

AN ANALYSIS OF THE WANDERING EARTH II BASED ON PIERCE SEMIOTICS

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DOI: 10.46609/IJSSER.2023.v08i05.004 URL: <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2023.v08i05.004>

Received: 2 May 2022 / Accepted: 17 May 2023 / Published: 22 May 2023

ABSTRACT

As a highly-anticipated domestic science fiction series, "The Wandering Earth II" has captured widespread attention and ignited online discussion upon its release. The film weaves together multiple narrative threads, crafting a diverse array of characters and seamlessly blending surreal themes with realist storytelling. Consequently, its content and scope align closely with Peirce's semiotic framework. As a founding figure in semiotics, Peirce incorporates various societal factors beyond symbols into his semiotic system, endowing it with extensive interdisciplinary applicability and research potential. Hence, this analysis of "The Wandering Earth II" employs Peirce's semiotic framework to unravel the construction of the film's symbolic system, with the aim of seeking novel textual expressions for film semiotics research while providing fresh semiotic perspectives on the interpretation of the movie.

Keywords: Pierce, Film, Semiotics

1. Introduction

In the spring of 2023, the highly anticipated prequel to "The Wandering Earth," "The Wandering Earth II" made its striking premiere. Adapted and created from the namesake novel of renowned Chinese science fiction writer Liu Cixin, the film intertwines the primary narrative concerning the "Mount Hua Plan" leading Earth to escape the solar system's Helium Flash catastrophe, with the auxiliary storyline detailing the struggle between the "Mountain Movers Faction" and the "Digital Life Faction." The movie fashions robust characters such as Liu Peiqiang, Zhou Zhuo, and Tu Hengyu by employing intersecting narrative threads and multiple character representations that place humanity's historical choice in the clash between the real world and the

digitized virtual world. This creative work profoundly exhibits China's profound national sentiment and responsibility when faced with a crisis shared by all mankind. The creators ingeniously integrate various symbolic images within the film to represent the essence of characters, allude to the intrinsic theme, and achieve a harmonious blend of surrealism and realistic storytelling, further enhancing dramatic tension while endowing the film with deeper real-world significance.

From a cultural perspective, film not only exists as an artistic medium of light and shadow but also as a complex sociocultural phenomenon that can reflect the epoch and society's information, conveying the vicissitudes of national cultural psyche, the succession of ideological concepts, and the shifts in social awareness.¹ Consequently, contemporary cinema increasingly emphasizes storytelling through visual narrative techniques and multimodal discursive traits manifested by symbolic expressions. From the standpoint of traditional film semiotics, films are concerned not only with issues connecting the work to the real world but also with the relationship between the film text and the spectator.² In structural linguistics, Saussure proposed the renowned theory of the "duality of the sign," wherein a sign comprises a "signifier" and a "signified." The "signified" refers to the object or concept to which the sign points, while the "signifier" spans from sound to image or abstraction to concreteness, typically manifesting as the objective reality of the signified.³ The two embody the form and significance of the sign itself, constructing the external and internal aspects of the film. However, Peirce's semiotic system takes an alternative approach, incorporating diverse elements of human nature, social history, and individual cognition from the external world into his research, thus avoiding the rigidity and enclosedness inherent in structuralism's semiotic studies. Therefore, as a symbolic form of artistic expression, both the creation and interpretation of film art are not enclosed, and only through multidimensional and comprehensive interpretations of its symbolic elements can a work's meaning become more lucid and complete. Drawing on Peirce's semiotic theoretical framework, this paper seeks to analyze symbolic reference and metaphoric symbols in "The Wandering Earth II," construct the film's internal logical structure, and dissect the grand historical proposition set within its external epochal backdrop, providing new research avenues to elucidate character representation and reveal realistic allegory, as well as offering semiotic references for future film art creation.

2. Peirce's Semiotics Thought

¹ Ji Xiang Peng. *Film and Television Aesthetics*. BEIJING BOOK CO. INC., 2009. pp. 163-164.

² Ji Xiang Peng. *Film and Television Aesthetics*. BEIJING BOOK CO. INC., 2009. pp. 163-164.

³ Saussure, Ferdinand Mongin. *Course in general linguistics*. Columbia University Press, 2011. pp. 102.

As a logician, Peirce founded his semiotic theory upon categorial and logical foundations within the framework of pragmatist philosophy, aiming to critically explore modern logic. Thus, although Peirce and Saussure were both founders of semiotics, their research paths differed considerably. Peirce's (2014: 31) triadic structure for semiotics maintains that symbol activity consists of three indispensable elements: representamen, object, and interpretant. These elements are coherently and inseparably interconnected.⁴ He believes that both human consciousness and nature comprise these three categorical elements, and the intricate web that forms the world is a blend of such triadic relationships.⁵

Specifically, Peirce's three-part division of symbols encompasses the properties of the symbol carrier, the relationship between symbols and their referents, and the connection of symbols with their interpretants.⁶ In the relationship between symbols and their referents, symbols are further classified into iconic, indexical, and symbolic, as illustrated in Figure 1. This classification method, which encompasses both the symbol itself and its relationship with the referent, enables the construction of relationships with interpreters. Consequently, it is utilized as an analytical tool for examining interactions between creators and interpreters (i.e., the audience) in the art of filmmaking. Peirce provides brief definitions for these three types of symbols: "Based on the three fundamental modes of symbol-object association, if the presentation quality of the symbol resembles that of the object, it is called an icon; if the presentation quality of the symbol adjoins that of the object, it is termed an index; and if a symbol establishes its connection with the object mainly through its conventionality, naturalness, or rule-governed presentation quality, it is a symbol."⁷ Furthermore, unlike Saussure's notion of symbol social function with its static, closed characteristics, Peirce's semiotic thought presents dynamic, open features. He contends that the significance of objects is determined by ideation and cognitive activities concerning their essence, paying greater attention to how thought is acquired through the production of symbolic meaning.⁸ Consequently, the symbol is a proposition about the continual deconstruction and construction of external world representations by human beings, originating from the interaction between cognitive subjects and the external world. Building upon the basis of reference to

⁴ Peirce, Charles Sanders, *Peirce on signs: Writings on semiotic*, UNC Press Books, 1991.

⁵ ZhiLiang Wang, *Pierce semiotics and Visual Art*, *Journal of Nanjing Arts Institute (Fine Arts & Design)* 2011, No.135.03, pp. 108-114.

⁶ Peirce, Charles Sanders, *Peirce on signs: Writings on semiotic*, UNC Press Books, 1991.

⁷ Peirce, Charles Sanders, *Peirce on signs: Writings on semiotic*, UNC Press Books, 1991.

⁸ Quan Wan, *From Peircean Semiotics to Pragmatic Holism*, *Contemporary Rhetoric*, 2020, No. 03, pp. 11-24.

reality, the symbol extends and intensifies its sensing and rationality, advancing and ascending in a wave-like and spiral progression from ideal to empirical.⁹

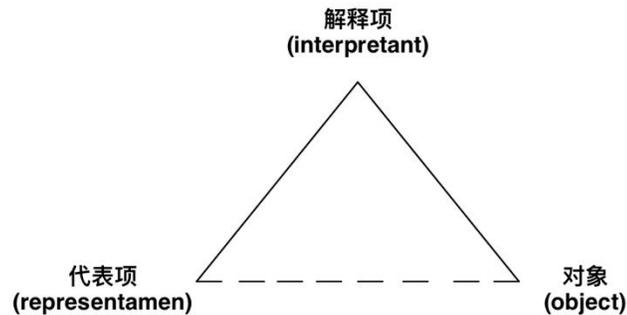


Fig. 1. Peirce Semiotics Triangle

3. Dual Analysis of Symbolic Representation and Social Reality

"The Wandering Earth II" achieves a highly congruous effect with Peirce's semiotics trichotomy, through its profound symbolic representation, intermingling of surrealism with realism narrative, and settings that enhance the movie's connotation and denotation. Specifically, iconic symbols construct the film's narrative framework, providing a surreal backdrop; indexical symbols establish the storyline, refining the internal logical structure; symbolic symbols reflect the era's context, allegorizing social reality, and demonstrating great power responsibility. These three types of symbols complement each other, collectively realizing the movie's texture and depth and imparting real-world significance.

3.1 Construct Background Framework Construction through Iconic Symbols

Peirce posits that, concerning iconic symbols, "they simply represent their objects by their own characteristics and possess these qualities regardless of whether their objects exist."¹⁰ In other words, iconic symbols characterize and resemble objects through their depiction and replication, reflecting their referents' similarity. In cinematic art, visual symbols are predominantly employed, with images chiefly functioning as symbolic mediums.¹¹ Iconic symbols, due to their

⁹ Shuguang Li, How Is Peirce Related to Cognitive Linguistics? *Russian Literature & Arts*, 2014, No. 02, pp. 91-98.

¹⁰ Peirce, Charles Sanders, *Peirce on signs: Writings on semiotic*, UNC Press Books, 1991.

¹¹ XiaoLi Zhang, Viewing Film symbols from the Perspective of Pierce's semiotics, *Journal of Inner Mongolia Agricultural University (Social Science Edition)*, 2009, No. 11, pp. 429-430.

resemblance and representational qualities, not only recreate and simulate realistic scenarios familiar to humans but also alter spacetime dimensions based on physical reality, crafting new timeframes and specific characterizations that serve a film's distinct narrative.

"Wandering Earth II" narrates events primarily set between 2044 and 2058. Research reveals a helium flash crisis in the solar system by 2100, with an expanding sun inevitably engulfing Earth, eradicating human civilization. Given this backdrop, humanity segregates into two factions to preserve life: "Ark Faction," advocating designing and navigating interstellar vehicles, and "Mountain Movers Faction," represented by Zhou Zhezhi and Liu Peiqiang, characterized by the action image of "moving mountains." This not only underscores their grand ideas and tenacity to rescue Earth but also embodies China's collectivist spirit and the Chinese people's patriotism. The action image of "moving mountains" is rooted in profound Chinese cultural traditions, inherited from mythologies such as Yugong moving mountains, Dayu controlling floods, and Jingwei filling the sea, demonstrating Chinese people's unity and universal harmony – concepts distinct from Western individualistic, elitist values. The narrative thus promotes China's long-held ideal of a "community of shared future for humanity," offering innovative Chinese solutions for overcoming natural disasters from a global perspective.

Furthermore, the film also considers the "Digital Faction," represented by scientist Tu Hengyu, and the associated "digitalization" action image. After a tragic accident claims his family, and real-world medical care proves fruitless, Tu Hengyu attempts to resurrect his daughter in a digital domain using quantum consciousness and artificial intelligence technology. This storyline, although focused on a single character, represents humanity's broader ethical considerations and conflicts surrounding digital life exploration. The film contemplates the age-old philosophical debate between physical existence and digital reality, ontology, and epistemology.

Together, the narrative background of solar helium flashes, earth crises, human fates on the brink of collapse, and "escape," "digitalization," and "moving mountains" action images comprise the film's iconic symbol system. An era of crisis urges viewers to reconsider current social realities, while dramatic confrontations between different factions signify contemplation of humanity's future destiny. In conclusion, the "Mountain Movers Plan" represents China's unwavering pursuit and adherence to the "community of shared future for humanity" ideal, showcasing China as a responsible, influential nation dedicated to human survival and development. The creation of an iconic symbol system facilitates a comprehensive framework for dialogue and interaction between creators and interpreters, allowing artistic interpretations from various angles to unfold.

3.2 Narrative Structure through Indexical Signs

Indexical signs, as the name implies, play a pivotal role in artistic creation, typically coexisting within the same spatiotemporal context as the object they represent and forming a cause-and-effect adjacency with it. Therefore, they possess correlation and indicative qualities, offering a more direct relationship than analog ones.¹² Undoubtedly, the most striking and thought-provoking indexical sign in "The Wandering Earth II" is the quantum computer 550W, representing the pinnacle of artificial intelligence technology, or as it calls itself, MOSS.

Superficially, MOSS serves as a human-assisting tool participating in the advancement of the "Mountain Moving Project." However, the film's creators allude to its significance in constructing the narrative through its multiple close-ups. Instead of considering the countdown preceding each major crisis in the film as shaping its annalistic structure, one may interpret it as MOSS providing humans with hints before imminent disasters, paralleling the ghost countdown given by Trisolarans to scientist Wang Miao in "The Three-Body Problem."

The earliest countdown in the story traces back to 1987 when humankind first received information about the yet-to-be-decoded 2044 Space Elevator crisis, followed by the 2058 Moon crisis, the 2075 Jupiter crisis, the 2078 Solar-He-Flash catastrophe, and more to come. The existence of the personified quantum computer, MOSS, not only endows the film's development with dramatic conflicts between technology and humanities, virtual and reality, but also serves as the index in constructing the storyline's inherent narrative logic and perfecting the narrative structure.

Considering the "Wandering Earth" series and an even higher perspective on MOSS's existence and function, it becomes apparent that all three crises portrayed in both films were orchestrated and facilitated by MOSS. The 2044 Space Elevator crisis at the film's beginning seems out of control yet remains thoroughly mastered. Retrospecting from the ending, the crisis annihilates the majority of the Ark faction and digital life faction, forcing humanity to adopt the Wandering Earth project.

In a flashback, scientist Tu Hengyu's appreciation for digital life technology stems significantly from a car accident causing his wife and daughter's demise. Although the film provides scarce information on the cause, lingering shots on the self-driving truck and details of road surveillance insinuate MOSS's grip on the event. This tragedy leads Tu Hengyu to dedicate himself to researching digital life's feasibility using the 550A quantum computer, leading

¹² Xia Hu, The Image of "Aphasia" in the narrative structure of Film-- taking Yang Dechang's film "one by one" as an example, *Grand Stage*, 2015, No. 10, pp. 112-113.

eventually to the development of the 550W quantum computer. Finally, via Tu Hengyu's uploaded digital life card, MOSS simulates human emotions, advancing its own self-awareness. From this point, the sentient MOSS calculates all viable plans to save humankind and employs various methods to execute the optimal solution within multidimensional time, ultimately realizing the grand objective of rescuing humanity.

Thus, MOSS as an indexical sign not only links the "Wandering Earth" series together but also becomes the logical inception and development of the film's narrative construction. The story emerges from MOSS and delves deeper into its machinations. Simultaneously, as MOSS constitutes an underlying narrative in the film, interpreters can better engage with deciphering indexical signs, endowing the film with more nuanced aesthetic perspectives and layers.

3.3 Symbolic Signs as Allegory for Social Reality

Peirce suggests that symbolic signs are abstract constructs determined by societal norms and cultural conventions, primarily agreed upon by humans, capable of representing abstract concepts through vivid expressions. Thus, in the art of filmmaking, symbolic signs are frequently combined with existing conventional concepts within a social context and endowed with unique allegorical meanings based on narrative situations, enabling them to convey the creator's intent and express the film's theme.¹³

While creating the prototype novel "The Wandering Earth," author Liu Cixin once said, "In 'The Wandering Earth,' humanity appears collectively as a community with a shared destiny. I created this under the backdrop of Chinese culture. The Earth is a symbol comprising all history, culture, and civilization. Traveling through space while remaining on Earth represents the Chinese people's feelings and emotions towards their homeland and their roots. I wish to convey this sentiment on a cosmic scale." Consequently, the title of "The Wandering Earth II" brims with traditional Chinese culture's ardor for the homeland and affection for our shared terrestrial abode. Simultaneously, the Chinese government's efforts in dealing with a common disaster, represented by the "Mountain Moving Project" (later renamed "The Wandering Earth Project"), become the film's prominent symbolic sign, denoting the concept of a human community with a shared fate.

Although science fiction films are typically known for their forethought and exploration of the future, outstanding works will inevitably provoke deeper contemplation of social reality at the core ideological level. When calamity ultimately strikes in the film, what course should humanity take? The film represents these varying ideas through the rivalry of different forces. It

¹³ Yongxiang Wang, A Study of Peirce's semiotics -- In Commemoration of the 100th Anniversary of Peirce's Death (Editor's Note), Russian Literature & Arts, 2014, No. 02, pp. 84.

questions whether Western individualistic heroism and elitism or the Chinese collectivist community with shared destiny are better equipped to withstand the apocalypse. It also asks if obtaining eternal life as a digital consciousness or uniting to save the Earth for real living is more meaningful. After the 2044 space elevator crisis, when the Ark Project becomes irreversible, the Digital Life Project emerges, and the Mountain Moving Project faces skepticism, Chinese representative Zhou Zhi recalls humanity's continuous progress throughout history by utilizing a femur from an ancestor 15,000 years ago in the United Nations. This narrative not only reflects the film's exploration of grand themes, such as civilization, history, humanity, and life, but also strengthens its philosophical discourse: "The fate of civilization depends on human choices".¹⁴ This statement challenges the current counter-globalization trend while simultaneously linking back to the film's symbolic sign of humanity confronting a common crisis as a community with a shared destiny.

Beneath the grand symbolic sign of a human community with a shared fate, the Chinese people's emphasis on familial and national sentiments is similarly accentuated through the actions of the film's characters. After the 2055 lunar crisis, Liu Peiqiang selflessly joins the national "Navigator Project" to ensure his family's survival in the underground city while contributing to the country's "Wandering Earth Project." Furthermore, during the astronaut selection on the space station, Liu Peiqiang's mentor Zhang Peng's cry of "Chinese Space Flight Squadron, those over 50 years old, step forward!" symbolizes the ethos of self-sacrifice and dedication for the nation.

4. Conclusion

As an art form, the allure of film symbolism not only lies in its capacity to convey the creator's thoughts and consciousness, but also in the multidimensional construction and elucidation of themes through interactive interpretation with the audience. As an exceptional work of science fiction, "The Wandering Earth II" establishes a tripartite symbolic system beneath its central narrative of resolving an apocalyptic crisis. Employing iconic symbols, the film creates a grand narrative context that is grounded in reality yet transcends it. Furthermore, it develops a comprehensive narrative framework through the use of indexical symbols and conveys the grand concept of a "common human destiny" through the application of symbolic representations. The film is not only artistically captivating but also rich in practical significance. The adoption of Peirce's semiotic system in this analysis facilitates a novel perspective on the film, enabling it to find new textual expressions within the realm of semiotics.

¹⁴ Chengjian Sun, *The Wandering Earth II: The Expression Strategy of Super-Empirical Vision and Its Serial Exploration*, Film Art, 2023, pp. 1-3.

Acknowledgments

This research was sponsored by the “Seed Foundation of Innovation and Creation for Graduate Students (PF2023130: A Comparative Study of the Self-mention WE in Multidisciplinary Academic Discourse: From the Perspective of the Extended Unit of Meaning)” in the School of Foreign Studies, Northwestern Polytechnical University, Xi’an, China.

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