

REFLECTIONS ON THE SUBJECT-OTHER RELATIONSHIP IN ROBBE-GRILLET'S EARLY NOVELS: A STUDY THROUGH KEY SIGNIFIERS

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Abstract: As a representative writer of the French nouveau roman, Alain Robbe-Grillet in his early works focused on the core issue in post-war French intellectual circles--the relationship between the subject and the other. To explore how his novels rethink this relationship, this paper takes key signifiers as the entry point and, drawing on textual analysis, systematically interprets the artistic features of destabilizing the signified within the connotative system and reconstructing the signifier network and textual structure. Through key signifiers, Robbe-Grillet transcended the subject-centered stance of Sartrean existentialism, and, from a structuralist perspective, reined in the infinite drift of signifiers and constructed an egalitarian relationship in meaning creation between the author and the reader. His literary practice further repaired the rift between the subject and the other, fully demonstrating the ideological depth and the value of formal innovation of the French nouveau roman.

Keywords: Robbe-Grillet; Subject; Other; Key signifiers

1 INTRODUCTION

Alain Robbe-Grillet (1922-2008) is usually associated with the French nouveau roman by the academic community. This association is justified because, in the literary and theoretical fields of that era, Robbe-Grillet made outstanding contributions to overcoming the creative impasse of French realistic novels, thereby galvanizing a group of avant-garde writers brave enough to challenge the realist tradition under the banner of the nouveau roman. Nevertheless, the connection between a writer and a literary school is highly complex; furthermore, writers affiliated with the French nouveau roman often achieved breakthroughs through distinctly different creative ideas and forms. Therefore, this paper adopts textual analysis and undertakes an in-depth study of the creative characteristics of Robbe-Grillet's early novels through the lens of the subject-other relationship. As is well known, although post-war France experienced overall economic growth, various domestic and international challenges remained acute, such as frequent peasant uprisings, workers' strikes, the Poujadist movement, the Indochina War, and the Algerian War of Independence. These social events manifested themselves at the ideological level, making the relationship between the subject and the other a focal point that French intellectuals could not ignore.

2 CONTEMPORARY FRENCH PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE SUBJECT-OTHER RELATIONSHIP

After the two World Wars, France underwent a profound intellectual transformation. One major cause was that the trampling on human nature and the disregard for life in the wars severely undermined the sanctity of the subject. The crisis of the subject's legitimacy then led philosophers to rethink the subject-other relationship, and the search for new foundations for the subject's legitimacy became a driving force in the evolution of French philosophy. Alexandre Kojève's reinterpretation of Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's tripartite division of existential phenomenology, Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist humanism, and the linguistic propositions of structuralist semiotics were all influential in French intellectual circles at that time. Considering the critical targets and theoretical tendencies of *For A New Novel*, this paper adopts Sartrean existentialist humanism and structuralist semiotics as its reference frameworks. It first examines both the causes of the rupture between the subject and the other in existentialist philosophy and how structuralist semiotics attempts to mend this rupture.

Sartre refused to derive negation from the positivity of being. If being is absolutely self-identical, nothingness—which represents difference—can never be linked to identity. It is therefore necessary to adopt a dualist conception of being: being-in-itself and being-for-itself. Human subjectivity lies in the freedom of thought, that is, the ability to conceive the meaning of negation through the affirmation of being. “Just as nothingness presupposes negation, negation in turn presupposes the negator. The humanization of nothingness is accomplished: ‘Man is the being through whom nothingness comes into the world’[1].” Here, negation is derived from nothingness, so human freedom of thought resides in the subject's inherent power of negation. In this way, the two realms of being may be unified in human subjectivity. Regardless of whether Sartre succeeded in reconciling being-in-itself and being-for-itself, his thought significantly contributed to the restoration and elevation of the human subject. Existentialism flourished in France around the time of the Second World War, partly because it presented itself as a humanism amid widespread nihilism in

post-war society. Sartre's Being and Nothingness offered a positive vision of human subjectivity that bolstered French national identity in the context of war and reconstruction. "Existentialism, which emerged in Germany after the First World War, was further developed by Sartre and became prevalent in France in the period surrounding the Second World War [2]." Notably, Sartre's theory did not satisfactorily address the problem of the subject-other relationship. Freedom originates from the subject; the other exists only as an object and a contingent entity for the subject, serving as a basis for the subject's free existence. The confusion accompanying his humanism thus raises the question of which subject's existence--or exercise of the power of negation inherent in freedom--can be deemed legitimate.

Structuralist semiotics upholds the heterogeneity between language and subjective experience. This heterogeneity manifests itself in communication with the other: in Claude Lévi-Strauss's concept of the "floating signifier", the signifier is insufficient to capture the signified at the moment of utterance. Meaning therefore no longer springs from subjective experience. In other words, meaning resides in the possibility of combining experience within the constraints of the signifier(i.e., language), and subjective experience as meaning can only be partially communicated to the other. Structuralist semiotics thus shifts emphasis toward the other in communicative interaction, since different others will interpret the same subject differently or even in opposite ways through language. This view profoundly challenged existing understandings of the subject-other relation. If Sartrean humanism placed the subject on a pedestal, structuralist semiotics decentered the subject toward the position of the other. The other engages in diverse interpretations of social discourses, and the difference between the subject and the other becomes absolute, eliminating the subject's superiority over the other. From this perspective, structuralist semiotics effectively mended the rupture between the subject and the other: the absolute recognition of difference affirms the equality and pluralism of the subject and the other, even if such equality and pluralism emerged within the homogeneous civilization of France.

3 KEY SIGNIFIERS IN ROBBE-GRILLET'S EARLY NOVELS

Robbe-Grillet never lacked the courage and determination to explore the unknown world. In *For A New Novel*, he repeatedly stressed his commitment to exploring the world. In short, the writer's exploration of the world through creation unfolds within a new, unstable, and, to some extent, unknown fictional world.

In Robbe-Grillet's early novels, different signifiers exert unequal influence on textual structure. While any single signifier in a finished novel may alter the structure to some degree, this paper focuses on key signifiers--one or several recurring elements whose variation triggers drastic structural shifts, even a collapse, rendering the plot unworkable. Furthermore, key signifiers function as relays between different signifying chains. As key signifiers shift with narrative perspective, the novel's structure unfolds through their alternation. To analyze these works, readers must suspend the reading habits shaped by realism: key signifiers determine structure precisely because they constitute the writer's theme or main object of depiction. This paper argues that key signifiers in Robbe-Grillet's early novels differ functionally from those in realist fiction: they tend to dissolve the signified in the connotative system, thereby highlighting their central role in textual structure.

This paper examines the "mirror" in *Three Reflections* and the "centipede remains" in *Jealousy* as key signifiers. As a structural key signifier, the "mirror" operates at the intersection of multiple signifying chains. Like a real mirror, it is empty and generates no meaning in itself; instead, it reflects other signifiers. These signifiers converge at the mirror--the nodal key signifier--and then radiate into distinct chains, forming the novel's structural whole. In a sense, the convergence of signifying chains at key signifiers resembles a node of a spiderweb: internal threads gather and stretch outward to absorb impact. The mirror fulfills this relay function between the signifying chains of "window" and "mannequin". It thus resists the imposition of fixed meaning from the connotative system while reflecting other signifiers back into the text. Although the novel appears to consist of meaningless still lifes, the mirror underpins structural coherence.

The "centipede remains" performs the same function. The smudge on the wall where Frank killed a centipede attests to his presence, witnesses his attention to A (the wife) and her affection for him, and even embodies the narrator's (the husband's) jealousy--closely aligning with the novel's theme. Yet unlike realist fiction, the "centipede remains" simultaneously gathers other signifiers and continuously dissolves such thematic meaning. As the narrator meticulously records, "This illustration depicts parts of the limbs: one antenna, two twisted mandibles, the head, the first segment, half of the second segment, several walking legs, and so on [3]." The signified of the connotative system is submerged in a flood of signifiers, vanishing under near-anatomical precision. Nevertheless, diverse signifying chains are still reflected through the "centipede remains"--those of wiping the mark, of erasing letters (secret correspondence between the wife and Frank), and of recalling A's photograph--thereby ensuring the structural integrity of *Jealousy*.

Another example is the recurring "circle" in *Voyeur*. The circle is hollow and empty, bearing no metaphorical or symbolic content; meanwhile, it is the product of artificial precision. It can be the "fine and neat" figure-eight rope binding Jacqueline, the flight path of seagulls, or the slightly squinted eyes of the witness Julien: "[...] Round, motionless, one on each side, with a black hole at the center of each [4]." The key signifier "circle" not only empties the signified of meaning but also enables the effective unfolding of multiple signifying chains.

4 ROBBE-GRILLET'S REFLECTIONS ON THE SUBJECT-OTHER RELATIONSHIP

Examining the deeper significance of key signifiers through the lens of the subject-other relationship clarifies how Robbe-Grillet's works addressed the crisis of rupture between the subject and the other, deepening the understanding of

his early novels and theoretical claims.

A crucial expression of the subject-other relationship in the literary field is the author-reader relationship. In Sartre's "committed literature", readers possess subjective perception and creativity, collaborating with the author to produce the literary object. Yet Sartre also states: "[...] between the signposts set up by the writer are empty spaces; the reader must reach them on his own and go beyond them [5]." Readers' freedom is thus guided and summoned by the author; the reader becomes a condition for the writer to grasp the transcendence of the literary object. To some extent, the hierarchical issue of the subject and the other remains unresolved: the other still serves as a basis for the subject's self-understanding. In Robbe-Grillet's literary practice, however, key signifiers dissolve the signified in the connotative system, eliminating such "signposts"--fixed meanings prior to reading and interpretation. Readers' exploration becomes an absolute creation of meaning. As Robbe-Grillet notes: "All this can only encourage the reader (or spectator) to adopt a mode of participation different from the one he is used to [...]. He demands that the reader take part in a creation, that he himself construct the work-world, and thereby learn to construct his own life [6]."

Furthermore, key signifiers sublate the linguistic assumptions of structuralist semiotics. Although they acknowledge the heterogeneity between subjective experience and language, they limit the drift of signifiers. As shown in the textual analysis, Robbe-Grillet's early novels often adopted a networked signifying structure, with signifying chains converging at key signifiers. As a result, the writer subjectively makes limited choices among signifying chains, positioning key signifiers and defining their functions; and these choices serve to organize the novel's structure. In *For A New Novel*, Robbe-Grillet states: "The entire critical consciousness of the novelist serves him only in making choices, not in justifying those choices [7]." In this way, Robbe-Grillet made full use of literature to repair the subject-other relationship and reconcile existentialist humanism and structuralist semiotics.

More importantly, Robbe-Grillet's literary exploration carries broad and profound socio-cultural significance. France experienced rapid economic growth in the 1950s, celebrated as the "French Miracle", yet underlying tensions and problems accumulated and erupted in the May 1968 events. Roland Barthes keenly observed new developments in the 1960s, noting thought-provoking changes in the demonstrations analyzed in *S/Z* [8]. During the protests, most demonstrators held radios to their ears, following coverage of unfolding events. In contrast to earlier street battles, the gesture of listening to the radio seemed to blur the boundaries between people and things: the radio became an extension of human hearing. Reports broadcast simultaneously with the fighting across the barricades exemplified the reification of humans, the perceptualization of objects, and the coincidence of discourse and action--all vividly captured in Barthes's recollection of the May 1968 events.

Against this background, 1960s critiques of humanism represented by the debate between structuralism and existentialism become understandable. Robbe-Grillet's linguistic exploration was thus deeply motivated: amid the challenges between romantic humanism and scientific structuralist semiotics, he sought his own answer to humanity's predicament. "Now, people face major questions: Does our life have a meaning? What is it? What is man's place on earth [9]?"

5 CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that key signifiers in Robbe-Grillet's early novels serve as a structural and philosophical mechanism through which he reconfigures the subject-other relationship. Through textual analysis of the "mirror", the "centipede remains", and the "circle", this study has demonstrated that these signifiers do not convey fixed meanings; instead, as empty nodes within the connotative system, they dissolve the signified, redirect other signifiers, and thereby generate a fluid yet coherent narrative architecture. On this basis, Robbe-Grillet effectively transcended the limitations of both Sartrean existentialism and structuralist semiotics. Against Sartre's subject-centered humanism, his key signifiers eliminate authorial "signposts", granting readers absolute freedom as meaning-creators and establishing an egalitarian author-reader relationship. Against structuralism's infinite semiotic drift, the networked convergence of signifying chains at key signifiers produces a productive tension between openness and systematicity. Thus, Robbe-Grillet neither privileges the subject nor dissolves meaning into pure contingency; he affirms the equality and pluralism of the subject and the other through formal innovation. In repairing the philosophical rift between the subject and the other, his literary practice responds profoundly to the crisis of humanism in post-war France and attests to the enduring significance of the French *nouveau roman*.

COMPETING INTERESTS

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