

Interpretation of the film “Dog Man” based on Lacan’s Mirror Image Theory

Yuran Luo

Major in Drama and Film and Television, Hunan University of Technology, Zhuzhou City, Hunan Province, 412000

Abstract : “Dog Man” is a psychological drama film adapted by director Luc Besson based on real events. The film tells the story of the protagonist Douglas, who is hurt by his violent father since childhood and even imprisoned in a dog cage for several years. As he grows up, he can only accompany hundreds of dogs and is marginalized by society. After experiencing a series of setbacks from family, love, and society, he leads a group of dogs to seek revenge and resist those who have hurt him. The crime genre of the film hides anti-genre stories, and this article attempts to sort out the self-identity construction process of Douglas from the perspective of Lacan’s mirror theory.

Keywords: Lacan; Mirror Theory; Luc Besson; Dog Mod

1. Overview of Dog Man

Dog Man is a film adapted from real events, which was edited and directed by Luc Besson. It was nominated for the Golden Lion Award and the Queer Lion Award in the main competition unit of the 80th Venice International Film Festival. The reason for the strong emotional resonance and self-identity among the audience is that the film takes them into a world where violence and innocence coexist. The film focuses on the image of an “angel” misunderstood by human prejudice, exploring social and family themes such as “love”, “faith”, and “redemption”.

The film tells the story of the protagonist Douglas, who, after suffering from the ravages of fate, finds himself through his love for the little dog and rises up to resist. It mainly revolves around Douglas, exploring how his growth process leads to the realization of self identity from misidentification to identification, and the construction of a new self.

With the growth of age and experience, Douglas’s identity also undergoes different mirror stages and emotional expressions as the film changes in time and space. His spiritual core also conflicts, just like Lacan’s “Mirror Theory” - the self in the mirror and the self in reality, from being damaged to gradually achieving self-improvement, and ultimately achieving self-redemption, forming the true “Dog God”.

2. Analysis of the Character of Douglas in Dog Man from the Perspective of Lacan’s mirror theory

2.1 Self-misidentification and self-identification

According to the mirror theory, the establishment of self-consciousness of infants is based on “misidentification”. Due to immature sensory development, infants cannot perceive the world comprehensively and collectively, but mistake the overall image in the mirror for themselves, and establish self-identification on the basis of this “misidentification”. But with the continuous extension of the life course, the growth process of the subject is also a process of seeking “self” in the interweaving of “misidentification” and “identification”.

In the film, both father and mother have established a mirror relationship with the childhood Douglas. Mother’s love for music and father’s violent style are imposed on the immature Douglas as the education of the outside world. However, in the mirror theory, children’s acceptance of the mirror image is always suspected. Even if the image in the mirror has a sufficient sense of affirmation, it is still different from the subject and it is difficult to completely achieve a perfect fit with the mirror image. This also determines that Douglas’ growth process is doomed to be full of contradictions and pain, and his life is doomed to tragedy.

In the first six months after birth, the infants in the stage of selflessness and unconsciousness establish a “feeding-dependence” desire relationship with the mother who protects and feeds them. However, in the growth process of Douglas, he has received less care from his

mother since he was young because his mother left. When the director deals with the images of family members, he also puts more emphasis on the images of his father and brother. Compared with the weak and gentle mother, his father and brother bring Douglas more violence and pain. Even because his father threw him into a dog cage, Douglas lost his trust and sense of security in people. Later, he always chose to keep a distance from society, thus saying “the more I communicate with people, the more I like dogs”.

In the juvenile welfare institution, Douglas, because of his disability and psychological trauma, does not fit in with the people around him. However, under the encouragement of his drama teacher Salma, he also reconstructs a new “mirror me” based on his love for drama and music. That is, he establishes an identity with the image he creates in stage performances. Under the makeup, Douglas can enter another image. He plays the role of the image in Shakespeare’s plays, forgetting his real, bruised body and becoming radiant. However, this happy time is still short. When Douglas has a ignorant and pure love and dependence on Salma, her departure once again makes Douglas confused. At that time, he completes the identification and misidentification of self again.

After growing up, Douglas is still frequently blocked in love and work. But in the process of working in the cross-dressing club, he wears a wig and plays the role of Edith Piaf, singing her “La vie en rose” and “Ode to Love”. Piaf’s unfortunate childhood and tragic experience also become the portrayal of Douglas’s inner heart at this time. In the cheers of the audience, he enjoys the incredible surprise and self-satisfaction brought to him by disguising as a woman.

It is in such identification and misidentification again and again that Douglas gradually builds the self-image of the subject. In Lacan’s opinion, “due to the intervention of the overall image of the mirror, the subject suffers a certain transformation, which plays a decisive role in the lifelong companionship of the subject”^[1]. However, with the intervention of the mirror image, the real image of the subject is hidden, forming an image that deviates from the “real”.

2.2 The role of others in self-construction

“The subject goes through the mirror stage and experiences the alienation from others, where they can only restore themselves to the external world”^[2]. According to Lacan’s theory, in the process of self-construction, we need to constantly accept the identity of others and improve ourselves in the identity of others. The second assimilation stage of the mirror image theory also points out that we must follow social rules, accept social discourse norms, and identify with the discourse system of “others” in order to be subjected to itself. The mirror image does not only play a role in infancy. As another, it shapes the human self throughout life. Because of the intrinsic lack of self, it needs external others to constantly enrich and confirm itself. In the film, Douglas is mainly influenced by the male others represented by his father and brother, as well as the female others represented by his mother, drama teacher Salma, and psychiatrist Evelyn.

In *Dog Man*, the discourse system of “others” initially appears in the image of his father. In Douglas’s childhood, his father, as a dog trader, made a living by fighting dogs, and abusing dogs was common. But Douglas is a family anomaly completely different from his father and brother. His love and sympathy for dogs have never allowed him to truly integrate into his brutal family. Compared with his father’s extreme violence, his brother’s indifference and betrayal have also made Douglas lose his trust in people since childhood. Douglas once said: “dogs do not bully each other because of different breeds, but people will cause conflicts for various selfish reasons”, this sarcastic line also indirectly points to the abuse of his father and brothers. That is, when he faces various threats as an adult, he can only rely on the dogs he raises, and choose to solve them by violence and violating the law.

In addition to the roles of his father and brothers, the film’s description of male characters is relatively vague, and the male images that appear are mostly negative traits, such as the insurance agent Ackerman who is disguised as a Douglas fan but actually has ulterior motives, or the Latino gang leader who bullies the weak and vulnerable. These characters are not useless to the fate of the characters, on the contrary, as an “opposite gender”, they always affect the fate of the protagonist, and also deepen Douglas’s doubts about human nature.

In the film, the mother as the earliest female image, became a relatively warm psychological comfort Douglas, Douglas and his mother in the kitchen to listen to music to prepare meals warm getting along is also the few warm moments, but she is weak and pregnant, due to the weakness of the force, when the son was put into the doghouse, she chose to escape and self-preservation, did not produce the shelter, but gave him a good memory about love. Instead, after entering adolescence, the dramatic teacher in the juvenile welfare institutions, Salma has

a more profound impact on Douglas. She taught Douglas makeup and acting, and how to play others in Shakespeare's drama, to temporarily escape from reality, from the artistic world to get a place to rest. However, Salma's marriage to Douglas also produced a huge psychological trauma, making him more inferiority, without love and respect in the human society, Douglas chose to be in the company of dogs.

The film takes the overall flashback and interlude as the main narrative method. The opening scene investigates a case from the perspective of psychiatrist Evelyn. Although Evelyn is the heroine, she is more similar to a bystander in Douglas's self-identity and witnesses Douglas's self-construction. Due to her own kindness and sadness, she does not treat the suspect Douglas with malice, which makes Douglas choose to open his heart to her and reflects his clear love and hate under his crazy and strange appearance.

2.3 Self reconciliation and salvation

Lacan believes that the desire of man is the desire of others, and because it is a kind of other's desire, the process of self-confirmation can never be completed. Due to the barrier of symbolic order, just as the self can never really meet others, the self and the self can never be truly reconciled. In Luc Besson's previous films, there is often a theme about self salvation. The heroes often have a gentle heart and a seemingly sharp appearance. They are isolated from the crowd and alienated from the society. It is often at the end of the film that goodwill or humanity guides them to realize salvation.

And Douglas in *Dog Man* is a character who concretizes and maximizes these traits. His faith is established when he is thrown into a dog cage by his father. Contrary to the banner on the dog cage "In the name of god", only a few letters can be seen in the perspective of the cage - "dog man". Since then, the dog has become the god in his life, and also the protector and follower of his suffering life. Douglas no longer follows the mainstream beliefs and rules of society, but is completely moved by his heart and has established his own set of inner rules. After decades of hardship, he leads his dogs to protect the vulnerable people like himself and challenge the injustice of society and fate, because of love and faith.

The last scene is that Douglas fell in the church cross by the sun cast shadow, surrounded by hundreds of different types of dogs around. Such a symbol of the scene cleverly sublimated the soul of Douglas, at this moment "dog" will turn into "god", and in a poetic way to God, dog, man to achieve three integration. Douglas finally completed the self redemption, but also in the process of leisurely death, truly achieved the construction of self identity. Such an ending also means that Douglas has been constantly understanding and breaking through himself in the process of seeking himself, which also marks the process of the gradual breakdown of the mirror image.

3. Conclusion

Dog man shows the power of love and faith to the audience through the self-redemption of Douglas, which is full of sadness and strength. Under the cover of the crime theme of the film, Luc Besson's thinking about pain is contained, and the cruelty of the world and the complexity of human nature are revealed in the black fairy tale, but also full of hope and courage. The process of watching the film is also the process of self-spiritual analysis of people who have experienced pain. Every audience is experiencing the process of constantly finding themselves, the process of recognizing their own identity and realizing the balance between "self" and "other", which is actually the process of self-identity construction.

References

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