

Metaphors of the lens: symbolism and visual expression in cinematography

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Abstract: This article explores how the metaphor of signs and symbols is expressed in films through the visual language of cinematography to deepen film narratives and themes. Based on semiotic theory, the article analyzes how visual elements such as composition, lighting, shadow, and color express the director's abstract concepts. Through case studies of three classic films—*Parasite*, *In the Mood for Love*, and *Les Misérables*—the article reveals the key role of metaphor and symbolism in cinematography in expressing characters' emotions, revealing story themes, and shaping visual narratives. It comprehensively demonstrates the unique position of cinematography in storytelling and explores its impact on the audience's emotional experience and level of understanding.

Key words: cinematography; camera language; semiotics; metaphors

1 Introduction

As a comprehensive art form, film combines visual, auditory, narrative, and other elements, with the visual component undoubtedly being one of the most immediate and significant means of expression. Cinematography is not just a technical method for capturing images; it also serves as a metaphorical and symbolic tool for film narrative, imbuing images with deeper meanings through the language of the camera. As film art has evolved, directors and cinematographers have come to realize that the lens is not merely a window to display the story but also a medium that can convey complex emotions and ideas through elements such as composition, lighting, shadow, and color. This metaphorical system, constructed from visual symbols, has elevated the role of cinematography within film.

The importance of "visual symbols" in narrative and emotional expression has been emphasized by French theorists like Christian Metz and André Bazin. Meanwhile, Jean Mitry distinguishes three levels of representation in the image: reproduction, semantics, and art. These define the three layers of film aesthetics: image, symbol, and art, offering a robust analytical tool in film studies to help decode the deeper meanings embedded in the language of the camera [1].

Exploring the metaphorical expression of cinematographic language not only enhances our understanding of how cinematic works are constructed but also reveals how directors and cinematographers use visual symbols to explore reality, emotion, and philosophy. This study provides valuable insights into the art of cinematography, showing how the symbolic system behind the lens affects the audience's viewing experience.

By closely analyzing the visual language in classic films, this study demonstrates how cinematographers and directors transform abstract emotions and ideas into concrete visual symbols through photographic techniques. This research not only deepens our understanding of visual symbolism in film narratives but also offers new perspectives for studying

semiotics in film theory.

2 Semiotic foundations of cinematography

Cinematography can be seen as a complex system of visual symbols, whose intricate mechanisms can be explored through semiotic analytical methods. Semiotics is a relatively young discipline, and film theory is similarly young, but over the past few decades, cinema has matured into a sophisticated art form. In an interview, Christian Metz pointed out that "film theory emerged when cinema was entering a crisis, producing more and more 'meta-cinematic' works, like those of Godard — films that reflect the death of cinema and already contain semiotic elements" [2]. According to semiotics, all language and communication are based on a system of signs, which consist of a signifier (the form, such as an image, sound, or word) and a signified (the meaning it represents). In cinema, visual elements such as camera angles, composition, and lighting function like words in a language, form the signifier in filmic signs, while the metaphors, symbols, or emotions they convey represent the signified.

Cinematic semiotics, a branch of semiotics, focuses on analyzing how the symbolic system of cinema operates. In his book *Language and Cinema Semiotics*, French film theorist Christian Metz examines the linguistic structure of film through the lens of semiotics, arguing that cinema forms a unique visual semiotic system through its images, sounds, and narrative elements. He approaches the concept of "film language" from a perspective different from traditional theories, viewing it as a metaphor that refers to the distinctive mode of expression that defines cinema [3].

As a comprehensive art form, cinema is not simply a blend of image, sound, and narrative—it is also a complex symbolic system. Within this system, cinematography constructs a network of signs and symbols through the language of the lens, which conveys the metaphorical and ideological content of a film. This provides a theoretical foundation for understanding metaphor and symbolism in cinema.

In cinematography, the use of the camera can be viewed as the arrangement and combination of multiple symbols. The camera is not merely a tool for recording reality; it conveys specific emotions and ideas through techniques such as composition, lighting, and scene. For instance, an upward shot often symbolizes the power and dominance of the subject, while an overhead shot may imply a character's vulnerability or helplessness. Lighting shifts can evoke different emotions and moods within a film. Cinematography not only generates aesthetic pleasure for the audience but also builds complex symbolic and metaphorical structures through the language of the camera, enabling viewers to grasp the film's narrative and emotional layers. These symbolic techniques enrich the film's narrative structure and create a multi-dimensional space for audience interpretation.

3 The presentation of metaphor and symbol in cinematography

Metaphor is a common rhetorical device in cinematography, which gives a deeper meaning to a particular image by associating a concrete thing with an abstract concept. Metaphors in cinema do not only rely on lines or plots, but also link image elements to emotional or ideological concepts through the language of the camera. Cinematography, as an important part of the visual narrative, conveys the complex meanings of metaphors and symbols through the language of the camera. These visual symbols help the viewers go beyond the surface narrative to understand the deeper themes of the movie. Metaphors and symbols in films are often skillfully presented through cinematographic techniques, including composition, light and shadow, camera movement, and the use of color. The following chapter will analyze in detail how these cinematographic techniques represent metaphors and symbols in films.

Metaphors and symbols in cinematography can be expressed through lens language, composition, color, light and shadow, and other visual elements. Metaphors allow visual elements in a film to transcend their superficial meaning and convey deeper emotions and ideas, while symbols reinforce the theme of a film through specific objects, colors, or light

and shadow. Through these techniques, cinematographers not only give movies a richer level of interpretation, but also provide a unique emotional experience for the audience.

4 Analysis of metaphor and symbolism in classic films

This chapter will analyze different cinematographic techniques in three classic films, exploring the use of long shots, spatial composition, and light and shadow in relation to metaphor and symbolism. Specifically, it will examine long shots and metaphor in *Parasite*, spatial composition and symbolism in *In the Mood for Love*, and light and shadow and metaphor in *Les Misérables*, revealing how cinematography conveys complex thoughts and emotions through visual language.

4.1 Long shot and metaphor in *Parasite*

Parasite (2019), directed by Joon-ho Bong, conveys rich social metaphors through its superb cinematography. The use of long shots in the film enhances narrative fluidity while metaphors class differences and social stratification through visual language.

4.1.1 Metaphors of class stratification

In *Parasite*, long shots particularly highlight the class differences between the characters. For instance, when the Kiser family returns to their semi-basement apartment from the wealthy man's house on a rainy night, long shots are employed to depict their downward journey. The continuous uncut shots illustrate the descent of the poor back to a lower position from the heights of the rich man's world. This long shot not only emphasizes the physical displacement of the characters through uninterrupted movement and scene transitions but also metaphorically represents the irreversibility of their social positions and fates. It symbolizes their decline in the social hierarchy, fully embodying director Joon-ho Bong's concept of "vertical space", which posits that the vast gap between different classes is an insurmountable boundary. The continuity of the long shot allows the audience to experience this "descent", enhancing the film's social critique.

4.1.2 Metaphor of social segregation

Another notable use of long shots occurs when the Kiser family temporarily occupies the wealthy man's mansion while the rich family is away camping. The camera smoothly follows the characters as they explore the mansion, metaphorically illustrating their fleeting fantasies of an affluent life. However, the long shot ultimately returns the audience to reality, emphasizing the social isolation of the poor who cannot genuinely integrate into the wealthy lifestyle.

This type of long shot appears multiple times throughout the film, with the combination of camera language and narrative structure, enabling it to convey a profound social message while advancing the storyline [4]. Through uninterrupted camera movements and seamless spatial transitions, the antagonism between characters and social classes is underscored, serving as a metaphor for the widening gap between the rich and the poor, as well as the social injustices resulting from entrenched class divisions.

4.2 Spatial composition and symbolism in *In the Mood for Love*

Kar-Wai Wong's film *In the Mood for Love* (2000) presents the repressed emotions and social constraints of its two protagonists through delicate spatial composition and a melancholic visual atmosphere. In the film, spatial composition serves not only as a design element but also as a means of conveying the inner worlds and emotional struggles of the characters through symbolism.

4.2.1 The symbol of repression in narrow spaces

Composition in cinematography is crucial, and one of the most frequent compositional techniques in this film is the use of "frame within a frame". This involves utilizing elements such as doors, windows, staircases, and corridors to create additional frames within the primary film frame, placing characters within these confined spaces [5]. The spatial composition of the film often features narrow, enclosed environments, symbolizing the repressed emotions and social

constraints experienced by the protagonists. For example, the relationship between Su Lizhen and Zhou Muyun is repeatedly depicted through narrow corridors, closed rooms, and tight stairwells. These constrained spaces represent their inability to express their feelings freely and highlight their constrained identities within social norms.

In a classic scene, Su Lizhen and Zhou Muyun meet in a narrow stairwell, separated by walls and railings. The camera captures their physical distance through symmetrical compositions, symbolizing their emotional inaccessibility. The foreground's railings suggest a "cage", implying that their relationship is fundamentally flawed and unable to transcend societal constraints. Through this spatial composition and lens compression, Kar-Wai Wong intensifies the sense of isolation between the characters, metaphorically representing the insurmountable moral and social barriers they face.

4.2.2 Symbolism of reflection in mirrors

The use of mirrors is another significant symbolic element in the film's spatial composition. The camera often captures the inner divisions and emotional complexities of the characters through their reflections. For instance, when Su Lizhen tries on a cheongsam, her image is reflected multiple times in the mirror, symbolizing her internal emotional conflict and contradictions. This compositional technique not only adds visual layers to the image but also conveys the multiplicity of the character's emotions through visual symbolism.

The reflections in the mirror also suggest a separation between the characters' illusions and the realities of their lives. Their relationship exists only as a mirage, as intangible as the reflections themselves. Through this spatial composition, the film skillfully transforms the characters' emotional expressions into visual metaphors, showcasing their struggle between desire and morality.

4.3 Light and metaphor in *Les Misérables*

Les Misérables (2012), adapted from Victor Hugo's renowned novel, is presented in the form of a musical and has garnered significant attention for its innovative themes and distinct social critique. The design of light and shadow in the film serves not only to create atmosphere but also to express the characters' moral struggles and societal contradictions through the strong contrasts of light and shadow, functioning as powerful visual metaphors.

4.3.1 Opposing metaphors of light and shadow

In cinematic expression, light typically plays three roles: modeling, representation, and characterization [6]. In *Les Misérables*, the stark contrast between light and shadow symbolizes the characters' moral struggles and the opposition between good and evil. For instance, during the conflict between the police and the youth, the strong sunlight contrasts sharply with the shadowy surroundings; the light tends to illuminate the police while shadows envelope the young people in the streets. This interplay of light and shadow not only symbolizes the power disparity but also metaphorically represents the injustice and oppression present in society.

Through the careful placement of light, the director positions the characters at the intersection of light and darkness, metaphorizing the complexity of their moral choices and social conflicts. The opposition between light and shadow reflects the polarization of society, revealing each character's journey and struggle between good and evil.

4.3.2 Psychological metaphors in shadows

In the film, shadows serve not only as symbols of the darker aspects of society but also as metaphors for the characters' psychological states. Key scenes, such as violent confrontations and the internal struggles of the police, often unfold in low-light conditions, where the characters' faces and bodies are engulfed by shadows. This treatment of light and shadow acts as a metaphor for the characters' inner anxieties, insecurities, and moral ambiguities.

Moreover, shadows symbolize the hidden conflicts and oppression within society. Through the skillful use of light and shadow, the film intertwines social issues with the characters' psychological experiences, revealing the deep-rooted

problems of racial conflict and class oppression in French society. The metaphors of light and shadow allow the audience to empathize with the dilemmas faced by the characters while simultaneously reflecting on the oppressive influences of their social environment.

The long shots, spatial composition, and light and shadow design in *Parasite*, *In the Mood for Love*, and *Les Misérables* exemplify not only a masterful use of cinematic techniques but also serve as powerful tools for conveying metaphors and symbols through the language of photography. These photographic techniques enrich the narrative depth of the films, enabling the audience to gain a deeper understanding of the social issues, emotional struggles, and moral choices expressed throughout the stories.

5 Conclusion

Cinematography transcends mere visual expression; its artistry lies not only in the beauty of composition but also in its profound influence on the narrative of the film. Through lens language, light and shadow, and other cinematic techniques, cinematography possesses a unique ability to convey thoughts, emotions, and social criticism through images, rich with multi-layered connotations of metaphor and symbolism.

This thesis analyzes *Parasite*, *In the Mood for Love*, and *Les Misérables*, demonstrating that cinematography serves as a foundation for the film's aesthetics and acts as a crucial bridge for expressing narrative and emotion.

In summary, cinematography is not only a technical means but also an artistic form of expression imbued with symbolic significance. Through exquisite lens language, films can transcend their narratives to convey deeper messages. In this context, the cinematographer emerges not merely as a visual storyteller but also as a transmitter of ideas, employing flexible photographic techniques to metaphorically and symbolically represent specific intentions. This artistic approach provides deeper meaning to the film, allowing audiences to engage with and reflect on real societal issues while enjoying the visual experience.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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