

Psyche and Power: Freudian Perspectives on Political Narratives in Cinema

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Abstract: This research will clarify how the psychological aspect of the characters in Bertolucci's films is influenced by the political background, and clarify the psychological motivation behind the behavior of the characters through Freud theory. By analyzing three films directed by Bertolucci at different times and combining Freud's psychoanalytic theory, this research explores in depth the influence of political context on the psychology of the characters. The results show that political turmoil not only has a great influence on the psychology of the characters, but also manifests itself in their behavior through their latent desires and conflicts. The innovation of this research is to integrate Freud's theory with the analysis of political cinema to reveal the complex mechanisms by which political environments form the psyche of individuals and promote behavior in different cultural contexts. Furthermore, this research proposes to further explore the diverse political environments and their psychological effects in global cinema by combining Freud theory with other theoretical frameworks such as marxist criticism and feminist theory.

1. Introduction

Film, as a visual medium, serves not only to present a story to the audience but also to reflect the mental states and behaviors of characters, offering insights into the political backdrop and cultural atmosphere of the contemporary society. It is an art form that amalgamates artistic expression with advanced technological means, utilizing cinematic techniques to materialize the subjects and construct a myriad of audiovisual elements, thus driving the ever-evolving nature of film as an art form [1]. Bernardo Bertolucci, an immensely talented Italian film director, exhibits a unique creative style by skillfully intertwining romantic plots imbued with familial nuances and profound psychological critiques, often complemented with political and social contexts. Cinematic engagement with the audience's unconscious, as explored through Freudian theory, underscores the unique psychological impact films have compared to other artistic mediums, a concept that Bertolucci masterfully embeds within his narratives. His films are not known for providing immediate gratification but rather evoke a sense of nostalgia and melancholy. Bertolucci's storytelling is mesmerizing, reflecting various social issues and intricate human experiences. As demonstrated in historical cinematic applications of Freudian psychoanalysis, directors like Bertolucci utilize psychological constructs to deepen character and narrative development, reflecting complex political landscapes [2]. His characters often possess nuanced inner worlds and convey profound meanings

through their glances and actions. This thesis undertakes an analysis of three films directed by Bertolucci during different periods. Through examining the political backgrounds and applying Freud's theory, it seeks to explore the psychological impact of the political context on the film characters.

2. "The Spider's Stratagem"

"Strategies of the Spider" is one of Bertolucci's representative works shot in his homeland Italy during the 1970s. In this film, he began to explore the profound charm reflected in characters with psychological complexities, achieving initial success with this movie. Similar to Sandis's nuanced use of Freudian themes, Bertolucci's films often weave a complex tapestry of psychoanalytic cues that enrich the storytelling and deepen viewers' emotional involvement [3]. He's films, much like the psychoanalytic exploration of horror cinema, use Freudian tension to enhance the narrative, dramatizing political anxieties that resonate deeply with viewers' subconscious fears. This film not only questions the alliance with the anti-fascist Resistance that was cultivated by post-war Italian political institutions, but reveals a cultural preoccupation with the re-emergence of the castrating authority of Italy's right-wing politics that was occurring at the time the film was being produced: the early years of a very dark period of Italian history that would later be known as the epoch of "strategy of tension".

The film portrays Athos Magnani Jr.'s modern-day journey to Tara, a quaint Northern Italian town. Summoned by the enigmatic Draifa, Athos Jr. seeks to unravel the mystery surrounding his father's murder – his father, the local anti-Fascist hero Athos Magnani Sr., who was fatally shot during a theater performance on June 15, 1936. In the course of encountering his father's three anti-Fascist comrades – Costa, Rasori, and Gaibazzi, Athos Jr. stumbles upon a plot to assassinate Mussolini, who was due to visit Tara for the theater's inauguration. The sinister plan aimed to strike during the performance of Giuseppe Verdi's *Rigoletto*, precisely when "Rigoletto" sang the haunting aria "Ah! La maledizione." Unfortunately, the plot is betrayed, leading to Athos Sr.'s tragic demise on the same stage. Haunted by the uncanny resemblance between his father's death and the foiled assassination scheme, Athos Jr. decides to flee Tara, evading not only his father's co-conspirators but also Draifa, his father's former lover. He makes his way to the train station, only to be inexplicably drawn back to the town. In his investigation, he unearths the shocking truth that his father was a traitor who exposed the assassination plot to the town's authorities, even divulging the location of the explosives. Soon after, Athos Jr. orchestrates his own heroic and anti-Fascist demise with the aid of his friends – an act he deems necessary to honor Tara as a martyr. In the aftermath of this revelation, Athos Jr. delivers a speech at a commemorative gathering for his father, yet refrains from disclosing the truth of his father's death to the assembled crowd. The film concludes with Athos Jr. once again at the train station, futilely attempting to escape Tara.

In this film, the protagonist's tremendous shock upon learning the truth about his father's identity is not followed by a revelation of the truth. In Freud's psychological theory, this is an example of the son's psychological defense mechanism at work—a way people protect themselves from mental conflicts and distress. In the context of political struggles, characters may face significant pressure and psychological challenges, triggering the activation of defense mechanisms. Thus, avoiding the truth may be a way of escaping reality, while displaying empathy could be a strategy to gain support and trust from others, thereby obtaining an advantage in political battles.

3. "The Last Emperor"

Having explored the intricate web of personal and historical entanglements in 'The Spider's Stratagem', we now turn our attention to 'The Last Emperor'. This next film deepens our exploration

of Freudian themes, shifting from the personal vendettas and historical shadows of Italy to the expansive imperial courts of China. Here, the psychoanalytical focus expands to include not just the individual's subconscious conflicts but also the profound impact of cultural and political upheaval on personal identity. Robert Zaller discusses how Bertolucci crafts Pu Yi's narrative arc to explore the psychological impact of his powerlessness and delusions of grandeur, effectively using Freudian theory to analyze his life trapped under various regimes. This portrayal enriches our understanding of the character as a symbol of historical and psychological processes [4].

Freudian theory, particularly his concepts of the ego, superego, and id, provides a framework for understanding the complex interplay between individual psychology and external societal pressures. In 'The Last Emperor', these aspects are exemplified through Pu Yi's fluctuating sense of power and his responses to external control. The ego represents the organized, realistic part that mediates between the desires of the id and the super-ego. The super-ego can control the id's impulses, especially those which society forbids, such as sex and aggression. Based on this framework, the relationship between Pu Yi's personal struggle and graver social and political pressure can be excavated.

This film, filmed in 1980s, traces the life of the last emperor of China feudal dynasty. It meticulously depicts Puyi's desire and helplessness for power to show that he tried hard to keep the imperial power, while Freud's concept of power dynamics and the influence of subconscious mind on behavior are precisely concerned about this theme. Take Puyi's interaction with a pet mouse and a tennis as an example. His actions symbolize that he is struggling to secure this precarious throne. The outbreak of the Xinhai Revolution of 1911 changed all this. Even after he was expelled from the palace, he tried to return to the palace with the help of the Japanese, but he was just a puppet emperor. After the founding of New China, Pu Yi was put into prison and ended his exile in the Soviet Union. Several years later, he eventually became an ordinary citizen. The life in the secluded palace is completely different from the outside world. The long-term separation from the society has caused Pu Yi's lack of social cognition, and the experience of turning an emperor into a normal people is quite profound for him. These life experiences can be analyzed by Freud's theory of sexual psychological development, which emphasizes the lasting influence of early experiences on adult life. Owing to the long-term experience of growing up in the isolation and control of the Forbidden City, this is clearly demonstrated in his struggle with authority and identity.

Zhang Muning carried out an overall understanding on the audiovisual language of this film, in which he analysis Bertolucci's usage on light, color, and sound to show Pu Yi emotional and psychological state changes. This approach can be linked to Freudian theory as it visually represents the inner conflicts and transformation of the character [5]. In the film, Pu Yi keeps a mouse as a pet, which reflects his desire to control things and exercise authority. For instance, Pu Yi's interaction with his pet mouse can be analyzed through Freud's theory of the "id"- representing his primal desires for control and dominance, a response to his powerlessness within the larger socio-political context. In addition, Puyi's reaction to loss and betrayal is in line with Freud's "defense mechanism". He turned to use things around him to divert attention, such as teasing his precious mouse. This is not only his way of transferring frustration, but also the performance that he needs control. And the tennis ball he took away from the palace, after being expelled, is also a symbol of power shift. Similar to the mouse, the tennis ball becomes an object that Pu Yi needs to possess and manipulate. However, in the end, Pu Yi's pet mouse dies, and he is no longer the emperor of the Qing Dynasty, resulting in the disappearance of everything he could control. Pu Yi's frequent withdrawal into his own world, especially under stress, illustrates Freud's notion of regression as a defense mechanism. This behavior is a retreat to a stage of development where one felt safer, which in Pu Yi's case, can be linked to his life before his deposition. The portrayal of leadership and loss in 'The Last Emperor' resonates strongly with Freudian themes of authority and self-identity, as leaders often embody the cultural

superego. The symbolism of the Forbidden City as both a physical and psychological prison for Pu Yi highlights his isolation and the illusion of power, echoing Freud's concept of internal conflict and external facade. Huang Yu's analysis discusses the symbolic narrative in 'The Last Emperor', focusing on the metaphor of 'doors' which represent different stages in Pu Yi's life, from his imperial life to imprisonment and eventual freedom [6].

The shifting political landscapes, from imperial rule through Japanese occupation to communist control, serve as backdrops for Pu Yi's evolving self-concept, illustrating Freud's notion of the superego's role in mediating between evolved societal norms and personal desires.

Upon being taken to Manchuria by the Japanese, his consort, Wenxiu, seeks a divorce and leaves him. Pu Yi initially believes that nobody can divorce him, but Wenxiu's departure further reveals his gradual loss of control over power. The concept of "projection" is crucial in understanding Pu Yi's distrust of those around him. According to Freud, projection involves attributing one's unacceptable qualities to others. Pu Yi's paranoia about betrayal reflects his own conflicted loyalties and his projection of these conflicts onto others. According to Freud, the parts of the mind that are not consciously perceived are the most influential, making the subconscious the true mental reality, and determining our destiny. Freud's psychoanalysis no longer emphasizes absolute rationality in human behavior but instead, believes that people can think from an emotional perspective [7]. Therefore, Pu Yi's behavior can be interpreted as an unconscious yearning for power and a sense of security. His prolonged seclusion and confinement in the palace may have given rise to unresolved childhood psychological issues, such as anxiety and inferiority. Pu Yi's pursuit of the throne can be seen as an unconscious seeking of paternal authority, attempting to compensate for the lack of fatherly love during his childhood. Moreover, his unwavering obsession with power also demonstrates a characteristic of the "love of power syndrome", which frequently embodies the realm of the subconscious that psychoanalysts often explore, representing an uncontrollable craving for authority.

4. "The Dreamers"

After delving into the complex interplay of power, identity, and loss in 'The Last Emperor', we transition to the turbulent streets of Paris in 'The Dreamers'. This shift brings us from the vast political landscapes of mid-20th century China to the intimate confines of a Parisian apartment, where the political becomes intensely personal. In 'The Dreamers', Freudian theory illuminates not only the psychological dynamics of its characters but also the psychosexual undercurrents that emerge during a period.

The film "The Dreamers" was shot in 2004 and, although referred to as an erotic film, it actually serves as a metaphorical expression of political demands beneath the guise of sensuality [8]. Whether it's the film's opening imitation of the speech of the founder of the French Film Library, Henri Langlois, or the appearance of Chairman Mao's portrait while Isabelle, Theo, and Matthew play at home, the film endeavors to subtly allude to the underlying seriousness of politics from a "playful" perspective. In the context of the European Red 60s, the notion of "individuality" was rewritten and utilized as a cultural resistance unit. Within this backdrop, individuals' pursuit of bodily freedom coincides with their pursuit of ideals; to them, bodily freedom manifests as intellectual freedom and the freedom of societal systems. The complex interplay of political idealism and personal freedom among the protagonists in 'The Dreamers' can be interpreted through a Freudian lens, where the characters' overt expressions of liberty also signify deeper, subconscious desires. The symbolic interpretation of these desires suggests a nuanced portrayal of political and bodily freedom, echoing historical and psychoanalytical dimensions. Similarly, the portrayal of historical moments as mythologized cinema by Dai Yutong emphasizes Bertolucci's intention to create a narrative suspended from historical consequences, thereby enriching the Freudian interpretation of the

characters' actions [9]. The film "The Dreamers" converges the diverse perspectives people had towards society and politics onto the three main characters. Any account rendered of an event encompassing taboo elements substantiates the presence of certain forces. When Leo wins the game and demands that Matthew and Isa engage in a relationship, the presence of Chairman's portrait on the wall seems to empower their pursuit of bodily freedom with strong political significance. Therefore, the unspoken relationship between Isa and Leo, as well as their shared longing for freedom and bodily liberation, aligns with the political implications conveyed in the film. As the film approaches its conclusion, the scene of the three of them embracing inside the tent in the living room intensifies this bodily energy. Bertolucci's "The Dreamers" intricately weaves the personal desires and political tensions of its characters into a broader narrative of cultural upheaval, reflecting the symbolic depth of the 1968 Paris protests. According to Dai Yutong, the film uses these intertwined relationships as metaphors to explore larger ideological battles, exemplifying how historical contexts can enrich cinematic symbolism [10]. The check represents the reality of society, shattering the illusionary realm, forcing them to reenter the symbolic world of social politics, and transforming their id energy into political energy. Thus, they seek self-transcendence in the new environment, reaching the pinnacle of psychological ecstasy with boundless expansion of political aspirations. Bernardo Bertolucci chose an open-ended ending, leaving space for the audience to ponder, which not only reflects the director's questioning and contemplation about the revolution but also represents his emotional stance that he cannot abandon. The passionate fervor of the young people in the film attempts to overturn everything, but the "Mai 68", with no clear political agenda, ultimately becomes a thorough "cultural" revolution. It infuses fresh blood into the spiritual and cultural aspects of France and even the whole of Europe. The film effectively captures the essence of "Mai 68", where this revolution, much like the restless hearts of the youth, is often driven by rebellion without a clear sense of direction. In the early 20th century, Paris served as the world's artistic hub, nurturing numerous exceptional artists and cultural thinkers. However, it was precisely within this flourishing cultural environment that people's inner worlds were affected in complex ways.

Freud believed that the subconscious harbors deep-seated desires and psychological conflicts. The film's protagonist, in the pursuit of his dreams and self-discovery, may encounter conflicts within his subconscious. His yearning for Parisian culture and his unwavering dedication to his cinematic dreams reflect his profound desire for a better life and success. Simultaneously, the fluctuations in his emotions and career may also reveal unresolved psychological issues from his childhood. These conflicts and desires may be symbolically represented in his dreams.

5. Conclusion

This thesis analyses these three Bernardo Bertolucci's films with different political backgrounds, perceives the diverse and complex effect on film characters stemmed from political contexts. According to Freudian theory, various political backgrounds shape the psychology of people in different times, while their behavior is essentially driven by veiled desires and conflicts. Although Freud's theory can be regarded as a theoretical framework for analyzing individual psychology, its universal applicability needs to be pondered, especially in the face of different cultural and historical backgrounds, such as Pu Yi's experience. Therefore, an environment in which modern criticism exists is essential.

An in-depth analysis of the psychological state of characters can help us better understand the cultural connotation conveyed by films and reflect on people's mental journey under relevant political backgrounds. More importantly, this paper puts forward the view of broader psychological influence caused by political turmoil, which accords with the view of unconscious driving force of human behavior.

To sum up, political context has left a deep imprint on individual psychology, which is prominent in the process of analyzing Bertolucci's films with Freudian theory. The significance level of the resonance between historical events and personal crises is revealed to the public through the theory, like Oedipus complex, narcissism, and depression, for instance. In the future, Freudian theory can be combined with the latest psychological research to launch the analysis of political films. Diversified political environment and its performance in global movies can be treated as a feasible research direction, thus exploring a wider understanding and possibility for Freudian psychology in varying cultural narratives. At the same time, the effect of combining other theoretical frameworks (such as Marxist criticism and feminist theory) with Freudian theory should not be underestimated. This interdisciplinary cooperation method adopted in films can sort out the interaction between complex personal psyche and political structures.

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