

Film Theme Expression: Dual Variations of Narrative Structure and Editing Techniques

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Abstract. Nowadays, film narratives and editing techniques are diverse, with each director having their own stylistic preferences. So, how exactly do these techniques contribute to conveying the themes of a film? This paper aims to analyze Cao Baoping's films "The Dead End" and "Cock and Bull", exploring the narrative structures, editing styles, and other audiovisual techniques in his works, as well as how their innovative breakthroughs enhance thematic expression. Through collecting and analyzing relevant literature, the author conducts a comparative study of the two films. By applying film narratology and visual rhetoric theory, this paper interprets their respective uses of causal linear narrative, multi-perspective circular structure, and montage techniques, while exploring the differences between these approaches and their interactive relationships in thematic communication. The final research reveals the crucial role of narrative and editing techniques in enriching cinematic dimensionality. In "The Dead End", the linear causal narrative constructs a sense of inescapable moral dilemma, while flashback montages externalize the characters' psychological trauma; "Cock and Bull" deconstructs truth through multi-perspective collage, while parallel montage intensifies emotional resonance. The study concludes that Cao Baoping's directorial approach strikes a unique balance between commercial viability and artistic expression, providing Chinese-language cinema with exemplary cases where formal innovation serves as a vehicle for cultural discourse. His methodology carries significant implications for subsequent filmmaking practices.

Keywords: Film narrative techniques, Cao Baoping, cinematic aesthetics, montage techniques

1. Introduction

The structure itself in the system of crime story told by Cao Baoping is used as a metaphor of theme. The Dead End and Cock and Bull are using diametrically opposite narrative structures to question the depth of human nature and the meaninglessness of destiny. The narrative modularity trend has cut across the mainstream international cinemas [1]. The fact that the achronological narrative forms are becoming even more popular [1] could be evident to all. This research is dedicated to the innovative achievements in the narration and audiovisual language in the films by director Cao Baoping, The Dead End and Cock and Bull series, that are based on crime-series. This is of great importance to comprehending the creative development of modern Chinese crime movies as well as

to the construction of authorial position, and offers theoretical allusions to the creative practice of the Chinese-language genre cinema. The present study in particular evolves on two main planes the novelty of narrative forms and the ability to express using montage modes. The literature analysis approach used in this paper is the systematic review of the applicable theoretical literature and the discussions of the film. The advantage of this method is that it is effective in terms of analyzing the creative philosophy of the director and the artistic nature of the movie, and thus helps to develop the research in depth; At the same time, integrating the close reading method, this research paper presents shot-by-shot analysis of the crucial scenes to analyze the synergistic effects of the approach to narrative and the visual means of expression. The final goal of the research will be to decide about a systematic vision of the aesthetics of crime films by Cao Baoping and the intensive influence of his innovative films. In order to reach this objective, the analysis as a multidimensional one consists of deconstruction of narrative models, analysis of montage effects, and explanation of the connotational meanings.

2. The Dead End

As one of the landmark events in the filmography of the director Cao Baoping, the film *The Dead End* (2015), which premiered in the banquet rooms across the country, has defined his classic role as the creator of films of the crime genre production, emphasizing the barbaric level of nerves through his skill for storyline and his scrupulous involvement of the fundamentals of human nature, which perfectly balances the artistic style and commercial success. The movie is not only an extension of what Cao Baoping had already experimented with prior in the production of "The Equation of Love and Death" (2008), but also the precursor to the arresting narrative architecture that would come to typify its future production, namely in the production of "Cock and Bull" (2016). In *The Dead End*, director Cao Baoping penetrates deeper into the depth of the one issue of light and dark sides of human nature, in the essence of crime and punishment. The film is based on the Xilong family massacre by the novelist, Xu Yiguang and it begins with a narrator giving an account of the story of the 7-year old family massacre of the Xilong family and the lives of the three perpetrators, Xin Xiaofeng, Yang Zidao, and Chen Bijue. Plagued by the fact that the three lead characters have been committing the same crime seven years ago, they live to suffer in consequence, having an orphaned girl named Tail constantly. Their self-destructive work ethics and hooliganlike mannerisms are atonement in sick behavior. A closer look of the three has an eerie veil by the shrewd new police captain Yi Guchun. One incident after another culminates in his heightening suspicions of Xin and Yang who now behave erratically. The reality eventually leads to a fruitful discovery by Yi who finds out that the landlord has been taping the conversation between Xin and Yang. The eye opener in the story is the execution of Xin and Yang, and Chen prefers ending his life by throwing himself into the sea. When the viewer thinks that justice has been done, the arrest of the real murderer reveals fatal facts: Xin, Yang and Chen had been unfairly punished because of their involvement in a crime that was stronger than the real crime. It is a stunning twist to the story.

The movie engulfs viewers into its carefully developed plot, hermetically sealed reason and interesting imagery that is an art form in building psychological tensions. This is essentially due to the director operating like a surgeon in ensuring a smooth conduction of narrative. *The Dead End* is constructed in a strict cause-effect linear form [2]. This structure of monolithic narrative has a conclusive role in the narration of crime films [3]. It guarantees the airtight logical coherence that matches expectations of the audience toward cause-effect relationships and effectively risks plot disorientation. Cao Baoming has skillfully applied monolithic narrative structure and cause-effect

linear structure using central plot sequences in the Dead End, which will be considered in further analysis.

2.1. Usage of monolithic narrative

According to Eugene Vale, continued focus on the monolithic evolution of images causes staleness and weariness, and the viewer is glad to have such narrative features that will occasionally shift the mind. Classical monolithic narrative films describe the stories chronologically, but with a plan to sprinkle with the exotic elements (so-called turns) and confrontation. This method at once teaches the viewers to quickly grasp storylines and to introduce foreshadowing and all of this through an omniscient lens that guarantees narrative involvement and avoids the monotony that is easy to find in the cinema [3]. But being monolithic does not mean being monotonous. A film planning plays the central plotlines in its distinctive narration with secondary subplots. Both narrative levels are character-focused where they play central roles in the communication of themes and dimensionality of characters [3]. As an example of this, consider *The Dead End*: the family massacre that is presented at the very beginning of the movie is used as the catalytic crime that structure-wise binds all the future events of the plot. Then the plot proceeds chronologically, and splits into two main subplots: The core game of cat and mouse between Xin Xiaofeng and Yi Guchun, similar subplots of the second love of Yang Zidao to Yi Guxia, and the love story between Chen Bijue and Tail [4]. These three narrative threads all revolve around the massacre case, and in the same breath, they emphasize the complex interdependencies of the characters, and cause a greater number of conflicts and unexpected twists [4].

First, looking at the main plot of the movie: Yi Guchun and Xin Xiaofeng are in a psychological battle of will over the case of the massacre, all the hints are gradually stacked on this one, the dramatic tension is created. As Yi Guchun, and Xin Xiaofeng head out to locate the goldfish, the two share a seemingly unimportant conversation on the murder case of seven years prior to the reservoir, which causes Xin to become so distracted that he can almost run over a stray dog on the highway. In addition to such deviant peripeteia, there is a deeper reflection of deliberate repetition of key facts: The highly extreme shots of Xin Xiaofeng pouring cigarette butts with his bare hands - direct physical reflection of the critical hint of Yi with regard to the government of the fingerprint of the murderer. This visual eye opener makes the viewers make a chilling come-to-see: the reasoning behind the compulsive behavior of Xin is the attempt to destroy the fingerprints the first step to avoid forensic insight into the truth. In monolithic narrative film, the tactical repetition of this aberrant event (i.e., how Xin had to continuously remove fingerprints by dropping cigarettes on them) offers the audiences a factual explanation system. This narrative system is what makes the creation and the denouement of enigmas logically consistent, to avoid mental disconnection by manifesting causality [3]. It is the turning point of the story when Yi finds out that Xin, Yang, and Chen are brothers. His master informing how the victim had a child who was seven-year-old, and this fact is painfully appropriate in the case of the trio, who adopted a daughter called Tail. The movie moves forward with carefully confined-step revelations and confrontations, with the central storyline being impeccably chronologically clear. After adhering to the investigative pattern of the pursuit-suspicion-resolution, the final application of lethal injection on Xin Xiaofeng would be the unavoidable resolution of this narrative logic pattern. In this way, the character-based main focus plot is able to gain a smooth dramatic closure, which offers closed effects of dramatic framework, but the already closed structure is understandable and upsets logical rationality.

At the same time, the secondary subplots carry out more detailed characterization of character in relation to the main catalytic event in such a way that it gives the roles a verisimilitude and a three

dimensional projection and bends thematic issues through the multiple prisms of a narrative. The tragic romance between Yang Zidao and Yi Guxia is a cinematic expression of the internal conflict of Yang, and it is also a representation of the presence of altruism in the trio, which creates contrasting chiaroscuro of human soul where guilt and remorse of criminals are the only prism of human nature. This is the highest expression of the non-simplistic monolithic narrative: The subplots do not take the narrative dominance, but enhance character verisimilitude to the extent that leads the viewers towards existential reflection on the inherent paradoxes of humanity in these two aspects: the inaccessibility of redemption in the midst of irreducible moral complexity [3].

2.2. Application of cause-effects sequential design

The cause-effect linear structure is central in the labyrinth of narration of the Dead End. It drives the plot with carefully designed causal relationships following a classic, linear sequence of exposition - rising action - climax - falling action - denouement [2]. The causes-and-effects phenomenon act as the chain of causality in this monolithic story, irreversibly joining all the past wrongs of the characters with the current reality in the unarguable story logic.

The movie takes seven years and creates a definite cause-effect sequence of crime-investigation-revelation. Their former sin (original cause) is what compelled the assumed identities and lowly professions (immediate effect) of Xin, Yang, and Chen; But it is the very work moribundity (new cause) of self-endangering that ought to transform into an atonement device (new effect), and whose behavioral deviations is what prompts Yi to make his detective discovery, which would later lead to a justice reckoning (new effect).

This chain of events interlocked continues to follow, as a result of which each of the effects in sequence is adapted into an immaculate cause, which continually arranges the emotional oscillation of the audience [2]. As an example, the cigarette-putting out gesture of Xin Xiaofeng: the reason behind this obsessive-compulsive action is that his fingers were deposited by the scene of the crime seven years earlier (cause), thus the obsessive attempts to eradicate (effect). As Yi observes this pathological recurrence twice, the habitual way of behavior becomes crystallized into forensic confirmation (ultimate effect). Every detail in place becomes a part of the chain of the clue-foreshadowing-revelation cause, which definitely meets the essence of narrative tautness, which the real purpose of the audience seeks to satisfying in crime film.

The whole movie works out a general plot line between the family massacre (cause) and the ultimate judgment of the trio (appearance) which was absolutely symmetrical like bookend, according to the cognitive anticipation of the audience. Each of the subplots having developed indefinitely increases the logic of crime-atonement-judgment. "

The literary style of The Dead End creates a unique form of a likeness of fatalistic realism by flawlessly glorifying the use of a monolithic narrative and cause-effect linear narrative. The sense of logic within the movie (crime-atonement-judgment) drives the storytelling process in the sense that each choice of the character at the same time represents the effect of the events that happened before and the cause of what will happen afterwards. This circular sequence makes linear narration a helix of personalization of substance. This trick of nesting narrative 3 allows the curbing of the crime genre plausibility at the forensic level and at the same time, a transcendent artistry is achieved: impeccable synthesis of the form and content, when the causal closure of narrative structure is the ultimate metaphor of the existential dilemma of humanity: everyone is caught in his/her own web of causality, and his/her struggle fights against the confinement.

3. Cock and Bull

The aesthetics of the black comedy and harsh reality are clearly explained in another masterpiece of Cao Baoping in the crime genre: "Cock and Bull" (2016). In case *The Dead End* encapsulates human complexity by use of causally nested monolithic narration, then *Cock and Bull* dismantles and transforms the crime story through its multi-perspective non-linear narrative and interplay of limited omniscience. In so doing, this part of the paper will discuss the unique narrative structure and the tactics used in *Cock and Bull*, and how effective they are in conveying the theme.

The movie is presented as a strange murder with three parallel plots in the form of the personal account of Song Laoer (car mechanic), Wang Youquan (petty criminal), and Dong Xiaofeng (hitman). The story starts with the murder of Mao Ge and Song is the main suspect. His amateur investigation of the case leads to the case of Wang, who stole the motorcycle of the victim of the crime to clear his name. The appearance of the photograph of Song, which was a part of the white suit jacket of a motorcycle, shows that Mao was only a scapegoat; in fact, the killer wanted Song himself in the direct line of fire. The movie then reverses to the worldview of the hitman Dong Xiaofeng and to reveal the mystery to the audience: it was the case of mistaken identity of this incompetent assassin which led to the whole chain of events which seem absurd to the viewers. A great combination of multidimensionality and main themes of the story, *Cock and Bull* is a golden prototype of how Chinese black comedy can perfectly blend with revolutionary narrative genres and paradigms. The movie breaks traditions of crime genre structures and creates new multi-perspective circular plot of the film with building a blackly comic allegory with absurdity and brutality tied together. This is because its trio of chapters give the feeling of a loop where the same events were recounted as many times as possible but with various focuses and the participants of the story actively switching between omniscient and limited perspectives so as to create a palpable element of suspense [2]. At the same time, the tonalities of black comedy flash out the gravitas of the genre, triggering a deep reflection in the viewer. This movie is an act of bold formal experimentation on the part of Cao Baoping; where repetition of the narrative is not dulled by repetition of scenes, but the revelations created by the strategic placement of clues that finally lead to the climactic breakthroughs of epiphanies. This cinematic experiment attained with success obtains a supreme balance between artistic experimentation and spectatorship. The analysis that follows will break down the non-linear circular structure of *Cock and Bull* using the concept of its omniscient + limited multi-perspective approach, explaining why polyphonic repetitive narration forms its unique appeal. In non-linear story-telling, the chronological timeline is willfully broken at unidimensional resolution. The restructuring of the temporal patterns to display subjective psychological reasoning, these movies deliberately degrade the narrative integrity of the plots establishing polyphonic volumes [5]. Although *Cock and Bull* is a logic-dependent crime setup, this aspect is intentionally weakened by the non-linear style of the movie. In this case, the circular layered form prevails using various narrative strands as well as the recursive temporality to help the audiences to assemble the epistemic puzzle [2]. Such paradigm of narrative recounts the same occurrence, but with different orientations when chronically tracking the similar actions of the characters. The clues that occur within the information demand synthesis among the audience to reach a reconstruction of the entire logical chain. The use of the loop-biased layered structure is mostly the tool of *Cock and Bull*, disclosing the actions and the vision of Song Laoer, Wang Youquan, and Dong Xiaofeng towards the main incident [2]. At the same time it capitalizes on polyphonic repetitive narration, absurdistic situations and a satirical sense of humour to capitalize on the interest of the audience in uncovering the mystery [6].

3.1. Plot analysis

The movie relies on the investigative outlook of Song Laoer to create a false history. Guiding the viewers on his search of the truth, they cannot help, but correlate the death of Mao Ge and the escape of Wang Youquan. However several exceptions make themselves felt: two pillars of stone that fall trailing after Song see no one; he is almost crushed to death by a falling plummeted stone pillar--all this a warning of grim plans. The first act willingly introduces two seeds in the story without including essential information: it is not yet clear who the killer was targeting, what the scene of the crime looked like, so there is a deliberate disorientation it achieves. This kind of restricted thinking places the cognition of the audience into the vision of only one character, which greatly inhibits the ability to understand the holistically as much as possible to obtain the suspense that is carefully measured as it would be the case within the genre of crime [7].

Disruptive narrative reversal of the film is provided by the introduction of the hitman Dong Xiaofeng. The viewers slowly rebuild the truth by his path Dong, who is hired to kill Song Laoer, mistakenly kills Mao Ge because of false recognition. His stolen suit left behind on the motorcycle subsequently becomes the forensic bread and Roses that allow identification to be done on his identity to Song. The analepsis and recapping storyline of this part completely reveal the scene of the crime and the integration of all hints and foreshadowing into a sensible logical process that leads to epiphany in the audience. This is where, the movie shifts to an omniscient viewpoint in which the narrator will be omniscient, or know-it-all [7]. Therefore, the combination of constrained and omniscient perspectives entails herein a complementary interpretation of cinema that is enriching, which adds a dimensionality to the narrative [7].

3.2. Narrative deconstruction

At the very beginning, Cock and Bull is made to have deliberate narrative obfuscation by the looping weight of its narrative structure. The multi-story-telling (non-linear) technique employed by Cao Baoping in five chapters is the use of the strategies of clue-planting and implementation of hyperlinks (patiotemporal). The five perspectival modules of the film start off divergent, as the initial three major segments of the film stick to the character-focused view until their late-stage convergence when viewers finally get to make sense of the causal mosaic [8]. A number of seemingly isolated stories mix to enhance the appeal of this Chinese black comedy. Thematic juxtaposition and polyphonic narration reveal to the viewers through the movie how insatiable human material lust and the sardonic irony of destiny on the weakest of moral character can be.

4. Discussion

4.1. Comparative analysis

The Dead End uses linearity of cause-effect and monolithic narrative to illustrate an unavoidable moral actions confrontation. The self-redit of the protagonists is the ironic continuation of their criminality as it turns out that humanity has a one-sided morality where, in fact, salvation can be an alternative punishment. Such a plot structure ensures smooth development of the plot, vivid character crystallization, and inexorable causal closure which increases existential inevitability. The film interrogates

- 1.The Legal Rudder of the Judicial Complicity: Xin is personally surrendering in order to face capital punishment, the inability of the law to act on the actions of people and powerlessness against

spiritual wickedness supports the ineffectiveness of the law systems.

2. The Parenthood Paradox: Raising Tail acts as a framing attempt and not unconditional love.

These stratified ethical questions make the crime thriller a work of spiritual philosophical cogitations [3].

Cock and Bull uses a multi-perspective non-linear storyline to subvert the logic of classic crime films as a black comedy created out of misconception and coincidences. The circular stratified form is used by the director to overcome the restrictions of linear temporality and causal relations of monolithic story-telling, and to creatively implant the complex and infinite social plots established through intertwining realities into cinematic art [3]. The movie shows by the divergent views of Song Laoer, Wang Youquan and Dong Xiaofeng that the truth is relative and depends on the observer. Every character, although trying their best to survive, ends up abused by life, an aspect that reflects the helplessness of discriminated social classes. The story revolves around frenzied unity, aka fractured unity, which is intertwined with five fractured stories and turned this black comedy type of crime chase into a social satire. The film breaks the insurmountable barriers of coherence and perfection creating in the process the expressive frontiers of Chinese crime cinema.

Chapter four point two: Montage: The Language of Editing.

Cao Baoping builds thematic depth in both *The Dead End* and *Cock and Bull* although the narration constructions do not occur in a vacuum but are supported by a surgeries editing technique that only enhances emotional appeal and philosophical appeal. Here the analysis will look at their unique usage of montage:

1) Psychological Montage *The Dead End*.

- Fragmentation of a traumatic memory is externalized by flashbacks.
- Moral tension is enhanced by cross-cutting.

2) Collision Montage in *Cock and Bull*.

- Existential absurdist sees in a jumbled up time editing.
- Photoperspective cuts dismantle objective reality.

Cinema Montage which started as a kind of architectural idea, has changed the visual language of cinema radically. The said editing method both increases the dimensionality of a film and its rhythmic accuracy and intentionally creates interpretative space to the viewers [10]. Being a creative process, which coordinates the interaction of visual images, sounds, and music themes [9], it solidifies the directorial vision and triggers the pluralistic development of cinema [10]. The following discussion will de-cipher the unique techniques of montage used in the *Dead End* and *Cock and Bull*.

The flashback montage uses sudden and short visual insertions to externalize the mental states of characters [10]. *The Dead End* makes use of this trick successfully: When Yi says about the historic massacre in the car when they go to get goldfish, it makes Xin have a visceral response his near-car crash with a stray dog reveals his deep-seated sense of guilt. His obsessive habit of putting out the cigarette (as he does again and again in the presence of Yi) in the following panic is the behavioral marker that obliterates the assertion of doubt. It is interrupted by the frame which suddenly switches to two eye-opening flashbacks, the pendant (which is the only piece of evidence of a fingerprint of the crime scene seven years before) and the first sight of Xin by Yi of her cigarette-putting out habit. Cognitive process shown through these juxtaposed images puts indirectly the relationship between Yi and evidence dots that he is relating. At the same time, the tension of the audience is released with the rhetoric of crime investigation by Yi contrasting with quick cuts of the background life of the victim family and snippets of the cruel assault on the girl. This triple-layered montage work turns their car conversation into a chilling case-file addition and the micro-expressions of the actors

increase visceral fear. When Yi secretly enters the apartment where he has rented in the climactic sequence of the movie, where he finds the surveillance recorded by the landlord, the bombardment of flashbacks starts. The frame swings madly between the dawning awareness on Yi, incriminating dialogue of Xin/Yang, manic antics of Chen and painstaking notes of the landlord. This 60 seconds bombardment montage has been utilized to produce two effects:

- 1) Cognitive: Squeezes the investigative revelation of Yi.
- 2) Visceral: Reflects the audience shock by being disjointed with cuts [10].

The rhythmical disruption of the technique facilitates the stress of significant action and forensic facts. In *The Dead End*, this editing does not just present the crime but a viewer can even feel the burning mass of guilt, the soul burning.

Cross- montage is a form of parallel montage. Frame to frame transitions can also be done in soft transitions, implying that when a single image is gradually fading away, another image will be displayed [11]. This is a cross-cutting montage effect, which connects events in different locations that occur simultaneously at the same time, and creates a complex web of storylines that increases the degree of dramatic tension. In the climax scene of *The Dead End* when Xin admits that he does it and he wants Yang to turn himself in the never-ending back and forth switching of the point of view between Yi Guchun and Yang Zidao creates a powerful visual effect [9].

Parallel montage is applied in the filmmaking process to enhance narrative structure beyond time and space. *The Dead End* constantly juxtaposes the warming scenes of the three people tending to Tail with their penitentiary activities of the massacre the seven years ago. The juxtaposition reveals their contradictory humanity, who are both loving and guilty and makes them even more dialectic of the main idea of the film, the sin vs. redemption [9]. The ethical dubiousness propels the audience to struggle with the doubt of forgiveness; *Cock and Bull* is a protracted parallel montage experiment, and every character point starts piecing together bits of the truth, but sequentially. The effect of this new method is to increase a sense of suspense generated by departing with perspectival fragmentation and creating a Polydimensional Storyworld that requires the audience to actively reassemble [9].

5. Conclusion

This paper has indicated that the two movies share common characteristics such as the ability to use different storytelling methods to make an important contribution to cinematic expressiveness. *The Dead End* is in the efficient spirally progressive causal form, which is attained by the closely-knit linear narration. *Cock and Bull* makes a skilled use of the suspenseful nonlinear plot, throwing viewers down the rabbit hole of confined and omniscient point of view to enjoy the excitement of a criminal investigation story. In the meantime, even the creative montage technique allows the viewer ample room to their imaginations and invites them further into the narrative structure to fully enjoy the cinematic spectacle, which is to say, the viewers are invited to unravel the mystery together with the characters. Therefore, another conclusion of the research is that the unique and creative narrative technique of Cao Baoping adds more layers and thickness to his movies. Linear narration and cause-effect reasoning further add weight to the depictions of the moral quandary whereas the visual multi-visionary circular form creates a remarkably engaging mind-through research to the participants. The montage editing language broadens the artistic narrative of the film, creating a psychological tension, enhancing the narrative suspense, and causing an unbelievable response in the souls of viewers. The two groundbreaking innovations made by Cao Baoping in the narrative structure and montage techniques are more appropriate to deliver the main ideas of his own films and humanize their thought-provoking. These two brilliant pieces of work do not just offer methodological

directions of the genre of crime, but also high standards of nonconformist language of film. They have great reference value to future studies on the nature of synergic influences of montage and narrative architecture. The 2023 movie *She Is Gone* also uses the device of multi-perspective narration, which is also a definite nod to the narrative paradigm of Cao Baoping, which only proves that his innovative style is now the new benchmark of crime thrillers made in China. An innovation of the genre is supposed to involve innovation of the narrative and editing techniques and more profound cultural expression. The next phase of research needs to investigate more deeply the new opportunities of such creative approach - not only to bring together the appeal to commerce and artistic perspective but also to see its role in the development of the film world in China in the digital age and what it could imply to the organization of its structure.

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