The Overlap of Confusion: Self and Dreams in Maya Deren's Experimental Film

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Abstract: "Meshes of the Afternoon" was directed by Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid. The experimental expressions in the film, such as the continuous repetition of dreams, shaking scenes, dancing movements, no audio-visual language, and so on, have formally shattered the establishment of the traditional film language system. It broke through traditional narrative thinking and logical thinking as well as took its own perception as the only clue of the film, the overlap between dream and reality, as well as the relationship between subconsciousness and sex, especially the layers of metaphor for reality from the feminist perspective, so as to explore the possibility of experimental film expressions being completely independent from mainstream films. In today's digital film era, reviewing the past images is not only to return to important historical nodes, but also to retrospectively sort out, reflect, and think forward about the significance of the concept and practice of current experimental films.

Keywords: Experimental film; Semiology; Feminism; Structuralism; Phallocentric

1. Introduction

Nowadays, "experimental film" is no longer a strange term. It covers a wide range, including the practicality of all films of the same type and the innovation of the form of image works. At present, no matter in popular culture, film art, or academic film research, the practice or research based on experimental film has become marginalized. Modern art's acceptance of experimental images may only regard it as an extended film or a spiritual extension, but the artistic pursuit and ideal contained in experimental films are not in-depth. In the era of digital film, the identity of film itself is dissolving. The term "experimental film" seems to be stuck to an "experiment" that only remains on the surface [1]. Reviewing the past images is not only to return to important historical nodes, but also to retrospectively sort out and reflect on the formation of artistic concepts and practical models, think forward to the significance of the concept and practice of current experimental films, as well as look forward to experimental films that do not belong to the digital age [2].

In the 1920s, artists began to explore experimental images. Experimental images have always appeared in a way against tradition and convention. The most important part of experimental images is experimental film. The early experimental images completely rely on the form of film and assume the ideological theories of some artists as the creative subject, such as Dada, structuralism, Einstein's theory of relativity, existential philosophy, and Freud's psychoanalytic theory. The unique way of experimental film caters to the development of the whole era and is also the main medium for artists to express themselves. Maya Deren's experimental film, "Meshes of the Afternoon," was produced during Hollywood's golden age in the 1940s. Different from the same period of American commercial film narrative, anti-traditional narrative structure,

and away from the reality of abstract expression, it is in the subconscious and inner shaping of the successful and profound expression of feminist awakening.

2. Overlapping and confusing narration

"Meshes of the Afternoon" broke the tradition of linear narration, took space as a microcosm of itself, and turned its possibility into an endless sense. In the film, the director established a fictional world based on her own real-life scenes and repeatedly narrated the process of going home in the character's dreams, with difference in each repetition. In the first repetition, the person in black appeared in the film; in the second repetition, the woman found that the person in black might be herself. When she wanted to find out the person's identity, she found that the person's face was a mirror; in the third and fourth repetitions, the audience gradually understood the woman's body movements in expressing the difficulty of self-cognition until the final self-breaking. There is no coherent causal logic in the film. Simple events without logical order are used to express the director's spiritual world. While following the non-linear narrative mode, the subject event is retained, and the change of time and space is used to highlight the turning point of the plot as well as the change of emotions. It is not equal in each repetition from the first trip home to following the man in black, and to the awakening of self-awareness in the second repetition. When this self-exploration goes from discovery to in-depth in the last repetition, it can be clearly seen that the woman stabbed herself and the person in black with a knife [3].

In the short 15-minute film, the director established four spiritual dimensions with four repetitions. In the narrative, they all start from the origin, but in expression, each repetition constantly develops deeper. Compared with traditional linear narrative, nonlinear narrative is easier to draw complex plot and bring complex symbolism into the plot. Through dreams in the film, Maya Deren retains an important part of the original plot, while flashbacks and interludes intertwine the past and future to highlight subconscious changes, create suspense, and reveal the mystery in the interweaving of time and space [4].

3. Presence and absence

Movies add similar themes to different timelines and juxtapose them to enhance their consistency. When the woman first came home, the director did not reveal who the person in black was, but in the process of the person's appearance, it brought out the key in the mouth, a knife, and a flower, which established a spiritual world with self-subconscious activities through the emergence of different objects and a new reasonable explanation for the subsequent narration. These objects do not appear inadvertently in the film. They are used as symbols to interpret the director's confrontation and reflection on the real society. At the beginning of the film, the woman picked up a flower from the ground, and then took out a key to open a door. The key fell, and when she opened the door, she followed the person in black. While following the person, the woman's mood changed; uneasiness, anxiety, fear, and feelings of struggle were externalized in life objects. The key is a symbolic object. The moment it fell reflected the awakening of the woman's self-consciousness. In the repeated lens, the key became a knife. In the face of a profound expression of the mainstream concept, it conveys a sense of loss and competition. The intention of the knife is obvious, which is a metaphorical patriarchal symbol – the most straightforward embodiment of "phallocentrism." Phallocentrism includes two aspects: the first is that in society, in the fields of politics, economy, law, religion, education, military, and family, all the positions of authority are reserved for men, whereas women are evaluated by men's standards, and nothing of the opposite occurs; the second is to objectify women, limit and hinder women's creativity, and prevent their contact with social knowledge and cultural achievements [5]. From various forms of expression, from the key to the knife, this in-depth portrayal of the transition from consciousness to a right seems particularly sharp.

The mirror represents men. The woman picked up a knife to defend herself and stabbed the person's face (mirror). In Lacan's theory, infants experience the mirror stage at 18 months; this stage is mainly the establishment stage of infants' self-cognition. At the same time, looking in the mirror is a game of presence and absence [6]. In the film, the man did not appear until the end. The face of the man in black (mirror) is a kind of "presence" in a certain sense. The exact character setting was not specified in the film, but the man in the film is seen as "absent" in himself, relative to the mirror image. With the constant repetition of time and the deepening of consciousness in the film, the woman finally goes to the sea. She finally broke free from the closed space and subconsciously destroyed the inner self of the male world, which clearly reflected the process of her self-search and in trying to completely crush the superego in the pursuit of men's ideal. Through these objects, the fragmented expression criticizes the hegemony of male centrism [5].

4. Experimental images

In the film, the director integrates fragment, flashback, and repetition to move between the past and the present, making this simple story complex, so as to achieve the output of self-consciousness. Its repetition restores the complex truth behind a simple event from different angles and shows the confrontation between social consciousness and an individual. In the film, the use of montage extends the disorder of space and time in the expression of self-consciousness. In traditional films, this lens assembly method is only used when it needs to be omitted in line with the narrative logic; otherwise, it will be regarded as a wrong way to shatter visual unity [7]. However, in Maya Deren's images, her montage editing techniques make many seemingly illogical events and the disorder of space and time reasonable. The reproduction montage appears repeatedly at the key of the event. When the content of these shots is consistent with the way of the shots, they have only one intention, which is to make the character's intention more profound and imply the development direction of a specific scene. Maya Deren skillfully gave full play to the expressive function of montage in the film, creating and showing time and space, which involved a wide range of fields and various artistic forms [8]. With that, the film accurately reflected the social phenomena and revealed the hidden corners closely related to life. Through the repetition of dreams, objective facts were combined with self-subjective consciousness, so as to create a new "real world." The repetitive chase, the knife, the raging sea, and the flower contained their own meaning on each parallel line, which finally came together, gradually blending and resulting in each other. This split and integrated narrative made the film more spatial and static, enhanced the narrative emotion, infiltrated personalized consciousness into the film, and guided the audience to extend their attention to the spirit and consciousness outside vision. In addition to the space-time connection in montage, she made use of the material potential of films. The emergence of grid-by-grid and multiple image clips in the film further experimented on spatial concepts to achieve a barrier expression of self-consciousness.

5. Contrast between dreams and reality

Freud's theory on dream interpretation holds that "all dreams have their own meaning and spiritual value," which "represent the realization of a wish." Dreams are unconscious behaviors. Dreams transform the unconscious latent level of thought into the visual level, so that people can analyze the potential ideology through the representation of dreams [9]. Maya Deren tried to interpret her subconscious mind by presenting dreams with images.

Dreams have their own unique mode of operation, which is mainly divided into condensation, drift, and secondary modification. "Condensation" means that a huge part of the subconscious level is compressed in dreams to form a smaller proportion, thus showing a fragmented appearance [8]. In "Meshes of the Afternoon," the film switches between dream and real life from the close-up of a woman's sleeping

face. In the dream, the woman sees multiple instances of herself. Maya Deren used special film editing techniques to make this switching more fragmented. The role of condensation in dreams cannot be quantified. In dreams, repeated elements are re-decomposed and combined to form meaningful contents [10].

"Drift" is another form of operating mechanism in dreams. The important components of the subconscious mind may become insignificant in the visible plane [9]. In the repeated scenes of Maya Deren's film, there are symbolic life objects, such as a key, a telephone, a knife, and a flower, all of which convey a sense of conviction that women are trying to achieve to varying degrees. These objects are not dispensable. Through these symbolic objects, one is able to appreciate the self-seeking and self-killing acts of women in their subconscious.

"Secondary modification" offers a camouflage of the deeper structure of dreams and the treatment of the narrative, as well as provides a seemingly logical causal relationship, but in fact, it is the alienation of the subconscious [9]. The real scenes, life objects, and repeated fragments in the film seem to have a coherent story and a certain temporal output, but in fact, the relationship among these events, objects, time, and space is vague. This kind of camouflage is based on the interpretation of dreams by the self-subject and expresses the alienation effect of the subconscious by visually arranging the chaotic events [11]. This is also a new interpretation of Maya Deren's experimental film, reconstructing the narrative to explore the unconscious spirit. In the dream, the knife-wielding self finally ended the cycle of the transformative power with a sense of imposed distress and torture, while in reality, it is a self-destructive tendency that cannot be dispelled by the recognition of one's true heart [12].

6. Conclusion

Today, with the rapid development of science and technology, there are abundant images that can add forms of expression to experimental images. However, new media occupies most of people's lives; media has become life itself, and films are no longer "pure." The development of digital technology is dissolving the boundary of media, and the experimental value is far from bringing all the possibilities provided by commerce. Whether it is the change of society or the breakthrough of film production, the experimental image used to promote ideology has been neglected. In the face of the "outdated" new environment, modern popular formal features such as misappropriation, juxtaposition, and time code should be reconsidered, so as to provide new enlightenment for the foreseeable future of experimental films. Looking back to the past of all the experiments of film practice, we can imagine an endless future in a variety of intertwined experimental images and society itself.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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