On the Semiotic Embodiment of British Satirical Drama Films

–Take Chaplin's Monsieur Verdoux and The Gold Rush as an Example

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Abstract: Film semiotics is a theory within the professional discipline of film and television that is rich in meaning. The works of many playwrights can be referred to as textbooks for the application of film semiotics analysis. This paper focuses on two works of drama legend Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* and *Monsieur Verdoux* to compare and analyze the meaning of film semiotics. *The Gold Rush*, with *The Gold Rush* as the background and money as the symbol, satirizes human greed and unlimited pursuit of money and power, describes the weakness of human nature and the flaws of society, and reminds people to cherish the present moment. *Monsieur Verdoux*, with love as the clue and emotion as the symbol, embodies modern people's pursuit of love and marriage, reflecting the changes and diversification of the concepts of marriage and love in contemporary society, and the pursuit of freedom and independence, reminding people to cherish freedom and independence, and the pursuit of true happiness. According to the research findings, the future research on movie semiotics still needs to be studied in depth.

Keywords: film semiotics, Chaplin, British satirical drama, Verdoux, *The Gold Rush*

1. Introduction

British satirical drama film is a special type of film that reveals social problems and class conflicts and reflects the profound connotation of human nature and values through satire and humor. In this kind of movie, semiotics is an important way of expression, which allows the audience to understand the theme and connotation of the movie more deeply. Taking Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux* and *The Gold Rush* as examples, this paper explores the ways of expression of semiotics in British satirical drama films and the messages they convey. By analyzing the symbols in these two films, one can better understand Chaplin's thoughts and reflections on social issues and values, as well as his unique insights into film art.

2. Film Semiotics

2.1. Development of Film Semiotics

As a western discipline emerged in the 1960s, film semiotics fully applies the crystallization of western humanities to the study of film, opening up a new direction for the study of cinema, which is undoubtedly of epoch-making significance in the history of western cinema. Based on the language, lens and ideological phenomenon of the movie, this discipline proposes to study the movie as an independent symbolic system. At present, the academic community mainly divides film semiotics into two main stages, namely, the first semiotics and the second semiotics.

The birth of the first semiotics was marked by the publication of "Cinema; Language System or Language" by French scholar Christian Metz in 1964 [1]. To understand its theory, it is first necessary to understand the origin of its ideas. In the nineteenth century, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure applied structuralism to the study of linguistics and made a strict distinction between "language", "speech" and "language system". Language", "speech" and "language system" [2]. Speech is a concrete linguistic phenomenon, the words people say and write every time. The language system, i.e. the structure of language, determines the specific meaning of a word. Language is the sum of speech and the language system, the unity of the energetic (the sounds and images of speech and writing) and the referent (the meaning of language itself). Based on this, Structuralist Linguistics divides language into two levels, namely, the concrete surface form of language, the "surface", and the meaning represented by the surface form, the "meaning". With the spread of structuralism as a cultural trend in the 1960s in France ushered in a golden age. Influenced by structuralism, Metz cited the structuralist linguistic research methods of Saussure and his mentor Roland Barthes in "Cinema; Language System or Language", and limited the object of research in film semiotics to the structure beneath the surface phenomenon of film. He defined film for the first time as "a language without a language system", and further adopted the concepts of linguistics to explain the "referent and denotation" and "film code system" of film, and concluded that film semiotics is the most effective way to study the phenomenon of film. He further adopted the concepts of linguistics to explain the "referent and reference" and the "film code system" of film, and summarized the famous "eight combinations of segments" in cinematography [2].

However, this theory of Metz's studies film as a general language, sticking to the text of the film, but instead, its study has gone towards closure and static, and it is difficult to grasp the deeper meaning of the film through simple delineation. After the redefinition of several scholars, such as Anberto Eco and Peter Warren, the definition of the film semiotic system became more detailed and clear, and the study of film semiotics also opened up a direction other than structuralist linguistics. 1975, Metz, on the basis of the original theory, further combined Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis and published the paper "Imaginative Referentiality" [3]. In the paper, Metz shifted the research subject to the film audience, no longer focusing on the study of film language itself, but emphasizing the audience's subject position in the film, signaling the formal establishment of the second film semiotics. The second film semiotics from static theory to dynamic, emphasizing the interactive relationship between the film and the audience, more flexible at the same time makes the film semiotics more scientific, for the later western film studies provide a solid theoretical foundation. This paper takes the two representative works of the famous British director, actor and screenwriter Chaplin, *The Gold Rush* and *Monsieur Verdoux*, as case studies, to analyze the application of the second film semiotics in the actual film shooting.

2.2. Second Film Semiotic Theory

In his article "Imagining the Energetic Finger", Metz says that movies attract audiences by fulfilling the "satisfactions" that they seek when watching movies [3]. This includes the fulfillment of the audience's need to escape from real life and the satisfaction of the audience's desire for voyeurism. The former satisfaction is based on the gradual weakening of the symbolic rational self-consciousness of the audience after entering the theater, and the audience's identification in the process of watching the movie to achieve, Metz in explaining this phenomenon, citing Lacan's mirror theory. Mirror theory consists of two parts, one is the "Mirror Stage Theory" and the other is the "ISR Triple Boundary Theory", both of which contribute to the audience's multiple identifications, enabling the audience to be attracted by the content on the screen and persuaded by the content of the movie [4, 5]. The so-called "mirror stage" means that when human beings are 6 to 18 months old, they begin to recognize their own images in the mirror, and by distinguishing between the self and the image, as well as between the self and other people, infants gradually build up their self-awareness, realizing the transition from "passive acceptance" of the mirrored self to "active acceptance" of the mirrored self, and then to "active acceptance" of the mirrored self. By distinguishing between self and image and self and others, infants gradually build up self-awareness and realize the transformation from "passive acceptance" of the mirror self to "active acceptance" of the self-image. At the same time, when the infant tries to touch the mirror, he or she is able to realize that the self in the mirror does not exist in reality, thus realizing the difference between the real self and the mirror image, which is also known as the "alienation of the self". However, this alienation does not cause the infant to have an aversion to the mirror self. On the contrary, when the image in the mirror changes in response to the infant's movements and wishes, the infant is amused. This is because the mirror image becomes a tool for the infant to establish self-identity and gives the infant a sense of identity. This phenomenon does not only occur between infants and mirrors, but also when the object changes from a mirror image to another human being, this phenomenon of building self-identity with the help of external objects is still prevalent. The three ISR realms represent the Imaginary, Symbolic and Real realms, of which the Imaginary realm refers to the subjective realm of human consciousness. The understanding of the "Imaginary Realm" is based on an in-depth interpretation of the word "Imagination". It is because of the nature of imagination that the "imaginary realm" becomes a realm of identity characterized by narcissism. However, this identity is full of misidentification and fantasy, and it is through such imaginative misidentification that the infant begins to discover and refine itself through the alternation of the "symbolic realm" and the "real realm". In "Imagination and Indicators", Metz argues that due to the special nature of the art form of film, it is born from the beginning in the imaginary world of the director, screenwriter and other creators, and it is also an imaginary world constituted by different indications [6]. Through the real camera technology, different camera language and presentation methods, and real scenes and dialogues, film constitutes a pseudo-reality which is enough to weaken the audience's self-consciousness, and at the same time, it is naturally fictionalized and imaginative, and the two are combined with each other, so that film is called "the technology of the imagination" by Metz.

Mirror theory is mainly reflected in three aspects of the movie. The first is the audience's self-identification. For adult viewers, they have already established their knowledge of the world, others and themselves before watching a movie, so until the audience walks into the theater, they have a strong self-awareness and know clearly their identity as a viewer, that is, their identification with their own movie-viewing behavior. In order to immerse the audience as fully as possible in the content of the movie, movie creators need to use multiple means to continuously attract the audience's attention after the opening of the movie. In order to enhance the audience's sense of immersion, the more common techniques include the change of characters' perspectives, the change of filming techniques

and articulation, etc., and this purpose and technique involves the second and the third types of identification, which are the viewer's identification with the characters of the movie and the viewer's identification with the camera, respectively.

The audience's identification with movie characters is a remarkable manifestation of the mirror theory, when the screen replaces the mirror and the object changes from a mirror image of the audience's self to a character. The fiction of the movie is based on the real world, and the movie characters often have a lot of characteristics of real human beings in the real world, so that the audience can find common ground, thus creating a sense of identification and substituting themselves into the characters. This sense of identification is not as intuitive as in movies, although it is also found in other forms of art. The reason for this is that when the audience enters the theater, their limbs are restricted, while the brain's perceptions are highly active, and in the darkness of the environment they are highly similar to the mirroring stage of a baby, so the audience is more likely to identify with the character.

The audience's identification with the camera is reflected in different aspects. First of all, since people's eyes coincide with the camera during a movie screening, it is easy for people to have the illusion that the images on the screen are taken by "my eyes". According to Metz, "any vision consists of a double movement: projection ('scanning' the searchlight) and the formation of an inner image: consciousness as a sensitive representation of a record (like the screen). At the same time, it is as if I felt, as is often said, 'investing' my gaze in things, and the illuminated things began to exist in my mind [3]." In other words, in the process of watching a movie, the viewer acts as both a projector and a camera, capturing the image with his or her own two eyes and projecting the image of the movie in the realm of his or her imagination. Combined with the many filming techniques in the movie shooting process that are in line with the way the human eye observes things, such as pushing, pulling and panning of the lens, the audience's identification with the camera can be greatly strengthened. These three identifications are superimposed on each other, enabling the audience to immerse themselves in the content of the movie to a great extent, reducing the interference of the real world and thus satisfying the audience's need to escape from real life.

In "Imagining the Energetic," Metz suggests that the creation and appreciation of film is due to the "absence" of the object of desire, and that the pursuit of this long-absent object occurs in order to satisfy one's own desires [6]. Cinema is characterized by both visual and auditory sensations, and audiovisual is also a major driving force for film creation. The audio-visual drive demands the "absence" of the object and maintains a certain distance from the object; it does not seek to obtain the object itself directly, but gets pleasure through the pursuit of the object and the search for substitutes. The "double absence" in cinema occurs between the viewer and the actor; the viewer is absent from the actor during the actual filming of the movie, and the actor is not physically present on the screen while the viewer is watching the movie. Metz relates this relationship to exhibitionism and voyeurism. The actor is unaware that an audience is watching during the filming process, presenting the image of the exhibitionist, while in the dark viewing environment, the actor's absence frees the audience from the fear of voyeurism being detected, and the circumvention of the actor's gaze from the camera greatly increases the audience's sense of security and satisfies this voyeuristic desire, while at the same time the audience grasps a God's point of view in the transformation of the different characters' perspectives, which confers a great deal of film viewing The pleasure of watching the movie is also given to the audience.

Based on the above theories, this paper will study the embodiment of the second film semiotics in Chaplin's satirical films by comparing and analyzing Chaplin's two representative works.

3.   British Satirical Drama

In the field of dramatic art, satirical drama is a great turning point. In satirical drama, the playwright uses some artistic techniques to reflect the deeper meaning of the piece. In the work, the playwright will express the satirical meaning of an event or character or even the whole society through the structure of the work. Since the audience's perception of the situation in which the characters exist in the work is very different from that of the characters, the words and actions of the characters are different for the audience, which are usually contradictory behaviors [7].

For satirical drama, it serves two purposes. First of all, satirical drama is humorous and it can bring people happiness. Because of satirical drama, people feel the humor of an event through different techniques. Secondly, because it is satirical, satirical drama can make people have some deeper thoughts. When people fully understand the satirical meaning of a piece of work, they will think about what the play is satirizing and thus change something. The development of satirical theater began with religion. Typically, there were no plays in England before the Norman Conquest. However, the clergy created plays to spread the Bible [8]. Eventually, these plays made their way out of the churches and onto the streets and cemeteries. Because the plays became popular, overcrowding of audiences led to the destruction of cemeteries. After this, comedic elements and farce began to overtake the religious ones. Trace the development of English drama from suspense plays to morality plays and finally to Shakespeare. The very first plays were not popular, and some of the ancient writings were struck down because of Latin Christianity. Because Latin Christianity saw the theater as a threat to its spiritual authority, the Church did nothing to encourage theatrical performances since the weakening of Romanist theater. However, the theater craze continued to take off because of the powerful attraction it would have on the eyes and ears, immersing the audience. Through theater performances around the world, some European parliaments have revived many theater-related festivals.

There are many outstanding and representative figures in the world of satirical theater. For example, Chaplin. The pantomime he created was a major breakthrough in satirical theater. His outstanding works include *The Gold Rush*, Modern Times, and *Monsieur Verdoux*. His black top hat and his all-black suit along with his iconic beard and cane have become his trademark.

4.   Chaplin

4.1.   Chaplin's Life and Status

Born on April 18, 1889, Charlie Chaplin, a stage actor by trade, was a world-renowned master of comedy, a great artist of critical realism, a film and television actor, director and screenwriter. Chaplin's films depict the real life style of people at the bottom of the society in a humorous and witty way, exposing the bitterness and helplessness of the life of small people. Chaplin's outstanding contribution and influence in the field of comedy is that he elevated the vulgar "farce" for the sake of laughter to the artistic height of critical realism, and his firm exposure and satire of the evils of the capitalist society is Chaplin's outstanding contribution to the political and social development.

4.2.   Chaplin's Movie Achievements

Chaplin began his film career in 1913 with the Keston Film Company, and his first film, *Making a Living*, was released in 1914. Since then, Chaplin has been involved in the movie business and has made a name for himself. After working for three studios, Chaplin's quest for independence led him to set up his own studio, which produced *The Gold Rush* in 1925 and Monsieur Vandoorne in 1997. Chaplin's movie style can be divided according to the time period. In the early days, he created silent movies focusing on the small people in the industrial society, mostly to perform to get love and

affirmation, this stage of the work has a certain irony but definitely not deep enough. In his later films, Chaplin's expression of critical realism became more and more prominent, and in his critical comedies, Chaplin used intense techniques to express his indictment of a particular subject. Chaplin's direct and bold artistic expression attracted a great deal of attention from both left-wing intellectuals and stone-wingers at the time, because Chaplin's critical dramas spoke of the crimes and punishments of the times, and dealt with sensitive aspects of the economy, politics, and war.

After Edison's invention of the phonograph and the technology of talking pictures, there was a worldwide debate about the rationality of the existence of talking pictures and their performance. In this debate, Chaplin expressed his attitude towards "talkies" through the movie "City Lights" and the "anti-" talkie" manifesto published in its publicity brochure. Chaplin believed that cinema should be a universal language, expressed and communicated through the physical movements of mime, and he feared that the use of dialogue would cause actors to neglect the art of acting. Because of the inevitable distance between pantomime and the real world, Chaplin later accepted and created the dialogue film The Great Dictator.

Fat pants, tattered bowler hats, moustaches, big-headed shoes, and walking sticks are the prominent image numbers in Chaplin's movies. The unique sound symbols in Chaplin's movies, such as mechanical rotation sound and electric current sound, participate in shaping Chaplin's movie style of exposing social reality. For example, in *Monsieur Verdoux*, *Verdoux* clothing and accessories in the stylistic style of the continuation of silent comedy film style in the comedy characteristics of his image, although a bank clerk, pants beard or quite Chaplin's personal symbols image [9]. However, Verdoux's image with the development of the plot, turned into a good and evil, sad and hateful role, the end of the questioning of the cruel reality of society also further pushes this image to the peak. The helplessness of life leads *Verdoux* to the path of revenge, and the movie turns from Chaplin's imaginative drama to a reflection on the nature of people's oppression in the real world [10].

5.   Semiotic Embodiment in Chaplin's Satirical Comedy

Henri Verdoux, the protagonist of *Monsieur Verdoux*, is a bank clerk who trades in murder for money. *Verdoux* has multiple and richly defined identities in the film: a con man, a killer, a bigamist, a vegetarian, a humanitarian, a good husband, a misogynist, an egoist, a cynic, a halfway decent chemist, a pseudo-philosopher, and a redneck. The movie is a comedy that exposes the real face of American society during the Great Depression and satirizes the ugliness of the society. The movie is good at using metaphorical expression, using the small to see the big, borrowing the "incinerator", "bugs" and other imagery to imply that *Verdoux* will change in the future. Here the figurative things are the "referents" and Verdoux's behavioral changes are the "references". The movie portrays Mr. *Verdoux* as a character who is good and evil at the same time, and depicts both the bright and dark sides of the society while showing human nature. Here, Mr. *Verdoux* becomes the "reference", and the good and evil of human nature and the ugliness of society become the "reference".

Chaplin emphasized actors' performances in his films, so not much effort was put into the sets of a film like *Monsieur Verdoux*. For example, when the liar *Verdoux* looks at the night sky, the "moon" in the night sky has obvious artificial traces. This is the basis for Chaplin's emphasis on performance, and it is also the "reference" in the film, and the corresponding "reference" is Verdoux's identity and behavior as a con man.

The Gold Rush is a heart-wrenching western, a silent movie directed by Chaplin. It succeeds in conveying to the audience the profound meaning it is meant to convey through the rich use of signs and symbols. A great deal of symbolism is also utilized in *The Gold Rush*.

First of all, some of the items captured in each shot of the film are given special symbolic meanings. For example, gold is given several meanings such as wealth, power and freedom in the movie. The discovery and excavation of gold became one of the important purposes of people's exploration in

the West, as well as a cause of competition and conflict among people. The gold prospectors' pursuit and desire for gold also reflect people's endless desire for material wealth. The clothes worn by the protagonists are also a symbol. Their clothes are all dark-colored, representing their firmness and determination. In contrast, the clothes worn by the villains are light-colored, implying their weakness and greed. Also, the scenes and backgrounds in the movie are an important symbol. For example, the early gold miners lived in nature, a life that was hard and bound to have unlimited and unknown challenges, but they were free. However, as time and the economy progressed and cities were built and prospered, so did the greed and desire of the people. The background and architecture of the city are important symbols that reflect this change. The establishment of the city has brought material convenience to people, but it has also brought problems such as the gap between the rich and the poor and social injustice. The characters in the movie are also an important symbol. The protagonists represent courage, justice and freedom, while the villains personify greed, fraud and evil. The interaction, cooperation and conflict between the protagonists are also important threads that the movie seeks to highlight. In *The Gold Rush*, the change of shooting perspective is often carried out based on the action and positional movement of the characters, and the switching of the camera's distance and proximity is also in line with the law of people observing things in general life, creating the viewer's sense of identification with the camera. For example, the close-up of the wooden sign plunging inch by inch into the snow at the beginning of the movie first focuses on the sign, and then zooms in on the whole body of the gold prospector who is wielding a hammer. Even though there is a great deal of exaggeration in the movie, such as the characters and houses being blown by the wind and snow and sliding in the opposite direction, these elements instead make the viewer immersed in the situation, and their mood rises and falls with the characters' situations in the movie. The characters frequently encounter difficult situations, such as having a bear break into their cabin and running out of food and having to stew their leather shoes, but each time they manage to pull through and become wealthy at the end. The twists and turns of the plot correspond to real life, making the audience identify with the characters, which not only reduces the audience's skepticism about the characters, but also allows the audience to fully immerse themselves in the exciting plot. It is for this reason that *The Gold Rush* is undoubtedly an excellent piece of work, and Metz's theory is reflected in it.

6. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the history and theory of film semiotics, and concludes with a comparison of the embodiment of film semiotics in *Monsieur Verdoux* and *The Gold Rush*, showing the value of film semiotics in actual film and television creation. The two works are different in the expression of film semiotics, Mr. *Verdoux* mainly embodies film semiotics by the emotions of the characters in the film, while *The Gold Rush* mainly embodies film semiotics by the "gold mine". The two films also share the same expression: they are good at attaching connotations to figurative objects in order to reveal a certain fact or truth. The study of the practical application of film semiotics is very meaningful and deserves more in-depth exploration.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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