Original Research Article

The role of color in establishing emotional tone and shaping characters in films: A case study of raise the red lantern

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Abstract: This study analyzes the film Raise the Red Lantern as a case to explore the application and significant role of color in cinema. By examining the construction of color tones, the correlation between color and emotional tone, the role of color in shaping characters and driving narrative clues, as well as how visual symbols signify meaning, it reveals the unique value and far-reaching influence of color in film art. Color is not only a core element of film visual communication but also an important bridge connecting the film and the audience, profoundly affecting viewers' understanding and perception of the film's content.

Keywords: "Raise the Red Lantern"; Color utilization; Visual symbols; Visual communication

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background and significance

Film and television works are primarily visual arts before belonging to the audiovisual category. As an artistic expression form primarily presented visually, film can fully utilize visual elements such as imagery, color, and composition to convey emotions and portray character images, gradually unfolding an engaging narrative framework. Color, as a crucial component of visual expression, plays an irreplaceable role.

1.2. The importance of visual communication in film art

Raise the Red Lantern, a classic film by director Zhang Yimou, is widely acclaimed for its unique color utilization and profound thematic expression. Through the ingenious use of color elements such as red lanterns, red, black, and white, the film successfully establishes a oppressive emotional tone. Therefore, analyzing the role of color in establishing emotional tone and shaping character images with Raise the Red Lantern as a research sample has high representativeness and research value.

2. Film color and the construction of emotional tone

2.1. Overview of color tone

Color tone refers to the dominant color tendency in a film, determining the film's overall visual style and emotional atmosphere. The color tones in Raise the Red Lantern are primarily red, black, white, and dark, cold hues.

Red occupies a pivotal position in the film. The red lanterns, as symbolic icons, not only represent the power and status of the feudal family but also hint at the tragic fate of the female characters. Black symbolizes the darkness and oppression of feudal society, while white conveys a dual meaning of purity and sadness. Dark, cold tones further intensify the film's tragic sense, making viewers visually feel a heavy sense of oppression.

2.2. Color tone and emotional expression

2.2.1. Warm tones: Early resistance at Chen's mansion

At the beginning of the film, when Songlian first enters Chen's mansion, the director uses warm tones to create a warm and serene atmosphere. However, this warm tone is quickly replaced by the red of the red lanterns, foreshadowing Songlian's impending entanglement in the feudal family's whirlpool. At this stage, Songlian's resistance has not completely disappeared; she tries to change her fate through her own efforts. However, as the plot progresses, her resistance gradually fades, and red becomes a tool for her to compete for the right to have her lantern lit.

2.2.2. Bright red tones: Gradual assimilation and lantern competition

Bright red tones dominate the film, symbolizing not only the power and status of the feudal family but also hinting at the tragic fate of female characters. Songlian and the other wives engage in fierce competition for the right to have their lanterns lit, a struggle that manifests not only materially but also spiritually.

2.2.3. Dark, cold tones: Sober pain and melancholy over fate

Dark, cold tones appear multiple times in the film, especially when the female characters suffer misfortune. This tone not only intensifies the film's tragic sense but also allows viewers to deeply feel the female characters' sober understanding and painful feelings about their fate. Against the backdrop of these dark, cold tones, the fate of the female characters appears even more tragic and helpless.

2.2.4. All-white tones: The death of the third wife and the protagonist's heartbreak

All-white tones carry the dual symbolic meaning of purity and sorrow in the film. When the third wife is confined to the death chamber, the film cleverly uses a white background to contrast the bloody scene, making this visual presentation easier to touch viewers' deep-seated pity and sympathy, thereby effectively exposing the cruelty and darkness of feudal ethics. Meanwhile, white subtly reflects Songlian's inner despair and suffering. As the story progresses, Songlian gradually descends into the abyss of despair, and the use of all-white tones allows viewers to deeply feel her spiritual transformation and suffering.

2.3. Color contrast and emotional tension

2.3.1. Black-and-white contrast: Prominent tragic effect

Another dominant color in the film, black, symbolizes the failure of hope and the approach of death. Throughout the film, except for the warm tones before Songlian enters Chen's mansion, the remaining scenes are almost shrouded in a black haze, profoundly revealing the heavy reality that women in the old era were powerless to change their tragic fate.

The use of black-and-white contrast pushes the connection between snowfall and death, evil to the extreme. In the black-and-white scenes, the purity and innocence of snowfall form a stark contrast with the darkness and cruelty of Chen's mansion, further highlighting the cruelty and injustice of feudal society. This contrast can not only enhance the film's visual effects and infectivity but also deepen viewers' understanding and reflection on the film's theme and intention.

2.3.2. Red-white contrast: The intertwining of hope and despair

Red and white form a sharp contrast in the film, with red representing hope and power, and white symbolizing despair and helplessness. In the lantern competition among Songlian and the other wives, red

becomes the focus and symbol of their struggle. However, as the plot develops, red gradually loses its original meaning and value, becoming a symbol of emptiness and void. White, meanwhile, consistently accompanies Songlian's inner changes, allowing viewers to deeply feel her inner despair and pain.

3. The promotion of film color and narrative clues

3.1. The role of color as a narrative clue

Color in film not only has symbolic meaning and emotional expression functions but can also serve as a narrative clue to drive the development of the plot. In Raise the Red Lantern, the color of the lanterns is closely linked to Song Lian's fate, becoming an important narrative clue in the film.

Changes in lantern color not only reflect Song Lian's status and power dynamics within the feudal family but also predict the direction of her fate. When she first enters the Chen mansion, she gains the power to light the lanterns, with the red color symbolizing hope and power. However, as the plot progresses, she gradually loses this power, and the red of the lanterns also fades, ultimately disappearing completely. This change not only embodies the tragedy and helplessness of Song Lian's fate but also drives the development of the plot.

3.2. The application of color in plot cohesion and expansion of ideographic space

The skillful use of color in film can not only enhance plot cohesion but also expand the ideographic space of the film. In Raise the Red Lantern, this purpose is successfully achieved through the use of color.

Changes in color in the film are closely linked to the development of the plot, with each color change presageing the progression of the plot. For example, when Song Lian loses the power to light the lanterns, the red of the lanterns gradually fades. At the same time, the use of color also expands the ideographic space of the film, allowing viewers to more deeply understand the film's theme and connotation.

4. Conclusion

Through an in-depth analysis of the use of color in the film Raise the Red Lantern, we can discover that color plays a crucial role in film art. It is not only a key element in constructing the emotional tone but also an important means of shaping character images, driving narrative clues, and achieving visual rhetoric.

Furthermore, through the interpretation of visual symbols and the analysis of visual rhetoric, we can further recognize the unique value of color in film art. Issues such as the relationship between the implied meaning of symbols and visual communication, and how viewers interpret visual symbols, are explored. On this basis, we can not only more deeply understand the themes and ideas conveyed by this film but also provide new perspectives and methods for the study of film visual communication. In the creation of film art, we should pay more attention to the use and innovation of color, with the aim of creating more film works with profound connotations and unique charm.

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