

ARTICLE

Analyzing the Adaptation of *Rebecca* from the Novel to the Film in Light of the Black-and-White

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ABSTRACT

Classical Chinese aesthetics is based on Chinese philosophy. The characteristic of classical Chinese aesthetics regards “artistic conception” as one of the basic aesthetic categories. Chinese art speaks highly of the charm of *the black-and-white*. During the adaptation, there is the same beauty in the black-and-white photography and the “color without color” of Chinese paintings. The “artistic conception” is similar between them from the aesthetic perspective. Therefore, the unique “artistic conception” of the novel should be mastered, if the adapter aims to retain the “soul” of it. In other words, film adaptation not only considers “similarity in form”, but also draws much attention to “similarity in spirit”. The latter is the essence of film adaptation.

1. Introduction

Rebecca is known as Daphne’s masterpiece. Being published in 1938, the novel became a bestseller and brought Daphne instant international acclaim and recognition. *Rebecca* was filmed by English famous director Alfred Hitchcock in 1940, which won the Academy Awards for nine nominations in 1940 and Best Picture and Best Cinematography at last.

Many scholars and critics at home and abroad have appreciated *Rebecca* and the film of the same name from different perspectives. Nowadays, both the novel and the film have been the classic. However, studies on them just

focus on feminism, gothic novel, female gothic, comparison between the novel and the film, movie review, narrative technique and so on. Based on the literary review, the close reading of *Rebecca* (N) and seeing of *Rebecca* (F), and the interests in the theory of classical Chinese aesthetics, the paper is intended to probe into the film adaptation of *Rebecca* (N) in light of the black-and-white to dig out the core of adaptation.

It is undoubted that the novel reflects Maurier’s consciousness and endeavor to create a world full of mystery and suspense. Similarly, Hitchcock is skilled in presenting the unique mystery and suspense by means of his own adaptation method. In other words, the “spirit” of the novel

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is transferred to the film successfully by Hitchcock; he grasps the “soul” of the original in the film adaptation. That is to say, the “artistic conception” is similar in the novel and the film from the aesthetic perspective. And the black-and-white of classical Chinese aesthetics provides the necessary theoretical explanation for it.

2. The black-and-white

Classical Chinese aesthetics originates from Chinese philosophy. The distinguishing feature lies in that it regards “artistic conception” as the aesthetic standard, and *the black-and-white* is the important factors in artistic appreciation. Spatial awareness of Chinese art speaks highly of the charm of *the black-and-white*; “Color without color is best color”. *The black-and-white* refers to conciseness and summary of colors. The charm of *the black-and-white* lies in the inside. Pure white light may reflect red, orange, yellow, green, cyan, blue and purple through a prism. Meanwhile, the proper blend of red, yellow and blue may form a simple black. That is to say, white may gather seven lights in one, and black may cluster five colors in one. Although there is no colorful magnificence in black and white, their connotations surpass the color on the surface. Their unique simplicity and connotation will always be irreplaceable. Just as Zhu Liangzhi explains in his *Fifteen lectures on Chinese Aesthetics* that colorful world is just the representation and it is illusive and insubstantial. While colorless world is very natural. (Zhu Liangzhi, 2006: 173)

3. The Black-and-White in Adaptation of *Rebecca* (N)

Through the black-and-white photography adopted in the film, the characters are portrayed very well, especially Mrs. Danvers, the narrator “I” and Ben. In addition, the theme is performed well in order to keep the “soul” of the novel effectively by means of the images, such as the manor, Manderley, and the sea. The charm of *the black-and-white* reflected in the characters and images just goes the same line with the “color without color” in Chinese painting. Analysis of its artistic charm is a best way to understand the director’s skilled technique in creating suspense and the quirky artistic style of the film.

The basic unit of film is frame. The frame refers to every single photo recorded on the film. The director can put a landscape into a frame. Movie pictures continuously display the present rather than the past and the future. In other words, the pictures do not have temporality. For human’s visual sense, the image-forming principle in the movie-making is the 1/10 second longer of eye-catching

than the actual time in the case of eye membrane exposure. As a result, when the frames which do not link up on the films are showed according to a certain rate, An illusion of a group of movable objects will appear. Zhang Jinghui states that a film is a still picture which is composed by a number of frames. But a continuous film is a movable painting. (Zhang Jinghui, 2008: 31-40) In a nutshell, film is connected with painting. Film is a movable painting in a sense. Chinese ink painting and the black-and-white photography have something in common in “artistic appreciation of the ideorealm”

3.1 Characters

In *Rebecca* (F), the director Alfred Hitchcock successfully masters the “soul” of the novel by means of making efforts to portray the relationships between the characters. On one hand, he adopts unique method to portray the characters, such as off-screen voice, reaction shot, moving photography and so on. On the other hand, he puts emphasis on the comparison between the characters, especially the narrator “I” and Mrs. Danvers, the narrator “I” and Rebecca. Most of all, it is the black-and-white photography that helps the director to present their images to the audience vividly. During the process of the black-and-white photography, the audience will focus on the characters rather than the colors or shooting techniques.

3.1.1 Mrs. Danvers

The charm of *the black-and-white* in the film cannot be separated from characterization. A very typical figure is Mrs. Danvers. She is the very embodiment of the particular combination of evil, madness and perverse sexual obsession. When the narrator arrives Manderley for the first time, Maxim tells her that “She [Mrs. Danvers] will be stiff with you at first, I dare say, she’s an extraordinary character, but you mustn’t let it worry you. It’s just her manner” (Maurier, 2002: 87). In Maxim’s opinion, Mrs. Danvers is not a friendly woman by nature. Mrs. Danvers is extremely faithful to her owner Rebecca, Maxim’s first wife. When the narrator “I” was first taken to Manderley by Maxim, Mrs. Danvers arranged everyone in the manor to welcome her. “...and there, ranged one behind the other in the hall, overflowing to the stone passages beyond, and to the dining room, a sea of faces, open-mouthed and curious, gazing at me as though they were the watching crowd about the block, and I the victim with my hands behind my back.” (ibid: 91) On the surface, Mrs. Danvers bids welcome to the narrator in the name of herself and the staff. In fact, she aims to show her status or authority to the second wife “I”. At that time, Mrs. Danvers came

out from the ranks. “Someone advanced from the sea of faces, someone tall and gaunt, dressed in deep black, whose prominent cheekbones and great, hollow eyes gave her a skull’s face, parchment-white, set on a skeleton’s frame.” (ibid: 91) The author Maurier uses “white skull’s face”, “dark eyes” to describe Mrs. Danvers. Similarly, in the film the black-and-white photography successfully presents the old woman to the audience. Her black clothes with a white bowtie makes people terrible. “A weird gaunt figure in her black dress, the skirt just sweeping the ground like the full, wide skirts of thirty years ago.” (ibid: 349) “A black figure stood waiting for me at the head of the stairs, the hollow eyes watching me intently from the white skull’s face.” (ibid: 97) At that time, the second wife was in panic and looked around for Frith, but in vain. The audience can feel Mrs. Danvers’s indifference and mercilessness from her extremely black clothes and white face, especially the protruding cheekbones, sunken eyes and drooping hands.

The author Daphne du Maurier ever used the word “black” for several times to describe the woman. “I could see that black figure standing out alone, individual and apart.” (ibid: 92) In the second wife’s eyes, she is just like a cold-hearted, terrible and living ghost, and may appear at any time. Similarly, in the film Hitchcock also skillfully presents Mrs. Danvers’s image to the audience by the black-and-white photography, which is more visual than the one in the novel.

Then, it is known that montage can liberate film time as well as film space. In other words, it gives film a freedom of focalization. However, Hitchcock abandons his typical montage full of tension in order to draw attention to the relationship between the characters. As Haeffner holds that in *Alfred Hitchcock* that “On *Rebecca*, Selznick got Hitchcock to leave his ‘montage-driven’ approach with longer takes and slicker, more conventional editing patterns which reinforced the emotions of the characters rather than showcasing cinematic technique” (Haeffner, 2005: 8). Thus, it is much better to focus on characters’ features.

With the black-and-white photography, the characters’ inner life may also be presented to the audience. Most of all, the contrast between them becomes much more apparent. For example, Mrs. Danvers’s viciousness and the second wife’s kindheartedness, Rebecca’s vanity and the second wife’s simplicity. Mrs. Danvers’s appearances often trouble “I”. What’s worse, she has the habit of having a peep at “I”. And then she will burst into superior laughter. This kind of nightmare shadows often torment “I”. So Mrs. Danvers is not only mysterious but also very malicious. Each time they talk with each other, Mrs. Danvers is just like an owner rather than a servant. On

the contrary, the second wife is always very timid. She is often humiliated by Mrs. Danvers. Maxim ever blames her that she is just like a maid, and not the mistress of a house. The director Hitchcock also presents Mrs. Danvers to the audience successfully by means of his own method. In the film, he arranges Mrs. Danvers’s appearances out of everyone’s expectation. The audience might never watch her routes. She usually appears suddenly or disappears secretly. Especially, Hitchcock makes full use of some reaction shots to express the second wife’s terror and panic. This kind of method successfully shows the characters’ psychological activities and depicts their emotions. Apart from it, mystery is generated which promotes the development of plot and attracts the audience’s attentions.

One day the narrator “I” came to Rebecca’s room out of curiosity. However, Mrs. Danvers appeared suddenly and said that Rebecca was still alive in everyone’s heart, and lived in every room in Manderley. As a result, “I” has been scared to death. At this moment, Hitchcock adopts a high light in Mrs. Danvers’s face. Immediately her face becomes so white and dead. It is just the black-and-white photograph that reflects Mrs. Danvers’s image to the audience appropriately. Moreover, her image pushes the development of plot and the expression of the theme.

3.1.2 The Narrator “I”

In addition, the narrator “I” is a companion to Mrs. Van Hopper, a monstrous, selfish but rich American woman. In the film she relies on simplicity and honesty to treat others instead of good appearance and flubdub. She is very plain in daily life and friendly to all the people, including servants. Different from “I”, Rebecca never appears in the novel and the film, but her wealth and nobleness are everywhere. In the ball, her costume always suits her well. She is a very lovely creature and full of life, who is never awkward, never without grace. One day the narrator “I” entered Rebecca’s room where there were so many wardrobes. When one of them was opened, it was full of clothes. The narrator “I” was surprised at those luxurious and gorgeous clothes: “There were evening dresses here, I caught the shimmer of silver over the top of the white bags that enfolded them. There was a piece of gold brocade. There, next to it, was velvet, wine-colored and soft. There was a train of white satin, dripping on the floor of the wardrobe. Peeping out from a piece of tissue paper on a shelf above was an ostrich feather fan” (Maurier, 2002: 232).

However, “I” just has several clothes, which are very ordinary and simple. They are very different from Rebecca’s sable wrap, chinchilla, velvet dress completely. The narrator herself also thinks that she is inferior to Rebecca:

“With straight, bobbed hair and youthful, un-powdered face, dressed in an ill-fitting coat and skirt and a jumper of my own creation, trailing in the wake of Mrs Van Hopper like a shy, uneasy colt” (ibid: 12). Although “I” is not as pretty, intelligent or capable as Rebecca, her simplicity is enough to prove her charm, which attracts Maxim to fall in love with her very soon. When the narrator complains of her own plainness, Maxim says that “I ask you because you are not dressed in black satin, with a string of pearls, nor are you thirty-six” (ibid: 52). “You would not be in this car with me if you were.” (ibid: 51) It is obvious that real beauty comes from the inside.

So the black-and-white photography is characterized by simplicity as well as “color without color is best color” in Chinese painting. Especially its simplicity, serenity and implicit features become even more prominent after experiencing the impact of color photography. The black-and-white photography focuses on the character’s natural beauty away from the colors, just as like the narrator “I” in the film. Thus, the audience will better devote their minds to enjoying the characters’ unique charm. So it is very appropriate for the black-and-white photography to perform the narrator’s simplicity better.

In addition, the black-and-white photography has manifestation. It can allow the audience to focus on the plot and actors simply. Hitchcock wins by means of paying close attention to the story and characters. It is no doubt that the film can stand the test of time better. The audience not only can experience the story with a quirky twist, but also can be close to the characters’ inner hearts. For example, the narrator “I” is very shy, coward and self-abased. As the audience, they understand her panic and her change. Moreover, Rebecca never appears in the film. However, her complexity, evil are still obvious. In a sense, the emotional features and functions of the black-and-white might be helpful for people to express their deep psychological feelings of the theme. Compared with the novel, the film may convey the feelings to the audience effectively and directly. Zhang Jinghui mentions the reason in her book *It is the Means That Means* that the director can bring a landscape into a frame. However, the novelist just depicts the person or the thing in the landscape. In other words, a film can rely on its dramatic power and visibility to arouse the audience’s direct responses. Nevertheless, the novel can only lead to the audience’s feelings and imagination indirectly through the literary description. (Zhang Jinghui, 2008: 32)

3.1.3 Ben

Ben is a very important and mysterious character in the film. It is just he who arouses the narrator’s much more

curiosity. Thus the climax of the story may be presented to the audience. Ben’s father used to be one of the keepers in Manderley. In the film Hitchcock adopts several close-ups to perform Ben. As a result, his appearance and facial expression are very weird with the black-and-white photography. Most of all, they contain hidden meanings, which leave room for the audience to imagine.

In one afternoon, Maxim and “I” have a walk. The dog Jasper also follows them. When they come to the seaside, Jasper runs toward a cottage beside the sea. So “I” hurries to search the dog regardless of Maxim’s opposition. Then, “I” finds it in front of a cottage, and a very odd man comes out with fear, who is Ben. “He had the small slit eyes of an idiot, and the red, wet mouth. He smiled at me, showing toothless gums.” (Maurier, 2002: 153) At that moment, “I” is very surprised and scared. Here it is another suspense to the audience. Why does Maxim become angry with the narrator? Why does Jasper go straight to the cottage? In the novel, the author Maurier uses many words to write the dialogues between “I” and Ben. However, in the film Hitchcock mainly utilizes the close-up to focus on them, especially Ben rather than pays attention to the dialogues between the two. Under the influence of the black-and-white photography, apart from Ben’s ragged clothes, his eyes are very bright and mysterious. His face looks like dirty. But his wide eyes pop out. It seems that the director puts all the secrets in his eyes. However, he is incapable to tell the truth. Thus, the audience cannot do anything but guess the truth from his eyes. He just says several strange sentences: “I know that dog. He’s not yours... I want to do nothing. I just put the shell away... She’s gone in the sea, ain’t she? ... She won’t come back no more?” (ibid: 154-156) As a result, the story becomes more and more mysterious. The audience would imagine that Ben is a key character in the film.

In fact, the black-and-white photography contains much more imaginations than color photography. All colors disappear in *the black-and-white*. And all the images become abstract because of *the black-and-white*. Thus, there lies a psychological distance between the audience and the things which are from the film. The aesthetic process contains a sense of contemplation. So does in Chinese ink painting. The abstract beauty of Chinese ink painting cannot be replaced by watercolor painting. Similarly, the black-and-white image is a kind of visual abstraction through the filter of the colorful world. It is the black-and-white image that purifies the defective world. It has the power to reach the nature directly.

3.2 Manderley

Black-and-white photography not only is featured by

simplicity, serenity and implicit, but also makes the spatial relation more implicit and skillful by means of the contrast between the black and the white. Art not only shows the good things of life, but also makes ordinary things more extraordinary in order to shock people. So does in Chinese ink painting. Chinese ink painting not only possess a unique charm, but also provides a rich imagination. It has the ability to express the artist's personality and "artistic conception", which is a highly brief artistic method. Su Shi ever wrote a poem *Drunk Poem in Lake-House*, in which there are two sentences: "Black clouds like ink roll in the sky without covering mountains, but white raindrops like innumerable pearls jump into the boat" (The two poetic lines are translated into English by the present author herself). Obviously it presents a black-and-white ink painting, such as the black cloud like rolling ink, the white rain like beating pearls. People might not see any color from it, but it possesses a kind of "artistic conception"—implicit beauty, hazy charm and simplicity.

Almost the entire story takes place in the magnificent manor—Manderley, which is very mysterious and gloomy. Everything here creates a thrilling atmosphere, including the deep avenue, silent trees, mysterious large rooms, dark doorway, empty corridor, and a variety of clothing with the abbreviated name. People may feel that Manderley is just like a haunted manor, where a potential terror lingers. Especially at the beginning of the film, the narrator dreams that she comes back to Manderley again and possesses a supernatural power to pass the gate: "Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again. It seemed to me I stood by the iron gate leading to the drive, and for the way was barred to me. There was a padlock and a chain upon the gate. I called in my dream to the lodge-keeper, and had no answer, and peering closer through the rusted spokes of the gate I saw that the lodge was uninhabited" (ibid: 1). Hitchcock adopts a long shot to produce a kind of suspense, which provides a sense of truth and entirety. At this time, the whole manor is shrouded in mystery and gloom. It has already been a desolate ruin, such as no smoke from the chimney, forlorn lattice windows, narrow and unkept drive, white and naked limbs, old trees and so on.

At the beginning of the film, only the drive is covered by a heavy fog. Gradually the whole manor is shrouded by fog. With the black-and-white photography, the fog becomes grey, terrible and mysterious. Furthermore, Hitchcock successfully deploys the off-screen voice to produce a kind of mysterious effect. At that time, the director fully grasps the theme and the "soul" of the novel. With the black-and-white photography, the manor becomes much more weird and mysterious. It is easy for the audience to speculate endlessly. As a result, suspense is immediately generated. So the black-and-white photography adopted

by Hitchcock is more suitable for presenting this dark atmosphere vividly.

In addition, there are many kinds of flowers or plants in Manderley, such as rhododendrons, ivy and so on. Although they are very common in daily life, the black-and-white photography makes them meaningful. In the novel, we just imagine their color or shape according to the words. However, in the film the rhododendron is not red, and the plants are not green with the black-and-white photography. On the contrary, they are just black or white. The rhododendrons are very red, but it is just black in the film. It is just the "black" color that indicates Rebecca's destiny. The reason is that "The rhododendron is a brief beauty. Not lasting very long" (ibid: 186). Rebecca is endowed with beauty and talent, but she still dies of cancer. For the audience, their implied meaning and symbolic significance become more and more obvious, just like Chinese ink painting. It is believed that Chinese ink painting is a best way to reach to the real. The black and the white have been the conciseness of all colors. When Maxim marries the narrator "I", Maxim buys a banquet of flowers for "I" extempore. Perhaps Maxim buys rose or lily, but in the film the flowers are white or black. Of course, white may be a symbol of purity. However, in China white often indicates unluckiness. Specific to the film, the flowers might indicate Maxim and the second wife's tortuous love or the tragic fate of Manderley. It is undoubted that the black-and-white photography plays a crucial role in reflecting the implied meaning of those common things

3.3 Sea

Northrop Frye has pointed out in his *Anatomy of Criticism* that sea and forest or other natural images may be seen repeatedly in many poems. This phenomenon might not be called coincidence. (Frye, 2006: 142) According to his archetypal criticism, once the prototype becomes a literary image, it often appears in literature. Most of all, it might be a part of a person's literary experience.

In *Rebecca* (N), the roaring sea is not only a natural landscape. On the contrary, it is a symbol of the force of nature, which is very powerful and irresistible. During the film adaptation, the director also pays more attention to the natural images. With the black-and-white photography, the symbolic meanings of the sea are presented to the audience vividly. In the film, the sea is often very roaring, turbulent or tumbling. Its power is everywhere. Zhu Gang mentions that Abyss, land of the dead, will swallow, tempt and poison all things, which is terrible and inescapable like fate. (Zhu Gang, 2006: 205) In short, it symbolizes the end of life.

Firstly, its unpredictability makes it become a dan-

gerous zone which engulfs life. Rebecca dies in the sea and her body has sunken there for a long time. No matter how capable and shrewd, she is still swallowed by the powerful sea. Her bedroom is a good place to watch the sea. However, the second wife “I” says that “Somehow I was glad my rooms were in the east wing. I preferred the rose-garden, after all, to the sound of the sea” (Maurier, 2002: 123). When she cannot sleep, she will lean out of the window and enjoy the peacefulness and stillness. Although the narrator likes the sea very much, she is also afraid of its power: “The sound has a mournful harping note sometimes, and the very persistence of it, that eternal roll and thunder and hiss, plays a jagged tune upon the nerves” (ibid: 165). One night when a boat ran aground, Rebecca’s body was found out of everyone’s expectation. As a result, the masquerade has to be stopped. The narrator “I” hurries her pace to the seaside in search of Maxim. The whole place is shrouded in mist. The sea is gray. The seawater strikes the rocks violently like a roaring lion. At this moment, the story has reached to its climax. When “I” knows that people not only find Rebecca’s boat, but also discover her body, “I” was extremely shocked. She is eager to find Maxim. Finally, she finds him in the seaside cabin. At this moment, Hitchcock mainly focuses on their relationship with some reaction shots, including Maxim’s confession and the narrator’s true love for him. Here their love stands a severe test. It is easy for the audience to guess whether they can live together happily or whether Maxim will be punished because of Rebecca’s death. Suspense is inevitable.

Secondly, people are afraid of its mystery. It is sometimes calm and gentle or roaring and tumbling. It contains all the secret and dark things. At the beginning of the film, the camera lens changes from the memory to a roaring sea. The seawater strikes the rocks violently and stirs white waves which has striking contrast with the black rocks. Then the camera lens moves slowly along the cliff from the sea to a man, who stands there seriously. At this time, the audience feel that there must be a secret in his heart. Moreover, the secret may be not good from the turbulent seawaters, black rocks and extremely white waves, which are full of terror and mystery.

In addition, the sea is very calm and gentle, when the narrator is portraying for Maxim. However, when “I” expresses her respect for famous Manderley: I ever bought a postcard, when on holiday as a child in the west country. It was the painting of a house. That’s Manderday. However, I feel ashamed, because Maxim becomes angry and says that Manderley is beautiful, where he was born and lived all the time, but now he is unwilling to see it again. Apparently, his words make the narrator very surprised.

What’s worse, Maxim begins to be irritated, when the narrator refers to swimming. As a result, suspense comes into being immediately. So Hitchcock successfully attracts the audience’s eyes. When the sea is calm, the black makes it so dark and mysterious. However, when the sea is roaring, the white, caused by seawater striking rocks, makes it so violent and terrible. Through the black and the white, the suspense appears continually. Hitchcock makes full use of the images to master the theme of the novel during the adaptation.

All in all, the key point does not lie which art is better between film and novel. Both film and novel have the ability to reach to their own peak of art. Of course, whether the black-and-white photography or color photography adopted in this film is not the key matter. The most important lies that the theme of mystery and suspense is more suitable for adopting the black-and-white image, because it fully achieves the director’s artistic purpose and displays the bizarre artistic style of the film. Perhaps other directors will utilize colorful photography to direct this film, but Hitchcock’s version has been a classic. Thus, it is generally agreed that Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* (F) can bring the audience a real effect. Perhaps *Rebecca* (F) has to adopt the black-and-white photography because of the condition. Here it is unnecessary to consider the condition at that time. It should be said that it is wise to choose the black-and-white photography to express the theme. This is not only because it is much more suitable to shape the characters and the environment, but also because it can fully represent the theme and retain the “soul” of the novel.

4. Conclusion

Throughout the analysis, the paper provides a new perspective to appreciate Hitchcock’s film adaptation of *Rebecca* (N). Hitchcock’s version has been a classic. He successfully achieves the purpose of mastering the “soul” of the novel by means of his unique way, which cannot be compared by western theories. It is undoubted that there are some immutable differences between novel and film, because they belong to different artistic form. However, Hitchcock’s adaptation deals with the problem and embodies a kind of aesthetic effect in light of *the black-and-white* of classical Chinese aesthetics. Hitchcock grips the unique “artistic conception” of the novel skillfully. The “soul” of the novel is revealed successfully in the film from the “artistic appreciation of the ideorealm”. That is to say, film adaptation lays great emphasis on the “soul” of the original novel. Thereby, although “similarity in form” is important for the film adaptation, the essence of adaptation lies in “similarity in spirit”. The changes that the director has made in his adaptation just serve for the essence.

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