

## A Poignant and Beautiful Application Practice of Film Semiotics in the Ending-the Character Portrayal of "Leon"

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**Abstract:** Jean Epstein, a French film theorist and director, believed that film is a universal language. As one of the core elements of film art creation, how to shape well-developed film characters is a problem that every director must solve. Directors of different styles all have unique artistic expression strategies for character shaping. A detailed analysis of character images is one of the important research topics for film creators. This article aims to analyze the artistic expression methods of the director's character image shaping in "Leon" from the perspective of "application of film semiotics", with the expectation of re-understanding this classic image on the screen and other impressive characters in the story.

**Keywords:** Character Image Building; Film Language; Film Semiotics; "Leon"

### 1. Introduction

This is a story about two children, a girl and a boy. In their hearts, they are both twelve years old. They both feel lost and they both love each other deeply. The above is Luc Besson's evaluation of his Hollywood debut "Leon" (which is usually translated as "The Assassin is Not Too Cold" or "Leon the Assassin" in China). As Luc Besson's Hollywood debut work, Luc Besson successfully tells the story of a "middle-aged killer uncle and a troubled girl with a broken family and ruined family" [1]. In this film, Luc Besson nearly perfectly balances the commerciality and artistry of this movie as a Hollywood commercial film. Not only that, Luc Besson also successfully made Natalie Portman, who was only 12 years old at the time, become a highly sought-after "future star" in Hollywood through the role of Matilda in the film, and together with the French national treasure actor Jean Reno, they created a classic assassin image in the history of cinema. Next, this article will attempt to disanalyze Luc Besson's method of

shaping the characters of the main characters in the film from the perspective of film semiotics. In an attempt to re-understand this classic killer image on the screen and other impressive characters in the story from the perspective of film semiotics.

### 2. "Leon": a Tragic and Beautiful Application Practice of Film Semiotics

#### 2.1 The Multi-Faceted Killer Leon

Wemberto Eco believed that [2], the film image itself is a symbolic system, and the so-called resemblance between the film image and the reproduced object only exists between the image and the concepts formed by the cultural background. The image symbols are also completely arbitrary, stylized and groundless. In "Leon", Luc Besson utilized this kind of symbol that "exists only between the concepts formed by the image and the cultural background" to shape the image of Leon as a hitman. In the conventional thinking of ordinary people, "killers" and "killer organizations" imply coldness, ruthlessness, decisiveness and money above all else. So, Luc Besson, with a pair of powerful hands, a stern expression behind heavy sunglasses, a lit cigarette, an aged face, a brief but serious and low conversation, a cigarette butt that was forcefully snuffed out, a target photo that was slowly pushed over the table, and finally an empty cup that was placed back on the table. This series of shots, by magnifying the scenes and individual parts of the characters, instantly attracts the audience with the mystery and solemnity of the characters, thereby capturing the audience's attention while establishing the character image and personality of Leon as a "killer".

But Luc Besson did not create this classic assassin image in film history exactly in accordance with such stereotypes. In this film, Luc Besson not only enhances Leon's "killer character" through the above-mentioned symbols

but also highlights Leon's uniqueness by using props as symbols. At the very beginning of the film, a series of shots that "cut" from the Manhattan River all the way to the tavern where the story originated, gradually "advancing" from long shots to close-ups, introduce the background of the story and the "origin" of the protagonist. The simultaneous hanging of the American and Italian flags on the streets in the film gives the audience a clear hint that this is a story that takes place in the United States and is related to Italy or Italians. The protagonist of the story is an "outsider".

Immediately after that, Luc Besson broke the audience's stereotype of a hitman with a glass of milk. As Wemberto Eco pointed out in "The Division of Film Codes" [4] : In film language, the following ten types of codes can be distinguished: perceptual codes, cognitive codes, transmission codes, mood codes, pictographic codes, graphic codes, experience and emotion codes, rhetorical codes, style codes, and unconscious codes. Wemberto Eco believes that the above first nine codes are not all the determining factors regarding the process of film creation and appreciation. In addition to the above-mentioned codes, there are more concealed determinants, which he calls unconscious codes. Ultimately, all the above-mentioned codes are subject to the constraints of this system of hidden determinants. In the audience's inherent perception, "killer" is usually associated with items or symbols that are impactful and oppressive, such as cigarettes, strong alcohol, and blood. However, in this paragraph, Luc Besson replaced "strong liquor" with "milk". Compared with the "numbness, indulgence and harm" brought by alcohol, milk is "warm, moist and nutritious". The substitution of this symbol implies that Leon, as a hitman, has the potential to "break the tradition" and is "dual and multiple". Therefore, while the tension and sense of oppression were overwhelming, the audience also had completely different expectations of Lyon because of these differences.

As mentioned earlier, Luc Besson had already hinted at Lyon's "outsider" identity with the symbol of the "national flag" at the beginning of the film. Next, Luc Besson returned to the process of shaping Lyon's identity as a "killer". During the execution of the character in Lyon, Luc Besson ingeniously employed the element of "sound effect" as the transmission code and

pictographic code [6]. The so-called transmission code refers to the perceptual conditions that constitute and determine the image, and it determines some physical characteristics of the symbol carrier to ensure the effective transmission of aesthetic qualities. The so-called pictographic code [7] is a code based on perceptual components, which function by means of transmission codes. In the film, during the process of the target character, Mr. Jones, fleeing from Leon's pursuit, the sounds of collisions, breathing, phone calls, gunshots, heartbeat, and the drawing of Leon's sharp blade when the final target character is threatened by Leon all belong to transmission codes. The combination of these codes constitutes the perceptual conditions of the image, thereby determining the symbol carrier. That is, Mr. Jones' physical characteristics (image), thereby ensuring the effective transmission of aesthetic qualities (emotions).

As for Leon's daily life, the dark clothes, hats and sunglasses, as well as the gloomy indoor environment, also serve as symbols suggesting that Leon is in a state of wandering in the dark. The application of these symbols makes Leon's cold, ruthless and decisive character image more credible and concrete.

In addition, Luc Besson also used the "film" itself as a symbolic code to demonstrate the complexity of the character Leon. The so-called pictographic code is to convert the signified part in the pictographic code into the signified part in another signified relationship to implicitly refer to more complex and culturally associative elements. In this film, Luc Besson completes this process in this way: The "Song in the Rain" that Leon watched itself expresses the pursuit of artistic freedom and the yearning for a happy life for mankind. It is first and foremost a transmission code, namely the plot of the film "Song in the Rain", which is an objective and concrete entity. These transmission codes enabled Leon to form perception, which in turn became pictographic codes for Leon. Luc Besson presented these pictographic codes along with Leon on the screen. For the audience, these codes together become illustrative codes, showcasing Lyon's childlike and kind side. At the same time, it expresses Lyon's yearning for the dreamy life in the film as well as his own desire for self-identity and normal ordinary life in real life. This enables the audience to develop an identification with Leon, empathy and

anticipation for the character's happy ending.

As an important element running through this film, the potted plant that Leon carries with him, of course, cannot be ignored. In fact, this is also the most important symbol in this film. Its significance is even much higher than Leon's signature catchphrase in the film, "No women, no kids." If "No women no kids." is a linguistic symbol, it is the principle and code of conduct that Leon, as a hitman, must follow. Then this potted plant is undoubtedly an important symbol of a movie image. Film symbols are different from natural language symbols. They are a kind of "image symbols" that appeal to the audience's vision and hearing.

That is to say, film symbols are composed of images and sounds, and they are real material forms that the audience can directly perceive. In film symbols, images and sounds are both signifier and signified. In the film, this potted plant is both the plant itself (the signifier of the image) and the reflection (the signified) of Lyon himself. In other words, this potted plant itself is also a part of Lyon, so it must always be by Lyon's side. This is why Lyon always takes this potted plant wherever he goes and places it in the sunlight every time. Even after being besieged in a hotel room, at the last moment of parting with Matilda, the reason why Leon would hand over the potted plant to Matilda. Because potted plants need sunlight, just as Leon himself longs for a normal life and to bask in the sun. This attitude of being born in the dark and yearning for the light actually laid the groundwork for Lyon's tragic and heroic ending in the end.

## **2.2 The "Mature" Problem Girl Matilda**

As the female lead of this film, Luc Besson also applied a large number of principles of film semiotics to the portrayal of Matilda. Film semiotics holds that creating a film is a process of coding. Just as Christian Metz pointed out [8], the audience understands the film works through various codes-the specific codes of the film (which also include various secondary codes) and non-specific codes. Therefore, Christian Metz regards the textual system of film works as a mixed place where various codes meet and are interconnected. In the reprint of "The Language of Cinema", Christian Metz divides the language of cinema into five levels of signatory methods, each with corresponding code rules: The first is the general perceptual level, the second is the

cognitive level of audio-visual image symbols on the screen, the third is the sum total of various symbolic relationships and intentional referential relationships related to the cultural world outside the film, the fourth is the sum total of the narrative structure of large combined segments, and the fifth is the sum total of various film technique systems. Christian Metz concluded: "Film semiotics indicates that film as a whole is a field within which many signatory systems are superimposed and interwoven. Film language is merely one of these systems, and all the related film codes (that govern film information) have five organizational levels, which form a hierarchical system." In the film, Luc Besson skillfully applied these principles of film semiotics. From the moment Matilda made her appearance, all visual elements were mobilized to shape Matilda's "problematic character". The slightly worn shoes, the lit cigarette, and the melancholy and tired face trapped behind the railing-these elements, through the director's camera work in this scene, become a string of codes that the audience can perceive, instantly drawing the audience into the film's setting and allowing them to feel Matilda's difference and misfortune. In the audience's inherent perception, worn-out shoes symbolize poverty or an unvalued family environment, and lit cigarettes are the unique "masculine symbols" of adult men, signifying Matilda's rebellious "problematic personality" and "maturity beyond age". The tired face trapped behind the railing represents a kind of cage-like restraint. In a pan shot, Luc Besson simultaneously presents these codes to the audience, allowing them to immediately form a perception of Matilda's image and an expectation of her character.

Next, Luc Besson unexpectedly used the actor's movements to make Matilda constantly highlight her body curves through changes in posture, thereby further shaping the "mature image" that Matilda should have as a woman. From a semiotic perspective [9], these movements that highlight the beauty of the body's curves are, in a biological sense, a clear and strong sexual symbol and sexual suggestive code existing between the opposite sexes. Luc Besson used these symbols here through the actor's movement arrangement, and it was used on a teenage girl in her prime. It can be said that it has created a very strong sense of contrast and visual impact through a very unconventional and unconventional way. We can also put it this way:

In this part of the shot design, Luc Besson actually presented a teenage girl in her youth as a mature woman directly by applying the principles of film semiotics and combining audio-visual design. In the audience's fixed perception, teenagers should be innocent and carefree. However, Luc Besson, through such an unconventional cast arrangement and audio-visual design, directly broke the audience's fixed perception by creating an impact through visual symbols, and even deliberately made the audience start to have "unrealistic thoughts" beyond the age of the characters psychologically. Thus, the presentation of the image of the problem girl was completed. Such an arrangement also lays the groundwork for the subsequent development of the story and the transformation of the characters' fates in the film. Meanwhile, these ingenious designs also provide a logical premise and rationality for the development of the relationship between Matilda and Leon and the transformation of their fates in the subsequent story of the film.

### **2.3 Stan, Who Appears Elegant but is Actually A Perverted Black Police Officer**

Just like creating Leon and Matilda, in this film, Luc Besson also presents the seemingly elegant but actually perverted villain image of Stan by applying the principles of film semiotics. If Luc Besson used the principles of film semiotics to break the audience's fixed perception when creating the character of Leon, then his portrayal of Stan was to completely subvert the audience's values by applying the principles of film semiotics. Theoretically speaking, when conveying a set of information, the transformation rules of different symbol systems and the qualitative rules that ensure the people participating in the communication process can understand. Such as the grammar of a language. Therefore, in human life, the concept of codes should be broad. Food, myths, fashion, images, character types in literary works, personal and non-personal narratives, etc., can all constitute codes. The same kind of code has systematicness, homogeneity and coherence. Due to the need for narrative, films also have a series of codes, namely the rules that govern the means of film expression. A film as information contains multiple codes: characteristic codes (that is, codes specific to the film, such as special effects, quick editing, camera movement, shot assembly,

shot angles, etc.); Pan-codes (codes that are not specific to films and exist in social culture, such as codes in politics, society, business and customs); Common codes (such as the gesture movements shared by film performance and theatrical performance, the light and shade contrast and backlighting shared by film and lighting, and the composition, color, line and shape shared by painting art)

"State" Secondary codes (for instance, the "phrasing method" is a set rule that is valid for all films, while categories such as "cut", "cut", and "gradually appear and disappear" are secondary codes for the "phrasing method", and the rules governing the unique expression methods of a certain type of film can be regarded as secondary codes. Performance can be divided into two types of codes: realistic performance and expressionist performance). A scene can have different codes at the same time. The codes of a film are visual codes, composed of the content of the shot itself, and thus have less randomness.

Therefore, as the villain of this film, Stan, who first appears, actually shows up before the audience in an elegant manner. Whether it is a well-fitting pair of leather shoes and a suit, a delicate grooming, or a person who loves music, in the audience's inherent perception, these are all symbols existing in social culture, and these symbols themselves are all associated with "elegance". However, Luc Besson, by capturing the tense expressions of other characters, the changes in the rhythm of the music, and Stan's action of "sniffing out lies", symbolically and in reverse presents Stan's seemingly elegant but actually terrifying character image and his own perverted nature. And this thus forms a strong sense of contrast, subverting the audience's preconceived notions.

Next, to enhance this image, Luc Besson symbolized the process by presenting the "combination" of Stan's actions and musical effects during the massacre of Matilda's entire family. In this scene, the deliberately amplified giggles made by Stan's twisting of his muscles and bones after taking drugs, the imitation of insect movements, the imitation of a symphony conductor's movements, the posture when using a gun as if playing an instrument, the action of moving and killing while dancing, and finally ending this performance with a curtain lifting action similar to a curtain call. By using these common codes (Stein's performance movements)

in combination with characteristic codes (shot arrangement and editing) and the tense atmosphere created by Eric Sera's original music "Noon", Luc Besson naturally connects these behaviors with the psychological feelings related to "evil", "perversion" and "terror" in their subconscious. Thus, the image of Stan, the evil and perverted black police officer, was presented to the fullest extent, making the audience feel horrified.

As the main villain of this film, Stan's act of killing so brutally just because of a simple dispute is already enough to shock the audience. However, in order to make this character evoke more and deeper fear and hatred in the minds of the audience, and at the same time strengthen the motivation and rationality of Matilda's revenge, Luc Besson continues to symbolize the character of Stan. After slaughtering Matilda's entire family, Stan faced his old neighbor and said, "Let that poor family go. Why don't you let them go?" When questioned, he leisurely stuffed the bullets one by one into the gun barrel and threatened the old man by shooting the glass behind him with his hand without any explanation. In the collective consciousness of the audience, "police" is originally a symbolic image representing "fairness, integrity and justice", but here, Stan's actions clearly go against the audience's traditional symbolic perception of "police", and are completely the behavior of a bloodthirsty demon. At the end of this scene, when Stan fervently said, "Tell them, we are on official duty," Stan finally revealed his true colors, which not only made the audience shudder but also successfully implanted a complete and three-dimensional image and symbol of an evil and perverted black police officer in their consciousness.

### 3. Conclusion

From the perspective of the film itself, the ending of "Leon" is undoubtedly poignant and beautiful. From the previous argumentation, it can be found that by the end of the film, when Leon and Matilda are trapped in the hotel and fighting like beasts, since Luc Besson's character portrayal of Leon and Matilda has already been deeply rooted in people's hearts, the audience's emotions have been fully aroused by the film. Therefore, the audience felt sympathetic towards the two's fate and even regarded them as a "divine couple", thus desperately hoping that they could escape and ascend to heaven. After

sending off Matilda and his beloved potted plant, Lyon, who was already seriously injured, let out a wild beast-like roar. Luc Besson, through the selection of the shooting Angle, turned Lyon himself into an image symbol. It made Leon a concrete carrier of the audience's viewing emotions. Ultimately, when Lyon was knocked down by Stan at the hotel entrance, Luc Besson used dreamlike light and shadow as a symbol to express Lyon's reluctance to part with a good life and pushed the audience's resentment to the peak.

At the end of the film, when Matilda transplanted Leon's pot to the open space on the lawn, she said the line, "I think we will be okay here. Leon." The potted plants and lines here are actually carefully designed symbols by Luc Besson. They not only symbolize that Leon has finally found redemption, but also that Matilda has finally transformed from a troubled and unconventional problem girl to a normal ordinary girl who can return to a normal social life and grow up healthily. The potted plants transplanted to the open ground have also become the connecting symbol between Matilda and Lyon. Before meeting each other, Lyon and Matilda's lives were both gloomy and extremely struggling, just like potted plants in flowerpots, longing to grow (to obtain love and freedom), but unable to grow (to obtain love and freedom) because of the lack of nourishment from the land (love). After the potted plant was transplanted to the open ground, because of the existence and nourishment of the land (love), the potted plant finally became "water with its source and a tree with its roots" (finding the meaning of life and existence), and thus could grow healthily towards the light from then on. Just like after Matilda and Leon met, because of the existence of "love", a bond was formed between them. From being strangers to becoming familiar, from being cold to being warm to each other, and eventually being inseparable through life and death. This further highlights the kind and friendly nature of the two, bringing the film to a perfect conclusion and thus completing this tragic and beautiful application practice of film semiotics.

To sum up, as an important component in the study of film theory, the supplementary role of film semiotics in film analysis methods cannot be ignored. But it should also be noted that although film semiotics is extremely rare The spirit of science, but since its birth, film

semiotics has been subject to fierce criticism. With the in-depth study of film theory, the methodological deficiencies of film semiotics have become increasingly obvious. Because film semiotics essentially avoids substantive issues such as form and content, works and reality, artistic characteristics and social functions, it is a purely descriptive system. Perhaps, as the American film critic James McByne put it, "Film semiotics is a counter-movement against the widely developed Marxist ideological theory in the 1960s and its movement in the field of film theory and criticism, and it is a manifestation of academic mysticism [10]."

However, despite the many flaws of film semiotics itself, we have to admit that film semiotics has broken through the empirical and blind nature of traditional film theory and attempted to establish a scientific and systematic theoretical system for film art. This kind of trial is helpful for understanding the nature and function of films, enabling the rapid development of film theory research. It itself has a relatively high-level theoretical and academic nature. This is also the original intention of this article in choosing this writing perspective.

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