

Historical Representation and Psychological Analysis in French Films

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to explore how French films reflect the social features and the depth of human nature in a particular historical period through the two artistic techniques of historical representation and psychological analysis. Firstly, the research results in related fields at home and abroad are reviewed, the theoretical basis of historical representation and psychological analysis in film is established, and the specific meanings of these two concepts are defined. Through the analysis of several representative French historical films, we examine which major historical events the directors chose as their Settings, and how they used narrative strategies and visual elements to create an authentic historical atmosphere. At the same time, we also pay attention to the psychological state of the characters in the film, that is, the shaping of the character's personality, the portrayal of the inner world and the personality traits in the social and cultural context, which have a profound impact on the audience's understanding and feeling of the film. Further, the paper explores the intersection between historical representation and psychological analysis, showing how the two interact to enhance the artistic effect of film. For example, a complex historical background can give a character a richer psychological level, and the psychological changes of the character can reflect or affect the development of the historical process. On this basis, we choose several classic cases for in-depth analysis, and compare the differences in the methods of different directors when dealing with the same subject.

Keywords: French Film, Historical Representation, Psychological Analysis, Narrative Strategy, Visual Elements, Socio-Cultural Context.

1. Introduction

French film occupies an important position in the global film art, and its history can be traced back to the beginning of the birth of film. From the early short films of the Lumiere brothers to the work of emerging directors today, French cinema has always been known for its unique artistic style, profound thematic exploration and innovative technical practice. [1] Particularly noteworthy is the high sensitivity and depth of French films in dealing with historical subjects, as well as the delicate analysis of the psychological state of the characters, which makes it an ideal material for the study of historical representation and psychological analysis. Historical representation is an important aspect of film creation. It is not only a visual presentation of past events, but also a way to explore and reflect on history through image language. Psychological analysis delves into the spiritual world of individuals or groups, revealing the motives and emotions behind human behavior. Together, the two can provide audiences with a viewing experience that is both authentic and enlightening [2]. Therefore, studying these two elements in French films not only helps to understand the artistic value of these films themselves, but also provides us with a new perspective to think about the relationship between history and human nature.

The main purpose of this thesis is to reveal how films use narrative structure, visual symbols and performance techniques to tell stories and depict the inner world of characters through a detailed analysis of historical representation and psychological analysis in French films. The core of this study is: 1. Historical representation: How do French films choose and adapt historical events? What narrative strategies and visual designs do directors employ to recreate specific historical scenes? How do they maintain artistic freedom while ensuring historical authenticity? 2.

Psychological analysis: How are the characters in the film shaped? What methods have directors used to show the characters' inner conflicts and sociocultural influences on their personalities? How do these techniques help the audience understand the characters more deeply and resonate with them emotionally? 3. Intersection of the two: What is the interaction between historical representation and psychological analysis? How do they work together to enhance the artistic effect of the film? We can compare the works of different directors to understand their different strategies when dealing with the same subject.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Relevant Research Status at Home and Abroad

Before discussing the historical representation and psychological analysis in French films, it is necessary to understand the current research situation at home and abroad. The study of French films by foreign scholars mainly focuses on its aesthetic characteristics, director style and their influence on global film culture [3]. For example, in their book *Film Art: An Introduction*, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson analyze in detail how the French New Wave movement (*La Nouvelle Vague*) changed the narrative of world cinema. The domestic research focuses more on the acceptance of French films in China and its influence on Chinese film creation. In his thesis *Dialogue between French and Chinese Films*, Professor Wang Zhimin pointed out that French films not only provide a valuable source of inspiration for Chinese filmmakers, but also promote cultural exchanges between the two countries.

In terms of historical representation, many studies focus on specific historical events or periods [4]. For example, American scholar Robert Burgoyne's book *Film Nation:*

Hollywood and the Second World War deeply discussed how Hollywood films reflected and influenced social mentality during and after World War II. In contrast, the French film community has a more detailed study of domestic historical films, involving various important moments from the Revolution to the contemporary era. For example, *Dictionnaire du cinema francais*, edited by Jean Tulard, offers readers a comprehensive look at historical representation in French cinema.

Psychological analysis, as a branch of film studies, has also received extensive attention [5]. The theories of internationally renowned psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung have been widely used in the psychological analysis of film characters. In his article *Film Psychology: From Freud to Postmodernism*, Chinese scholar Li Daoxin discusses the influence of different psychological schools on film art, and points out the application value of these theories in understanding the motivations of movie characters.

2.2. Theoretical Basis and Research Method

Historical theory provides a solid theoretical support for the study of historical representation in French films. What is History? By E.H. Carr The role of the historian in interpreting the past tense is emphasized, arguing that history is not merely a record of facts, but a process of constructing a narrative by selectively presenting certain events. The same applies to film, as directors also choose and adapt historical material according to their own vision and intentions. In addition, Hayden White's "meta-history" theory further proposes that all historical writing contains metaphorical structures, which can also be used to analyze how film texts convey historical information through visual and narrative techniques.

Psychoanalytic theory provides profound insight into the characters in movies. Freud's subconscious theory revealed the deep reasons behind human behavior, so that we can better understand the character's behavior motivation. Jung's concept of the collective unconscious helps us understand why certain themes and images resonate across cultures and eras. In addition, Lacan's mirror stage theory also provides a new perspective for analyzing the development process of character self-cognition. Applying these theories to film analysis can help us dig deeper into the inner complexity of characters.

2.3. Concept Definition

1) Definition and scope of "historical representation" : "Historical representation" refers to the artistic practice of presenting past events in various forms in film works. It is not only limited to direct description of specific historical facts, but also indirectly reflects the characteristics of a certain period through the depiction of social features and people's living habits of a certain era. Therefore, in this study, "historical representation" covers all elements that can evoke the audience's association or imagination of a certain historical period, including but not limited to scene layout, costume design, language use, etc.

2) Manifestation of "psychological analysis" in films: "Psychological analysis" refers to the activities of revealing the inner world of characters through film narration and technical means. It can take the form of a direct display of a character's thoughts and emotional states (such as an inner monologue), or it can imply psychological changes in the character through external behavior or environmental changes. In this study, "psychological analysis" includes both

explicit expressions (such as lines and facial expressions) and implicit symbolic systems (such as camera movement and color use).

3. Historical Representation in French Cinema

3.1. Selection and Adaptation of Historical Themes

When choosing historical subjects, French films tend to focus on major events that have had a profound impact on the country and society. From the French Revolution to two world wars to colonial conflicts such as the Algerian war, these moments not only shaped the identity of modern France, but also provided a wealth of material for filmmakers to mine. For example, *"La Grande Illusion"* (1937), directed by Jean Renoir, explores class differences and human commonalities through stories in prisoner-of-war camps during World War I; *Farewell, My Queen* (2012), which focuses on court life at Versailles on the eve of the French Revolution, reveals the end of an era.

In addition to being directly based on real events, many French films are also based on literary works such as novels and biographies. This type of work has usually been time-tested and has a broad readership base. For example, *Les Miserables* (1995), based on Victor Hugo's novel of the same name, and *De Gaulle: The Liberation of Paris* (Dunkerque, 2017), based on General de Gaulle. These adaptations not only retain the spiritual core of the original works, but also carry out innovations in visual presentation, making the classic story a new life.

3.2. Narrative Strategy and Directing Technique

The method of historical representation in French cinema has changed with The Times. Early historical films such as *Napoleon* (1927) employed grand spectacle and epic narrative structures, emphasizing heroism and the relationship between the fate of the individual and the currents of history. During the New Wave, directors such as Jean-Luc Godard focused more on individual experience, challenging traditional historical narratives through non-linear storytelling and fragmented editing. In The 21st century, a younger generation of directors such as Roman Polanski (in *The Pianist*, 2002), who is not French but is heavily influenced by French cinema, tend to adopt a more nuanced and realistic approach, combining personal and collective memory. It presents a complex and diversified historical perspective. In order to accurately recreate a particular historical environment, directors pay great attention to authenticity in detail. Costume designers study the fashion trends of the time to make sure that each costume reflects the period; The set artist will also carefully construct the scenes that fit the historical context, from the architectural style to the interior decoration. In *Marie Antoinette* (2006), for example, Sofia Coppola uses bright colors and lavish costumes to show the exuberance of French court life at the end of the 18th century; And in *The Da Vinci Code* (2006), even though it is a mystery rather than a strictly historical drama, its detailed depictions of famous sites such as the Louvre also enhance the film's sense of reality.

3.3. The Balance between Historical Authenticity and Artistic Fiction

When dealing with historical subjects, how to maintain the balance between artistic freedom and respect for historical facts? On the one hand, the director needs to have enough space to build an engaging storyline and give depth to the characters; On the other hand, too much deviation from historical facts may cause dissatisfaction among the audience and even mislead the public. Therefore, a good director will find a proper juncture between the two. *Darkest Hour* (2017), for example, while not a French film, shows Churchill's key decisions in the face of the Nazi threat, offering both charisma and a faithful portrayal of the political situation at the time. When it comes to sensitive or controversial historical issues, French films usually take a cautious approach. Directors often use metaphorical or symbolic means to express their opinions rather than direct conclusions. For example, films dealing with the Algerian war, such as *Les mains sales* (2015), don't explicitly take a stand, but allow the audience to ponder the meaning of this complex history through the depiction of the fates of different characters.

4. Psychological Analysis in French Cinema

4.1. Characterization of Character and Depiction of Inner World

In French films, dialogue and monologue are not only tools to promote the development of the plot, but also an important way to reveal the inner world of the characters. Through carefully designed lines, directors and screenwriters can dig deep into the psychological activities of the characters and bring the audience closer to the emotional experience of the characters. For example, in *Le Genou de Claire* (1970), Eric Homeli uses delicate dialogue to show the subtle changes of feelings between the protagonists; In works such as *Love Death Robot* (although it is an international collection, some of the storytelling techniques can be borrowed from French film analysis), the inner monologue is used to express the characters' thought processes and inner conflicts. An actor's performance is essential to convey the psychological state of the character. Good acting allows the audience to intuitively feel the emotions, desires, and fears of the characters. *The Artist* (2011), for example, was a silent film that won global acclaim for Jean Dujardin's remarkable body language and facial expressions. Similarly, Isabelle Huppert in *La pianiste* (2001) brings a complex and conflicted character to life on screen, giving the audience a deep understanding of her inner world.

4.2. Personality Traits in Sociocultural Context

French films often place characters in specific historical or social contexts as a way to explore their motivations. These contexts not only provide a framework for the characters to act, but also reflect the relationship between social values and individual choices of the time. For example, in *May '68* (2004), the film depicts the lives of young people during the student movement in Paris in 1968, showing the idealistic spirit of that generation in pursuit of freedom and equality; *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* (2004) expresses the impact of war on individual fates through the story of two lovers in the aftermath of World War I.

Social changes often have a profound effect on the

psychology of individuals, and this effect is fully demonstrated in French films. For example, *Les roseaux sauvages* (1994), set in the French countryside after World War II, subtly touches on the confusion and challenges of the era's social transformation through the experiences of several teenagers growing up. In addition, *La vie d'Adele* (2013) focuses on the identity of young people in modern society, especially in terms of gender and sexual orientation, reflecting the diverse and inclusive cultural characteristics of contemporary French society.

4.3. Psychological Conflict and Emotional Expression

French films are good at presenting the inner contradictions of characters through complex narrative structure and multi-dimensional characterization. For example, *Shutter Island* (not French, but its psychological thriller elements can be used as a reference) uses suspense and inversion to explore the protagonist's mental state; In *L'amant* (1992), Jean-Jacques Annaud uses romantic love stories to reveal the light and dark sides of human nature. These films enhance the depth and appeal of their stories by showing different forms of inner conflict. Emotion is one of the most direct Bridges between the film and the audience. French films touch audiences' heartstrings and resonate with them through deep emotional descriptions. For example, *Amelie* (2001), with its warm and touching plot and unique visual style, has successfully aroused the beautiful memories and yearning of countless audiences around the world. And *Jeux interdits* (1952) touched people's longing for peace and happiness through the innocent love of a little girl in a time of war. Whether happy or sad, French films have always been able to skillfully use emotional elements to create memorable artistic effects.

5. The Intersection of Historical Representation and Psychological Analysis

In French films, historical background is not only the place where the story takes place, but also an important factor in shaping the character and inner world. When movies place characters in the midst of certain historical events or social changes, these external circumstances can profoundly affect their behavior patterns, values, and emotional responses. For example, in *Farewell, My Queen* (2012), director Benjamin Biolay delicately depicts the nobles' psychological changes in the face of the coming revolution by showing the last days of court life inside Versailles. Based on the novel of the same name by the French writer Chantal Thomas, the film tells the story of Sidonie Laborde, a lady-in-waiting at the side of Queen Marie Antoinette, who witnesses the queen's final days and records the details of her life during this turbulent period.

Social class and power structure: In the film, Versailles is not only a symbol of luxury and power, but also a place where the class system is strictly divided. As a low-ranking court lady, Sydney's behavior and values are deeply influenced by this environment. She had to adhere to a strict code of etiquette and maintain a humble attitude in the presence of the upper nobility, reflecting the fact that society was highly hierarchical at the time.

Uncertainty about the coming changes: As the Revolution approached, the atmosphere inside Versailles became increasingly tense. The nobles began to realize that the social

order on which they depended was shaking, and this uncertainty and fear profoundly changed their daily behavior. Queen Marie Antoinette, for example, was gradually transformed from a carefree woman enjoying life to one who was worried about the fate of herself and her family. Sydney's feelings for Marie Antoinette are complex and contradictory. On the one hand, she was a loyal follower of the Queen and would do anything for her; On the other hand, she was well aware that the power of revolution was unstoppable. When she is forced to make a choice - whether to remain loyal to the old system or accept the new reality - her inner conflict comes to a head. Many of the characters in the film struggle to balance their private desires with their sense of social responsibility. Empress Marie Antoinette, for example, tries to maintain harmony between her position at court and her personal life, but as the situation deteriorates, she has to face the greater responsibility of protecting her family from the storm of revolution.

In order to recreate the atmosphere of the period, *Goodbye My Queen* uses a lot of historical details to decorate the scene, including costumes, furniture, and the layout of the palace interior. These carefully designed visual elements not only enhance the authenticity of the story, but also make the audience feel like they are in Versailles at the end of the 18th century. In addition, the choice of music is equally important, which creates both an elegant and melancholy mood and a timely reminder to the audience that the outside world is changing dramatically. The dialogue in the film is often short but meaningful, especially when describing key events or expressing the inner feelings of the characters. At the same time, the unspoken words and long silences also convey a lot of information. For example, Marie Antoinette and Sydney sometimes only need to make eye contact to convey each other's feelings, which makes the emotional expression more subtle and powerful. Through the in-depth analysis of the historical background and characters' psychology in *Goodbye, My Queen*, we can more clearly see how the director skillfully uses the specific historical environment to shape the characters' images and reveal their emotional fluctuations and psychological changes in the face of major social changes. This precise capture of the atmosphere of *The Times* not only makes the emotions of the characters more authentic and believable, but also provides the audience with a new perspective to understand that turbulent period.

On the other hand, the psychological state of the characters can also affect the development of history in turn. Some films depict the choices and actions of individuals to reveal their impact on major historical events. *De Gaulle: The Liberation of Paris* (Dunkerque, 2017), despite the film's title, actually focuses on General Charles de Gaulle's key decisions and leadership style during World War II, and how these factors profoundly influenced the fate of France. The film is not strictly a biopic, but uses specific historical events to show de Gaulle's important role as a leader. General de Gaulle, with his firm determination and unyielding spirit, persevered in the darkest hours against Nazi aggression. His "June 18 broadcast" became the spiritual symbol of the French resistance and encouraged countless people to continue fighting. By looking back at this pivotal moment, the film shows how de Gaulle used his oratory powers to inspire his people, and underscores his belief that France would not only not be conquered, but would rise again. De Gaulle's leadership style is not only reflected in his personal charm, but also in his selection and support of team members. The

film shows the challenges he faced in forming the Free French forces and how he united people from different backgrounds against the enemy. This power of teamwork and collective action was integral to the eventual liberation of Paris. At key turning points in the war, such as before and after the Allied landings in Normandy, de Gaulle's decisions were crucial to ensuring that France could participate in post-war reconstruction as a sovereign nation. His vision enabled him to find the best solution in a complex and volatile international situation, thus ensuring that French interests were not harmed.

Through the detailed analysis of the influence of the characters' psychology on history in *De Gaulle: The Liberation of Paris*, we can see that French film is not only a tool to record history, but also an art form to explore the motive of human behavior and its far-reaching impact on society. By depicting the choices and actions of key characters, the two films vividly show how individuals can make a difference in major historical moments, while also prompting viewers to think deeply about the relationship between individual power and social change. This deep exploration of the interweaving of history and humanity has made French films widely recognized and praised around the world.

6. Conclusion

Through the in-depth exploration of historical representation and psychological analysis in French films, we find that these two elements play an indispensable role in film creation. First of all, historical representation is not limited to the visual presentation of past events, but also involves the construction of a convincing historical background through narrative structure, visual symbols and performance techniques. This representation is not only a record of facts, but also a selective interpretation of history by directors based on their own perspectives and intentions. Secondly, in terms of psychological analysis, French films show a high degree of artistic sensitivity and profound humanistic care. They are not only satisfied with the surface of the plot, but also committed to excavating the complexity of the inner world of the characters, revealing the deep emotional fluctuations of human nature and the personality characteristics under the influence of social culture. Whether through dialogue, monologues, or delicate performances by the actors, the directors strive to make the audience feel the psychological changes of the characters. The intersection between the two is particularly important. The historical background gives the characters a richer psychological level, and the psychological changes of the characters in turn reflect or affect the historical process. This interactive relationship has made film not only a form of entertainment, but also an important medium for thinking about the relationship between history and humanity. The uniqueness of French cinema in dealing with historical representation and psychological analysis has provided valuable inspiration for filmmakers around the world: the balance between truth and fiction; The importance of details; The central position of characterization; The value of multiple perspectives. Although this thesis has made a comprehensive analysis of the historical representation and psychological analysis in French films, there are still many directions worth further exploration; Evolution in the new media environment. It is hoped that these conclusions and prospects can provide valuable reference for subsequent scholars and promote the sustainable development of related fields.

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