwined, how to achieve self-justification and how to set up the "suspense points". The Chinese name of the film gives a glimpse of the story, as it is pronounced and understood as a mirror's phase, but the word "jing" here is the Chinese character for "realm", which means "dream", implying that the whole story revolves around dreams, which are the most important element in the narrative. The film organises

the story timeline and the images presented in two ways to show the difference between dreams and reality, and on this basis presents suspense for the film. The first is the “reversal” of the story. Suspense films can generally set up suspense in two ways: one is the omniscient “plot” reversal, which guides the audience through the ups and downs of the plot; The other is the use of ‘limiting perspective’, with ‘character’ as the main reversal factor [1]. In this case, the audience is “the one with the least amount of known information”, and when the identity and positioning of the characters are very different before and after the “reversal”, the audience will be shocked and suspicious of their previously formed basic perceptions. In the second half of the film, therefore, the reversal of the setting of the characters can manifest itself as a highly ritualistic and meaningful part of the film. In *The Face of the Realm*, the second approach is mainly used. This false memory is mixed with the real one, so that for the first half of the film, the audience is convinced of his “goodness” by his fond memories. But the false memories are a figment of the hero’s imagination, i.e. a vision that no one but he would see, so they are presented from the hero’s first point of view. The root of his inner turmoil and pain is that he too cannot accept that he is his sister’s murderer; he believes himself to be good and responsible for her, but the evil thoughts that have manifested themselves have briefly suppressed his conscience, so this tangle is his desire to find someone to take on these evil deeds in his place. So, he embellished his image, keeping only the side that loved his sister dearly. By subconsciously mapping his evil side onto others in reality, a man in black appears in the dream world, travelling in the place of his brother to commit this act of murder. The rest of the images are shown from a God’s point of view, or third view, representing a part of what really happened [2].

The second part is the timeline of the story [3]. The film takes a temporally fractured and spatially parallel approach to presenting the parts of the hero’s memory that he selectively forgets and remembers. In the first half of the film, the male protagonist dreams of himself as a very loving image of his sister, all in harmony and warmth when spending time with her. This part of the picture is dominated by warm colours, with an overall bright look and feel in order to create a warm and pleasant atmosphere, and also to allow the audience to vicariously experience the good things that the two had done together in the past, and to be convinced of the positive image of the brother. But as the play progresses, the dreaming brother once again arrives at the junction where his sister was lost. This time, with the interference of the Dream Master (set up to have the ability to alter the dreams of others), the brother finally sees, or rather recalls, the truth - that it was he who had abandoned his sister. From here the plot takes a sharp turn and the pieces of the dream world begin to come together. In the first half of the film, the heartwarming images shown are only half of the plot, as the sister’s behaviour is uncontrollable, so she always has sudden attacks to ruin the cozy atmosphere. Gradually, the male protagonist begins to be impatient and even violent towards his sister, indicating that the seeds of conflict have already been planted inside the male protagonist, and the first layer of suspense is revealed. The evil thoughts within the hero are a superimposed and deepening process [4]. At first, he might just want to leave his sister at the crossroads and let the heavens decide what his fate will be. But to his surprise his sister actually comes back to him with the help of a kind man. He begins to feel his sister’s haunting presence, which becomes the direct motive for his eventual murder of her. And while the dream world acts as a conduit to connect the entire work, this dream pathway that runs throughout forms the structural framework. The dream world in the film complements the real story, and indeed these messages are hidden in the story through the tone of the images and the composition of the perspective [5].

With the structure of the story as a solid skeleton, the use of visual techniques has to be used as the flesh and blood to fill it in. In order to achieve the goal of blurring the space of reality and the space of dreams, artistic techniques such as the use of colour and the transformation of light need to be carefully worked out. There are two layers of dreams in the film, the first of which is a falsely retouched, half-true dream. In this layer of dreaming, there are both real and fictional elements, an

effort is made to reduce the use of mixing and crossing and to create a stable and meticulously lit image. The main emphasis is on the beautiful and deep relationship between the hero and his sister, and the scenes are mostly brightly lit and highlighted with warm tones. But as the second layer of the dream begins to gradually reveal the truth, the film's tone begins to gradually intensify, which can add to the eeriness and tension of the atmosphere created by the red light. This tonal contrast can also be done in a relatively straightforward way in a short film, with plot and story reversals and contrasts [6].

3.2. Core of the Story and Philosophical Ideas

Sociologically speaking, human beings are social animals and as such people are often influenced in their inner spiritual expressions and thoughts by a variety of external social factors. These external social factors are both positive and negative of course, but which energy it is and the extent to which it affects people is largely determined by the person themselves internally. In Freud's spiritual doctrine, when things do not develop in the direction one expects or produce an unacceptable status quo, one's conscious mind instinctively rejects and thus suppresses these bad things into the subconscious mind. At the same time, in order to avoid the reappearance of these hidden things and the creation of unbearable pain due to specific triggers, people try to release people's unexpressed pain and unfulfilled desires in reality through the realm of dreams. In the dream world, people are the masters of the whole world. Through the central regulator, the subconscious mind, people recode and decode scenes from reality through the subconscious mind and then map them in the dream world [7]. It is interesting to note that humans may deal with negative emotions, such as anger, fear, sadness or guilt, in a glorified form.

Most of the film's narrative takes place in a dream, as the man's mind is pulled frantically by a sense of relief and the infinite guilt he feels for his sister after killing her with his own hands. In this extreme emotion, he began to self-glorify his memories, shifting the blame onto someone he had conjured up and who did not actually exist. Using this self-deception, he finally achieved a brief moment of relief. After many years of success and fame, he still did not give up his search for his sister until he met the Dream Master Mirror who claimed to be able to help him find her. In his dream, he recalls all the past days when he and his sister were dependent on each other. They have not known who their parents are since they were young, and the two siblings have no one to turn to, with the younger sister even having a severe intellectual disability and mental illness. In order to survive, he has to work to earn a living while taking care of his younger sister who is incapable of taking care of herself. However, God doesn't stop imposing fate on people just because they are a miserable person. Because without an educational background, he couldn't do some decent jobs with high income and had to work odd jobs to make ends meet. But his sister's situation led to him not being able to juggle his work very well either, so at a young age he has already experienced the warmth of the world. Even so, because his sister was the only family he had in the world, he tried to shoulder his responsibility as an older brother and take care of her to the best of his ability. He would take his sister to eat her favourite cake and gently reassure her to wait for him when she pouted and wanted to follow him to work, loving his family and placing a deep trust in his only family member. So in the dream world, he rediscovers a sense of being [8].

But in the environment of dreams the object of desire always disappears from one's craving. As the film reaches its climax, the heartwarming pace comes to an abrupt halt. The beautiful sequence continues but takes a sudden turn. When his sister shares a cake with him at the cake shop, he is annoyed by the fact that his salary has been deducted for the day and refuses the cake, but she suddenly throws the cake on the floor in a mental disorder, which is in fact not the first time that she has been out of control in public as it were [9]. In the face of mixed looks from the other customers, he anxiously controlled his sister to keep her from picking up the dirty cake and eating it, while

silently enduring the vague curses of the other customers. The camera pans around and he is on his way to make a delivery when his boss calls out of the blue to question him about why he has been complained about by a customer for not delivering to the customer's home on time. He is at a loss for words and after his boss angrily informs him that he has been fired he just silently puts the phone down, unexpectedly at this moment he is unusually calm and seems to be used to this kind of thing. But in fact, he just made a decision, and that decision was that he would get rid of his sister once and for all, and leave it to God to decide what her fate would be. So, he took his sister to a strange junction far from home under the pretext of taking her to an amusement park, told her to wait for him where she was and that he would be right back and left. Back at home he was still easing his inner turmoil. Who knew that a knock on the door would suddenly sound at that moment, and God seemed to be forcing his hand that some kind person who lived nearby happened to know his sister and happened to be there on business and sent her back. At this moment he suddenly felt that his sister was like a dog's skin that he could not get rid of. Looking at her innocent look and giggling at himself, he suddenly felt that there was a devil standing in front of him, so he finally decided to kill this devil with his own hands. And at this moment, standing in the God's perspective of the dream world, he finally saw the truth. With the sudden collapse of the dream world, he was slapped awake by the Dream Master in reality, and she, who had not yet recovered from the reality of the party, looked at the Dream Master's eyebrows in front of her and suddenly felt that the two faces had overlapped across time. The dream master slowly asks him to make a choice and the film comes to an abrupt end, a reflection on what choice he has made [10,11].

The suspenseful short film "Realm Phase" is a story that leads to a man's disillusioned sense of self after the loss of his sister, pulled by the dual identity of victim and perpetrator, and is ultimately oriented to explore the theme of survival. The man survives in a confused realm of two worlds, with elements of both reality and his own embellished imagination. The truth is that everyone lives in a world that is a mixture of truth and falsehood, where beautiful fantasy and harsh reality go hand in hand, because every external factor affects how we see the world, and when we make different choices, the so-called parallel universes are born. The parallel universe may be a realistic version of our dreams, and it remains to be seen what the deeper relationship is between the two, but what is clear is that, from a materialistic point of view, the line between reality and fantasy has never been clear-cut; we have the ability to shape dreams in the same way that we have the ability to shape reality, only because it is so difficult to shape reality, we are in an imaginary world. This is the connection and meaning of the existence of dreams and reality.

Films tell stories that need to be understood by realistic and real people in order to resonate with audiences. The film director has the absolute power to tease the audience, and the audience has the right to choose the film, to think about the direction of the plot and to comment on it. But this power on both sides must be based on a rational narrative and audience perception.

4. Conclusions

This paper analyses the deeper core of dream narratives and the inner structure of audience perception in suspense films in terms of both expression and content ideas. It is evident that the spiritual and fantasy worlds of the characters in the dream narrative are not only the driving force of the story, but also a projection of the reality in which the audience can find their own shadows and the psychological impact of social development. This paper analyses how the design of the timeline and the inversion of the use of colour in *The Realm of the Phantom* can be used as a cinematic expression, providing an insight into how the film conveys important messages to the audience by constructing a distinction between dreams and reality. In addition to this, the paper also profoundly analyses the profound tragic core and philosophical reflections behind *The Face of the Realm*, and also discusses how the subject of suspense films can better construct a better story core. This paper has been emphasising that

suspense films should aim to bring a more universal experience and a more relevant truth to the audience. Even the most dazzling plots and fancy visual effects have not been detached from the audience and gone too far. In particular, dreams and spiritual development have become important issues that cannot continue to be ignored in contemporary society, and are key rooted in the depths of society and human nature. Judging from the creative practice of *The Realm Phase*, a truly excellent suspense film must not only be able to set up excellent suspense and cognitive logic on such a complex basis as the dream narrative, but also reflect and critique reality, which is the meaning and value of the narrative.

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