

Analysis of the audiovisual language of the movie *The Last Emperor*

Zhang Muning

School of Journalism and Communication, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, China
Morning11025358@163.com

Abstract: *The Last Emperor* is a biographical film released in Italy in 1987, which won nine awards at the 60th Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Cinematography and Best Art. The film's director, Bernardo Bertolucci, tells the story of the tragic life of China's last emperor through the film's contrasts of color and light, and through the expression of symbolic imagery on several occasions, aided by an atmospheric soundtrack. This paper will analyze the use of audiovisual language in *The Last Emperor* by analyzing the film's light, shadow and color, the symbolic expression rich in deep meaning visually, and the soundtrack in the film aurally.

Keywords: *the last emperor; audiovisual language; symbol*

1. Introduction

The Last Emperor is a biographical film directed by Italian director Bernardo Bertolucci and starring Zun Long, Chen Chong and Wu Junmei. It tells the story of the ups and downs of the life of China's last emperor, Aisin Gioro Puyi, through a Western perspective. The movie is about a large span of time, through the late Qing Dynasty, the Republic of China and then the establishment of the new China, during which Puyi is both a witness to the changes of the times and a casualty in the flood of the times. In this movie, the director skillfully uses audio-visual language, using the "last emperor" Puyi as a starting point, to tell the story of the historical changes in Chinese society from the end of the Qing Dynasty to the 1960s and 1970s.

2. Light and Color

Visually, light and color are one of the most important elements in shaping the audiovisual language. More and more directors are focusing on the expression of light and color in their films, so that the characters are portrayed in a fuller and more three-dimensional way, enabling them to better convey the value and meaning of their works. Director Bernardo Bertolucci used the presentation effect of theatrical lighting in his film *The Last Emperor*, combining natural and artificial light to make the picture more ornamental and artistic, and improve the artistic beauty of the whole work. Light and color complement the narrative in the film, giving the audience a strong viewing experience.

When the movie is about Aisin Gioro Puyi's life in the palace, the images are mainly in warm colors and mostly in yellow. On the one hand, yellow symbolizes the imperial power, the Forbidden City in the palace, the dragon robe, the dragon chair main color is yellow, Puyi in such an environment to spend a carefree early childhood; on the other hand, the film's yellow hue is darker, which also implies that living in the palace Puyi is no real power, is manipulated by the foreigners and the royal family of puppets. Among the shots of Aisin Gioro Puyi's modern life, the images are mainly in cold colors, giving people a feeling of oppression and being bound. The movie opens with footage from a train station, where war criminals are escorted off the train, at a time when Puyi has already spent most of his life, such a historical figure adrift in a troubled China, obliterated in the dust of history.

The whole film changes in color and light, as Puyi grows up, changes, goes to prison, and a series of turning points in his life are constantly changing. When the three-year-old Puyi just entered the palace, he was alone to face the Empress Dowager Cixi and all the dowager concubines. The color of the whole picture is more eerie and dim, which creates a mysterious and horrible characteristic of the palace to the audience. This kind of more depressing, not very comfortable to look at the color of the picture continued until the time when Puyi's teacher, Zhuang Shidun appeared. When Puyi was communicating with

Johnston, there was a beam of light hitting Puyi's face, which symbolized that the advanced ideas from the outside world gradually entered into Puyi's heart, and Puyi's thoughts and perceptions changed. When Puyi makes up his mind and decides to reform, the light of the movie flickers, showing the protagonist's inner hesitation and struggle. And after Puyi's wedding and Puyi's abolition of the throne, the colors of the film gradually become brighter, which is something that makes Puyi feel good and free. In the later narration of the restoration of the pseudo-Manchukuo, the picture once again takes on a cold tone, when Aisin Gioro Puyi gradually realizes that he has slowly fallen into the puppet of the Japanese Empire and lost his freedom. After the middle-aged Puyi's imprisonment, the picture has been in the state of alternating light and darkness, and after Puyi's release from prison, the color of the film gradually becomes normal. The changes in light and color throughout the film symbolize the historical figures' gradual acceptance of their own inability to act in their time after being washed away by the flood of history, and their gradual transformation into a peaceful and free normal human being.

Cinema is the art of "light and shadow", and the whole movie is covered with gray light and shadow. In the eyes of director Bernardo Bertolucci, Puyi's life is a life that cannot be chosen by himself, and it is a life of tragedy. The light and shadow effects in the movie not only show the changes in the fate of the main character Puyi, but also map out the vicissitudes of Chinese society from the late Qing Dynasty to the 1960s and 1970s after the founding of New China. When Puyi enters the palace at an early age, the picture is dimly lit and low-toned, alluding to the decline of the Qing dynasty and its impending demise. At the end of the movie, Puyi got out of the reality of the prison, but also out of his own inner "cage", at this time the main body of the film color tone green, the contrast and saturation of the screen compared to the previous picture overall high. The image shows Puyi watering the flowers, he is surrounded by green plants. Puyi opens his brand new life in the green color which symbolizes the new birth, and also heralds a new era for China. At the end of the movie, Puyi approaches the Forbidden City, where he lived during his youth, and the tone of the screen turns to a bright and vivid red, a red that is different from the dim red at the beginning of the movie, a red that represents the People's Republic of China, a red that brings warmth and joy to the viewer. Through the use of light and color, the director maps the alternation and change of the characters and the times at all times.

3. Soundtrack and Plot

The whole movie is co-produced by a team combining Chinese and Western music culture and music style, the soundtrack and the content of the picture are closely intertwined, the whole movie's soundtrack is atmospheric and magnificent, orchestral and theme melody variations of music interlaced to accentuate the protagonist, Aisin Gioro Puyi's ups and downs of the legend of his life.^[1]

The title song of the movie is "The main title" composed by David Byrne, the whole piece of music is melodious, melodious and graceful, the beat is smooth and relaxed, showing the easy elegance of the aristocrats. The richness of the chords makes the piece as complex and exquisite as a tapestry, in which the percussion instruments have a transparent and soft tone, with rich variations and harmonies, which is the finishing touch of the whole piece. Then the whole movie kicked off. The movie screen here uses cross montage, adopting the narrative technique of flashbacks to bring the audience's perspective and thoughts back to the era in which the main character Puyi lived.

At the Manchurian Railway Station in 1950, Puyi chooses to commit suicide in his room out of fear. The knock on the door by the head of the administration office is accompanied by the words "Open the door!", the scene shifts to 1903, and the soundtrack, "Open the door", is played as the Qing soldiers enter the residence of the Prince of alcohol and bring Puyi back to the Forbidden City. "Door" appears here for the first time as a major intention of the entire movie. The soundtrack for this section is first low and mournful, rendering an oppressive atmosphere, accompanied by a burst of fast-paced sweeping strings from the lute, which changes the tempo of the whole music and adds to the urgency. When Puyi's mother carries Puyi out of the room, the erhu pulls towards the main theme of the piece, contrasting with the voice of the minister who reads out the imperial decree coldly and mercilessly, and the erhu seems very mournful and touching here. The young Puyi is about to leave his home for an unknown and unforgiving world, where he will forever lose the love of his mother and the shelter of his home, the freedom and joy of his childhood, and become a political victim. After the erhu comes the violin with a variety of chords, and the whole music picks up the tempo and is poignant and resolute. The ministers knelt down, and at this time Puyi had changed from an ordinary child to the son of heaven, and began to embark on a life of tragedy.

The Forbidden City's bondage to Puyi was only the beginning of his miserable life. Time has changed,

and thirty years later, Puyi was trapped as a puppet emperor in pseudo-Manchukuo, where he once again witnessed a vermilion door slamming shut in front of him. At that time, Puyi's wife Wanrong has been addicted to drugs, so the Japanese want to send her out of the pseudo-Manchukuo palace. Puyi desperately trying to obstruct, once again shouted "Open the door!", but still no one can open the door for him.

The transformation of Aisin Gioro Puyi's life in the film is saddening and regrettable, "The Last Emperor" is the theme music of the film "The Last Emperor", which is played many times in the film, and the combination of picture and music emphasizes the character's inner life and the change of his destiny. This change is the theme of the movie itself, that is, Puyi's change from "dragon" to "man" and the development of his humanity. At the end of the movie, Puyi returns to the Forbidden City, where he lived as a child, as a tourist, with the theme music "The Last Emperor" intact. Puyi went behind the dragon chair and took out the grasshopper given to him by his childhood minister, the grasshopper jumped out of the cage and Puyi disappeared into the picture. This surrealistic camera language suggests that Puyi eventually also unlocked the shackles of his own destiny, and the music fades to an end as the guide introduces Puyi's life.

There is a lot of source music in the movie, which also highlights the combination and collision of Chinese and Western styles throughout the movie. In the scene of Puyi and Wanrong's wedding, the guests watch the Peking Opera "The Greatest Havoc in the Palace of Heaven" at the Smooth Sound Pavilion, and when Johnston leaves China, "Friendship for a Long Time" is played on the platform with Chinese musical instruments, while all the active music at all the banquets in the days of Puyi's life in the Japanese Embassy is in the Western style. The soundtrack in The Last Emperor is a combination of Chinese folk instruments and Western folk instruments, and the music throughout the movie contains both Chinese musical elements and Western musical arrangements and structures.

Ryuichi Sakamoto has argued that the place of the soundtrack in a movie should not be randomly placed, and that it should only belong to that place after it is created. Thus, Ryuichi Sakamoto's film scores fit the content of the images, and are not simply placed randomly as background music. The uniqueness of The Last Emperor's soundtrack also lies in the characteristic mentioned by Ryuichi Sakamoto. That is, the soundtrack of a movie is supposed to fit a particular passage and cannot be misplaced. The style of the soundtrack in the movie changes along with the fate of the characters. In the Chinese style, traditional folk instruments such as guzheng, pipa and flute are chosen to show the life in the palace; in the Western style, symphonic music is used, which is magnificent and has a kind of instability, showing the turbulence and uncertainty of the current situation, and also the drastic change of the destiny of the main character, Puyi. The combination of Chinese and Western music is an ingenious arrangement by the creative team, which also allows the audience to feel the collision of Chinese and Western cultures in the movie.

4. Symbolic expression

The symbolic specific imagery presents a wealth of information in the film and is a vehicle for conveying symbolic meaning.^[2]

4.1. Doors - heavy shackles

The image of "door" appears many times in the movie, which symbolizes the shackles between personal destiny and the development of the times, and "inside the door" and "outside the door" are not only measurable distances, but also a symbol of resistance in the flood of the times. Inside the door" and "outside the door" are not only measurable distances, but also symbols of resistance in the current of the times. In the movie, the shout of "Open the door" and the closing of the door appear three times, each of which represents Puyi's situation and encounters at different times, and marks the turning point of Aixinjueluo Puyi's life. The first time it appears is when Puyi appears as a prisoner of war in the opening scene of the movie, where Puyi tries to commit suicide in the guardhouse, but is stopped by the prison warden. This "door" represents Puyi's freedom and dignity. The second time is when Puyi learned that his own mother died, riding a bicycle to leave the Forbidden City, the palace gate blocked Puyi's way, this "door" blocked Puyi's claim as a son, the emperor's identity to bring Puyi's yoke, is that he could not get out of the life of the "door! This "door" blocked Puyi as a son's claim. The third appearance is in the palace of pseudo-Manchukuo, the car took away Puyi's wife Wanrong, "door" blocked Puyi's pursuit of his lover. Puyi lived his whole life in the "door", chasing after the stability and freedom that his heart longed for, but he could never get out of the door.^[3]

The three "doors" that appear in the movie have different symbolic meanings at different stages.

The door symbolizes freedom. As a young man, Puyi wanted to leave the Forbidden City and go to the outside world of freedom, but as the last emperor of the Qing Dynasty, he was burdened with the illusory power and hope of the Qing Dynasty. Under the yoke of feudalism, Puyi ascended the throne at the age of three and abdicated at the age of six, and the vermilion gates of the Forbidden City surrounded Puyi's childhood. Later in the pseudo-Manchukuo, Puyi was used by the Japanese, and once again was locked up in the palace of the pseudo-Manchukuo under the control of the Japanese, and once again became a puppet of others. Afterwards, Puyi was captured by the Soviet army and underwent ideological reforms in the prison gates, and it was not until he was over 100 years old that he stepped out of the gates that had trapped him for the first half of his life. The "gate" symbolizes feudal imperial power. At the ceremony of Puyi's accession to the throne, Puyi, who was only three years old at the time, ran through the yellow curtains and accepted the three kneels and nine kowtows from all the ministers. Wearing a dragon robe of the young child Puyi playful manner, and this solemn ceremony seems out of place, such a door, opened the Puyi tragedy of life. "Door" symbolizes love. In Puyi's life, there were three women who were very important to him, one was his mother, one was the nursemaid who raised him, and the other was his empress, Wanrong. The death of his mother, the departure of his nursemaid, and the departure of Wanrong all made Puyi face that heavy, closed door for him again and again.^[4]

4.2. Grasshopper - its own destiny

Grasshopper as a pet has always been placed in the cage to play, Puyi and the grasshopper in the movie, has been "imprisoned" in the Forbidden City in the huge grasshopper cage. Grasshopper cage is a metaphor in the movie, the cage is the cage of Puyi's tragic destiny, Puyi's life has not been able to escape from the cage of his own destiny and the flood of the times. The first time the grasshopper appears in the movie is at Puyi's enthronement ceremony, when the minister pulls out the grasshopper from his bosom, suggesting that Puyi's fate of being bound in a cage has begun. The second appearance is in Puyi's old age, Puyi returned to his former "home" as a tourist, and took out the katydid from the back of the dragon chair, and when Puyi gave the katydid to the little boy, he himself disappeared, and this surrealistic expression implies that Puyi gained both spiritual and physical freedom.

4.3. Eyeglasses - Pursuit of Freedom

During the time Puyi lived in the Forbidden City, Puyi's teacher Johnston brought Puyi the advanced western concepts of freedom and equality, which made Puyi long for the outside world more. As Puyi grew up, Johnston realized that Puyi's eyesight was affected, and he suggested that Puyi wear glasses. This move was opposed by the imperial concubines, and Puyi argued for it, implying that Puyi had been influenced by Western thought and reflecting Puyi's inner confrontation with feudal imperial power. After Puyi wore glasses, Puyi's thinking gradually westernized, began to advocate their own choice of consort, aspired to study in England. Puyi's thinking had a significant change in this period, openness and freedom gradually came into Puyi's heart.

"Door", "Grasshopper" and "Glasses" are the important images in the movie. "Door" is the three shackles that Puyi can't get rid of in his life; "Grasshopper" is the hint of Puyi's own destiny; "Glasses" is the embodiment of Puyi's longing for freedom. The diversified symbolic language expression shows the era's hold on the fate of the protagonist, giving Puyi's tragic life a more concrete kernel. The symbolic narrative language of *The Last Emperor* is used throughout the film, and the combination of light, shadow, color, and soundtrack creates an excellent audio-visual language. In the film's length of more than three hours, director Bernardo Bertolucci, through the control of audio-visual language, reproduced Puyi's long life artistically, allowing the audience to "see" history and "hear" history.

5. Conclusions

Life is like a play, and light is like a dream. *The Last Emperor*, as a historical biographical film, has achieved a better audiovisual effect through a rich audiovisual language, which visually and aurally conveys the film's profound value core to the audience. *The Last Emperor* is a Western perspective on Chinese characters, and has its own unique interpretation compared to biographical films of the same genre, focusing on the description of history itself without adding too much political color or personal orientation. Bernardo Bertolucci's artistic expression also gives the West one more way to understand Chinese culture. Contemporary film creators should grasp the relationship between light and shadow and

color, soundtrack and plot, and symbolic expression in the film, and through their own construction and use of audiovisual language, let the audience feel the charm of film art in the world of light and shadow.

References

- [1] Xu Ting. (2018). *The Journey from "Dragon" to "Man"--An Analysis of the Musical Characteristics of the Movie "The Last Emperor"*. *Yihai* (05), 37-40.
- [2] Hao Jinyue. (2019). *Audiovisual language analysis of the movie The Last Emperor*. *Audiovisual* (04), 80-81.
- [3] Ren Mengjie. (2021). *On the symbolic expression in the movie The Last Emperor*. *Overseas Chinese Garden* (12), 92.
- [4] Zhang Zhida. (2015). *The Game of Individuals and Power Structures: The Symbolism of "Door" in The Last Emperor*. *Radio & TV Journal* (06), 64-65.