

# Characteristics of Storytelling in Epic Cinema

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**Abstract:** The core of epic film lies in telling a good story on the screen, in order to achieve this purpose, epic films are taken from history and claimed to be faithful to history, but these are not historical reality, and can only be called image reality. Based on this effect, the core of the story to be told in epic film is hidden behind the screen, and it is for the audience to mobilise their own deep psychological structure to reconstruct this again after watching the film, and the charm and vitality of this story is thus reflected.

**Keywords:** Epic film, Storytelling; Genghis Khan.

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## 1. Introduction

Epic is an ancient form originating from the Ancient Greek period, which originally refers to the celebration of historical figures and the telling of historical stories in the form of poetry. It is inseparable from the long-standing human custom of "storytelling". Petroglyphs of primitive people represent that human beings have begun to record events with images, and researchers believe that primates are telling stories to each other while grooming each other's hair.

In the twentieth century, human storytelling entered a whole new orbit, from the original storytelling with language and words to the use of continuous film and video images, and also with the help of television and film to spread the "story" farther, even to the other side of the globe. Cinema was born a thousand years after the epic, so the epic can undoubtedly serve as one of the most important samples for the creation and reference of cinema. Epic film is a unique film genre that integrates the phenomenon and connotation of historical epics into a film story and expresses them through audiovisual language. Epic cinema rides on the vehicle of screen communication, covering the ambitions, anxieties, hopes and fantasies of the 20th century, and rearranging and retelling historical figures and stories through the form of images. This is what makes the screen image different from a picture, "Individual images may show things, but they do not signify anything other than what they mean. It is only through the totality of the facts to which it relates that an image can take on a specific meaning and 'ideational power'. It thus acquires a unique meaning, which in turn gives new significance to the whole (of which it is a part)." [Mitre. *The Aesthetics and Psychology of Images* [J]. *World Cinema*, 1988, (3): 14] So it is because of this that epic cinema carries a brand new form, purpose and value at the beginning of its appearance.

## 2. Connotation of Epic Film

Most of the great epics inherited from the history of human races have the same characteristics: long history, grand scenes, prominent protagonists, unbridled personalities, and events that have a great influence on the direction of history, and the films with the above characteristics are firstly known as "epic films"; in addition, there are also a part of the films, whose contents are not directly taken from the classical epics. There are also some films whose contents, though not directly taken

from classical epics, can still be classified as "epic films" because of their stylistic similarities. At present, there is no authoritative and unified definition of the term "epic film" in the field of film studies, but it has been mentioned in many Chinese and foreign film theses. Epic poetry and cinema both originated in Europe, and then cinema was fully practiced and developed in Hollywood, so epic cinema appeared as a kind of "historical epic phenomenon" in Hollywood in the early days, while its earlier possibilities were practiced in Italian silent cinema. It was then manipulated by David Griffiths and Cecil B. DeMille, reaching its peak in the 1950s and 1960s. The genre evokes grandiose spectacles, "thousands of characters" and performances of Hollywood superstars.

Epic films cannot simply be classified as historical. Epic films are different from other storytelling films that depict history. "Historical narratives are like scaffolding: having climbed the steps of their individual narratives, one's vision extends far beyond the territory on which the steps are built." [Peng Gang. *Readings in Postmodern Historical Theory* [M]. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2016: 148.] The "history" involved in epic cinema goes beyond the steps and crosses over to new levels of content. Although epic poetry originated in the ancient Greek period, it has appeared in every era since then, so the content of epic film is very broad, and all subjects from ancient and modern times and from China and abroad can be involved; and "poetry" distinguishes it from simple historical subjects, and "poetry" should embody poetic narration. Poetry should be embodied is a poetic narrative, no matter the heroic characters, pounds of magnificent momentum, or destroyed or established the spirit of resistance or courageous fighting, or in order to show personal romantic feelings or the glory of the empire of the content, can be achieved through the performance and interpretation of the epic film to show.

## 3. Epic Film and Historical Truth

Historical narrative and epic are both based on the historical facts of the narrative, the former focuses on "history", emphasising the rigorous and objective writing of the laws of history, and different historians will have different historical interpretations of the same set of historical events; the latter focuses on "poetry", which favours emotional. The latter focuses on "poetry", favouring the emotional portrayal of history and expressing emotional attitudes, and in the praise of historical figures, different epics are wrapped in different praises. In terms of Mongolian "Genghis Khan"

related works, all of them are based on the research of historical books such as "History of Yuan", "New Yuan History", "Secret History of Mongolia", etc.; Vasilij Jan's "Genghis Khan", René Grousset's "History of the Mongolian Empire", and Pikulin's "Study of the Mongol Western Expedition", etc., are all serious historical writings, and the Chinese film "A Generation of Genghis Khan", "A Generation of Genghis Khan", "A Generation of Genghis Khan", "A Generation of Genghis Khan", and so on, are serious historical works. Genghis Khan, the Mongolian film Genghis Khan - No Right to Die, the Japanese film Cangwolf: Until the End of Days, and the Russian film King of Mongols are popular literature for the general public, and cannot be compared with the former in terms of reliability, rigour, and scientificity.

In the "Introduction" to his book *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Hayden White discusses the difference between a historical treatise and a story, stating that "the elements in the field of history are organised into chronicles by arranging them in chronological order of events; chronicles are then organised into stories by further arranging the events into chronological order of events". manner of further organising the events into the various components of the 'scene' or process of events." "Historical stories follow the sequence of events from the prologue to the provisional ending of a social or cultural process ..... Chronicles do not have endings; in principle, they do not have prologues" , "The same event can serve as a different element in many different historical stories with one different element, depending on what role it is assigned in the particular thematic account of the set of events to which it belongs." Take the event of his marriage in the Genghis Khan film; marriage was originally happy and sweet, but in the film Genghis Khan, the pride of a generation, his marriage is a reflection of Mongolian marriage customs and an interlude in his upheaval of a career, urging him to struggle; the Mongolian film Genghis Khan - The Right to Die Without Death is more The Mongolian film "Genghis Khan - No Right to Die" emphasises responsibility through marriage; the Japanese film "Cangwolf: To the Ends of the Earth" is almost a prelude to his life-long pondering of the meaning of "Cangwolf"; the Russian film "King of the Mongols" introduces the bad custom of "not fighting for women" through marriage, and what he does afterwards is "for all Mongols". What he does afterwards is "for all Mongols".

#### **4. The "Image Truth" And "Intuitive Reduction" of Epic Film**

As an art of cinema, epic films claim to be highly reductive of historical reality, including characters, scenes, and environments; however, as we all know, the so-called reductions are not reductions in the sense of history, let alone historical reality. The reality presented by the film is one-sided, and it is the "historical reality" that the film crew, with the director as the core, believes or can achieve. Therefore, in this sense, the epic film is only a grand narrative that tells a historical story. In this context, the cinematographic images presented by the film can only be called "image" reality, which is one-sided and cannot be compared with the documentary film.

For the general audience, the first impact on the audience is wide screen, big scenes, big events, big history, in the sense of entertainment, no audience care about the reasonableness

of these "images", or even according to these "images" to complete the appreciation of the film, only on the film about the film, after all, the height of the film, the film can only be said to be the "image" of reality. After all, the highly condensed and carefully scripted historical story limits the field of appreciation, and it is suspected that there is a deviation if one jumps out of the scope of the film to talk about history.

Therefore, the "image truth" of epic films is an unspoken tacit agreement among the audience. Compared to the question of whether or not the film is faithful to history, the audience is more concerned about what kind of story is told to me, and from this perspective, the story arrangement, story advancement, timeline arrangement, and story logic are more thought-provoking. In terms of the structure of the story, "The aim of structuralism is to constitute the illusion of a complete object by defining its units and rules of combination." [ Nick. Brown. *Historical Review of Film Theory* [M]. Beijing: China Film Press, 1994. 110.] This "illusion" describes the almost fantastic meaning generation process of the image from the deep psychological structure (unconscious level) of the viewer (human), and this meaning generated by the viewer can be called the "secondary creation" of the film, which is completed by the viewer. This meaning generated by the audience can also be called the "secondary creation" of the film, which is completed by the audience. As presented by narrative psychology, "Narrative psychology is to discover and study the formation of 'self', personal characteristics, emotional orientation, life attitudes, and cultural images of the narrative subject through the study of these told stories, and its point of research is the human being. " [ Song Suli. *Research on Chinese Documentary Films in the Perspective of Narrative Psychology (1978-2008)* [D]. Communication University of China, 2008.] The audience also has its "viewing psychology", in which the audience feels that the story fits with my experience, and unconsciously, the audience "intuitively reduces" the story to the one that the creative team actually wants to tell. In this way, the story becomes more vivid and continues down the line, giving life to the story.

As a film telling the story of Genghis Khan, when dealing with the position or role of historical events in the story, there are different perspectives at the beginning, end and key points of the story. For example, at the starting point of the story, Generation Genghis Khan tells the story of the marriage of Temujin's parents, which is the same in Japan and China, while the Mongolian film Genghis Khan - No Right to Die and the Russian-Mongolian co-produced film King of the Mongols do not deal with the story of Genghis Khan's childhood, which is perhaps related to the fact that Mongolians are familiar with the story of Genghis Khan. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that Mongolian people are familiar with the story of Genghis Khan, and the screenwriter of the film knows very well that the target audience of his film is the Mongolian group, so he doesn't need to narrate it too much. In terms of the end of the story, the Chinese film "Genghis Khan", the Russian film "King of Mongolia" and the Mongolian film "Genghis Khan - No Right to Die" all end with the unification of Mongolia in 1206, while the Japanese film "The Cold Wolf" ends with Genghis Khan's crusade against the Jin Dynasty. The story only briefly touches on his later exploits in the four corners of the world, and neither of them touches on the process of him becoming the leader of his clan, unifying Mongolia, or the wars he

fought in Asia and Europe. Though there are surely many moving stories, the narrative purpose of the film has been achieved, and too much description adds to the story, and an abrupt end of the film would be the wisest way to end the film. In terms of the key points of the film, the arrival of Marco Polo in Chinese cinema inspired Temujin's determination to protect his family and his tribe; the birth of Temujin's eldest son, Akatsuki, in Japanese cinema led to an emotional turn in the film; the imprisonment of Temujin in Russian cinema served as a turning point in his life; and the Mongolian cinema, in a duel in which he was defeated, lent the character the opportunity to cry out that he had no right to die! The Mongolian film uses the character's voice to cry out "There is no right to die" after his defeat in a duel, emphasising that he carries the responsibility of the entire tribe. The key points of the four films are completely different, which shows that the themes of the four films are also different, reflecting the different narrative choices under the same topic in the narrative of the film texts. The key point, as one of the plots of the story, is an integral part of the narrative strategy of the film text, which is a discourse constructed by the narrative theme in order to express a certain narrative intention, around a certain narrative theme or themes, in an attempt to achieve a certain narrative purpose.

In general, epic film focuses on "storytelling" rather than "history-telling", and the story is a story told by the director and screenwriter under the structure of history, characters and events, combined with their own existing experience; even with the same theme, different storytellers abstract their own stories. Even if it is the same subject, different storytellers abstract the storyline with individual characteristics. Therefore, the story told by the epic film has a part that is

faithful to history, but also has a literary poetic presentation. As the medium of storytelling, "image" is the driving force, image is to tell a good story for the service, and the most fundamental thing is what kind of story is told in the epic film, the answer to this question is not on the surface, but must be deeply understood to get the answer, which is hidden in the audience's self-consciousness and the secondary creativity. secondary creation.

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