

Image as Symbol: Conflict Metaphor Construction in Pema Tseden's Films

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Abstract

Symbols are an important element of film, and the metaphorical function of symbols helps the works to express meaning. In the works of Chinese director Pema Tseden, the conflict between modern civilization and primitive civilization in Tibet is the object of his persistent expression. In his different works, space symbols, image symbols and color symbols are constantly intertwined and transformed into mysterious sight. This article aims to analyze how the director expresses the conflict between modern material civilization and traditional Tibetan civilization by analyzing the works of Pema Tseden on the basis of the space theory proposed by Michel Foucault.

Keywords: Pema Tseden, heterotopia, external image

1. The Metaphor of Signs

The birth of semiotics stems from Christian Metz's application of Ferdinand de Saussure's structural linguistics to film studies. An important way of expressing the symbols of the film is the application of the aggregation relationship, that is, metaphor. The metaphor of the film does not express the appeal directly, but uses the means of direct signification to achieve the purpose of implicit signification (Dudley Andrew, 2018). And such ideographic processes are usually achieved through the successful use of signifiers and signifieds. Indeed, as pointed out by Ferdinand de Saussure in *Course in General Linguistics*, the two most important and fundamental concepts of semiotics are the signifier and the signified.

Pema Tseden's films, as the representative works of minority films, express the cultural dilemma encountered by Tibetan areas, and also bring the semiotic characteristics of Chinese films to the extreme expression (TAN Zhiyong, 2021). This article aims to complete the partial decoding of Pema Tseden's works by discussing the space symbols, image symbols and color symbols in Pema Tseden's works.

2. Multiple Expressions of Clash of Civilizations

The clash between modern material civilization and traditional Tibetan civilization has always been an important theme in Pema Tseden's works. In his works, the state of cultural self-sufficiency is always broken by the intrusive modern culture. There are three important ways for Pema Tseden to express this "break": first, it is accomplished through the invasion of Tibet's unique space, modern materials such as television, and modern space such as barbershops, so Tibet has to appear "alienated", thus forming a unique cultural space such as "heterotopia"; secondly, the impact on the culture identity of the Tibetan people, putting a mask on the protagonist or cutting off the "little braids" that symbolize their identity, all make the Tibetan people feel some ways of identity anxiety. Also, through the strong contrast of colors, the lonely inner world of the protagonist under the impact of the clash of civilizations is constructed. The article argues that multiple spatial symbols, external image symbols and color symbols are important ways to direct this conflict of metaphors.

2.1 Metaphor of Multiple Spatial Symbols

Space itself is an important visual symbol in the film. In Pema Tsenden's works. Space is an important narrative element that cannot be ignored, and it can even be said to be the director's personal symbol. In works such as "Jinpa" and "Tharlo", the Director showed the spatial characteristics of Tibetan in a documentary manner, and these characteristics also concentrated on the challenges faced by Tibetan under the impact of modern material civilization. Cultural and identity dilemmas, and the following discussion will focus on temples and mirrors.

Heterotopian geospatial: Temple. The concept of "heterotopia" comes from Michel Foucault's 1967 speech "Des espaces autres". In terms of this concept, spaces are relational and juxtaposed—one trades off and another grows, and the differences highlighted by the mixing of different spaces will give unconscious "entrants" who do not belong to this space or are creatures that originally belonged to this space create discomfort. In Michel Foucault's view, one of the functions of a heterotopia is a system of opening and closing, which endows the heterotopia with the dual properties of isolation and infiltration—people cannot enter and exit freely, only with permission are they eligible to enter.

Temple is an important "heterotopia" symbol in Pema Tsenden's film, a typical opening and closing system, which is a metaphor for the conflict between nationality and modernity. In the film "The Silent Holy Stones", the temple is a space where tradition and modernity juxtapose. People can only practice here, and there are not many entertainment programs. However, with the emergence of living Buddha TV sets and the appearance of VCDs brought by the little lama's father, the temple, which was originally isolated space, has exchanged with modern material culture—so the formation of "Heterotopia", the temple began to become a place where multiple cultures flowed together, the temple began to become a place where multiple cultures flowed together. In "Jinpa", Jinpa took the dead sheep to the temple to do soul relief. The cultural identity, social identity and even geographical location of the temple are isolated from the surrounding. The monks refused to do soul relief for the sheep and also rejected Jinpa. The entry of the spirit of Jinpa—he needs religion to comfort and relieve himself, the temple at this time is a closed heterotopia. And the way Jinpa is allowed to enter—500 yuan incense, when the heterotopia is opened—can only be entered through money. Such an opening and closing shows the strong contrast between Jinpa's own guilt and hastily transcended after being paid, showing the impact of modernization on the traditional place of worship, and a metaphor for the traditional culture and the traditional culture in this heterotopia.

2.2 *The Virtual Space of the Conflict Between Utopia and Heterotopia.*

The mirror In Michel Foucault's view, the "mirror" has a dual function in modern culture. The first is its function of Utopia: the presentation of an imagined near-perfect social relationship. The second is the function of heterotopia: the juxtaposition and ebb and flow between spaces. In Pema Tsenden's films, the mirror, as a signifier, plays an important role, and indirectly expresses the director's cultural appeal—the illusory nature of modern material civilization itself through metaphors. The mirror not only creates a dream-like modern utopia for the protagonist, but also a virtual space where modern civilization and traditional civilization grow and develop (Wan Chuanfa, 2017). In the film "Tharlo", the first time the mirror appears is Tharlo himself sitting in front of the mirror in the barbershop. The mirror presents a virtual material space. Through the mirror, the audience can find that Tharlo's true self is not present—he lost his braids and became a modern person in a certain sense; he and Yang Cuo established a relationship between men and women, and had the love that he wanted. Here, what the mirror sees is Tharlo's own utopia, and his relationship with modern civilization is almost perfect. But at the same time, it is also Tharlo's heterotopia. First of all, the incongruity he feels because of the loss of his braids, or the conflict between him, who represents primitive culture, and Yang Cuo, who represents modern civilization, are all because he entered this space. Second, the mirror itself is an entity that exists in material space, and it is the place where the two spaces of modernity and tradition are connected (that is, the juxtaposition of several spaces in heterotopia), and Tharlo's actual position is also due to refraction. Become real, but to get this feeling you have to go back to the absence of the real self. In such a cycle, the mirror becomes the mediator of the conflict between utopia and heterotopia representation (Lamo Tsenden, 2015).

2.2.1 *Metaphors of External Image Symbols*

Identity anxiety originates from the lack of "identity". "Identity" has two meanings: First, it refers to an individual's determination of his social status based on his distinctive characteristics. Second, it refers to the pursuit of cultural identity. The combination of the two is "identity". (Luo Gang & Liu Xiangyu, 2000) In Michel Foucault's works, the protagonist usually lacks one of the identities or even none of the two, such as Tharlo. In this way, by showing the partial absence of the main character's external image or adding a metaphor to the identity anxiety of the protagonist and even the people in Tibetan, with the impact and invasion of material civilization, different identities continue to overlap and change, reflecting the possibility of the two civilizations changing and growing.

The first is Tharlo, who lost his braid. Before entering the city to apply for an ID card and contact Yang Cuo, the male protagonist Tharlo is a person who believes that the world is a black or white world—this can be seen when

he recites “Serve for people”. But the police asked him to apply for an ID card, and Yang Cuo shaved off the “little braid” that symbolized his status as a shepherd. When he thought he had love but in fact only lost money, he lost part of himself. When the police found that he had no braids and had to re-issue his ID card, he could no longer recite “Serve for people”. The appearance and disappearance of Yang Cuo made the world no longer the space with clear standards, a world “Though death befalls all men alike, it may be weightier than Mount Tai or lighter than a feather” vanished in his eyes. He lost his braids, his flock, his ability to memorize “Serve for people”, and the criteria for judging his own value. He is no longer that old Tharlo. There are also couples taking pictures in the photo studio. The newlyweds Tharlo met when taking ID photos in the photo studio changed their identities through constant scene switching and ever-changing clothing—Americans representing European and American civilization, Beijingers representing Chinese civilization, etc. However, during the shooting process, they had been holding Tharlo’s lamb in their arms, and because of the appearance of the sample, they were not too nervous about the shooting. Against the background of the Statue of Liberty and Tiananmen Square, this picture was very impactful. By showing the different civilizations. In contrast, the metaphor expresses the uncertainty of the identity of the Tibetan people under the cultural shock.

The second is the little lama lost under the mask of Monkey King in “The Silent Holy Stones”. As Georg Simmel said, the rare and exotic products brought by the emergence of modernization constantly stimulated the over-tired nerves of the public with surprises, and everyone’s curiosity was aroused. The VCD of “Pilgrimage to the West” is to the little lamas what the World Exposition is to the ordinary people, and it is uncontrollably attracted. And watching the VCD—*The Monkey King*, the impact on the little lama is irreversible. The Monkey King mask is the true portrayal of the little Lama’s heart. His reluctance to let go of the TV and VCD has changed his original appearance. Although he did not miss the Dafa meeting in the end, just like the mask hidden under his monk’s robe, the Monkey King is also hidden in his heart, the mask is not only worn on his face but also on his ego. Thus, the little lama became a mixed individual who couldn’t place himself, and could only keep getting lost.

2.3 Color Metaphor

Color is an important part of film audio-visual language. By restoring reality, it produces a sense of reality in space and time, which is indispensable for film narrative. The diversified use of colors is also an important feature of Pema Tsenden’s works.

The director expresses the lonely inner world of the protagonist in the context of the clash of civilizations through the extreme use of color. “Tharlo” is an overall tone of black and white, symbolizing the black and white real world in Tharlo’s mind. At the beginning, the ratio of black and white in the film is almost equal, but since he couldn’t fit into the music that Yang Cuo likes in karaoke, black has the upper hand, and seeing Yang Cuo and her “love” in the bar—even the presence of lights could not illuminate the dark night around Tharlo. In the end, Tharlo chose to sell the sheep, and thus sold the last in his white world. Therefore, at the end of the film, with Yang Cuo’s departure, Tharlo could only be gradually swallowed up by a world where there was only black. By showing the gradual expansion of the proportion of black on the screen, the director metaphorizes the corrosion of modern civilization to Tharlo’s pure inner world, which further strengthens the film’s sense of conflict.

“The Silent Holy Stones” is colorful. The little lama’s world consists of white temple walls, yellow soil and red robes—a harmonious and peaceful Buddhist world. The Monkey King mask is almost the most abrupt existence. It is the only bright color in the boring life of the little lama. The identification and desire of modern material civilization.

3. Conclusion

Among the minority films that have appeared in the film market in recent years, Pema Tsenden’s works are among the most excellent and highly completed. The director builds a “heterotopia” that belongs only to the people of Tibetan through landscaping—a place where modern civilization and traditional civilization clash, such as the temple in “Jinpa” that only pays for the sheep, and also the temple in “The Silent Holy Stones” that communicate Tibetan civilization and material civilization. There are also places where “black” and “different” are juxtaposed, such as the mirror of the barber shop in “Tharlo”. It also expresses the identity anxiety of Tibetan people under the impact of civilization by increasing or reducing the external image characteristics of the protagonist, such as the Monkey King mask of the little lama in “Quiet Mani Stone” and the lost braid in “Tharlo”. Questions like “I’m no longer me, then who am I?”, maybe all the answers disappear from the screen with Tharlo (Liu Jiayin, 2015). Discussing the space symbols and character symbols in Pema Tsenden’s works will help us analyze and understand his creative ideas, and have a deeper understanding of the cultural dilemma of Tibetan people.

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