

# *Aftersun - An Author's Voice on Screen*

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**Abstract:** *Aftersun* is self-described by director Charlotte Wells as an "emotional autobiography" because it contains her personal traumatic experiences. The film focuses on 31-year-old Sophie, who looks back at home videos, watching and recalling a holiday to Turkey with her father when she was 11 years old. The events of that trip are uneventful, but the grief hidden by her father and the young Sophie's lack of understanding of him, add a subtle but strong emotional dimension to the film. Through personal artistry, the director allows *Aftersun* to reveal her personal emotional leanings to the audience, and the purpose of this paper is to explore how she gives voice to herself in the film. This paper will focus on how the director constructs a unique narrative perspective through the medium of home video, how the emotions and relationships of the characters are enhanced or implied through the frame of the camera, and how these designs contribute to the emotional presentation of the film. On this basis, this paper will explore what personal emotions she buried in *Aftersun* in the context of one of the director's short works.

**Keywords:** *Aftersun*, director's voice, narrative point of view, camera frame

## 1. Introduction

Filmmaking is a lengthy process of decision-making. On the one hand, films are commercial and thus require consideration of budgets, distribution, and marketing; on the other hand, film is a hybrid art that combines various artistic elements to produce [1]. Filmmakers add their own creative designs to make them highly audio-visually appealing to the audience. The filmmaker, all the people on the film production team, including but not limited to writers, producers, directors, cinematographers, actors, and composers. In these roles, the director is the one who sets the style of the whole film [2]. The director needs to make the scenes come alive, because if the director can't get all the production elements to work together, then the final presentation is hardly compelling. For example, the scriptwriter and the soundtrack artist both have their own styles, which may not work together or contrast well in the final presentation, so the director needs to be able to control their styles as a whole. The style that is finally style is the director's decision among the countless choices, it could be said that the emergence of style is the voice of the director. Style cannot be fully theorized and analyzed [3]. However, audiences can still find the director's style in some of the designs that break with traditional filmmaking. Furthermore, because these styles are a collection of the director's choices, the audiences are allowed to find the director's personal emotional leanings in the film. *Aftersun* is chosen as an example to describe and analyze the director's voice on screen, because it is an art cinema, where classic narrative patterns and the rules of camera language are often broken, and which

thematically contain the director's personal emotional tendencies. To make the description and analysis clear, this paper will first describe the background of *Aftersun*, then analyze the unique narrative point of view that the director set up in the film, then find out how the director used the camera to highlight the design he wanted in the film, and finally argue how the themes in the film reflect the director's own feelings.

## 2. Background of *Aftersun*

*Aftersun*, which came out in 2022, was the first full-length film that Charlotte Wells wrote and directed. Realist art films tend to have a looser narrative structure, but the protagonists' journeys are often not random [4]. *Aftersun*, a film with a realist bent, also has a similar narrative structure, albeit loosely plotted, with the protagonist's journey being confined to a single trip. Set in the 1990s, the story follows Sophie as she watches footage left behind from her past and remembers what happened when she was 11 years old on holiday in Turkey with her young, single father. Shaky home video footage is interspersed with memories of the past through the adult Sophie, building a bridge between the past and the present. *Aftersun* has a loose narrative structure, the trivial events in the film are uneventful, but there is always a father-daughter bond and a light touch of sadness. This film was chosen for analysis because, on the one hand, it has a unique way of telling a story and using the camera, on the other hand, the theme of the film is a continuation of the theme of the director's first short film and expresses the director's own inner emotions.

## 3. Artistic Design in *Aftersun*

### 3.1. Camera – A Medium to Connect the Past and Present, Reality and Memory

Deviations from the classics are an important way for authors to have a voice in their films [4]. In the work of a director with a strong artistic vision, classic narrative patterns and rules of camera language are often broken, and they will use some designs to make up the film's unique style. Wells mixes the objective record with a subjective point of view to form the film's unique narrative point of view, the camera is the special medium used to achieve this in this film. The blurred home videos are an important narrative thread in *Aftersun*, and also a recurring symbol in the film. The film begins with Sophie filming her own father in her own first-person perspective, before the film stops and becomes blurred. Then, the adult Sophie shows up in a crowded room with flickering lights. Her eyes are closed, and she seems to be in her own world. The home video reappears, gradually becoming clearer from its broken state, like a reconstruction of Sophie's memories: it was her father who said goodbye to her. At the end of the film, the audience learns that the entire plot is based on 31-year-old Sophie's recollection of her own experience on vacation in Turkey with her father 20 years ago, while watching back the footage on camera. It is the objective record that brings up Sophie's personal memories, and in the story that follows, these two ways of remembering the past are intertwined. For example, from 00:50:05 to 00:53:30, the director does not focus the camera on the character, but instead uses a static shot to capture the mirror reflecting the figure, the television screen, and the video playing on the screen. The mirror occupies only a small part of the shot and therefore reflects only part of the characters and the hotel room; its purpose is not spatial dispatch, but to reflect a fragmented recreation of the past and the author's remembrance of that time. The television screen is divided into two images, one of the father and daughter captured by the camera, and one of the father and daughter reflected on the screen. At first, Sophie was playing with her father with the camera, but when she asked him about his 11th birthday, he asked her to turn the camera off. The television set, which had been playing a color video, was left with a black screen reflecting the father and daughter. In the reflection of this black screen, Sophie's father tells of his sad eleventh birthday. The color of the screen changes from colored to black, representing the change in atmosphere and mood between father and daughter, from

pleasant to melancholic. In addition, the video on the television represents the reality of what the already adult daughter saw, i.e., the objective facts recorded by the camera, and when it is switched off, it means that what follows is transformed into the daughter's subjective memory. Just as Sophie said, "I'll just record it in my little mind camera." It is here that the switch between the two narrative points of view is made, in a unique and imperceptible way.

Another shift and mix of objective and subjective is also associated with the camera, which occurs at 01:32:09–01:34:50 of the film. The scene begins with the father filming Sophie leaving; the camera follows her movements and ends with her waving at him and the camera freezing at the moment. Followed by the camera's slow pan to the right to reveal the blue-gray color tone of reality, the camera sweeps across the adult Sophie's room, and the viewer sees Sophie sitting on the sofa with her eyes closed. The video just shown in the film is what she showed on TV. This is like in *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), where the camera freezes and then pulls out until the viewer sees that the editor is cutting the film, thus achieving the transition from film to reality in the film through editing. It is true that modern technology can extend human perception [5]. In addition to allowing people to see things they would not normally see; the film is also an extension of human memory. Then, the camera continues to pan until it reaches a blank corridor, where the father is holding a camera in front of the audience. It seems to correspond to the earlier shot of the father filming his daughter leaving, but it is the imagery of the adult Sophie. Evidence of this was when he turned away and opened the door behind him, and he stepped into a crowded space with flickering lights. It is there that Sophie, as an adult, imagines herself dancing with her young father (01:29:39–01:32:01), and it is also in this space that Sophie's memories and imagination mingle to express. In a surreal way, the emotional resonance she felt with her father when she reached the same age as he did back then. Sophie thinks about things from the past that she didn't fully understand at the time. She does this by remembering and imagining [6]. As a result, the image of Father putting down the camera and entering that space implies that, even though he has left, he lives on in Sophie's heart. A pan shot moves from objectively recorded video to Sophie's real life to Sophie's emotional thoughts about her father. It also connects the camera in the film to the camera in real life. This helps the audience understand the director's intention to emphasize the scene's emotional tone. The memories of childhood are now revealed anew and given a new twist of sorrow and Romance [7].

The above-mentioned narrative point of view is not a continuation and development of Wells' previous works, but it is a recognizable style in this film. Beyond that, Wells places his characters in the frame of the camera, without allowing their actions to constantly advance the plot, but rather allowing their inner selves to be expressed within the frame. Although some shots may not seem to provide valuable information, they create an emotional reality that implicitly conveys the emotions of the characters, and their relationship with each other.

### 3.2. Using the Frame of the Camera to See the Character

Unlike theatre, the camera allows the film director to highlight what is important to the audience [8]. In other words, the directors can choose what to make the audience pay attention to on screen, they can show, hide or reconstruct the information about the story world in the way they want. So, what is shown on screen is what the director thinks is important for the audience to see. These include information that drives the plot forward, as well as shots that seem unrelated to the plot but are deliberately highlighted by the director. The director's voice is often contained in the latter.

The footage of *Aftersun* is based on 31-year-old Sophie's voyeuristic view of the past, and interspersed with the voyeuristic viewpoint of her as an 11-year-old. As a result, there are many shots of Sophie as a child "look," and what she sees is what is in the frame of the camera. The child's looking is often aimless and naive. Thus, on the one hand, this leads to things within the frame of the camera that are not necessarily relevant to the story, and on the other hand, it allows for a kind of

unintentional voyeurism of others. For example, at 00:15:33 - 00:16:04 of the film, Sophie is in the toilet cubicle and sees through the keyhole two women outside discussing sex, the limited view of the camera also shows her lack of understanding of these things. Of all the "look", Sophie spies her father the most, but is never able to look inside her father.

### **3.2.1. The Father's Back - The Side Sophie Can't See**

First of all, it's important to note that the father's back is seen a lot in the film, and the length of time it takes to appear suggests that the director is trying to signal its presence. In 00:07:16–00:10:06 of the film, the first night Sophie and her father check into the tavern, after settling Sophie to sleep, her father stands on the balcony of the room, with his back to the room, smoking, and shaking. The camera is placed in the room, separated from her father on the balcony by a glass door, so the audience can only hear Sophie's breathing and not the sounds made by her father. At the beginning of this long take shot, the camera captures Sophie in the foreground lying in bed, while the father is placed in the corner of the frame, creating a peek-a-boo view, as if Sophie is looking at him. Then, the audience can see the father smoking on the balcony, his body swaying, the meaning of which is not clear, but conveys his complex emotions, both pleasurable and depressing. The peek-a-boo camera only captures the father's back, but not his front, suggesting the emotions the father tries to hide from his daughter. The long-take shot also enhances the rendering of his mood, a slow, lackluster scene.

Another notable shot of the father's back occurs at 01:25:34 - 01:26:34 of the film. Sophie and the islanders celebrate her father's birthday with a pleasant song, and the image dissolves into her father's crying back. The shifting white border to the left of the frame creates another voyeuristic perspective, with the observed father crying with his back to the camera, all the fragments of broken emotions intertwined, yet he still does not show his full-frontal face to the voyeur. The audience is not told exactly what happened to the father, but only through snippets of his conversation with Sophie, that he did not have a happy birthday as a child, that he was a rather debauched man in his youth, and that he divorced his ex-wife, but the full picture is not known. In fact, it reflects 11-year-old Sophie's lack of understanding of her father, and through these voyeuristic shots, the viewer sees Sophie as a sensitive and vulnerable father at a low point in his life, but nonetheless unable to see what this side of him is really like.

### **3.2.2. Frames within Frame - An Unattainable Distance**

In addition to only the back being visible, the barrier between the object of looking and the object of being looked at conveys the inaccessibility of both. In 00:16:38 - 00:17:06 of the film, Sophie watches her father on the phone through the latticed window of a telephone booth. This is a close-up shot of the father, who occupies a large space in the frame as the subject is observed. However, the camera fails to get a direct shot of him, but is instead blocked by the red border and glass of the phone booth. Also, the Point-of-view shot presents the father in an over-the-shoulder low-level shot, so his face is partially obscured by his own shoulder. As a result, although this is a close-up shot of the father, the audiences are not able to enter his inner world, but is placed with Sophie in a position of inaccessibility to him.

In fact, this use of frames within frames to represent the separation of the two is also directly present in the composition of the scene, which makes the direct obscuring of the shot by the frame more convincing. For example, at 00:28:33-00:29:02 of the film, the father is cutting the bandage on his arm in the toilet to the right of the camera, while Sophie is sitting on the bedroom sofa to the left of the camera. Firstly, the wall between the bedroom and the toilet forms the frame in this scene, in which the space where the father is compressed into the corner of the screen, while the space where Sophie is significantly more spacious. Secondly, in the choice of hues for the two spaces, the director

chose yellow-orange and blue-purple, two shades that are opposite on the color wheel. Sophie is in the warm tones of yellow-orange, while her father is in the cooler tones of blue-purple. The yellow tones often symbolize brightness and enlightenment, while the blue tones often have a melancholic quality, and when they appear in the same shot, another frame is created, namely the emotional and cognitive disconnection between Sophie and her father [9].

In addition to technical touches, one important way to find the director's voice is to look for continuity and development of the theme. The theme of *Aftersun*, however, is a continuation of Wells' s original short work.

### 3.3. A Theme That Continues and Evolves with the Author's State of Mind

In different films, a director will show recurring features [10]. This feature could include things like theme, character, editing, and so on. The first short film created by Wells, *Tuesday* (2015), has similar themes to *Aftersun*, about love and loss. One might even say that the continuation and development of the theme from *Tuesday* to *Aftersun* is a development of the author's personal feelings towards his father, although *Aftersun* prefers to explore the different stages of the parent-child relationship.

*Tuesday* shows how Ellie acts like an anxious teenager in daily life and is not understood by those around her. Every Tuesday, Ellie spends the night at her father's house, but he never appears in the film, and Ellie comes to terms with the loss in solitude. On Tuesday, Allie is in her adolescent stage, and she still has not accepted the fact that her father has left. In the first stage of mourning, people cannot believe that the person they love no longer exists in time and space [11]. In *Aftersun*, Sophie has grown up and has come to terms with the fact that his father is gone. When she picks up the home video that documents her and her father, she understands her father more fully and puts an end to her long mourning. The reader need not be concerned with the author's background when judging a work [12]. However, films with strong personal artistry emphasize the author as a structure in the film system, The viewer can catch a sense of who the artist is and what he or she is saying in the stylistic features of the narrative. In fact, this is a story rooted in personal trauma and memory [13].

## 4. Conclusions

In the production of a film, numerous filmmakers have their own artistic designs, such as a scriptwriter who has a type of story they specialize in, or a certain writing convention that has developed from working with a particular director. However, of all filmmakers, the director is the decision-maker of a film's style, and as a result, the director is often considered the author of a film. This paper focuses on how the director appears in *Aftersun*. The paper argues that in the film, shots that break with classic design can be interpreted as the voice of the director, such as unusual editing, a scene that does not advance the plot but is deliberately emphasized. When these specific expressions of the author's voice are linked to the themes of the film, the audiences can more clearly capture the director's comments. The paper begins by highlighting *Aftersun*'s unique narrative point of view, which is the connection between reality and memory through home videos; it then identifies the father's back that the director emphasizes in the film through long-take shots and recurring, links this to the plot and the unusual composition, which comes to the conclusion that the director tries to emphasize the grief the father hides, and the disconnection Sophie has from him; finally, in terms of theme, the paper finds many links between *Aftersun* and the director's first short work *Tuesday*, which can be interpreted as a personal development of the author's grief over the loss of his father. However, this paper is still limited. The line between commercial cinema and art cinema is now blurred, but this paper does not further explore whether the conventions of known genres are passed on in *Aftersun*, or whether they extend existing forms, which are some of the criteria for measuring the artistry of a

film. Thus, subsequent researchers can further analyze the personal artistry of the director in *Aftersun* in this direction.

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