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## An Interpretation of the Light Design of Roger Deakins' Works from the Perspective of Film Semiotics

### 从电影符号学角度解读罗杰·迪金斯作品的灯光设计

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Written by:

**Jia Tongyao**<sup>38</sup><https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2287-4748>**Jia Weizhang**<sup>39</sup><https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5075-2409>

#### Abstract

Semiotics offers an effective way for the study of light design, and has important value for the theoretical study of lighting in films. The light symbol is of conventionality, iconicity and indication. The American Cinematographer, Roger Deakins, has won two Academy Awards for Best Cinematography and been nominated 15 times for his works, which shows his high attainments in light design. In his creation, he used a variety of light design, so that the film can better show the plot of the script, restore the characters and scene modeling, which, at bottom, is a flexible use of the light symbol. With case study, literature study and interdisciplinary research, this paper takes Roger Deakins' works as an example, attempting to interpret the light design with the theory of film semiotics from various angles, and seeking for new discoveries for the theoretical research and practical creation in light design.

**Key Words:** film semiotics, light design, Roger Diggins' works.

#### Introduction

Roger Deakins' works is impressive with his classic picture composition and unique style of light and shadow. He often cooperates with such famous directors as the Coen Brothers, Denis Villeneuve, Sam Mendes and others. He has produced more than 40 excellent films, covering action movie, war movie, science fiction movie, suspense movie, western film, documentary film, feature film, and so on. Deakins has a very

#### 摘要：

符号学为研究电影光线设计提供了一个有效途径，对于电影布光的理论研究有着重要价值。光线符号具有规约性、像似性、指示性。电影摄影师罗杰·迪金斯累计获得两次奥斯卡最佳摄影奖以及十五次提名，在电影光线设计上有着极高的造诣。其在创作中使用多种光线设计技巧，使影片更好地展现剧本情节，还原人物及场景造型，即是对光线符号意义属性的灵活运用。借助于案例研究、文献研究和跨学科研究，本文以罗杰·迪金斯的电影作品为例，试用电影符号学理论解读电影光线设计，多角度诠释迪金斯的布光方式，为电影光线的理论研究和实践创作寻找新的发现。

**关键词：**电影符号学 光线设计 罗杰·迪金斯

unique control of film lighting, and has won two Academy Awards for best cinematography and been nominated 15 times. He is indeed a model for creators in films lighting to learn from.

Wang Hongjin (2010: 17-18) stated, "The light is not just a visual form, it is a character with high dramatic tension, and the light itself becomes a structure throughout the film, a parallel

<sup>38</sup> School of Theater, Film and Television, Communication University of China.

<sup>39</sup> College of English, Zhejiang Yuexiu University, China.



narrative.” As to the theoretical exploration of film lighting, it is generally summarized into three types of light effect: the dramatic light effect (the modeling effect), the documentary light effect (the natural effect), and the comprehensive light effect (the ideographic effect). At the same time, film semiotics also offers a suitable ideographic mechanism for it. According to film semiotics, symbols are signifiers carrying meanings, so the study of light symbols is the explanation of the meaning expressed by lighting in films. This paper is just the attempt to interpret the light effects of Deakin’s works from the view of film semiotics.

### Theoretical Framework

This paper combines the theory of semiotics with the practice of lighting in film creation, and makes a case study of the light design in Roger Deakins’ works from the perspective of film semiotics. In his *Literary Semiotics*, Zhao Yiheng (1990: 22-24) proposed “the conventionality, iconicity and indication of symbols according to the relation between signs and meanings”. Accordingly, the light symbol in films should also have three corresponding properties: the conventionality of the light symbol, the iconicity of the light symbol and the indication of the light symbol.

According to the three attributes of the light symbols in films, this paper interprets the conventionality, iconicity and indication of the light symbols in Roger Deakins’ works through three sections. The conventionality of the light symbol clearly presents the character’s mood and directly creates the environment atmosphere; The iconicity of light symbol is realistic in dealing with portrait modeling and highly restoring the scene form; The indication of the light symbol promotes the full expression of the theme tone, plot clue and aesthetic feeling of the picture. As the attributes of symbols can be combined in multiple ways, there appeared many comprehensive attributes of the same light symbol in Deakins’ works.

### Methodology

This paper uses three concrete methods to analyze, i.e. the case study, literature study and interdisciplinary research.

As a master of lighting creation in film, Roger Deakins’ works are numerous and cover a variety of types. His unique image style is indeed a treasure house for film and television creators and theoretical researchers to explore. With case

study, this paper takes Roger Deakins’ works as an example to analyze in detail the master photographer’s way of lighting and discusses its value in the category of film semiotics.

Meanwhile, the literature research is also an important method in the thesis. Through the appreciation of the light designs of his films in a large number of literature works, the thesis realized the significance of the combination between the meaning interpretation and the application of semiotic theory in film, and made a more comprehensive analysis of light symbols in Roger Deakins’ works.

Ma Rui and Wu Yingjun (2016: 118) mentioned, “Film semiotics is the application of semiotics in the field of film research, exploring the ideographic mechanism and ideographic potential of various film symbols, and focusing on the blind spot of original film research.” This paper adopts the method of interdisciplinary research to study the light designs. It takes light design as symbols in the film, and attempts to expand its theoretical basis to improve the philosophical space and to expand the cultural dimension of colorful light and shadow presentation in films.

### Results and Discussion

#### Results

Through the analysis of a large number of Roger Deakins’ films, this paper finds that it is highly suitable to explain the light design with the theory of film semiotics. The conventionality of film symbols is of high ideographic efficiency, and it can portray the dramatic stereotype in setting the characters and scenes. Whether it is to depict characters or show scenes, the audience can accurately and effectively understand their characters’ moods and environmental atmosphere. The iconicity of film symbols can transparently produce more real and natural effect in portrait modeling and scene form. With the help of causality, the indication of light symbols forms a certain order of meaning combination in the film text, and strengthens the ideation of films in the theme tone, plot clue, picture beauty and other aspects.

Furthermore, the thesis finds that the meaning expression of the symbols in movie is quite rich, and the meaning attribute of the same symbol at a certain moment may also be diverse. In Roger Deakins’ films, “firelight” appears many times as a light symbol with multiple meaningful

attributes, presenting visual effects that can be ethereal, spectacular, or absurd.

## A Semiotic Interpretation of the Light Design of Roger Deakins' Works

### I. The Conventionality of Light Symbols

According to Zhao Yiheng (2012: 86), "By virtue of the relationship between sign and meaning prescribed by society, such a sign becomes a conventional sign." The conventional light symbols in films have high ideographic efficiency because of their "convention".

#### 1. A Vivid Representation of Characters' Moods

In people's general cognition, light is often the synonym of beauty, happiness and hope, so the opposite of light, darkness, is naturally linked with terror, crime and despair. In Roger Deakins' *No Country for Old Men*, at the end of the movie, the cold-blooded killer, Chigurh, sat at the bedroom of Moss's wife. The light outside the window lit up the furniture in the room, but killer's face was hidden in the dark, with his hands revealed in specular highlights. The picture has a very oppressive sensation, as the ruthless Chigurh was portrayed like a cruel Death, and the claws of the devil will come upon Carla. A similar character is seen in *The Man Who Wasn't There*, where Eddie came to Dave's shop late at night fearing retribution from Dave. Here Deakins used oblique light to create a contrasting bright and dark face, with black shadows predominating, indicating that he is nervous and guarded. Then the two men sat opposite each other, with their jackets illuminated, but their shoulders and faces hidden in darkness. This eerie modeling light hinted at both their disgraceful psychology and the conflict to come. Dave walked over and looked down at Eddie. The black and white light on the bottom side was in contrast to the traditional Rembrandt light, and Dave, who was desperate, looked ferocious under such a special light and shadow.

The application light quality between cold and warm, soft and hard, is also an important means to present the character's modality. In the suspense movie, *Doubt*, Sister Aloysius got into a heated argument with the pedophile priest Flynn in his office. At this moment, Flynn was standing at the table, and the main light of the figure was the soft light of the warm yellow lamp, while the left cheek was reflected in the cold hard white light outside the window. The strong

contrasting combination of cold and warm, soft and hard, made the already deformed expression of the figure even more distorted because of the quarrel. In contrast, Aloysius, who was sitting on the chair, was much more relaxed in tone and expression than the former, as the figure's skin was already very pale, and her position was far away from the window. With the shelter of her cloak, the light on her face was soft and had little contrast. Here, Deakins guides the audience's cognitive judgment with the social conventionality of light symbols. Flynn's inner constraint made the light on his face contrasting strongly and full of anxiety, while the right-minded Aloysius had faith and the light on her softened accordingly. Meanwhile, the weather outside the scene was a thunderstorm, and Flynn's yelling was punctuated by lightning and thunder, with the chandelier exploding at key emotional points overhead. All of this lighting makes the viewers point their suspicion at Flynn.

Many small details can also reflect the efficiency of conventional light symbols in depicting characters. Aloysius, for example, dined in a room with fewer bright lights, in keeping with her routine, traditional, controlling and even paranoid habits; The light on Flynn was dappled and shadow, full of contrast, showing his seeming piety and gentleness, but dissoluteness under the table. Aloysius opened the window-shades to brighten the office, while Flynn pulled the curtains tight to soften the intensity of the light. The opposing light and shade makes the moods of the two opposing characters known at a glance.

#### 2. Direct Creation of Environment Atmosphere

According to Zhao Yiheng (2011: 37), "Things do not need to be fully perceived to carry meaning. The excessive quality of things involved in carrying meaning, only become a burden of meaning." By virtue of the conventionality of light symbols, light extends the meaning of the film text, and omits sufficient visualization.

Li Renjie & Gao Haixia (2008: 52) stated that "The proper use of light and shadow can bring the audience visual beauty and psychological impact, and can also have a certain narrative function in plotting." In the hotel chase scene of *No Country for Old Men*, Where Moss sat on her bed with a gun in hands waiting for the killer. Roger Deakins simulated a street light and set up a slanting light outside the window. From Bian Xiaohe we can see the thought of Roger Deakins,

"I wanted the street light coming through the window, so when Moss turned off the lamp in the room, we could get the red sodium light coming through the window. We put white light under the door so we could get a shadow picture of Chigurh walking up from the door to the hallway." Yellow light cast the shadows of window frames and patterned curtains on the wall, while another light shone on the door. Dark figure was mixed in the mottled background, so various light elements were unified in the whole picture without monotony, rendering a quiet and scary atmosphere. What is more ingenious is the cold white light oozing from the crack of the door, and the shadow of the killer's feet would be reflected when he stood at the door. This sense of panic that danger was approaching and would erupt at any time has full psychological tension. At this moment, both Moss and the audience are tense, which is the photographer's successful creation of the horrible environment.

For action movies, the lighting design should have a strong impact, to match the high kinetic performance of the characters and the audio-visual tension of the whole text. For example, in the action movie *Skyfall*, when Bond tracked the killer to the upper floors of a large building, the empty rooms were separated by glass structures and flanked by LED media facades that were displaying huge advertisements. Hope-Jones (2013: 51-54) mentioned, "It's a funny way to brighten up the scene by using advertising boards outside the floor-to-ceiling windows of the office." The mission of Bond was to catch the killer and found out the underminer. The dynamic light of the advertising boards was dazzling through numerous glass refractions. With the cover of the inverted reflection, Bond hid himself among it. When killer noticed something, a huge jellyfish was just floating up slowly on the LED media facades. The symmetrical mirror effect of the glass amplified the action tension of the characters and an atmosphere of adventure ensued. As Bond moved up to subdue the killer, the backlight silhouettes highlighted the intensity of the fight. The acrobatic fighting action appeared cold and unrestrained with the alternation between tension and relaxation.

The environmental atmosphere of the lighting can also be used as an extension of the psychological description of the characters. In the movie *The Man Who Wasn't There*, Eddie drove home with his wife Doris late at night, with the mottled shadows of the trees still reflecting on the windows, walls and faces of the characters. The whole atmosphere is peaceful but

boring, which is just the expression of Eddie's lonely and decadent daily life. When Eddie killed Dave and came back from the shop again, with the wind blowing and the leaves shaking. Eddie sat in the car, and the light spots were flickering on his face. The originally deathly wall also became tense due to the swaying of the tree shadow. The curtain in the bedroom rose and fell, and the wandering light and shadow enveloped Doris lying on the bed. Even if the depressed and apathetic Eddie, who seemed to be not interested in anything, did not show panic, the shaking light and shadow revealed his stirring inside.

## II. The Iconicity of Light Symbols

Zhao Yiheng (2012: 79) argued, "Iconic symbol refers to an object by its iconicity. A symbol stands in for something else because the symbol resembles it. Likeness looks simple and direct, and has a kind of transparency of representation." The light symbols with iconicity are the real reappearance of real characters and scenes.

### 1. A Realistic Treatment of a Portrait

Roger Deakins has a perfect command of light portrait modeling, but at the same time, avoids the light stealing the show. This realistic processing has a perfect sense of visual immersion, which can enrich the vivid depiction of the character image in films. For example, in the rooftop drinking scene of *The Shawshank Redemption*, Andy won beer for his fellow inmates. It was sunny at ten o'clock in the morning. The outdoor shooting here did not adopt soft light processing, but created a very natural and realistic character image with the help of the top light supplemented by the sun and spotlights. The prisoners, their faces full of fatigue out of a lot of work and years of repression, were now free to drink, a comfort they had never experienced since they were in prison. The top light of the hard quality formed a vivid highlights and shadows in the cheeks of everybody. This kind of treatment is not only the realistic portrayal of character, reducing their faces to vicissitudes of life, but also the metaphor of hope and freedom, with an unprecedented relax and peace on their faces. Freedom is like the sunshine on their shoulders, even if only a short time.

Roger Deakins himself mentioned, "I remember one of my fellow photographers saying about *The Shawshank Redemption*: It was very good shot, almost without lighting... I would like to say that most of the film was shot in a dark prison. I used a lot of lights to create the look of the prison.

Almost every shot was lit differently, even on the exterior, but there was no trace of lighting at the end.” (HomeBoy Cine Studio). The opera fragments of Andy in prison also adopted very realistic means to create characters: square, bedroom, library... all the prisoners looking up. Deakins took many facial close-ups of the group portraits with large light ratio, which made the gestures and expressions of the people true and echoed the symbolic meaning of the opera.

According to Wang Hongjin (2010: 8-9), “Natural light effect does not mean that the means of light expression is poor, but under the action of limited light source, as best as possible to reflect the most natural state of the subject.” In *Revolutionary Road*, the hero and heroine ran through the woods after their last argument. This chasing passage used multiple moving shots and subjective shots, quick alternate pros and cons of playing lens as well. The tense atmosphere was strongly rendered by the wobbly camera. The sun shone brightly through the leaves, and the highlights changed over the characters recklessly before they entered the shade to continue their argument. Deakins here didn’t do light processing, keeping the realistic shooting conditions of high contrast of light and dark areas. So the heroine’s anger, depression and hysteria were vividly displayed. In the dark evening, the heroine was still wandering in the woods. Deakins, with weak skylight and the basic filling light on character’s face, made the heroine fused together with the background, except the outline of hair light. This light is really depressing, under which the extremely sad torment of characters can be realized, as the pain of grief and resentment can’t be released. So the lost hope after having got it meant the extreme despair, which set the stage for tragedy.

## 2. An Accurate Reduction of the Scene Form

The light symbols with iconicity play an important role in explaining the film environment, which is the reproduction of real visual experience and the high restoration of the film scene form. Artificial lighting is a situation in which the real natural scene can be simulated. The film *Sicario* tells the story of a drug bust on the US-Mexico border. In the beginning, the truck of the police commandos directly broke the wall and into the house, with the dust rising immediately. Deakins set several spotlights to simulate daylight. The intense hard light pierced the room sharply, then a vast expanse of whiteness was seen in the smoke. With the red headlights embellishing, the violence and chaos of the environment was highlighted. Spotlights

from the overhead sky window created three rectangular light zones on the walls of the hallway, adding layers of light and shadow to the interior picture. The heroine broke into the room and killed the resistant drug dealers, with blood splashed on the wall, echoing with the red curtain aside, only to reveal the bloody reality of the border scene.

Another case is the direct use of natural light for iconicity processing. According to an article from Xin pianchang (2017) “The color and texture of the film were directly influenced by the location of the Chihuahua Desert... The character reduced to a dark silhouette by the scorching sun, and the spectacular sky formed by the thunderclouds of the rainy season was a poetic expression of Kate’s inner and external suffering. The endless barren landscape can make the character lost in this emptiness.” The scene of the drug squad crossing the desert was shot by natural light with density. The silhouetted figures of several people wandering in the endless land reflected the limitations and smallness of people in the primitive and savage frontier.

In the western movie *True Grit*, Coburn was taking Maddie, who had been bitten by a snake, on horseback at a gallop through the valleys, woods and wasteland that took them days to walk. The film shows the movement of time by changing the light. The characters experienced noon, afternoon, dusk, evening and late night, and each time period was corresponded to the real skylight situation: at noon, top light was dominant, and the shadow was more straight; In the afternoon, the light began to tilt and the color temperature gradually decreased; Dense panoramas were taken at dusk, and the colorful sky was particularly fascinating; The sun had set, and the evening had darkened; In the middle of the night, the environment was completely dark, and one can see the twinkling stars. The faint moonlight covered the earth and reflected the undulating outline of the wasteland. In the middle and close shots, artificial light was used to enhance the illumination of the “moonlight”, to describe the details of horses running and falling, characters’ expressions and movements. This scene carefully shows the magnificence and vastness of the western landscape and echoes the passage of life caused by poisoning with the passage of time created by light, showing the tininess and confusion of human beings in the land.

### III. The Indication of Light Symbols

Zhao Yiheng (2012: 83) stated, "Indication means that symbols and objects can remind each other because of certain relations --- especially the relation of causality, adjacency, part and whole, etc. --- so that the recipient can think of the objects of symbols. The function of deictic signs is to draw the interpreter's attention to the objects." The indicative nature of the light symbol plays an important role in expressing the theme of the work, promoting the development of the plot and improving the aesthetics of the work due to its rich meaning.

#### 1. A Targeted Collection Based on Thematic Tone

The atmosphere created by light and shade, hue, purity and other attributes can properly display the emotional tone of the story, directly affect the psychological mood of the audience, and richly express the artistic presentation by the lens.

In the movie *The Ladykillers*, the thieves firstly threw mud and then bodies into a boat. The eerie lighting design created a horrible and absurd atmosphere on the bridge. The panoramic setting was: The white light of the two rows of street lamps was spotty on the rain-covered road, and the light formed patches of highlights under the refraction and scattering of the fog, which formed a contrast with the dark sky. There were lights on both sides of the pillars on the bridge from below, shining on the peculiar little devil statue. The mid and close shot setting was: the character stood between two street lamps, so there was only backlight on both sides of the cheek, and the shadow in the middle was a typical sinister figure. At the end of the dialogue between the two thieves, the classic chessboard lighting was adopted. The high-contrast character modeling was perfectly integrated with the background of opposite light and shade, which explained the unity of characters and scenes in this atmosphere. In addition, the lighting effect of the little devil statue on the bridge column was very ghoulish, with the black sickle in the hand, and with the wide mouth and eyes particularly empty, indicating that thieves would be punished by the devil for their evil deeds. Throughout the film, the light and atmosphere of the bridge scene was the same, consistent with the theme of black humor in the film.

Another example is the application of lightning effect in the prison-breaking plot of the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*. Andy was packing

up things in the room, when one or two lightning flashes came into the room, indicating the excitement and nervousness of the protagonist. As Andy crawled through a hole in the wall into the claustrophobic plumbing system, the lightning flashed quickly in frequency, urging him to work harder, because hope was at hand. Andy hit the pipe with a rock, and the lightning just signaled every time he hit, because the sound of thunder could drown out the alarm of others. The strong electric light flashed on Andy's face and body, standing out his striving, fighting, longing for freedom. When Andy finally rushed through the sewer into the river, the high frequency of lightning in the weak moonlight environment appeared very dazzling, with the rising of thundering one after another. After Andy had endured twenty years of trial in prison, and personally experienced the valley of the shadow of death, freedom has finally arrived! The storm and the river gave him a new life from sin, and the lightning and thunder applauded his determination to save himself. The indicative lightning-effect symbol here is no longer a pure means of lighting, but an indicative cognition with symbolic meaning and color of religious redemption and judgment.

#### 2. A Metaphorical Reference Based on Plot Clues

The light symbol can also serve as an important story clue of the movie story text and make different changes with the progress of the plot and become the signal of the creator to express the implied meaning in the picture. The use of light and color in *Blade Runner 2049* can be taken as a good example. Director Denis Villeneuve once said in an interview that the color yellow was the clue the protagonist sought in the film.

In general visual perception, yellow is not a color full of science and technology, but *Blade Runner 2049*, as a hard science fiction film, used yellow light many times, and always stood out among other colors as a high saturation or high brightness color, which showed its profound implication.

Whenever the protagonist K approached the truth, a suggestive yellow color appeared. For example, in the yellow background of Saber Morton's home in the beginning, Saber Morton was nothing more than an assassination target in K's eyes, but it was because of this action that he began to explore his own identity. K found the small yellow flower under the dead tree, which symbolized the birth of life, thus detecting the

buried bones of Rachel. K came to Wallace's base, where yellow tone almost occupied the whole picture. Firstly, yellow represents nobility and power, similar to the color of emperors in traditional Chinese culture. The headquarters of the base controlled everything outside, which was a highly concentrated secular power. At the same time, yellow also symbolizes order and creation. Different from the chaotic world outside, the interior design of the base was symmetrical, unified and orderly. More importantly, it can receive sunlight. During shooting, the spotlight was mounted on a pulley and dragged to simulate the pure light and shadow changes of the sun rising and falling slowly. Fenghuang Wang Yule (2017) mentioned, "This is an original idea from the great god of photography Deakins. Being 'blind', Wallace himself does not need light; The light in the group building is made on demand and can move on demand. It can automatically follow visitors. In short, Wallace created a smart Sun-like lighting system inside his headquarters." The sunlight implied that Wallace's base had creator attributes, and was a temple to created replicants. In addition, yellow also stood for wisdom. The sun-lit base archives the memory of the whole world and provided clues for K to further explore the truth.

The warm yellow atmosphere in the brothel was seductive and soft. Mariette acted as a prostitute and found K, leading to the clue of replicants' revolutionaries. K went to explore the memory of the wooden horse. The fire in the old factory and the yellow background of the shop, led him step by step to the abandoned city --- the hiding place of Dyke, which was the very place where yellow was most concentrated in the film. As K walked alone, the yellow sand all over the sky caused by the environmental damage made a person feel the loneliness of the wasteland. The abandoned city building, the broken roads and bridges, the damaged head statues, the huge nude sculptures, and all the highly developed science and technology of materialistic, now were all buried in the boundless yellow sands, as the human society has fallen. Then K entered the building where Dyke was hiding, and the yellow color here increased the meaning of remembering the past. With Dyke's appearance, people began to sigh that the heroic Blade Runner was now aged. The relationship between K and Dyke gradually eased. In the evening, they drank and talked like father and son. K yearned for Dyke to be his father, and yellow was full of warmth at this moment.

### 3. A Poetic Expression Based on Aesthetic Feeling of Picture

It is also an important task of visual language to give full play to the beauty of things themselves. Appropriate use of indicative light symbols can make the meaning of the film more abundant and poetic and improve the overall visual aesthetic of the film.

In the scene of the train robbery of the movie *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, the robbers ambushed in the woods at night. The light source almost only came from the lantern in their hands. The light with low penetration could only illuminate a small area near the characters, while the surrounding was solid darkness, so the picture looked neat and unified. According to Bian Xiaohe (2014) "I put the bulb behind the flame and put little pieces of metal between the bulb and the flame, so that all the camera gets is little flames." With the candlelight flickering slightly, the facial expressions, clothes, watches, rails, trees, sand and so on were very textured. As the train slowly approached, Deakins used a longitudinal composition. With the headlights of the locomotive against the fog of the trees, the tracks was illuminated by the white light, and two beautiful curves was formed by the specular reflection of the metal.

When the camera cut to the woods, the headlights moved horizontally through the fog, creating a bizarre atmosphere with the Dyndall effect of the light and the movement of the trees into the shadows. The robbers in the woods stood in the flowing light and looked even more sinister. Then the train screeched to a halt, with the wheels rubbing against the rails creating an exaggerated spark that shone brightly in the darkness. "Underneath the train we also put little bare bulbs that gave a dim light to illuminate the steam and create the effect of red. We put a special effect device under the train that created a spark as if the train was braking." (Bian Xiaohe, 2014) As the train came to a halt in front of Jesse James, the steam immediately enveloped him, and the robbers rushed through the dense fog, with the strip car silhouettes of men and trees like a warm yellow light box. In this episode, Deakins used a variety of lighting methods to shoot the scene of robbery as a hero showing off his skills. The tension of the lighting effect poetically reflected the image of Jesse James as a chivalrous man.

In addition to the light effect of the big scene, many close-up lyrical shots also fully showed the visual beauty of the picture. For example, the

movement of the light on the ground of an empty room, and the change of the light outside the window, simulated the change of sunlight, indicating the empty building. Jesse James finally chose to leave the city and went back to his farm. With the passing of time, his friends would also leave one by one. The warm light of dim flickering more set off this desolate feeling, adding poetic sadness and stirring for the hero who would eventually go down.

Another example is the long shot lighting in the war film *1917*. In order to restore the sense of reality and immersion of the battlefield of World War I, iconicity light symbols were used for a long time. However, there were two very wonderful plots in the film, in which indicative light symbols played an important role in the sublimation of the theme of the film.

The first was the scene of “Nightmare from Hell”, in which the soldier Scofield woke up from coma. It was dark at night. The town was in ruins, with the burning of the distant church and the firelight reflected in the puddle, and the flares flashed across the sky. The battlefield at night was dangerous everywhere, just like the hero’s nightmare. Wo Kan Ba (2020) mentioned, “We wanted to make the scene more like a dream, like a surreal nightmare, to create an atmosphere that was both hellish and poetic.” Here Deakins simulated the light source of a flare by using a moving spot on an overhead. “We used LED lights on the model of the town made by the art team to indicate where to put flares. At the same time, our live-action buildings are needed to cast shadows from flares.”

The hero was running and hiding on the bumpy muddy road. The flares rose and fell in accordance with a certain rhythm. The large dynamic contrast between bright and dark created a strong sense of visual impact. At the same time, in terms of the scheduling of actors, the timing of the hero when to enter the light area, when to hide in the shadow, when to run, when to fall to the ground was also precisely controlled by coordinating the changes of the light, which successfully set off the hero’s nervous and panic heart. The position of light and shadow was particularly prominent in this segment, which was combined with the uncertainty and uncontrollability of the plot formed by the long shot itself, and the battle scene was rendered with rich colors and true magnificence.

The second was the “Light of Heaven” segment. *1917* followed the style of “one shot to the end” and had high requirements on the unity of light,

so all exterior scenes were shot on cloudy days. But at the end of the film, after Scofield finished his mission and found out Tom’s brother, he walked alone to a big tree, where the clouds lifted and the sun slowly emerged. In the beginning, Scofield had stood side by side with Tom, but now he’s alone. He pulled out a photo of his family and looked at it. The sunlight on the tall grass added a touch of fantasy to the intense atmosphere of the film. The protagonist closed his eyes for a rest, his stiff expression relaxed, the gentle sun on his cheek was bright and pleasant, the grass was wide behind him, and the sky was blue.

This sunlight, which Deakins calls “the light of heaven”, was taken at the same time as the weather changed from cloudy to sunny, which was exactly what Deakins wanted to achieve in the lighting design. The existence of sunshine in this long shot had great significance, which played an important role in the sublimation of the theme of the whole film text. Sunshine represented the change of the character’s situation and mood, was the memory of his comrades who died. After a near-death experience, sunshine was the yearning for peace and a better life of the character. Just as the director Mendes said in the awards ceremony of Golden Globe: “I was 17 years old when my grandfather joined the army, took part in the first world war, I hope he can look at us in heaven, I hope I never have a war.” The signification of the symbol of “Light of heaven” highlighted the theme of the film and enhanced the ideographic effect of the picture.

## Conclusions

The symbol is the mark carrying the meaning, and the light symbol is the interpretation of the meaning expressed by the light in the specific situation of the film. The photographer’s creation of light is the process of encoding light symbols. After the information to be conveyed is compiled, light symbols will have an impact on the presentation of the entire film text.

The conventionality of symbols pay attention to conventions, and the meanings they carry must be associated with people’s general cognition. The conventionality of light symbols is sometimes similar to that of dramatic light effects, which ignores the location of light sources and directly models characters and scenes. The differences of light and shade, cold and warm, soft and hard have completely different modal meanings in human universal cognition, so their meanings are accurate and

effective, which can not only present distinct characters' moods, but also directly create the atmosphere of the environment.

The iconic symbols emphasizes "iconicity", and the similarity of light symbols and objects has "natural" similarity. Just like the realism style of natural light effect, it makes people feel a "direct sense", and its depiction of portrait modeling and scene form have the function of realistic processing and are of high reduction.

Because there is a certain relationship between the signification and the object, they prompts each other. When the receiver perceives the symbol, he can think of the object of the symbol, and the effect of ideographic light can reach the same destination. The indicative light symbols can orientationally bring together the theme of the film, metaphorically refer to the plot clue, and poetically express the beauty of the pictures, so they can both give play to the aesthetics of light design and sublimate the theme.

The lighting method of "firelight" frequently used by Deakins is also very distinctive. The meaning of fire itself becomes the pre-text of "firelight", and its multi-cultural meaning enriches the overall connotation of the film. Deakins' "firelight" symbol is not only of iconicity, but also endowed with sufficient extended meaning as conventional or indicative symbols.

In brief, through the study of the light design in Deakins' works from the perspective of film semiotics, we can not only peep into the various modeling means in his light design, but also restore his original intention, so as to interpret the unique way of light distribution of the photographer, which is a tentative exploration of the development of the theory and practice of light design in films.

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