

Absurdity and Reality: The Black Humor Narration and Social Criticism in the Film "Let the Bullets Fly"

Sichen Li

*Beijing 101 Middle School, Beijing, China
lisichen0219@gmail.com*

Abstract. "Let the Bullets Fly" (2010) is a classic Chinese-language film directed by Jiang Wen. The film encapsulates profound social metaphors within an absurdist comedy format, exploring its narrative structure, symbolic metaphors, and social criticism. This paper primarily analyzes Zhang Muzhi as an atypical hero figure who embodies both chivalrous and bandit-like qualities, discussing his connections to traditional chivalrous spirit and revolutionary narratives. By decoding the director's narrative strategies through plot, dialogue, and camera language, this paper analyzes the metaphors of "bullets," "horses pulling trains," and other imagery. "Let the Bullets Fly" constructs a fable field of power struggle through highly symbolic narration. The film employs black humor to reflect the closed nature of the "Goose City" space, the capitalist violence symbols of "money" and "guns," as well as the mirror-image confrontation between "Zhang Mazi" and "Huang Silang." The study finds that the film deconstructs traditional revolutionary narratives through absurd plots, revealing the inevitability of the cycle of violence in power transitions, while the passivity of the masses as the "silent majority" reflects the dilemma of public subjectivity in China's modernization process. This study provides a new perspective for understanding how films define social power relations.

Keywords: Collective unconscious, power alienation, visual symbol, hybrid genre, narrative delay

1. Introduction

Directed by Jiang Wen, "Let the Bullets Fly" (2010) stands as a highly interpretable text in the history of Chinese cinema, renowned for its absurd narrative, sharp dialogue, and intricate metaphors. Ostensibly, the film depicts the wits and bravery of bandit Zhang Muzhi and bully Huang Silang, but in reality, it reveals the structural alienation of human nature under the game of power through the micro-social model of Goose Town. Beneath the shell of revolutionary narrative, the film directly addresses the eternal proposition of human nature: when individuals are placed in the vortex of power, money, and collective unconsciousness, how are their moral choices distorted, and how do they manifest their fragility or brilliance in resistance?

This article attempts to analyze the three dimensions of human nature structure in "Let the Bullets Fly" through the lens of psychoanalytic theory: the corrosive symbiosis of power (the collusion between the ruler and the ruled), the symbolic cycle of desire (the substitution of "money" and "gun"

as signifiers of desire), and the deconstructive dilemma of revolutionary narratives (the disillusionment of Zhang Mazi's ideal of "fairness"). By deconstructing the character relationships in the film (such as the "superego-id-ego" triangle represented by Zhang Mazi, Huang Silang, and Tang Shiye), this article further explores the irrational unfolding of human nature in extreme environments - whether it is the survival philosophy of "earning money on one's knees" or the tragic resistance of "dying standing up," both are ultimately engulfed by the gears of structural violence.

The profoundness of "Let the Bullets Fly" lies in the fact that it does not provide an answer to human redemption, but instead uses black humor to tear open the universal wounds of modern society: when "fairness" becomes a mere slogan and violence becomes the norm, the truth of human nature may be just like the collective silence of the people in Goose Town - under the strangling grip of power and desire, we are all "geniuses at pretending to be ignorant".

2. Literature review

2.1. The shaping of heroic image

This section will explore the portrayal of heroic images in the film "Let the Bullets Fly" and its exploration of human nature. Wu Hao analyzed the absurdity and reality in "Let the Bullets Fly" from the perspective of Lu Xun's context, pointing out that "the film's portrayal of the people in Goose Town inherits Lu Xun's criticism of the national character, and coincides with the 'playing', 'concealing', and 'cheating' characteristics revealed by Lu Xun in the national character [1]." "Zhang Mazi, who earns money standing up, cannot change the people who steal to survive on their knees [2]." In addition, Zhang Yaoyan studied the construction of human subjectivity in the narrative of the film adaptation of the novel "The Story of a Thief Official", and "found that the film's setting of character death and the specific plot settings that call for civic spirit and guide the people to rise up and resist strengthen spiritual criticism, profoundly reflecting the director's subjective concern in thinking [3]." Ran Zhuang analyzed the subversive and deconstructive nature of heroic images in the film from the perspective of postmodernism and power concepts, pointing out that the image of Zhang Ziqi not only avoids the erasure of heroic humanity in traditional grand narratives, but also grounds the characters, bringing them closer to the masses [4]. Wang Xingyi pointed out in his metaphor of power and identity that "the substitution of Huang Silang and the impersonation of Ma Bangde in power struggles eliminate the nobility of traditional heroes [5]." In summary, the portrayal of heroic images in the film "Let the Bullets Fly" not only reflects a profound exploration of human nature but also reflects the director's deconstruction and reconstruction of traditional heroic narratives.

2.2. The contradictory nature of public reactions

This section will explore the contradictory reactions of the public in the film "Let the Bullets Fly", revealing the underlying social psychology and cultural phenomena. Wu Hao, starting from the context of Lu Xun, analyzes the "spectator" character of the public in the film, pointing out that this character leads to the tragedy of Liu Zi and emphasizing its cautionary significance for today [1]. Furthermore, Zhang Yaoyan studies the film's criticism of weak human nature and its call for change, arguing that by increasing the setting of character deaths and the plot calling for human nature, the film strengthens spiritual criticism, revealing a humanistic sentiment based on human subjectivity [3]. Fu Shouxiang et al. further explore the change in the public's attitude towards Zhang Jiazi in the film, believing that this change reflects the dual nature of the public, namely

cowardice in the face of power and ferocity in victory [6]. In summary, the depiction of the contradictory reactions of the public in the film "Let the Bullets Fly" deeply reveals social psychology and cultural phenomena, providing a new perspective for us to understand human nature.

2.3. Interpretation of human nature from the perspective of postmodernism

2.3.1. The combination of absurdity and reality

This section will explore how the combination of absurdity and reality in the film "Gone with the Bullets" "constructs a Lu Xun-style context through unique film symbols, from analyzing nationality to metaphorizing life, to political satire and expression of ideals, conveying a kind of Lu Xun spirit through light and shadow" [7]. "Jiang Wen's films are tears with laughter, like Lu Xun's satire - wrapping reality in absurdity." [1]. "The horse-drawn train is a critique of modernity, with the combination of steam train and horse implying the chaos and incompleteness of social transformation." [8]. "The fence-sitting attitude of the people in Goose Town, who side with whomever wins, implicitly criticizes the predicament of enlightenment among the masses [9]." Yan Yifan further explored the form of absurd humor in the film, believing that it contains profound questioning of morality and humanity [10]. In summary, the film "Gone with the Bullets" not only demonstrates criticism of nationality but also metaphorizes life, expresses the ideal of pursuing social "fairness," and contains profound reflection. "Jiang Wen tells a story that everyone can understand, but the film is full of hidden metaphors, infinitely expanding the audience's imagination [11]."

2.3.2. Narrative strategy and human nature expression

This section will explore how the narrative strategies in the film "Let the Bullets Fly" reveal and manifest human issues. Zhang Yaoyan analyzed the process of adapting the novel "The Thief of the Bandit" into the film "Let the Bullets Fly" from the perspective of narratology, pointing out that "director Jiang Wen emphasized spiritual criticism and paid attention to the construction of human subjectivity in the adaptation process. By adding specific plots that depict the death of characters and call for civic responsibility, he profoundly reflected the weaknesses and mental states of human nature [3]." Furthermore, He Mengxia analyzed the narrative strategies of the film "Let the Bullets Fly", arguing that "the film, through its unique personal narrative style, not only dissects the structure and character relationships of the entire movie but also reflects Jiang Wen's unique cultural criticism, especially through the complexity of character relationships and the interweaving of narrative clues, unveiling the multifaceted nature of human nature [12]." Yang Yuzhi discussed the narrative perspective and camera language of "Let the Bullets Fly", pointing out that "the omniscient perspective and the 'other' narrative mode enable the film to fully reveal the inner emotions and psychological activities of characters. Through the close-up narrative of camera language, it further enriches the representation of human nature." [13]. In summary, the film "Let the Bullets Fly" deeply explores and manifests the complexity and diversity of human nature through various narrative strategies, providing viewers with a rich space.

2.4. Aesthetics of violence and reflection on human nature in movies

This section will explore how the violent elements in the audiovisual language of the film "Let the Bullets Fly" are cleverly utilized by director Jiang Wen to achieve a unique artistic effect. Qin Chen

analyzed the aesthetic style of violence in the film "Let the Bullets Fly" as "ubiquitous, formed through exaggerated actor performances, violent narrative modes, absurd storylines, humorous event twists, vivid dialogue, appropriate scene choreography, rich camera language, and vivid character images, creating a unique style of violence aesthetics.". In summary, the violent elements in the film "Let the Bullets Fly" not only have visual impact but also convey the director's profound reflections on human nature and society through absurdity and humor.

3. Case analysis

Jiang Wen's "Let the Bullets Fly" encapsulates a profound experimentation field of human nature within an absurd narrative shell. In the miniature society of Goose Town, which is alienated by power, the complex spectrum of human nature oscillates violently amidst the oppression of authority, the temptation of interests, and the struggle for awakening. Through meticulously constructed power structures, character interactions, and symbolic scenes, the film interrogates human nature in extreme situations, presenting a morally charged landscape full of tension.

3.1. Alienation of power: the distorted humanity under Huang Silang and the "Goose City Law"

Huang Silang is undoubtedly a representative of the alienation of human nature by power. His declaration, "Goose City is my land, I am the law," starkly reveals how power becomes an absolute will. He utilizes wealth, force, and rules (such as the "jelly case" manipulated by Hu Wan) to construct an oppressive system. Under this system, individual dignity is completely deprived - the tragic incident where Liu Zi, in order to prove his innocence, resorted to laparotomy to extract jelly powder, is precisely the ruthless crushing of individual life value by the logic of power. The extravagance of Huang Silang's mansion stands in stark contrast to the numbness of the common people, symbolizing the vast gap between the top of power and the bottom: power has corrupted Huang Silang and distorted the entire ecosystem of Goose City, making the common people learn to "earn money on their knees" in fear and give up the right to resist in numbness.

3.2. The abyss of greed: the moral collapse of advisors, common people, and survival dilemmas

If Huang Silang represents the active corrosion of power on human nature, then Tang Shiye and the people of Goose Town demonstrate how human nature can passively slide into the abyss of greed and hypocrisy under the pressure of survival. Tang Shiye's philosophy of "playing dumb" is the essence of his survival strategy - "making money, business, nothing to be ashamed of". He is adept at socializing and mercenary, symbolizing the complete blurring of moral standards in troubled times. His fate (dying in an explosion of a chair piled with silver) is a bitter irony of his lifelong pursuit: greed itself becomes the fuse of destruction.

The people of Echeng reflect collective moral collapse. They remain silent under Huang Silang's tyranny, yet flock to Zhang Mazi when he distributes money. This profoundly reveals the contradictory mentality of the lower-class people, who are caught between fear and greed. They long for fairness but are unwilling to bear the risks of striving for it; they abhor oppression but are easily bought off by short-term benefits. Zhang Mazi's phrase "whoever wins, they will help" fully exposes the utilitarian nature of human nature, which is to seek benefits and avoid harm. When the revolution requires sacrifices, they retreat; when the fruits of victory are within reach, they rush forward.

3.3. The glimmer of awakening: Zhang Mazi's idealistic dilemma and the paradox of human redemption

Zhang Mazi is a symbol of idealism and simplicity in the film. His declaration of "making money standing up" is a direct challenge to the twisted rules of Goose City. He pursues "fairness" and the dignity of "not kneeling", and his revolutionary motivation transcends personal self-interest, shining with the precious light of justice in human nature. However, the profound aspect of the film lies in the fact that it does not portray Zhang Mazi as a perfect savior, but rather deeply reveals the idealistic dilemmas he faces:

He spent all his money and distributed weapons, trying to awaken the public's consciousness of resistance. However, the response from the people was apathy and indifference. The awakening achieved at the enormous cost of the deaths of Liu Zi, his wife, and his adviser was extremely limited. To confront the extreme evil, he had to resort to schemes and even violence (faking a robbery by bandits and creating chaos). This itself fell into a moral dilemma: does using evil to counter evil taint the purity of the goal? At the end of the film, although Huang Silang fell from power, the people cheered and rushed to the watchtower to seize property. The "chair" symbolizing material desires was being scrambled for, and Lao San rode the "horse-drawn train" towards Pudong (the new playground of fame and fortune). Zhang Mazi's lonely figure riding alone on his horse announced the temporary defeat of his idealism - it is easy to overthrow a specific Huang Silang, but it is extremely difficult to eradicate the universal greed and servility in human nature. He ignited the spark but failed to completely illuminate the darkness deep within the humanity of Goose Town.

4. Discussion

The opening spectacle is both a parody of historical progression and a metaphor for how human desires drive society forward (or drive it mad). The conclusion, where the Lao San characters board the same train bound for a new "Shanghai," suggests that the cycle of power structures and human greed has not ended. This enclosed stage is a carefully designed laboratory of human nature by Director Jiang Wen. By placing diverse individuals in extreme situations (such as oppressive regimes, temptation of interests, and revolutionary storms), and observing their reactions, he reveals the universal fears, greed, numbness, speculation, and the indelible desire for dignity and fairness that exist in human nature.

"Let the Bullets Fly" does not provide a simple answer to the question of human nature's good and evil but rather constructs a complex and multifaceted prism. It grimly demonstrates how power alienates humanity, how greed spreads under the pressure of survival, and how difficult it is for a group to awaken; at the same time, it does not extinguish the flame of hope - Zhang Mazi's lonely figure symbolizes the unrelenting pursuit of fairness and dignity, and this pursuit itself is a testament to the brilliance of humanity. The open-ended loop at the end of the film (the three brothers heading towards a new "Shanghai") indicates that the struggle between humanity and power, desire and awakening is far from over. Director Jiang Wen, with his sharp imagery and profound speculation, allows the story of Goose Town to transcend time and space, becoming a mirror reflecting the eternal dilemma of humanity. When Zhang Mazi rides his horse towards the unknown distance, what he leaves behind is not only the ruins of Goose Town, but also an eternal question for every viewer's soul: "To stand or to kneel?".

5. Conclusion

"Let the Bullets Fly" achieves a triple deconstruction of the deepening of revolution, the chivalrous tradition, and the national character through black humor and metaphorical symbols. Jiang Wen uses the metaphor of "bullets" to both satirize the delay of change ("Let the bullets fly for a while") and expose the fragility of idealism in power games. The narrative tension and symbol density of the film make it an excellent work that combines commerciality and authorship, providing a unique research sample for social criticism in Chinese-language films. The commercial success of the film has reshaped Chinese directors' confidence in the marketization of "author films". Looking ahead, there is potential for deepening theoretical directions and tapping into existing markets.

References

- [1] Fu, S. (2020). On the influential narration of the film *Let the Bullets Fly*. *Journal of Xinjiang Arts Institute*, (3), 100–106.
- [2] He, M. (2016). An analysis of the narrative strategy in the film *Let the Bullets Fly*. *Knowledge Window (Teacher's Edition)*, (1), 74–75.
- [3] Li, C. (2016). An interpretation of the narrative strategy in the film *Let the Bullets Fly*. *Journal of Heihe University*, (6), 138–139.
- [4] Li, C. (2017). An analysis of Jiang Wen's narrative style in his films: Taking *Let the Bullets Fly* as an example. *Writing and Editing*, (3), 151–152.
- [5] Qin, C. (2016). Violent revolution and narrative carnival under the audition feast: An analysis of the violent aesthetic style in the movie *Let the Bullets Fly*. *Art and Technology*, (10), 127, 154.
- [6] Ran, Z. (2021). On the postmodernist colors and view of power in the film *Let the Bullets Fly*. *Taste·Classic*, (20), 1–17, 48.
- [7] Wang, S. (2019). The tragedy of Chinese-style heroes: A brief analysis of the movie *Let the Bullets Fly*. *Southern Dialects*, (2), 58–63.
- [8] Wang, X. (2020). Chivalry and anti-chivalry: The postmodern hero narrative in *Let the Bullets Fly*. *Modern Communication*, (9), 113–114, 112.
- [9] Wang, Y. (2018). *Let the Bullets Fly*: Jiang Wen-style criticism under the clothes of entertainment. *Drama Home*, (26), 113.
- [10] Wu, H. (2015). The absurdity and truth of *Let the Bullets Fly* in the context of Lu Xun. *Journalism*, (16), 45–48.
- [11] Yan, Y. (2019). Absurdity and reality: An analysis of the film *Let the Bullets Fly*. *New West*, (22), 82–83.
- [12] Yang, Y. (2021). Analysis of narrative perspective and cinematic language in the film *Let the Bullets Fly*. *Western Radio and Television*, (3), 151–153.
- [13] Zhang, Y. (2015). On the construction of human subjectivity in the narration of *Let the Bullets Fly* adapted from *The Story of a Thief*. *Journal of Lanzhou Education College*, (7), 19–20.