

Narrative Features and Cultural Signs in The Shawshank Redemption

Shutao Zhou

College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Heilongjiang Bayi Agricultural University, Daqing
163319, China.

zhsht139@163.com.

Abstract

The application of semiotic theories to the study of cinematics is a new branch of semiotics in the 1960s, that is, to study films as a special symbol system and ideographic phenomenon. Films provide semiotics with extremely complex cultural objects in time and space. The Shawshank Redemption is full of various types of signs. From the perspective of semiotics, this paper sorts out the development history of film semiotics, analyzes in detail the linear narrative and alternate narrative in The Shawshank Redemption, and interprets the cultural signs, in order to provide reference for the current Chinese films.

Keywords

The Shawshank Redemption, Film semiotics, Linear narrative, Alternate narrative.

1. Introduction

As the main methodology in film research, semiotics studies films as a special symbol system and ideographic phenomenon, which is the main means to analyze the composition of complex objects, and solves the ambiguity in researchers' understanding of the composition of film objects. As a unique form of artistic expression, a large number of signs contained in the films, while conveying various information, also give people a strong sense of stimulation. Structuralists, like Algirdas Julien Greimas, hold that the surface structure of narrative text can be observed directly, while the deep structure is the internal connection of things, which can only be explored through a certain cognitive model. The movie *The Shawshank Redemption* was adapted in 1994 by the famous director Frank Darabont from a novel by American writer Stephen King, which embodies the dual values of American pursuit of freedom and social responsibility, and shows the beauty of human heart and friendship. It is a classic work worthy of its fame from two dimensions of narrative mode and artistic expression. From the perspective of semiotics, this paper analyzes the narrative features of the film, and interprets various signs, hoping to provide some reference for the development of Chinese films.

2. A Review of Film Semiotics

Human cognition of the world comes from the logical expression of the sign matrix formed by the abstract generalization of various things^[1]. People live in a symbolized world. Anything can be expressed as a collection of sign sequences with a certain logical relationship, and it exists with the help of a narrator's unique perspective. There are many ways to express things. The understanding of the same event varies with each person's cognition. Semiotics was first put forward by Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist. He believed that semiotics should be a science to study signs objectively existing in human social activities, and its scope of application includes but is not limited to words, languages, etc. As a special form of artistic expression, films can achieve specific narrative goals.

Christian Metz, a French theorist who first applied semiotics theory to film research, proposed to construct the expression of signs and codes of films with the vocabulary of structural linguistics. In 1964, the publication of *Le cinéma, langue ou langage?* by Metz marked the advent of film semiotics. In 1965, in his paper, Pasolini posed the concept of poetic film for the first time and differentiated it from the prosaic film which he thought was not the real cinema, which caused a wide discussion in the field of film semiotics. Pasolini raised new trends in cinema and key issues in modern films. In the 1970s, film semiotics began to transform into a structural process and a representational process. In 1977, Metz's book *The Imaginary Signifier* marked the birth of the second film semiotics. The studies of Francois Jost, Umberto Eco, and others made film semiotics an prominent research field in the 20th century^[2].

The study of film semiotics in China began in the 1970s. *Structuralism and Semiotics*, compiled by Li Youzheng, is the first book in China to introduce the literature related to film semiotics. In the middle and late 1980s, Xu Zengmin's *Film Semiotics and Semiotics: Some Properties of Film Signs* and Yao Xiaomeng's *Film Semiotics and its Criticism* are the most representative works. Since the 21st century, the study of film semiotics has formed a situation with many participants and multiple perspectives. The representative works include *The Pleasure of Gazing: the Psychoanalysis of Film Texts* compiled by Wu Qiong in 2005, *The Film Linguistics* published by Wang Zhimin in 2007, *The Semiotic Analysis of European Films* written by Li Xue in 2014, and *The Revelation of Christian Metz's Cinema Semiotics on Theatrical Ontology* written by Pu Bo in 2017. Generally speaking, the research on film semiotics in China mainly focuses on the following three levels: first, the introduction and translation of relevant literature; second, the sorting out of relevant theories and literature of film semiotics; third, the evaluation of film semiotics.

3. Narrative Features in The Shawshank Redemption

3.1 Linear Narrative

On the whole, the narrative mode of *The Shawshank Redemption* follows the mature linear natural flow pattern of drama film^[3]. From the perspective of film semiotics, the narrative features of the film can be analyzed from the surface structure. The story in the film took place in 1947, when Andy, a banker, was accused by police of shooting his wife and her lover. The court found Andy guilty on the basis of almost certain facts, and the two life sentences imposed on him meant that he would spend the rest of his life in Shawshank Prison. In prison, he became good friends with Red, who was sentenced to life imprisonment for murder in 1927 and profited from selling contraband in prison. A month later, Andy bought a hammer for carving stones and got a big poster of star Rita Hayworth from Red, and put it on the wall of the prison cell. Over time, Andy's mastery of financial knowledge made him start to launder money for Norton, the warden of the prison. Andy gradually got rid of the prison's heavy labor and other abnormal harassment. He gradually improved his life by making tax returns and pension plans for the prison guards. At the same time, he won money to build the prison library, and also for the welfare of his inmates. The arrival of a prisoner Tommy broke Andy's peaceful prison life. Tommy revealed the real murderer of the shooting. Andy's request to the warden to rehear the case was rejected and Tommy was killed. Under the cruel reality, Andy dug the way to freedom and found the redemption of soul in a stormy night. Through the collection of various narrative signs, the film tells us a truth: if there is hope, everything can happen.

Through the analysis of the film, we can clearly see that it uses a typical linear narrative mode. The specific contents include the following: Andy goes to prison, Andy finds Red to buy things, Andy works on the rooftop and helps the captain of the prisoner to exempt taxes, the captain of the prisoner hurts the leader of the "The Sisters" Bogs, and helps the guards and warden to declare taxes, Brooks is at a loss after parole, Andy climbs out of the sewer to complete the soul's redemption, and Red finds Andy and starts a new life after parole. *The Shawshank Redemption* does not deliberately show the darkness of American prisons in the last century, but describes the long and helpless prison life through a relatively gentle narrative rhythm. The characters described in the film, such as Andy, Red,

and Brooks, have different but very similar destinies, and have completed their own redemption by releasing their souls. The development of the above series of plots plays an important role in shaping Andy's image and highlighting the theme. The first episodes can always subtly lead the subsequent narrative episodes, thus forming a complete linear narrative structure, completing the seamless transition of the narrative episodes, and driving Andy to seek the redemption of the soul, and also making the audience better understand the development and climax of the whole story. In order to avoid the monotony of linear narrative, some flashbacks are interspersed in the movie, such as the scene of Brooks' parole from prison to suicide. After the episode, the footage of reading letters by Andy and his friends was added. There are also certain details and repetitive descriptions in the film, such as the repetitive narratives of the warden tearing open the posters. These scenes have played significant roles. On the premise of not affecting the overall linear narrative structure, they add a lot of jumps and changes to the narrative structure, which can attract the audience more.

3.2 Alternate Narrative

In addition to the overall linear narrative mode, *The Shawshank Redemption* is also interspersed with alternate narrative segments such as Andy helping Tommy with the test, Andy chatting with Red, prison friends preparing gifts for Andy, Andy building a library in prison, Andy playing music in prison, and Andy going to the bank to get money. These plots all revolve around the theme of Andy's realization of soul redemption and freedom, and achieve the goal of mutual verification in content. Through multiple combinations of overlapping and event combing, they clearly present the image of Andy and other characters, and the theme of freedom and hope conveyed by the whole film is more and more prominent. Multiple logic lines effectively enhance the tension of the whole story. For the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, what impresses the audience most is Andy's 20-year-long pursuit of freedom and hope. Compared with Stephen King's original novel, the film has its limited playing time, and the expression methods and ways are also restricted, so the information to the audience is relatively limited. At the same time, because the visual images displayed by the film need to be converted into thinking language through the audience's brain for final recognition and understanding, this conversion process inevitably leads to the situation of semantic loss and plot misreading, which cannot achieve accurate screening in the human brain like words. In a limited time to complete the whole narrative process, create a full character image, and facilitate the audience to understand and absorb, the technical problems of the whole film must be effectively solved. In terms of theme interpretation, the film not only shows Andy and other characters, but also focuses on the process of Andy's search for soul redemption and the pursuit of freedom. Therefore, the film takes the second protagonist Red as the first person narrative perspective. For the protagonist Andy, it is like a third person's narrating the whole story^[4]. As a narrator of the story, Red's language directly affects the audience's hearing, giving the audience an instant experience and bringing a clear advantage to the scene. At the same time, each character in the movie has its own voice that is independent from the narrator. These voices make up for the limitations and shortcomings of time and space in Red's narration and play a good role in supplementing and explaining the narration. The narrative structure designed in this way is more operational.

4. The Cultural Sign The Bible

Shawshank Prison implies a real world full of sins and institutionalization, in which everyone lives. The entire film *The Shawshank Redemption* is trying to answer a question: how to escape Shawshank Prison and complete the redemption of the soul. In the narrative process of the film, the cultural sign of the Bible appears many times. It is one of the important props of the film, which promotes the development of the plot of the alternate narrative combination of the entire film. There are three specific descriptions of the Bible: the first is that the warden came out with Holy Bible in his hand and a cross on his chest. He said he believed in only two things: discipline and the Bible. The second is that the warden talked about the Bible with Andy during the cell tossing. He asked Andy to recite his favorite chapter, and the warden also recited his favorite chapter. Andy recited, "Watch ye,

therefore, for ye know not when the master of the house cometh.” The warden recited: “I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.” The subtlety of the two sentences in the Bible is that they point directly to the end of the two later, which is a profound satire on the warden. The third part is that when the warden finally opened the Bible, the page he opened is “EXODUS ”. This chapter tells the story of Moses, the leader of the Jews, leading his countrymen to flee from the Egyptian rule and run to the free land, which is similar to Andy’s story. It is under the guidance of freedom and light that Andy spent less than 20 years and finally escaped Shawshank and realized his soul’s redemption, while Red thought it would take 600 years to open a tunnel. In reality, everyone lives in Shawshank. There are many kinds of prisoners, like Brooks, who is kind and nervous, deeply bound in his heart, but has no yearning for freedom and hope. Even if he gets parole and leaves Shawshank, he walks into a bigger Shawshank. All kinds of maladjustments finally lead him to commit suicide. While other prisoners may confess their innocence, but are full of complaints, which is definitely not the correct attitude to getting out of prison. Only under the guidance of Andy’s freedom and light, Red’s soul has completely crossed the high wall, and the prison finally lost the meaning of restraining him. The movie plot interspersed by the Bible is exactly the art and charm of *The Shawshank Redemption*.

5. Conclusion

There are also hammer, posters, harmonica and other artistic symbols in the film. The hammer is a symbol of freedom and hope, and Andy used it to open the road to freedom in less than 20 years. The beautiful female star on the poster is also a symbol of freedom and hope. Behind her is Andy’s dream. The harmonica is a gift from Andy to Red. It is the power of the harmonica that supports Red’s insistence on parole and his reunion with Andy. With Andy’s desire for freedom and light, he dug open the tunnel that could not have been dug, climbed over 500 yards of the foul sewage pipe, and climbed towards the long-awaited freedom. In that stormy night, he stretched out his arms, embracing the overwhelming wind and rain, but also embracing the freedom and hope he had long desired. He has gained the freedom he has been pursuing, and has become the symbol of the spirit of freedom and the light of hope. This movie promotes the plot through the collection of various signs, and tells us a truth that as long as hope and light are there, helping others is to help themselves, and nothing cannot be achieved.

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