

Analysis on Christopher Nolan's Film Style

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Abstract: *In the history of science fiction films, Christopher Nolan and his works are prestigious in the United States and even in the world. Christopher Nolan's unique film style, known as the puzzling narrative, realized the personalized display and brought a new model of shooting techniques in contrast with the conventional. This work mainly discussed Christopher Nolan's film style from the organic combination of the narrative way, the staggered design of suspense in complicated stories, the complex imagination with concise editing, and the construction of time delay and space. Through the interpretation of Nolan's film style, the characteristics of the puzzling narrative were further analyzed, which can be used as the roadmaps for the interpretation of Nolan's series of films.*

Keywords: *Christopher Nolan; Film style; Puzzle; Narrative.*

1. Introduction

Christopher Nolan is known as the film master of Hollywood construction puzzles. The puzzle characteristics of its nonlinear narrative structure, the puzzle story, and the narrative maze constructed by strict logic make his films be delighted by different levels of audiences. The *Memento Memento*, *The Prestige*, *Inception*, and *Dunkirk* are his masterpieces. In the process of watching the film, the audiences are not only attracted by the story contents but also actively integrate into the film situation in the puzzle-like narrative scene [1]. Meanwhile, the audiences can have the sense of entering the maze of narrative with a stronger sense and more suspense, and even after watching the film, the audiences can be still intoxicated. This is mainly attributed to Nolan's puzzle-style filming and narrative techniques. Also, the mysterious story and the mystery narrative have contributed to the most distinctive style in Nolan's films, making Nolan's films unique. Nolan director's film style, with the color of German expressionism, is greatly influenced by Bertolt Brecht. Bertolt Brecht subverts the tradition of drama formed in Europe since Aristotle, and he treated drama as an educational weapon to urge people to face reality and resist oppression. Influenced by this concept, Nolan integrated psychological realism in his works with nonlinear narrative, unique logical thinking and philosophical thinking ability, which also complements the puzzle-style film shooting and narrative techniques. Through multiple narrative techniques, Nolan builds a narrative maze in perspective, time, structure, and audio-visual language, which is not only an innovation in the narrative field but also brings the unfamiliar aesthetic and puzzle game experience to the audiences.

2. An Overview of Christopher Nolan's film style research

At present, some academic achievements have been made at home and abroad, and the research also focuses on several aspects. Firstly, there has been a preliminary study of Nolan's overall film style and directing art, which is the dimension of checking Nolan's works from a macro perspective. Secondly, a detailed analysis of Nolan's classics has also gradually begun. From the *Inception* to the *Dunkirk*, almost all of Nolan's work has been interpreted in the process of research. Thirdly, the theoretical study of Nolan films is conducted from multiple dimensions. It includes the perspective of narrative science, the perspective of psychoanalysis and the communication of American culture. The construction of these theories and the film analysis play certain guiding roles for understanding Nolan's films. But the research on Nolan's film style tends to be on case studies focusing on the *Inception* and the *Interstellar* although the research perspective is wide [2]. In general, there are few film research literature for Nolan's films before he enters Hollywood, and the overall common film research results are still limited. As Nolan's narrative style has become a unique wonder culture of his works, the narrative motifs, identity issues, moral issues, and time and space issues involved are worth the diversified and exhaustive research.

3. Interpretation for the Christopher Nolan's film style

3.1. *The organic combination of various narrative methods*

Firstly, in the narrative series, Nolan prefers to use a non-linear narrative. Generally speaking, the linear narrative pays attention to the integrity of the story, the coherence of time, and the causality of the plot. This narrative concept contains the beliefs and demands for a sense of order and certainty of the world, so it can be in line with the natural logic of telling stories. Also, the linear narrative can maximize the unity of time, place, and characters, which helps to present the story content according to the development context of the story. The films such as the *Following*, *Memento*, *Inception*, and *Dunkirk*, *The Prestige*, and *Interstellar* start with flashbacks interspersed with many memories, forming a combination of flashbacks and interlude. Secondly, Nolan not only applied several narrative structures organically but also completed the bold innovation in the narrative structure through his imagination. In general, Nolan mainly used nested narrative, fragmented narrative, echo narrative, and multi-threaded narrative structures in his films. In the same film, these narrative structures are not completely rejected but organically combined [3]. In addition, Nolan's films have also frequently used the echo narrative structure. In addition to the above normal narrative structures, multi-threaded narrative also appears frequently in Nolan's films. The Multi-threaded narrative is enriched with multiple clues in a story architecture so that the audiences can obtain more appreciation perspectives and understanding dimensions. In the *Interstellar*, the walking of Cooper through the universe and the living of Murphy on earth are both important clues to the film. Cooper is responsible for showing audiences their discoveries in the vast universe, while Murphy tells the audiences about the changes of the earth. The combination of the two clues presents a complete and audience-responsible story structure. Meanwhile, Nolan used his logical thinking and overall control over the story to create pure narrative effects. This unusual narrative effect, though not fancy and rarely used, can always leave the audience wanting to rethink and reflect on the plots.

3.2. *Interleaved design of complicated story suspense*

As one of the most important designs in the narrative, the treatment of suspense can often get much attention within the whole story. Therefore, how to design suspense is of vital importance for enriching the film plots. Throughout all of Nolan's films, overall suspense is generally set at the beginning of the film to guide the development of the whole story. For example, in the *Following*, what means would Cobb use to kill his mistress? In the *Memento*, can Lenny find his wife's killer with his short memory? Can the superhero Dawn of Justice beat the culprit in Gotham City? In the *Inception*, can Cobb successfully implant his mind into Fisher's brain? In addition, Nolan also sets up small suspense in several parts of the film, thus supporting the appeal of the whole story. In the *Interstellar*, Nolan sets some inexplicable suspenses in Murph's room at the beginning of the film: Why does this room always have an abnormal noise? Why does the dust on the floor appear in a fixed shape? Is it really the ghost that Murph calls? In addition to the above suspense design techniques, Nolan is also good at incorporating emotions into the suspense design, rather than simply winning in skill. The examples include Cobb's love affair with his wife in the *Inception* and Kuqiao's family love with his children in the *Interstellar*, and Bruce Wayne's love and hate for Gotham City in the Dawn of Justice series, which are in turn the important factors driving the story and make the suspense more complicated and elusive.

3.3. *Complex imagination and concise editing*

Although Nolan's films are often more complex, they are always favored for the good viewing experience. Both the *Memento* and the *Inception* allow the audience to think well in the almost two-hour watching, which is the natural effect of the director's complete grasp of the audience's psychology. Taking the *Inception* as an example, Nolan has set up a five-fold story space and time (including the reality). Each layer of space and time is staggered, and any change of space and time can cause a chain reaction to the other space and time. In the process of these five space and time, Nolan first gave them general characteristics through the design of Cobb's team, such as the speed of time, and the ways of how to be awakened from the previous dream. And in the actual processing, Nolan gives them even more uniqueness. The first dream took place on rainy days, and the Cobb team wore relatively casual jackets. The second-floor dream took place in the hotel, where the Cobb team mainly wore business suits. The third layer of dreams took place in the snow mountain, and the Cobb team mainly wore gray and white snow clothes. The fourth dream takes place in the desolate lost domain, where Cobb and Ariadne are dressed wet and messy. By processing the landscape of several dreams, Nolan quickly gives the audiences

the key to identify the dreams which is the balance between the simplicity of the clip and the complexity of the imagination [4]. As such, Nolan eventually turned his film into a "mental game" between the director and the audiences. The director induces the audiences through the concealment and guidance of information, while the audiences enjoy the pleasure of searching in the process of solving puzzles. If the imagination of the narrative is the foundation of the film, then neat and clean editing is the best designer of the film. No matter how complex the narrative structure is, no matter how exquisite the suspense setting is, they must be under the magic of editing to glow with their original infinite charm.

3.4. Different delay of time and space construction

Unlike other directors, Nolan has always been praised for his handling of time and space in his work. These two dimensions create the necessary conditions for the presentation of its film narrative spectacle and become important parts of his film narrative culture. In Nolan's films, the time presents a typical "different delay" feature, which makes the meaning of his work constantly delayed, and even difficult to be confirmed. In addition, the space not only sublimates the concept of "region", but also connects fantasy with reality, thus showing diffusion structure and finally forming multi-form, dynamic, and flexible film styles. Therefore, for the study of the narrative spectacle and narrative culture of Nolan films, the narrative time and space are also worth injecting enough attention. Nolan creates two dimensions of film narrative regarding time and space, and the setting creativity of these two dimensions can fill the narrative spectacle with infinite possibilities [5]. The dimension of time makes the meaning of the film infinite, or even difficult to obtain the true significance, and the dimension of space makes Nolan's film break the limitations of different scenes, thus enriching the field and background of the story. The former leaves Nolan's films filled with uncertainty and openness, while the latter allows for the constant change and trigger of their meaning and connotation. The different delays of time and space construction not only can serve various narrative modes and suspense but also can inject vitality into the film itself.

4. Conclusion

Christopher Nolan established his leadership position in the film field by his unique film style. He combines conventional film with the Hollywood industrial system, thus deducing distinctive and highly recognized classic film and television works. In the film style interpretation, he uses narrative motifs, moral identity, narrative mode, suspense setting, and other techniques to create a unique narrative cultural system. These attempts not only present an unpredictable narrative style but also bring the audiences an immersive viewing experience. As such, the puzzling narrative has become Nolan's unique film style label.

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