

The Young and Prodigious T.S. Spivet: An Imagery Narrative of the World of Childhood

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Abstract

Jean-Pierre Jeunet, recognized as both an author and director, possesses a unique temperament and an aptitude for creating imaginative worlds and combining fantastical sights and sounds. With a childlike heart, his films often evoke a sense of the surreal. *The Young and Prodigious T.S. Spivet* continues in this vein, as it explores the world of childhood and offers insight into the romantic. It is a work that should be studied by creators of children's films in our country.

Keywords: Jean-Pierre Jeunet, *The Young and Prodigious T.S. Spivet*, world of childhood, surrealism

1. Introduction

The Young and Prodigious T.S. Spivet was awarded the Best Cinematography and Best Costume Design at the 39th French Film César Awards. It is a children's adventure film that tells the story of a ten-year-old boy who is a genius in sixth grade and is invited to speak at the Smithsonian Institution in New York after successfully designing a perpetual motion machine. During his journey, the protagonist experiences various "dangers" and ultimately reconciles with his family, returning home. The film's characters are vividly portrayed, including the cowboy father named Techumsa Elijah Spivet, who was born a century late, the insect-loving and housework-dodging Dr. Claire, the beauty pageant-loving and constantly complaining Grace, the twin cowboys who possess different bodies named Leighton, and the scientific genius T.S. Spivet. This film is a true children's movie,

which is a type of film that puts children under 14 (in their childhood) as the narrative subject. Its target audience is children, while also considering adults. The film depicts the life of children. (Fu Xinge, 2022) The film is told from the perspective of the protagonist T.S. Spivet, and through rich color language, including the dreamy and beautiful colors displayed in his hometown of Montana and the cold tones of New York City, as well as the imaginative and warm-hearted details that balance sensitivity and rationality, the film effectively showcases the world of young Spivet to the audience.

2. A Rich Language of Colors

2.1 The Romantic Colors of Montana's Romanticism



Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.

Just as Jean-Pierre Jeunet once said: “I hate the mixing of various colors. Only by selecting representative colors can we achieve a clear effect.” In Jeunet’s films, he likes to use simple basic colors such as red, yellow, and green, and he loves to have large blocks of complementary colors appear in the same frame, emphasizing the contrast of colors—a style reminiscent of the heavy colors in oil paintings. This rich color is not the true color that should be seen in life. Just as the environment and background of a fairy tale story usually differ greatly from real life, this treatment of color sets the film’s real scenes apart from the actual real world, alienating the real world scenes and giving us a sense of a fairy tale atmosphere. (Liu Cong, 2012)

Jeunet is skilled at learning color combinations from oil paintings and often pairs red with green. In *Amelie*, he also uses this color combination to create a red-green fantasy world. In *The Young and Prodigious T.S. Spivet*, the film begins by presenting the natural environment of Montana from a ten-year-old child’s perspective, capturing a world that is unique to a child’s

perception. In the eyes of the protagonist T.S. Spivet, his home is the warmest, and the director utilizes warm colors to showcase a world of childhood. Figure 1 shows the red car paired with green nature, figure 2 shows the red house with the green meadow, and figure 3 shows the mother in a green dress and the sister in a red dress—all of which give a warm sense and convey a strange but vibrant, surreal feeling that embodies a child’s unique sense of color, showcasing one’s hometown, and conveying a sense of comfort and warmth.

In addition to color, the whole picture is brighter as a way to present nature, and the environment is clean, which to some extent reflects the director’s aesthetic attitude in creating a warm world while highlighting the subject. Moreover, in terms of composition, the director’s meticulous efforts are apparent: Figure 1 has a stretched-out feeling that showcases both the environment and children’s playing world in a layered shot, arousing a natural curiosity in the audience, while figure 3 has a coordinated composition that gives a comfortable viewing experience. Although there are many elements in the frame—weeds, corn barrels, dogs, mother, and sister—the audience can still lock onto the two main subjects, and there is an implicit connection with the preceding feeling, that is, for T.S. Spivet, his family represents the most beautiful image in his heart, so the director uses a fairy tale world of color to present T.S. Spivet’s family.

2.2 Icy Tones of New York City



Figure 4.

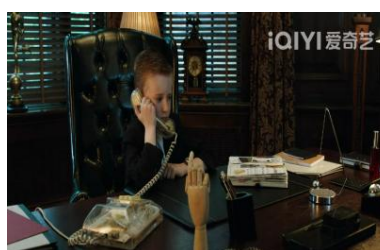


Figure 5.



Figure 6.

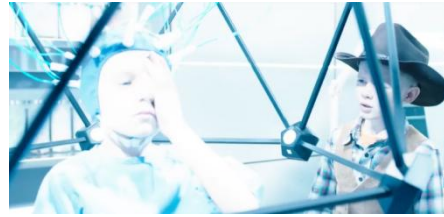


Figure 8.

The renowned French philosopher and anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, posited that “form and content possess identical properties, with the substance of content deriving its actuality from its structure, while that which is labeled as form is the manner in which the constituent parts of a structure contain its content.” (Li Yawen, 2019) In the film, *In the Heat of the Night*, we see that the presentation of visual and auditory language can often deeply reflect the content expressed in the film. When the protagonist, Virgil Tibbs, arrives at his destination—New York—it is a strange environment for him, representing his departure from the warm and loving Montana. As a result, the city gives the childlike protagonist a feeling of coldness and lifelessness. Unlike the fairy tale-like presentation of Montana, New York gives off a serious atmosphere with dense high-rise buildings that make it hard to breathe. Tibbs’ own feelings of longing cannot be expressed in this environment. The director uses dim and cold cinematography when Tibbs is dressed up and sitting in an office to show how his childlike nature does not fit in with the surroundings. The portrayal of the pure rational scientific state of the Smithsonian Institution is also excellently represented, with the entire color being stripped away, giving the viewer a terrifying experience of loneliness (figure 6).

3. The Narration Method of Imagination

3.1 Sensory Level

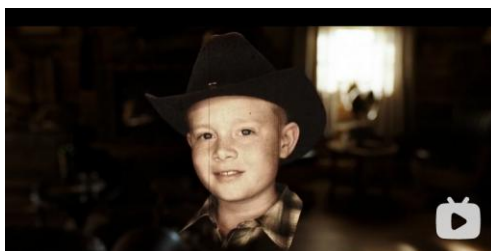


Figure 7.



Figure 9.



Figure 10.

In the film, although Spivet’s character is set as a scientific genius, he is still a ten-year-old boy with his own personal experiences and feelings. He has a sensitive side that is primarily revealed through his yearning for his brother, conversations with the family dog, and his desire for familial love. For example, in figure 7, when he chooses to pass through his cowboy dad’s room, he not only senses the western world but also remembers his deceased brother and the things he liked. Even though his brother is far away, Spivet cannot forget communicating and being together with him, and several details reveal his vivid imagination, such as his brother appearing and helping him make decisions when he received the Smithsonian call, playing with him as he appreciates beautiful scenery, and questioning him during the science experiment in figure 8. The main reason his brother appears is Spivet’s guilt regarding his death. By using his brother’s presence, the director expresses Spivet’s reluctance and strong sense of self-blame in a relatively gentle way.

Moreover, when Spivet prepares to leave his home in Montana, he talks to the family dog.

The dog is set as a TV-watching character, which is rarely seen in most films except animated ones featuring dogs as the main character. However, the director conceptualized this from the standpoint of a child, and the “supernatural design” is also acceptable. All of the dog’s responses are Spivet’s own imagination, reflecting his melancholic and emotional thoughts. He believes that everyone will leave and eventually go away. However, this idea also demonstrates Spivet’s psychological tension because his own leaving is actually an escape from his difficulties in dealing with himself and his family. During Spivet’s journey, he gains many life experiences, but these experiences, seemingly “actively” pursued, are actually inevitable. On the one hand, he hopes that his parents will miss him and worry about him, like all parents in the world, but his sense of guilt and lack of love prevent him from verifying this, as shown in figure 10. When he reaches the phone booth, the scene cuts to his excited family picking up the phone, each taking turns talking to him. His sister wants him to make a costume, his mother looks forward to his return, and his father approves of his actions. However, the scene transitions to Spivet still standing in the same spot, not making that call home.

The director captures the sensitive and vulnerable spirit of the child and excellently portrays Spivet’s inner world with a surreal technique, but also adheres to realistic principles in the description.

3.2 Rational Leve



Figure 11.



Figure 12.



Figure 13.

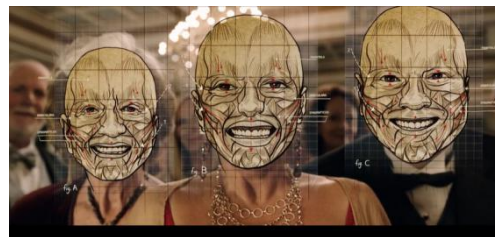


Figure 14.

The director is very good at using picture-in-picture to show the thinking of the protagonist Spivet, and uses some auxiliary pictures to let the audience understand Spivet’s way of thinking, which is conducive to entering the hearts of the characters. As shown in figure 11, when Spivet described his brother Leighton dying of a gunfire experiment, with a gunshot, the picture was supplemented by an analysis chart, which was objective and calm in the film, but it also made the body feel the intention behind it, because its analysis chart was also like an electrocardiogram, and then the straight line meant the end of his brother’s life, and the author believes that there is also the meaning of the whole family standing still. In addition, Spivet’s rational thinking is also reflected in the respect for science, and the ability to justify himself, the protagonist Spivet was ruthlessly hit by the teacher in the classroom, when the teacher evaluated his homework very poorly, he actually euphemistically said that his report has been published in a well-known and authoritative scientific journal, but the teacher still does not miss the opportunity to ridicule him, so the director stands in the child’s perspective and has a “confrontation” with the teacher, which fully reflects the fullness of the character, and the child’s image should not be affected by the “personality”. Just like everyone mentions scientists only think of “Dr. Caligari” “explosive head, wearing white, withdrawn personality” performance, and then all the characters who are related to science are

basically obsessed with scientific research to the extreme personality, but in *The Young and Prodigious T.S. Spivet*, Spivet is first of all a person, has its humanity, has its subjective initiative, so he will defend and resist, but he is a student here, so Spivet only “scolds” in the small world, vents emotions, and stands in the audience’s perspective, we can feel his loveliness. When Spivet embarked on the journey to New York, the upper right corner showed the analysis in Spivet’s mind, including the entire travel mode, time, and judgment from various angles, which made the whole picture simple but not dull, and also reflected the image that Spivet should have as a scientific genius: good at analysis, good at calculations, methodical, although the story of the genius boy feels relatively surreal, but the details handled by the director are convincing enough to believe that the story is true. It gave the audience the impetus to watch the film. When Spivet came to the speech site, when he observed the scientific “celebrities” around him, he also brought his own analytical mind to deal with unfamiliar environments, or to deal with situations outside his family, he used to distinguish the micro-expressions of others to protect himself, one by one superficially friendly people under his analysis, using muscle force distribution and the entire face line organization to judge others as “hypocritical”, and such rational analysis is also conducive to shaping the protagonist Spivet smart, alert, different from traditional scientific geniuses “Nenade” image.

4. The Expression of Poetic Details



Figure 15.



Figure 16.



Figure 17.



Figure 18.



Figure 19.



Figure 20.

The film tells a children’s adventure story. The entire world is presented from the perspective of a child, thus imbuing the film with a great deal of poetic detail which is both heartwarming and in keeping with the general tone. For instance, in scene 15, when the protagonist, Spivet, informs the “audience” of Layton’s death, the shot does not show Layton’s final moments or the scene of his passing. Instead, the camera pans to the outside scenery accompanied by the floating of dandelion seeds, which is a metaphor for Layton’s dispersal like a dandelion. The screen remains full of vitality and poetic feeling rather than becoming cold due to death. Nonetheless,

the audience can sense the sorrow and feel an oppressive anguish, laying the groundwork for Spivet's later tears when he remembers his family.

Furthermore, the film delicately portrays the situation of Spivet's family after Layton's death through subtle arrangements. Comparing scene 16 and scene 17, when Layton was present, the mother used a faulty bread maker. The camera shot was taken from a child's or husband's perspective as they watched her, "clapping" for her efforts. The mother just had to accept it, embodying a kind of French humor. However, after Layton's departure, when the mother used the faulty bread maker again, the director did not remind the audience with a voiceover. The applause and laughter were gone, but the lens informed the audience, starting from Layton's previous seat, to "stare" at the mother. This kind of visual and auditory expression carries a particularly strong aftertaste, with the director hiding the grief invisibly and the emotions gradually concealed, allowing audiences to have even greater understanding when reconsidering the film later.

In addition to Layton's death, the director also subtly expressed the love that both the sister and mother felt toward Spivet, as seen in scenes 18 and 19. Although the sister often complained that their entire family was abnormal or did not approve of Spivet's various experiments, she silently watched him when he played by the river, even though she might mock him from time to time. His mother did the same, watching Spivet in the same way. When Spivet finished his speech and the person in charge of the Smithsonian took him away, the director revealed the mother's presence through a long shot. This sets the stage for her later appearance at a talk show. Additionally, the director handled Spivet's pain with exquisite sensitivity. When Spivet arrives in New York and is chased by police, he fractures his rib, and afterward, his wound throbs with pain when he sits in the car of a helpful person. When the Smithsonian representative picks him up, he screams in pain. When Spivet goes to the talk show, the host picks him up, and he shouts out in anguish. However, when his mother lifts him, he smiles happily, and when his father carries him, he enjoys the moment. In my opinion, Spivet's surface injury represents the externalization of his internal psychological barriers, which can only be cured by his family. This poetic and

purposeful design by the director not only has the emotions of a child but also allows the audience to comprehend the deep meaning of the theme in an instant.

5. Conclusion

The film mainly revolves around the world of children, and this article provides a discussion and analysis from the perspectives of overall color composition, imaginative narrative, and heartwarming details. The film has important reference value for our country. Firstly, the director's concept respects children and allows them to truly own the "voice" of the film, displaying the inner world of children without reservation. Secondly, the film's pacing demonstrates how to tell a plain story in an exhilarating way, which is still a question that filmmakers in our country need to consider. It is hoped that our country will value children's themes in its films in the future, show more attentive care in screenplay research and audiovisual language design, respect the thoughts of children, and hand over the "microphone" to them!

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