Interpretation of Costume Design in Science Fiction Films from the Perspective of Postmodernism*

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Abstract—**Based on the aesthetic characteristics and spiritual connotation of costume design in science fiction films, this paper puts it in the perspective of postmodernism and interprets the postmodern concepts in costume design in science fiction films from three aspects: the basic features of science fiction movies and their costume design, the background of postmodernism and its resonance relationship with science fiction films, and the embodiment of postmodernist ideas in costume design of science fiction films.**

Keywords—postmodernism; science fiction; costume design

I. INTRODUCTION

Famous Hollywood director Steven Spielberg believes that "in terms of creativity, the potential of science fiction films is endless." The reason is that such films often create a space and time away from reality. In the futuristic world of science fiction, there can be various characters with strange images and weird shapes. The fantasy style, which is divorced from reality, makes the costume design in science fiction movies become the most inclusive clothing type for diversity, heterogeneity and novelty among all the movie costume styles, which also has typical post-modernism characteristics. Among the dazzling and magnificent visual wonders created by "science fiction costumes", the ideological power and basic concepts of postmodernism play an important role in the construction.

II. THE BASIC FEATURES OF SCIENCE FICTION MOVIES AND THEIR COSTUME DESIGN

Science fiction is a feature film based on science fiction. The basic characteristics are based on the known scientific principles and achievements of today, to make a fantasy description of the future world, and to show the audience a concrete picture of the future of mankind.

In modern times, with the development of science and technology and the revolution of ideological context, the imaginary texts created by science fiction films generally have a desire and trend to gradually break and fill up the

seemingly unbreakable concept gap in the pre-modern society. Ordinary people can become superheroes, heroines can save the universe, machines will fall in love with people, people will fall in love with machines, other organisms have higher intelligence than humans, and similar plots are often used in the stories of science fiction movies. The boundary between center and edge, machine and organic matter, matter and consciousness, body and spirit and other binary opposites is gradually blurred. The purpose is to provoke the audience to think about their own destiny and then improve the values, life view and world view of modern human beings.

As an important artistic and visual element in films, costume design of science fiction films, like that of other types of films, needs basic aesthetic, narrative and graphic features to convey the artistic style and emotion of films. Aesthetic appeal to the audience's visual sense directly, cause aesthetic emotion and endow the film with aesthetic value; narrative promote the development of the story; and graphic can show the character and make the audience understand the character.

The costume design of science fiction films has formed its unique artistic style in the interpretation of the above characteristics. It is mainly manifested in breaking the routine, creating a series of images beyond reality through a lot of exaggeration and reconstruction, while having a strong sense of technology and the future. The characters in science fiction movies are often of various types, each with a complete appearance, independent thinking and different temperament, which brings great imagination space to the design of clothes. Designers can create a variety of conceptual styles to express these characters with different images and strange shapes. However, no matter how exaggerated and deformation, they are not blindly formed, but formed under the guidance of the inner logic and true emotion of the film.

One of the main features of sci-fi clothing is the use of new materials, as well as a mix of different materials. Noble gorgeous, warm rustic, cold alienation and other visual effects can be switched in the same film. Yvonne Blake, the costume designer of the movie *Superman* (1978), said in an interview that when designing superman's costume, she set her goal to create something that would never be seen on the big screen. Considering superman's need to fly and other

technical factors, she used the newly introduced Lycra fabric when designing the superman costume, which was the first costume made with Lycra in the movie. In *The Maxtrix* (1999), the main characters enter the virtual world dressed in black, high-tech glossy cloth, artificial leather, coated boots, streamlined sunglasses, etc., looking neat and cool. After returning to the living space of human beings, the clothes they wear are changed into casual clothes made of cotton fabric, showing the plain meaning in real life.

The formation of costume style in science fiction movies is determined by the fundamental tone of science fiction movies, and the story plots in the movies shape the typical costumes of characters. Although science fiction films were born at the end of the 19th century, post-modernism is generally regarded as rising in the 1960s. However, with the development of science and technology, the plot setting of science fiction films is also updating and developing, which has a certain connection with the formation background of post-modernism on some levels. From this point of view, the costume design of science fiction films has the characteristics of postmodernism, which has its deep cultural background.

III. THE BACKGROUND OF POSTMODERNISM AND ITS RESONANCE RELATIONSHIP WITH SCIENCE FICTION FILMS

The rise, development and change of an idea or ideology are often closely related to its historical background. As a category of cultural and artistic significance, postmodernism itself has accumulated and evolved in the development of Western society, which has its own social and historical origin and scientific and cultural background.

A. Social and Historical Level

American sociologist and futurist Daniel Bell believes that postmodernism is the reflection of social changes in the cultural field. In the 1960s, due to the rapid development of media brought by electronic technology, human beings entered a new "information age". Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian writer, philosopher and media critic, also proposed his famous concept of "global village" for the first time. The arrival of "information age" has brought about a fundamental change in social formation. Therefore, information society and its state of knowledge have become the basic perspective of post-modernism to observe and analyze the state of surrounding culture.

It is also based on the arrival and development of the information society that "information" is often used as one of the entry points for the creation of science fiction films. Modern physics holds that matter, energy and information are the three elements that make up the objective world. However, compared with the other two factors, "information" itself is not the real objective existence, but the mathematical abstraction of human rationality to the objective world. Therefore, the virtual world born in the technology can be the background of science fiction stories, breaking all kinds of real laws in the physical world and constructing the real with models. (*The Maxtrix*, 1999)

B. Scientific and Cultural Level

Aristotle's Greek cosmology divided the universe into worlds above and below the moon, Kepler's three laws of planetary motion formed in the early 17th century, and Galileo's improvements to the telescope gave birth to the concept of modernity in modern physics. The advent of Newton's classical mechanics led to the final formation of the mechanistic cosmology. Step by step, through experiment and calculation, man has used the power of science and reason to overcome religion. From a mechanistic point of view, scientists from Newton until the end of the 19th century believed that the natural world worked as mathematically as the movement of a watch. However, in the early 20th century, with the exploration of the quantum world, the birth of quantum physics made the proposition of classical physics constantly overturned. Human beings found that the particle world followed different game rules from the classical world, and opened up a new perspective on the world and their own cognition. The discovery of phenomena such as "wave-particle dualism", "quantum state superposition", "quantum tunneling effect", "Heisenberg's uncertainty principle" and the introduction of scientific theories continue to shake the traditional scientific belief of using rational and accurate calculation to understand all kinds of things in the natural universe, and caused a huge impact on the absolute truth, authority and rationality. At the same time, quantum theory reveals that the mysterious behavior of the atom and its tiny components are the building blocks of everything, including ourselves. The ideas of "uncertainty, chaos and relativity" in the new scientific thoughts have been selectively absorbed and utilized by postmodernism to form a new way of looking at the world and human beings themselves.

Science fiction film itself needs to take science as the core to construct its story line. It is inevitable that the development of science will lead to the exquisite evolution of science fiction. With the birth of quantum physics, there are more and more sci-fi plots, especially the marvel universe series. *Ant Man and the Wasp* and *Avengers 4* feature superheroes entering the quantum realm. And in *Avengers 4*, time travel through quantum physics is the key to the avengers' ultimate victory.

Culturally, the student marches, strikes, occupations, gatherings and sit-ins of the 1960s constituted an important historical moment. By the student unrest of 1968, postmodern philosophy had debuted, deviating from the existentialism with strong ethics and individualism advocated by Sartre and Camus in the 1940s, and turning to irrational liberation of instinct, impulse, will, etc. and a more skeptical anti-humanistic attitude. Many scholars agree that the emergence of postmodernism is largely due to people's disillusionment with the cultural rebellion against capitalism and its military industrial system in 1968, and the belief that the entire modern cultural system of the west has been destroyed and the whole culture is in serious crisis.

The apocalyptic wasteland style of science fiction films was set to advance the story after the destruction of civilization. In such films, the concepts of culture, ethics and

other civilized societies are meaningless, and there is only a mortal struggle for the basic need of human beings — survival. (*Waterworld*, 1995, *Oblivion*, 2013)

IV. THE EMBODIMENT OF POSTMODERNIST IDEAS IN COSTUME DESIGN OF SCIENCE FICTION FILMS

The term "postmodernism" is a mixture of historical period and ideology, so it is defined by different criteria in different fields such as philosophy, aesthetics and sociology. The author only discusses the ideas that have been instructive to creative art and cultural practice since the mid-1960s and thus mapped to the costume design of science fiction films.

A. *Deconstructivism*

Deconstructivism was established by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. The core argument is that truth itself is relative and depends on the different positions of the judge and the thinking frame with bias. The main principle is that it is impossible to give a clear definition of anything, because even the most precise definition can be further defined through a game of language, because meaning can slide endlessly from one word to another in the chain of language. Therefore, deconstructivism believes that the relationship between language and reality is not established, and all language systems are essentially the products of cultural construction. Derrida's most important contribution to postmodernism is this relativistic view of conceptual frameworks, all of which can be criticized and deconstructed. The greatest influence of deconstructivism on culture and art lies in its rejection of systematic thinking. Language or other symbols became an infinite realm, unbounded by fixed patterns, and thus able to be dynamically connected to one another. The game of text in postmodern literature and the loss of style in art can be regarded as the extension of deconstructivism.

Science fiction film itself is to depict a space that does not exist in reality and let the audience know the characters that do not exist in reality. Therefore, the shaping of characters is less disturbed by the factors such as nationality, region, history and culture in reality, and there is no need to follow a certain overall framework or systematic style. Therefore, deconstructivism is often seen in the costume design of the characters in science fiction films, which is embodied in the deconstruction of traditional meaning. All kinds of artistic styles can cross their own barriers for absurd combination. Elements of multiple times can be mixed in a new structure. The sense of unity and order of clothing will collapse step by step in the face of deconstruction, thus causing an atmosphere of carnival together with the mood of the film.

Directed by Ridley Scott, *Blade Runner* (1982) is regarded as a classic in the history of science fiction films, although it was released in 1982, its costume design still looks bold and amazing today. Set in a futuristic Los Angeles, the film tells the story of a group of clones with the same intelligence and feelings as humans who come to earth to find a way to live forever before their mechanical energy

runs out, and are thus hunted down and destroyed by humans. The whole film is to show the future world of confusion, disorder, decadence and despair. The visual style of a mixture of science fiction, film noir, bounty hunter Western and love stories is also a mix of genres. Costume designer Michael Kaplan has suggested that Rachel's outfit was inspired by 1940s costume designer Gilbert Adrian. Although the film is set in the future, he hopes to create some atmosphere of 1940s film noir. Therefore, Rachel's costume is full of a sense of the future while revealing a strong Hollywood classic beauty. Pelisse, one of the four replicators, created her decadent, sexy and dark with leather, tights, ripped fishnet stockings and other elements. Plastic raincoats, biker jackets, vintage trench coats, fur coats and other types of clothing have also appeared in the film. The fusion of various clothing styles renders the rebellious, future, chaotic and depressive atmosphere that the film wants to show.

Jean Paul Gaultier, a famous French fashion designer, showed his bold, witty and grotesque style in the film The Fifth Element. The heroine's avant-garde gelatinous braces, the hero's flamboyant leopard print, the villain's handsome clothing, and terrestrial's tights made of reflective material reveal a sexy appeal. At the same time, the costumes of various nationalities and the classics of various times are filled with a sense of the future beyond time and space after his deconstruction (tearing and reorganizing) style.

B. *Suspicion of Meta-narrative*

The French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard once noted, "If I were to define postmodernism in an extremely simple way, it would be the suspicion of meta-narration." The so-called meta-narration is also called authoritative narration, which refers to the narration that has been recognized and accepted for a long time. For example, history is progressive, and human beings can achieve the cognition of absolute truth and so on. Lyotard mainly criticizes two kinds of narration: one is the theory of human progress — from Christ's redemption to Utopia; second, scientific victory theory. Since the Second World War, he argues, these doctrines have "lost their credibility". This idea is largely due to the disillusionment that war has brought to mankind. As the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty put it: "Compared to any previous century, the 20th century made people aware of the 'contingency' of their lives, and realize how their lives were at the mercy of historical events and other changes beyond their control." Postmodernism's skeptical attitude towards authoritative narration supports those who are incompatible with the grand narrative and those who are suppressed and marginalized. On the basis of this concept, many avant-garde art schools, such as pop, hippie and punk, have the characteristics of criticism and confrontation without exception, and also announced the arrival of a pluralistic era.

Science fiction is born with a strong rebellious suspicion of the real society, just like the author mentioned above to break some fixed gaps. For the mainstream ideology, some science fiction films can be regarded as the outsiders "stirring up", but they can construct powerful subjects

through reasonable imagination and technical application, and their ideas have a weird and beautiful power. Such films themselves embody a suspicion of authoritative narration. Costume design, as a medium, needs to suggest that such characteristics of films and characters represent a kind of rebellion and deviation from the mainstream.

In *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), which won the best costume design award at the 88th Academy Awards, the actors' costumes are all made of old and dirty strips of cloth, scrap metal and rotten leather, and the leather jacket of the leading role is also made old and shabby. This treatment of costume modeling is to be highly consistent with the overall waste soil style of the film: a genre of sci-fi movies that describes the state of the human world after a devastating disaster. The film describes Australia after the nuclear explosion in the future. Human beings fight for limited resources in battle after battle, with the desert as the main background, including flying cars, gunfights, torture and other elements. Its costume designer, Jenny Beavan, is best known for her ability to bring characters to life, arguing that costume design has little to do with the clothes themselves and more to do with the story they tell. The film's costume, made up of gritty "rags," is rendered almost colorless by special effects, highly consistent with the film's whole world of destruction, loss of humanity, and desolation.

The suit in *Prometheus* is a mash-up of the usual cool colors and simplicity with a steampunk twist. The character, David, is a flawed androgynous robot whose immaculately polished appearance and character are inspired by the legendary rock star David Bowie.

C. Reconstruction of History

Postmodernism believes that history is just another narrative, and its paradigm structure is a kind of fiction, bound to myths, metaphors and stereotypes that are not realized by itself. No matter how objective and authentic historical materials are, they are ultimately just a series of interrelated texts that can be interpreted in various ways. One does not have direct access to the past. All one has are conflicting stories that historians connect in different ways. Therefore, the activities of art, reason, religion, politics and so on in history should be regarded as part of the same dialectical process, and the creative interaction between them should be seen, so that history can be understood in a broad and open way. Since the narrative can't correspond to the "too much", people can describe the "same" events in many different ways, and people can only obtain evidence indirectly, nothing is completely transparent. Collage technique in artistic creation and eclecticism in architecture, film and other fields can be regarded as the concrete expression under the reconstruction of historical concept.

Although the characters in science fiction movies are imaginary, their identities and personality characteristics are still based on real life, so that the audience can have emotional resonance with such characters. Spider-man has always been one of the most popular superheroes in the marvel series because he is an ordinary high school student, struggling with his studies and struggling with rent and

utilities. Costume design, as visual information, needs to highlight the lifelike role, often using the style, style or type of classic or current clothing. But after all, the characters are in the future world of high technology, and their clothes are transformed into future clothes through the imaginative treatment and modification of designers with retro tendency.

The Hunger Games is full of retro 19th-century aristocrats, but the movie is set in the new homeland of North America, which was destroyed in war. Therefore, at the same time of restoring ancient ways, exaggerated, enhanced lightness of color and other processing make the clothes have a sense of the future, giving the audience retro-futuristic visual effect. Retro costumes are also ubiquitous in *Star Wars*: upper class men's wear before and after the Renaissance, medieval robe made of cotton and linen, even the gothic and Byzantine styles. But all the clothes have been re-cut and other elements added to give them a new look. For example, the robe of the Jedi Knight has added elements of the Japanese kimono to express his magnity and firmness of spirit. The appearance of the robe is concise and smooth.

V. CONCLUSION

Postmodernism overturns modernism with the main features of centralization, mainstreaming, binary opposition and unity to a certain extent, and forms many basic concepts of postmodernism with the central concepts of decentralization, marginalization, diversification and diversity. These concepts are in line with the costume design of science fiction films in many dimensions, which enables the costume design of science fiction films to transcend the physical and social space, the boundaries of nationalities and ethnics, the boundaries of gender, class and race, and unify the old world, the new world and the third world. The dialogue between the past, the present and the future has broadened the understanding of human beings on their existing experience and revealed more than the original imagination of human beings. It has become the source of nourishing the visual effects of science fiction films, and meanwhile, it has also given a new breadth and depth to human life.

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