

Visual Plaisir and Narrative Jouissance: An Analysis of Visual Production and Narrative Mechanism in *Game of Thrones*

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Abstract: Relying on advanced imaging industrial technology and groundbreaking creative production, *Game of Thrones* successfully constructs a magnificent visual spectacle and a gripping, unpredictable narrative: the visual imagery exhibits a "marked" function of producing cultural symbols, thereby releasing immense imaginative potential for visual space; the narrative method is freely twisting and rich in detail, thus forming a highly disruptive viewing experience. The combined force of these two elements creates a rarely replicable miracle of film and television cultural dissemination. This paper utilizes Roland Barthes' concepts of plaisir and jouissance to analyze the modes of visual cultural production and the narrative mechanisms that subvert audience expectations behind the brilliance of *Game of Thrones*.

Keywords: *Game of Thrones*; Visual Symbols; Narrative Mechanism; Plaisir; Jouissance

1. Introduction

Roland Barthes, in his *The Pleasure of the Text*, contributed two concepts: Plaisir and bliss. The former stems from the direct process of reading the text, while the latter comes from the feeling of textual rupture. Using these two terms to summarize the two textual characteristics presented by *Game of Thrones* in its visual production and story narration is very apt. "plaisir" is referred to as a readerly text, as its focus is on pleasing the reader, being "comforting, comfortable". [1] "jouissance" is also called a writerly text; such texts are disruptive, challenging, and often interrogate widely accepted social ideologies. [1] As a phenomenal American TV series, the success of *Game of Thrones* is inseparable from its dual exploration in visuals and narrative: it is not only a visual representation based on realistic and imaginative worlds but also subverts traditional singular narrative modes through equal multi-perspective, multi-protagonist narrative tendencies, setting gripping suspense and

enigmatic endings, thus forming a unique narrative mechanism.

How did *Game of Thrones* become the world's strongest IP after gaining global attention? In this majestic geopolitical drama, through grand scenes and numerous character threads, *Game of Thrones* builds a highly imaginative virtual world: these continuously emerging image spectacles, together with a postmodern complex narrative method, bring the dual pleasures of visual pleasure and blissful narrative, driving viewers to tirelessly engage in the thinking and discussion of the text.

2. Spectacle Generation, Cultural Presentation, and Symbolic Recognition

The term "spectacle" originates from Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*. He believed that spectacle is the "dominant mode of life in news, propaganda, advertising, and entertainment performances". [2] The essence of spectacle is a society where visual image production reigns, with film and television becoming powerful spectacle creators. Zhou Xian argues that "spectacle and scene have become the most basic visual means in film, while all other linguistic elements take a back seat". [3] He categorizes image spectacles into action spectacles, body spectacles, speed spectacles, and scene spectacles. Although these spectacles are virtual, they simulate, to some extent, the ways cultural identities are presented in reality. And as visual image symbols, they complete the process of spectacle construction and visual symbol emphasis. In *Game of Thrones*, spectacle is mainly manifested as geographical spectacle (scene spectacle), cultural spectacle, and body and action spectacles.

2.1 Geographical Spectacle: and Representational Space

Game of Thrones is also seen as a political geography drama. This TV series displays the respective local customs and practices of the Seven Kingdoms and Nine Great Houses. In the opening title sequence, accompanied by the

seamlessly natural music of German composer Ramin Djawadi, key locations and their geographical models such as King's Landing, Dragonstone, the North, and the Wall are described in sequence, foreshadowing the completely different geographical landscapes and conflict zones from south to north about to appear in the series. To present the realistic yet imaginative geographical features of the kingdoms in the show, the Game of Thrones production team traveled around the world, finding perfect filming locations in Croatia, Iceland, Northern Ireland, etc.: King's Landing was filmed in Dubrovnik, Croatia, whose ancient walls, narrow streets, and majestic palaces closely match its image in the show; the plotlines involving the White Walkers and wildlings north of the Wall were mostly filmed in Iceland; the filming location after Jon Snow is captured by wildlings comes from Vatnajökull National Park in Iceland, the largest glacier in Europe, presenting a spectacle of an icy world to the audience.

The French thinker Henri Lefebvre established the theory of the production of space, using the "triadic dialectic of space" as the basic theoretical framework to reveal how multiple elements and forces such as economy, politics, and culture reshape space. Within his theoretical framework, the production of space is divided into spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces (spaces of representation). [4]Representational spaces correspond to the lived spaces of characters in the TV series. "Urban sculptures, monuments, streets, and city walls can all generate specific spatial representations. Through the abstraction and crystallization of spatial practice, and through the encoding and decoding of spatial syntax in different forms, they construct an everyday life experience of different qualities." [5]

These geographical spectacles, on the one hand, greatly conform to the geography of the different kingdoms in the novels, and on the other hand, also serve as spatial carriers for narrative power and political games. Game of Thrones itself is set against the backdrop of European medieval history. The differences in the landscapes of the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros reflect medieval European feudal culture, while the grasslands, deserts, and slave city-states of Essos correspond to the spatial characteristics of the historical Mongol Empire and Middle Eastern civilizations. Therefore, the construction of geographical spectacle in Game of Thrones is not random or the

result of production team fantasy, but is based on profound historical and cultural metaphors, careful integration of natural and human elements, and the construction of a symbolic system. This construction helps the audience achieve an astonishing sense of realism and narrative depth in the virtual world, becoming a stage for power struggles, cultural conflicts, and character destinies. The author of the novels, George R.R. Martin, drew heavily on the historical and geographical features of the real world when constructing the world of Game of Thrones, using a technique of interweaving reality and fiction to endow the two continents of Westeros and Essos with profound historical and cultural depth. The shape and scale of the former continent approximate South America, but its geographical divisions and climatic features are closer to Europe. When watching Game of Thrones, the audience is compelled to ponder the geographical imagery and the blanks (empty spaces) brought by the geographical locations and features within the show. The division of the Seven Kingdoms mirrors the political (structure) of medieval European feudal fragmentation. For example, the harsh, desolate, and sparsely populated North shapes the Stark family's resilient and honor-focused character. This geographical world not only enhances the credibility of the virtual world but also makes geographical spectacle a carrier of cultural identity.

Space has always been a text that can be interpreted. The geographical spectacle in Game of Thrones presents not only an imagined space but also a cultural space. The physical space design of King's Landing highlights the class differentiation and power asymmetry of this coveted place. The Red Keep perched high on a hill overlooks the narrow, dirty slums, symbolizing the great distance between the ruling class and the populace. For the ruling Cersei Lannister, King's Landing is a place for power struggle, where all power can be transformed into the highest stake in the game; for the Imp Tyrion, King's Landing is a city of systemic injustice and human absurdity. The space of Essos, in Daenerys's eyes, is a constantly changing perspective: the Dothraki sea symbolizes primal power and freedom, while the Slaver's Bay cities (Astapor and Meereen) expose ubiquitous oppression and resistance. Daenerys's growth from an inexperienced girl to a liberator with a large army, her movement from grassland to city, to desert and ocean, reflects her growth trajectory

and further activates the narrative potential of these geographical spectacles.

The Iron Throne, as the power center of the Seven Kingdoms, is both a physical object and a central symbol of geographical space. Its sharp, uncomfortable design hints at the violence of acquiring power and the danger of its occupant. Many spaces in King's Landing, such as mazes, tunnels, prisons, and council chambers, are shaped by the director as enclosed, dark spaces where assassinations and alliances, resistance and defiance constantly occur. North of the Wall, there is a heterotopian space for the Seven Kingdoms and the audience, rejected by the mainstream continent yet posing a constant threat to the continental kingdoms. These geographical spaces reflect power distribution, cultural norms, and political structures, showcasing the challenge of marginal spaces to central power.

2.2 Cultural Spectacle: Ethnic Identification and Identity Signifier

Cultural spectacle in film and television is never solely for visual effect presentation; it is also a cultural symbol expressing spatial characteristics, an interpretation of the cultural meaning of the described space. To showcase the different kingdom and ethnic cultures in the story, characters are endowed with different distinctive personal identities and family symbols, which constitute floating signifiers, metaphoring their kingdom and family's identity, beliefs, character, etc. The appearance of different characters carries their own regional culture and physical characteristics. "As a formal symbol, the body's appearance, expression, movement, clothing, adornment, etc., all contain specific meanings. The form of the body itself embodies a certain logic of meaning production." [6]

Stuart Hall, quoting W.E.B. Du Bois, cites skin color, hair, and bones as signifiers of race. Although he points out that race as a signifier is not fixed and racial categorization is meaningless, these three are biological facts. In *Game of Thrones*, the wildlings always appear in ragged clothing, with animal skin clothes creaking during movement; in the Northern Kingdom, the Stark family appears in black cold-weather clothing; in the southern Dorne, both men and women wear light and flexible clothing; for the male-dominated warrior nation of the Dothraki, the production team not only designed a unique language but also shaped the image of these fierce nomadic riders skilled in cavalry through exposed muscles and

loose trousers. Daenerys and Cersei have completely different clothing styles at different stages of their rule; behind this visual change, it helps the audience establish the process of the characters' environmental and identity changes.

According to the Peircean semiotic typology framework, signs include: icons, indices, and symbols. The meaning of a symbol is established mainly relying on laws and habits; it is the most common and universal sign. Symbols find clear correspondence in *Game of Thrones*: symbols are emblematic symbols, totemic logos. Different ethnic groups are endowed with symbolic meanings through emblems; through these quickly recognizable signifiers, the dozens of races in the series are endowed with different ethnic spiritual connotations and cultural meanings. In *Game of Thrones*, the Nine Great Houses all have their worshipped spiritual totems: the falcon of House Arryn, the direwolf of House Stark, the stag of House Baratheon, the lion of House Lannister, the rose of House Tyrell, the kraken of House Greyjoy, the dragon of House Targaryen, the sun of House Martell. These symbols constantly appear on the clothes or family banners of the characters in the show. These family totems, along with their house words, reflect the independent and distinctive regional characteristics of different families. The direwolf itself is just an animal, but after being conventionally agreed upon as the symbol of House Stark, it means "the North," "honor," and "Winter is Coming." House Targaryen, due to its Valyrian bloodline and genetic inheritance of dragons through magic, has the dragon as its totem.

2.3 Body Spectacle: Character Connotation and Meaning Interpretation

Steve Neale, in *Masculinity as Spectacle*, argues that in the identification process with the male protagonist, the audience can experience a sense of power. In *Game of Thrones*, the male body is also accepted by the audience as a spectacle, most of the time through its charm, actions, and other physical states. Neale believes that when the male body satisfies the pleasure of being looked at (voyeuristic pleasure), violence is absent. In *Game of Thrones*, the male gaze upon males is handled through feminization, among other ways.

The shaping of male spectacle in *Game of Thrones* is particularly prominent: what the audience relish discussing is the power ranking. Aside from unsolvable existences like the Faceless Men, Arthur Dayne is publicly recognized as the

"greatest knight" in Westeros. Additionally, Khal Drogo, Barristan Selmy, Oberyn Martell (the Red Viper), Gregor Clegane (the Mountain), and others are constantly discussed by the audience. However, these characters, whether prominent or hidden, are not simply praised or gazed upon but are panoramically displayed in multiple aspects of masculinity and their complex relationship with power, violence, and trauma.

The male image in *Game of Thrones* is deconstructed and subverted into several categories: knights or Kingsguard possessing top-tier combat power, which aligns with Connell's proposed "hegemonic masculinity": the widely accepted and revered ideal type of masculinity that can legally maintain patriarchal rule. It is usually dominant, emotionally repressed, advocating force, and controlling towards women and other men. The Dothraki people are a presentation of such hegemonic masculinity; Robert Baratheon was once a mighty warrior and conqueror, but after becoming king, his masculinity decayed into that of a gluttonous, drunken, obese man, symbolizing the decay of his inner power and masculinity. His lament for the passing of "war and love" indicates that this male identity built on force and conquest finds no place in peacetime, ultimately leading to self-destruction; "Kingslayer" Jaime Lannister was initially also a perfect representative of hegemonic masculinity—handsome, dashing, and highly skilled in combat. However, after having his sword hand cut off, this traumatic event completely destroyed the core pillar of his male identity (martial prowess). Thereafter, his character arc revolves around remaking himself: he must learn to fight with his left hand, developing wisdom, strategy, and a sense of honor. Jaime's maimed body is a physical castration of his past masculinity and also the starting point for his growth into a more complex individual; characters like Varys (the Spider) and the dwarf Tyrion, who do not conform to traditional masculinity, survive by relying on their own intelligence: Tyrion Lannister is a representative of subordinate masculinity, but he proves through his intellect that it is a more powerful and enduring male capital than (hegemonic) masculinity; although Varys is deprived of the physiological basis of traditional masculinity, his very existence questions and subverts the notion that "masculinity must be linked to physiology."

Baudrillard pointed out that the body in the spectacle society carries heavier connotations,

being an "object that is more beautiful, more precious, more brilliant than any other." [7] It is undeniable that *Game of Thrones*, to attract audiences, also creates a large number of spectacle perspectives of the female body, placed under the male gaze. "Under patriarchal culture, the state of the female body is shaped and produced by male demand, and the mutual penetration of image media and the female body has also become a site for the reproduction of male power." [8] For example, Daenerys first appears as a commodity objectified by men, later becomes the sublime motherhood of three dragons, and finally grows into a queen with a large army rivaling Cersei. The show does not lack shots displaying the female body extensively to attract male audience gaze.

Overall, through its vast gallery of male characters, *Game of Thrones* critiques the bankruptcy of hegemonic masculinity, offers pluralistic narratives of the body, and redefines bodily power.

3. Narrative Mechanism

3.1 Anti-Genre Narrative: Deconstruction and Shattering of Fantasy Film/Television

The core reason *Game of Thrones* could subvert the viewing experience of global audiences and have a profound impact lies in its systematic challenge, deconstruction, and even shattering of long-standing narrative genres and tropes in fantasy literature and film/television. Theoretically, it is a profound narrative revolution.

The anti-genre narrative mode of *Game of Thrones* first involves the deconstruction of the "hero's journey" and protagonist plot armor: the series adopts an equal narrative, multi-focal approach, unfolding the story through numerous POV (Point of View) characters, making the narrative center extremely dispersed, with no single protagonist: the narrator only tells what a character sees, observes externally, and does not explain thoughts and emotions. In anti-genre stories, character actions subvert the basic situational patterns, action types evolve in the opposite direction, exceeding the scope of action consistency, and situational types, thematic types, and story types also consequently evolve in the opposite direction. [9]

In previous TV dramas, character images were distinct, right and wrong were clear. Audiences would involuntarily fall into past viewing experiences: before the protagonists win a happy heroic ending, their turbulent lives follow them

like a shadow, but this is just a great footnote to their legendary stories. There is no so-called protagonist plot armor in *Game of Thrones*, which is why the show has only ever received nominations for Best Supporting Actor awards at major awards ceremonies. The audience's newly established impression of the protagonist often stops abruptly with sudden reversals: Ned's death completely breaks the "hero does not die" law; the Red Wedding destroys the viewing expectation of "poetic justice." The *Game of Thrones* story begins with the Stark family, and the director first lays out a charming righteous character image. However, past viewing habits easily fall into the narrative trap woven by the author: Eddard Stark is preconceived as designed with protagonist plot armor. When the sudden and unexpected outcome appears, the audience's psychological expectations instantly collapse. Yet, when the audience traces back the story's themes and details, it is not difficult to find that the protagonist's rapid fall from grace is not without reason: Ned let his guard down against enemies, refused cooperation with Renly and Littlefinger's proposals, stubbornly adhered to honor and ritual, thus missing the best opportunity for counterattack, imprisoning himself and plunging his family into the abyss. Ned's death breaks the genre rule of "the protagonist does not die," creating immense uncertainty and narrative tension. The audience's horizon of expectations is completely overturned: they can no longer believe that morally upright characters will be protected, thus generating real anxiety about the fate of every subsequent character.

Secondly, there is the subversion of moral dualism. Traditional fantasy narratives usually follow a clear binary opposition of good and evil (e.g., the Fellowship vs. Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings*). In *Game of Thrones*, most characters carry complex humanity and operate in moral gray areas. The series refuses black-and-white character portrayal; almost all main characters are in profound moral gray areas. Jaime Lannister initially is an oathbreaker bearing infamy, a villain who tries to murder a child. But as the narrative unfolds, the audience understands his motivation for saving King's Landing, his sense of honor, and his respect for Brienne, making the character extremely complex and contradictory. There is also the Imp, Tyrion Lannister: he is intelligent, merciful, but also addicted to drink, hires assassins, and kills his father in anger. He is a compound containing both good and evil. This way of shaping that subverts the good-evil binary forces

the audience to constantly adjust their moral judgments and emotional investments. The narrative drive shifts from "good triumphing over evil" to "the struggles and choices of complex individuals in extreme environments," closer to the complexity of the real world.

3.2 Mini-Narratives: A Collage of Personal Destinies

In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-François Lyotard argues that any era has certain dominant narratives, which he calls "grand narratives" or "meta-narratives." These meta-narratives claim to provide the entire society with an ultimate meaning, unified goals, and a macro theoretical framework of value standards, such as the "Enlightenment narrative," "emancipation narrative," "historical progress theory," etc. They presume to explain everything and guide humanity towards some ultimate goal. "Meta-narratives operate through inclusion and exclusion, tidying up the chaotic world into an orderly kingdom, suppressing and excluding other theories and other voices with universal principles and common goals." [10] But alongside these grand narratives, there exist many small narratives/mini-narratives, which may be excluded and devalued. The fundamental characteristic of postmodern society is distrust towards meta-narratives; these grand, totalizing narratives have collapsed, replaced by countless local, heterogeneous, fragmented "mini-narratives." These mini-narratives compete with each other, and none can claim to hold an absolute truth status. Lyotard believes that mini-narratives are not only "the form that imaginative invention particularly likes to adopt, but also the exemplary form of popular knowledge and a form of resistance against the social and political." [11] Today, Lyotard's questioning of grand narratives and his call for mini-narratives have gained new attention; they discuss secularized life details and philosophy, indirectly disintegrating various meta-narratives.

The mini-narratives in *Game of Thrones* come from its deviation from traditional narrative structures; the narrative is more like a historical chronicle than a teleological story. It lacks a single, through-running core conflict but is composed of countless simultaneously advancing, interwoven mini-narratives. Traditional TV dramas follow the classic three-act structure of equilibrium - disruption of equilibrium - restoration of equilibrium at a higher level, and the ending is

usually closed, providing answers to main questions. Game of Thrones uses anti-genre techniques, its narrative pursuing non-linear progression and open endings. For example, the "Red Wedding" case is not the story's climax or ending but a mid-series event that shocks everyone. It does not serve a protagonist's growth arc; instead, it brutally interrupts multiple narrative lines, mimicking sudden, catastrophic events in history. Bran's ascension, Jon's exile, Daenerys's tragedy, etc., are not the "satisfactory endings" all audiences expected. It is more like the beginning of a cycle: the "story" never ends, the game of thrones continues, only the players change. This is an open ending, leaving the audience with reflection rather than satisfaction. The narrative effect created by this move is: the narrative loses traditional safety and predictability, and the audience experiences a sense of flow and contingency approaching real history.

In traditional fantasy films like *The Lord of the Rings*, there exists a clear meta-narrative pattern: good will inevitably triumph over evil; after the hero's journey comes a glorious fate; history moves towards some bright endpoint. Game of Thrones constantly destroys these meta-narratives: Ned's death shows that good and evil are not necessarily rewarded; Daenerys does not move from liberator to savior; after humans defeat the White Walkers, they do not enter a new era of unity but return to power struggles. On the ruins of collapsed meta-narratives, Game of Thrones constructs a network composed of countless mini-narratives: the POV character structure becomes the carrier of mini-narratives; every family has its own narrative of just motives, each considering itself the maintainer and ruler of order. Yet, no one's narrative is absolutely correct; they are merely competitive discourses unfolding from different standpoints. "Truth" and "justice" have no standard; they are only locally determined. They are valid within their own camps; when conflicts arise, they cannot be resolved through debate but only through contests of power to determine victory. This indirectly confirms Foucault's statement: truth is a product of power. The ending of Game of Thrones with Bran's ascension is not the victory of the traditional meta-narrative of "the hero becomes king." The destruction of the Iron Throne brings the ultimate symbol of the meta-narrative to an end: namely, one center, one apex of power, is no longer the final goal of a story. Power is once again dispersed and returns to the competitive landscape of

mini-narratives.

4. Conclusion

Game of Thrones, with its grand narrative scale, complex character relationships, and meticulous world-building, has become an exemplary work of contemporary film and television art. It shapes vast and spectacular image spectacles, allowing audiences to immerse themselves and obtain visual pleasure. Symbolic spectacle construction enables geographical space to transcend the function of physical background, becoming a core tool for thematic expression and emotional intensification. By decoding these symbols, the audience not only understands the operating rules of the world but also deeply experiences the grand narratives of power, death, and memory; its anti-genre narrative and mini-narrative modes represent a revolutionary victory in narrative. Game of Thrones refuses to provide grand narratives of ultimate meaning, empowers every local area and character with the power to tell stories, incorporates the world into heterogeneous and vibrant mini-narratives, and brings audiences a blissful narrative experience. It is precisely thus that Game of Thrones achieves the realistic creation of a fictional world, the propulsion of multi-dimensional narratives, and the dialectical expression of power and resistance.

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