

Research on the Limitations and Paths of Innovative Development of Biographical Films

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Abstract:

For a long time, the film art form of biographical films has been relatively fixed and has not undergone revolutionary development for a long time. However, Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* the latest typical film of this type has broken the long-standing rules and regulations of biographical films, expanded the margins of biographical films, and provided a reference for the subsequent creation of related types of films. This article analyzes the limitations and innovations of biographical films represented by *Oppenheimer*. This paper argues that biographical films are limited by definition and connotation, and their form and gender perspective have certain limitations. Therefore, there are certain difficulties in the innovation of this type of film. This paper argues that *Oppenheimer* breaks the linear constraints of biographical film time narratives, and at the same time uses more original soundtracks and sound effects that conform to the narrative connotation of the film. All of this gave *Oppenheimer* a new perspective. This article concludes that biographical films need to show more of the spiritual core of biographical characters while moving closer to commercialization to trigger audience thinking.

Keywords: *Oppenheimer*; innovation; biographical film

1. Introduction

As a long-standing creative practice in human history, biographical literature has tried almost all possible art forms as its carrier in its long development process. George F. Custen, who was an early researcher on biopics, gave the following definition: Biographical films depict the life of a historical figure in the past or present [1]. The unique mass communication advantages of contemporary film art have enabled

biographical works to find a new medium, and biographical films that use high-tech image symbols to record the deeds of characters have come into being. Film is a time art that takes the form of space, so it has unique advantages in portraying characters. Hobsbawm mentioned the so-called "twilight zone", that is, biographical films can integrate personal memories into the history of the people. Under the support of Hollywood film industrialization, biopics,

as an art style with the widest appreciation group, are increasingly becoming a partner for writing biographies to interact with. The combination of the two makes biographical culture present a rich and colorful dynamic and vitality. This paper will sort out the famous benchmark biographical films of all ages, and focus on the analysis of the film *Oppenheimer*, to find a way out for the overall development of biographical films.

2. The Characteristics and Development Limitations of Biographical Films

2.1 Analysis and Evolution of Biographical Films

The great "Citizen Kane" released in 1941 dramatized the fall and corruption, reaching a climax in a tragic atmosphere. Biographical films have shifted from the initial focus on the narrative of personal experience to artistic beautification and interpretation. In "A Beautiful Mind", Nash achieved a perfect balance between madness and healing, and the interweaving of schizophrenia and a beautiful mind completed the construction of the character's light arc. At this stage, biographical films are more focused on transforming the inner emotions of the characters through an innovative stream of consciousness. The 2-hour chaos of "Bohemian Rhapsody" could not hide the madness of the last 20 minutes. The non-traditional biographical film plus the addition of music made this film stand out in the biographical film series. This film shows that the artistic focus of biographical films can be inclined to music and other aspects, inheriting and developing the creative form of musicians' biopics. The movement and montage structure of these biographical films makes the images of the characters in them more realistic and vivid. The dynamic image presentation of static text historical materials has promoted the transformation of the recipient's appreciation of psychological structure at a deep level and promoted the communication and interaction between people and the world. In the context of today's consumer society, the visualization and poeticization of biographical literature are in line with the public demand for reconstructing cultural personality since the new era. The hero worship and ideal expectations caused by strengthening individual consciousness and pursuing multiple values, as well as the biographical film boom brought about by the prosperity of popular literature and art, have brought human cultural behavior of preserving their records into a new realm [2].

2.2 Characteristics and Limitations of Biographical Films

Biographical films have very different characteristics from other types of films. Taking the biographical films of the classic Hollywood era as an example, most of them show the great achievements of the biographical figures in the context of the time and expand and recreate the image of historical figures in line with mainstream ideas and American values. Therefore, biographical films have become one of the effective propaganda tools of the national film industry, not only in capitalist countries but also in socialist countries. Since biographical films are a re-exploration of the identities of historical greats and benchmark figures and are also enhanced by star performances, the deconstruction of characters is also an important part of biographical films. Historical figures often appear single and symbolic due to the lack of visual materials, and the performances of stars add more "meaning" to historical figures. At the same time, influenced by the narrative context of Hollywood personal heroes, biographical films tend to show the struggles of small people. The emergence of small-person biopics has made the image life writing in the postmodern period more democratic and diversified, and stars playing small people has also made the audience's identification more complicated. In particular, the identification of the possibility of small people becoming stars is particularly obvious in sports biopics. In this new cultural context, the protagonists of biopics may no longer be well-known historical figures who are powerful and detached from the world. The public history in which small people participate also emphasizes the dramatic narrative of their respective challenges.

In addition, biography also has certain limitations in film and television expression. Including the fixedness of its form, especially the limitation of its gender perspective, biographical films cannot well reflect the light arc of female characters through the transformation of perspectives. At the same time, the "low reputation" of biographical films means that biographical films cannot deeply participate in the development of film. From the research on biographical films in English in recent years, many scholars have pointed out a dilemma that has long plagued biographical films: biopics are regarded as a "respected but low-reputation genre". "Respected" is because a large number of well-known legendary historical figures (such as Oppenheimer and Lincoln) have appeared in this genre, and it has attracted the participation of many famous film directors (such as Nolan and Spielberg), while "low reputation" is because this genre is far less favored by scholars in film research than mainstream genres such as melodrama, musical and western [3]. To give an example in recent

years, perhaps related to this “low-reputation genre”, Spielberg was reluctant to publicly regard “Lincoln” directed by him as a biographical film. As a genre film with a relatively fixed subject matter, biographical films have extremely few points for innovation [4]. The “Second Wave of Feminism” in the West in the 1960s promoted the development and innovation of many Hollywood films, but biographical films could not break through and expand in this direction. Dennis Bingham admitted in his book on Hollywood biopics that although Hollywood biopics are an important male theme, films about men and women are two different themes. He even claimed that female biopics have an “insurmountable” tradition that has trapped women in “a cycle of failure, victimization, and downward trajectory” in movies for decades. As a benchmark of Hollywood’s cross-era biographical films, *Citizen Kane* has attracted worldwide attention for its pioneering value. However, its essence is still a male documentary. The important biographical film of the same period, *Julia*, has not received attention. *Julia* has been comparatively ignored. Unlike Hollywood maverick Orson Welles, Fred Zinnemann never fitted the Americanized auteurism of Andrew Sarris, so claiming *Julia*’s historical and stylistic equality with Welles’ “masterpiece” is no mean feat. And if need to believe entrenched critical wisdom, *Julia* cannot be compared to *Citizen Kane* simply because men’s and women’s film histories are inherently different [5].

3. The Possibility of Innovative Development of Biographical Films--Taking *Oppenheimer* as an Example

3.1 Innovation of *Oppenheimer* in Biographical Films

Nolan showed his textbook-level biographical film creation concept in *Oppenheimer*, but in this film, Nolan did not show the historical events experienced by the character in a linear narrative of time like traditional biopics but focused more on restoring a real “father of the atomic bomb” and letting the audience enter his complex and changeable inner world.

One of Nolan’s major innovations in *Oppenheimer* is the use of sound, such as the use of blank space, silence creates a tense and deep atmosphere, allowing the audience to feel the deepest emotional fluctuations of the character in silence, or by consciously eliminating secondary sounds to highlight and strengthen a certain main sound, and then as a metaphor for emotional expression, let the audience focus on the key factors in the movie, and better understand and feel the theme and emotions expressed in

the movie.

When listening carefully to the music of *Oppenheimer*, the studies will find an instrument with a very prominent sound, that is, the violin. In *Oppenheimer*, the most tense moment is undoubtedly the plot of the “Trinity” experiment about to explode. The audience was nervously looking forward to this moment, guessing how Nolan would use sound effects to match this huge energy picture. However, the film unexpectedly did not use the huge low-frequency sound or explosion expansion sound design that the audience imagined. In the background music “Trinity” during the explosion stage, the violin became the medium that pushed tension and anxiety to the peak. The foundation of this work is built on a fast and repeated paragraph. On this basis, to depict the complex and violent physical and chemical changes of the explosion, other strings are added from time to time to form a non-musical intrusion in the overall rhythm. This clever arrangement creates a dense sense of chaos, and the frantic performance of the violin seems to be repeatedly blown on the edge of losing control. However, when this blade-like sound wave is about to rush towards the audience, all the sounds suddenly disappear. Nolan used a completely blank sound design technique to leave silence for this moment. In the face of huge energy, everything will be swallowed up, including sound. Compared with the high-intensity processing of large-scale explosion sound effects in other movies, this unique sound blank processing not only exceeds the audience’s imagination but also conforms to the physical laws in the real world. At the same time, this blank treatment also plays a role in buffering the rhythm of the film, allowing the audience to feel the suffocating fear and anxiety in silence. The use of violins in film soundtracks can not only render the atmosphere of the environment but also portray the character of the characters. The success of many film soundtracks is inseparable from the rich functions of the violin. In Nolan’s interview, he clearly stated that the reason for choosing the violin is that the violin can instantly change from a beautiful and romantic melody to a terrifying sound with manic tremolo. The contradictory sound characteristics of the violin are very consistent with the contradictory inner world of *Oppenheimer*’s character.

3.2 *Oppenheimer*’s Compromise and Breakthrough with Hollywood Individualism and Commercialization

Oppenheimer is undoubtedly a masterpiece. Although director Nolan cannot get rid of the clichés of individualistic narratives, he still adds reflections on nuclear explosions in the limited space structure. Some people praise it as another artistic peak of Christopher Nolan, but

some people criticize the various clichés that are filled in it. *Oppenheimer* seems to be the least author-identified of all Christopher Nolan's films so far. This can be seen from the various responses of mainstream film review websites. Carefully studying authoritative film and television review websites such as Rotten Tomatoes and reading a large number of reviews, data show that whether it is praise or criticism, almost all of them have drowned Christopher Nolan in the ocean of "routines". The most criticized point is its approach to Hollywood individualism. Personal heroism emphasizes that the unlimited pursuit of fame, wealth, and profit is the direct goal of human activities, which is closely related to capitalist society. Historically, the personal heroism shown in Hollywood movies has strongly opposed the coercion and control of power, advocated freedom, including freedom of thought, freedom of belief, and freedom of speech, and demanded the establishment of a multicultural system. As a mainstream culture, personal heroism satisfies the actual desire of capitalist society for ideological diversity and continues to occupy the ideological and cultural field of capitalism. Nolan's *Oppenheimer* still seems to be unable to break away from this cliché. After Nolan's famous film "The Dark Knight", he seems to have not been able to break away from the eulogy of personal heroism. *Oppenheimer* not only brought quantum mechanics to the United States on his own, but also built a team on his own, and even fought against the huge military and political groups on his own. Of course, in this process, he was confused, compromised, and even gave up, but throughout the entire film, the audience witnessed how a talented physics genius climbed to the top of the world step by step. The "Eurocentrism and Male Centrism" summarized by Regis DuBois in his book "Hollywood: Film and Ideology" seems to set off the theme of superheroes expressed by Nolan. But unlike the happy ending of common Hollywood hero movies, *Oppenheimer* tends to express reflections on post-war trauma, thought-provoking anti-war themes, and "scar" endings. Lost, stunned, anxious, and tortuous, are often the typical atmospheres he creates.

Oppenheimer makes biographical films more commercial, but there is no doubt that Nolan has proved that biographical films can change their ideas and cater to the overall trend of Hollywood, no longer sticking to the previous definition of art films and "pseudo-documentaries". This can be regarded as a breakthrough in the framework of biographical films. First of all, in terms of awards, *Oppenheimer*, like other great biographical films, has won numerous awards at major award ceremonies. At the 96th Academy Awards, 7 of the 13 nominations were won and won the most important awards such as Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Actor. At the same time, it also reaped

a lot of rewards at the Golden Globe Awards and the British Academy of Film Awards. In terms of box office, there is also frequent good news. The global box office of 976 million US dollars surpassed "Bohemian Rhapsody" and became the highest-grossing biographical film. And behind these beautiful illusions, Christopher Nolan has created another excellent but non-revolutionary commercial film. Nolan is finally no longer the independent-minded director with a reclusive temperament. This is not the case. As a director of Hollywood blockbusters and a creative person, he sometimes, as a Promethean hero, tries to make a more rational plan for Hollywood's film energy, thereby creating a more lucrative box office [6]. He is undoubtedly successful in this regard. But sometimes, he always transforms into an *Oppenheimer*-style "sober person", constantly practicing the extreme proposition of non-productive consumption with grand productions that are better than one.

4. The Future Development and Innovation of Biographical Films

Biographical films need to focus more on the reflection of the characters and the era they represent, rather than just indulging in the deconstruction of the characters. *Oppenheimer*'s reflection on the nuclear explosion presents a finishing touch, without squeezing out the characters. The growth and shaping space of things, on the contrary, provides more thinking space for the audience. He does not look at the Hiroshima nuclear explosion with a harsh and cynical eye but tries to inspire the audience to think about the significance of the nuclear explosion to mankind with a progressive and long-term perspective [7]. Although the film does not present any cruel scenes of the Hiroshima catastrophe, this may be to avoid the landscape and aesthetic clichés of traumatic films to the greatest extent, and then bring the audience experience deeper into the inner world of the characters, to arouse a strong "immersive" emotional resonance [8]. The 'body with excess meaning' that appears in the biopic - the body of the actor and the body of the historical figure - is in sharp contrast to the 'body lacking meaning' in the documentary - there are not enough images to present the deceased person. The protagonist in the biopic, as the absolute core and focus of the film, should certainly give full play to his understanding of the character, but the actor and director are often immersed in expression and do not leave room for the audience to think [9]. The content of biographical films is often rich, but due to the homogeneity of Hollywood movie routines, the core needs to add thinking about the problems in the context of the film, rather than instilling

its ideas into the audience as a preacher.

5. Conclusion

Taking *Oppenheimer* as an example, this paper analyzes the development obstacles and innovation patterns of biographical films. The narrative in *Oppenheimer* can be roughly divided into three time and space. Strauss's Senate cabinet hearing in black and white is the first time and space, *Oppenheimer's* secret hearing in color is another time and space, and the third time and space is *Oppenheimer's* linear biography. The conversion of the three times and space is the continuous conversion of the three timelines and the conversion of the three visual spaces, which adds structural richness to the film narrative.

In terms of form, traditional biographical films are mostly based on linear narratives. The future development of biographical films needs to focus more on narrative innovation. Blindly flat narration will make the image of the characters too flat, and the traditional "dramatic conflict" is not applicable in biographical films. The reasonable use of non-linear narrative or even multi-angle narrative will not only not bring confusion to the audience, but will bring multi-angle diversity to the narrative level. Therefore, the development of biographical films needs to pay

attention to multi-dimensional innovations such as space and form.

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